School Improvement Under ESSA

Use this handout as a backgrounder for organizers and community members to understand the facts about school improvement under ESSA, and what it means for your school.

State Decisions

- Your state has recently made decisions — written into their state ESSA Plan — about how to evaluate all public schools, including public charter schools. Some states are using a grading system to rate schools, for example, an A-F scale.

Identification of Underperforming Schools

- States are required by law to identify the schools that are “lowest performing,” and schools where subgroups of students are performing at that lowest level or are “consistently underperforming”.

- The law says that your state must categorize these schools as in need of either “Comprehensive Support and Improvement” (CSI), “Targeted Support and Improvement” (TSI), or “Additional Targeted Support and Improvement.” (ATSI) These schools might be “F” schools if the state uses a grading system. If your school is identified as CSI, TSI, or ATSI, the school is required to notify you.

School Improvement

- For all schools, the state is required to describe how the state system of education agencies (districts, regional offices, charter managers, etc.) will support your school with resources. These resources could include:
  - in-person trainings for changes in discipline practices and other topics
  - partnership with an outside consultant or nonprofit organization
  - online materials for teachers and administrators

- All schools, even those that do not receive any federal funding, have budgets that should be driven by local priorities and that support programs that serve school communities. These priorities and programs are called school improvement strategies.

- Depending on how the state evaluates or rates your school, these school improvement strategies are likely limited by requirements set by the state or district. Typically, high-achieving schools have the most flexibility and struggling schools must implement school improvement strategies determined by the state or district.
Fact Sheet: School Improvement Under ESSA

Engagement

- All school improvement strategies must be decided and implemented by school and district administrators (e.g. principals) in collaboration with community members (e.g. students, families, teachers, advocates). This collaboration (engagement) is both required by law and essential for effecting real change for students. (Check out A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement from the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools for why this works).

- Engagement of the whole school community, however, is not possible without resources. ESSA includes funding for family engagement, and many programs include engagement as an allowable use of funds. You can help to increase those resources by:
  - Advocating for additional funding and other resources for your school either from your local district or school (write a letter to your school board, attend or demand meetings with district administrators to address funding, partnerships, contracts, and staffing). You can also push for more funding from the state (join other families and advocates working to change your state’s budget or funding formula).
  - Taking a leadership role, either officially (run for office or join your school’s Title I School Site Council) or as a community leader who helps to gather families, host events, connect community partners to the school site, write grant applications, or participate in evaluation efforts (e.g. get the word out about results from a school climate survey).
  - Connecting funding to engagement by working with administrators and community leaders to ensure that engagement is written into grant applications, program strategies, and/or school policy.

Student Involvement

Students should also be encouraged to participate. Teachers and families can support this engagement by inviting students to events, running or supporting student leadership trainings or committees (e.g. student government), or focusing classroom projects on engagement in school and local government.

Funding Available

Title I Parent and Family Engagement Set-Aside

Each district is required to reserve at least 1 percent of its Title I funds to carry out parent and family engagement activities, including those described in the written policy section below. The law further requires that parents and family members of low-income children must be involved in decisions regarding how these engagement funds are spent. These parent and family engagement funds must be used for at least one of the below activities:

- Supporting programs that reach families at home, in the community, and at school
- Disseminating information on best practices focused on engagement, especially for increasing engagement of economically disadvantaged families
- Giving subgrants to schools to collaborate with community-based organizations or businesses that have a track record of improving family engagement
- Any other activities that the district believes are appropriate to increase engagement

*From The Leadership Conference Education Fund’s ESSA Guide for Advocates (2017)