



Every Student Succeeds Act: Guiding LEA Needs Assessments and Plan Development to Consider Early Learning

Early learning proponents have been actively seeking opportunities in Consolidated State plans for explicit recognition of the critical foundational role of the pre-K to grade 3 years. Advocates acknowledge a limited number of explicit references to early learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), but have discovered many openings in the law where resources could be used for early learning at the state educational agency level (SEAs) and by local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools.

Once Consolidated State plans have been approved at the federal level, everyone's attention will turn to the development of LEA plans to be approved by SEAs. Local early learning supporters will need persistence to highlight and then advocate for opportunities to increase access and quality within LEA and school plans. Important vehicles for advocacy are the needs assessments that LEAs undertake as part of local plan development. Local needs assessments, if structured appropriately, can play a major role in raising the profile of early learning needs and options during the development of LEA and school plans. Without special attention to early learning during the needs assessment process, LEAs may simply not think about the possibilities and continue with past patterns of expenditures.

This brief is intended to help SEAs consider options for framing LEA needs assessments and plan development activities from an early learning perspective, and then communicating possibilities to local districts. The brief includes:

- **Options for the SEA Role**—a list of actions that the state agency can take proactively to support LEA needs assessments;

- **LEA Needs Assessments in ESSA**—the law’s expectations for LEA needs assessments and plan development within the Titles along with challenges that SEAs can help address;
- **Shaping Local Needs Assessments through Guiding Questions**—examples of question sequences that can guide LEA and school discussions; and
- **Shaping Local Needs Assessments through Data Elements**—examples of data elements and simple analyses that could inform a profile of local early learning needs.

Options for the SEA Role

The state educational agency can take a leadership role in guiding LEA needs assessments and plan development by taking one or more of the following actions:

- Provide a **template** for LEA needs assessments and plans that includes early learning requirements and/or options—ideally this would be a template for a consolidated LEA needs assessment and plan;
- **Require** consideration of and reporting on results from analysis of data elements that are relevant to early learning access and quality (e.g., percent of entering kindergartners with pre-K experience);
- Provide **summary data** from state-level databases (which may be found in different agencies’ data systems) to provide **comparative information** for LEAs (e.g., the percent of children with risk factors);
- Provide **training and guidance** to LEAs about the conduct of needs assessments and plan development, including information about the types of data that would facilitate determination of early learning needs;
- **Review LEA plans** and plan justifications from the perspective of early learning access and quality, including the addition of an early learning specialist to the SEA review teams; and
- Provide **comments on LEA plans** to incorporate early learning opportunities.

LEA Needs Assessment and Plan Development Under ESSA

In many ways, the contribution of ESSA to improving outcomes for students rests on the quality and depth of LEA planning and needs assessments, that is, the extent to which the planning fully examines the underlying reasons for observed gaps. The greater

flexibility offered by ESSA (in comparison to previous laws) brings added responsibility for LEAs and SEAs to identify and adapt strategies that are tailored to local needs and resources. As a result, local stakeholders must consider carefully their options when preparing plans and SEAs may face more challenges when reviewing LEA plans.

Examples of questions that SEAs may consider when thinking about the supports needed by LEAs and schools and when reviewing LEA plans:

1. *To what extent do LEAs and schools have expertise and capacity, including trained staff, to undertake needs assessments and develop solid plans? (SEAs can provide guidance, training and support to LEAs and schools.)*
2. *Are LEAs and schools willing to take an objective and open-ended review of needs without “pre-determination” of programmatic solutions? Will LEAs and schools provide opportunities to seek input from new stakeholders and incorporate new ideas? (LEAs and schools may be tempted to simply continue existing programs without re-examining needs of current students.)*
3. *Are LEAs and schools motivated to take on a systematic and evidence-based review of student needs that goes beyond aggregated achievement data to examine root causes and gaps? (LEAs and schools might naturally turn to summary results from tested grades—a good first step—but will likely need encouragement to take additional steps)*
4. *Do LEAs and schools have at hand the type of information that will inform ESSA planning? (Without SEA support, LEAs and schools may not think about the types of data that can inform assessment of needs.)*
5. *Do LEAs and schools have knowledge of and access to data about pre-K experiences that might reside in other agencies’ data systems? (SEAs can pave the way with other state agencies to facilitate data availability for LEA needs assessments).*

In addition to the greater responsibilities that accompany greater flexibility, ESSA includes numerous requirements for LEA needs assessments, making a consolidated needs assessment (i.e., an assessment that can inform plans for Titles I, II, III, IV) an appealing direction for the sake of efficiency.

The chart below identifies a variety of provisions in ESSA that require LEAs to develop plans that meet students' needs, including mention of formal needs assessments.

Examples of Provisions in ESSA related to LEA Needs Assessment and Planning

<p>Title I, Part A LEA Plans <i>Section 1112(b)(1)</i></p>	<p>LEA Title I plans must identify the students who might be at risk for academic failure and develop a well-rounded program of instruction that will help them meet challenging State academic standards. Included is the provision how the local educational agency will support, coordinate, and integrate services provided under this part with early childhood education programs at the local educational agency or individual school level, including plans for the transition of participants in such programs to local elementary school program.</p>
<p>Title I, Part A Schoolwide Programs <i>Section 1114(b)(6)</i> <i>Section 1114(b)(2)</i></p>	<p>Schools that serve 40% or more low income students are eligible to operate schoolwide Title I programs. Under a schoolwide program, a school may consolidate federal, state, and local education funds to address the needs of students in a flexible manner.</p> <p>A comprehensive plan is required for a schoolwide program. Such a plan is based on a comprehensive needs assessment of the entire school which is based on the academic achievement of children in relation to challenging State academic standards, particularly the needs of children who are failing or at risk of failing to meet challenging standards as well as other factors.</p>
<p>Title I, Part A School Improvement <i>Section 1111 (d) (1) (B)</i></p>	<p>Comprehensive support and improvement plans must be based on a school-level needs assessment, informed by a review of student performance indicators and a review of resource inequities.</p>
<p>Title II, Part A <i>Section 2102 (b)(3)</i></p>	<p>LEA plans must address the learning needs of all students, including students with disabilities, English learners, gifted students. LEAs must base plans on advice from and meaningful consultation with teachers, principals, other school personnel, charter school leaders, parents, community partners on how best to improve LEAs' activities under Title II.</p>
<p>Title III, English Learners and Immigrant Students <i>Section 3116 (b) and Non-Regulatory Guidance: English Learns and Title III of the ESEA, as amended by ESSA</i></p>	<p>When establishing Language Instruction Educational Programs (LIEP), LEAs should develop plans based on the unique needs of English learners, including taking into account distinct subgroups of English learners.</p> <p>An LEA should consider the developmental and language needs of children when determining who should be served by Title III funds.</p>

<p>Title IV, Part A Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants</p> <p><i>Section 4106(d)</i></p>	<p>LEAs that receive an allocation that is \$30,000 and greater must conduct a comprehensive needs assessments every three years about: a well-rounded education for all students, school conditions for student learning, access to personalized learning experiences supported by technology, and professional development for the effective use of data.</p>
<p>Title IX, Homeless</p> <p><i>Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non- Regulatory Guidance Title VII-B of the McKinney -Vento Homeless Assistance Act, as amended by ESSA Section 723(c) (2) Section 722(g)(6)(A)</i></p>	<p>An LEA application for subgrant shall include an assessment of the educational and related needs of homeless children and youth.</p> <p>Local liaisons are charged with identifying preschool-aged homeless children, and ensuring that these children and their families have access to and receive needed services for which they are eligible (e.g., LEA -administered preschool programs, Head Start, Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities), and other preschool programs administered by the LEA.</p>

Additional needs assessment requirements will be associated with competitive programs authorized in ESSA including the LEARN and Preschool Development grants. SEAs that are considering these future opportunities might build in additional needs assessment elements in anticipation of future grant opportunities.

Shaping Local Needs Assessments through Guiding Questions

SEAs have several options to “jump start” the thinking of LEA and school stakeholders about needs assessments. One approach offers LEAs a series of questions to guide discussions about needs in a systematic manner. Given the breadth of needs assessment expectations across Titles, LEAs and schools will undoubtedly appreciate and benefit from any structure and guidance that SEAs can provide.

In the sequence of assessment questions below, the first question introduces the overarching topic and the sub-questions illustrate ways to explore potential needs. Note that the questions suggest different types of data collection, including reviews of administrative records, analysis of assessment results, surveys, and interviews.

Examples of Guiding Needs Assessment Questions

- A. To what extent have students entering kindergarten had experiences that prepare them to succeed? (to inform use of Title I funds for pre-K)
- What proportion of incoming kindergartners have participated in preschool?
 - What is the breakdown of preschool settings and what is known about the quality of those settings (e.g., QRIS ratings)?
 - What are the characteristics of children who don't receive preschool services?
 - What are the experiences of low-income children? . . .of dual language learners?
- B. What are the developmental gaps of incoming kindergartners? . . .of incoming first graders? (to inform plans for LEA use of Title I funds for pre-K and K)
- What are the patterns of results of kindergarten entry assessments by domain?
 - What are the patterns of end-of-year kindergarten results by domain?
 - What are kindergarten and first grade teachers' perspectives on children's learning strengths and needs?
 - How do parents perceive the readiness of their children?
- C. To what extent are the transitions across system levels effective for children and families? (to inform any LEA use of Title I funds as well as Title II and Title IV options)
- What is in place to help children and families make smooth transitions (e.g., home and school, pre-K and K, K and grade, and grade 2 and 3)?
 - How do parents perceive the readiness of their children for transitions?
 - What information would parents have found useful to make transitions easier?
- D. How well prepared are staff in pre-K and the primary grades to support children's development in all domains? (could inform Title II plans)
- Do all professional and paraprofessional staff have professional training/credentials in early learning?

- Do administrators and leaders have the professional training and information they need to support high quality early learning programs?
- In what areas do staff want more support? How do those areas relate to the results of assessments?

Other needs areas to explore: helping parents support children’s learning; intensity of services; continuity of educational services over the summer; preparation to support dual language learners.

Shaping Local Needs Assessments through Data Elements

Instead of, or in addition to, guiding questions, an SEA could identify data elements along with suggestions for analyses that could illuminate needs. The examples below present data elements that are likely available at the LEA and school level along with suggested analytic breakouts. The examples also include the types of needs that results of analyses might suggest.

Examples of Data Elements/Data Sources/Analyses

- A. For **students who are struggling in 3rd grade reading**, examine patterns of early learning experiences (quality and intensity of pre-K and K), results of formal and informal literacy assessments, and extent of intervention experiences (referrals and supports).
 - Patterns may show: 1) gaps in pre-K opportunities for some groups of students; 2) need for improvement in precision/interpretation of screening and assessment tools; 3) inadequacy of interventions; 4) roadblocks/lack of progress during particular time periods or at specific benchmarks.
 - Data could inform LEA use of Title I funds and school improvement plans for comprehensive and targeted support and improvement schools as well as Title II funds to support relevant professional development.

- B. Gather information about formal **training and credentials** of administrators and Pre-K to grade 3 staff in terms of **child development, literacy, working with dual language learners, special needs identification/referral**. Augment with staff members’ self-identified needs for professional development in the same areas.

- Review may indicate: need for targeted external support for staff which could be fulfilled through coaching support, professional development, or additional staff.
 - Data could inform LEA use of Title I and II funds.
- C. Summarize **disciplinary records** of pre-K to 3rd grade students to identify any **patterns of discipline** that involve removal of students from classroom settings. Compare the disciplinary patterns with overall statewide results to determine problem areas.
- Patterns may show: overall need for training in child development and/or classroom management; staff who may require support in the form of coaching/professional development.
 - Data could inform plan for Title I and IV (conditions for learning).
- D. Review patterns of **English language development and attainment** by grade 3 dual language learners. Identify the K-3 histories of students who have made limited progress in developing English proficiency in terms of classroom assignment, type and intensity of language interventions and supports, and participation in language programs. Contrast those histories with patterns of students who have made substantial progress.
- Patterns may show: overall need for professional development; staff who may require support in the form of coaching/professional development; inadequate interventions
 - Data could inform Title III and II plans.

Summary

LEAs will undoubtedly have different capacities to undertake needs assessments and varying levels of information available to them, but a few messages can apply to all:

- Combining data about performance with information about opportunities and resources forms a more complete picture than relying on only a few data elements;
- Combining information that is required by the SEA of all districts with locally relevant data augments the picture of needs;

- Access to information about the comprehensive needs of young children may involve gathering data that has been collected by other agencies, e.g., Health and Human Services agencies;
- Data breakdowns by population subgroups (e.g., dual language learners, different preschool experiences, health/disability) helps to pinpoint needs and adapt solutions; and
- Comparisons of all types (e.g., with similar districts, trends over time, with state benchmarks) help to set priorities.

As described above, SEAs can play multiple roles in supporting LEAs at the needs assessment stage. Systematic needs assessment work based on solid data sources is the foundation of good planning and the beginning of finding appropriate evidence-based solutions.