

OPENING DOORS FOR EARLY LEARNING AND EARLY GRADES SUCCESS

The Opportunities and Risks for Educational Equity in New York State Under ESSA

The new federal education law known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) asks states to redesign their accountability systems to focus on what they value most about school performance and what to do when a school is not meeting expectations on these measures for any group of students. This emphasis on providing the tools and sustained support to address opportunity and achievement gaps can provide a new impetus to focus on crucial early learning strategies across New York.

Investing in high-quality early childhood programs generates improved student outcomes as well as significant short- and long-term economic benefits and positive returns for taxpayers. While New York State has made important gains in expanding access to pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds — with nearly two-thirds of eligible children now enrolled in pre-k programs — there is a long way to go on both expanding access to high-need 3- and 4-year-olds *and* ensuring quality.

We also know that early learning does not end with high-quality child care and pre-kindergarten programs. Children must successfully transition into kindergarten and

receive academically and social-emotionally rich, age-appropriate learning opportunities in the early grades. When successful, these strategies can help children develop a love of learning and reach proficiency on grade-level reading standards by the end of third grade — a critical benchmark for long-term success.

Our coalition of civil rights, education, parent, and business organizations believes that in crafting New York's ESSA state plan, the state must:

- Keep student achievement and attainment front and center in our accountability system, while also including a limited number of key additional indicators;
- Generate and publicize additional data beyond test scores, providing useful and transparent information to parents and other stakeholders; and
- Take action when schools are not meeting rigorous expectations for any group of children, and enact supportive means to help schools improve.

In support of these principles, we recommend that state policymakers advance the following early learning strategies through ESSA:

The bottom line: ESSA can help increase awareness of critical early learning strategies and provide the urgency, resources, tools and transparency to expand high-quality early learning opportunities.



- **Ensure challenging, developmentally appropriate academic standards in the early grades.** Strong academic standards are the backbone of excellent teaching and learning. As the Board of Regents and State Education Department complete their review of the state’s academic standards, they must maintain and strengthen the state’s early learning standards and provide support for integrated curricula that incorporate best practices for active learning, such as using play, movement and language, and other academic and non-academic evidence-based learning strategies.
- **Have academic achievement drive school performance determinations and improvement strategies in the new accountability system.** National research and New York’s own achievement results show the importance of helping students read on grade level by third grade. As the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading has found, “74 percent of students who fail to read proficiently by the end of third grade falter in the later grades and often drop out before earning a high school diploma.” Here in New York, students who meet English language arts (ELA) standards by the end of third grade are four times more likely to be proficient in ELA at the end of sixth grade than their peers who do not meet standards. This pattern holds true across racial, ethnic, and income groups and points to the need to ensure that academic indicators remain most heavily weighted in New York’s accountability system in order to direct attention, resources, and urgency to support students who are at risk of falling behind.
- **Include a limited number of other key accountability indicators that support early learning.** In addition to academic

indicators, New York should incorporate a small number of other valuable measures that are directly related to student success and are within the control of the school. Because instructional time is so important, accountability indicators should include expecting schools to reduce chronic absenteeism and to reduce student disciplinary measures that remove children from instruction, including but not limited to out-of-school suspensions. There are research-backed, school-based strategies for addressing both of these issues.

It is important to note that *access to early childhood programs* should not be an accountability indicator used to rate schools; this measure is often not within the control of an individual school, and while it *leads to* student success (an input), it is not *evidence of* student success (an output). Instead, access to early childhood programs can be incentivized by including it in diagnostic needs assessments and school report cards, as described below.

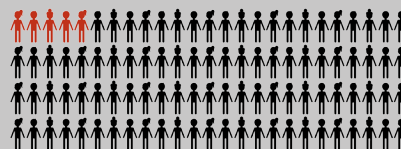
- **Create an improvement process that sets schools on a path to success.** For elementary schools that are identified as needing targeted or comprehensive support and improvement, the state should ensure that the improvement process begins with a high-quality diagnostic needs assessment that addresses school-based causes of underperformance and incorporates key early learning strategies (and supports districts and schools in their use), including:
 - o the availability of a pipeline of high-quality birth through kindergarten programs, which can be supported with federal funds in programs that serve significant numbers of low-income students;

- o best practices for kindergarten transition, including structured communication and shared professional development between pre-k providers (including child care providers) and kindergarten teachers;
- o implementation of early warning systems for K-3 students who may be struggling, including early screening for learning and attention issues; and
- o additional time for learning for students who need it, especially in communities that do not have access to high-quality early childhood education programs.
- **Improve parent engagement, support, and transparency.** The state's accountability system should ensure meaningful continuous engagement with parents. In addition, ESSA requires New York to provide better school report cards to shine a light on school performance as well as opportunity gaps. The state should ensure that school report cards indicate whether schools provide access to high-quality pre-k. The state should also take advantage of funding opportunities in ESSA to encourage independent parent voices and parent-led organizing.
- **Support strong educators for all students, recognizing the critical role of teachers and school leaders for student success.** In addition to providing resources and tools to support educators in the classroom, the state should require additional practical experience in teacher preparation programs, including providing prospective teachers with experience in multiple types of settings and with students of different age ranges — promoting a strong understanding of both content knowledge and child development. The state should also address the needs of the early childhood workforce, which will promote program quality and student success.

Why is it so important to read on grade level by the end of third grade?

If a student was **well below proficient** (level 1) in **third grade ELA**, the likelihood she will be **proficient** in **sixth grade** is ...

5%



If a student was **well below proficient** or **partially proficient** (level 1 or 2) in **third grade ELA**, the likelihood she will be **proficient** in **sixth grade** is ...

17%



If a student was **proficient** in **third grade ELA**, the likelihood she will be **proficient** in **sixth grade** is ...

74%



Source: State Education Department, 2012-13 and 2015-16 linked English language arts student assessment results. Data provided by request.