

Statement of Dr. Susan S. Bunting
Secretary of Education
State of Delaware
“The Every Student Succeeds Act: States Leading the Way”
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First, I would like to thank this Committee for working to develop and approve ESSA with 85 “yes” votes in the Senate in 2015. At that time, I was serving as a local district superintendent and as an AASA legislative advocate, and was fortunate to share the perspective of superintendents with Delaware’s congressional delegates to not only confirm that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) had run its course and that its one-size-fits-all approach did not yield necessary improvements, but to also enthusiastically support the new law’s support for promoting different approaches to improving struggling schools across the country. By passing ESSA, Congress harnessed the energy in states and local communities in Delaware and across the country, and infused promising practices into the implementation of the new law while still ensuring appropriate accountability guardrails. While it is too early to provide final judgement on the prospects for ESSA to realize its goals, I am greatly encouraged by the work underway in Delaware to create more equitable opportunities for all children.

Stakeholder Engagement in ESSA Assessment, Accountability, and Reporting

Congress embraced state and local flexibility in ESSA, while preserving accountability for outcomes for all students. This was a bipartisan acknowledgement that states and school districts, with the support of the U.S. Department of Education, are best situated to know how to serve the young people in their communities. No one better understands the potential and the possible pitfalls faced by our schools than the education professionals I represent and serve. Delaware educators are working to “get it right” for students. With support from the Council of Chief State School Officers, we are working to close gaps and turn around schools, and we are making sure that school improvement interventions don’t result in unintended consequences for kids. To date, we have attempted to do this by surrounding ourselves with stakeholders who are providing constant input and feedback on the best ways to maximize flexibility in promoting student success.

Admittedly, from the beginning, Delaware’s ESSA plan has been one “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” The law rightly asks states to work closely with stakeholders – teachers, principals, parents, students, tribal leaders, and community organizations – to do what is best for the students in their state and local communities. Delaware thoroughly embraced this opportunity and involved a diverse group of stakeholders in not only writing its ESSA plan but also in myriad other ESSA-connected activities. The plan’s design was a collaborative effort between the Department of Education and an ESSA Advisory Council, whose members ran the gamut from the president of the state’s superintendents’ association to a Nanticoke tribe member, from legislators to PTO officers, and from businessmen to the Executive Director of the

Latin American Community Center. Together they crafted a plan that strikes an appropriate balance by setting a high bar to ensure all kids receive an equitable education while making sure those closest to students have the flexibility they need to make critical decisions on how to reach mutually established targets.

As an example, the law makes sure every child is tested at least once a year, but allows state and local leaders to determine the best way to conduct those assessments. Stakeholders contributed to Delaware's selection of Smarter Balanced as its assessment tool to measure third through eighth graders' academic proficiency and growth. Being concerned about the testing load for upperclassmen, they supported the decision to administer the SAT to all eleventh graders to fulfill the high school academic assessment requirement.

Another major stakeholder contribution was a distinct but equally diverse committee's creation of a new statewide accountability system, entitled the Delaware School Success Framework (DSSF). Developed by practitioners and stakeholders, DSSF includes multiple measures of school success rather than a single academic indicator. Included at both the elementary and secondary levels are academic proficiency in ELA and math and growth in ELA and math. In addition, school quality measures include chronic absenteeism, proficiency in science and social studies, career and college preparedness, and a 9th grader's being "on track" for graduation. A further indicator of student success is the graduation rate, which is calculated for the 4-, 5-, and 6-year adjusted cohort. The latter two indicators are factors solely at the secondary level. Finally, at both levels, English Language Learners' progress toward proficiency as documented via ACCESS 2.0 is a factor in each school's overall "success." All factors are weighted with the academic measures comprising a greater percentage of the overall 500-point index.

Delaware's communities were also deeply involved in the design of new ESSA state, district, and school report cards, which will debut on December 17th of this year. Mirroring the practice of conducting community conversations about the ESSA plan design, a Delaware Department of Education team held an assortment of meetings with parents and community members throughout the state to solicit input regarding what information they would most like displayed via the electronic document. Participants in these sessions examined lists of federal and state required contents, identified which of those along with community specific informational items warranted inclusion, and expressed preferences for which should be featured on the main page and which should be listed under tabs. The result of this collaborative process, precipitated by congressional approval of ESSA, is that the federally-required report card will better reflect Delaware's community needs than prior iterations have in the past.

Transforming State and Local Education Systems

This connectivity with stakeholders from the 98-mile stretch of this gem of a state is only one of the noteworthy changes in what Delaware is doing differently under ESSA. Paramount as well has been the restructuring of our state Department of Education, which has been transformed from a regulatory agency into a supportive one. During the ESSA plan design, the Department adopted an icon featuring Delaware's vision of "Every learner ready for success in college, career and life" surrounded by the top priorities for the state's work - rigorous standards, engaged

community, early learning, and environments conducive to learning. These priorities focus the Department's work to the extent that every project and even budget decisions are strictly guided by the citizen committees' and Department staff's established priorities. In order to best prepare for the identification of Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) and Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools, our agency has reorganized personnel and responsibilities to form Academic Support, Educator Support, Student Support, and Operational Support Teams dedicated to service to schools. For the past eighteen months since I became Secretary, our message to the field and education stakeholders has been, "We are here to support you."

Working with Districts and State Policymakers to Improve Our Schools

Another key ESSA-related change has been the introduction of individualized district superintendent goal-setting and summative conferences. Soon after the verification of Smarter Balanced and SAT results, I meet with each individual superintendent to discuss his/her district's and schools' results. Based on the state's academic targets for the Year 2030 (a year chosen because of the 2017 entering kindergartners' opportunity to pass through the educational system in the 13 years before 2030), each superintendent and I calculated the annual growth his/her district must make in order for the state to reach its academic goals. Recognizing his or her individual district's contribution to the state's overall achievement, the local superintendent in turn shares with and holds school leaders in their home district accountable for progress toward the district's academic goals. In addition, each superintendent selects a specific subgroup that warrants particular attention based on performance data. During the conferences I include such directed questions as, "How do you plan to increase third grade reading proficiency?", "What strategies do you have for enhancing SAT scores?" and "What additional supports are you providing to your English learners?" At mid-year we again meet to discuss progress toward the overall goals and engage in deep conversation about accomplishments and challenges. A final query is always, "What can the Department do to be of greater support?" This concept of superintendent accountability is a relatively new one in our state. Yet, the overarching theme of support is being embraced from the leadership to the local level, and ESSA has greatly facilitated this approach.

During these conversations superintendents frequently mention groups with which educators have not been given enough professional learning to support. In addition to English learners, students with disabilities and those who are economically challenged, educators have more recently cited concerns about supporting trauma-impacted students. As a result of these conversations, the Delaware Department of Education is working with higher education institutions to develop a teacher pipeline that is prepared to enter classrooms with the skills necessary to best serve our diverse student population. These skills include the knowledge of and experience in working with special education students, English learners, and those who have endured adverse childhood experiences. In fact, Delaware has launched a major initiative to introduce teachers and administrators throughout the state to and encourage the use of trauma-informed practices.

The refreshing change from NCLB's focus on identifying and punishing schools to ESSA'S support model has helped to promote the redesign of the former silos, created by individual work groups,

to a new synergetic team structure at the Department. This performance support team is composed of professionals focused on student, educator, and academic support focused on enhancing the overall success of schools. The law ensures every state will focus on improving low-performing schools, yet gives states the opportunity to work with local educators, parents, civil rights advocates, and other stakeholders to determine the best evidence-based strategies to improve specific struggling schools. As Delaware fulfills the requirement of identifying both CSI and TSI schools in November, individuals within the performance support teams are working together to create a menu of evidence-based available supports that can be aligned with individualized plans developed jointly between the state and local education agencies/charters. No longer is a single office within the state Department of Education responsible for school improvement; rather a team is ready to come together, across areas of expertise, in an effort to address the specific and unique needs of each of our schools. In the spirit of collaboration and community, my agency is facilitating regular communication between and the solicitation of feedback from local education agencies, charters, and multiple stakeholder groups to build a more cohesive approach to continuous school improvement.

Delaware's political leaders have embraced a role in our state's school improvement movement. Recognizing the plight of the state's struggling schools, state legislators passed a Fiscal Year 2019 (FY19) budget that funds math specialists for our state's lowest performing middle schools. Moreover, they allocated monies to support the placement of reading interventionists in the lowest performing elementary schools. Acknowledging the impact of poverty on learning and of the steadily expanding English learner population in the state, the FY19 budget also included six million dollars for opportunity grants that were made available to the forty-four schools whose student populations met the 60% poverty and/or the 20% English learner criteria. Both traditional and charter schools have flexibility to invest these funds in the supports each deems most beneficial for its students.

Ongoing ESSA Challenges

ESSA positives have been many and its negatives few. Despite careful planning and invaluable input from a variety of interested partners, Delaware has encountered a few challenges in implementing the law. Our design to include science and social studies proficiency in the academic achievement and progress sections of our accountability system failed to receive initial approval from the US Department of Education, even though Secretary DeVos has strongly encouraged states to "think out of the box." Consequently, we were forced instead to relegate those two key subjects to the School Quality section of our accountability system. A second challenge has been the unavailability of a high school growth measure. Although we originally had hoped to use PSAT scores as the baseline upon which to measure growth toward the SAT, that strategy was determined to be statistically unsound so we were unable to pursue it. A third challenge involved a volatile reaction within our state to the proposed use of stars as a rating symbol on the new report cards. Local legislators, for example, argued that a two-star rating would send an unduly negative message because "No one would stay in a two-star hotel!" The diverse group of stakeholders working on the project decided to use labels rather than stars to avoid unnecessary controversy.

As Delaware journeys deeper into ESSA implementation, the Department acknowledges that the most significant obstacle, that of turning around our struggling schools, still lies ahead. The names of our CSI schools will be published within the next month. My team has been working on a plan that will emphasize the Department's provision of necessary supports to struggling schools rather than our intent to punish or demean them. Such an approach reflects the Department's transformed culture, our belief in collaboration, and our realization that each school's needs must be assessed and uniquely addressed. The Department will provide districts with assistance in completing needs assessments to determine possible evidence-based interventions and strategies, thought partnerships, professional learning opportunities, on-line resources, and connections to experts, partners, and networks. Together we will improve outcomes for our kids.

Conclusion

Although Delaware's plan was the first to be approved, other states have also seized the opportunity to lead the way in implementing ESSA. As states and districts continue to advance in implementation, the spirit of ESSA will be more fully reflected in state and local systems. Throughout this process, educational leaders at every level are using the flexibility in ESSA to better meet the needs of all students, from every background. Since December 2015, states have worked hard to think differently about their schools and how they can better serve all students. They have asked for and taken seriously input from educators, administrators, parents, students, and community leaders, knowing that no plan can be successful without support and buy-in from the community. However, since these systems are complex, only time can reveal the benefits of full implementation.

When the Senate voted overwhelmingly to approve ESSA, it was a vote of confidence in state and local educators and their ability to do what is right for kids. I reiterate my gratitude for allowing us the flexibility to implement ESSA in a way that best addresses the specific needs of pupils in each state and request that you continue to support us as we now fully implement the law to ensure every student's success.

I am confident that states are taking advantage of the opportunity ESSA presents and will deliver better outcomes for all students. As state leaders, we don't consider this a job, it's our life's work. Like my colleagues here today, Delaware is committed to maximizing ESSA-supported opportunities. We WILL make it happen. Our children deserve nothing less.