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For State Education Leaders, Greater Control under New Law Means More Demands with Limited Resources

Survey also shows states would be hesitant to participate in federally funded private school voucher program

WASHINGTON, D.C., Dec. 12, 2017 - Although many state education leaders like having greater control over key education decisions as a result of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), all but one of the state leaders responding to a new survey said their state lacks sufficient funding, staffing, or expertise to carry out one or more key requirements of this 2015 federal law. The survey of state deputy education superintendents or their designees was conducted in the fall of 2017 by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at The George Washington University, and 45 states responded.

The survey also found that the Trump Administration's withdrawal of many federal regulations and written guidance for ESSA has some state officials looking for clearer directions from the U.S. Department of Education. Specifically, 25 of the state survey respondents said the written ESSA guidance is too little or lacking in detail, while 12 agreed it was the right amount, 2 said it was too much or too detailed, and 6 were unsure.

"The capacity of state education agencies is a persistent and often overlooked challenge, said Maria Ferguson, CEP's Executive Director. "The survey results suggest the demands of ESSA, coupled with a lack of clear guidance from the Department, are making it difficult for state agencies to show the kind of creative leadership ESSA was meant to encourage."

Despite the current administration's support for voucher-driven school choice programs, none of the responding state leaders indicated that their state would participate in a program to use federal ESSA funds for private school vouchers. More than half (25) of the responding officials were unsure whether their state would apply for such a voucher program, while 18 said their state would *not* apply, and 1 said that the state board of education, not the state education agency, would decide.

Planning for Progress: States Reflect on Year One Implementation of ESSA, reports the findings of the CEP survey, which gathered baseline information about states' experiences in the early phases of ESSA implementation. States had to submit their final plans for implementing ESSA to the U.S. Department of Education by September 18, 2017, and most of the law's accountability requirements take effect this school year.

ESSA was intended to shift control from the federal government to state and local education agencies, and 29 survey respondents agreed the law has accomplished that. Furthermore, 21 of these 29 saw this shift as a positive development. But even at this early stage of implementation, 23 state leaders report that ESSA has increased their state education agency's workload compared with the predecessor law, the No Child Left Behind Act.

States are giving school districts a strong say when it comes to determining next steps for low-performing schools that fail to improve within a certain timeline. Thirty-one survey respondents said their state will work with districts in making these decisions. Only two state officials indicated that the state education agency alone would decide. States are also taking actions to support districts in improving schools, including developing templates for needs assessments, creating a process for approving school improvement plans, and providing technical assistance.

“Most states seem to be following the spirit of ESSA and are not planning to impose top-down solutions to improve schools,” said Diane Stark Rentner, CEP’s Deputy Director. “Improving low-performing schools is very difficult work, and the more that states, school districts, and stakeholders can work together to identify appropriate interventions, the more support there will be for undertaking improvement efforts.”

The survey also revealed other findings about state ESSA implementation:

- **Expanded requirements for publicly reporting data in state “report cards” do not appear to present major problems for state leaders.** There are some exceptions, such as reporting on federal, state, and local per pupil expenditures, which is challenging some states.
- **State math, English language arts, and science assessments are in flux.** Thirty-five state respondents indicated that their state is planning changes in their ESSA-required assessments in the next three years. Some of these states are making changes because of new or revised content standards, especially in the area of science where 27 states report changing standards.
- **Engaging key stakeholders in ESSA planning has made a difference.** All of the respondents found stakeholders’ engagement in ESSA planning to be helpful, and most plan to continue consulting with key groups during ESSA implementation.
- **The proposed elimination of ESSA Title II-A funding to improve teaching and school leadership would present challenges for most states.** The Trump Administration and U.S. House of Representatives have called for the elimination of funding for Title II-A. Large majorities of survey respondents said that without these federal funds their state would be challenged to provide teacher and principal professional development, carry out teacher recruitment and retention programs, and reduce class size.

Planning for Progress: States Reflect on Year One Implementation of ESSA, is available for free on the CEP website, www.cep-dc.org.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995, the Center on Education Policy at The George Washington University is a national advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.