

# Every Student Succeeds Act Primer: High Schools

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**Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, states and districts are responsible for supporting and improving the quality of low-performing high schools.**

**High school graduation rate goals.** For all students and student subgroups, states must set long-term goals for the four-year high school graduation rate with measurements of interim progress. States may set goals for extended-year graduation rates (e.g., five-year or six-year graduation rate), but these goals must be higher than the four-year graduation rate goal.

**Low-graduation-rate high schools.** At least once every three years, states must identify high schools with graduation rates at or below 67 percent for *comprehensive*, locally-determined, evidence-based intervention. These schools have up to four years to meet state-set criteria that would allow them to exit the comprehensive support and improvement status. If these schools do not meet these criteria they must implement more rigorous state-determined interventions. In addition, districts may allow students in these schools to transfer to other public schools in the district.

**Funding for high schools.** Currently, high schools receive 10 percent of Title I funding; however, they enroll nearly one-quarter of students from low-income families.<sup>1</sup> In addition, there are 3,102 high schools that have a poverty rate of at least 50 percent, yet they do not receive Title I funds.<sup>2</sup> To address this inequity, ESSA allows districts to target Title I funds to high schools. Districts are allowed to lower the priority threshold to receive Title I funds from 75 percent to 50 percent for high schools. The priority threshold to receive Title I funds remains at 75 percent for elementary and middle schools.

**School improvement funding.** ESSA eliminates the School Improvement Grants program. However, it requires states to utilize 7 percent of their Title I funds to support school improvement activities. In addition, states may use 3 percent of their Title I funding to provide “direct student services,” which may include Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and other advanced course work; career and technical education that leads to an industry-recognized credential; credit recovery; and personalized learning.

**High school program.** ESSA eliminates the High School Graduation Initiative (HSGI) included in the No Child Left Behind Act. HSGI was the only program dedicated to high school dropout prevention and recovery. However, ESSA creates a new grant program for states and districts called the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant program. Funds from this new program may be used for dropout prevention as well as a variety of other activities related to supporting a well-rounded education, improving school conditions, and digital literacy.

**State and district plans.** State plans must describe how the state will work with districts to provide for the effective transition of students from middle school to high school and from high school to postsecondary education. Strategies for doing so may include integrating rigorous academics, career and technical education, and work-based learning; dual enrollment; and coordination with institutions of higher education and employers. In addition, district plans may use Title I funds to support experiential and work-based learning opportunities that provide students with in-depth interactions with industry professionals and academic credit. Plans also may support dual enrollment, early college high schools, and career counseling.

Policy	No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)	Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Waivers	Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
Requires intervention in low-graduation-rate high schools	No	Yes (within high schools with a graduation rate below 60 percent)	Yes (within high schools with a graduation rate at or below 67 percent)
Includes a program dedicated to dropout prevention and recovery	Yes	Yes (HSGI was maintained under waivers.)	No

<sup>1</sup> J. Chambers et al., *State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, Volume IV—Targeting the Uses of Federal Education Funds* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2009), p. 49, <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/disadv/nclb-targeting/nclb-targeting.pdf> (accessed September 28, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education unpublished analysis of Title I data from the Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics, School Year 2012–13.