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2019

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WHAT'S NEXT

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE BUSH INSTITUTE



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ALIGNING TIME, PEOPLE, AND MONEY WILL ALLOW STATES TO BETTER SERVE THEIR STUDENTS

by Anne Wicks

Our recommendations:

- STATE EDUCATION OFFICIALS SHOULD FOCUS ON THEIR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PROCESS WHEN IMPLEMENTING THEIR EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT PLAN
- STATE POLICYMAKERS SHOULD USE COMMONLY HELD DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY FOR EDUCATORS
- GOVERNORS AND POLICYMAKERS SHOULD CONCENTRATE ON ALIGNING STUDENT OUTCOMES AND FUNDING FROM PRE-K TO COLLEGE

As new state leadership settles in around the country, three facts should capture their attention. First, on average, about 40 percent of each state's budget is spent on education from prekindergarten through college. Second, the U.S. Department of Education has largely stepped back as states begin implementing their respective Every Student Succeeds (ESSA) Act plans, giving states remarkable latitude for the first time in nearly 20 years. Third, the most recent National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) scores largely flatlined, and far too many American students are not on track for future success. In this globally competitive world where policymakers are tasked with innovating to keep their state's economy growing and employment rates high, it is more important than ever to connect the real work of education to the long-term economic health of states.

While it was difficult to find substantive mention of education in the recent midterm and governors races, this is now a significant opportunity for states to distinguish themselves and their education systems. The work of improving education is complex, but a thoughtful focus by policymakers on the following three recommendations can guide prioritization of limited resources —time, people, and money—to better serve a state's young citizens.

STATE EDUCATION OFFICIALS SHOULD FOCUS ON THEIR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PROCESS WHEN IMPLEMENTING THEIR ESSA PLAN

Each state was required to articulate an approach to continuous improvement—a formal process of planning, acting, assessing, reflecting, and adjusting—to help manage the implementation of the large-scale and intricate changes outlined in ESSA plans. Unfortunately, in many of those plans, details about continuous improvement were left wanting. State leaders should ask who is responsible for continuous improvement, what are the interim measures of success, who owns the process, and how are stakeholders engaged throughout.

Implementation is difficult and will not be perfect. Policymakers should expect the work to be iterative. But without a transparent continuous improvement process, lessons learned along the way will be lost, false claims of victory will be made and student success will suffer. [New Mexico is an example of a state taking this on directly.](#)¹

STATE POLICYMAKERS SHOULD USE COMMONLY HELD DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY FOR EDUCATORS

Policy sets the conditions for success, but people improve schools and outcomes for students through action and decision-making. States should have commonly held definitions of high-quality teachers and principals based on state or national standards, which are built upon what is known from research and practice.

The commonly held definitions of quality need to be reflected in job descriptions, preparation program graduation requirements, and evaluation systems. State leaders who invest in and champion the meaningful preparation, support, and evaluation of educators help foster the professional growth of teachers and principals. Those educators, in turn, are better able to support the success of their students.

Districts are leading in this area; it is worth investigating, adapting, and scaling the human capital work started in the [Dallas Independent School District](#)², [Gwinnett County Schools](#)³, and the states and districts highlighted in a recent [report](#)⁴ by the National Council on Teacher Quality.

GOVERNORS AND POLICYMAKERS SHOULD CONCENTRATE ON ALIGNING STUDENT OUTCOMES AND FUNDING FROM PRE-K TO COLLEGE

While states spend considerable funds on education, the flexibility of those funds can be limited given how they are originally allocated or designated. These constraints increase

¹ <https://checkstateplans.org/continuous-improvement/new-mexico-continuous-improvement/>

² <https://www.dallasisd.org/domain/17129>

³ https://gwbccenter.imgix.net/gwbi_gwinnett_county_public_schools_report.pdf

⁴ <https://www.nctq.org/publications/Making-a-Difference>

the importance of ensuring that funding aligns with student outcome goals where possible. In other words, the state education budget is a numerical reflection of a state's education values and priorities.

Similarly, a state's ESSA accountability index should be a catalog of the indicators deemed most critical to measure student success. A few questions to consider:

- Does funding follow those indicators?
- Has your state invested appropriately in standards, assessments, and data management to measure academic proficiency and growth? [Washington State, for example, has invested in alignment in these key areas](#)⁵.
- Has your state invested, like [Rhode Island](#)⁶, in the sophisticated supports needed for schools identified for improvement?
- Has your state funded, given incentives to, or supported partnerships that align K-12 to community or technical colleges and the public higher education system as seen in [San Antonio and Albuquerque](#)⁷?

The state education agency is not solely responsible to align goals, funding, and programs. Alignment will result from this alchemy: a clear vision from a governor and state chief, a state agency focused on district support first and regulatory compliance second, feedback from stakeholders, and an ecosystem of districts, nonprofit agencies, higher education institutions, and businesses that prioritize partnerships and data.

Washington has given states a new opportunity to lead in creating and maintaining quality education systems. This process will require aligning time, money, and people, a challenging task under any circumstance. But a concentration on this alignment will increase the chances that a state's students become proficient learners with a life of their own opportunity, purpose, and mobility. The success of young people, after all, is the only outcome that counts for any education policy.

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⁵ <https://checkstateplans.org/standards-and-assessments-old/washington-standards/>

⁶ <https://checkstateplans.org/supporting-schools-old/rhode-island-supporting-schools/>

⁷ <https://www.bushcenter.org/stateofourcities/spotlight/college>



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