

EXPEDITING ESSA: Recommendations for Accountability and Supporting Effective Teaching



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+++++ INTRODUCTION +++++

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) creates a unique opportunity to refine our state's accountability system and redesign our supports for effective teachers. ESSA recognizes the importance of classroom teachers, who are the main implementers of education policy, by requiring teacher engagement in the creation of the state's ESSA plan.

We are a group of Teach Plus Policy Fellows and current classroom teachers from a variety of districts in Illinois, ranging from Carbondale in the south to Round Lake in the north. In this report, we present the ideas of 347 teachers from around Illinois on the design of the accountability system and the changes needed to ensure that every child in our state has access to excellent teachers. The three main conclusions are:

- + Teachers strongly support two of the Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) four proposed indicators of school quality: chronic absenteeism and 9th grade on-track. Teachers also strongly support additional indicators that capture school environment, college and career readiness, and students' access to a well-rounded education.
- + Teachers strongly support ISBE's proposed composite college and career readiness indicator, particularly the experiential benchmarks such as attendance and workplace learning.
- + On the use of Title II funding to improve teacher effectiveness, teachers showed strong support for evidence-based classroom size reduction and professional development that is ongoing, job-embedded, and teacher-led.

+++++ METHODOLOGY +++++

Between November 10 and December 17, we conducted 20 focus groups with 347 of our peers, representing 78 school districts throughout the state. During the focus groups, we provided an overview of ESSA and identified three areas for teacher feedback: accountability indicators, college and career

indicators, and uses of Title II funding. Within each area, we provided a brief overview, facilitated a conversation in the focus group, and asked participants to fill out a short questionnaire that included both open-ended and close-ended questions.

+++++++ SECTION 1: ACCOUNTABILITY INDICATORS ++++++

Teachers strongly support two of ISBE’s four proposed indicators of school quality: chronic absenteeism and 9th grade on-track.

Teachers also strongly support additional

indicators that capture school environment, college and career readiness, and students’ access to a well-rounded education.

Feedback on ISBE’s Four Proposed Indicators of School Quality

Teachers in the focus groups indicated very strong support—60 percent or greater—for two of ISBE’s four proposed indicators. Support was strongest for a 9th grade on-track metric, with 69.2 percent of teachers supporting the inclusion of this metric. An indicator of chronic absenteeism also

received strong support, with 60.6 percent of teachers supporting this measure.¹ However, this indicator also had the highest opposition, with 18.4 percent of teachers opposing the measure. Support for the other two proposed metrics was somewhat weaker, though above 50 percent in both cases.

Table 1: Support for ISBE’s Proposed Indicators of School Quality	% of Respondents who Strongly Support or Somewhat Support the Indicator
9th Grade on-track (9-12)	69.2%
Chronic Absenteeism (K-12)	60.6%
Success in AP/IB/Dual Credit/CTE (9-12)	53.6%
Pre-K-2 Indicator (K-8)	56.0%

Teachers were particularly passionate about chronic absenteeism as a measure. They indicated the importance of regular attendance as the first step in learning as well as the difficulty of being successful while dealing with gaps in instructional time. One teacher from Elmwood Park CUSD 401 preferred this indicator because it applied to all students, “It is important to have an

indicator that spans across grade levels.” Another teacher from Murphysboro CUSD 186 said, more simply, “Students cannot learn if they are not present.” However, some pointed out that teachers have little influence over chronic absenteeism with students and will rely on other school personnel to monitor and address this issue.

“Chronic absenteeism is most important because we need to know what’s preventing students from coming to school and what we can provide to help students not lose instruction time.”

– Teacher from Maywood, School District 89

Another theme that emerged from the focus groups is that early intervention is key. This idea was most commonly presented by those supporting a Pre-K-2 indicator but also cited by proponents of the 9th grade on-track indicator. Data that is collected after students leave, such as graduation rate, is informative but not actionable.

Teachers feel that they have the power to influence students’ success with information early on that they can utilize to address student deficits. A Catholic school teacher in Chicago noted, “It is easier to get students back on track when they are just starting their educational journeys than to try and make up the lost time when they are older.”

Likewise, a Chicago Public Schools teacher thought the “pre-K-2 indicator would be the most beneficial. Addressing students in this age range would alleviate many issues down the line.” There is a desire for an indicator similar to 9th grade on-track that would be

applicable for middle and early grades, and if such an indicator is not yet available we encourage ISBE to work with the research community to develop one for a future iteration of the ESSA plan.

Feedback on other possible indicators of school quality

Teachers indicated strong support for additional metrics that would show a more well-rounded view of educational success. Presented with 20 different potential indicators that were named in the state plan,

five garnered strong support from teachers. The full results are presented below, with those measures garnering 60 percent or greater support highlighted in **bold**.

Table 2: Support for Additional Indicators of School Quality	% of Respondents who Strongly Support or Somewhat Support the Indicator
Academic Indicators	
% of Students with Successful Completion of Student Portfolio	39.6%
Combined Lexile reading level	52.4%
Student Dropout Rates	56.9%
Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) readiness indicator	42.9%
“Ready to Learn” K-2 academic indicator (to be developed)	44.0%
Longitudinal data on current and former English Learners (such as access to AP/IB, graduation rates, etc.)	49.1%
School Climate Indicators	
% of students suspended or expelled	42.3%
Safe environments (as measured on the 5Essentials survey)	70.2%
% of students with access to physical activities such as sports or recess	64.2%
% of students who participate in extracurricular activities	47.3%
5Essentials Survey (Composite Score)	53.6%
Post-Secondary Readiness Indicators	
% of Freshmen on track at end of 9th grade	67.8%
% of students with postsecondary plan	52.2%
% of students earning postsecondary credentials (AP/IB/CTE/Dual Credit)	46.1%
% of students enrolling in college	50.0%
% of students who are College/career/workforce ready (also see Part II)	73.6%
Non-Academic Factors	
% of students with access to arts and enrichment coursework	66.8%
% of students completing arts and enrichment coursework	56.2%
% of students with chronic absenteeism	51.6%
% of students earning the State Seal of Biliteracy	25.4%

Discussion in the focus groups revealed several themes. One was the importance of non-academic factors, such as access to physical education, arts, and enrichment programs. Access to arts received support from 66.8 percent of teachers, and 64.2 percent supported access to PE or recess as an indicator. Many respondents mentioned that arts and physical education lead to a well-rounded education, allow students multiple avenues for success in addition to traditional reading and math scores, and have standards that can be assessed and will lead to academic improvement. One teacher at the UNO Charter School Network in Chicago noted that PE and recess “are not valued by school districts because they are not academic, [but] they are absolutely important to student brain development.”

A second theme that developed was a strong desire for a reliable tool for measuring school climate. Over 70 percent of teachers

supported using the 5Essentials to measure school safety. In the open responses, more than a dozen respondents explicitly mentioned the 5Essentials Survey by the University of Chicago Consortium as being a fair evaluative tool for judging school climate based on the feedback of a variety of stakeholders. Teachers like that the survey includes students’ perspectives and produces easy-to-understand results that can be tracked from year to year.

Finally, many teachers emphasized the importance of demonstrating student growth through portfolios or other assessments and assessing students at the early and late stages of their academic careers. Respondents suggested that growth could be demonstrated through examining lexile scores, using student portfolios, or items such as the Northwest Education Association’s Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA-MAP) test.

Schools cannot control their clientele. They can only work to grow students from the point they enter. Schools may have low overall success rates but can be making great strides in moving students forward. This growth needs to be acknowledged and given high consideration. Other schools with high success rates might actually be losing ground with students. A growth score would illuminate these areas of need as well.

– Teacher from Harlem School District 122



++++++ SECTION 2: COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS ++++++

Teachers strongly support ISBE’s proposed composite college and career readiness indicator, particularly the experiential benchmarks such as attendance and workplace learning.

Of the teachers in our focus groups, 68.3 percent were very or somewhat satisfied that the framework represents whether a student is college or career ready.² Most teachers agreed with this teacher from Glen Ellyn School District 41 who said, “I appreciate that it looks at different areas of the student and not just academic testing.” However, 52.9 percent were only “somewhat satisfied,” indicating that there is room to improve the

indicator. Many teachers took issue with specific indicators within the framework. The detail below indicates which parts of the composite measure have the most backing and where changes are needed. The indicator proposed by ISBE has three categories, and teacher support varied by category and by indicator within the category. The three categories are:

- + Academic and standardized testing benchmarks
- + Academic benchmarks and industry credentials
- + Behavioral and experiential benchmarks



Support was strong for all three categories, but strongest for the four proposed experiential benchmarks. More than 65 percent of teachers supported all four of the experiential benchmarks, and more than 75 percent supported the attendance and workplace learning benchmarks. A teacher

from Washington District 52 noted, "It is important to have a wide range of ways to show success...the attendance, community service, extracurricular and workplace learning help this [metric] to be more fair to all students."

Table 3: Support for ISBE's Proposed Indicators of College and Career Readiness	% of Respondents who Strongly or Somewhat Support the Indicator
Academic and Standardized Testing Benchmarks	
GPA of 2.8 out of 4.0	69.9%
College readiness entrance score on the SAT	60.2%
Benchmarks or Industry Credentials	
Industry Credential (e.g., Welding certificate or EMT license)	69.4%
Dual Credit Career Pathway Course (Achieve a grade of A, B or C)	69.5%
Advanced Placement Exam (Achieve a grade of 3, 4 or 5)	62.9%
Advanced Placement Course (Achieve a grade of A, B or C)	62.3%
Dual Credit College English and/or Math (Achieve a grade of A, B or C)	68.1%
College Developmental/Remedial English and/or Math (Achieve a grade of A, B or C)	61.5%
Algebra II (Achieve a grade of A, B or C)	57.8%
International Baccalaureate Exam (Achieve a grade of 4 or better)	41.7%
Behavioral and Experiential Benchmarks	
90% Attendance	76.5%
25 hours of Community Service (or military service)	70.2%
Workplace Learning Experience	78.2%
Two or more organized Co-Curricular Activities (including language and fine arts)	65.9%

Support was the most varied for the academic and industry benchmarks. Support for these benchmarks ranged from a high of 69.5 percent for a Dual Credit Career Pathway Course to a low of 41.7 percent for success on an International Baccalaureate (IB) exam. Common concerns focused on an overemphasis on college in the benchmarks to the exclusion of students who are not college bound. For example a teacher from CUSD 303 in St. Charles noted, "AP and IB programs only address a small percentage of our students, not the majority. The indicators need to be more equitable for all levels of students, not just top performers."

An additional theme that emerged was the importance of vocational education as a career pathway out of high school or as a foundation for other collegiate opportunities. A teacher from Crystal Lake SD 47 noted, "Only one of the indicators supports the trades. That needs to be increased. Too much emphasis is put on 'all kids go to college' [when] not all kids are college-ready or interested in going to college." Another teacher from Hillsboro CUSD 3 echoed this comment: "I strongly support readiness by application and practicums which include as many workplace skills and industry certifications as possible."

++++ SECTION 3: SUPPORTING EXCELLENT EDUCATORS +++++

On the use of Title II funding to improve teacher effectiveness, teachers showed strong support for evidence-based classroom size reduction and professional development that is ongoing, job-embedded, and teacher-led.

During our focus groups, we shared with teachers the list of district-allowable uses to support excellent educators through Title II funds. We asked them to choose up to five uses for these funds that they felt districts should prioritize in order to improve teacher quality. Two uses received support from more

than half of the teachers: reducing classroom size to a level that is evidence-based was chosen by 77.2 percent of teachers, and providing high-quality, personalized professional development that is evidence-based was chosen by 54.5 percent of teachers.³ In both cases, it is important to emphasize that ISBE needs to use the evidence-based criteria as a guideline for approving use of these funds, as the effectiveness of classroom size reduction and professional learning can vary greatly. The full list of responses can be found in Appendix A.

Classroom Size Reduction

A common theme that stood out in the discussion was the importance of reasonable class sizes. Most of these respondents referenced their own experiences with large classes, so it is reasonable to conclude that this issue is the most important to those affected by it, while those who already have manageable class sizes focused on

other issues. A teacher from Round Lake SD 116 emphasized the personal attention that teachers can give in smaller classes: “Class sizes are critical to students having access to teachers and for teachers to be able to know each student well enough to provide the appropriate level of support/challenge.”

“ I teach 42 kids in one class. 42. That is ONE class out of the 4 that I teach. And I am expected to make them grow at the same rate? ”

– Teacher from Chicago

While we acknowledge the teacher emphasis on class size reduction, the research on the effectiveness of class size reduction is decidedly mixed. A literature review in 2014 by Basha Krasnoff of Education Northwest concluded that “there is no evidence that minimal or arbitrary reductions in class size will improve student performance.”⁴ Rather, the greatest gains are from primary grade classes of fewer than 15, and gains in these grades are particularly strong for minority and low-income students. However, weak instructional practice will lead

to weak student performance regardless of class size, suggesting that districts should carefully choose between strategies focusing on retaining and improving teachers and those focusing on reducing class size, particularly if the additional teachers are inexperienced. Finally, nearly 2/3 of Illinois districts receive less than \$50,000 in Title II funding, a level of funding which makes reducing classroom size to evidence-based levels nearly impossible.⁵ As a result, we urge ISBE to be cautious in approving class size reduction under Title II.

Professional Development

A common theme raised by teachers in discussion was the importance of flexible, relevant, research-based professional development. Some mentioned specific programs, like National Board certification, Next Generation Science Standards training, or AP training, but most simply wanted the ability to select the most relevant training for them to apply in their own classrooms. Many pointed out the direct effect professional learning would have on student success. A teacher from Argenta-Oreana CUSD 1 pointed out that “being able to personalize PD means the teacher can learn a new practice and implement it immediately in their classroom.” Another from Elmwood Park CUSD 401 noted the need for sustained professional learning, “Continuous PD also allows teachers to use up-to-date methods of instruction.”

There is now strong evidence for what is considered effective professional development. Effective professional development focuses on content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, creates collaborative and active learning opportunities for teachers, and is sustained over at least 20 hours during the school year.⁶ Teacher-led Professional Learning from Teach Plus provides opportunities for teachers to lead their peers in professional learning is one example of this type of professional development. Pursuing National Board Certification is another. ISBE should ensure that any uses of Title II funds follow these guidelines for effective professional development.

+++++ CONCLUSION +++++

ESSA is a unique opportunity for Illinois to broaden its expectations for schools, correcting some of the problems of the NCLB era while maintaining a steady focus on improving outcomes for all students. We are encouraged that the Illinois State Board of Education has developed a robust engagement strategy in developing its ESSA plan and are pleased to add the voices of teachers from around Illinois. As the plan continues to develop, we urge ISBE to continue engaging those who will be tasked with implementing ESSA – the 100,000 teachers that work in schools in Illinois. Ensuring that teachers are actively engaged in the development of the plan will ensure a better plan, and one that teachers can support as districts begin implementation in 2017-2018.

+++++ **APPENDIX 1** +++++

Table 4: Teacher Preferences for Use of Title II Funds to Improve Teacher Quality	% of Respondents who chose this use (respondents chose up to five uses)
Developing or improving a rigorous, transparent and fair evaluation and support system for teachers, principals, and other school leaders.	41.3%
Developing and implementing initiatives to assist in recruiting, hiring, and retaining effective teachers.	30.8%
Recruiting qualified individuals from other fields to become teachers, principals, or other school leaders.	6.9%
Reducing class size to a level that is evidence-based.	77.2%
Providing high-quality, personalized professional development that is evidence-based.	54.5%
Providing training, technical assistance, and capacity-building in local educational agencies to assist teachers, principals, or other school leaders with selecting and implementing formative assessments, designing classroom-based assessments, and using data from such assessments.	22.8%
Carrying out in-service training for school personnel in the techniques and supports needed to help educators understand when and how to refer students affected by trauma, and children with, or at risk of, mental illness; the use of referral mechanisms; forming partnerships between school-based mental health programs and mental health organizations; and addressing issues related to school conditions for student learning.	22.5%
Providing training to support the identification of students who are gifted and talented and implementing instructional practices that support the education of such students.	19.8%
Supporting the instructional services provided by effective school library programs.	13.5%
Providing training for all school personnel, including teachers, principals, other school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, and paraprofessionals, regarding how to prevent and recognize child sexual abuse.	2.7%
Developing and providing professional development and other comprehensive systems of support for teachers, principals, or other school leaders to promote high-quality instruction and instructional leadership in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics subjects, including computer science.	35.0%
Providing high-quality professional development for teachers, principals, or other school leaders on effective strategies to integrate rigorous academic content, career and technical education, and work-based learning (if appropriate).	33.2%
Developing feedback mechanisms to improve school working conditions.	25.4%
Developing programs and activities that increase the ability of teachers to effectively teach children with disabilities, including children with significant cognitive disabilities, and English learners.	30.8%
Providing programs and activities to increase the knowledge base of teachers, principals, or other school leaders on instruction in the early grades and on strategies to measure whether young children are progressing and the ability of principals or other school leaders to support teachers, teacher leaders, early childhood educators, and other professionals to meet the needs of students through age 8.	32.3%



+++++ ENDNOTES +++++

¹ Question: "To what degree do you support or oppose the use of chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school quality to be used as part of the new accountability system?" (N=343) Responses "Strongly Support" (37.9 percent), "Somewhat Support" (22.7 percent), "Neither" (7.9 percent), "Somewhat Oppose" (10.5 percent), "Strongly Oppose" (18.7 percent), "Unsure" (2.3 percent). Results may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

² Question: "ISBE has developed a composite indicator for college and career readiness. This composite indicator is a framework which includes test scores, industry and academic credentials, and behavioral and experiential benchmarks. How satisfied are you that this framework represents whether a student is college and career ready? (N=319) Responses "Very satisfied" (9.1 percent), "Somewhat satisfied" (59.2 percent), "Not very satisfied" (15.0 percent), "Not at all satisfied" (4.4 percent), "Unsure" (12.2 percent). Results may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

³ Question: "Please examine the possible uses of Title II funds, which are designed to support effective instruction. Which of these would you want your district to prioritize as a means of supporting teachers? (Choose up to five) (Note: these options reflect activities outlined in ESSA. For complete descriptions, please see Title II Part A of ESSA.)" The complete responses are provided in Appendix 1.

⁴ Krasnoff, Basha (2014). What the Research Says About Class Size, Professional Development, and Recruitment, Induction, and Retention of Highly Effective Teachers. Northwest Comprehensive Center, p. iii.

⁵ Illinois State Board of Education (2016). FY17 Title IIA Allocations – Projected. Retrieved from: <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/nclb-proj-titleIIA-alloc17.pdf>

⁶ Krasnoff, pp. iv.

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