



FROM WHAT IT'S NOT TO WHAT IT IS

By Rafael Heller | Sep 23, 2019 | Editor's Note

Since the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed in December 2015, policy debates about the law have focused not so much on what it is, but what it isn't, not what it achieves but what it undoes. As Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) remarked in early 2016, ESSA reins in the federal government's power to influence education at the state and local levels, "revers[ing] the trend toward what had become, in effect, a national school board" under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). "The new law," he went on, "ends the highly qualified teacher definition and requirements, teacher evaluation mandates, federal school turnaround models, federal test-based accountability and adequate yearly progress."

Likewise, speaking shortly before ESSA's final passage, Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) — the law's coauthor, with Alexander — described it as, first and foremost, an effort to dismantle NCLB's most unpopular provisions, calling it a "bipartisan bill to reduce reliance on high-stakes testing." To be fair, she also noted that it "invest[s] in improving and expanding access to preschool programs." But as to what else the new law accomplishes, in a positive sense, for K-12 education, she was evasive, promising only that it will "ensure all students have access to a quality education, and so much more."

Three and a half years later, it remains difficult to see in ESSA anything like a coherent, guiding vision for the federal government's investments in education. The law's passage stands out as a successful political compromise, but — other than recommitting itself (weakly) to NCLB-style testing and accountability — ESSA articulates no new set of guiding principles for school improvement.

All the same, ESSA has begun to result in real changes on the ground, in many parts of the country. And now that states have finished writing their ESSA plans and have moved on to implementing them, attention has begun to shift from what ESSA is not to what is, in fact, going on under the new law.

For example, as [Kevin Close](#), [Audrey Amrein-Beardsley](#), and [Clarin Collins](#) ask in this issue of Kappan, what is happening to the value-added models of teacher evaluation that proliferated under President Barack Obama's Race to the Top initiative? To what extent have state and local leaders abandoned them, and to what extent do those reforms continue? Under ESSA, have state education agencies begun consolidating their power and influence over the public schools or, as [Adam Edgerton](#) asks, are they choosing to defer to local district leaders on assessment, curriculum, teacher quality, and other issues? Have policy makers taken steps to ensure, as Patty Murray promised, that all students will have equal opportunities to succeed or, as [Lance Fusarelli](#) and [Jennifer Ayscue](#) warn, have states begun to backtrack on their commitment to protecting the interests of disadvantaged student populations?

Not that ESSA represents the final word on how best to balance federal and state powers in K-12 education. As [Patrick McGuinn](#) notes, the pendulum will no doubt swing back, at some point, toward a much stronger federal role, since "those in power are generally inclined to use it, and states' propensity to underserve poor and minority students will always provide an invitation for intervention." And lest anybody gets too comfortable with the new lay of the land, keep in mind that ESSA is due to be reauthorized in 2021.

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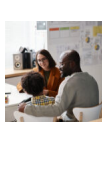
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