



To: Kimberley Harrington, NJ Commissioner of Education
From: Pat Wright, NJPSA Executive Director
Re: NJPSA Comments on NJ Draft ESSA Plan
Date: March 20, 2017

The NJ Principals and Supervisors Association, representing over 6,500 school leaders in New Jersey public schools, welcomes this opportunity to comment on the New Jersey State Plan Draft to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) issued for public comment on February 15, 2017. As instructional leaders of our schools, we understand and share the expressed goals of the Draft Plan to:

- prioritize and meet the needs of each student as the center of our instructional focus;
- promote and support local communities' and districts' expertise and flexibility to identify and address the unique needs of their students; and
- ensure that all students, particularly those in historically disadvantaged subgroups, have an equal chance to succeed through a steadfast focus of time, instructional resources, and quality instruction.

We also appreciate the Department's recognition that ESSA offers us an opportunity "to better align New Jersey's accountability systems and to more accurately and fairly measure student, school, and LEA (local education agency) performance" (Draft ESSA Plan, p. 41). We appreciate the recognition throughout the report that accountability indicators and systems must focus on areas within the school and district's control. And, we share the stated goal of better systems alignment, cohesion among initiative areas, and the long-overdue move from "three distinct accountability systems to a unified system of accountability with complementary indicators and a holistic system of support."

With these mutual goals in mind, NJPSA submits its comments and areas of concern for your consideration.

1. Process

We must begin our comments by acknowledging the extensive effort the NJ Department of Education, through its ESSA Team, has made to seek a broad range of stakeholder input on the development of the Draft ESSA Plan. NJPSA and its members have had multiple opportunities to participate in the discussion of the core components of this plan, including the option to submit written comments via survey instrument, principal focus groups, interactive meetings with the ESSA Team, and NJPSA membership on the ESSA Stakeholder Advisory Group. We appreciate and commend the NJDOE ESSA Team for their hard work in reaching out to, and

engaging with, a broad range of stakeholder groups on important and complex issues.

Due to time constraints and the breadth of the ESSA State Plan Draft, NJPSA and other stakeholders had to focus our attention and feedback on certain core components of the plan. As a result, key issues areas such as Section 5 Supporting Excellent Educators and Section 6 Supporting All Students were not subject to our review or comment. Some components of these sections, as discussed herein, contained surprise elements such as principal achievement coaches, where we as an association had no input. As these two sections are critical to the outcomes we collectively seek in the Accountability system, NJPSA recommends that the NJDOE continue its outreach efforts on these issues, including funding priorities, as New Jersey moves forward in implementing our ESSA Plan.

Further, ESSA requires more than meetings and discussions. It requires “meaningful consultation,” which in our view embraces collaborative decision-making as well. In this area, NJPSA urges the NJDOE to act and revise its Draft Plan in key areas where there was a strong consensus of stakeholder groups on a particular issue, yet the plan contains an alternate approach.

Indicator Weight

One such recommendation, as discussed herein, is the weighting of the indicators within the draft State Accountability Plan. In discussions at the ESSA Stakeholder Advisory Group meetings about the relative weighting of indicators within the Accountability Formula, there was a strong consensus that student growth should be weighted higher than testing proficiency rates. Yet the Draft Plan, issued after this discussion, provides for the equal rating of proficiency and student growth within the proposed accountability formula. ESSA specifically expanded options for states in their accountability systems from the test-focused No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to broader choices. “Of particular note, states can now reward schools for making outstanding student progress rather than simply focusing on a school’s proficiency.” (Draft ESSA Plan, p. 40)

Despite this statutory recognition of the importance of student growth and enhanced state level flexibility, the NJ Draft ESSA Plan continues to equally weight proficiency rates and growth measures, without any apparent proposal for a reward system for growth. **NJPSA urges the NJDOE to embrace the spirit of ESSA and true collaborative decision-making. We urge you to honor the consensus of diverse stakeholder groups AND sound educational practice to modify the indicator weights to focus more on student growth than proficiency in our accountability system. This approach would inspire strong instructional practice in our classrooms while holding schools (and educators) accountable for issues they actively impact over time. While we agree that meeting the bar of proficiency is an important component in a system of multiple measures of school performance, our members strongly believe that student growth is a more important measure for both the student’s pathway to success and for accountability purposes.**

Long Term & Interim Goal Setting

Another area where a unified concern was expressed by the ESSA Stakeholder Advisory Group was the issue of long-term goals and proposed interim targets which will be utilized for identification purposes. Diverse stakeholder representatives expressed the sentiment that differentiation is necessary to provide a fair approach to long term educational goal-setting for all students. Yet, no change appears to have been made in the interim targets or the process for setting them that acknowledges differentiated growth.

Within the context of a common end goal (80% proficiency), local pathways to reach that standard may appropriately vary. We agree that local baselines will necessarily differ, yet a one size fits all percentage approach continues to be applied to the required growth increments for all student groups. This approach negates the concept of differentiation based upon the unique learning needs of students and subgroups of students. Research tells us that learning rates vary, particularly for students with language barriers or learning disabilities that impact their growth rates. The proposed system of long term goal setting does not empower schools and districts to provide information about their student populations as part of the goal setting process as the NJDOE will simply unilaterally issue the interim targets, based upon a uniform percentage, regardless of context. Frankly, this approach is eerily similar to that of the counter-productive No Child Left Behind. **We urge the NJDOE to revisit this issue and share its research methodology for its increment setting process.**

Addressing P-2

We would be remiss if we did not address the issue of P-2 schools' performance and growth. Unfortunately it is unclear to us at this juncture how accountability, as it relates to either student performance or student growth, will be calculated since there is no current or planned assessment for these grades and state statute actually forbids the administration of standardized assessments in kindergarten through second grade. See P.L.2015, c.134.

Submission Window

In order to provide sufficient time for stakeholders to thoroughly review the Draft Plan, NJPSA also recommends that the NJDOE consider extending the public comment period and/or consider postponing the submission of New Jersey's State Plan until the September submission date. A later submission would provide an enhanced opportunity for collaborative decision-making, data review and local planning efforts as envisioned by the statute in its process requirements. In the event the NJDOE moves forward with the April 3rd date, we urge the NJDOE to continue its well- received, ESSA outreach practices beyond the submission date.

2. Plan Components We Support

As noted, NJPSA fully supports the goals of the NJ ESSA Plan Draft to ensure high quality learning opportunities and support for all students to fully prepare them for college or career and to close any learning gaps. In addition, we specifically support the following areas of the Draft Plan:

- **Alignment of Reporting and Accountability Systems:** NJPSA applauds Department efforts to align accountability systems including NJQSAC, ESSA, and other school/district reporting as it will eliminate duplicative and sometimes cumbersome work

on the part of districts while ensuring more transparent and accessible information for parents, the community, teachers, school leaders, and other education stakeholders;

- **Creating More Accessible Reports:** We are equally encouraged by the outline of how the Department plans to modify statewide reporting to make it more accessible and useful for school leaders, teachers, parents, board members, and the community. Translating reports into additional languages, creating crosswalks to allow comparison of schools and districts, coupled with new guidance on how to use reports, are essential to enhanced data use by the school community and beyond. We urge the Department to share a sample of this report, work collaboratively with the field and focus on developing performance reports that not only meet transparency goals, but also inspire constructive conversations within the school community;
- **Including a 5 Year Graduation Rate:** Including not only the 4 year graduation rate, but also the 5 year adjusted rate, recognizes the value of allowing schools and districts to work with students who may need additional time to obtain a diploma, including special needs and English Language Learners (ELLs). This was why NJPSA supported the inclusion of the 5 year rate several years ago. That reasoning remains the same today.
- **Taking a Conservative Stance on Incorporation of a New Accountability Metric – Chronic Absenteeism:** NJPSA was particularly happy to see the Department take a more conservative approach when it comes to incorporation of chronic absenteeism as a new indicator. Given the variation among districts as to how an absence is counted, coupled with the fact that we are not yet sure how the metric will impact accountability statewide, we appreciate the prudent approach the Department took as it relates to making the new metric a ‘more nominal’ percentage of the new accountability framework. Our members have concerns that many factors surrounding this indicator are outside local control and may not in fact be actionable at the school level. As a result, it is not an indicator that we believe best measures school success. However, we do appreciate ongoing efforts with stakeholders, including NJPSA, to identify issues surrounding the use of this indicator, to define terms to establish comparability among districts as we move forward, and the NJDOE planned guidance to the field on this issue.
- **Approach to Measure, Support and Promote the Progress of ELL Students:** NJPSA supports the multi-pronged approach to promoting and measuring the progress of English Language Learners (ELLs) as envisioned by ESSA. Specifically, we support the approach to proficiency and growth that incorporates a student’s English language proficiency level and years in our country as a more fair and realistic metric. We do have concerns about the impact of the NJDOE established long-term learning goals on this population based upon the such factors as their exposure to schooling before entering this country, their varying language development levels and the impact of language barriers on their demonstration of knowledge in tested subjects. Overall, we do believe the Plan more effectively promotes the learning growth of ELLs through

provisions to:

- utilize the Student Growth Percentile for elementary and middle school students,
 - expand the ELL subgroup to include former ELLs for up to four years post-exit as a fair method of capturing and attributing their growth;
 - inclusion of both a 4 and 5 year cohort in the calculation of graduation rates; and
 - plans to develop an English Language Arts assessment in Spanish to provide a forum for ELLs to fairly demonstrate their ELA knowledge.
- **Recognizing Participation Rate Challenges:** Further, ESSA unfortunately requires schools to not only report on lack of participation in the statewide assessment, but also to record those students not participating as ‘not proficient.’ This provision is not valid and is quite punitive as it has a direct impact on a school’s ‘summative score.’ Given this mandated federal approach, the NJ Department’s approach proposal for a state level “penalty” which simply requires the information be included on the report card is appreciated. How schools are able to address parent and student populations who refuse to participate in statewide assessment will vary. Further, penalizing schools that show due diligence toward encouraging test participation is simply counterproductive. Rather, focusing supports and additional resources is a better approach – an approach the Department has long taken and we appreciate this supportive approach.

NJPSA recommends that our performance reporting in this area separate out the students who are counted as “not proficient” because of a failure to participate from students who took the test and scored in the “not proficient” range. This is more accurate reporting to the public. Finally, we also urge the Department to advocate to eliminate the invalid and overly punitive approach of counting students who refuse to participate as not proficient. This is not an accurate or fair approach to district accountability.

- **Utilizing a Tiered System of Support at the Local Level** In addition, NJPSA supports the development and use of a tiered system of support, in every school. It fosters the use of formative assessment and data driven instruction. However, success of this program is only possible with consistent and aligned Department support. As such, we urge the Department to provide the necessary support and training to implement this approach for all New Jersey students and schools.
- **Sustaining 21st Century Community Learning Centers:** Similarly, the Association supports efforts to maintain and promote 21st Century Community Learning Centers as an additional means to provide educational enrichment activities that comprehensively dovetail with the school curriculum
- **Permitting Schools Flexibility With Developing School Wide Programs:** Finally, NJPSA supports the Department proposal to schools under the 40 percent poverty threshold to operate schoolwide programs if they can show a need and a track record of

success in the past. We would merely ask the Department to monitor this program to create resources for districts to replicate the success of others.

3. Areas of Concern & Recommendations

In addition to the issues raised above, NJPSA recommends that the Department take a serious look at, the following:

Taking a Lead on the Definition of Chronic Absenteeism: While we were disappointed to see the Department move in the direction of chronic absenteeism for the 'other indicator' under ESSA, NJPSA appreciates the Department taking a more conservative approach when it comes to incorporation of the metric. In order to utilize a metric for comparative purposes, consistency in how the metric is interpreted or understood is necessary.

Unfortunately, today there is significant variation in how schools define "absence." Some districts consider tardiness to equate to an absence, others do not. Some districts allow for excused absences where a student is attending certain events, while others do not. This variation must be addressed to allow for the fair use of the metric within the State's accountability system. Moreover, the grade range within a school building greatly impacts how school personnel work with parents and community to address absenteeism issues. Moreover, how a school works with students and parents varies based upon the age of the child. Recognizing this difference is important. Given this, we are happy to see the Department take a proactive approach with stakeholders to address the inconsistency within the field and look forward to working together to create a more reliable measure based upon solid guidance from the NJDOE. This guidance must contain clarifying definitions of terms including "day present," "absence" and productive reporting requirements on this metric that lead to positive strategies and conversations within the school community.

As an Association we also urge the Department to not only include exceptions for those instances currently covered by regulation or best practice (e.g. Take Your Child To Work Day or college visits), but to also include a limited medical basis within the exception to absence. Many schools maintain a policy that a child must be 'fever free' to return to school. This is consistent with public health policy. Further, since a core goal of our system is to encourage student readiness for college or career, a corollary exemption to the college visit exception must be developed for students pursuing a career (job interviews, potential work site visits, etc.).

Over-weighting Sub-groups: NJPSA is also concerned with the methodology used within the Accountability Formula as it relates to sub-groups. Given that the 'n' size has been reduced to 20, and the system averages all sub-group scores regardless of size in relation to district population, the proposed system has the potential to have an outsized impact on the summative score of districts. Moreover, it is not necessary given the robust identification system proposed for identifying schools in need of Targeted support and improvement and those with consistently underperforming subgroups.

Creating equal weights for all subgroups will greatly affect the individual accountability

performance and/or growth indicator numbers, particularly when there are small numbers of subgroups. This effect is realized even more acutely when some of those groups are at the low end of the 'n' size.

Additionally, a school with one particular subgroup of 20 students might only have 19 the next year and the change in the score as a result may be significant but not meaningful when the subgroup is no longer included in the calculation. Eliminating this will not diminish the importance of calculating performance of subgroups. **The department should consider giving it less than 50 percent weight within the performance and growth accountability indicators.**

Further, fluctuations around small numbers of students (i.e. around the 'n' of 20), is likely to be a significant issue. We recommend that, to be included as a subgroup, a sub-group should have met the 'n' for at least the three years previous or the group represent some determined percentage of the total school population. Stability of the group is critical to ensure that the data analyzed is comparable and truly reflect the school.

We also recommend that the use of the confidence interval be continued when determining if a group has met an interim target. Again, with the n size of 20 the impact of the size of the group on the reliability and validity of the scores increases and the confidence interval allows for this to be factored in.

Moreover, the summative performance for subgroups is calculated, and low subgroup performance is clearly identified, in the identification of schools for Targeted and comprehensive supports. Given this, it is not necessary that they also make up 50 percent of the performance and growth accountability indicator scores. The summative accountability score isn't the true lever of change. Rather, the robust intervention and support system is. ESSA requires districts, in concert with the State, to provide enhanced supports to students where performance issues are identified.

Finally, under the proposal, a district's summative number is included on the School Performance Report. The report also includes information on subgroup performance, relative to interim targets set by the Department. But, absent significant explanation and context, what does this score mean? We know that the score is a relative scale in comparison to other districts. How will this be explained to the public? Moreover, does it reflect how successful a school is? Why and how? Reporting a numerical summative score without context or explanation to the public will be a disadvantage in our efforts to lead productive conversations about school performance and growth. In the past, similar metrics were utilized to calculate which schools were in need of improvement or support (bottom 5 percent) but the actual number was not included on performance reports. **We urge that this number not be included here as well.**

Accordingly, we recommend that the Department take a more cautious approach, as taken with chronic absenteeism, and walk back the percentage of sub-group accountability as it relates to performance and growth. We also suggest a confidence interval and business rules regarding small sub-groups be employed ('n' of 20 in the last

three school years to be utilized). Such a change does not affect the school, district and State requirements to support students and address the achievement gap, it merely allows us to acclimate to a new system of accountability.

Drawing Fair Comparisons: NJPSA also questions how the proposed system will draw comparisons for accountability purposes. Regional districts in particular can be comprised of 7-12, 10-12, K-12, K-8, or other iterations. **Does the plan seek to compare districts with similar compositions? We would urge the Department to ensure that analysis include district composition in determining comparability.**

Choosing the Right Benchmarks: Particularly as it relates to mathematics, students may successfully complete algebra coursework well before reaching high school. The plan currently utilizes completion of the Algebra 1 PARCC assessment. A large number of students may complete that course, and the assessment, well before entering high school. Given this, it may be advisable to examine what the chosen benchmark assessment is in future years.

Educator Supports: With the enactment of ESSA, NJPSA proactively reviewed its provisions concerning supports for educator quality in both teaching and leadership. In the summer of 2015, NJPSA staff met with the Commissioner and Department staff in a collaborative effort to help drive federal investments to areas of the state system that best support the capacity of instructional leaders to drive our common educational vision at the school level.

A new body of knowledge has been amassed over the past decade regarding the importance of school leadership. Valid and reliable research has now proven that effective school leadership is second only to direct classroom instruction in raising student achievement, and evidence shows school leadership has the greatest impact in schools with the greatest need. Over this same decade, the role of principals and other school leaders has become increasingly complex. Principals are not only operational leaders responsible for establishing a safe and supportive school environment; they are also instructional leaders responsible for providing ongoing coaching and mentoring to teachers and students.

Despite the increased demands placed on principals, state and local efforts around effective recruitment, preparation, and ongoing support have not kept pace.

For the first time, ESSA (Section 2101(c)(3) allows states to reserve up to three percent of their district allotments for statewide school leadership activities. NJPSA urged the NJDOE to take advantage of this discretionary set aside to finally focus on the unaddressed development needs of school leaders. Specifically, we recommended effectively utilizing these newly available funds to support these goals:

- Expanding leadership training programs designed to prepare and support principals and other school leaders in high-need schools, by providing funding to expand the current work of the School Leadership Program grant which focuses on the development of a leadership pipeline and leadership skill development targeted to school improvement

efforts in Trenton, Bridgeton and Millville, New Jersey;

- Expanding the work currently taking place in the Connected Action Roadmap (CAR)/Blended Online Learning Modules pilot schools to build leadership capacity to implement New Jersey's educational vision as embodied in CAR;
- Supporting the continued expansion of the New Jersey Leadership Academy, a collaborative, team-based leadership approach to professional development for principals and superintendents focused on strong instructional leadership in New Jersey schools. Continued NJDOE funding for this highly effective and well-utilized leadership development program is critical as the current funding stream will end this year;;
- Providing assistance and support to principals and school-based leaders responsible for the provision of early childhood learning programs to ensure alignment with the elementary schools, effective transitions between early learning and kindergarten, staff support and increased parent and community engagement

In addition, ESSA calls on states to coordinate with local stakeholders and principals in the development of plans to use federal funds and to ensure that any strategies to improve student achievement demonstrate evidence. It also requires that state review panels consist of educators who have been practicing within the past five years, including teachers and principals representing various school contexts across the state.

Unfortunately, the Draft State ESSA Plan does not include the Title II set aside, none of the NJPSA recommendations set forth above, nor does it include NJDOE support of these goals or proven initiatives. We are disappointed that our association, that has taken the lead on leadership training in New Jersey, was not consulted on this section of the Draft ESSA Plan.

Instead, the plan focuses its priorities and resources on existing NJDOE agency needs such as upgrades to its certification system, rather than an investment in educators in the field. Resources to the field are vital to provide the time and support needed to:

- provide appropriate educator feedback during the evaluation process,
- Create real opportunities in every school for educators to meet collaboratively to analyze student data and student learning;
- establish practicing professional learning communities as an effective, collaborative mechanism in every school working to enhance instruction and learning;
- target learning and resources to the use of technology and data in instructional practice; and
- operationalize new career options including teacher leadership.

NJPSA sees a lost opportunity in this section of the Draft ESSA Plan as currently written and asks the NJDOE to continue to pursue partnerships with NJPSA and other stakeholder groups representing educators to enhance educator growth and development throughout New Jersey. Additionally, we ask the NJDOE to revisit the issue of Title II set asides next year as a positive lever for leader quality.

Overemphasizing ELL Populations: While recognizing the importance of addressing the needs of ELL populations as mandated by ESSA, we are not sure whether a school's performance should so dramatically be affected by one sub-group, particularly where the number of students could be quite limited in number. One thought would be to establish a certain percentage of the student population that must be required prior to including a 20 percent weight in the Accountability Formula - in essence setting a 'floor' to inclusion of the stand alone number within the summative score. In the alternative, we may want to look at reducing the percentage associated with this sub-group in the overall Accountability Formula. As noted above, we support the positive approach to ELL growth contained in many provisions of the draft plan and note the significant safeguards contained within the Accountability framework to ensure that ELL students' progress in their achievement levels. This sub-group is already included under the performance and growth metrics, as such does such a large percentage of a school's summative score need to also be incorporated?

Focusing on certification systems rather than supports: While understanding efforts to upgrade the current certification system, which we must acknowledge is antiquated, we are not sure how investing in the system will help ensure that schools with lower performance will attract better educators? Rather, we would urge the Department to focus more comprehensively on recruitment and retention efforts, which are acknowledged within the plan but not spelled out. Further, we would urge the Department to work with the educational stakeholders (P-12 and higher education) to effectuate this goal. Working together, we can better encourage individuals to enter and remain in education.

Coordination of Supports: Finally, we appreciate Department efforts to streamline and coordinate reporting for schools. Unfortunately it is not clear whether that same coordination is envisioned as it relates to the myriad of entities which are to support schools (e.g. the Regional Achievement Centers (RACs), County Offices, ESSA Monitors, Program Officers, and outside providers).

We fully endorse the concept within the plan of a State 'tiered system of supports.' However, the Department, in implementing this differentiated approach, must ensure that there is on-going coordination of supports for schools and districts. Coordinating supports will help effectuate comprehensive and sustained school improvement while avoiding initiative overload.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the thoughts and recommendations of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association. We look forward to working with the Department and our fellow stakeholders on this comprehensive initiative.