

Assessing Resource Equity Provisions in Title I of ESSA: An Analysis of State Education Agencies Responses and Early Implementation Activities

Chad Lochmiller, Ph.D.
Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
Indiana University Bloomington

Context and Purpose of the Study

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) introduced new school improvement requirements for state education agencies (SEA), which require SEAs to work with local education agencies (LEA) to address persistent resource inequities as part of the state's school improvement planning process. Specifically, 20 U.S.C. § 6311 (2)(d)(1)(B)(iv) (2016) requires that a state's comprehensive support and improvement plan must identify resource inequities which contribute to low levels of academic achievement in the state's lowest performing schools. Such a review might include both LEA and school-budgeting practices related to the allocation of people, money, time, and programs. This requirement grants the SEAs and the Title I program a potentially influential role relative to allocation of education resources within schools and districts. As such, understanding how Title I program directors make sense of this provision and seek to implement it has significant implications for state, district, and school improvement efforts.

The purpose of this study is to examine how officials within state education agencies, particularly Title I directors, are preparing to implement ESSA policies which aim to eliminate resource inequities within schools designated for comprehensive school improvement. The study will address four research questions:

- How are state education agency officials preparing to implement the resource equity provisions required by the Every Student Succeeds Act within the context of their state's school improvement efforts?
- What factors, including data/evidence, influence state education agency official's understanding of these provisions and to what extent do these factors shape their response(s) to the policy give their state's specific learning improvement priorities?
- What barriers do officials within the state education agency encounter as they attempt to communicate their understanding of these provisions to colleagues within the SEA, LEA, and schools?
- How, if at all, are the provisions prompting changes in program structure, design, or practice across SEAs related to the allocation of education resources?

Study Design

An Indiana University research team will complete this study in two phases. The first phase will employ an interview only qualitative design. The second phase will employ a multi-case qualitative approach (Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Yin, 2014). I describe each phase below.

Phase 1. In phase 1, the research team will conduct structured telephone interviews with state education agency officials (e.g., Title I directors) in all fifty states to document early implementation efforts pertaining to the resource equity provisions found in ESSA. This phase will generate baseline data describing the SEA's understanding of the provisions. Interviews with participants will last approximately 60-minutes. In addition, the research team will obtain documents and other public records from state education agencies pertaining to the implementation of ESSA's resource equity provisions. Phase 1 will be supported with internal funding from the IU School of Education.

Phase 2. Phase 2 will focus on 4 to 5 case study sites where the research team will conduct intensive fieldwork over a two- to three-year period (2018/19 through 2020/21). This work will consist of a series of "deep dives" into SEAs, LEAs, and schools. During each multi-day site visit, research team members will conduct interviews with SEA and LEA participants, observe pertinent SEA and LEA activities, and collect pertinent documents/artifacts. A primary goal for this phase of the study is to generate "images of possibility and practice" for SEAs and LEAs to follow as they implement and refine their local responses to the resource equity requirements. Phase 2 will be supported with external funding from a philanthropic partner.

Benefits to SEA Participants

The study will inform scholarship related to the implementation of new ESSA provisions and broadly support SEA practice related to Title I school improvement. Phase 1 will produce important insights about current implementation and planning efforts in each state. This information is not readily available to Title I directors across state contexts. Information obtained in this phase might inform implementation activities. Phase 2 will yield detailed "images of possibility and practice" that will assist state education agencies and policy actors in developing successful responses to the resource equity provisions in ESSA. This information will be released in the form of policy/practice briefs as well as the development of a knowledge base for Title I directors. Additional resources might include the development of an online knowledge base aimed at sharing practices across state contexts.

Role of National Title I Association

The role of the association in this study is two-fold. First, the association will provide assistance recruiting SEA administrators to participate in the study through newsletters, emails, and other association communications. Second, the research team will collaborate with the association to develop applicable sessions at the annual conference, policy/practice briefs specifically designed for association members, and potentially Webinars or Zoom conferences on specific topics. Long term, the team might undertake additional studies focused on the effectiveness of particular improvement initiatives within Title I Distinguished Schools. This work would support further development of online resources, training, and supports for Title I directors in SEAs and LEAs.