Personalized Learning and the Every Student Succeeds Act
Mapping Emerging Trends for Personalized Learning in State ESSA Plans

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Over the past decade, a shift toward personalization has begun to take hold in our classrooms and learning communities across the country. Advocates have embraced this movement in hopes that it will close achievement gaps, increase student engagement, and address the disconnect between K-12, postsecondary education, and the workforce.

While the depth of practice varies significantly across regions, states, and communities, the level of commitment to personalized learning is on the rise as an increasing number of stakeholders begin to advocate for policies that enable the expansion of personalized learning systems. The recent reauthorization and early-stage implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provide evidence of this transformation. Federal policymakers gave states significant flexibility to advance innovative, next generation education systems, and in turn, most states leveraged these possibilities into a foundation for personalized models and strategies.

**High-Quality Personalized Learning**

The transition to personalized learning is no small task, and while early momentum is encouraging, significant work remains to help states scale individual strategies into cohesive, high-quality personalized learning systems. While this analysis reveals emerging policies and strategies that advance personalized learning, few states have begun the hard work of transitioning their entire system. To do so, states will need to adopt a rigorous definition of personalized learning that adheres to the following principles:

- **Instruction aligned to rigorous academic standards and social-emotional skills** students need to be ready for college, career and life.
- **Customized instruction** that allows each student to design learning experiences aligned to his or her interests.
- **Varied pacing of instruction** based on individual student needs, allowing students to accelerate or take additional time based on their level of mastery.
- **Real-time differentiation of instruction, supports and interventions** based on data from formative assessments and student feedback to ensure every student remains on track to graduation.
- **Access to clear, transferable learning objectives and assessment results** so students and families understand what is expected for mastery and advancement.
The Opportunity of ESSA

The possibilities in ESSA to advance personalized learning span the law, giving states an opportunity to design an education system that provides all students with the supports they need to graduate college and career ready. These possibilities include:

• The opportunity to design multiple measure accountability systems that emphasize the growth of all students.

• Flexibility to create balanced assessment systems that evaluate and guide learning.

• Flexibility to create locally-driven school improvement strategies that support the continuous improvement of all schools.

• An opportunity to build a workforce of educators ready for personalized learning environments.

• Greater funding flexibility to expand student opportunities including new coursework options, social and emotional learning supports, and technologies that enable personalization.

Over the past year, states have engaged in conversations with diverse stakeholders to explore the possibilities under ESSA and develop plans for implementation of the new law. KnowledgeWorks supported states in this exploration process, elevating opportunities to advance personalization and providing guidance on the development of cohesive, high quality education systems. During this timeframe, we also engaged in an extensive research project to analyze ESSA plans in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Our goal was to identify emerging policies that support greater personalization across the country. For some states, personalization was integral to their vision; for others, it emerged in the form of a strategy or set of practices to better support students. Despite differences in scope, we uncovered a promising shift toward personalization rooted in a commitment to closing achievement gaps and increasing readiness for college, career, and community engagement after graduation.

About this Publication

The goal of this publication is to elevate the trends that emerged during our review of state ESSA plans. While these plans only represent a part of the policy work happening across the country, they provide an important lens into the complexities of building and aligning personalized learning systems. We aim to tell that story in a way that is approachable for stakeholders across the country.

This publication opens with a quantitative dashboard to provide readers a first glimpse at the prevalence of personalized learning strategies in state ESSA plans. The core of the publication is then divided into five sections featuring policy trends that span the following issues:

1. State Vision
2. Accountability Systems
3. School Support and Improvement
4. Supporting Excellent Educators
5. Supporting All Students
The final section of the paper reveals a set of key values that appeared consistently across ESSA plans as justification for why states favored personalized strategies for teaching and learning. Collectively, these sections will provide readers with a sound understanding of a variety of issues driving state conversations about personalized education for student success.

**What’s Missing: Assessments**

While this analysis covers most major functions of ESSA, it does not provide an overview of state assessment systems. Despite widespread flexibility in the law to advance better assessments, we did not find strong evidence of significant change in current state plans. Several states are advancing new performance-based science assessments, a few are exploring local assessments, and one state is committed to more granular score reporting to improve responsiveness to student needs. Although these examples are encouraging, they remain limited. KnowledgeWorks will continue to monitor states’ progress on this issue and communicate findings as the field evolves, particularly as states begin to explore the Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority.

**Building a Movement**

We hope the information in this report contributes to the growing conversation about how to build quality personalized systems that result in success for each student.

The trends identified in this report are based on plans alone and are not an indication of high quality implementation. Progress will depend on deep stakeholder buy-in and a state commitment to continuously refine and improve its education system.

As ESSA implementation unfolds, KnowledgeWorks will continue to support high quality implementation and elevate stories of progress. We must learn together if we hope to build an education system that ensures every student graduates ready for the challenges that lie ahead.
**ESSA and Personalized Learning Dashboard**

**39 state** ESSA plans reference personalized learning. Here’s a snapshot of how states are advancing this approach.

**VISION**

17 states
incorporate personalized learning into their vision for ESSA implementation.

**ACCOUNTABILITY**

19 states
will establish dashboards to provide parents, students, and other education stakeholders with comprehensive data on school quality and student opportunities.

25 states
will use an academic proficiency indicator that accounts for the performance level of each student in a school, such as scale scores or performance indices, incentivizing improved performance for each student regardless of whether they score below or above proficient.

**SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

11 states
will prioritize personalized learning strategies for supporting schools identified for improvement.

12 states
will prioritize strategies for meaningful community engagement in the development and implementation of school improvement plans.

**EXCELLENT EDUCATORS**

10 states
will explore the development of a statewide system of micro-credentials for educators to personalize and enhance professional development.

14 states
will launch an online professional development platform for educators to make personalized professional development available anytime, anywhere.

**SUPPORTING ALL STUDENTS**

21 states
will prioritize the use of Title IV funds to support schools and districts to offer social-emotional learning and whole child supports to enhance or improve existing course offerings.

19 states
will ensure all students have a personalized learning plan that aligns to their academic needs, interests, and goals.
The development of a vision statement is an important step in designing a cohesive education system. A vision statement provides clarity on the aspirations of stakeholders while helping address alignment across an array of policies and programs. While ESSA does not require states to publicly report their vision statements, the consolidated plan template released by the U.S. Department of Education in December of 2016 encouraged state education agencies to reflect on their overall vision and how the different sections of the consolidated plan work together to create a comprehensive system.²

This guidance encouraged many states to question the purpose of their education system and to consider strategies that better prepare all students for success. KnowledgeWorks’ analysis of state ESSA plans found that

one third of states have personalization at the core of their vision for K-12 education. These states believe learner-centered systems will best prepare their graduates for college and career success.

Our analysis also uncovered several trends within these vision statements that provide important insights on how states define personalized learning.

**TREND: Personalization is a central tenet of the state’s vision.**

As mentioned above, one-third of states incorporate personalization in a meaningful way in their ESSA vision statements. While terminology differs from state-to-state, the leading message emphasizes the creation of a student-focused system where individual needs and interests are met to ensure success in college, career, and life. Aside from personalization, the most common terms used to convey this concept are individualism, learner-centered, and student-centered.

Arkansas’ ESSA plan articulates a particularly strong vision and aligned goals for personalization developed through a statewide stakeholder engagement process that included listening tours, multiple public comment periods, and rounds of revisions. In the state’s own words, ESSA ushered in “an unprecedented opportunity to reframe state support and accountability systems within states’ unique contexts, enabling each state to personalize its approach to ensuring equity, access, and opportunity for all of its students.” The state’s final vision statement and aligned goals read:
**Vision:**
The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) is transforming Arkansas to lead the nation in student-focused education.

**Goals:**
- **1. Prepared Graduates** – Each student will meet or exceed education milestones along pathways to graduate prepared for college, career, and community engagement.
- **2. Student Growth** – Each student will meet or exceed his/her expected individual growth annually.
- **3. Personal Competencies** – Each student will develop personal competencies that foster learning, community engagement, and success in life.
- **4. Student Success** – Each student will be actively engaged in college, career preparation, military service, and/or competitive employment one year after graduation.
- **5. Customer Service** – The ADE will build the capacity of each team member to provide efficient and effective customer service.

**TREND: Competency-based practices are integrated into a vision for personalization.**
Personalized learning is a general term that encompasses a wide range of student-centered teaching and learning strategies ranging from project-based learning, to blended learning, to competency-based learning. While ESSA plans frequently reference personalization generally, a handful of states commit to a vision that integrates competency-based practices. These states emphasize the importance of building a system that prioritizes mastery over time, that recognizes and accommodates for differences in student pace, and that intentionally aligns content to student interests and needs.

With more than a decade invested in competency education, New Hampshire’s ESSA plan provides the deepest commitment to this approach which it defines as “... a structure that creates flexibility, allows students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic content, regardless of time, place or pace of learning.” But New Hampshire is not alone in its support for competency education. South Carolina’s ESSA plan identifies personalized and competency-based learning as a strategic initiative of its vision, aspiring for every district in the state to have at least one school fully committed to personalized and competency-based learning. Similarly, North Carolina’s vision depicts an educational system that supports four pillars of personalized learning which include a unique learner profile for every student, the opportunity to pursue an individualized learning path, the ability to follow a competency-based progression, and a learning environment that is flexible and structured to support individual goals.

**TREND: Readiness, social-emotional, or employability skills are central to the state’s vision.**
ESSA stakeholder conversations often called on states to emphasize social-emotional or employability skills in addition to academic knowledge. These skills, stakeholders argued, are foundational to success in a world and job market that is increasingly filled with uncertainty. Nearly a dozen states
responded to these stakeholder concerns by broadening their definition of college and career readiness in ESSA to include social-emotional or employability skills.

South Carolina and Kansas, for example, included profiles of an ideal graduate in their ESSA vision that emphasize core readiness skills. These states arrived at their vision following extensive statewide conversations about the characteristics that graduates should have to ensure success beyond high school. Kansas’ ESSA plan states that “a successful Kansas high school graduate has the academic preparation, cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability skills and civic engagement to be successful in postsecondary education, in the attainment of an industry recognized certification or in the workforce, without the need for remediation.” Similarly, the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate outlines the World Class Knowledge, World Class Skills, and Life and Career Characteristics that each student should have upon graduation. These skills include creativity and innovation, collaboration and teamwork, integrity, self-direction, and perseverance, among others.

**TREND: Equity is central to the state’s vision for personalization.**

Personalized learning has tremendous potential to address the country’s challenge to achieve equitable educational outcomes for all students. The approach’s emphasis on targeted supports for every student, and attention to individual interests and academic and cultural needs, underscores the importance of closing achievement gaps between struggling students and their peers. A handful of states illustrate this connection in their ESSA vision statements, making it clear that they believe personalization is essential to improving educational equity in the state.

Vermont’s ESSA plan, for example, explains that equity was the motivation behind the state’s historical work to advance policies that emphasize personalized learning, proficiency-based frameworks, and consistency in the availability of educational services and supports. The state embraced these policy changes to eliminate equity gaps across traditionally underserved student groups and to provide equitable access to a shared baseline of educational services and supports. Oregon’s stakeholder engagement process for ESSA uncovered a similar statewide commitment to equity and personalized learning. The state responded to this feedback by creating a student-focused vision that rests on four foundational commitments, one of which is equity. Through this commitment, the state aspires to ensure every learner receives the necessary resources and educational opportunity they need to thrive. This focus builds on the state’s recent commitment to close on-time graduation rate gaps between white students and students in historically underserved subgroups.

**TREND: Multiple pathways are central to the state’s vision for college and career success.**

The concept of “multiple pathways” appears frequently in state vision statements as a strategy for elevating student choice. States want to provide students across all ages
with more learning options to improve student engagement and increase relevancy to postsecondary education and the workforce. Some of these options include career and technical education programs, college in high school, work-based learning internships, military, and service-learning.

Maine and North Dakota, for example, integrate multiple pathways into their state’s strategic vision. Maine, a state with a rich history in proficiency-based learning, includes multiple pathways as one of five components of its strategic plan. The Multiple Pathways for Learner Achievement component emphasizes “building a system of schooling that meets the needs of all students will require building an educational system with unprecedented flexibility and multiple avenues for student success. Creating multiple pathways for student achievement must be a central focus of our efforts.”

Similarly, North Dakota’s ESSA plan articulates a vision for all students to graduate “choice ready with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be successful in whatever they choose to do, whether they pursue a post-secondary degree, enroll in a technical college, enter the workforce, or join the military.” North Dakota’s emphasis on multiple pathways is an effort to ensure that diplomas are meaningful, eliminating what the state calls “the honesty gap” that exists when students receive a diploma from their school but soon realize the diploma does not actually indicate readiness for college or career.
### PERSONALIZED LEARNING TREND

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For detailed information on these states, as well as other states that may be pursuing these trends, please visit KnowledgeWorks State-by-State Strategies for Advancing Personalized Learning Under ESSA.
Federal policymakers crafted ESSA in response to national concerns that the previous law, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, narrowed the curriculum by focusing predominately on math and reading achievement and disproportionately focused educator attention on students most likely to perform at grade level. Now, the law gives states significant flexibility to design multiple measure accountability systems that align to their vision of student success. Educators, parents, and other stakeholders seized this flexibility during the stakeholder engagement process, advocating for student-centered accountability practices that emphasize rigorous academic growth and educational opportunity for every student. In fact, nearly every state in the nation has integrated at least one personalized learning concept into its ESSA accountability system. While the result is more transformative in some states than others, ESSA helped usher in a new era where education systems are designed to support the individual success of each student, instead of focusing narrowly on the students most likely to achieve proficiency and increase school accountability scores.

The following analysis provides an overview of ESSA accountability trends designed to encourage personalized teaching and learning practices. While states make a compelling case for why they adopted these indicators, their impact will depend on each state’s ability to create high quality systems for implementation.

**TREND: The academic proficiency indicator incorporates scale scores and performance indices to account for the performance level of each student in a school.**

Half of all states expressed a desire to transition away from academic proficiency indicators that only give credit for students who perform at or above proficient. These states believe that NCLB’s emphasis on academic proficiency – as defined by the percent of students proficient or above – encouraged educators to narrow attention and supports to the students who perform in the “bubble” closest to the proficiency benchmark, rather than focus on ways to help students grow in meaningful ways no matter where they fall in the accountability spectrum.

As a result, nearly a dozen of these states embraced average scale scores, an approach that ranks the performance of all students on a scale, and uses the average (or mean) as
the reported performance score. The process repeats to calculate an average scale score for each subgroup of students in a school. While the arguments in support of scale scores are promising, the field must closely evaluate their impact in accountability systems to determine whether the measurement approach is a better tool for calculating proficiency. Importantly, many states adopting scale scores have proposed to combine those scores with traditional proficiency measures when calculating academic proficiency. They argue that each score provides important information that will help stakeholders better identify the right schools for intervention. In Maryland, for example, half of a school’s academic proficiency score will be determined by the percent of students performing at proficient or above on the state assessment. The other half will be calculated through a scale score that averages all student performance levels in the school. While proficiency is the goal of Maryland’s system, the state argues that average scale scores are helpful for identifying schools where a low proficiency rate masks many students close to proficiency as well as schools where a high proficiency rate masks students who need additional support to achieve grade level performance.14

In addition to scale scores, more than a third of states adopted a performance index to emphasize student achievement across varying performance levels. This approach calculates proficiency by awarding increasing points for students who perform at higher levels on the proficiency scale. For example, South Carolina will calculate student performance on assessments by four categories: Does Not Meet Expectations; Approaches Expectations; Meets Expectations; and, Exceeds Expectations. An achievement index will assign points for each student whose score meets one of these four levels on the state assessment, with greater points awarded for higher levels of proficiency. Points are aggregated across all English language arts (ELA) and math assessments, and the school’s performance is measured as a percentage of the maximum points available.15 States adopting a performance index argued that the approach helps focus attention on the achievement of all students while also elevating schools that do an exceptional job of helping large proportions of struggling students advance to mastery.

**TREND: An elementary and middle school indicator emphasizes student access to a wide range of high-quality learning experiences.**

Nearly one-fifth of state ESSA plans commit to creating or exploring accountability indicators that empower elementary and middle school students by providing expanded course or subject offerings. Five states have already developed indicators for implementation in the 2018-2019 school year, while four states are working on indicators for future amendments to the state’s ESSA plan. Expanded course offerings will enable educators to tailor learning to individual student interests, increasing student engagement and mastery of challenging academic standards.

Louisiana’s new ESSA accountability system illustrates a deep commitment to student opportunity at all levels, from elementary through high school. An Interests and Opportunities indicator will determine whether schools are
exposing students to diverse learning experiences that help develop student skills and talents. At the elementary and middle school level, Louisiana expects schools to offer every student access to quality visual and performing arts, foreign language instruction, technology consistent with current standards, and a variety of co-curricular activities (academic, athletic, and special interest clubs). Similarly, Kentucky will develop an Opportunities and Access indicator to ensure students receive a well-rounded education. The indicator will measure four components: Rich Curriculum, Equitable Access, School Quality, and Whole Child Supports. The rich curriculum component, in particular, will take into account the amount of time elementary and middle schools spend on instruction for visual and performing arts, health and physical education, science, social studies, and career exploration through career and technical education courses (for middle school only).

**TREND: A high school indicator emphasizes multiple pathways for demonstrating college and career readiness.**

Many states leveraged ESSA’s flexibility to begin new conversations about how to measure college and career readiness. States saw this as an opportunity to incorporate measures of academic mastery at the high school level that extend the focus beyond performance on state standardized assessments in math and ELA. As a result, more than two-thirds of states now include College and Career Readiness indicators in their accountability systems. These indicators recognize a wide range of pathway opportunities for high school students including completion of advanced coursework (such as dual enrollment and early college high school programs), career pathway opportunities, work-based learning experiences, service learning, and mastery on a military readiness assessment. States incorporated these indicators to encourage greater student choice and opportunity for high school students.

States with particularly strong College and Career Readiness Indicators established rigorous benchmarks or cut-scores for each pathway option. Some states also incorporated incentives for schools to create pathways where students attain higher levels of mastery. Louisiana’s Strength of Diploma indicator measures not just whether a student receives a diploma, but the strength of the diploma it receives. The indicator awards increasing points for students who attain a high school diploma as well as postsecondary credit or credentials. A student who earns a diploma and earns a passing grade in an advanced placement course would earn 110 points whereas a student who earns a diploma and an associate’s degree would earn the maximum of 160 points. Kentucky took a similar approach with its Transition Readiness Indicator. The indicator holds schools accountable for student attainment of an academic benchmark (such as a B or higher on six dual enrollment credits) and attainment of either a career or military readiness benchmark. Examples of career accomplishments include mastery of benchmarks on Workforce Innovation Board approved industry certifications or earning a B or better on six credits of approved dual credit courses.
TREND: An extended-year graduation rate indicator provides credit for schools that successfully graduate students who need additional time. Although the Obama Administration’s ESSA Flexibility package gave states the opportunity to seek a waiver for inclusion of extended-year graduation rates in state accountability systems, only a handful took advantage of the opportunity. Under ESSA, however, more than 36 states plan to recognize extended-year graduation rates in their accountability systems. This trend illustrates growing support for policies that provide students in need of extra time and the support necessary to complete that state’s graduation requirements. While a four-year high school experience is ideal, most states were careful to craft accountability systems that incentivize additional supports for students who may be able to graduate in five, six, or even seven years.

In addition to their four-year graduation rate, Massachusetts will use what the state calls an “extended engagement rate” that aggregates the percentage of students who have graduated within five years plus the percentage of students that are still enrolled in school after five years. This calculation is different from traditional five-year graduation rates, which only account for students that have received a diploma within five years of entering their assigned cohort. Many states also incorporate extended-year graduation rates into their long-term goals. For example, New Mexico’s long-term goal for graduation states that more than 84.5 percent of the class of 2022 will graduate high school in four years, more than 88 percent of the class of 2021 will graduate high school in five years, and more than 90 percent of the class of 2020 will graduate high school in six years.

TREND: An equity indicator emphasizes the importance of targeting supports to close achievement gaps. Nearly one-third of states will incorporate an equity indicator into their accountability systems to hold schools accountable for closing achievement gaps between the performance of all students and subgroups of students. An intentional emphasis on targeting supports to address the needs and strengths of every student is a central tenet of personalized learning. In personalized learning systems, educators are expected to target supports for students and align learning to individual interests and needs to help struggling students accelerate their learning. Most states that chose to incorporate equity indicators will focus on the performance of the lowest-quartile
of students in a school. This approach will account for the lowest performing students through an equity indicator in addition to the academic proficiency indicator. The remaining states with an equity indicator chose to emphasize achievement gap closure between the all students group and each subgroup of students. By incorporating these indicators, states help incentivize the use of personalized strategies to accelerate learning for students most in need of support.

New Hampshire’s decision to include an equity indicator is tied to the state’s commitment to competency-based learning and ensuring that all students accelerate to mastery. The state’s accountability system will incorporate an indicator that directs extra attention to students farthest from proficiency in each school. Specifically, the indicator will award points for the growth of students in the lowest quartile of achievement as well as points for the growth of the remaining 75 percent of students. The state will then assign a weight of four to one in favor of the students in the lowest quartile.22 Georgia’s plan, on the other hand, will measure the extent to which all students and each student subgroup meet the state’s annual 3 percent goal for achievement in ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies. Schools will earn one point when a subgroup target is met; 0.5 points when progress is made but the target is not met; and 0 points when no progress is made. Additionally, schools will earn 1.5 points when students in the economically disadvantaged, English Learner, and students with disabilities subgroups meet a 6 percent improvement target. The state hopes this indicator will incentivize schools to make greater annual gains for these historically underperforming subgroups.23

TREND: School quality is measured by a survey that captures student voice.

Strategies to elevate student voice also emerged in state ESSA plans. Nearly ten states are either implementing or exploring the use of student surveys as a measure of school quality and student success. While surveys can be challenging to design for accountability decisions, they are an important tool for capturing student perspectives about the quality of their education. Strategies to elevate student voice promote learner agency, an important facet of high-quality personalized learning environments.

North Dakota’s student engagement indicator heavily emphasizes student voice, accounting for 30 percent of a school’s accountability rating at the elementary and middle school level and 20 percent at the high school level. The state will use the AdvanceED Student Engagement Surveys to gauge student opinions about their learning experiences across three domains: behavior, cognitive, and emotional. The surveys produce quantitative information on whether students are committed, compliant, or disengaged in their educational experience.24 Nebraska will also incorporate a student survey aligned to the state’s new accountability system called AQuESTT – Accountability for a Quality Education System Today and Tomorrow. The survey will evaluate student progress on the six AQuESTT tenants which include: Positive Partnerships, Relationships, and Student Success; Transitions; Educational Opportunities and Access; College and Career Ready; Assessment; and, Educator Effectiveness.25
TREND: A dashboard empowers parents, students, and other education stakeholders with comprehensive data on school quality and student opportunities. Nearly 20 states plan to incorporate robust dashboards, or reporting systems, to provide stakeholders with comprehensive data on school performance. These states believe greater data transparency will drive bold community conversations and help identify solutions for meeting the needs of each student. Additionally, these states believe dashboards will help uncover performance issues that are not reflected in a single summative score. The indicators featured on these dashboards include student access to a well-rounded education, pathway opportunities, staffing capacity, educator effectiveness, discipline data, attendance, student on-track rates, postsecondary enrollment and attainment, and local indicators of school effectiveness.

In these states, stakeholder support for the development of data dashboards was robust. The Pennsylvania Department of Education, for example, held thirty sessions with stakeholders to identify nearly two dozen research-based indicators for inclusion in a new Future Ready PA Index. The state released the index this fall to “help foster a shared language for educators, parents, students, and community members regarding the multiple levers associated with improving student opportunities and outcomes.” Michigan is also in the process of rolling out its new online dashboard, which the State Board of Education approved in 2017. The dashboard, which was designed with significant parent feedback, will incorporate nearly twenty measures of school quality and success. It is an integral component of the state’s strategic plan and builds on the state’s Strategic Partnership with Parents, Families, and Community Services component which encourages and promotes, meaningful, authentic engagement with parents and families.
**PERSONALIZED LEARNING TREND** | **STATES TO WATCH**
---|---
The academic proficiency indicator incorporates scale scores and/or performance indices that account for the performance level of each student in a school. | New Hampshire Oklahoma South Carolina Ohio
An elementary and middle school indicator emphasizes student access to a wide range of high-quality learning experiences. | Georgia Kentucky Louisiana Maryland
A high school indicator emphasizes multiple pathways for demonstrating college and career readiness. | Georgia Kentucky Louisiana
An extended-year graduation rate indicator provides credit for schools that successfully graduate students who need additional time. | Delaware Michigan New Mexico
An equity indicator emphasizes the importance of targeting supports to close achievement gaps. | Delaware Georgia Kentucky Nevada
School quality is measured by a survey that captures student voice. | Iowa Nebraska North Dakota South Dakota
A dashboard empowers parents, students, and other education stakeholders with comprehensive data on school quality and student opportunities. | Michigan Nevada Oregon Pennsylvania Tennessee

For detailed information on these states, as well as other states that may be pursuing these trends, please visit KnowledgeWorks State-by-State Strategies for Advancing Personalized Learning Under ESSA.

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The prescriptive school improvement strategies of the NCLB era produced mixed results, in large part because they did not reflect the specific needs of local communities. ESSA, on the other hand, shifted responsibility for school improvement back to states and local communities, giving them the freedom to identify evidence-based strategies for improving the lowest-performing schools in the state. The law requires states to establish two categories for intervention and support – Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools and Targeted Support and Improvement Schools – but gives districts the flexibility to identify their own evidence-based strategies for addressing systemic challenges in their schools. States are only required to apply more rigorous interventions if a Comprehensive Support and Improvement School fails to make adequate improvement after four years of implementing its own reform.

Admittedly, ESSA’s widespread flexibility makes it challenging to identify emerging trends for school improvement. State plans often lack specificity on how they plan to support schools in need of improvement, and districts have not yet offered their solutions. While this current lack of specificity has invoked criticism from concerned advocates who want the best for students in struggling schools, there are some emerging trends and practices that are encouraging.

These trends reveal a growing commitment to school improvement strategies that seek to identify and respond to the unique needs of students and schools instead of advancing a one-size-fits-all approach to education reform.

The following analysis provides an overview of school improvement trends in state ESSA plans that support personalized strategies for student and school success.

**TREND: State-established, student-centered principles guide local school improvement efforts.**

More than ten states have responded to the lack of prescription in the school improvement section by establishing principles to help districts develop and execute a high-quality vision for school reform. A small handful of these states have aligned their principles for school improvement to core tenets of a personalized learning system. For instance, Rhode Island lists a set of five principles, or beliefs, to guide district school improvement efforts.
Collectively, these principles set forth a theory of action for school reform in the state. They include:

- **A belief that learning must be personalized** to meet the needs of all students, and that a broad variety of pathways to college and career readiness must be made available, so that student and family choice can be a key driver in educational attainment.

- **School improvement requires innovation**, and that innovation cannot be achieved through coercion, but rather through empowerment of those closest to the students, namely families and educators.

- **This empowerment must come through the form of greater flexibility and autonomy** at the school level, while maintaining tight standards of accountability for outcomes, and taking appropriate action if needed when outcomes are not met.

- **School improvement is the work of all members of the state community**, meaning Rhode Island must emphasize shared responsibility for improving opportunities and outcomes for every Rhode Island student. This mutual responsibility acknowledges that all education partners in the state can and should play a role in improving access to high quality opportunities and educational outcomes for students.

- **School improvement is not possible without authentically engaged communities and families** at all stages of the planning and implementation of school improvement efforts. These principles emphasize the belief that every student can succeed, put forth expectations for responsibility at all levels of the system, and elevate the state’s priorities so that everyone is operating with a common understanding that schools, the community in which the school resides, and the state share responsibility for turning schools around.

Tennessee’s district accountability framework also includes principles to guide improvement efforts. The state makes a direct connection between its accountability framework and school improvement, creating clear alignment between those two sections of the plan. Like Rhode Island, Tennessee outlines expectations and flexibilities for schools and districts, providing context for how the state will approach school improvement and what types of local strategies could be prioritized.²⁹

**TREND: An emphasis on real-time data elevates emerging needs and emphasizes continuous improvement.**

States have begun to emphasize the importance of providing and analyzing real-time data to support continuous improvement at all levels of the system. These states believe access to real-time data will help schools and educators make more informed decisions about how to design evidence-based supports that better meet the needs of educators and students. Some states will establish systems to ensure educators receive more frequent access to data that is already collected. New Mexico, for example, has plans to develop a comprehensive data system that collects data
nightly from schools and districts to consistently monitor indicators and track students’ growth toward mastery. Other states will begin to monitor and collect additional data “snapshots” throughout the year.

Improved data access on its own does not ensure real and lasting improvement for schools. Many states will provide targeted technical assistance and professional development for schools to help educators respond to emerging needs. As such, in addition to creating real-time data systems, New Mexico has integrated data literacy as part of the state’s organizational conditions for improvement. The state wants to build an instructional infrastructure where data is well-organized and clear for teachers’ use.

**TRENDS: Community and family engagement are central to the school improvement process.**

While ESSA required states to describe their strategies for engaging stakeholders in the development of state plans, most states have not committed to specific strategies to sustain that engagement moving forward, particularly in school improvement efforts where stakeholder engagement is critical to success. However, half a dozen states are actively thinking about how to meaningfully involve parents and families in the school improvement process, beyond the plan development phase. These states understand that authentic engagement of parents, families, and diverse community members in both the development and implementation of school improvement plans is essential to improving schools thoughtfully and sustainably. Schools can leverage tremendous community assets and supports to ensure educators better meet the needs of each student.

Rhode Island requires districts with schools identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement to convene a Community Advisory Board (CAB). This board will give diverse community stakeholders a structured way to provide feedback and support on the initial development of an improvement plan, as well as to provide ongoing support during the improvement process. Although school districts have flexibility in establishing a CAB to fit their specific needs, the CAB’s membership must “be representative of a broad range of community stakeholders from the communities served by the identified school(s).”

New York also elevates parental engagement in innovative ways. As the state outlines in its plan, the state expects districts to spend school improvement dollars wisely but also wants to ensure that districts have ownership over their spending choices. Therefore, Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools will be required to implement a participatory budgeting process that gives parents a voice in determining how school funds are spent. Chosen strategies must align to the results of a needs assessment conducted by the school, ensuring funding is relevant to the improvement process.
TREND: Personalized learning is emphasized in school improvement strategies.

Nearly one-fifth of states identify personalized learning as a promising approach for school improvement. State approaches range from an emphasis on personalized learning plans, to performance-based assessments, to expanded pathway options for students. While this momentum is encouraging, it is important to note that for the most part, these states do not provide a clear definition of personalized learning or a detailed description of how districts and schools would implement personalized learning approaches to improve schools.

Vermont and New Hampshire provide the most comprehensive descriptions of how personalized learning drives school improvement. Vermont recently implemented a field review process as part of the state’s data collection system to identify strengths and areas of growth for districts. This qualitative component generates school improvement data from a review team that visits schools to monitor high quality instruction and strategies to support personalized learning such as the existence and implementation of rigorous proficiency-based graduation requirements, personalized learning plans, and the availability of the state’s flexible pathways. New Hampshire, on the other hand, plans to build state capacity for school improvement by partnering with an established organization to provide assistance in multiple components of school improvement, including evidence-based practices for personalized learning. Additionally, the state will consider trainings and support from its Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) pilot program as a viable option for districts with high percentages of schools identified in need of support and improvement. Early results from PACE districts reveal the approach has been effective for historically underperforming students. Finally, the state outlines ways in which it will integrate personalized learning plans to engage students in underperforming subgroups, carefully monitoring each student’s learning against the plan to ensure they are working.

A few states proposed using the Direct-Student Services set-aside to ensure students in struggling schools have access to more learning opportunities aligned to their interests. These opportunities include (among others) extended learning time, advanced placement, dual credit, career and technical education, and personalized learning experiences. The Supporting all Students section of this analysis provides a more in-depth look at how states are leveraging this strategy.

TREND: A focus on the whole child is important to recognize in the school improvement process.

Many states have begun to emphasize the importance of health and social emotional supports in school improvement strategies, especially in traditionally underserved areas. This is an important, and sometimes overlooked, area of personalization for students who have fallen behind, as often they experience barriers to learning that reach beyond academics. State strategies for supporting the whole child in
the school improvement process include connecting districts to community supports and services, incorporating social emotional development into the needs assessment and improvement process, and creating state social-emotional learning (SEL) standards.

North Carolina, for example, will use the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model to provide health and environmental services to help address issues resulting from poverty and poor health that often impact student outcomes. Wisconsin, a state that has a clear focus on equity in its ESSA plan, will provide support to districts for mental health services, SEL, and behavioral issues and will include training on promising practices such as trauma-sensitive schools, youth mental health first-aid, and behavioral interventions.

Alternatively, Oregon will include a review of major systems that impact outcomes for students in its comprehensive needs assessment process, including academic and social emotional supports. This includes “opportunities to enhance culturally relevant pedagogy and practices, improve mental health supports, improve nursing and counseling supports, and connect with other partners and community-based organizations to improve supports for students.” Other states, like Michigan and Ohio, are in the process of developing SEL standards, designed in part to address school improvement. Still others, like West Virginia, look to community schools as a possibility for addressing the needs of the whole child, as they are designed to focus on partnerships and wraparound services for students in need.
## Personalized Learning Trend

| State-established student-centered principles guide local school improvement efforts. | New York  
Rhode Island  
Tennessee |
|---|---|
| An emphasis on real-time data elevates emerging needs and emphasizes continuous improvement. | New Mexico  
Tennessee  
Vermont |
| Community and family engagement are central to the school improvement process. | Idaho  
New York  
Rhode Island |
| Personalized learning is emphasized in school improvement strategies. | New Mexico  
New Hampshire  
Vermont |
| A focus on the whole child is important to recognize in the school improvement process. | North Carolina  
Oregon  
Wisconsin |

For detailed information on these states, as well as other states that may be pursuing these trends, please visit KnowledgeWorks State-by-State Strategies for Advancing Personalized Learning Under ESSA.

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One of the few universally accepted findings in education research – of the factors schools can directly control – is that teacher quality has the greatest impact on student achievement. The federal government underscored this in NCLB by requiring that all teachers be “highly qualified,” which it defined as a bachelor’s degree, a state teaching certificate, and demonstrated evidence of subject-matter expertise in the subject area. While the intent of the “highly qualified” rule was admirable, it sometimes created unintentional barriers to the creation and expansion of new learning models.

Under ESSA, Congress replaced the “highly qualified” requirement, instead requiring a state to set their own requirements so long as they, at a minimum, demonstrate to the federal government that its teachers have met state certification and licensure requirements. This shift gives states full responsibility and authority for building high-quality educator workforce systems that align with their vision for college and career readiness. Specifically, states can update their certification and licensing requirements to reflect new teaching roles and align to instructional competencies that prepare educators for success in personalized learning environments.

States have responded to ESSA’s flexibility by advancing innovative strategies to personalize professional development and ensure educators have the skills to succeed in new learning environments.

The following analysis highlights the trends emerging in state plans to support educator excellence.

**TREND: Micro-credentials offer educators opportunities for personalized professional development.**

Many states recognize the importance of personalizing professional development for each educator—a pivot from the old paradigm of predetermined, whole-group professional development. Nine states helping lead this transformation are piloting micro-credentials, enabling educators to earn badges for demonstrating competency in specific skills or areas of knowledge. Micro-credentials provide teachers an additional way to earn meaningful recognition throughout their career, compared to traditional systems that predominantly recognize...
advanced degrees and years of service for salary schedules and licensure advancement. Some of these states have even begun to align micro-credentials with compensation, advanced licensure, and licensure renewal. Every state exploring or implementing micro-credentials envisions delivery in a blended setting using an online professional development platform.

In Arkansas, a new system of micro-credentials will serve as the centerpiece for the state’s fully-personalized system of professional development. The state will develop and implement a digital platform of available micro-credentials— for both teachers and leaders—that will directly align to the state’s educator standards and to each educator’s areas for growth, identified in individual professional growth plans. Arkansas will also provide targeted professional development opportunities by partnering with state teacher organizations and regional education service cooperatives to offer face-to-face support, virtual training, and micro-credentialing specifically for novice teachers. The state also plans to partner with postsecondary institutions to develop micro-credentials that teacher candidates can pursue in order to complete their preparation program with a degree and additional credentials that demonstrate mastery of specific skills. Finally, the state will incentivize districts to align compensation with attainment of micro-credentials.

**TREND: Online platforms deliver personalized professional development offerings.**

Many states will leverage online platforms to deliver personalized professional development to educators. These platforms make it possible for educators to access customized training and support anytime and anywhere from a self-paced library with extensive options. Some advanced online portals link to educator dashboards or learning management systems that enable educators to earn micro-credentials upon mastery of a particular set of skills. It is important to note that states do not intend to abandon face-to-face professional development; rather, they intend for online platforms to augment existing delivery systems to better respond to educator needs.
North Carolina, for example, integrates abundant, self-paced professional learning opportunities into an online portal known as Home Base. The portal features a student information system, which allows students, parents, and teachers to view grades, assignments, attendance, and more. Teachers can also access individual educator evaluation and professional development data and aligned online resources to build critical knowledge and skills. In addition to Home Base, educators in North Carolina can access 94 online learning modules, including self-paced, facilitated, and mini-modules, created by state department staff. Additionally, this online system features a Massive Open Online Course, which allows a large number of participants to learn together in an online setting.44

**TREND: School leaders can access personalized professional development programs.**

ESSA permits states to reserve up to three percent of their Title II, Part A grant dollars to support school leaders. Numerous states are leveraging this opportunity to establish leadership development programs, competencies, and evaluation systems that prepare school leaders to advance individualized, growth-oriented teaching and learning environments. Several of these states plan to provide personalized professional development geared toward leadership, while a few states plan to create new leadership roles aligned to student-centered learning.

Arkansas has partnered with the Arkansas Association of Education Administrators to develop an induction and mentoring program for new leaders. The goal is to connect beginning administrators to needed information and support during their first year and to lead them in self-reflection and goal-setting for year two. Upon culmination of the induction program, leaders will be asked to the Arkansas Leadership Quest program, which combines face-to-face support with digital tools to maximize support for principals and to provide quality, personalized learning that leads to evidence of practice through micro-credentials.

**TREND: The state offers educators training on personalized learning strategies.**

The transition from the traditional model of education, which relies heavily on whole group instruction and differentiation as needed, to a model of personalized learning for all is no small task—it is a transition that demands patience, continuous training, and attention to detail. Some states plan to ensure a smooth transition by offering professional development opportunities specifically around the pedagogical skills needed to facilitate a personalized learning environment. Some states will partner with external groups to deliver the training, some will leverage their own cohorts of expertise to deliver the training, and others will simply incentivize districts to coordinate the training on their own.

West Virginia intends to use Title II, Part A funds to improve the skills of teachers, principals, and other school leaders by providing support on the implementation of personalized learning for all students. The state identifies three focal components of instruction in a personalized learning
environment, which are high quality core instruction for all, targeted instruction for small groups of students, and intensive support on a one-to-one basis for enrichment or remediation. To ensure the success of personalization for school faculty, the state will collaborate with LEAs to provide training on data-driven decision-making around six essential components:

1. Leadership for personalized learning environments;
2. School culture focused on achievement;
3. Teams and processes focused on achievement;
4. Family and community partnerships;
5. Formative assessments; and
6. High-quality, learner-centered instruction.45

TREND: Educator preparation programs align to student-centered learning systems.

Educator preparation programs are critical grounds to prepare teachers for success in student-centered learning environments. Although state departments of education have limited policy influence over the higher education sector, some states have developed partnerships with postsecondary institutions to prepare teacher candidates for student-centered learning environments. Some states are even exploring ways to partner with postsecondary institutions to begin preparing the next generation of educators while they are still in high school.

To better prepare its teacher candidates for competency-based learning environments, New Hampshire has established the Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) Network. The IHE Network, which consists of experienced leaders with expertise in educator preparation, has convened a Leadership Preparation Programs Committee to “lay the groundwork for new collective and institutional approaches preparing leaders that have the knowledge base including a level of understanding and proficiency that supports competency-based and personalized learning.” The state is also working with the Network for Transforming Educator Preparation and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform to ensure seamless alignment from preparation to practice. In fact, the New Hampshire Department of Education already includes a regulatory requirement that educator preparation programs evaluate teacher candidates based on demonstration of competencies aligned to their chosen area of certification.46
## PERSONALIZED LEARNING TREND

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<tr>
<th>PERSONALIZED LEARNING TREND</th>
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<td>Arkansas</td>
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<td>South Carolina</td>
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<td>Online platforms deliver personalized professional development offerings.</td>
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<td>School leaders can access personalized professional development programs.</td>
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<td>The state offers educators training on personalized learning strategies.</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
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<td>Educator preparation programs align to student-centered learning systems.</td>
<td>Arkansas</td>
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<td>Mississippi</td>
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For detailed information on these states, as well as other states that may be pursuing these trends, please visit KnowledgeWorks State-by-State Strategies for Advancing Personalized Learning Under ESSA.
SUPPORTING ALL STUDENTS

State ESSA plans detail a wide range of state strategies for expanding educational opportunity for students, particularly those from historically underserved populations. Under this section, for example, states must describe how they will implement the new Title IV, Part A Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program as well as their priorities for 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) funding.

Many states leveraged the Supporting All Students section to highlight efforts to personalize supports for students, ranging from whole child and social-emotional learning (SEL) support, to multiple pathways, to competency-based education.

This analysis provides a description of the emerging trends in state ESSA plans for expanding personalized supports for students.

**TREND: Students benefit from whole child and social-emotional learning experiences.**

One of the most prevalent trends in state ESSA plans is the inclusion of SEL supports and a focus on the whole child. Almost half of states plan to dedicate funding to support development of social-emotional competencies for students or to create wraparound supports that include a focus on student health. While the student Support and Academic Enrichment Program outlined in the federal law does require states to focus on safe and healthy schools, a handful of states are going above and beyond to integrate personalized supports for students.

Indiana, for example, is approaching whole child supports in an innovative way. The state’s Interconnected System Framework is supported through a new initiative—the Indiana School Mental Health Initiative—at Indiana University, and it provides support to schools and community partners to ensure that all students are mentally and emotionally healthy.

Additionally, several states, including Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin, are partnering with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning to create SEL competencies for students. The goal of this project is to help states develop comprehensive SEL competencies for pre-K through 12th grade, though participating states are at different stages of the work.
**TREND: Individualized learning plans help ensure each student is on a path to success.**

Another trend present in many states is a commitment to individualized plans to help students manage transitions so they can catch up to their peers academically, and set college and career goals. In many ESSA plans, students have opportunities throughout their K-12 education, whether with the direct support of a counselor or not, to set goals and track progress based on their own academic needs and interests. Often, educators work with students to develop these plans in middle school or early in high school to provide focused support for students to meet their academic and career goals.

In South Carolina, for example, eighth graders work with their parents or guardians and school counselors to develop an Individual Graduation Plan (IGP). These plans are designed to align students’ needs, interests, and career aspirations. Students receive support in working towards the goals outlined in their IGP throughout high school. Similarly, the Georgia Career Coach pilot program ensures students develop individualized plans to align their academic experiences to their career aspirations. Career coaches support students with individualized support to identify interests, aptitudes, and skills to guide students down a path that aligns to their career goals. Additionally, career coaches connect students to a variety of initiatives in the state that enable students to pursue their own personalized pathways, including career and technical education, work-based learning, and opportunities to earn college credits while in high school.

**TREND: Multiple pathways enable students to align learning to their interests and ambitions.**

Strategies to provide students with multiple pathways appear across multiple sections of state ESSA plans. As mentioned previously, many states incorporated multiple pathway indicators in their accountability systems to expand student opportunity and increase relevance. Many of these states also referenced multiple pathways in their Supporting All Students sections, describing their intentions to invest in and increase access to multiple pathways, including career pathways, advanced coursework, dual enrollment, and early college.

For example, Louisiana will leverage the 3 percent Direct Student Services reservation to create academies for elementary, middle, and high schools that provide students with access to courses and experiences that align with their goals. This can include dual enrollment in high school or music and dual language courses in elementary school. In Colorado, one element of multiple pathways is to advance Career Technical Education (CTE). This relies on engaging businesses and industries to provide work-based learning opportunities for students and creating metrics that include K-12, adult education, higher education, and workforce.

**TREND: Technology enhances student personalized learning experiences.**

Several states plan to leverage the required technology reservation under the Student Success and Academic Enrichment Program to advance personalized learning.
Strategies include purchasing and providing training to educators as well as providing students access to classes not readily available in their districts.

Arizona plans to use technology to provide students with personalized, rigorous learning experiences. The state plans to provide professional learning, training, and technical assistance to help educators build the necessary skills to leverage technology to support students.\textsuperscript{56} Tennessee is implementing multiple strategies to advance personalized learning, included blended learning and predictive analytics. The state is also implementing pilot programs to establish an evidence base in support of leveraging technology to deliver tailored instruction.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{TREND: The state prioritizes personalized learning strategies for 21st Century Community Learning Center grants.}

ESSA maintained the authorization for the 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) program, reaffirming a federal commitment to investment in afterschool programs. Moreover, federal policymakers expanded the program to include extended learning time programs. This creates an opportunity for districts, schools, and community partners to provide personalized programming outside of the traditional learning day for students based on their unique needs and interests.

In Rhode Island, the state established two priorities for 21st CCLC funding. The first priority focuses on third grade reading proficiency, and the second emphasizes advanced learning. This second priority aligns to the state’s revised Secondary School Regulations and promotes the use of innovative strategies to promote personalized learning opportunities outside of school hours.\textsuperscript{58} Massachusetts will prioritize its 21st CCLC funding for schools that implement service learning and project-based learning in alignment with core subject areas and that provide additional ways for students to work towards mastery of core subject areas using personalized approaches.\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{TREND: Competency-based strategies help ensure student mastery.}

Several state ESSA plans include competency-based approaches to meet the diverse needs of students. Competency-based education emphasizes student agency in the design of learning experiences, empowering students to choose how they will demonstrate mastery of rigorous competencies. Students can move on to new content when they are ready, and will receive customized supports to ensure they close achievement gaps with their peers.

Tennessee is exploring strategies for integrating competency-based instructional models across schools, with a focus on high-needs schools and districts. The state is in a process of advancing pilot programs to identify the best approach for scaling these types of practices to other districts.\textsuperscript{60} Maine’s education system is shaped by competency-based practices, referred to locally as proficiency-based education. The system includes a proficiency-based diploma to ensure that students graduate ready for college and career.\textsuperscript{61}
### PERSONALIZED LEARNING TREND

| Students benefit from whole child and social emotional learning experiences. | Indiana  
North Carolina  
Rhode Island |
|---|---|
| Individualized learning plans help ensure each student is on a path to success. | Georgia  
Minnesota  
South Carolina  
Wisconsin |
| Multiple pathways enable students to align learning to their interests and ambitions. | Colorado  
Louisiana  
New Hampshire  
Vermont |
| Technology enhances student personalized learning experiences. | Colorado  
Massachusetts  
New Hampshire  
Rhode Island |
| The state prioritizes personalized learning strategies for 21st Century Community Learning Center grants. | Arizona  
New Hampshire  
Tennessee |
| Competency-based strategies help ensure student mastery. | Maine  
Tennessee |

For detailed information on these states, as well as other states that may be pursuing these trends, please visit KnowledgeWorks State-by-State Strategies for Advancing Personalized Learning Under ESSA.

LEARN MORE
Key Values

ESSA required every state to lead a stakeholder engagement process before submitting an implementation plan to the U.S. Department of Education for approval. Conversations with community members, parents, educators, and students revealed a set of key values that helped bolster the adoption of personalized learning strategies in many states across the country. While these values are encouraging, it is important to note that well-intentioned values do not always translate into sound policies. A commitment to equity, for example, may produce entirely different policies in one state than another. Similarly, states may leverage these values with varying degrees of efficacy and with varying results in their systems.

The following analysis provides an overview of some of the key values that helped catalyze state adoption of personalized learning policies.

**KEY VALUE: A broad and diverse set of decision-makers is essential for designing high-quality education systems.**

Most states emphasized deep commitment to collaboration with the communities they serve, advocating for engagement of a broad set of stakeholders including parents, students, educators, business leaders, community leaders, civil rights organizations, and colleges and universities. State plans emphasize this value through strategies that meaningfully involve the community in the school improvement process, incorporate community values in the state vision, create native language assessments that are developed and reviewed with community partners (look at Hawaii’s plan for a good example), and incorporate surveys into the accountability system that measure student reactions to school quality and student success measures.
KEY VALUE: Leveraging community assets provides greater opportunities for students.
An increasing chorus of stakeholders recognize that learning cannot happen within the four walls of a classroom. Parents and students want learning to be more relevant, and educators aim to leverage community assets to expand educational opportunity for students. The blending of school and community offers tremendous potential for movement towards personalized learning systems. State ESSA plans provide a range of strategies for leveraging community assets to expand educational opportunities. These include the creation of career pathways that enable students to earn industry certifications in partnership with local employers, extended learning opportunities that enable students to earn academic credit with community partners, and college in high school opportunities that enable high school students to earn transferable college credit.

KEY VALUE: Equity requires a more intentional focus on the growth of students who are farthest behind.
States have new opportunities under ESSA to focus on increasing growth and learning outcomes of historically undeserved students, allowing for a shift from traditional approaches to equity that emphasized access over proactive supports. States are now focused on making improvements for student groups that are often farthest behind, in part by developing specific, targeted strategies for accelerating their academic achievement. State strategies also address the unique experience of the whole child through social-emotional development. These strategies are further evidence of a commitment to addressing the difficulties that students significantly below grade-level often face. Examples include the continuation of community schools that provide wraparound services, professional development that focuses on trauma-informed concepts and cultural competencies, and specific approaches to support students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, and migrant students.

KEY VALUE: Diplomas should represent readiness for postsecondary and career.
ESSA stakeholder conversations across multiple states centered on the importance of building K-12 systems that prepare students to seamlessly advance to postsecondary education or career opportunities. Stakeholders often referenced the need to restore faith in the value of a diploma so students, parents, employers, and postsecondary institutions believe graduates have the knowledge and skills to advance without the need for remediation or job training. This value emerged most often in state vision statements for ESSA plans, particularly in states that convened stakeholders to develop a “portrait of a graduate.” These vision statements articulate the knowledge, skills, and life characteristics expected of graduates to be successful for life beyond high school. States also emphasized readiness when describing initiatives that promote multiple pathways to graduation. Student access to equally rigorous and diverse pathway experiences helps increase relevancy and readiness for postsecondary educational opportunities and career.
KEY VALUE: A valuable educational experience requires that student voices are heard.

Students are, in many ways, the most important stakeholder group to engage when developing education systems. They can offer important information on the quality and impact of teaching and learning strategies, as well as insights into the culture of a school building. A significant number of states were intentional about elevating student voice in their education systems. Some states approached this by integrating student surveys into their accountability or reporting systems to measure school quality, while others advanced strategies to provide every student with an individualized learning plan that aligns to their interests, goals, and needs.

KEY VALUE: All levels of the system should focus on continuous improvement.

One of the most encouraging values reflected in state plans is a commitment to continuous improvement. Many states have signaled intentions to revise their ESSA plans over time, just as they expect their districts to do with their own implementation plans for school improvement. A number of states have tiered supports and expectations for continuous improvement among all schools and districts, not just those designated in need of support and improvement. Additionally, some states plan to continue their own stakeholder engagement efforts to help review and refine ESSA policies. A handful of states have also outlined specific plans to revisit accountability indicators or create new goals over time to reflect the changing needs of the state. An ongoing commitment to continuous improvement will ensure the education system remains responsive to the evolving needs of schools and communities.
Additional KnowledgeWorks ESSA Resources
KnowledgeWorks has released a series of resources to help education stakeholders leverage ESSA to advance personalized learning opportunities for students and educators. Read on to learn more about the possibilities that exist under the new law.

State-by-State Strategies for Advancing Personalized Learning through ESSA – This resource provides a state-by-state summary of the strategies that each state incorporated into their plan for implementation of ESSA. This 50-state data set will help stakeholders identify emerging strategies across the country to advance personalized learning for students.

ESSA and Personalized Learning Dashboard – Our ESSA and Personalized Learning Dashboard provides a high-level glimpse of common strategies that states are advancing to personalize instruction for students and educators. The dashboard helps illustrate the growing support for personalized education systems.

A Visioning Toolkit for Better Assessments – Created in partnership with the Center for Assessment and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, this toolkit will help stakeholders explore the new assessment provisions under ESSA that support the design of next generation assessment systems.

Recommendations for Advancing Personalized Learning Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – This resource provides a set of concrete policy recommendations to help states leverage ESSA to build high-quality personalized learning systems. Readers will also benefit from guiding questions that will help stakeholders consider strategies to advance state and local alignment, college and career readiness, equity, and continuous improvement.

New Opportunities to Advance Personalized Learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act – Our first ESSA resource offers a side-by-side comparison of the differences between the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and ESSA, providing important insights on opportunities within ESSA to advance personalized learning.
1. Section 1204 of ESSA, the Innovative and Assessment Accountability Demonstration Authority provides states the opportunity to pilot next generation assessments with a group of their districts if the state can provide evidence that the pilot assessments are of high technical quality and comparable to the federally-required statewide assessments as well as a compelling plan for scaling the assessments statewide within five years.


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KnowledgeWorks is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing personalized learning that empowers every child to take ownership of their success. With nearly 20 years of experience exploring the future of learning, growing educator impact and working with state and federal policymakers, our passionate team partners with schools and communities to grow a system-wide approach to sustain student-centered practices so that every child graduates ready for what’s next.

Get more resources to help make personalized learning a reality at KnowledgeWorks.org.