

# COLLABORATIVE PATHS TO QUALITY INSTRUCTION:

Policy Recommendations for  
Implementation of the  
Indiana State ESSA Plan



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## +++++INTRODUCTION+++++

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides a unique opportunity to improve the process by which the state of Indiana supports struggling schools. A key feature of the Indiana ESSA plan is a provision for autonomy and flexibility, which the state, in turn, can use to improve and/or redesign systems of school support to better meet local needs.

As it was in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, in ESSA, there is a requirement to pay close attention to student subgroup data in order to identify trends. For the purposes of statewide accountability, these student subgroups include racial and ethnic groups, economically-disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. The Indiana State ESSA plan stipulates that negative trends around achievement and opportunity gaps in Indiana school systems and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) should be corrected by schools within a certain structured timeline, or else state involvement becomes necessary.

Embedded within the Indiana ESSA plan are planning grant provisions for those schools that fail to meet state expectations. The plan allows for conversations around how educators can solve the problem of lack of equity. Integral to the plan are aggressive growth goals which have been set for all of the aforementioned subgroups. Some of these goals require subgroups to reach a level of performance not previously achieved. For Indiana's black, Hispanic, special education, and English language students, the stakes have, arguably, never been higher.

As public school educators in Indianapolis with wide-ranging experiences working in high-need schools, we know the importance of purpose, focus, and consistency in the maintenance of high-performing schools. We also know that turning low-performing schools around and improving educational outcomes for entire groups of students in low-performing subgroups is difficult. A 2017 article, [In Washington D.C., A Road Map for Reinventing Professional Development in Schools](#), "Improving teacher practice is hard work. It is intellectually demanding, and we can't meet our goals for all students unless we get great at it."<sup>1</sup> Education experts agree that this work requires extensive and long-term concerted efforts. And unfortunately, it is work that challenges and quite often exceeds, a failing school's capacity.

We believe that the flexibility in the ESSA plan should be employed to increase a struggling school's ability to correct course. The state could achieve this by formally fostering more collaboration using teacher leadership as a primary vehicle. As teacher leaders in our own schools, we know that teacher leaders are often best positioned to affect the kind of academic growth required to improve student outcomes and, ultimately, turn around failing schools. To increase academic performance among low-performing subgroups, significant effort must also be made to attract and retain more excellent teachers in classrooms.

# +++++ REQUIREMENTS UNDER THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT +++++

ESSA defines two tiers of schools in need of support: Comprehensive support schools and targeted support schools. Comprehensive support schools make up the bottom five percent of Title I schools, while a school's criteria for a targeted status is tied to its performance with identified subgroups. A school may be identified as a targeted school if data show a continuously underperforming subgroup despite overall school performance. Federal law requires states to identify schools at least once every three years for comprehensive and targeted support, and districts are to receive funds for schools in each category. In Indiana, targeted schools will be identified for the first time in the 2018-19 academic year.

ESSA doesn't specify a set of school intervention programs for state implementation. Instead, it allows the schools, districts, and states to choose evidence-based strategies to meet local needs. Schools must demonstrate a strong plan for sustainability. However, school intervention plans can vary greatly throughout the state.

## +++++ METHODOLOGY +++++

To gain a better understanding of the current state of affairs, we reviewed the Indiana plan for ESSA implementation. We took a look at the most recent disaggregated data for state accountability examinations and graduation rate data that were available. We then consulted key research concerning the state of teacher attrition, looking specifically for any information about Indiana teachers. We also examined current teacher leadership initiatives, especially those sponsored by the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE).

## +++++ BACKGROUND +++++

### SUBGROUP PERFORMANCE

Equity is one of the guiding principles outlined by the IDOE ESSA plan. Disaggregated data for state accountability examinations show that there is clear need for continued attention to equity in K-12 education in our state.

Indiana data show that a pervasive achievement gap between students of color and white students persists on every statewide exam with students of color performing at rates below white students. This disturbing trend, perhaps unsurprisingly, extends to graduation rates as well. Students of color in Indiana graduate at lower rates than every other racial group.<sup>2</sup> Also, students in the lower socioeconomic status category (identified by the free and reduced lunch status) continue

to pass state exams and graduate at rates far below students in the higher category.<sup>3</sup> In addition, compared with general education (GenEd) students, students receiving special education (SpEd) services also lag significantly behind their peers and graduate at rates far below GenEd students.<sup>4</sup>

We have observed these pervasive gaps with our own students. When students in these subgroups repeatedly fail at school and/or standardized exams, many of them internalize failure as a norm. With little remaining hope and faith in the education system (and some increasingly saddled with adult responsibilities), many end up choosing the path of least resistance, opting to drop out of school entirely rather than take remediation courses or pursue



adult education. In Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) alone, there was a non-waiver graduation rate of 70.17 percent for the school year ending in 2017.<sup>5</sup>

### TEACHER ATTRITION AND LEADERSHIP

An American Educational Research journal article states that “one of the pivotal causes of inadequate school performance is the inability of schools to adequately staff classrooms with qualified teachers.”<sup>6</sup> Efforts to improve educational outcomes must consider the needs of the subgroups as a starting point, but in addition to the issues these subgroups face are the problems of Indiana’s current teacher turnover rates and overall teacher shortage.

Indiana teacher turnover statistics are among some of the worst in the nation.<sup>7</sup> As a Journal of Education Finance study finds, “when high-quality teachers leave the classroom, the effect on both student performance and school and district fiscal operations is significant and deleterious.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, the Learning Policy Institute states that “when there are not enough teachers to go around, the schools with the fewest resources and least desirable working conditions are the ones left with vacancies.” This compounds the problem for schools serving high-poverty

Action (or inaction) to combat educational disparity in this state will have a major impact on thousands of high-need students in Indiana, their families, and their communities.

and high-minority populations because teachers tend to leave these schools at higher rates.<sup>9</sup> The teacher attrition factor is a large and complex working part of the struggling subgroup problem described above. This issue deserves considerable thought.

A few state programs already support teacher leadership to help solve the problem. One such program is IPS’ Opportunity Culture, which pays teacher leaders more to take on mentorship responsibilities. This program allows for teacher leaders’ increase in pay by giving principals permission to re-allocate school funding, resulting in zero additional cost to the school. The program incorporates a facilitated design process which requires checks to ensure that academic progress is being made. The philosophy behind the program is, “Investing in excellent teachers transforms schools, creates empowered teams of educators, and positively impacts teaching and student learning outcomes in the city of Indianapolis.”<sup>10</sup>

## +++++ RECOMMENDATIONS +++++

As the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) creates guidelines for distributing school improvement funds, it is our recommendation that teacher-to-administrator, teacher-to-teacher and district-to-district/university collaboration, teacher-led professional development, and other modes of collaboration such as school-to-university collaborations, be included in targeted school improvement plans. Some, but not all, teachers in our state have the tools they need to bring about the kind of change underserved students need. These collaborative measures will improve conditions for teachers and encourage retention by providing the support and guidance that all teachers need to support struggling subgroups of students.

## RECOMMENDATION 1: TEACHER-TO-ADMINISTRATOR COLLABORATION.

Clearly-defined pathways for professional advancement, distributed leadership models, and overall increased opportunity for participation in the decision-making processes serve to increase teacher buy-in and enhance a teacher's sense of commitment to the school. These pathways also fall in line with the IDOE's ESSA guiding principle of transparency. Moreover, involving teachers in the process of developing a school improvement plan ultimately deepens teacher understanding of the complexity of (and necessity for) changes being made at the school. In addition, pathways for

professional advancement and increased involvement in the decision-making process are often necessary to retain instructional staff long-term. Taking care to ensure that teacher leaders are given opportunities to get involved in the administration of schools is key to retaining and developing a committed core of teachers long-term. A committed core of teachers collaborating, sharing effective practice, and pushing each other to be better year over year is key to setting the stage for academic growth among underperforming subgroups of students.

## RECOMMENDATION 2: TEACHER-TO-TEACHER COLLABORATION.

There should be an increased effort to create and foster distributed leadership programs like Opportunity Culture in targeted schools from districts across the state. In this way, highly-qualified teachers, with an in-depth understanding of the targeted school's goals, can lead the creation of a long-term professional development plan for teachers with less experience. We believe that the state will get a high return on investment by allowing schools to invest in teacher leaders and charging them with effecting improvement beyond their own classrooms. In this way, these teacher leaders can foster growth and propel schools forward.

The state should also facilitate more teacher leader-led professional learning communities. This should be done so struggling teachers can learn new strategies from educators with expertise, try these new ideas in the classroom, and bring their experiences and feedback back to a learning community for continued support. Continued training for teacher leaders and plans for accountability would be key components for the implementation and long-term success of these programs. Providing professional learning environments that are teacher-led, long-term, and focused on support through implementation has much more potential for the kind of dramatic increases in student subgroup performance that the Indiana ESSA plan requires.

## RECOMMENDATION 3: OTHER MODES OF COLLABORATION.

Improved outcomes for students in struggling subgroups will depend on the spread of solid instructional ideas, effective methods, and innovative practice. To achieve this, there needs to be collaboration among teachers

that extends beyond school buildings and districts. As the IDOE creates guidelines for distributing school improvement funds, they must work to connect struggling schools and instructors with model schools and instructors.

Programs currently exist that foster the kinds of collaborative efforts mentioned. One such effort, the Ball State Sciencetech Summer Science Institute, is now in its fourth year. In this program, university professors deepen teacher content knowledge while instructors collaborate with peers from across the state to create original, impactful lessons and courses. Teachers receive support from a network of instructors and university professors who continue to share resources, updates, and results.

Another example can be seen in the collaboration between the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and a program for professional development called LEAP (Learning together to Advance our Practice.)<sup>11</sup> In this program, hundreds of educators from schools across the district share a two-week-long professional development experience in the summer and participate in weekly workshops. The goal of the program is to build a strong cohort of teacher leaders across the district with the power to improve the educational experience for DCPS students. Two national education experts describe the experience saying,

“They do this hard work in teams, sharing the load, building trust among one another, and building expertise in the processes of goal-setting, measurement, and continuous improvement.”<sup>12</sup> In supporting this flagship program, DCPS has taken a step to cultivate and fortify teacher leaders and formally foster the sharing of effective practice to improve outcomes for ‘at-risk’ student sub-groups in their own struggling schools with, as Hawley Miles reports, “lots of progress to show for it.”<sup>13</sup>

While a shortage of teachers remains and achievement gaps persist, new efforts at growing collaboration are gaining steam. Teachers remain hopeful about the future of teacher leadership and state support for teacher leader programs. Fostering programs that allow, encourage, and require schools to be exceptional stewards of human and financial resources is best practice. The potential for positive academic change dramatically increases when teacher leadership with ongoing teacher leader professional development are central to the process. Recognizing this fact is vital to achieving our shared goals under ESSA.

## +++++ CONCLUSION +++++

The manner by which Indiana chooses to address current achievement gaps could have immense impact on many underserved groups of students and their families. Given all of the factors correlated with educational attainment, this impact, positive or negative, is sure to reverberate in their lives and communities. We must take swift, intentional action to correct course for the sake of our at-risk students. This will require that we make efficient use of resources already available. One of these resources is the wealth of knowledge and creativity of our educational community. The intentional spread of effective practice among educators is key to setting the stage for positive academic outcomes. This is especially important as we work to address the needs of our ‘at-risk’ students who are often in greatest need of effective instruction. These efforts require increased teacher leadership and collaboration. We call on IDOE to prioritize teacher leadership and collaborative efforts to build capacity and competency among Indiana’s K-12 teachers to elevate the quality of instruction our most vulnerable students receive and positively impact the lives of all of the students the state serves.

## +++++ ENDNOTES +++++

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<sup>2</sup> Indiana Department of Education. (2017). Graduation Rate Data [2017 Disaggregated Graduation Rates] Retrieved from: <https://www.doe.in.gov/accountability/find-school-and-corporation-data-reports>

<sup>3</sup> See endnote 2

<sup>4</sup> See endnote 2

<sup>5</sup> See endnote 2

<sup>6</sup> Ingersoll, R. M. (2001). Teacher Turnover and Teacher Shortages: An Organizational Analysis. American Educational Research Journal, 38(3), 499-534. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312038003499>

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<sup>11</sup> Leading Educators Blog. (2016). Learning and Practicing Strategies to Improve Instruction with DCPS. Retrieved from <http://www.leadingeducators.org/blog/2016/8/1/davyc3ma9roxzb5ydbclpxwcxwfe5m>.

<sup>12</sup> See endnote 1

<sup>13</sup> See endnote 1