

# Every Student Succeeds Act Primer: Personalized Learning



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**The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 supports states and districts in implementing personalized learning, a student-centered approach designed to help all students develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities that will prepare them for college, a career, and life. Personalized learning emphasizes (1) developing trusted and caring relationships between teachers and students; (2) connecting learning to the real world; (3) linking curriculum to students' interests, strengths, and aspirations; (4) providing students individually targeted instruction, practice, and support where they are struggling; and (5) creating more flexible learning environments. Personalized learning requires those working in schools to rethink the ways they teach and support students in their learning.**

## Direct Student Services

With personalized learning, schools and school districts use a variety of approaches, such as redesigning classrooms and teaching methods, to ensure all students have the opportunity to master the skills and knowledge that will prepare them for

college and a career. Under ESSA, a state may use up to 3 percent of its Title I funds for "direct student services" that may support the acquisition of [deeper learning skills](#), including the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, collaborate with peers, communicate effectively, and be self-directed. States award grants to geographically diverse districts to use these funds. Districts may use these funds to support

- components of personalized learning;
- student enrollment and participation in academic courses not otherwise available at a school, including advanced course work; and
- activities that assist students in completing credit-bearing postsecondary education-level instruction, such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, including covering fees associated with such course work.

## Funding for Digital Learning

Under a personalized learning model, teachers and school staff use tools, technology, and data to enhance classroom instruction, assess individual students' progress, and jointly identify next steps for meeting their needs. Although ESSA eliminates the Enhancing Education through Technology (Ed-Tech) State Program, it creates a new Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants program. ESSA authorizes up to \$1.6 billion annually for this new program to provide formula grants to states for multiple purposes,<sup>1</sup> including improving student academic achievement and digital literacy through the effective use of technology. Up to 60 percent of the subgrants states provide to districts from this program may be used to support activities such as providing resources to personalize learning and carrying out "blended learning"<sup>2</sup> projects.



## Teacher Capacity to Support Personalized Learning

Under ESSA, states may use federal professional development funding to provide teachers, principals, and other school leaders with personalized, evidence-based support designed to

- build teacher capacity to use data and assessments to improve classroom practice;
- develop and implement instructional practices that support dual- or concurrent-enrollment programs and the integration of rigorous academics, career and technical education (CTE), and work-based learning;
- create common planning time to allow teachers to collaborate on efforts to prepare students for postsecondary education and the workforce; and
- support training and professional development for teachers, principals, and other school leaders on how to effectively integrate technology into curricula and instruction.

ESSA also includes a competitive grant program to support professional development to improve classroom instruction specifically for English learners. Grant funds from this program may be used to support the use of technology-based programs that are effective in increasing student academic achievement and instruction of English learners.

## Standards

Under ESSA, states are required to adopt challenging academic content standards and demonstrate that those standards align with entrance requirements for credit-bearing course work in the state's public system of higher education and with relevant state CTE standards. Ensuring students learn challenging academic content and skills, while also developing academic mindsets, is a goal of personalized learning.

## Assessments

Under ESSA, assessments must include measures that assess higher-order thinking skills and understanding that better reflect a personalized learning approach. Provisions include the following:

- States may deliver assessments, in part, in the form of portfolios, projects, or extended-performance tasks designed to encourage students to think critically and solve complex problems. ESSA also permits states to evaluate student academic achievement through the development of comprehensive assessment instruments, such as technology-based assessments and computer-adaptive assessments.
- States may administer assessments through either a single summative assessment or multiple interim assessments provided during an academic year. Those interim assessments result in a single summative score. This is an opportunity to implement a more robust system of assessments that support personalized learning in pursuit of deeper learning outcomes.
- ESSA allows up to seven states, and a consortium not to exceed four states, to implement an innovative assessment and accountability pilot, including competency- or performance-based assessments.
- A district may submit for approval from the state, permission to use a "nationally-recognized" high school academic assessment instead of the state high school assessment for accountability purposes. The nationally-recognized high school assessment must meet federal assessment requirements regarding alignment, quality, and validity and may be more rigorous in content coverage and difficulty than state-designed assessments.



- ESSA authorizes federal funding for state assessments with an emphasis on balanced assessment systems that measure the full range of state standards and competency-based assessments that allow students to advance based on demonstrated mastery of a skill. These provisions make it easier for states to develop and implement higher-quality assessments that target higher-order thinking skills more effectively than narrow, low-quality assessments. For example, assessments may incorporate extended-performance tasks to measure students' depth of knowledge. States also may use federal assessment funding to improve the delivery of assessments and support teachers in the development of classroom-based assessments, interpreting data from assessments, and using that information for designing instruction.

## Transitions

Under ESSA, state and district Title I plans must describe how the state will work with school districts to provide for the effective transition of students between middle grades and high school and from high school to postsecondary education. District plans may include coordination with institutions of higher education, employers, and others and increase student access to dual-enrollment course work. In addition, districts may use Title I funds to support experiential learning opportunities and work-based learning opportunities that provide students with in-depth interactions with industry professionals and academic credit. These provisions facilitate personalized learning by connecting students to their local communities and the world beyond the classroom by engaging them in real-world learning opportunities.

## Report on Student Home Access to Digital Resources

Under ESSA, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences is required, no later than eighteen months after the enactment of ESSA, to complete a study on the educational impacts of student access to digital resources outside of school. The study will evaluate barriers that students face in accessing digital resources outside of the classroom, challenges faced by students who lack home internet access (such as homework completion), and how these student barriers impact instructional practices of educators. The report will include a description of effective practices that states, districts, and other entities have used to improve student access to digital resources outside of the classroom.

## Accountability

ESSA requires a multiple-measures accountability system that must include at least one indicator of school quality or success selected by the state, in addition to students' performance on the statewide assessment, high school graduation rates, and English language proficiency. This gives states the flexibility to include indicators in its statewide accountability system that reflect the impact of personalized learning.

## District Plans

Under ESSA, district Title I plans may describe how the district will assist schools in developing school library programs that will provide students an opportunity to develop digital literacy skills.

For additional fact sheets and videos about ESSA, visit [www.all4ed.org/essa/](http://www.all4ed.org/essa/).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants program has three purposes: (1) provide all students with access to a well-rounded education; (2) improve school conditions for student learning; and (3) improve the use of technology to raise academic achievement and digital literacy for all students. If a district receives less than \$30,000 for this program, the district may choose to support only one of these purposes.
- <sup>2</sup> As defined by ESSA, blended learning means "a formal education program that leverages both technology-based and face-to-face instructional approaches."

Photos provided by Henry County (Georgia) Schools.

The **Alliance for Excellent Education** is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org)