State education officials are being given greater control over everything from evaluating teacher performance to setting education standards, thanks to a comprehensive reform bill signed by President Barack Obama in December 2015. The legislation, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, reduced the federal government’s role in setting education policy and granted more authority to the states, a move that education officials are hopeful will lead to strides in fixing widening achievement gaps and other issues that have plagued the nation’s public schools.

ESSA replaces the No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB, which allowed the federal government to have a major hand in overseeing testing, assessing teacher performance and monitoring low-performance schools. The new law does away with the NCLB’s one-size-fits-all approach, providing states and local districts with enhanced power to carry out many of those functions.

State policymakers are hopeful that the new legislation will help them tackle some of the major challenges they are addressing in public schools.

One of the key directives of the previous law was for schools to improve the performance of all students, through test scores and other measures. Many states found that requirement to be unworkable and ineffective. The new law empowers state and local decision makers to develop their own systems for school improvement based upon evidence, rather than imposing the cookie-cutter federal solutions set forth under the NCLB act. Officials agreed that providing more sway to states and school districts is a positive change from the prescriptive federal requirements of the past several
Kentucky state Sen. Jimmy Higdon, who serves as CSG Education and Workforce Development Public Policy Committee co-chair, praised the new flexibility for states to make education policy and funding decisions.

“The Every Student Succeeds Act provides much-needed flexibility for states to have greater control over funding decisions and accountability systems,” said Higdon. “In Kentucky, we are preparing for the new law by making education our top priority. SB 1 will be our Let Teachers Teach Act. It will repeal and replace outdated laws to meet the individual needs of our communities instead of following the prescriptive guidelines set forth in No Child Left Behind.”

Going forward, states will not be expected to transition to the new requirements all at once. They have until the 2017-18 school year to implement their new accountability plans. The U.S. Department of Education has indicated that the transition period will be gradual, rather than signaling an abrupt end to NCLB.

While the final regulations were released in December 2016, many states already have formed working groups, task forces and committees to plan for the implementation of ESSA.

States will still have to report their progress and maintain accountability under the new law, which requires that any action taken to support school improvement be driven by student outcomes.

The act also replaces more than 50 of the grant programs under NCLB with a block grant, known as the Local Academic Flexible Grant, to provide states and school districts the funding flexibility to support initiatives based on their local needs.

Looking ahead in 2017, the recent selection of Betsy DeVos by President Donald J. Trump for the position of U.S. Department of Education secretary and the anticipated changes in the role the department plays in policy implementation will have a large impact at the state and local level. State and local level education decision-making has been a stated priority of the Trump administration. “I look forward to the new presidential administration’s focus on increased local control of education policy,” said Higdon.

**Early Childhood/ Child Care**

Affordable, high-quality and accessible child care is a challenge for many families. While studies show that early childhood education is important to cognitive development, programs can be relatively expensive, especially for low-income households. In addition, the availability and access to child care varies significantly across the states, and is extremely limited in some areas. Access to high-quality, affordable child care is a critical education issue for the future, and will continue to be a challenge for parents and guardians to fully participate in the workforce.

**Physical Activity in Schools**

The Every Student Succeeds Act passed in 2015 emphasizes the importance of a “well-rounded education,” which specifically includes physical education and wellbeing. Since children and young adults spend a great deal of their time at school, educators must prioritize physical activity during the school day, which may increase academic performance and lower students’ risk for obesity and other health problems. Now that Congress has established physical activity as a national expectation for public education, it is up to states, districts and schools to decide how they are going to incorporate it into their curriculum.
Skills and Apprenticeships

Skills and apprenticeship programs are a focus area for state education leaders looking to improve post-high school opportunities for students. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, apprenticeship programs provide significant benefits for both businesses and employees. Employees are able to earn on average $50,000 per year while in employer-paid training programs that allow the apprentice to earn a two- or four-year degree. For businesses, there is typically a return of $1.47 for every dollar invested in apprenticeship programs. The programs also correlate with lower turnover rates, improved productivity, and provides a custom-trained and experienced workforce.

College and Career Readiness

For over a decade, the federal government has closely linked college and career readiness with raising academic standards in English and mathematics. The newly passed Every Student Succeeds Act, however, gives states the flexibility to pursue the goal of “college and career readiness” in unique and well-rounded ways. As they implement ESSA, states must decide what knowledge and skills their public schools will prioritize in an attempt to prepare students for college and career.

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