CSAI Brief

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Equity Principles: Foundational Truths to Promote Equity in States' ESSA Plans

What Are Principles and Why Are They Important?

The Google Dictionary defines a principle as "a fundamental truth that serves as the foundation for a system of beliefs or behaviors." In other words, a robust set of principles will guide good problem-solving and decision-making, and they can be applied again and again in similar situations to help you reach your goals. Every day, each of us is faced with a blizzard of situations we must respond to. Without a set of guiding principles, we would be forced to deal with all of these situations individually as if we were experiencing each of them for the first time. If instead we classify these situations into types and have strong principles for dealing with them, we can make better decisions and experience better results.[1]

Why Have a Set of Principles for Guiding More Equitable Accountability Systems?

The reauthorized federal education law known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) shifts much of the authority for developing equitable accountability systems from the U.S. Department of Education to state education agencies. This increased authority creates new decision-making challenges for state agencies, such as how to evaluate and rank school performance, identify and support struggling schools, and communicate school performance results to the public. State agencies now assume much greater responsibility for developing equitable accountability systems, monitoring the system's progress, identifying problems and unintentional consequences emerging from the new system, and making improvements to ensure the system improves equitable access to a high-quality education. Extensive commentary exists to describe the challenges that state agencies face as they attempt to overhaul their accountability plans to support more equitable educational systems. A detailed synthesis of this commentary is beyond the scope of this brief; however, more information is readily available.[2] States can more effectively manage these new responsibilities and improve their problem-solving capacity by applying a robust set of equity principles to guide decisions. As an example of how principles can support the decision-making process, consider the stakeholder feedback process. As states engage with various stakeholder groups, they generate a wide range of complex and conflicting ideas and solutions. As states reflect on stakeholder feedback and consider refinements in their equity plans, having a set of clearly defined principles can be helpful in guiding the selection of practices that address the states' unique context, while ensuring that any changes prioritize equity and improvement for all.

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[1] Dalio, R. (2017). Principles. New York: Simon and Schuster.

[2] A summary of state agencies' challenges implementing accountability systems to improve equity under ESSA can be found in the following sources:
https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/01/20/essa-poses-capacity-challenges-for-state-education.html
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuJuxZ3WMrA

Principles for Promoting Equity in States' Accountability Systems

It is often easier for people to agree on a set of principles than a set of practices, and those principles create a common ground to promote more collaborative decision-making. With this in mind, we present eight guiding principles to support states' equity plans as they shift from focusing on compliance to promoting more equitable opportunities for student learning through accountability, technical support, and a focus on continuous improvement. These principles are not intended to be an exhaustive list or a recipe for success. Rather, they are considerations that can facilitate deeper thought and reflection about how states might approach the decision-making process as they revisit and revise their accountability systems. We encourage states to add principles to this list or revise these principles to fit their unique context.

Principle #1 A Well-Designed Theory of Action Establishes a Common Purpose and Clear Direction for Achieving Equity

A theory of action or logic model is important when states want to design and evaluate the implementation of accountability policies and systems. It is the roadmap that states use to articulate clear equity-focused goals and determine how to reach them. A theory of action is a schematic representation that details a clear, logical, and step-by-step approach detailing how the state will meet its equity goals. A well-developed theory of action includes the following features:

♦ Resources a state needs to implement a more equitable accountability system

♦ Inputs, or state-level practices to be implemented. Practices may include training, tools, resources, or other supports that the state education agency provides to districts and schools to support the use of accountability results to promote equitable opportunities for students

♦ Outputs, or subsequent changes in district and school practices that result from state practices. Outputs typically represent the desired behavioral changes SEAs would expect to see district leaders, school leaders, and teachers implementing as a result of the training and support provided

♦ Short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes, which are changes that filter down to the classroom level and, ultimately, the student level, to produce desired changes in equity and performance. Examples of short-term outcomes may include changes in students' engagement levels, absenteeism rates, or referral rates. Medium-term outcomes may include changes in students' engagement levels, school climate measures, or interim assessments. Long-term outcomes typically represent changes in distal measures that are less sensitive to day-to-day change, such as student achievement on statewide standardized tests

A well-developed theory of action can also be a helpful tool in delineating between the practices, resources, and indicators designed for accountability purposes (i.e., compliance; promoting equity) and those designed to support continuous school improvement.

Principle #2 A Strong Collaborative Process Promotes Unification among Stakeholder Groups

School improvement is more likely to be achieved when all stakeholders work together toward a common vision. Often, groups forge ahead with plans that result in unintended consequences for other groups, especially when the stakes are high and improvement is imminent. To work effectively, purposeful and meaningful collaboration should focus inward and outward to get results.

Focusing Inward. Within a SEA, authentic collaboration requires unified leadership, a common vision (which a theory of action can facilitate), structures that promote collaborative values, and a commitment to internal accountability for results. Although moving the needle on any one of these areas may seem insurmountable within a large bureaucratic structure like a state education agency, even small improvements can make a big difference. With a strong collaborative internal culture, a state is much more likely to develop strong external engagement.

Focusing Outward. Collaboration must also extend outward to a very diverse and expansive group of external stakeholders. According to a recent article from the Education Commission of the States, four characteristics are associated with effective stakeholder engagement:[3]

- ♦ Inclusion: Seek out groups that may feel disconnected or have not historically been engaged in a public education dialogue

- ♦ Accessibility: Make it easy for people to participate, to understand what is happening and to be heard

- ♦ Sustainability: See stakeholder engagement as a continuous process involving ongoing dialogue—not as a one-time proposition

- ♦ Focus on Results: Use engagement as a stepping-stone toward building long-term partnerships that can help school systems get results that matter

Principle #3 Augmenting Goals with Action Plans, Timelines, and Regular Check-Ins Sustains Momentum

Prior research and practical experience suggest that SMART goals—specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound—are necessary prerequisites for achieving a goal. Cross-department teams within a SEA should consider developing these goals for key ESSA requirements, such as overall achievement, subgroup achievement and erasing achievement gaps, identifying CSI/TSI schools, addressing resource inequities, and ensuring all students have access to qualified and effective teachers.

Once a SEA has SMART goals in place, consider specifying milestones, deadlines to meet each milestone, and specific action steps to achieve them. Because things can happen that are out of any single department's control, it is helpful to identify a cross-department team that regularly meets to review and update the plan, assign tasks, report progress, and hold people accountable for results.

[3] Jordan, M., Chrislip, D., and Workman, E. (2016). Education Commission of the States Special Report: Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement. Denver: Education Commission of the States.

Principle #4 Measuring School Conditions for Learning Sharpens the Focus on Equity

The Learning Policy Institute (LPI) recently released a number of articles to promote the use of what they call "opportunity to learn" indicators.[4] These are a diverse set of indicators that aim to open up and strengthen opportunities for learning, especially for disadvantaged subgroups. These indicators align with ESSA requirements and include:

♦   Chronic absenteeism rates

♦   Student suspension/expulsion rates

♦   Extended-year graduation rates (5–7 years)

♦   College and career success measures (e.g., percentages of students who enroll in college-ready AP or IB courses)

♦   School climate measures

Student assessment results only tell part of the story. Other indicators of school conditions can shine light on specific conditions and opportunities that, when acted on, can create greater equity. According to research from LPI, *"well-chosen indicators of school conditions and outcomes can leverage greater attention to students' opportunities to learn . . . in ways that can produce much greater equity"* (p. 1).

Many states include these equity indicators in their ESSA plans. If that is the case, a helpful next step for SEAs is to connect these opportunity measures back to a well-developed theory to ensure that each of the measures—including other performance indicators required under ESSA—align with and support the short- and long-term outcomes a state wants to prioritize. For example, a school climate survey can be used to measure the extent to which working conditions are improving. Access to, completion of, and performance in AP, IB, and other college- and career-ready coursework can be a powerful proxy for longer-term student performance outcomes (e.g., college persistence and completion).

Principle #5 Clear, Simple, and Accessible Reporting Practices Motivate Actionable Decision-Making

Reporting tools used for communicating annual school performance results should be designed with the primary goals of ensuring the validity of scores, making sure final results are defensible, and making sure results can be easily interpreted and useful for decision-making. Reports that motivate actionable decision-making share the following characteristics:

♦   Meaningfully differentiate among schools

♦   Balance ease of communication with transparent reporting on individual indicators

♦   Report on a full dashboard of measures for all relevant subgroups to monitor continuous improvement

♦   Report additional relevant measures beyond those identified under ESSA

Useful reporting is challenging because it requires a careful balance between simplicity and transparency. For reports to be useful, they need to be easy for non-technical audiences like parents and families to understand and engage with. At the same time, state reports should provide transparent information to inform subgroup gaps and equity issues. Among states that use annual summative ratings to rank school performance and identify schools needing additional support, a primary challenge will be clearly communicating how a total performance score is calculated,

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[4] Kostyo, S., Cardichon, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2018). Making ESSA's equity promise real: State strategies to close the opportunity gap. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

including the indicators and weights that make up that total score. Among states using a dashboard or decision rules, a primary challenge will be making the identification process easy for parents and families to easily differentiate among schools when looking across a variety of indicators.

Principle #6 Data-Driven Improvement Cycles Are Essential for Scaling-Up Evidence-Based Practice

A large body of research literature exists to guide evidence-based school improvement practice; however, there is still much to be learned about what types of statewide supports work best, for whom, and under what conditions. For example, what works for students in a rural school may not work for students in an urban school, and what works for one subgroup of students may not work for another.

How do we create statewide systems that promote data-driven cultures and prioritize evidence-based practices that address students' unique needs? ESSA provides incentives and flexibility for states and districts to test new strategies. For example, many states are taking advantage of federal assessment waivers and grants to develop more robust systems of assessments and improve reporting and school support strategies. In the same way, states can offer incentives to districts to help them test and scale effective student support strategies.

One specific example that has proven effective in scaling up effective strategies is the use of Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles.[5] PDSA cycles are often implemented through networked improvement communities that bring together practitioners and research experts to apply their knowledge to address specific problems. PDSA cycles start with a specific plan to address a problem or set of problems. The plan is implemented, and data is systematically collected and analyzed to determine how well the plan worked, and for what groups of students. Then, the group refines the original plan to better address gaps or groups for whom the intervention wasn't as successful, and the cycle begins again. A process like this can help districts and states improve quickly by innovating, evaluating, and scaling up what works.

Principle #7 Assessment Innovation Holds Great Potential for Improving Equitable Practice

Next-generation standards and curricula demand new and innovative approaches to assessing higher-order thinking. The traditional way of testing students using annual standardized multiple-choice tests no longer captures the full range of skills that students must know and demonstrate. States can improve schools' capacity for data use and improvement by developing, vetting, or adopting new assessment tools that measure higher-order thinking; introducing assessment systems that shift from primarily summative to primarily formative, and increasing assessment literacy training. Under the federal Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA), states are encouraged to develop and test new assessments to streamline their existing systems of assessment. New Hampshire and Louisiana are two states approved to develop and test new assessment approaches under IADA, and other states are following their lead. How each state plans to move to next-generation systems will differ depending on existing state policies, context, and priorities.

As states continue testing and scaling new approaches to assessment, their methods often vary depending on how tightly or loosely coupled each state wants these systems to be between state and district. For example, states like New Hampshire and Louisiana are testing approaches for integrating performance-based assessment (The PACE model in NH) and interim assessment of ELA and social studies content (LEAP 2025 in LA) into their statewide accountability systems. Other states provide interim and formative assessments to districts for voluntary use, giving more leeway to districts to determine whether and how they want to use them.

[5] Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. (2015). Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. See also Dynarski, M. (2017). State Plans Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Where is the Research? Brookings: New York, NY. Report retrieved from: https://www.brookings.edu/research/state-plans-under-the-every-student-succeeds-act-where-is-the-research/

Principle #8 Balancing a State's Capacity to Provide School Support with the School Identification Process Is Essential for Building Trust and Strengthening Partnerships

As states begin to review and refine their existing methods for identifying CSI/TSI schools and providing universal support to schools, they should consider how many schools will be identified and then determine whether existing plans for supporting these schools can reasonably be provided given state resources. States have two levers to utilize here: the criteria for identifying schools and the types and intensity of support provided to schools in different tiers. The important thing is to make sure that a state can provide the levels of support called for in its ESSA plans to all schools that qualify for services.

Moving Forward

As states revisit their ESSA accountability plans, adopting a set of principles can be a helpful strategy to guide strategic planning, focus decision-making, and build stakeholder consensus around the common goal of creating a more equitable educational system. We offer the principles described above as a starting point for state teams that are preparing to engage in stakeholder feedback and evaluate their equity plans. We encourage states to apply, test, and adapt these principles to support their unique circumstances.