

ESEA REAUTHORIZATION: AN OVERVIEW OF THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

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On December 10, 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) was signed by President Barack Obama and became the United States' current national education law (United States Department of Education [U.S. DOE], n.d.). The ESSA was a long overdue reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which was our nation's original federal legislative effort to demonstrate a "longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students" (para. 1). In its 50-year history, the ESEA has endured numerous changes and reauthorizations that have identified the roles of the federal government, states, and local education agencies in education policy (see Figure 1).

The ESSA was a compromise between two Senate and House bills that were passed during the 114th United States Congress (i.e., Every Child Achieves Act of 2015 and Student Success Act, respectively). Two different versions of a bill prompted a conference committee to draft a compromise bill (Kuhlmann, 2015, July 30). This bipartisan group included:

- Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN),
- Senator Patty Murray (D-WA),
- Congressman John Kline (R-MN), and
- Congressman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott (D-VA).

The compromise bill resulted in the ESSA, was voted on and passed by both the House and the Senate, and subsequently signed into law by the president.

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Unlike previous ESEA reauthorizations (see Figure 1), the ESSA has shifted a great deal of education authority from the federal government back to states and local education agencies. The ESSA:

- (a) ensures that each state has set high college and career standards,
- (b) enables states to maintain accountability by directing resources towards schools that require improvement,
- (c) empowers states and local education agencies to use appropriate, evidenced-based interventions that foster school improvement,
- (d) encourages states to preserve annual assessments as an informing mechanism that does not overshadow teaching and learning,
- (e) increases access to quality preschool programs for more children, and

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(f) secures new resources to identify and investigate promising educational practices and to replicate proven strategies that enhance students’ educational outcomes (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).

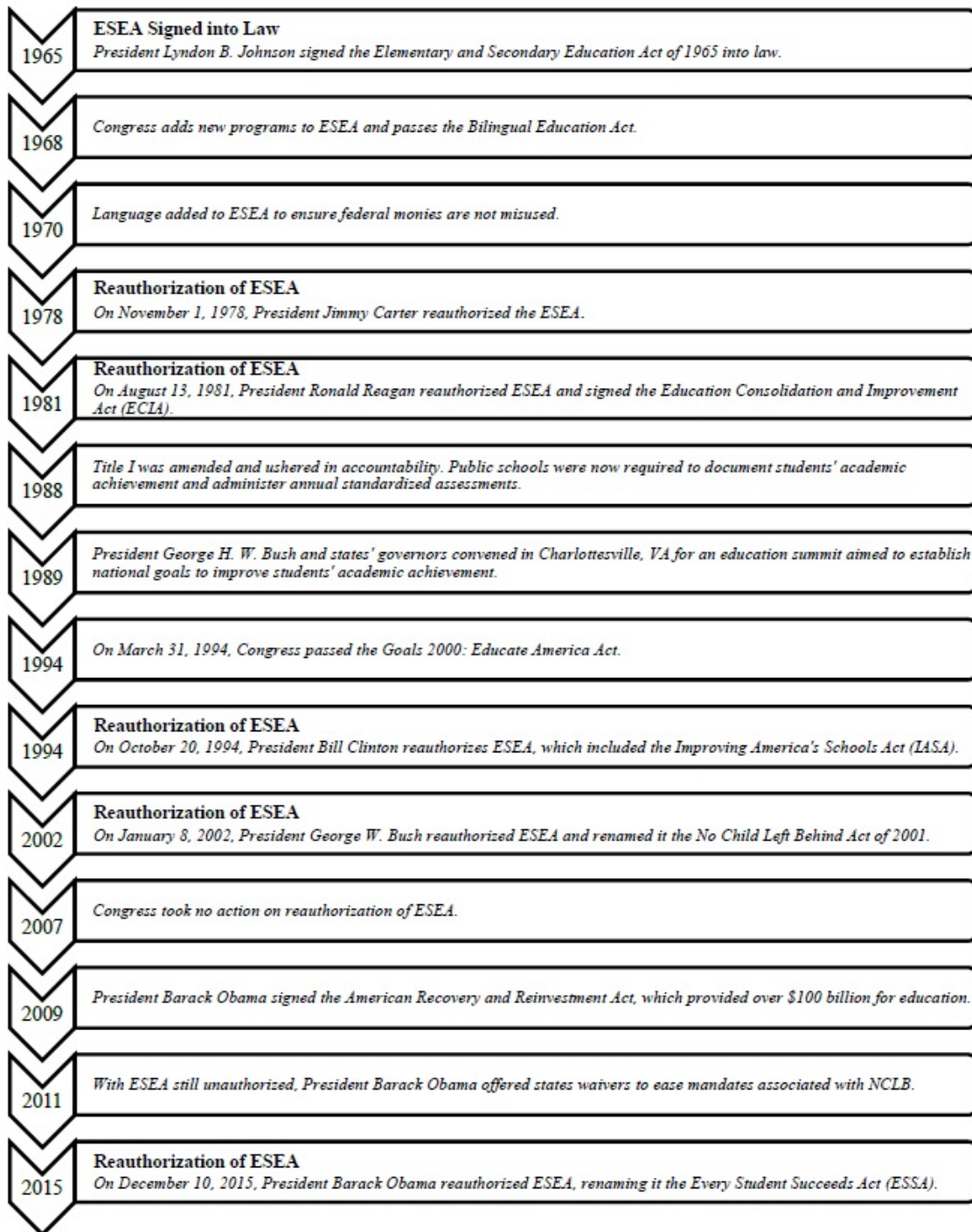


Figure 1. Timeline of ESEA

Annual testing in reading and math will still occur among students in Grades 3-8, and students will be assessed in science one time during (a) elementary, (b) middle, and (c) high school (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). High school students will be assessed once, and the assessment administered may be a nationally recognized assessment, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test. States may also implement alternative assessments to gauge student achievement, such as extended performance tasks, projects, and portfolios.

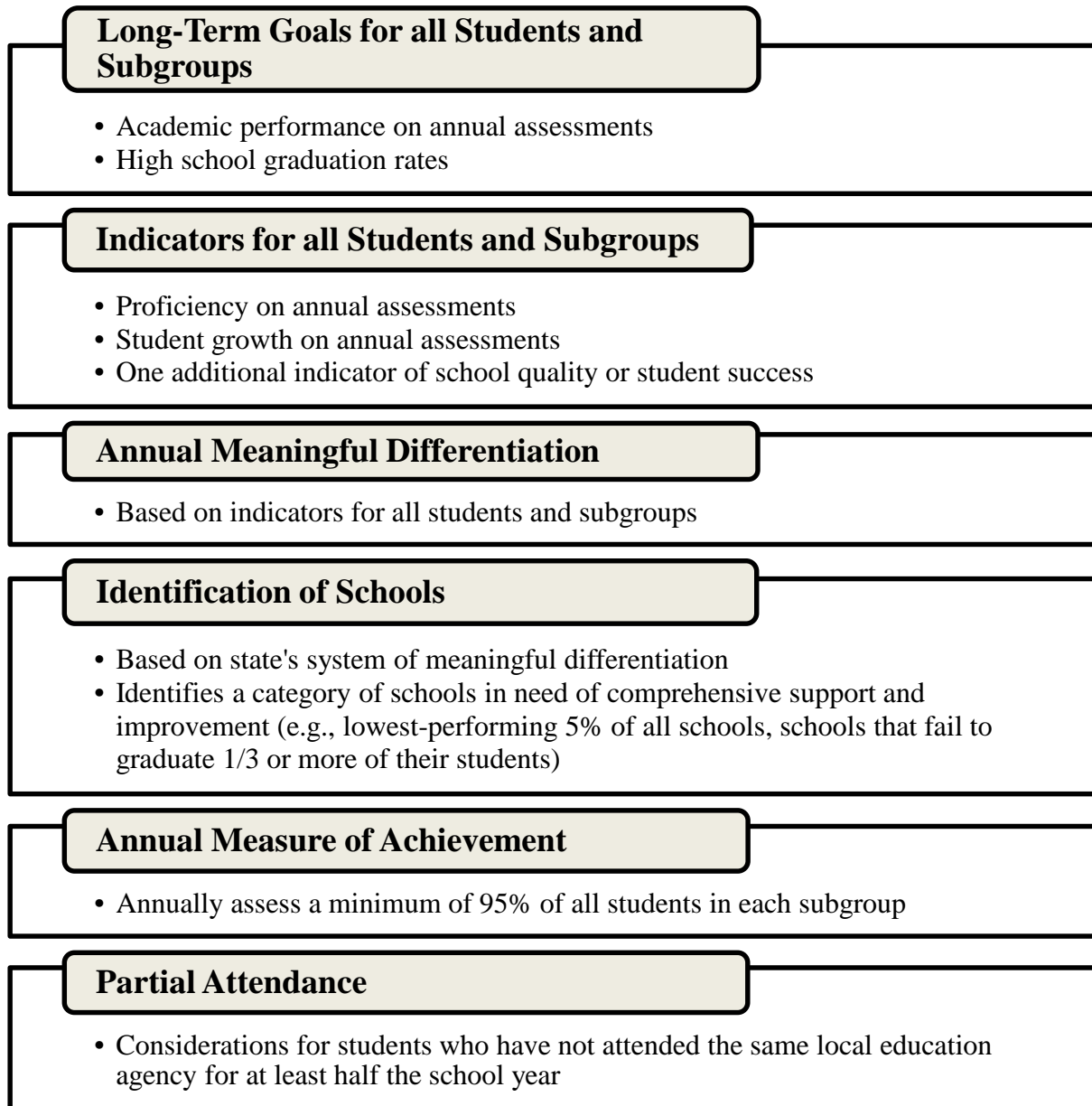


Figure 2. ESSA Criteria

States' accountability systems must be in place beginning with the 2017-2018 school year (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). States will report high school graduation rates and student performance on assessments for the state, local education agency, and school campus disaggregated by the following subgroups:

- each major racial and ethnic group,
- economically disadvantaged students as compared to students who are not economically disadvantaged,
- children with disabilities as compared to children without disabilities,
- English proficiency status,
- gender, and
- migrant status. (p. 58)

As shown in Figure 2, ESSA has defined the criteria for each state’s accountability system. Each state and local education agency will also prepare and submit annual report cards that are publically available. The ESSA also supports states with ensuring that schools train, recruit, and retain effective teachers, principals, and other school leaders.

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT IN TEXAS

With the ESSA now in place, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) is preparing for its implementation during the 2017-2018 school year, and the initial perception seems favorable. Immediately after its passage into law, former Texas Commissioner of Education Michael Williams (TEA, 2015, December 9) noted, “For Texas, this legislation brings an end to the ongoing requests for federal waivers made necessary by requirements few if any states could ever meet.” Likewise, Louis Malfaro (2016), the current president of the Texas American Federation of Teachers, noted that the ESSA “will give Texas plenty of flexibility to create something that focuses resources on struggling students instead of labeling them failures and prescribing punishments” (para. 12).

Prior to the passing of the ESSA, TEA had been revamping Texas’s teacher and principal appraisal systems, formerly known as Professional Development and Appraisal System, or PDAS (TEA, 2015, December 15). The new appraisal systems, the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) and the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS), will require the reporting of student growth as an aspect of the appraisal system. However, ESSA does not mandate that the reporting of student growth must be in the form of students’ scores on annual assessments. Therefore, school districts in Texas will be able to implement T-TESS and T-PESS beginning during the 2017-2018 school year “without the burden of federal interference” (para. 5).

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