



# Illinois State Board of Education

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## **Findings From the Illinois State Board of Education Listening Tours for Local Perspectives on the Every Student Succeeds Act**

### **Report**

**June 2016**

# Contents

	<b>Page</b>
Executive Summary .....	1
Key Findings From ESSA Listening Tours .....	1
Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Background and Changes From NCLB to ESSA .....	4
Methodology .....	6
Data and Sampling.....	6
Analyses .....	8
Limitations .....	8
Key Findings from ESSA Listening Tours.....	9
Student Achievement.....	9
Assessment.....	10
Accountability.....	11
Schools and Districts.....	14
Improving Programs and Services .....	16
Other Elements in ESSA.....	17
Summary .....	20
Appendix.....	A-1

## Executive Summary

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015. ESSA is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act which provides funding streams and guidance to support equitable education for all students through supplemental educational opportunities. Before implementing programs authorized under ESSA by the 2017–18 school year, each state must submit a plan to the U.S. Department of Education (ED). ED will add additional criteria through proposed regulations regarding a consolidated application that states may incorporate all programs within the statute into one plan. The plan specifies how each state will address academic standards, assessments, and school-level accountability systems including specific indicators and the overall systems of differentiation, reporting requirements and school improvement, including ensuring the inclusion of all student subgroups.

To ensure that the Illinois state plan accommodates the needs of schools and districts, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) held a series of “listening tours” in April and May 2016. These listening tours occurred at 11 sites around Illinois. Nearly 470 district superintendents, school principals, teachers, policy advocates, parents, community members, and other administrators attended the listening tours.

The objectives of the listening tours were twofold:

- to provide an overview of the new ESSA requirements and funding opportunities; and
- to gather feedback from education stakeholder about implementation of ESSA in Illinois.

The Midwest Comprehensive Center (MWCC), a federally funded regional comprehensive center operated by American Institutes for Research, supported ISBE in documenting the stakeholder feedback.

### Key Findings From ESSA Listening Tours

- School, district personnel, and parents seek meaningful student assessments that provide growth measures, do not require an excessive time burden, and may be adapted to meet the needs of student subgroups.
- School and district administrators indicate strong interest in local control and flexible accountability measures.
- Administrators find most value in accountability measures that assess a school’s growth over time. Some administrators expressed concern about measures that compare the school’s growth to the growth rates of other schools.
- School and district administrators and other personnel seek more communication from ISBE to prepare for upcoming grant opportunities and connect with other local education agencies (LEAs) around Illinois.
- Administrators seek the opportunity to share funding among Title grant programs within their district or share funding with other districts working on similar programs.

- Family and community engagement are primary concerns for parents, community members, advocates, and school and district administrators.
- Teachers and advocates seek opportunities to support professional development, professional learning communities (PLCs), induction and mentoring programs, and teacher leadership.
- Representatives from a number of groups advocate for supports for social and emotional learning, behavioral and mental health, and physical well-being.

## Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the support and help of many individuals and organizations. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all of them, especially the nearly 470 individuals who participated in the listening tours.

Special thanks to the following Regional Offices of Education (ROEs), Intermediate Service Centers (ISCs), and National Louis University, all of which hosted listening tours.

- National Louis University
- North Cook ISC
- ROE 3—Bond, Christian, Effingham, Fayette, and Montgomery Counties
- ROE 4—Boone and Winnebago Counties
- ROE 9—Champaign and Ford Counties
- ROE 19—DuPage County
- ROE 21—Franklin, Johnson, Massac, and Williamson Counties
- ROE 26—Fulton, Hancock, McDonough, and Schuyler Counties
- ROE 50—St. Clair County
- ROE 51—Menard and Sangamon Counties
- South Cook ISC

We also would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their willingness to facilitate listening tours and support the inclusion of district and school perspectives.

- Matt Donkin, superintendent, ROE 21
- Dr. Vanessa Kinder, executive director, South Cook ISC
- John Meixner, superintendent, ROE 26
- Linda Oshita, assistant superintendent, ROE 4
- Jane Quinlan, superintendent, ROE 9
- Dr. Darlene Ruscitti, superintendent, ROE 19
- Susan Safarty, superintendent, ROE 50
- Dr. Jeff Vose, superintendent, ROE 51
- Dr. Cindy Whittaker, chair, North Cook ISC Governing Board
- Julie Wollerman, superintendent, ROE 3

## Introduction

The Every Student Succeeds Act was signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015. ESSA is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provides funding streams and guidance to support equitable education for all students through supplemental educational opportunities. Full implementation of ESSA by states is required by the 2017–18 school year.

Before implementing new ESSA requirements, each state must submit a plan to U.S. Department of Education. ED will add additional criteria through proposed regulations regarding a consolidated application that states may incorporate all programs within the statute into one plan. The plan specifies how each state will address student assessment, accountability measures, and education for student subgroups. In addition, the state plan outlines each state’s intention to apply for funding streams supporting rural education, technology, and preschool, among other areas.

To ensure that the Illinois state plan accommodated the needs of schools and districts, the Illinois State Board of Education held a series of “listening tours” in April and May 2016. These listening tours occurred at 11 sites around Illinois at Regional Offices of Education, Intermediate Service Centers, and National Louis University. Nearly 470 district superintendents, school principals, teachers, policy advocates, parents, community members, and other administrators attended the listening tours.

The objectives of the listening tours were twofold:

- to provide an overview of the new ESSA requirements and funding opportunities; and
- to gather feedback from education stakeholder about implementation of ESSA in Illinois.

The Midwest Comprehensive Center, a federally funded regional comprehensive center operated by American Institutes for Research, supported ISBE in documenting the stakeholder feedback.

Findings from the listening tours will be used to inform ISBE’s development of a state plan to implement ESSA. To continuously engage stakeholders, ISBE plans to hold two additional rounds of listening tours. One round will be conducted after ISBE drafts an initial version of the state plan. After this round, ISBE will revise the state plan, incorporating comments from stakeholders. Then ISBE will conduct one more round of listening tours to collect feedback on the revised plan.

This report provides information about the new ESSA requirements, the methodology used to document and synthesize feedback, and findings from the listening tours.

## Background and Changes From NCLB to ESSA

ESSA reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and replaces No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which was signed into law in 2002. There are several key differences between ESSA and NCLB:

- Under ESEA flexibility, states were only required to differentiate Title I schools to identify “focus” and “priority” schools for additional support, based, at minimum, on proficiency and graduation rates only. With the new ESSA law, states are required to differentiate schools using the following accountability indicators:
  - student proficiency in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics;
  - graduation rate (for high schools) or a “valid and reliable” academic indicator, such as growth (for elementary and middle schools);
  - progress in English-language proficiency attainment for English Learners (ELs); and
  - an additional indicator measuring school quality or student success (some examples include school climate, social and emotional learning, and student engagement).
- ESSA retains requirements for testing students in ELA, mathematics, and science, along with the requirement that 95 percent of students must participate in the state’s chosen assessment. However, ESSA also allows districts to administer nationally recognized assessments in high schools in lieu of regular statewide assessments, as long as they meet state requirements.
- ESSA allows LEAs to use up to 10 percent (previously 5 percent under NCLB) of family engagement funding for district-level engagement initiatives, distributing the other 90 percent among schools in the district.
- Preschool Development Grants now will be administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), in partnership with ED. This change reflects congressional understanding of the important roles of both HHS and ED in supporting young children. Illinois currently has a Preschool Development Grant through Race to the Top.
- ESSA consolidates several NCLB funding streams to support student achievement through improved infrastructure. Under the new Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant program, LEAs will receive formula funding for a new Title IV, A. These funds may be used to support a well-rounded education; improving conditions for student learning; and/or expanding the use of technology to support instruction within prioritized schools.
- ESSA retains funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers. In its ESSA state plan, the state must identify indicators to measure the program’s effects on student achievement.
- Under NCLB, rural districts could use Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) funding to support activities specified under other Title provisions. ESSA removes the ability to use REAP funding for Educational Technology State Grants (Title II, Part D) and State Grants for Innovative Programs (Title V). However, ESSA increases the minimum REAP grant award from \$25,000 to \$80,000; ESSA also adds a “hold harmless” provision, ensuring that REAP grant districts will not experience a decrease in funding.

With consideration for the new ESSA requirements and programs, ISBE staff gathered feedback about important considerations for the development of a state plan during the listening tours.

# Methodology

## Data and Sampling

The findings in this report come from a listening tour conducted at 11 sites in Illinois during April and May 2016. The listening tours were open to the public to collect feedback from as many ISBE stakeholders as possible. Attendees included state General Assembly representatives, legislative staffers, regional superintendents, district superintendents, assistant superintendents, other district administrators, school principals, assistant principals, teachers, librarians, parents, community members, school board members, nonprofit organization staff members, union members, and policy advocates.

ISBE invited their partners and stakeholders throughout Illinois to attend a listening tour session to solicit their input in the development of the State's plan to address new ESSA accountability requirements. To encourage conversation, ISBE developed the following guiding topics and questions:

- Student achievement
  - What do we value in a state plan to improve student achievement for all students?
  - What might we need to do differently to ensure these values are met for each subgroup of students?
- Accountability
  - Growth measures: Do we value growth that is the same for all students or some growth is weighted differently based upon district location and context?
  - Growth measures: Based on your own experiences, how do you value growth in relation to achievement?
  - Goals: How best should the state articulate goals to meaningfully hold schools and districts accountable for progress of all students and each subgroup?
- Schools and districts
  - What do you want to see in a state plan to improve coordinated services to schools and districts?
    - What would you hope to see in a new plan?
    - What do you believe should be excluded in a new plan, in your own experience?
- Improve programs and services (title grants)
- Other elements in ESSA
  - What other opportunities are provided in ESSA to support students in Illinois?

As partners of ISBE, the Illinois Education Association (IEA) and the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) developed the following guiding questions:



- Student achievement
  - What instructional strategies have you found to be most effective for improving the achievement of students in your school?
  - What instructional strategies have you found to be most effective for improving the achievement of specific student populations (e.g., English Learners) in your school?
  - What student data have you found most accurately measure the effectiveness of instructional strategies teachers utilize in your school?
- Accountability
  - Growth measures: What do you think is an appropriate annual goal for student progress on the statewide assessment based on your experience?
  - Growth measures: What other information do you think the state should consider when setting academic achievement goals for your school?
  - Goals: How can the state help teachers in your school ensure their students are meeting annual academic achievement goals on the statewide assessment?
- Schools and districts
  - What are the different kinds of community-based services that would benefit children and families in your community?
  - How can the state help schools coordinate with community-based services to better serve children and families in your community?
  - What outcomes should the state use to measure the effectiveness of collaborations between schools and community-based services in your school?
- Improve programs and services (title grants)
  - What programs and services have you found to be most effective for improving the achievement of your students?
  - What programs and services have you found to be most effective for improving the health and safety of your students?
  - What programs and services are missing that you think are needed in your school?

In total, 470 people attended the listening tours (see table 1).

A note taker from the MWCC team attended each listening session to document the formal testimony and the facilitated discussion.

**Table 1. Listening tour dates, locations, and participants**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Host ROE/ISC/District</b>	<b>Location of Listening Tour</b>	<b>Total Number of Participants</b>
4/18	ROE 4 (Boone/Winnebago Counties)	Loves Park	37

4/18	ROE 50 (St. Clair County)	Belleville	48
4/19	South Cook ISC	Chicago Heights	70
4/21	ROE 19 (DuPage County)	Lombard	75
4/21	ROE 9 (Champaign and Ford counties)	Champaign	22
4/25	ROE 3 (Bond, Christian, Effingham, Fayette, and Montgomery counties)	Vandalia	11
4/26	North Cook ISC	Skokie	71
4/27	ROE 51 (Menard and Sangamon counties)	Springfield	42
4/27	ROE 26 (Fulton, Hancock, McDonough, and Schuyler counties)	Macomb	27
5/17	ROE 21 (Franklin, Johnson, Massac, and Williamson counties)	Johnston City	21
5/19	Illinois State Board of Education	Chicago	46
<b>Total</b>			<b>470</b>

## Analyses

The MWCC team coded notes taken by the official note taker for each listening tour session into broad topic areas aligned with the questions of interest identified by ISBE and IEA and IFT. These notes were also coded into additional subthemes as they emerged. After the coding process, researchers were able to sort the data and identify recurrent themes. The team also reviewed public comments and written testimony from listening tour participants. This report presents the key findings of feedback from stakeholders shared at the ESSA listening tours.

## Limitations

Limitations of the data provided in this report include the following:

- Participation in the listening tours was entirely voluntary and attendees decided themselves whether to attend an ESSA tour and whether to contribute feedback. Therefore, the responses collected may not truly represent the thoughts of Illinois education practitioners as a whole. Inferences about larger practitioner group(s) to which attendees belong cannot be made (i.e., findings may not be generalizable).
- Listening tour analysis was conducted on notes taken by experienced note takers, and the analysis was informed by training in qualitative coding methods from experienced coders. These notes, however, may be susceptible to note-taker and analyst biases.

# Key Findings from ESSA Listening Tours

## Student Achievement

Listening tour participants shared their input about what the Illinois State Plan should include to improve the achievement of all students.<sup>1</sup> The following themes emerged from their comments.

### Support struggling students at all grade levels

Participants at the listening groups expressed the need to provide support for students across different grade levels. An individual from ROE 3 suggested that the state “needs to remember all kids at all grades when they struggle.” Another participant from this ROE suggested that the same information is being taught over and over to students in remedial courses. In the South Cook ISC group, a participant shared the series of supports that are being used to help students, including student learning and perception data, multitiered systems of support, reading specialists, PLCs, and a staff advisory group to discuss school policies.

### Value students’ social and emotional well-being so they are ready to learn

Listening group participants shared the need to care for students’ social and emotional well-being. An individual from North Cook ISC emphasized that “we must value students at all stages and ages, and also value that students must be healthy to learn.” This individual suggested a public health approach to social and emotional well-being, including the introduction of mental health professionals in early childhood education and expanded home visiting programs.

### Address needs of student subgroups

Participants also discussed what could be done differently to improve the student achievement of diverse learners and subgroups. They acknowledged that schools serve a wide variety of students, and that schools must address the needs of each group’s unique needs. One participant at the ROE 9 listening tour expressed a desire to recruit a teacher workforce that reflects the diversity of the student body. One district assessment coordinator at the listening tour suggested that the state should consider other measures for poverty beyond qualification for free and reduced-price lunch.

Listening tour participants also discussed the needs of students with disabilities. One participant at the ROE 4 listening tour felt that special education was separate from other educational programs in the state. Another shared that “sometimes we’re asked to implement policies that were made for general education, and they don’t work for special education populations.” An individual expressed a desire for greater access to speech and occupational therapy for students with disabilities.

Attendees also discussed the needs of homeless and foster students. A clinical supervisor at the Chicago listening tour noted challenges facing students in foster care. The clinical supervisor

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<sup>1</sup> Speakers were not asked to identify their roles at the ROE 4 and South Cook ISC listening tours. For the remaining listening tours, participants are identified by their role in education (e.g., superintendent, teacher, or parent).

recommended that students in foster homes should be able to register for school immediately, and noted that better communication among stakeholders is necessary.

Regarding ELs, one listening tour participant expressed a desire to allocate Title I funding for Spanish literacy and Spanish-language science assessments. In addition, multiple participants responded to the Title III stipulation that students be accounted with the EL subgroup for years after exiting services. These participants recommended a longer time to measure EL gains, arguing that that growth could happen beyond the four-year window.

At the Chicago listening tour, a principal indicated interest in additional ISBE support for community schools and ELs. An advocate for multilingual education from the ROE 26 listening tour expressed support for reclassifying EL students after four years to allow for more longitudinal data on EL student progress. The advocates noted opportunities to support Spanish-language assessments through Title I funding, along with professional development to support native language instruction through Title II funding. Another policy advocate from the Chicago listening tour noted that ELs are “a fascinating group full of potential,” and that the state plan should provide opportunities for students to meet that potential.

Finally, a number of individuals said it was unclear what the future of gifted education would be under ESSA. One participant noted that it is currently unclear how gifted students will be identified within the school population for funding, and another wondered about the state plan for gifted education. A teacher and parent at ROE 9 noted that there are a lot of provisions in ESSA that can support high-ability students.

## **Assessment**

Listening tour groups also discussed how student achievement should be assessed as part of the state plan. The following themes emerged from the discussions.

### **How to address opt-outs**

At multiple sites, participants shared concerns about the impact of families opting out of Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments. At the North Cook ISC listening tour, one participant asked, “How will the state handle opt-outs for state testing, especially since assessments are used for teacher and principal evaluations?” Another participant from ROE 26 expressed concern with the 95 percent participation requirement for statewide assessment and wondered how that would work with parental choice.

### **Need for flexible and diverse types of assessments**

Individuals also discussed the need for a diverse range of assessments. A participant from the North Cook ISC suggested that the state should consider a broader range of assessments to reflect the different languages spoken in Chicago. Another participant noted “Right now there are three categories of students: those taking the statewide assessment, those taking the alternate assessment, and the 1 percent that can opt out of testing. Can we find an assessment that will work for all students?” An individual from ROE 26 expressed concern that there are too many assessments, and that enrichment opportunities are being overlooked by schools in order to

prepare for assessments. This person recommended that student learning be expanded beyond the subject matter found in assessments, and another from North Cook ISC emphasized that districts need multiple assessments.

### **High school assessments**

Individuals expressed concern about high school assessments and the shift from ACT to SAT. One participant noted that the House passed a bill to allow school districts flexibility in selecting between the SAT and ACT, and suggested that schools should have a choice given that every assessment may not fit every student. An individual at the ROE 4 site also asked for clarification and guidance from ISBE around using the SAT or ACT in the 2016–17 school year and noted that switching tests is an involved process for school districts. A participant also expressed concern that the new contract for the SAT will not be effective until a new state budget is passed, and districts meanwhile still have to plan their own assessment strategies.

At the Chicago listening tour, a parent indicated that the current statewide assessment “emphasizes a narrow set of skills,” and that classrooms spend “too much time teaching to the test.” The parent expressed that future assessments could include “soft skills” such as collaboration and creativity. Another parent at the Chicago listening tour echoed concerns about the limitations of current standardized testing. One arts education advocate at the North Cook ISC tour noted that current testing takes time away from other programs. A union member expressed interest in “decoupling” standardized assessments from teacher evaluations. A policy advocate at the Chicago listening tour expressed the need to create “high-quality assessments” that expand on current testing.

### **Accountability**

At a number of listening tour sites participants discussed how student achievement should be measured, particularly as it relates to accountability. At the South Cook ISC group, one participant expressed a concern that “accountability is confused with ranking schools in some order.”

### **Balancing flexibility and meaningful measures**

The need to include flexibility with accountability was a consistent theme across groups. Individuals encouraged ISBE to develop a new accountability system that reflects the diverse students and issues in the state. A policy advocate at the Chicago listening tour noted that accountability measures should incorporate the varying resources and needs of schools and communities.

Participants at several listening tour sites discussed the need for flexibility when tests are given, suggesting that testing at a single time of the year doesn’t capture all students’ growth. A participant from North Cook ISC recommended adding flexibility to the accountability system in light of the needs of smaller districts. Another individual from ROE 26 agreed that flexibility is valuable, but that the flexibility should be focused on increasing opportunities for students in failing schools.

While flexibility was emphasized as important factor, participants also desired meaningful accountability measures. An individual from North Cook stated “Flexibility is important, but we don’t want measures that are compliance just for the sake of compliance—we want to know that there’s a purpose.”

A few participants recommended specific standards and performance indicators. One participant at the ROE 19 listening tour recommended the Illinois Balanced Accountability Measure (IBAM) as a cost-affordable model to selecting what should be required in assessments. Another participant recommended the AdvancED performance accreditation model as the foundation of the state’s continuous improvement and accountability system. This individual also strongly recommended a proven, validated peer review process in the state’s accountability plan.

Attendees had mixed opinions on the 5 Essentials model for school improvement. A science teacher at the Chicago discussion noted that the 5 Essentials survey was “invaluable and points to clues to what students are feeling, as well as teachers and parents.” However, a district coordinator at the North Cook ISC listening tour noted that the 5 Essentials language does not necessarily apply throughout Illinois; the survey was initially designed for schools in Chicago.

### **Other submeasures (family and community engagement and social-emotional learning)**

Conversation in the North Cook group included the possibility of including an accountability sub-measure focused on family and community engagement. Participants suggested that the high quality school measure include positive climate, social and emotional learning supports, and family engagement. At the Chicago listening tour, one policy advocate also indicated that “the state report card should include measures of health and wellness.”

In two of the listening tour groups, individuals discussed the possibility of incorporating school climate information in the accountability system. In the North Cook group, an individual suggested that a measure of school climate/culture be used to assess accountability. In the South Cook ISC group, an individual suggested that the state needs to place more emphasis on discipline and school safety and helping school staff and teachers to create a positive school climate.

### **Relationship between assessment and accountability**

Several attendees at the Chicago listening tour indicated a need for changing the role of student assessments in accountability systems. One school board member from the ROE 51 listening tour expressed that the required additional indicator for ESSA accountability measures should not increase the burden of testing. A parent indicated that the current accountability system is “flawed” and that collected data must be normalized for meaningful interpretation. Another parent indicated that the current accountability system is “too focused on outcomes.” Another policy advocate at the ROE 26 listening tour expressed the need for an accountability system with more comprehensive data collection. One teacher at the Chicago discussion indicated that accountability systems seem “punitive” and that it is important to understand the harmful effects of closing low-performing schools. The teacher indicated that accountability systems should highlight and work towards areas for improvement for schools, rather than closing the schools.

One policy advocate at the ROE 19 listening tour noted that NCLB focused very heavily on assessment. This means that there were not many structures for K–2 accountability measures, because assessment starts at third grade. The policy advocate noted that ESSA provides an opportunity to develop accountability measures for K–2 instruction.

### **Teachers and accountability**

Listening tour participants expressed some concerns about how the current accountability system is affecting teachers. A teacher stated that all of the tests are making students and teachers unhappy. An assistant principal wondered if the state plan might include a process that would keep schools accountable but not base teacher [evaluation] outcomes solely on student performance. A superintendent at the ROE 19 listening tour stated that “we could accomplish a lot if we crafted teacher evaluation to be more of a coaching model.” At the ROE 50 session, a school administrator noted that the state should consider allowing more flexibility for districts around teacher evaluation. Overall, listening tour groups shared a desire for an accountability system that supports teacher practice.

### **English Learners**

In terms of addressing accountability as it relates to English Learners, a participant at the ROE 26 listening tour noted that Title II within ESSA stipulates that ELs are to be included in the EL subgroup for reporting and accountability purposes for a period of up to four years after being reclassified. Participants in multiple groups suggest tracking reclassified ELs through high school, noting that achievement gains for English Learners are likely to occur after the four-year tracking requirement. In addition, participants suggested that having longitudinal data would serve as a valuable indicator of school districts’ effectiveness in closing achievement gaps for these students. A policy advocate at the Chicago listening tour indicated that the state accountability system should include considerations for the needs of bilingual students. Finally, a participant at the ROE 26 discussion recommended that accountability and data decision making on ELs within ESSA be done in consultation with the Illinois Advisory Council on Bilingual Education to ensure the collection of fair, valid, and reliable information.

### **Rising Star and AdvancED**

Listening tour groups also brought up the topic of Rising Star, a Web-based continuous improvement platform for districts and schools to submit required reports for accountability purposes. Individuals were divided on the ongoing use of Rising Star. A member of the ROE 4 group asked ISBE to keep the platform operating so that the district has a consistent base for continuous improvement plans.

A school principal from ROE 26 and a superintendent from ROE 3 indicated that they preferred the AdvancED accreditation process. The principal noted that he found the Rising Star submission system too time consuming and cumbersome, and that the AdvancED process allowed him to see what needed to be done to improve his schools.

The superintendent from ROE 3 expressed a concern that previous school improvement processes were not supported with sufficient expertise and ongoing support to maintain them over a period of time. Many listening tour sites communicated their interest in continuing to use

the AdvancED process. One public commenter asked ISBE to give thoughtful consideration to adopting a process that is valid, reliable, and used consistently in nearly 1000 districts and 32,000 schools around the world.

## **Growth measures**

Listening tour groups were asked whether individuals value growth that is the same for all students, or whether they prefer to have some growth weighted differently based on district location and context. “Measuring whether kids are a certain level of proficiency doesn’t tell us enough information. We need to measure their growth as well.” said one individual in the ROE 51 group.

Multiple listening tour groups brought up a preference for measuring growth against a district’s own student results, rather than the results of other districts in the state suggesting that one district’s performance may not resemble another district’s performance. A school board member recommended rather than looking at a single test, but a state plan should consider student growth from the beginning of the school year to the end. A school board association member at the ROE 21 listening tour emphasized the importance of connecting students to a wide range of classes and building growth measures that capture student learning in multiple areas of a well-rounded curriculum. One individual at the ROE 4 discussion mentioned that his or her district was using the Austin Growth Model to continually assess progress.

Measuring growth at the high school level was also a repeated theme. An individual expressed concern about whether subject-based math assessments at the high school level are able to capture growth. In the North Cook and ROE 3 groups, individuals discussed dissatisfaction with the PARCC assessment’s measures for capturing growth. An individual in the ROE 3 group emphasized “We’re talking a lot about growth models and assessments—they are tied together. The assessments have to be aligned with growth models.”

## **Schools and Districts**

The listening tour groups were asked what they wanted to see in a state plan to improve coordinated services to schools and districts. The following themes emerged from these conversations:

### **Statewide system of delivery**

Individuals in multiple listening groups discussed the need for more organization in the statewide system of delivery. A superintendent at the ROE 50 discussion encouraged the state to specifically look for ways to coordinate all of the services for the lowest performing schools in the state. Another speaker from South Cook ISC suggested that database tools and tagging could expand the reach of services.

### **Financial support**

Across the listening tour groups, individuals mentioned the need for appropriate financial support for schools. A school board member at the ROE 51 listening tour expressed the need for adequate school funding that “puts less of a burden on our local taxpayers.” Other individuals



encouraged a revision to the state’s funding formula to address issues with the Illinois Teacher Retirement System. A regional superintendent at the ROE 21 discussion recommended adding flexibility to grants so that individuals are able to share resources across grants. Participants also mentioned the need to adequately fund support for technology and transportation costs.

### **Community schools**

Individuals in the North Cook ISC group discussed community schools and 21st Century Community Learning Centers, emphasizing that the state has a strong program and that these should continue to be part of the state plan moving forward. One individual discussed how 21st Community Centers are an important resource to promote nonacademic development, and that community schools’ courses build student skills like problem solving, creative thinking, and resourcefulness. Another individual discussed how community schools help to build relationships with families.

### **Elements to include in Illinois State ESSA Plan**

Listening tour groups also shared overall recommendations for the state plan. Two speakers emphasized the importance of keeping the state plan simple, and allowing schools and districts to use their own experience and research base to inform practice. Multiple individuals also mentioned the importance of ensuring that the state plan is in the best interest of students.

A school boards association field director expressed the hope that ISBE will allow districts to have a leadership role in the development of the state plan. Another participant at the ROE 4 discussion asked ISBE to also keep the needs of regional offices of education in mind when drafting the state plan. Another participant from this group recommended that the state reconsider when to release requests for proposals (RFPs) so that schools and districts are able to implement programs at the beginning of the school year, rather than starting in January or February.

Listening group participants also shared a set of questions and recommendations recommended at the process of developing the state plan. Multiple speakers shared the need for more streamlined and clear communication from ISBE. An individual at the ROE 4 listening tour shared that he or she is receiving many e-mails from different groups within ISBE and that there needs to be more consistency in what is shared. Other participants emphasized the importance of allowing the public to ask questions and share input throughout ESSA implementation. A school administrator expressed concern about the current burden of paperwork for teachers, and suggested that the state wait until all rules and regulations are released from the U.S. Department of Education.

Speakers also shared a need to strengthen communication around the collection of data. A director of curriculum and assessment stated that teachers don’t always understand why certain data are needed, and thus the state plan must be focused and concise. In addition, a speaker from South Cook ISC mentioned that the state needs a streamlined process to collect data since it could eventually become a burdensome process.

In terms of what should be excluded from the state plan, a participant from ROE 51 asked that “anything that is unfunded should be excluded.” In addition, the individual suggested that state

testing that doesn't provide valuable feedback or requires too much time be excluded from the plan.

## **Improving Programs and Services**

Listening tour attendees discussed the opportunities to apply for Title funding under the new ESSA structure. The following themes emerged from the discussions.

### **Adapting to possible Title II reduction**

Across multiple listening tours, participants identified potential solutions to effectively use Title II funding, which may be reduced under ESSA. At the ROE 9 listening tour, a policy advocate noted that there is a close alignment between the ESSA Title II mandate and Illinois's regulations on principal preparation. Because of this alignment, Illinois may be a strong candidate for school leadership funding. At the ROE 51 conversation, a retired principal and gifted education advocate noted the importance of supporting professional development for gifted educators, and mentioned that Title II funding can be used for this support. A teacher at the ROE 51 listening tour noted tapping into teacher networks as a solution to reduced funding. The teacher mentioned that the state can combine funding for teachers that are already working together, and reduce the role of administrators in Title II programs. In addition, there were some questions about how ESSA might impact current program funding levels. A superintendent at the ROE 19 discussion inquired about decreases over the last four or five years in state professional development, administrative outreach, and special education funding. The superintendent was curious about whether these programs might see increased funding under Title II or other ESSA funding streams.

### **Funding early childhood education initiatives**

In two sites, participants spoke about using Title funding to support early childhood education. At the North Cook ISC listening tour, a policy advocate recommended using title funding to link early childhood and elementary education. The policy advocate noted that investing in early education can be a "proactive step" towards future years of assessment. A superintendent at the ROE 3 discussion inquired about whether pre-kindergarten programs would still be included under the new ESSA structure. One attendee at the South Cook ISC listening tour inquired whether districts can use Title funding to explore full-day kindergarten. A teacher organization member at the ROE 26 listening tour inquired about funding preschool programs.

### **State's role in administering title funding**

Some participants had ideas for ISBE about effective administration of Title funding and collaboration with districts. At the ROE 50 discussion, a teacher association leader indicated the importance of having the teacher voice on ESSA and title funding committees. Attendees at the ROE 50 and South Cook ISC listening tours indicated the importance of providing flexibility to districts around Title-funded programs. In addition, another South Cook ISC participant noted the importance of notifying schools and districts early about Title grant opportunities, especially if the LEA would need to hire new staff to administer the grant.

## **Other Elements in ESSA**

Listening tour participants identified several other key considerations for the Illinois state plan. The following themes emerged across listening tours.

### **Family and community engagement**

Attendees at several sites noted the importance of family and community engagement in the state plan. A school board member noted at the ROE 51 discussion that his school received a U.S. News & World Report silver award of distinction, due in large part to the school’s family and community engagement initiatives.

A policy advocate at the North Cook ISC discussion asked, “How do we use ESSA to build a comprehensive plan that values family and community engagement, incorporates a whole child view, and builds schools that are really connected to communities and families?” This question alludes to feedback from speakers across sites, including parents, school board members, policy advocates, and an Illinois General Assembly representative.

As mentioned in the Background section, ESSA allows districts to retain 10 percent of family engagement funding for district-level initiatives. At the ROE 3 discussion, a General Assembly representative noted that retaining up to 10 percent of funding at the district level is “a good goal, as many of our students’ homes do not have good parental support.”

One parent at the ROE 50 listening tour discussed the need to incorporate the parent voice. The parent noted that parents “want to be involved with the [ESSA state plan] process,” and that there should be more opportunities for parents to participate in developing education guidelines.

In addition to family engagement, attendees noted the importance of connecting with the community. A teacher at the ROE 51 listening tour noted that schools rarely communicate with organizations or community members. If a school is not able to provide a class or service with their current capacity, a community member may be able to fill the gap. For example, a school may not have the funding to hire an art teacher, but a community member might be capable and willing to volunteer. At the North Cook ISC discussion, a parent and education advocate emphasized that as members of the community, “the public is the most important stakeholder,” and ISBE must consider the public’s needs when drafting the state plan.

### **Teacher engagement and professional development**

Attendees discussed the importance of considering the needs of teachers. Participants spoke about opportunities within ESSA to bolster teacher engagement and leadership opportunities. At the ROE 19 discussion, a regional superintendent noted that teacher leadership is “critical—it’s important to have teacher leadership supports at both the school and district levels.”

Multiple attendees noted the importance of including the teacher voice in the Illinois state plan. A teacher association leader at the ROE 50 listening tour implored ISBE to “use the teachers, as they know their students. [There are] many teacher leaders, coaches, and mentors statewide.” A teacher organization member at the South Cook ISC conversation discussed opportunities to include the teacher voice, such as facilitating “teacher leadership participation in developing all

sections of the [ESSA state] plan, communication developed specifically for teachers, and opportunity for feedback from teachers.” The teacher organization member encouraged ISBE to increase the number of teachers participating in the Center for Teaching Quality Collaborative, and noted that teacher leader roles should be transparent and aligned to the needs of students.

There also was some discussion about teacher recruitment and retention. At the North Cook ISC listening tour, one school board member asked, “How can we make Illinois the most attractive state for teacher candidates?” A teacher organization member at the ROE 26 meeting explained that teachers can be scarce and districts have difficulty paying adequate salaries to retain teachers. The teacher organization member noted that some districts have been using Illinois Virtual Schools to find quality teachers and provide students with requisite courses.

Attendees also discussed professional development considerations. A teacher at the ROE 50 listening tour encouraged ISBE to “look into the business world” for inspiration on the professional development process. At the ROE 3 discussion, a teacher recommended using National Board professional development as an option for Title II funding. The teacher noted that the National Board process provides opportunities to align professional development with national standards. A teacher association leader at the ROE 50 listening tour listed some ideas to improve professional development, such as establishing new professional development guidelines, funding induction and mentoring programs, providing more opportunities for release time, developing leadership institutes, and offering teacher leader training. A teacher organization member at the South Cook ISC discussion seconded the need for teacher induction programs, mentoring opportunities, and teacher leadership training.

Some attendees expressed interest in professional development programs supporting student subgroups. A district staff member at the ROE 19 listening tour noted the importance of providing professional develop for both teachers and administrators to support ELs. This sentiment was seconded by a language acquisition director at the ROE 26 discussion. At ROE 51, a retired principal emphasized the importance of including professional development to meet the needs of high-achieving students. A clinical supervisor at the Chicago listening tour suggested that ISBE offer professional development programs focusing on trauma-informed care.

Participants also discussed PLCs across the listening tours. One union member at the Chicago listening tour recommended support for collaborative professional opportunities. A school board association staff member noted at the ROE 3 listening tour that the state should give more consideration to PLCs and allow districts time to collaborate and work on their professional development processes. At the North Cook ISC discussion, a teacher indicated interest in “meaningful, sustained, and relevant professional development opportunities,” and expressed hope that ISBE will use the ESSA state plan to “support professional learning communities and development opportunities.” At the ROE 21 discussion, a school board association member noted that PLCs may improve instructional efficiency where other strategies do not work. The school board member noted, “We’ve tried merit pay, which only fostered completion. We tried the turnaround models; for example, one model involved firing the principal and a lot of staff, and that didn’t work...however, we could see a lot of success if we invest in PLCs.”

## **Role of school libraries**

Some attendees discussed the importance of funding to support school libraries. A school librarian at the North Cook ISC listening tour noted that school librarians are glad to be included, along with other school support personnel, in considerations for ESSA funding. The librarian noted that “powerful libraries make powerful schools.” A librarian at the ROE 19 listening tour site said the state used to provide some significant help for libraries; now, the school gets 68 cents for each student. The school also used to get database services, but now many students do not have experience with databases. The librarian indicated that “the biggest issue is staffing—someone needs to update the devices and library collections.”

## **Social and emotional learning**

ISBE has statewide social and emotional learning (SEL) standards, which outline benchmarks for development in grades K–12. Some listening tour attendees expressed interest in continuing Illinois’s SEL supports through ESSA. A policy advocate at the North Cook ISC listening tour noted that “ESSA provides an opportunity to strengthen the state’s SEL standards. And under ESSA, we have an opportunity to incorporate SEL within early childhood education.” The policy advocate also noted that it takes many years for students to master SEL. Another policy advocate at the North Cook ISC session noted that the state guidelines should help students develop all of the social and emotional skills that they need to succeed. At the ROE 50 discussion, a PTA member said ISBE’s SEL standards are beneficial. A school administrator at the ROE 50 listening tour site expressed interest in seeing an SEL measure used for accountability. The school administrator indicated that social-emotional and school climate surveys should be included in SEL measures.

In addition, a policy advocate at the Chicago listening tour indicated her satisfaction with ESSA’s connection of health and learning. The policy advocate noted that Title I, II, and IV funding could be used to implement professional development, behavioral, and mental health supports. At the Chicago listening tour, a teacher noted that a “sense of safety” within the school is critical for learning.

## **Career and technical education**

Some attendees discussed the role of career and technical education (CTE) in the ESSA plan. A CTE consortium director at the North Cook ISC listening tour referred to longitudinal data indicating that students are taking spending more instructional time in core subjects, but assessment performance remains flat. The consortium director indicated interest in working with ISBE to incorporate CTE within core subject instruction. An attendee at the South Cook ISC discussion indicated interest in seeing CTE included in programs supporting a “well-rounded education.” At the ROE 4 listening tour, one attendee asked for information about how the new ESSA regulations might affect Perkins funding for CTE.

## **Local control**

At some sites, attendees discussed flexibility and local control over various aspects of ESSA implementation, including assessment, accountability measures, and decision making. In particular, local control was a prominent conversation topic at the ROE 4 and ROE 21 listening

tours. At the ROE 4 discussion, three attendees indicated a preference for more local control. One attendee inquired about opportunities for local decision making around choosing which student assessments to administer and measuring growth and graduation rates. A principal at the ROE 21 listening tour indicated that the districts should have flexibility in deciding what student achievement variables should be measured. A school board association member at the ROE 21 discussion noted that ESSA reduces some of the “federal footprint” on education programs.

At the ROE 21 listening tour, a district staff member noted that the state should consider allowing more local control, because locally elected school boards and LEA administrators have the best understanding of local students. The district staff member notes that education also requires considerations the local career and postsecondary opportunities that are available once students graduate. A district staff member at the ROE 26 listening tour and a school board association member at the ROE 3 listening tour echoed the sentiment that locally elected school board members and administrators are in the best position to make decisions.

## Summary

Across the state, education stakeholders provided valuable feedback to inform ISBE’s draft of the Illinois ESSA state plan. While some major themes were discussed across sites, some topics garnered more conversation at particular listening tours.

Local education practitioners and parents noted limitations in current standardized assessment practices. Standardized assessments require valuable time, which cannot be used for instruction. The PARCC exam also provides limited student achievement and growth data, which has implications for school improvement efforts. School and district administrators indicated strong interest in formative assessments (a wide variety of methods used to evaluate students learning), and growth measures. Some attendees also emphasized the importance of integrating CTE with academic content knowledge. Attendees also noted the importance of adapting assessments to accommodate student subgroups, including high-achieving students, ELs, bilingual students, and homeless and foster youth.

Attendees expressed interest for flexibility in measuring accountability. Several practitioners noted that progress will vary for every district. Some attendees suggested accountability and growth measures that longitudinally chart each district’s progress individually. Practitioners also noted opportunities to create new accountability systems for K–2 students, since the youngest students are not subject to assessment.

Attendees noted opportunities to coordinate funding streams and services among districts. Practitioners also discussed interest in sharing funding between Title programs. As many attendees noted, a coordination of services could support teacher professional development through PLCs, teacher mentoring programs, and shared professional learning opportunities.

Family and community engagement was a major theme of interest throughout the listening tours. Parents, community members, advocates, and others noted the importance of including family and the community in school decision making. Some attendees highlighted the potential benefit of having community members volunteer or provide services to local schools.

Practitioners expressed concern for meeting the whole child’s needs, not simply academic goals. As part of this sentiment, several attendees discussed the importance of social and emotional learning supports. Some attendees also noted the opportunity to introduce SEL into early childhood education. In ESSA, practitioners see an opportunity to bridge early childhood education with elementary education, giving students a continuum of learning.

Local control was a topic for discussion at particular listening tours. In particular, attendees from ROEs 4 and 21 had a strong interest in retaining local control over assessment and accountability measures. At both sites, practitioners emphasized that local school board members and administrators know their students well and are in the best position to make decisions for them. Although ROEs 4 and 21 are on opposite sides of Illinois, they are both in rural areas, which may explain feelings of close community and understanding of local students.

Based on feedback from the listening tour attendees, ISBE should consider the following key points raised by school and district staff.

- School, district personnel, and parents seek meaningful student assessments that provide growth measures, do not require an excessive time burden, and may be adapted to meet the needs of student subgroups.
- School and district administrators indicate strong interest in local control and flexible accountability measures.
- Administrators find most value in accountability measures that assess a school’s growth over time. Some administrators expressed concern about measures that compare the school’s growth to the growth rates of other schools.
- School and district administrators and other personnel seek more communication from ISBE to prepare for upcoming grant opportunities and connect with other LEAs around Illinois.
- Administrators seek the opportunity to share funding among Title grant programs within their district or share funding with other districts working on similar programs.
- Family and community engagement are primary concerns for parents, community members, advocates, and school and district administrators.
- Teachers and advocates seek opportunities to support professional development, PLCs, induction and mentoring programs, and teacher leadership.
- Representatives from a number of groups advocate for supports for social and emotional learning, behavioral and mental health, and physical well-being.

Several listening tour attendees expressed gratitude that ISBE is collecting and incorporating local feedback into the state’s ESSA plan. As the ISBE representatives noted during the listening tour presentations, NCLB was in place for nearly 15 years. The feedback and recommendations given by education practitioners, parents, community members, and advocates could shape Illinois’s education system for another 15 years or longer. Input from the listening tours can be used to shape the future of education in Illinois.