Will Decentralization Lead to Greater Educational Inequity?
The Every Student Succeeds Act

Anna J. Egalite
Lance D. Fusarelli
Bonnie C. Fusarelli
North Carolina State University


Abstract:
In December 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was a long overdue reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. What is remarkable about this new federal legislation is that it explicitly reverses the decades-long federal effort to more tightly couple the U.S. educational system. While not removing testing requirements, the legislation dramatically reduces the federal role in shaping education policy, returning power to the states to design educational systems as they best see fit. The law places sharp limits on the use of executive power over education and has the potential to remove the federal government from oversight and accountability. Utilizing public documents, including legislation, speeches by federal officials, analyses by policy organizations, and news accounts, the authors trace the evolution of federal efforts to more tightly couple the educational system. The authors then analyze key components of ESSA in order to estimate whether the effort to decentralize governance back to the state and local level will improve education and further reduce inequity or whether, in fact, the reduced federal role will exacerbate existing inequities.

Please direct correspondence to: Anna J. Egalite; Educational Leadership, Policy and Human Development; North Carolina State University; anna egalite@ncsu.edu
"With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal—that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will." — President Barack Obama, December 10, 2015

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, P.L. 114-95), replacing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as the most recent reauthorization of the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which provided federal funds to state and local education officials to improve educational opportunities for children from low-income families. ESSA keeps NCLB’s requirement for states to test students in grades 3-8 and once in high school, and continues the federal mandate that school performance be publicly reported by various demographic subgroups. ESSA also requires states to intervene in low performing schools, although the choices about specific corrective actions are left to states (Tooley, 2015). However, ESSA sharply reduces the role of the executive branch, specifically limiting the ability of the Secretary of Education to grant waivers requiring states to adopt specific academic standards, assessments, accountability systems, or teacher evaluation systems (ESSA, 2015; Rotherham, 2015).

In many ways, the newest reauthorization of this federal education law reinforces restrictions that were written into the original legislation, such as those that prohibit the secretary from forcing states to use a particular test for accountability purposes or prescribing numeric long-term goals or measures of interim progress for student achievement and graduation rates (King, 2016). There are four notable ways, however, in which ESSA places new limits on the use of executive power over education. First, ESSA notes that the Secretary of Education cannot use the state plan or waiver process to coerce or provide incentives for states to adopt a particular set of standards, including the Common Core State Standards. Second, ESSA prohibits the Secretary
from specifying any aspect of teacher or school leader evaluations. This includes student performance on standardized tests, which states were required to include in teacher evaluations under NCLB waivers that were granted prior to the law’s reauthorization (USDOE, 2012). Third, while the federal government will continue to provide oversight of the use of federal funds, ESSA gives states the flexibility to customize their accountability systems (ESSA, 2015). Specifically, states are required to ensure that accountability measures of student and school performance include non-test score measures but offers wide latitude to states to interpret that rule in a manner that is appropriate for their local context. When evaluating schools, states are permitted to include measures of student engagement or school climate for example, as well as access to and completion of advanced coursework. In this regard, Congress continues the trend started by NCLB waivers to create more diversity in accountability systems across states, although the Secretary of Education no longer has the ability to supersede state plans.

Fourth, ESSA defers to state and local authorities to design school interventions and supports for low-performing schools, which are defined as the bottom five percent of schools, schools in which student subgroups perform poorly, and schools in which more than one-third of students fail to graduate. This represents a departure from the process under NCLB waivers, when the USDOE specified a narrow choice of school turnaround options. Under ESSA, states are required to locally develop and implement a support and improvement plan but the federal government cannot mandate exactly how states should intervene to turn around their lowest performing schools (ESSA, 2015).

According to Robinson (2016), both Republicans and Democrats in Washington believe the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) should play a smaller role in education, in turn giving state and local education authorities more power and control. If indeed power and control
shift substantially back to the state and local levels, it will reverse three decades of gradual (and since NCLB, not so gradual) increases in federal control over education (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2015).

The purposes of this paper are twofold: (1) to examine how ESSA might impact state and local education, specifically whether the promise of decentralization and devolution of power may reasonably be expected to occur; (2) to speculate on whether this promised devolution of power will enable state and local education officials to enhance educational equity throughout the system or whether in fact, it may create more separate, more unequal schools. We begin by providing a brief overview of federal education policy initiatives of the past several years, followed by an explication of the theory of action supporting efforts to decentralize power and control in education. We conclude by speculating on possible outcomes as the new legislation is implemented and how it might impact equity in the educational system.

I. The Evolving Federal Role in Education: A Brief History

Since passage of the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, state and federal involvement in education has gradually (and sometimes, not so gradually) increased, with mayors, governors, state legislators, U.S. Secretaries of Education, and presidents playing a more active role in shaping education policy at the local level. In the 1990’s, under the banner of systemic reform, states attempted to induce organizational change by more tightly coupling key inputs, throughputs, and processes to improve the educational system (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2003). Such changes included implementation of more rigorous performance-based standards, high-stakes testing, and development of comprehensive accountability systems (Rowan & Miskel, 1999).
With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002, the federal government became increasingly involved in the nuts and bolts of schooling at the local level, implementing a series of top-down command and control measures such as performance reporting and outcomes-based assessments (Fusarelli & Johnson, 2004). The goal was “to create coherent policy systems by aligning key policies to support demanding learning goals” (Spillane & Jennings, 1997, p. 450). In practice, NCLB dramatically expanded the federal role in education policymaking by conditioning the receipt of Title I funds on student achievement outcomes (Manna, 2010). Schools were required to demonstrate that they were making adequate yearly progress (AYP) based on the percentage of students who were proficient on state assessments of math and English Language Arts. Schools were assigned performance ratings based on overall proficiency rates on these tests, as well as proficiency rates for various categorical subgroups, defined by student race/ethnicity, eligibility for free or reduced price lunch, students’ limited English proficiency, and student disability. States were permitted to choose their own test, to define proficiency, and to determine the schedule by which proficiency would be reached, up to a national target of 100 percent proficiency by 2014. Schools that failed to make AYP were identified for improvement and were subject to a series of sanctions, including offering and paying for supplemental educational services and public school choice. Over time, these changes led to a loss of local control, as states and the federal government increased their involvement in education (Tyack, 1990; Wirt & Kirst, 1997).

The progression of increasing federal control over education since President George H. W. Bush’s initial, limited efforts to create voluntary national standards has been quite remarkable. In less than three decades, the federal government moved from little more than funding a small portion of education, mostly targeted to students most at risk, to encouraging
states to adopt higher standards and curriculum, adopt school report cards, and implement high-stakes testing and accountability systems; mandating annual testing of children in grades 3-8 in reading and math; disaggregating testing by student subgroup; and influencing what constitutes a highly qualified teacher (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2015). These latter efforts were accomplished through the competitive grant program known as Race to the Top and the U.S. Department of Education’s decision to leverage ESEA flexibility requests to incentivize states to enact a preferred set of education policies in exchange for relief from NCLB’s more onerous requirements. The reaction from Republican Senator and Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, Lamar Alexander, acknowledged the great acceleration of efforts to more tightly couple the educational system that was occurring under the Obama Administration: “This simple waiver authority has turned into a conditional waiver with the [Education] Secretary having more authority to make decisions that in my view should be made locally by state and local governments” (U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Pressroom, 2013).

Some scholars have argued that the federal government was simply following the lead of innovative states (Mazzoni, 1995), while others have asserted that the federal government used its visibility and limited power of the purse through such efforts as the Race to the Top initiative to great effect to induce preferred reforms at the state level (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2015). Regardless of which came first, the clear direction in federal education policy from George H.W. Bush to Obama has been a marked effort to more tightly couple the educational system in pursuit of effectiveness and efficiency (Fusarelli, 2002).

II. Centralization or Decentralization? The Role of the “State”
The theory of action behind decentralization is relatively straightforward: those closest to the problem know best how to fix it; they are most familiar with the complexity of the issue and given freedom and flexibility, will best be able to address it. The further removed from a problem one is, the lesser the chances of successful intervention. For example, critics of NCLB have charged that the federal government is ineffective at mandating educational change at the local level. Hess (2016) asserts “federal efforts have yielded incoherent mandates, bureaucratic sprawl, and one-size-fits-all dictates, with lots of consequent foot-dragging and ineptitude” (p. 4).

Drawing from Hess’ criticism, the central argument in support of decentralization is that top-down command and control efforts are markedly less effective in a system that has historically been loosely coupled (Weick, 1976, 1982). By virtue of its political development as an institution, rooted in local control and absent mention in the U.S. Constitution, education has been largely under local, and gradually, under state control, with little federal interference until the last few decades. Some researchers have pointed out that schools are more loosely coupled than many other public organizations, with multiple, often conflicting goals, lack of agreement on best practices, fluid participation from multiple stakeholders, and uneven policy implementation (Meyer & Rowan, 1983). As a result, efforts to more tightly couple an educational system that at best suffers from fragmented centralization may be inappropriate or ineffective.

Similar to other areas of public policy and management, education has undergone various periods of centralization and decentralization in an effort to find the right or ideal mix of administrative control to produce the most effective and efficient governance system possible. This is particularly important because public education is a massive enterprise; education
spending is the single largest state expenditure. As a result, in tight fiscal times, “getting it right” becomes a priority. Of course, education is also a highly political endeavor, with sharp differences in the values and beliefs among key stakeholders about the appropriate degree of control and oversight (Conley, 2003).

The passage of ESSA offers an illustrative example. For more than a decade, Congress failed to reauthorize No Child Left Behind. Critics at the state and local levels complained about the unworkable tenets of the legislation, such as the requirement that all students be 100 percent proficient by 2014. As Hess (2016) observed, “NCLB proved to be remarkably prescriptive about how states would measure school performance and what states would do to schools deemed ‘in need of improvement’” (p. 2). State and local officials pressed repeatedly for greater relief from the law. The inauguration of President Obama presented an opportunity for change. Obama had a well-defined education agenda that he wanted state and local officials to embrace and implement. In the midst of the Great Recession, effectively utilizing the power of the purse through the Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive grant program, the Administration promised additional federal education aid to states adopting certain education reforms aligned with President Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s reform agenda. In order to avoid laying off teachers and making significant cuts to education budgets, most states quickly complied and adopted reforms aligned with the Administration’s agenda.

As the Race to the Top funds ran out and as Congress remained deadlocked on reauthorizing NCLB, the Administration then sought to solidify the gains made through RTTT by granting waivers to states from key tenets of the legislation if they implemented reforms supported by the administration (Hess, 2016). While such efforts were welcomed by state and local officials, many in Congress complained that President Obama was essentially legislating
through the executive branch—superseding Congress’ authority by granting relief from the law. Many of the waivers granted were “big” waivers—waivers that went well beyond minor adjustments to the law. The language used by the Obama Administration evoked key principles of decentralization: that state and local education officials know best their needs, problems, and how to go about solving them; that change cannot be mandated by Washington; and that overly prescriptive rules and regulations inhibit effective organizational change.

While in general agreement with much of this position, Congressional leaders viewed the Obama administration’s widespread granting of waivers as further evidence of the abuse of executive power. Similar to battles over the Affordable Care Act, Congressional Republicans viewed the president’s actions to gut NCLB as a thinly veiled attempt to legislate through the executive branch. These concerns became significant enough that Congressional leaders moved quickly to reauthorize NCLB via the Every Student Succeeds Act. In large measure a sharp and pointed rebuke of President Obama, ESSA severely limits the power of the executive branch over education; specifically, the power of the Secretary of Education to grant waivers from the law. Celebrating its passage, Sen. Lamar Alexander said, "You had Washington running 80,000 schools in 42 states. We got rid of all that" (Alexander, 2015). Popular support was assured by an unexpected coalition of conservatives and teachers unions, brought together by backlash to the narrow and prescriptive nature of education policy under the Obama administration and its perceived federal overreach and ensured the bill was met with strong bipartisan support in both chambers, passing the House by a vote of 359 to 64 and the Senate by a vote of 85-12.

III. ESSA and the Equity Question

While it would be premature to assess whether ESSA will affect educational inequity, the tension is evident by Brown’s (2015) comment that the law “attempts to thread the needle
between conservatives who want to shrink the federal government’s footprint in education and civil rights advocates who worry that some states, left to their own devices, will obfuscate or ignore the poor performance of schools serving low-income and minority students.” Some researchers worry that while some states will undoubtedly use their newly granted freedom to further improve their educational systems, others may well do the bare minimum (Gerson, 2016).

In part, the answer depends on how much actual power and authority are devolved to the states. In the 1980s, states attempted to decentralize education under the banner of “site-based management”. Rhetoric notwithstanding, very little power and authority actually devolved to building-level school leaders. State governments retained a great deal of control, and what power was devolved tended to be pushed down to the district, not to the school, level. The operant question is in which areas or domains power and authority will be devolved. Will state accountability systems begin to dramatically diverge under ESSA? Will some states do away with high-stakes testing? Will ESSA accelerate the demise of the Common Core, leading to more divergent curricula? Will states take more or less aggressive actions in reducing the achievement gap?

Although passage of ESSA clearly reflects a reaction to federal overreach by the Obama administration, it also reflects a reaction to perceived inappropriate overreach to NCLB, what McDermott and DeBray-Pelot (2009) describe as federal intrusion on states’ rights to set educational policy and, “undeniably, that’s exactly what it is—all in the name of equity” (Fusarelli, 2009, p. 244). A key empirical question to be addressed is to what extent increased federal or, for that matter, state involvement in local education governance and reform has improved education. Researchers contributing to a volume of case studies examining the issue were split—some believed increased state and federal control reduced educational inequity while
others thought it made the problem worse (Fusarelli & Cooper, 2009). The outcome of ESSA will contribute significantly to this debate, as legislators and policymakers struggle to find the ideal mix between centralization and decentralization.

The upcoming presidential election may impact how involved the executive branch becomes in education reform. It also depends on how vigilant legislators in the U.S. House and Senate are in monitoring USDOE compliance with the new law. Recently, USDOE officials proposed a new rule that school districts must demonstrate they are spending enough on poorer schools before they receive federal funds—an action the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service noted “appears to go beyond what would be required under a plain language reading of the statute” (Brown, 2016, p. 1). Senator Lamar Alexander, one of the key architects of ESSA, called the USDOE’s actions “intolerable”. He stated, “As soon as the president himself signs the law, they start rewriting it over in his own department” (Brown, 2016, p. 2). Donna Harris-Aikens of the National Education Association stated “the department was seeking to establish a strict definition of compliance, contradicting the law’s call for greater flexibility for districts and states” (p. 4). These conflicts give us a taste of the upcoming political battles over implementation of ESSA—the writing of rules and regulations to administer the law—and how the outcome of those battles may shape how much power and authority are actually devolved to state and local education officials under the new law.

IV. Specific Provisions with Potential to Impact Equity

The original legislative intent of ESEA was to ensure equal educational opportunity for all children, regardless of family background, student demographics, disability, or English language proficiency. Subsequent reauthorizations sought to accomplish that goal by centralizing authority to higher levels of government. The result of uncommon bipartisan compromise, ESSA
reverses that trend by devolving federal control to the states. What specific provisions in the latest reauthorization of this landmark federal legislation have the potential to advance or inhibit ESEA’s foundational commitment to equity?

First, ESSA maintains a focus on low-performers by requiring states to identify the lowest performing five percent of all schools and any high schools that fail to graduate one third or more of their students for comprehensive support and improvement. Having identified those schools most in need of comprehensive support and improvement, states must target resources to them by way of a comprehensive and evidence-based improvement plan. Funding for these efforts will no longer come though the standalone School Improvement Grant program, which ESSA discontinues by consolidating it with Title I money. Section 1003(b)(1)(A) increases the amount of money states can set aside for school improvement from four to seven percent of Title I funding. Further, Title IV, Part A of ESSA authorizes $1.65 billion for Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, which can be directed towards dropout prevention efforts. Funds can be used to provide well-rounded educational programming, such as music and the arts, as well as college and career readiness initiatives or they can be directed towards mental health programs or drug and violence prevention. Finally, schools in which more than 40% of the population are low-income students may be designated as a “school wide” Title I program and these schools will have significant flexibility over spending and will be permitted to commingle federal funds with state and local resources in order to develop comprehensive plans for ensuring all students meet state standards.

Second, while NCLB was criticized for focusing attention on those kids who were close to basic proficiency (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Krieg, 2008; Reback, 2008), ESSA grants states the flexibility to choose how heavily they want to weight various accountability indicators.
Specifically, ESSA requires a minimum of four indicators for elementary and middle schools: three academic indicators—such as proficiency on the state test, English-language proficiency, and one other, such as student growth—plus one school-quality indicator, which could be student attendance, chronic absenteeism, dropout rates, school climate, arts, or staff retention. High schools must also include graduation rates. It is up to individual states to decide how they want to weight these indicators but all accountability data has to be disaggregated by subgroup, not just test scores. A pressing question is whether states will use this newfound flexibility in creative ways to implement bold interventions rather than just demonstrate compliance with the federal law. As Secretary King noted, “[ESSA] will require vigilance on the part of educators, the civil rights community, and state leaders to ensure that new flexibility helps us to close achievement gaps rather than obscure them” (King, 2016). If history is anything to go by, we can expect states to experiment when designing their accountability systems under ESSA. By 2014, for instance, 18 states had taken advantage of NCLB waivers to include multiple measures in their accountability system, beyond student proficiency, graduation rates, or test participation (Polikoff, McEachin, Wrabel, & Duque, 2014).

Third, ESSA shines a spotlight on subgroups in ways that have never been required before. Under NCLB waivers, states were permitted to create “super subgroups,” which allowed them to combine various subgroups into a single category for accountability purposes but ESSA disallows that practice. Academic achievement outcomes must be disaggregated at the school level by gender, race/ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status, student disability status, migrant status, and English proficiency status. Further, ESSA requires that states include students’ English-language proficiency in state accountability plans, which has never before been required by the federal government. Only six states currently do this (Martin, Sargrad, & Batel,
2016), which is remarkable given that nine percent of U.S. public school students are English language Learners (USDOE, 2015).

While the flexibility and transparency provisions outlined thus far offer some promising indicators for ways in which ESSA has the potential to advance equity, the most encouraging changes the new federal law makes in this regard relate to school funding formulas. Title I Part A is the federal government’s largest federal investment in elementary and secondary education. The original legislation was written with an anti-poverty intent but the opacity of its funding formulas has restricted the effectiveness of this longstanding federal investment (Gordon, 2016; Gordon & Reber, 2015). One way that ESSA might promote equity through Title I funding is by clarifying fiscal compliance issues that have left this program mired in bureaucratic confusion. Specifically, the technical details of the “supplement, not supplant” (SNS) requirement of ESEA that ensures states use Title I funds for additional spending, and not as a replacement for existing spending, has proven troublesome for districts to navigate (Junge & Krvaric, 2012). Most districts have hired Title I coordinators to ensure they adhere to the complex state and federal rules governing this regulation but confusion about permissible uses of Title I funds is commonplace (Gordon, 2016). As a result of uncertainty about what spending is technically permissible under this regulation, these coordinators often prioritize spending on “add-on” services such as teacher professional development or after-school programs that are clearly supplemental but aren’t necessarily effective at improving student outcomes (Dynarski & Kainz, 2015). ESSA addresses this issue with a new revenue-based supplemental funds test that encourages schools to more effectively use their Title I funds to improve student outcomes (Gordon, 2016). Equity may be advanced under ESSA if these new rules reduce the fear of a federal audit uncovering fiscal noncompliance, giving districts the confidence to pursue bold
Another way that ESSA might promote equity is through USDOE regulations concerning its comparability requirement. Because Title I funds are allocated to the school district for distribution instead of being allocated directly to schools, the comparability requirement is intended to promote equitable distribution of state and local funds across schools within a given district. Nonetheless, many school districts don’t divide funds equally to ensure that high-poverty schools get as many dollars per student as schools with more affluent students. Roza (2010) notes that the comparability provision “loophole” requires that teacher salaries are counted as full-time-equivalent positions instead of being measured by salary differentials (ESEA, Section 1118 (c) (2) (B)). Because more experienced teachers tend to cluster in more affluent schools (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002), when school districts allocate funding based on staffing ratios instead of teacher salaries, this often results in wealthier schools receiving more funding than low-income schools (Woodworth, 2013). ESSA might overcome this inequity through regulations by the U.S. Department of Education, which has proposed that districts should be required to demonstrate comparable spending between schools by counting teacher salary differentials instead of counting full time equivalent positions (Ujifusa, 2016).

It remains to be seen whether such regulations will be permitted, however. On one side, House Education and the Workforce Chairman John Kline and the Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Lamar Alexander claim that such regulations go beyond the scope of what the law permits and will require states to complete a costly overhaul of their finance systems (Alexander, 2016). On the other side, Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. and Senators Elizabeth Warren and Patty Murray assert that the
proposed regulations are consistent with the law’s origin as a civil rights piece of legislation. It remains to be seen what these regulations will look like in practice.

Regardless of the outcome of the regulation battle described above, ESSA is still expected to spotlight inequities in school spending through its school finance reporting requirements (Roza, 2016). Currently, district accounting practices don’t facilitate school-by-school spending comparisons but ESSA’s new school-level reporting requirement will highlight systemic inequities in school district funding formulas that regressively send a larger share of state and local funds to more affluent schools, which are more likely to employ higher-salaried teachers (Carr, Gray, & Holley, 2007; Roza & Hill, 2004). Once these reports become available in the 2017-18 school year, districts can anticipate pushback from advocacy groups about why longstanding policies result in lower spending on poor and minority students than on their more affluent peers. Thus, in the same way that NCLB influenced equity in education by shining a spotlight on student outcomes by school, ESSA has the potential to influence equity in education by highlighting disparities in school spending.

As data about these funding inequities accumulates, it is likely school boards will have to revise local education policies. While large-scale teacher reassignments might be an unpopular remedy (Weingarten, 2016), other solutions might include reducing class sizes in those schools with lower-salaried teachers or concentrating literacy specialists, aides, tutors, counselors, or other support staff in under-resourced schools (Roza & Yatsko, 2010). Woodworth (2013) proposes switching to a weighted student funding formula, also known as student-based budgeting. Under this approach, the education funding associated with an individual student is determined based on characteristics such as special education status or family income, which are thought to influence a child’s educational needs. A pilot program under Title I Part F of ESSA
will actually allow up to fifty school districts to experiment with student-based budgeting. Termed the “Flexibility for Equitable Per-Pupil Funding” program, participating districts will be able to consolidate federal, state, and local funds in order to implement a weighted student funding system. Schools will receive more funding for children with characteristics associated with educational disadvantage, such as students with special educational needs, students for whom English is a second language, or other characteristics chosen by the local educational agency.

V. Conclusion

ESSA offers a reset in relations between national, state, and local policymakers. The bipartisan bill, which Obama termed a “Christmas miracle” (Obama, 2015), represents an opportunity to rethink how to best achieve equity in education. Because full implementation isn’t expected until the 2017-18 school year, the transition period poses opportunities and challenges for educational leaders who wish to advance the goal of equity as states investigate new opportunities for innovation and revise accountability systems to take advantage of the full flexibility ESSA offers.

How will states use their newfound authority? Much of what happens with this new federal legislation will depend on what states make of the new opportunities it affords them. Recognizing this challenge, Education Secretary John B. King remarked to reporters shortly after the law’s passage in January 2016, "The key will be to make sure states use their new flexibility around accountability and intervention systems in ways that are [focused] on equity and opportunity for the highest-need students" (Klein, 2016).

State departments of education have traditionally been weak institutions, deferring to localities when it comes to education, but ESSA requires them to take the lead on choosing how
to evaluate schools and how to target interventions. How effective they will be at these tasks remains to be seen. States will need time to build expertise about how to design an effective accountability system for their context, how to best target interventions to improve low-performing schools, and which measures of student progress are most helpful and revealing. They need time to build capacity to oversee new accountability systems, especially if they’re incorporating innovative new measures such as those derived from student or parent surveys. Long term, states will need to continue investments in longitudinal data systems in order to build a knowledge base about what types of interventions work in low-performing schools and they will need help with the human capital demands of building analytic capacity to assess the efficacy of particular resources and interventions.

In theory, there are many provisions in ESSA that might reduce educational inequities, but only if states seize the opportunity that ESSA offers. States will play a decisive role moving forward. It remains to be seen if they have the capacity and willingness to leverage the flexibility being offered to them to make sure that this time, no child really is left behind.
References


Tooley, M. (2015, December 24). No child left behind is gone, but will it be back? *The Atlantic.*


