

## **Shifting From Compliance to Continuous Learning: Leveraging ESSA to Advance a Learning System in Education**

The history of human progress is built on our ability to work together to accumulate knowledge and skills and to build upon what came before—from the Cognitive Revolution 70,000 years ago to the birth of the Scientific Revolution 500 years ago to the rise of the information age in our own time. Today, sectors that have developed structures, processes, and cultures focused on thoughtfully using data and evidence to inform continuous improvement have experienced ongoing progress and (periodically) breakthrough successes, such as in health, technology, energy, and athletics.

But this learning engine is ironically and profoundly weak in our education system, which is instead more likely to drive compliance and act as a barrier to innovation, improvement, and scale. It is not that our education system lacks ideas, but the gaps in structures, processes, and culture constrain the coordination and demand for evidence-based actions and continuous learning. This means that even successful innovations often become fads that are tried, unevenly implemented, and discarded rather than evolved with reasoned adaptation to greater impact and scale.

- What would it look like and what would it take to shift our education system from its current compliance-based frame toward the creation of a **learning system** at and across all levels?
- In pursuing this vision, how can we build on and accelerate initial bright spots?

Last year, EducationCounsel convened leaders from multiple sectors to explore these questions. We will soon publish a white paper that provides our initial articulation of such a learning system, as informed by our research, the experience of other sectors, input from experts, and the rich discussion at the convening.<sup>1</sup>

**This shorter companion piece provides a summary of our forthcoming paper and makes the case that implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presents myriad important opportunities for the federal government, states, districts, and schools to advance the shift toward a learning system in education.<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> Several of the central terms used in this paper—continuous learning, continuous improvement, innovation, evidence-based, research, data-informed, evaluation, scale—can mean and connote different things to different audiences. Our vision of a robust learning system welcomes different approaches, methodologies, and nomenclature. It acknowledges and embraces that improvement can happen in many ways, whether regular or irregular, incremental or breakthrough, planned or organic.

### A. Why is it Important to Embrace a Learning System Approach in Education?

There is a growing consensus that we need our education system to drive big improvements in both opportunity and outcomes if we are going to truly prepare each and every student for success in the modern world. There is a further consensus emerging that this will require fundamental shifts in the nature of teaching, learning, and supports. Evidence and experience tell us that every complex human endeavor has required systems and cultures of continuous learning and improvement to make these kinds of significant advances. So too with education.

The good news is that we know more than ever before about the science of learning and development, the impacts of adversity, and the untapped potential in each and every child. Meanwhile, modern data systems and technology are beginning to enable us to understand more; communicate insights in timely, tailored, and actionable ways; act in real time; and better translate knowledge into practice and policy. Finally, there is great insight and experience from improvement science that can be better applied in education, and some bright spots in education itself.<sup>3</sup> But we can only begin to take advantage of all of this—and be ready for future breakthroughs and innovations—if we prioritize efforts to build and sustain a learning system at all levels of education. This shift will be a marathon, not a sprint, but it is one that is long overdue and essential to achieving our goals (though of course, it is not sufficient on its own). If we are successful, this effort could undergird a much more successful education system for the long term.

### B. What Would an Education Learning System Look Like?

In our forthcoming paper we have tried to distill this complex, nuanced topic into a relatively simple framework. We hope our articulation can help advance alignment toward a shared vision of a thriving learning system at and across all levels of education, from school to district to state to federal. Indeed, establishing a shared vision—and then continuously improving it over time—is itself an important first step in promoting a learning system.

**Four main ideas** animate our vision for what a learning system would look like in education:

- 1) Making this shift is ultimately about changing both individual mindsets and organizational culture. We need a **learning culture** in education in which continuous learning is simply “the way we do business.” **Structures and processes** can help beget that culture, which then can reinforce and sustain those structures and processes in a virtuous cycle. But there must also be intentional (and early) efforts to build a learning culture directly. Indeed, without paying close attention to mindsets and hard but essential adaptive shifts, improvement efforts will ultimately fail to take hold.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, increasing numbers of practitioners are engaging in improvement efforts via models like networked improvement communities (NICs) (e.g., [Student Agency Improvement Community](#)) or design thinking (e.g., [Summit Public Schools](#)). More and more schools and districts are changing how they value and use data to inform, empower, enlighten, and improve efforts and results (e.g., [Kentucky Department of Education](#), [Long Beach Unified School District](#)). Research-practice partnerships at the district and state levels are beginning to grow, produce results, and add to the evidence base (e.g., [University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](#), [Tennessee Education Research Alliance](#)). And, as discussed in Part C of this paper, evidence-based approaches and systems of continuous improvement are central to some state ESSA plans.

2) In addition to the cultural piece, a thriving **learning system** requires the constant strengthening and integration of **three interrelated components**:

- The **research and development (R&D) infrastructure** generates and evaluates insights, evidence, tools, products, policies, and practices to best inform teaching and learning. It has mechanisms to surface issues and anomalies from practice; prioritize and coordinate research efforts; generate various forms of research evidence; develop research-based tools and strategies; and support ongoing translation and dissemination to engage with and empower professionals across the system.
- The **data infrastructure** makes it possible for every person with a stake in education to have the information needed to make the best decisions possible for the best outcomes possible. An effective data infrastructure collects, links together, and protects the critical data needed to answer end-users' questions, while safeguarding individuals' privacy. In addition, it provides transparency as to how the system is serving students while also providing timely, tailored, and appropriate information to stakeholders.
- The **continuous learning infrastructure** supports ongoing efforts in practice and policy to implement, refine, and provide feedback on what is generated by research, development, and practitioner-led innovation. This component of the learning system includes, at all levels, the built-in mechanisms that advance research-based, data-informed actions; guide reasoned adaptations of those actions to account for particular contexts; and feed further research, development, and movement to scale.

These three components of a learning system overlap significantly and engage with each other in dynamic, purposeful ways. Their interactions take various forms, arise through different entry points, and will often follow organic, context-specific pathways.

3) Our paper focuses particularly on unpacking the essential **elements of the continuous learning infrastructure** because this component of the overall learning system has, in our view, been least attended to in practice, currently poses the greatest barrier to scale, and also holds the greatest potential for impact in terms of revving the learning engine across all levels.<sup>4</sup> The continuous learning infrastructure is comprised of the following **three elements**:

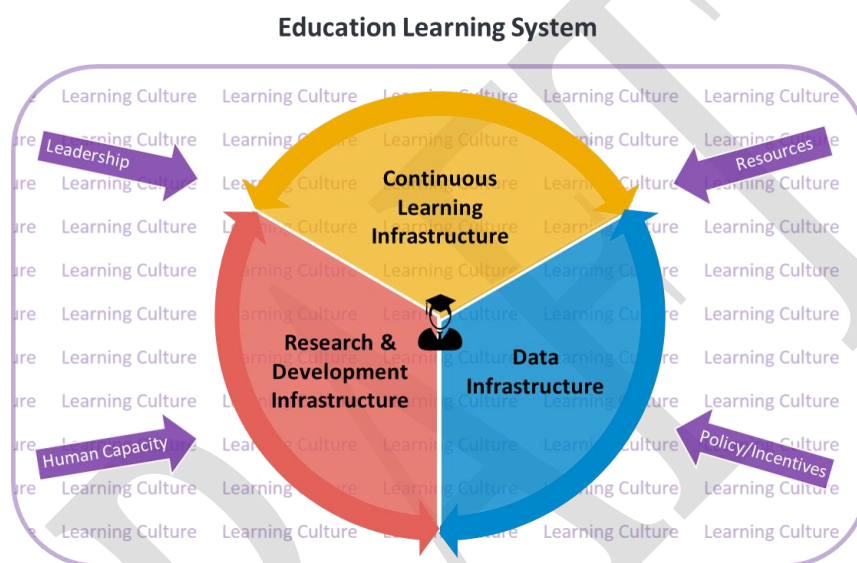
- **Organizational design** that aligns all aspects of education organizations with the learning system vision, including the structures, processes, capacity, and resources that prioritize and support continuous learning as a key part of each organization's and individual's work;
- **Continuous improvement methodologies** that are embedded within regular organizational and individual routines to guide learning and improvement efforts through appropriate processes of innovation, adaptation, implementation, evaluation, and review; and
- **Collaborating communities**, both formal and ad hoc, that prioritize informed, facilitated collaboration with an array of internal and external stakeholders, and advance and accelerate the learning beyond what is possible on an individual basis.

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<sup>4</sup> There are many models for engaging in thoughtful and systematic improvement efforts, from NICs to Six Sigma. All generally include some variation of an improvement cycle (e.g., the Plan-Do-Study-Act or PDSA cycle) but have important distinctive features that are better suited to particular contexts and actors. For more information on seven leading models and their application to education, see Paul LeMahieu, et al., "Working to improve: seven approaches to improvement science in education," *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 25 Issue: 1 (Feb. 27, 2017).

- 4) Each component of the learning system can be powered by **four key drivers** of change, which are themselves part of the learning system as well as early action areas that can help establish and strengthen each of the other learning system components. These drivers include a focus on **leadership** at all levels; **human capacity** with the necessary knowledge, skills, and mindsets; sustained **resources**, including not just money but also time; and the right mix of enabling **policies and incentives**.

Taken together, these four animating ideas create a vision for a continuously improving learning system in education—one that must be in place in and across each level of the education system:



*Figure 1:* This image summarizes our vision for a learning system that would exist at and across all levels of education. With students at the center and a learning culture permeating throughout, the learning system would deeply integrate the three main components and the four key drivers.

### C. **How Can We Leverage the Every Student Succeeds Act to Begin to Get There?**

At our convening, we began discussing how we can accelerate the shift to an education learning system. We only scratched the surface of generating, prioritizing, and sequencing the steps, and we plan to do more of that work moving forward. But there is a critical and immediate opportunity to begin or (in some cases) advance this shift: the implementation of ESSA.

We read ESSA<sup>5</sup> not only to support learning system approaches but also to explicitly call for states and districts to pivot from compliance to continuous learning:

- First, ESSA sets two broad goals: It requires that state standards align with **college and career ready expectations**, and it maintains and expands the federal focus on **equity**, with a particular focus on state actions that improve educational opportunities and outcomes for students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and other marginalized groups.
- From there, ESSA **returns authority back toward states and districts** (relative to the No Child Left Behind Act) to design the systems and strategies necessary to best achieve these goals, thus providing new room for leadership and innovation.
- However, ESSA also expects that state and local ESSA strategies be demonstrably **aligned with each state's college and career readiness and equity goals; based on research and evidence, where available; developed and implemented through significant, ongoing stakeholder engagement; and periodically reviewed and continuously improved over time.**

This is not just an aspirational read of ESSA. Continuous improvement—along with related learning system actions such as data collection and reporting, use of evidence, progress monitoring, and evaluation—is “baked in” throughout the statute, from state consolidated plans to local consolidated plans to school improvement plans. For example, ESSA Title I requires that state plans be “periodically reviewed and revised as necessary.” Title II requires states and districts to “use data and ongoing consultation...to continually update and improve” their strategies to support teachers and leaders. Even waivers under ESSA will not be approved unless the Secretary of Education determines that the state has presented a sufficient plan to “monitor and regularly evaluate the effectiveness” of the proposal to “ensure...continuous improvement.”

#### **Examples of ESSA Provisions Requiring Periodic Review and/or Continuous Improvement**



<sup>5</sup> For more about how to maximize ESSA's value and drive deeper learning outcomes for all students, see EducationCounsel's report, [Making the Most of ESSA: Twenty Questions for Developing and Implementing Strong State ESSA Plans That Advance College and Career Readiness and Equity](#).

In most if not all state and local contexts, the move toward a learning system represents a significant shift that will have to take hold culturally and systemically over time, even with these federal nudges. There is no magical light switch to flip here. Indeed, the perspective of one leading healthcare expert at our convening helps put the magnitude of the shift in perspective. Despite the fact that healthcare is widely considered to be far ahead of education in embracing a learning system approach, this expert estimated the health care system is still only 10% of where it ultimately needs to be.

But rather than feel paralyzed by the challenge, states, districts, and schools have a number of opportunities (and responsibilities) to get started in their ESSA planning and implementation and then to grow and continuously improve the learning system itself.

### ***State Spotlight: Tennessee***

Tennessee is one of several states that exemplifies in its approach to ESSA implementation a focus on the movement from compliance toward the purposeful development of learning systems at all levels. According to the [Tennessee Department of Education's \(TDOE's\) approved ESSA plan](#):

"In 2013, the TDOE underwent systemic reorganization.... This reorganization signaled a **shift in mindset from strict compliance to one of continuous improvement and support....**" (p. 28 (emphasis added))

"[TDOE] is committed to supporting districts through continuous improvement practices. Our system of performance management is not viewed through individual, categorical areas but in a more comprehensive manner to align with the department's philosophy and organizational structure...." (p. 133)

This approach includes support from TDOE to districts in terms of planning, setting targets, analyzing data, conducting interim reviews, providing feedback, and rewarding progress with earned autonomy. (p. 134) According to the plan (pp. 134-40), these efforts will be supported through several mechanisms, including:

- Centers of Regional Excellence, which are the primary mechanism of TA to districts;
- Networked Improvement Communities, which "join[] the discipline of improvement science with the capacities of networks to foster innovation and social learning in an effort to improve student outcomes";
- ePlan, which provides an online mechanism for districts and schools to develop, submit, and revise their plans;
- District Strategies Reports, which present a series of targeted strategies that TDOE believes can help districts and schools move toward greater success; and
- Tennessee Education Research Alliance, through which TDOE will work with Vanderbilt University to generate timely, accessible research findings to inform education leaders.

The following are examples of some **key entry points in ESSA** for helping advance the shift from compliance to continuous learning **at each level of the system (state, district, school)** as well as three additional **cross-cutting entry points** where ESSA implementation can help strengthen the components of a learning system more broadly. We have also included initial examples of how some states are planning to take advantage of these opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

#### **A. Continuous Learning at the State Level: *Periodic Review of State Plans***

At this time, all states have submitted their initial plans for ESSA implementation, and most state plans have been approved by the U.S. Department of Education. ESSA requires states to “periodically review[] and revise[]” their ESSA plans “to reflect changes in the State’s strategies and programs.” Leading states can establish and implement ongoing cycles of review and improvement that collect and review data from numerous sources (e.g., student data systems, feedback loops from the field, stakeholder engagement) and then make reasoned decisions about how to adjust strategies moving forward. This is especially important given the quick timeline that states had to draft their plans across so many substantive areas. Rather than hope initial plans were “right,” states will be better served by taking a learning posture toward continuously improving how they implement ESSA over time. This is in many ways about effective project management, and requires the state to establish dedicated structures and staffing for implementation and regular review in key ESSA policy areas (e.g., accountability); set clear benchmarks and build cycles and processes to collect data and information to help raise up potential challenges and improvements; and prioritize opportunities for collaboration in data analysis and continuous learning including across state education agency offices, with local districts, and in partnership with other critical stakeholders.

- In its ESSA plan, the [District of Columbia](#) committed to creating an “accountability governance structure” to “ensure ongoing examination and refinement” of its new set of accountability indicators and to consider potential metrics to use in the future. (p. 25) The District’s commitment to continuous improvement of its new plan includes technical working groups, feedback loops, consultation with key stakeholders, and public transparency. The plan even includes a specific pledge to consider how to add high school growth as a measure by the end of the 2018-19 school year.

#### **B. Continuous Learning at the District Level: *LEA Plan Templates & Approval Process***

While much of the ESSA focus to date has been on the development of state plans, a key focus now is on districts developing their local ESSA plans. States have wide latitude in designing what must be included in local plans and how the state will review and ultimately approve those plans. Further, ESSA requires local plans to be periodically reviewed and revised as appropriate. This provides a rich opportunity for states committed to building a learning system to embed continuous learning in meaningful ways. For example, states can ask districts to articulate how they will rely on evidence generated by the R&D infrastructure, collect an array of actionable data, and engage in cycles of continuous improvement. During the review process, states can ask districts questions less focused on compliance and more on learning: “What will you do with these federal funds? Why did you choose those particular strategies?”

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<sup>6</sup> For more on specific ESSA opportunities for driving a learning system approach, see Results for America’s (RFA) [Leverage Points](#) paper. More recently, RFA published an [analysis](#) of all the state ESSA plans, highlighting states that took advantage of each opportunity in ESSA to advance a learning system approach. It is worth noting that the federal consolidated state plan template did not require states to speak to each potential leverage point; thus, there are certainly more promising practices underway than are mentioned in this brief or RFA’s scan.



How will you know if they are improving outcomes? What process will you use to adjust your approach depending on what you learn?”

- [New Jersey](#)’s ESSA plan adopts a learning orientation to developing, reviewing, and approving local plans. The process will incorporate “needs assessment, including data analysis; plan development, including exploration and selection of evidence-based practices and outcomes; plan implementation; and evaluation of implementation and outcomes.” (p. 34) By focusing the local planning process on identifying and meeting student needs while also working to streamline overlapping state processes, New Jersey will help districts avoid the common misstep of making federal compliance the driving force behind district planning.

### C. Continuous Learning at the School Level: *School Improvement Plans & Systems of Professional Learning*

There are several powerful opportunities under ESSA to advance a learning system approach at the school level. For example, ESSA requires states to make annual accountability determinations and identify lowest-performing schools for either comprehensive or targeted support and improvement, for which ESSA provides significant federal funding. Those **school improvement plans** *must* include evidence-based actions and be informed in part by a needs assessment and a review of resource allocations. Further, ESSA requires that the plans are monitored and periodically reviewed. States embracing a learning orientation can create school improvement plan applications/templates that require clear processes and resources for periodic review and continuous improvement, including progress monitoring, feedback loops, data analysis, stakeholder engagement, and a sequenced set of performance measures.

Also, ESSA Title II and Section 8002 require that funds used for **professional learning** support activities that “are sustained..., intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom focused.” Title II also strengthens the focus on **principal leadership**, including a new, optional three-percent set aside. All of this reinforces the need to shift mindsets and school design toward making each school function as a learning system focused on innovation, evaluation, collaboration, and continuous improvement, including but not limited to the lowest-performing schools mentioned above.<sup>7</sup>

- [New Mexico](#)’s approach incorporates data, evidence, and continuous improvement throughout the school improvement process. The state plans to take into account not only front-end considerations such as a comprehensive needs assessment, data and root cause analyses, and the selection of evidence-based interventions, but also mid- and back-end efforts to establish clear metrics, track progress throughout implementation, gather actionable feedback, and evaluate the impact of school improvement efforts. (pp. 102-106)

### D. Cross-Cutting Opportunities to Strengthen the Learning System Itself

#### i. *Data Collection & Reporting*

As described above, data are critical to continuous learning. ESSA has many data collection and reporting requirements (including new ones like school-level per-pupil funding), but states committed to continuous learning should go beyond the minimum accountability requirements to also collect and

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<sup>7</sup> For more information, see [A New Vision for Professional Learning](#) by Learning Forward and EducationCounsel.



make available a wide range of data that can inform improvement at all levels while protecting student privacy. Indeed, one of the most powerful levers a state can pull is to ensure actors throughout the system have timely access to stable, appropriate, interoperable, secure, accessible, and accurate data systems. These systems should provide user-friendly visualizations of data including not just lagging indicators of student progress such as annual summative test scores, but also leading indicators of performance and critical data related to implementation.<sup>8</sup>

- [New York](#) will develop a data dashboard that will create a “transparent and intuitive way to assess the performance of schools in relation to a variety of metrics that include both those that are used for accountability and those that measure important aspects of schooling, but are not appropriate to be used for high-stakes decisions.” (p. 69-70) To support more effective school improvement plans, New York implements a data-rich needs assessment (the [Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness](#)) that “serves as the foundation of the improvement cycle.” (p. 86) It also plans to help districts and schools make strategic use of “multiple sources of data” that the state maintains, including the ability to compare data across peer schools and districts. (p. 95)

## ii. *Use of Evidence & Evidence Building*

ESSA makes an unprecedented commitment to evidence-based decision making and to further building the evidence base. The law defines “evidence-based” to include four tiers of evidence depending on the rigor of the supporting studies and then applies that term more than 60 times throughout the law. Although many of those provisions do not *require* the use of evidence-based approaches, ESSA mandates that all school support and improvement plans include evidence-based interventions. ESSA also requires that any interventions meeting the lowest, fourth tier of the definition be subject to “ongoing efforts to examine the effects” of the intervention. States committed to building a learning system can help districts and schools make thoughtful selections of evidence-based approaches across ESSA titles. They also should establish systems and structures to evaluate the impact of both proven and innovative strategies and thus add to our collective knowledge of what works, for whom, and under which circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

- To help schools reduce chronic absenteeism (a new state accountability indicator under ESSA), [Ohio](#) is partnering with [Proving Ground](#), an initiative of Harvard University’s Center for Education Policy Research, to “help schools and districts implement quick turnaround evaluation...to provide evidence that strategies are meeting evidence-based requirements. This work...is designed to help build long-term capacity for research and evaluation.” (p. 53) Ohio’s approach will not only help improve implementation in studied schools through continuous improvement cycles, but also build the evidence base for how best to reduce chronic absenteeism in other schools throughout the state.

<sup>8</sup> For more information, see the Data Quality Campaign’s [resource bank](#).

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see RFA’s [Evidence in Education Lab](#) resources and the [Better Evidence, Better Choices, Better Schools](#) report by the Center for American Progress and Knowledge Alliance.

### iii. ***Ongoing Stakeholder Engagement***

ESSA requires broad and deep engagement with stakeholders as part of developing state plans, local ESSA plans, and school improvement plans, but there are fewer mandates around *ongoing* stakeholder engagement. Yet, states, districts, and schools can only drive continuous learning and make necessary adjustments if they have well-functioning feedback loops in place to supplement the administrative data they collect. From school leaders and educators to students and their families to community groups and businesses, education leaders should take advantage of the “running start” of the ESSA plan development processes to continue having regular, authentic stakeholder engagement. This includes both regular outreach to public constituencies (the “grassroots”) through communications, surveys, request for comments, etc., and deeper engagement of leading representatives (the “grasstops”) through more embedded systems, such as task forces, advisory groups, convenings, etc.<sup>10</sup>

- After managing a robust engagement process during the plan development phase, [Tennessee](#) made a strong commitment to continuing to work with stakeholders throughout ESSA implementation. The state describes three key goals of this work: “inform our work as we identify new state priorities and needs in future years”; “result in feedback on state programming uses of ESSA program funds”; and “hold the department accountable for implementing our plan with fidelity—knowing that in instances where updates or revisions are necessary, these will not be done in isolation.” (p. 27)

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<sup>10</sup> For more information, see Partners for Each and Every Child’s [resource bank](#) and CCSSO’s [Let’s Get this Conversation Started](#) and [related resources](#).