

## ESSA Implementation Requires Accountable Leadership

Now that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has become law, K–12 leaders will get what they've wanted—more flexibility. But to these happy folks, former state education official Joe Frey says “be careful what you wish for!” During his career, Frey often longed for flexibility with federal mandates but admitted that he'd be less than honest if he didn't use them to keep constituency groups at bay. “Federal regulations require it,” was often a go-to phrase. However, Frey warns that under ESSA, school leaders will be held more accountable than ever for closing achievement gaps and improving education equity.

Putting his SEA “hat” back on, Frey provides five tips for K–12 leaders as they navigate accountability systems with fewer federal directives.

### 1. Commit to school improvement, not models.

School turnarounds are complex and have few successful examples to follow, but Frey says not to allow frustration to inhibit thoughtful policies that guide school district efforts and effectively allocate resources to get the job done. Instead, look at flexibility as providing opportunity for creativity. ESSA allows educators to work on root causes of underperformance and apply strategies and resources to solve problems.

One warning though—for every reformer claiming their model will address all your needs, Frey encourages K–12 leaders to understand how the model will impact parents, teachers, students, and the resources needed to sustain it. It's not just about signing a check.

### 2. Standards are for students, not politicians.

Standards must clearly articulate what students need to know and

be able to do, and shouldn't reflect political talking points. Frey says that “if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there” shouldn't be your motto. Educators have a real stake in getting standards right, as they are the foundation for creating curricula to prepare students for college/careers. Standards also need to provide a roadmap for teachers to guide classroom instruction and support appropriate assessments that measure student mastery.

### 3. There is no “rock to hide behind” in the digital age.

Technology makes it easier to compare state data for expected student growth, graduation rates, college remediation rates, NAEP scores, and other metrics. States must report key performance metrics by student subgroups as under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), so performance gaps for special needs, English language learners, and low-income students will be even more in the spotlight. Frey notes that transparency is here to stay, so oversimplifying accountability systems won't do anyone any good.

### 4. If it's not working, stop.

Frey recalls that he often questioned whether he really wanted to know if an approach to a problem was actually working under NCLB as a state official. If it wasn't, he was more worried about the implications for his education department's policies, finances, and credibility and thought it was easier to just move onto the next problem. But under ESSA, states can implement innovative approaches, measure results, and probe why certain strategies are/aren't effective without exposing

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districts to draconian consequences for not succeeding. Schools are no longer tied to a specific model, so just focus on outcomes. Create an ongoing system to monitor and evaluate progress, make adjustments as needed, and avoid one-size-fits-all solutions. Frey says that some approaches will be less effective in one LEA than another, but ESSA allows you to gather evidence about why different strategies are needed and provides the flexibility to adapt and move in a new direction.

### 5. Teacher evaluation is not the enemy.

Teacher evaluations ignited a maelstrom of suspicion, distrust, and fear among teachers under NCLB. However, ESSA allows school leaders to set aside standard algorithms and develop more effective ways to measure teacher performance and their impact on classroom instruction, student growth, and achievement. Now, Frey says that SEAs have a real opportunity to create innovative approaches designed to support teacher development while holding them accountable for student achievement and success.

*Adapted from, “Why Can't the Feds Just Leave Us Alone and Let Us Do Our Jobs?!” by Joe Frey, Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC), November 2015, [ctacusa.com/blog](http://ctacusa.com/blog).*

