

## Ensuring Quality School Leadership Resource List

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# The Every Student Succeeds Act: Strengthening the Focus on Educational Leadership

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This article offers (a) an overview of the attention federal policy has invested in educational leadership with a primary focus on the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), (b) a summary of the critical role school leaders play in achieving the goals set forth within federal educational policy, and (c) examples of how states are using the opportunity afforded by the focus on leadership in ESSA. **Findings:** Through the examination of federal policy and existing research in this arena, we review the level of attention paid to educational leadership within Elementary and Secondary Education Act, its reauthorizations, and other federal education legislation. ESSA provides an enhanced focus on educational leadership and acknowledges the importance of leaders in achieving federal goals for education. Furthermore, ESSA acknowledges the importance of developing a strong leadership pipeline and, thus, allows states and districts to use federal funds to support leadership development. In this article, we delineate this focus on leadership within ESSA and offer examples of how states are planning to support leadership development. **Implications and Conclusion:** The

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important role that school leadership plays in supporting student, teacher, and school-wide outcomes warrants its inclusion within federal education policy. However, the opportunity to realize ESSA's intended goals around leadership development could be undermined by forces at both the state and federal levels.

**Keywords**

federal and state policy, educational leadership, Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA, preparation

**Introduction**

In December 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law, reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and replacing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). ESEA, the federal law that authorizes federal funding for K-12 schools, represents the nation's commitment to equal educational opportunity for all students and has influenced the education of millions of children. ESSA has two primary goals: to require states to align their education programs with college and career ready standards and to extend the federal focus on equity by providing resources for poor students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. For those in the field of educational leadership, ESSA provides a direct acknowledgment of educational leadership as a factor in achieving national educational goals. Specifically, the act provides new pathways for states and districts to use federal funds for the development of school principals and other school leaders (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

This article assumes that the federal purposes behind ESEA and ESSA are valid—that underserved student populations must receive additional resources and special attention in order to receive equitable educational opportunities and that the federal government should have a role in stimulating and supporting improvement in the quality of education offered to students. Furthermore, we applaud the explicit inclusion of leadership among ESSA's substantive goals. ESSA provides an opportunity for leadership development to be substantively addressed within a stable and long-term federal policy. Our support and enthusiasm, however, is tempered by two concerns. First, we are concerned that forces at the state and federal levels (e.g., budget proposals) could undermine the efforts of states and local education agencies to support substantive leadership development. Second, we are concerned that programs for leadership development included within many state

ESSA plans “will under- or over-reach, and that states without the knowledge, capacity, or will to act smartly will stagnate or regress” (Castagna, Young, Gordon, Little, & Palmer, 2016, p. 2). Without prioritizing leadership and adequately supporting the development of educational leaders, current policies and programs will have a hard time meeting the core purposes of the legislation.

The case for supporting the current focus on educational leadership and leadership development in federal policies and programs rests on a simple argument: Leadership matters. A growing body of research has consistently demonstrated that leadership is one of the most important school-level factors influencing a student’s education (e.g., Coelli & Green, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Specifically, by directing their organization, managing the people within the organization, leading vision and goal development of the school and district, and improving the instructional agenda in their schools and districts, leaders influence student learning and development (Leithwood et al., 2004). Through their focus on these four critical areas, principals are one of the most important school-level determinants of student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). Emphasizing building leaders within federal policy and incorporating their development within programming at the state and district levels are essential to realizing federal education policy goals.

Furthermore, a growing body of evidence demonstrates a link between leadership preparation and practice. Extensive reviews of research on exemplary leadership preparation programs and quality program features (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2009; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; McCarthy, 1999; Young & Crow, 2016; Young, Crow, Ogawa, & Murphy, 2009) point to similar attributes of quality features. Key among those features are (a) a quality and coherent curriculum that emphasizes instructional leadership and school improvement and (b) integrated field experiences that support the curriculum and are supervised by experienced educational leaders. Indeed, research suggests a strong relationship between what is taught and changes in how candidates understand and enact their leadership (Young, O’Doherty, Gooden, & Goodnow, 2011), the development of competencies (Leithwood, Jantzi, Coffin, & Wilson, 1996; Orr & Barber, 2007), the capacity to support educational improvement (Pounder, 1995), and problem framing and problem solving. Moreover, in a comparative study of two university–district partner programs and one conventional university-based preparation program, Orr and Barber (2007) found that a comprehensive and standards-based curriculum was significantly and positively related to three types of outcomes: self-assessed leadership knowledge and skills, leadership career intentions, and graduate career advancement.

The time seems ripe for examining the treatment of educational leadership within federal policy and state plans for leadership development to ensure congruency with new knowledge on the important roles educational leaders and leadership development play in fostering student success. This article begins with a review of the level of attention dedicated to educational leadership within ESEA, subsequent reauthorizations of this landmark bill, and other federal legislation focused on education. Subsequently, we summarize the literature demonstrating the influence of educational leadership—both direct and indirect—on the learning environment and on student achievement. We also describe the focus on leadership within ESSA. Having reviewed the evidence linking leadership to federal education goals, we then share several examples of how states are supporting leadership development by using new avenues available to them through ESSA. We conclude with a brief discussion of the opportunities and challenges presented by ESSA for leadership development.

## **The Role of Leadership in Federal Education Legislation: 1965-2015**

Educational leadership has traditionally been an underappreciated and under-resourced topic in federal education legislation. However, as the knowledge base supporting educational leadership has expanded, so too has its treatment in federal policy.

Since the initial passage of the ESEA in 1965, school leadership, which includes terms like school leaders, educational leaders, principals, and educational leadership, has been referenced in multiple pieces of public federal law. Using Pro Quest Congressional we found 1,042 pieces of legislation that include the terms *education* and one or more of the following school leadership terms: *administrator*, *school leader*, *school leadership*, *educational leader*, *educational leadership*, and *principal*. This number, however, is somewhat unreliable because the terms *principal* and *administrator* are used in a number of bills to reference something other than a school leader (e.g., principal investigator). However, when the terms *principal* and *administrator* are removed, the number of references to school-level leadership decreases significantly to 14 pieces of federal legislation, the majority of which have been passed since 2000. It is possible that the greater frequency of reference to school leadership in federal policy since 2000 suggests a growing appreciation for educational leadership among policy makers.

In addition to considering how frequently school leadership has been referenced in federal policy, it is also important to consider how substantively and in what capacity school leadership has been addressed. The majority of

references to school leadership occurred in flagship education policy bills, such as the reauthorizations of ESEA (2015, 2001, and 1987), the 2004 reauthorization of Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and reauthorizations of the Higher Education Act (HEA; 2008, 1998, 1992, and 1986). For a full breakdown of flagship federal education legislation referencing school leadership, see Table 1. The greater part of the remaining references to school leadership are found in appropriations or supplemental appropriations bills as well as in independent education reform bills.

With regard to substance, the three most relevant pieces of federal legislation include ESEA and subsequent reauthorizations and reauthorizations of the HEA and IDEA. We provide a few highlights from each of these pieces of legislation below.

### *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*

In 1965, the Congress authorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Developed by the Commissioner of Education and his team during the Johnson administration, ESEA represented a revolutionary set of programs. For the Johnson administration, the legislation had two primary purposes: (a) to provide a legislative strategy for establishing the precedent of federal aid to K-12 public education and (b) to serve as a cornerstone of Johnson's "War on Poverty" (Kirst & Jung, 1980). The Johnson administration set out to achieve what it believed state and local governments were not: ensuring access to quality education for underserved populations. According to ESEA's Declaration of Intent, the purpose of Title 1 was "to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies serving areas with high concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means" (PL 89-10 Declaration of Intent, quoted in Kirst & Jung, 1980, p. 21).

The initial authorization of ESEA in 1965 did not include reference to building level leadership, but did reference educational leadership at the state level. Specifically, the legislation included the following language (ESEA, 1965):

make grants to State educational agencies to pay part of the cost of experimental projects for developing State leadership or for the establishment of special services . . . (p. 59)

training and otherwise developing the competency of individuals who serve State or local educational agencies and provide leadership, administrative, or specialist services throughout the State . . . (p. 62)

**Table 1.** Flagship Federal Legislation Referencing School Leadership.

Legislation type	Legislation name	Year passed	Educational leadership focus
Every Student Succeeds Act	ESEA reauthorization	2015-2016	Optional “3% set aside” of Title II A funds for state-level activities and funding for “evidence-based” interventions around leadership
Higher Education Opportunity Act	HEA reauthorization	2007-2008	Funding for partnership grants for the development of leadership programs
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)	IDEA reauthorization	2004	Providing personnel development grants and interdisciplinary training to support school leaders
No Child Left Behind Act	ESEA reauthorization	2001-2002	SEA grants and LEA subgrants to support leadership (reform certification, induction/mentoring, professional development) and support for establishing a national principal recruitment program
Higher Education Amendments of 1998	HEA reauthorization	1997-1998	Sense of Congress Declaration that leadership is important and support for partnerships between IHEs and K-12 schools to identify strong candidates
Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act	HEA reauthorization	1991-1992	Support for establishing state leader academies and professional development academies in each state
Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988	ESEA reauthorization	1987-1988	SEA grants and LEA subgrants to support leadership
Higher Education Amendments of 1986	HEA reauthorization	1985-1986	Grants to “collect information on school leadership skills”

Note. HEA = Higher Education Act; IHE = institutions of higher education; LEA = local education agency.

According to Kirst and Jung (1980), increasing the capacity of state departments of education and their leadership was a deliberate strategy used to build ownership and support for the implementation of ESEA.

The reauthorizations of ESEA in 2015, 2001, and 1987 (particularly, ESSA in 2015 and NCLB in 2001), in contrast, addressed school leadership more comprehensively. They included the provision of local education agency (LEA) subgrants for the “development and implementation of professional

development programs for principals that enable the principals to be effective school leaders and prepare all students to meet challenging State academic content” (NCLB, 2001, p. 203). NCLB also included a national activity of demonstrated effectiveness where the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) was “authorized to establish and carry out a national principal recruitment program to assist high-need local educational agencies in recruiting and training principals” (NCLB, 2001, p. 212). The additional provisions for school leadership in the ESEA reauthorization of 2015 (ESSA) is covered in a later section of this article.

### *The Higher Education Act*

The initial authorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) in 1965 did not contain reference to school leadership; however, the reauthorizations of 2008, 1998, 1992, and 1986 did address school leadership. In fact, the 1998 HEA reauthorization included a “Sense of Congress” declaration on the importance of school leadership, and authorized grants to “collect information on school leadership skills” (HEA, 1988, p. 516). Other school leadership-related policies contained in HEA reauthorizations included the following:

- Establishing school leader and professional development academies in each state (1992)
- Providing partnership grants for the development of leader programs (1998 and 2008)

### *Individuals With Disabilities Education Act*

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) substantively addressed school leadership in a number of ways, including

- Providing personnel development grants to support “high-quality professional development for principals, superintendents, and other administrators, including training in instructional leadership,” as well as other areas critical to the leadership of students with special needs (P.L. 108-446, 2004, p. 129)
- Supporting leadership preparation activities that provide “interdisciplinary training for various types of leadership personnel” (P.L. 108-446, 2004, p. 133)

While leadership has not gone completely unnoticed within federal education policy, in comparison with the attention devoted to other educational personnel and programming, the focus on educational leadership has been limited. This is

particularly true when you consider individual pieces of legislation. For example, in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, school leadership is referenced in 15 places within the Act. In contrast, teachers are referenced in 135 different places. Within the next section, we review literature on the importance of educational leadership to attaining the goals set forth within federal education legislation.

## **Research on the Connection Between Leadership and Student Achievement**

Research accumulating over the past 40 years suggests the dynamic nature of both the leadership role and the context in which leaders work. However, over the past 15 years, evidence of the importance of school leadership in both direct and indirect ways has mounted, and this evidence has been consistently shared with the field and policy makers alike.

Leaders affect every aspect of schooling. Indeed, principal leadership directly shapes elements such as teacher practices (Robinson et al., 2008) through providing instructional advice (Robinson et al., 2008), allocating necessary resources for learning and development (Hornig & Loeb, 2010; LaPointe Terosky, 2014), offering professional development opportunities for teachers (Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012), establishing a culture of trust (Daly, 2009; Sanzo et al., 2011; Tschannen-Moran, 2009), prioritizing equity (Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007), collaborating and distributing leadership (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Marks & Printy, 2003; Sanzo et al., 2011), and focusing on student learning (Sanzo et al., 2011). Furthermore, through school leaders' direct influence on these factors, they indirectly affect student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2009; Robinson et al., 2008; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). There is substantial research evidence demonstrating that school leaders can be powerful drivers of student outcomes. Robinson et al. (2008) found in their meta-analysis that when school leaders focus on effective instruction, "the more likely they are to have a positive impact on students' outcomes" (p. 664). This follows logically as they "hold the formal authority, responsibility, and discretion for creating the very conditions and supports that promote student achievement" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, pp. 561-562).

The remainder of this section is categorically organized based on previous work by Leithwood and Riehl (2005) and Leithwood et al. (2008), who suggest that school leaders meaningfully influence student learning through their leadership of:

1. their organization,
2. the visions and goals of the school and district,
3. the people within the organization, and
4. the curricular and instructional agenda in their schools and districts.

In addition to providing a brief summary of the research that addresses the relationship between and among these four areas of leader practice and student achievement, we also highlight research that addresses the critical role of leadership in supporting one of the key goals of ESSA: educational equity. Although the evidence offered is not exhaustive, it is representative of common themes generally accepted by the field.

### *School Leaders Influence Their Organization*

Silins, Mulford, and Zarins (2002) note that “school as a learning organization is defined by the level and quality of leadership that characterizes the everyday work of the school” (p. 634). Principals and other leaders influence this everyday work in explicit ways like through hiring and staffing (Horng & Loeb, 2010), building a trustworthy and loyal culture (Sanzo et al., 2011; Silins et al., 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2009) that is also safe (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006), supporting a collaborative environment through distributing leadership (Sanzo et al., 2011; Silins et al., 2002; Spillane, 2005), fostering professional learning communities (Sanzo et al., 2011), making connections with families and the community (Hitt & Tucker, 2016), and leading school turnaround efforts (Leithwood et al., 2008).

School leaders who subscribe to an instructional leadership approach promote the achievement of school-wide goals and establish an atmosphere where attaining those goals is realistic (Robinson et al., 2008). This is a key leadership undertaking, given existing research (e.g., Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012) demonstrates how the quality of the learning environment affects achievement for students.

### *School Leaders Influence the Development of and Execution of the Visions and Goals of the School and District*

Essential to setting the tone, culture, or climate of an organization is the development and execution of vision and goals, a process that is advanced by the leader (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hitt & Tucker, 2016) and must be focused on student learning (Robinson et al., 2008). Researchers indicate that effective leaders explicitly plan and convey in detail how the mission, vision,

and goals will be met (Robinson et al., 2008; Sanzo et al., 2011). It is through these activities that school leaders are able to articulate and solidify a “sense of overall purpose” (Silins et al., 2002, p. 620) for the school and inspiration toward the advancement of improvement efforts. In short, school leaders who have attended to the organization and the people within their organization are well positioned to help their staff achieve their goals surrounding the mission and vision of the organization.

### *School Leaders Influence the People Within Their Organization*

The high-quality management of educator practice is an additional way school leaders support organizational effectiveness and enhance the learning experience for all students. As the formal educational administrator, school leaders influence positively teachers’ “motivations, commitment and beliefs connecting the supportiveness of their working conditions” (Leithwood et al., 2008, p. 32). Leaders are positioned to foster an encouraging and trusting tone that allows and empowers teachers to “take risks to improve outcomes” (Daly, 2009, p. 207).

Principals supervise teachers in their instruction through the “collegial and informal process of helping teachers improve their teaching (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008, p. vi). Relatedly, but distinctly different, school and district leaders are charged with evaluating the (a) curricular and instructional programming (Leithwood, 2012; Murphy, Elliot, Goldring, & Porter, 2006; Sebring et al., 2006) as well as (b) teacher and building principal professional practice (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988). Through utilization of data, school leaders can effectively evaluate and influence these areas, thus, sustaining the focus on the enterprise of continuous improvement (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

### *School Leaders Influence the Curricular and Instructional Agenda in Their Schools and Districts*

A primary responsibility of a school leader is to lead and monitor the curricular and instructional agenda (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Robinson et al., 2008; Sanzo et al., 2011), ensuring its coherence (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Part of this leadership responsibility includes providing guidance and advice about instructional practices and crafting targeted and individualized feedback, support, and opportunities for teachers in this endeavor (May & Supovitz, 2011). Robinson et al. (2008) found in their work that “leaders in higher performing schools are distinguished from their counterparts in otherwise similar lower performing schools by their personal involvement in planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and teachers”

(p. 662). Through more active engagement, oversight, and coordination of the school's curricular and instructional program, leaders were able to positively affect student outcomes.

### *Leadership for Equity*

Aligned with the original purposes of ESEA, leadership is considered an essential part of achieving equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for all students, especially for those students who are poor and/or marginalized. Researchers such as Gay (2002), Ware (2006), and Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, and Hambacher (2007), Castagno and Brayboy (2008), note that culturally responsive classrooms help to positively affect student achievement. Furthermore, the leader plays a critical role in fostering a culture of support and inclusivity as well as supporting culturally relevant practice among school staff (Auerbach, 2009; Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010; Khalifa, 2010; McKenzie et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2008; Scanlan & Lopez, 2012; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011; Youngs & King, 2002). Leadership's critical role in this endeavor is highlighted through the focus of Standard 3 in the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Building Standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2017) as well as in the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (NPBEA, 2015). Specifically, NELP Standard 3 calls upon leaders to "promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adults by applying the knowledge, skills, and commitment necessary to develop and maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive and inclusive school culture" (NPBEA, 2017, p. 17).

In sum, there is substantial research demonstrating the role of educational leadership in supporting organizational effectiveness, student educational outcomes, and educational equity. Because of their formal roles, school leaders affect schools greatly (Leithwood et al., 2008) and are either "credited or blamed for school outcomes" (Daly, 2009, p. 200). Although ESSA does not approach this level of specificity with regard to leadership practice, this evidence base justifies the focus within ESSA on educational leaders. Furthermore, state and district policy makers have been encouraged to consider this research in state plans for leadership development (CCSSO, 2016; Herman et al., 2016).

### **The Role of Leadership in ESSA**

Unlike previously adopted federal policies, ESSA presents a new and heightened focus on educational leadership, acknowledging the importance of leadership to school improvement and student achievement. The Act

recognizes that school leadership can be “a powerful driver of improved education outcomes” (Herman et al., 2016, p. 1). For those who have been advocating for a more intensive inclusion of leadership, this move has been widely praised.

Specifically, the reauthorization of the ESSA, “emphasizes evidence-base initiatives while providing new flexibilities to states and districts with regard to the use of federal funds, including funds to promote effective school leadership” (Herman et al., 2016, p. 1). Although the development of the Act was preceded by years of effort to educate the public and policy makers on the importance of educational leadership and leadership development, the passage of ESSA has stirred enthusiasm and activity among an even wider group of stakeholders who are all hoping to make the most of the heightened focus on educational leadership. In this section, we outline the main features of the policy, including how leadership is portrayed, how it can be supported at the state and local levels, and how the policy can support equity through leadership.

### *How Leadership Is Defined*

Under ESSA, states and districts are allowed multiple strategies for promoting school improvement, and “school leadership is explicitly acknowledged as a valid target of educational-improvement activities across the titles in ESSA” (Herman et al., 2016, p. 4). School leadership under ESSA is defined broadly and includes any individual who is (a) “an employee or officer of an elementary school or secondary school, local educational agency, or other entity operating an elementary school or secondary school” and who is (b) “responsible for the daily instructional leadership and managerial operations in the elementary school or secondary school building” (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015, p. 297).

### *How Leadership May Be Supported*

Title I of ESSA authorizes approximately \$16 billion in funding per year to improve state and local education programs (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Title I, which has traditionally included resources for identifying and improving low-performing schools, allows states and districts to use federal funds for activities targeting the knowledge and development of school principals and other school leaders. Title II, however, is where the majority of language concerning leadership development is found. Title II funds are typically reserved for recruiting and retaining teachers to reducing class sizes, or providing professional development.

ESSA includes both flexible and targeted funding with allowable uses to support the quality of teachers, principals, and other school leaders, including an optional 3% set-aside of Title II funds for school leadership, as well as state administrative funds. Together Title II, Part A allows each state to invest almost 8% of its total allotment to support leadership pipeline activities, including recruitment, preparation, and professional development. This is a significant increase in funds that can be used to support school leaders and contrasts starkly with current practice. For example, according to CCSSO (2016) “two-thirds of school districts spend no money on professional development for leaders” (p. 1).

Under ESSA, states may use funds (Title II, Part A and others) to support: (a) the quality and effectiveness of teachers, principals, and other school leaders; (b) the number of educators who are effective in improving student academic achievement in schools; and (c) more equitable access to effective teachers, principals, and other school leaders. Title II, Part A funds may be used in several ways to support school leadership, such as (a) to support both traditional and nontraditional pathways for developing educational leaders, (b) to improve state policies and practices concerning licensure or certification, recertification, and the adoption of standards for preparation and practice, (c) to help districts and local education agencies develop high-quality professional development, and (d) to support districts’ recruitment and retention strategies that ensure a strong leadership pipeline (Castagna et al., 2016; CCSSO, 2016; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; USDE, 2016).

ESSA Title II, Part B also includes funding opportunities for the development of a strong leadership pipeline. Specifically, four competitive grants are available to states, including (a) the School Leader Recruitment and Support Program (SLRSP), (b) Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED), (c) Teacher and School Leader Incentive Programs (TSLIP), and (d) Education Innovation Research (EIR). The SLRSP grants, formerly known as SLRP grants, are available to states and districts that are interested in developing and supporting talented leaders for high needs schools. Importantly, these grants can be carried out with higher education partners. The SEED grants are available to higher education institutions as well as other nonprofits to help recruit, select, prepare, and provide professional development for educators, including educational leaders. The TSLIP, formerly known as TIF or teacher incentive funds, have been expanded to include leadership and are available to states, districts, and other nonprofit organizations to support the career pathways for talented educational professionals. Finally, the EIR, formerly i3, are available for organizations interested in designing and implementing innovative, and preferably research-based, leadership models (CCSSO, 2016; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

### *Supporting Equity Through Leadership*

One of the key goals of ESSA is to extend the federal focus on and support for educational equity. It includes a number of provisions regarding the use of funds to support schools identified as low-performing, including the provision of development for school leaders and instructional staff. For example, Title II, Part A requires states to set aside 7% of their funding to help school districts support low-performing schools, including to help remove barriers to student achievement. Just as the knowledge and skills of educational leaders can be a key support to achieving educational equity, they can also be a barrier when leaders are not adequately prepared to support equity, inclusiveness, and cultural responsiveness. In such cases, leadership development can serve as an important intervention. As explained by Herman et al. (2016), “in many areas of the [ESSA] act where school leadership is not explicitly called out (e.g., school improvement efforts under Title I), states and districts could still choose to support leadership-focused activities in pursuit of school-improvement objectives” (p. 4).

### **How States Are Strengthening the Focus on Educational Leadership**

September 18, 2017 marked the deadline for the submission of consolidated state ESSA plans, and educational stakeholders at the local, state, and federal level have been anxious to gain insight into whether and how states have used the new opportunities to support leadership development offered through ESSA. Importantly, each state was required to include in its consolidated state plan a description of how it planned to use Title II and other relevant ESSA funds for improving the quality of educators, and a description of their systems for developing, retaining, and advancing educators—including principals and other school leaders. The state plans were required to include, at a minimum, a description of the state’s systems for certification and/or licensing; the preparation of new educational professionals, particularly, those being prepared to work with low-income students and students of color; and the professional growth and improvement of educational professionals (including school leaders), including induction, development, compensation, and advancement.

Preliminary reviews of state plans conducted by researchers affiliated with the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) indicate that many states recognized the emerging research base connecting educational leadership preparation and practice to key ESSA outcomes and have used it as an impetus to address school leadership in their ESSA implementation

plans. The remainder of this section provides three examples of state approaches to supporting school leadership, drawn from Michigan, New Mexico, and Tennessee. These three states are not alone in their focus on educational leadership or in their inclusion of new ways to support leadership development; rather, they were chosen for inclusion because they plan to exercise the option to use the 3% set-aside Title II funds for state-level activities that support school leadership in their ESSA implementation plans.

### *Example 1: Michigan*

Michigan plans to invest resources in facilitating the development of strategic partnerships between specific LEAs and educator preparation programs especially for the benefit of LEAs identified as Partnership Districts and/or LEAs with low-performing schools as identified by the accountability system. Partner educator preparation programs (EPPs) may be traditional programs within institutions of higher education (IHEs), experimental programs within IHEs, or alternate route preparation programs operated by IHEs or nonaffiliated nonprofit organizations, in accordance with Michigan law (MCL 380.1531i). These partnerships will focus on strategic recruitment of candidates and context-specific clinical and residency-based preparation for both teachers and leaders according to the needs of the partner LEA. Such district/preparation provider partnerships are evidenced-based for effective leadership preparation and suggest innovative thinking around school leadership.

### *Example 2: New Mexico*

New Mexico is seeking to improve the percentage of students being taught by effective or better teachers and principals using differentiated compensation systems for each level of effective, highly effective, and exemplary teachers. The state also plans to support the Principals Pursuing Excellence program to educate and empower principals to practice leadership behaviors that drive significant gains in student achievement. This 2-year leadership development program leverages a “turnaround mentor” to work with principals in struggling schools. Past participants in the program reported significant improvements. In some cases, schools improved more than 3 times the average school in the state in English language arts, and 1.7 times higher in mathematics.

### *Example 3: Tennessee*

Tennessee’s goal is to create statewide and regional leadership pipelines that produce transformational school leaders. As part of this effort, the state is

developing an administrator evaluation rubric to guide a fair and transparent administrator evaluation. The evaluation is designed to support a culture of support for instructional leaders and is intended to help engage educators in reflective dialogue to improve practice. The state also plans to support the Tennessee Academy for School Leaders to provide high-quality professional learning opportunities for school leaders that are aligned with the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards. This includes induction academies for new leaders, professional learning opportunities throughout the year, and university partnership opportunities to advance licensure. Additionally, the state plans to support the Governor's Academy for School Leadership, in partnership with the Tennessee Governor's Office, Vanderbilt University, and districts, to offer school leaders a 1-year leader development experience anchored in practice-based mentorship, in-depth feedback cycles, and tailored training sessions.

As noted above, these states represent only three examples of how states are planning to use Title II funding to support leadership development. Even within these three examples, we see a number of promising activities targeting the quality of school principals and other school leaders.

## **Conclusion**

The current opportunity to support educational leadership development through ESSA is incredibly important, and we are optimistic about many of the ideas that have been put forward by states thus far. However, as noted above, our support and enthusiasm is tempered by several concerns. First, we are concerned that the efforts of states and local education agencies to support substantive leadership development could be undermined by forces at either the state or federal levels. Second, we are concerned that programs for leadership development included within many state ESSA plans "will under- or over-reach, and that states without the knowledge, capacity, or will to act smartly will stagnate or regress" (Castagna et al., 2016, p. 2).

With regard to our first concern, perhaps the most obvious example includes recent federal budget proposals that eliminate funding for educational leadership development. Should the federal government choose to eliminate funding, it is unlikely that states will be in a position to fund the activities included in their state plans. Grim budget proposals, however, are not just a current concern, as education has been chronically underfunded for years.

An additional force at play is the reduced authority of the USDE to regulate the design and implementation of state plans. Although as Ferguson (2016) points out, the limitations placed on the Secretary of Education and

the department were a “fairly predictable response to both NCLB and the Obama administration’s efforts” (p. 72), they limit the ability of the USDE to serve as a resource for improving individual initiatives as well as the impact of initiatives more broadly. Combined with the potential lack of funding, states are placed in a more dominant role, but with fewer resources.

Similarly, while we are optimistic about the ideas that states are likely to put forward, we are also keenly aware of the shrinking size of state departments of education and the impact of such downsizing and record numbers of retirements on the expertise available within State Department of Education. The commitment and capacity of state departments of education are key to the effective implementation of ESSA programming.

Our final concern focuses on the tendency to think narrowly about educational leadership, the role of educational leaders, and leadership development. Importantly, leadership is an integrative enterprise and success is dependent not on one’s knowledge and skills in a few discrete areas, but in developing expertise in the areas identified by national standards for educational leadership preparation (e.g., NELP, 2017) and practice (e.g., Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, 2015). Our review of the literature only captured five of the key domains of leadership practice, yet leaders work in other domains, such as their engagement with parents and communities and their efforts to advocate for their students, staff, and schools, which are essential to effective leadership practice.

Finally, we understand the critical role that leadership plays in ensuring successful implementation, building commitment, and achieving educational goals. We applaud the fact that federal policy has incorporated insight from research on how leadership matters in supporting school improvement and student achievement. As we think toward future reauthorizations of ESSA, we would recommend a stronger emphasis on educational leadership that extends beyond leadership development to leadership practice. The research presented in the previous section demonstrates the important role that leadership plays in supporting successful school environments and student achievement. Furthermore, for more than 35 years, research has demonstrated the importance of strong leadership in the successful implementation of federal programs at the local school building level (Turnbull, Smith, & Ginsburg, 1981).

As demonstrated in this article, it has taken a long time for federal educational policy to give substantive attention to educational leadership and to allow the use of significant funding to support the development of a strong leadership pipeline. Just as it is important that current initiatives be fully funded, it is also essential that we consider how to strengthen the focus on and impact of leadership in federal education policy initiatives going forward. Thus, what we hope to see is not a change in federal goals or purposes,

but a commitment to fully fund ESSA as well as the adoption, over time, of an enhanced strategy for achieving these purposes with greater success.

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