Parents Are Key to Success

For 14 long years, students and educators lived under the deeply flawed No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed on December 10, 2015, replaces NCLB and returns decision making for our nation’s education back where it belongs – in the hands of parents, local educators, and communities – while keeping the focus on those students most in need.

The new Act goes into full effect during the 2017-2018 school year. Below are some key elements of the law that directly impact parents and guardians.

State and district plans
- States and districts are required to write plans on how they intend to prepare every student for the future; those plans must be crafted with the help of parents and teachers. Parents can participate by joining their local ESSA team, led by the local teachers association. If your school or district is not part of a local ESSA team, reach out to your local parent-teacher organization. The local ESSA team works in collaboration with the state ESSA team to ensure that parents’ and educators’ voices are heard and represented in the plans. Parents will have the opportunity to discuss the resources and programs most important to them, things such as school nurses, school health clinics, and afterschool programs.

Public comment on the state plan
- States and districts are required to write plans on how they intend to prepare every student for the future; those plans must be crafted with the help of parents and teachers. Parents can participate by joining their local ESSA

School support plans
- The state is required to identify schools in need of improvement; generally, these are schools not meeting the state’s expectations on assessments, graduation rates, English language proficiency, or student supports. For each school identified by the state, the district must develop a support and improvement plan; the district must develop that plan with the help of parents and teachers. The plan should be based on a school needs-assessment (also called an opportunity audit). A needs assessment allows parents to compare all the resources and programs in their child’s school with those usually found in a great school. Things parents should consider are school funding, full-time counselors, and courses that will prepare students for college. Parents can work with the local teachers association on both the opportunity audit and the school plan.

Direct student services
- If the district has been given money for direct student services, a parent can choose from among the services for their child’s education. Direct services may include academic courses not otherwise available at the student’s school, including advanced courses (Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate), career and technical education, credit recovery, and accelerated courses that lead to a regular high school diploma. Services may also include academic tutoring.

State and district report cards
- Parents now have the opportunity to help design the state and district report cards. Report cards will provide valuable information on school outcomes, such as chronic absenteeism and preschool enrollment, and on resources, such as school funding. Parents will have the opportunity to add additional information to the report cards, information such as the school counselor-to-student ratio, its student-to-school nurse ratio, and minutes per week students spend in physical education. For more information on how to get involved, reach out to the local teachers association or parent-teacher organization.

Continued
Student assessments

- ESSA requires that every student, with exceptions for students with significant cognitive disabilities and newly arrived English Language Learners, be tested in math, science, and reading or English language arts. By the time a student has reached their senior year, they will have taken at least 17 mandated tests. At the beginning of each school year, the district shall notify parents of their right to request information regarding any state or district policy regarding student participation in any tests required by the state or district; information shall include a policy, procedure, or parental right to opt the student out of such tests, where applicable.

Alternate assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities

- The district may provide alternate assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities; the student's individualized education program (IEP) team can determine if the student qualifies for an alternate assessment. Parents must be "clearly informed" of specific items, including alternate standards, the effect upon requirements for a regular high school diploma, and administration of and accommodations for participating in academic instruction and assessments for the grade level in which they are enrolled.

Assessment audits

- If the district receives a grant for an assessment audit, parents have the right to offer feedback on mandated tests. Questions parents may be asked include "do you find the tests useful," "do you feel any of the tests are duplicative," and "do you think too much time is spent on tests?"

English Language Learners

- States must make every effort to provide tests in languages spoken by the majority of students. With respect to recently arrived English Language Learners who have been enrolled in a school for less than 12 months, a state may choose to exclude such students from one administration of the reading or language arts test.

English Language Learner identification

- If a student has been identified as an English Language Learner or identified for participation in an English Language Learner program, the district must notify the parents not later than 30 days after the beginning of the school year. Below is a list of elements the district's notification must address:
  - The reasons for its identification of the student as an English Language Learner in need of placement in a language instruction educational program;
  - the student's level of English proficiency, how that level was assessed, and the status of the student's academic achievement;
  - the methods of instruction used in the program in which the student is or will be participating and the methods of instruction used in other available programs, including how such programs differ in content, goals, and the use of English and a native language in instruction;
  - how the program in which the student is or will be participating will meet the needs of the student;
  - how the program will specifically help the student learn English and meet age-appropriate academic achievement standards for grade promotion and graduation;
  - the program's specific exit requirements, including the expected rate of transition from such program into classrooms that are not tailored for English learners and the expected rate of graduation from high school (if currently enrolled in high school);
  - in the case of a student with a disability, how the program meets the objectives of the student's individualized education program (IEP); and
  - information pertaining to parental rights that includes written information detailing—
    - the rights parents have to remove their child immediately from such program,
    - the options parents have to decline to enroll their child in such program or to choose another program or method of instruction, if available, and
    - how parents may be assisted in selecting from various programs and methods of instruction if more than one program or method is offered by the eligible entity.
For those students who have not been identified as English Language Learners prior to the beginning of the school year but are identified as English Language Learners during such school year, the district must notify the parents during the first two weeks of the student placement in a language instruction educational program.

**Parent notification**

At the beginning of each school year, parents may request from the district information regarding the qualifications of the student's classroom teachers including, at minimum, the following:

- Whether a teacher has met state qualification and licensing criteria for the grade levels and subject areas in which the teacher teaches,
- Whether a teacher is teaching under emergency or other provisional status through which state qualification or licensing criteria have been waived,
- Whether a teacher is teaching in the field of discipline of the teacher’s certification, and
- Whether the student is provided services by paraprofessionals and, if so, what the qualifications of those paraprofessionals are.

In addition to the information that parents may request, schools shall provide information on the level of achievement and academic growth of the student, if applicable and available, on each of the state academic assessments. They shall also provide timely notice that the student has been assigned, or has been taught for four or more consecutive weeks, by a teacher who does not meet applicable state certification or licensure requirements at the grade level and in the subject area to which that teacher has been assigned.

**Homeless students**

Homelessness is defined as: children and youth sharing housing due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; children and youth living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camp grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations; children and youth living in emergency or transitional shelters; children and youth abandoned in hospitals; children and youth whose primary nighttime residence is not ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation (i.e., park benches); children and youth living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, or bus or train stations; migratory children and youth living in any of the above situations. The law permits students to remain in their school of origin if the parent and youth wish to remain in the school of origin and the law provides for transportation to and from the school of origin. Parents and youth that wish to enroll in a school closer to where they reside may do so, and the school must immediately enroll the student even if the student is not in possession of their academic records, health records, or proof of residency. If a dispute arises over eligibility or school selection or enrollment in a school, the child or youth shall be immediately enrolled in the school in which enrollment is sought, pending final resolution of the dispute, including all available appeals. The parent or guardian of the child or youth or in the case of an unaccompanied youth shall be provided with a written explanation of any decisions related to school selection or enrollment made by the school.