Reflections on ESSA

Assessment and accountability are controversial topics on the landscape of education today. The combination of end of year summative assessments and teacher evaluation as interpreted by NYSED led to a backlash known as the “opt out” movement.

The goal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) was that students living in poverty would have the same educational opportunities as students not living in poverty. Thus, the achievement gap would be smaller (Chenoweth). The goal of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) was “to create incentives for educators to focus on student achievement” (Rothman and Marion, 2016, p. 34).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) replaces No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The ESSA allows more state flexibility which may result in more education variation among the states. The entire student enrollment for the state of South Dakota is about 130,000; whereas, the enrollment of Nassau County is about 250,000. The implementation of ESSA will be different in South Dakota than in New York. In New York State, the New York State Education Department needs to comply with New York state laws and must respect New York traditions.

ESSA principles

ESSA requires that states establish standards and “explicitly requires that they be tied directly to what is required for credit-bearing classes in college, career, and technical education” (Chenoweth, p. 39). Forty years ago, districts across the state and even teachers within a building may have had different expectations for students. The expectation of standards is that all teachers of a course will have the same academic goals for that course.

The second principle is that educators have a responsibility to assist all of their students to meet or exceed the standards. The notion of closing the achievement gap is embedded in ESSA.

The third principle is that states still have the responsibility to measure whether schools are adequately teaching the standards. State assessments are designed to compare one group of students to another. The only way that stakeholders can compare the progress of groups of students is to have a common measure. ESSA continues the practice of yearly assessment in ELA and mathematics for grades three through eight and at least once for each high school core subject.

The fourth principle is that “the data show how well schools are serving all students and specific demographic groups of students” (Chenoweth, p. 39). One of the goals of this data reporting should be to identify “schools and districts that have been successful with large populations” of demographic subgroups (p. 39). The expertise of those schools and districts needs to be disseminated to other schools and districts with similar populations.

Role of NYSED

It has been suggested that there are five leadership roles of a state education agency (Weiss and McGuinn, 2016, p. 30):
• Articulate vision, priorities, and goals.
• Support academic improvement through implementing standards and assessments.
• Design and implement accountability systems.
• Administer, implement, and oversee state and federal funding and programs.
• Develop two-way communications with stakeholders and the public.

It is the work of the state education department to adopt academic standards, prepare assessments aligned to those standards, and to report results for the assessments (Weiss and McGuinn). Under ESSA “states must demonstrate that they have ‘challenging academic standards’ aligned with ‘entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the [state’s] system of public higher education’ and with ‘state career and technical education standards’” (Weiss and McGuinn, p. 30). The requirement for annual assessments for grades 3 through 8 and the reporting of results by subgroups has not changed under ESSA.

NYSED is responsible for designing and implementing the accountability system for New York State. The accountability system includes indicators of success, identification of school quality, and consequences for the lowest performing schools (Weiss and McGuinn). The indicators will be reported by school, district, and the state. The results will be disaggregated by student subgroups for each entity. States may develop systems that emphasize continuous improvement from year to year or they may design a system that is driven by specific proficiency goals. Under ESSA states are required to develop a system that meaningfully differentiates between schools using more than one indicator. These indicators must include proficiency on state assessments, high school graduation rates, an indicator for K-8 schools, an English language proficiency indicator for English language learners, and at least one other indicator determined by the state. The system may be guided by clarity, simplicity/complexity, fairness, closing the achievement gap, growth in reading and mathematics, diagnosing school problems. A simple system may not be seen as a fair system. A system focused on closing the achievement gap may not emphasize growth in reading and mathematics for all students. The decisions that need to be made do not have easy solutions.

Closing the Gap

One of the goals of NCLB was to close the achievement gap between different subgroups of students. This is also a goal of ESSA. One of the reports in the Instructional Data Warehouse is “Subgroup Analysis by Performance Level—Regional. This report is also available for each district. When the data for 2007 is compared to the data for 2015 for the NYS grade four ELA assessment, it seems that the achievement gap has become wider (Table 1). The differences between females and males increased from five percent to nine percent. The differences between Asians and Blacks increased from 14% to 38%, Asians and Latino from 18% to 40%, Asians and White from 2% to 10%. The difference between not low income and low income increased from 16% to 33%. The data does not indicate the reason for the change nor does it suggest solutions. The data does identify the goal of closing the achievement gap has not been accomplished in Nassau County.

Chenoweth (p.40-42) has studied districts that are more successful than other districts with the same demographics. The success is more about culture than about programs. Educators in more successful districts make use of current research on how students learn, feedback to students, and the organizational leverage of the principal. In more successful districts, teams of educators visit other successful districts. Successful teachers within these districts are encouraged to share their expertise with other teachers. In these districts, teachers agree on what students should know and be able to do. They give the same assessments at about the same time and trust each other to share the results. In high performing districts, the discipline system is focused on learning. There is more of a focus on in-school suspension than making use of out-of-school suspension. There is an expectation that suspended students will complete work and will be mentored.

Data Literacy

ESSA focuses more on teacher data literacy than NCLB did. Hopefully, the mindset about data will move from compliance and accountability to the use of data as “hard evidence to undergird educational decisions rather than relying on anecdotes and intuition” (Mandinach and Gummer, p.43). The expectation is that teachers will receive professional development on how to use data and assessment to inform classroom practice. There is recognition within ESSA that data goes beyond academic summative assessment data and includes data about behavior, attendance, and climate among others.
Maddinach and Gummer (p.44) provide a definition of data literacy for teachers

Data literacy for teaching is the ability to transform information into actionable instructional knowledge and practices … to help determine instructional steps. It combines an understanding of data with standards, disciplinary knowledge, knowledge of practices, curricular knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and an understanding of how children learn.”

The cycle for the use of data to change instruction may begin with data that is collected to answer a specific question. At other times, the data is collected and presented for discussion with the question being, “What student/curricular strengths and weaknesses do you see in this data?” If fifth grade students have been given an assessment on fractions, the assessment may have been designed to answer questions such as

- Which students know the fourth grade pre-requisite skills for grade five fractions?
- Which students successfully complete the level 2 questions aligned to the standards?
- Which students successfully complete the items that assess the fifth grade standards for fractions?
- Which students successfully complete the items that model the problems from class?
- Which students successfully apply what was taught to unique items?

The discussion among the fifth grade teachers may also include questions such as

- If a large group of students incorrectly answer an item, where is their mistake?
- Is there a difference among teachers on which items have a high success rate and a low success rate?
- What instructional technique did the successful teachers use for that concept?

Teachers need to be able to determine the right data for the question. It is also important to determine the quality of the data for answering the question. The quality of the data may be affected by the quality of the assessment items.

To be useful for instructional change, quantitative or qualitative data must be prioritized, examined, analyzed and interpreted. One of the keys is focusing on patterns and trends rather than individual items. Then, decisions need to be made about instruction adjustments such as changing instructional design or differentiating instruction. After implementing the changes, the effectiveness of the changes needs to be evaluated.

One of the key features of using data for instruction is the grade level or course team that examines the data. It takes time to build the trust to frankly discuss classroom successes and challenges.

ESSA is about student success and about collecting evidence of that success. The data may highlight where there is student success and where there is student need. Schools will become more successful when expertise is identified and shared.


**Additional Resources** (Chenoweth, p. 40-41)


[www.visible-learning.org](http://www.visible-learning.org)

[wallace-foundation.org/knowledge-center](http://wallace-foundation.org/knowledge-center)

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<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Achievement Gaps — Grade 4 ELA</th>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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