Before state education officials sent off Minnesota’s plan for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act to the federal government, Rep. Sondra Erickson wanted to make sure one important constituency got the chance to hear about it and weigh in. That group was the state’s legislators, who four years earlier had revamped how Minnesota evaluates school performance.

The Legislature dubbed this new system the "World’s Best Workforce," which focuses on getting students ready for success in the K-12 system (all third-graders reading at grade level, for example) and for life after high school. It measures the progress of each of the state’s schools in four main areas — standardized test scores, the closing of achievement gaps, college and career readiness, and graduation rates.

“What was important to me was that our system for federal accountability [under the ESSA] align with our existing state accountability system,” says Erickson, chair of the Minnesota House Education Innovation Policy Committee. “We don’t want to have teachers, parents and students conflicted.”

To that end, Erickson not only requested a legislative hearing on the ESSA in the 2017 omnibus education bill (HF 2), she included statutory language that the implementation plan be “consistent and aligned, to the extent practicable,” with World’s Best Workforce.

Erickson likes what she learned about the plan, saying it will provide for “continuity and consistency.”

A central tenet of the 2015 federal law was to give states more flexibility on education policy, and the ESSA has not supplanted changes made by states to their accountability systems. Instead, state ESSA plans mostly incorporate some of the new federal requirements (such as accounting for progress made by English language learners and including a measure of “school quality”) into their accountability systems.

Another goal of the ESSA is to evaluate schools on a wider range of indicators, rather than just how many of their students show levels of proficiency on standardized tests. Even prior to enactment of this federal law, many states had been moving in this direction, considering factors such as student academic growth, graduation rates, school climate and achievement gaps. Under the new federal law, states have considerable latitude on how to weigh the school-performance indicators.

Left to states, too, is how to classify and differentiate schools based on performance. Indiana and Ohio use an A-F grading system, a method preferred by some education-reform groups that say it’s the best way to provide transparency to parents and to stimulate change in low-performing schools.

In Michigan, the state has been using a top-to-bottom ranking system for its schools. That remains in place under the state’s accountability law, but its ESSA plan envisions use of a “dashboard model” in order to provide “a more holistic, data-driven story of what is happening in our local schools.” (The dashboard does not rank or classify schools.)

Some Michigan legislators, though, want summative ratings in place in their state.

“We need one identifiable system for every district,” says Sen. Phil Pavlov, chair of the Senate Education Committee, adding that he prefers use of an A-F grading system.
By: Monday, October 23, 2017 at 11:02 AM

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