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With the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states can seize the opportunity to better align their school improvement plans with current research findings about child development and early learning from birth to third grade. Historically, school accountability systems in the United States tend to *start* measuring success at third grade, ignoring everything that came before even though children begin developing critical language, literacy, and numeracy skills and foundational content knowledge long before they reach third grade. States and school districts across the country are beginning to fix this problem, and focus more of their school improvement and achievement gap closure strategies on the early years. <http://ccsso.org/resource-library/birth-grade-3-indicator-framework-opportunities-integrate-early-childhood-essa>

The *Birth to Grade 3 Indicator Framework: Opportunities to Integrate Early Childhood in ESSA, CCSSO/CEELO Toolkit* (B-3 Indicator Toolkit) summarizes the evidence supporting an early learning approach to school improvement. Then, we explain how early learning could fit within the framework of state ESSA plans. Finally, we review a list of potential indicators of access, academics, and engagement in early childhood education and considerations for states to integrate those indicators into their plans.

Embedding Early Learning in ESSA State Plans

In the B-3 Indicator Toolkit we explore what ESSA requires and allows, and outline some action steps for states to consider in each of these areas. Four broad areas of state plans present promising opportunities for increasing focus on early learning as a key part of school improvement. These areas offer a framework for how states can prioritize early learning in their state ESSA plans. Each of the four indicators represents areas (or strategies) of the state plan that are complementary, and to maximize the impact of any one area, states should align their approaches across all four.

Opportunity 1: Meaningfully differentiating schools

ESSA requires states to develop formal, high-stakes systems to identify low-performing schools and schools with large achievement gaps, based on at least five indicators. While ESSA prescribes some standards and boundaries for these accountability systems, the measures are largely left to states. But ESSA clearly signaled that states should move beyond a focus on test scores in reading and math to meaningfully differentiate all schools by including other indicators of school quality or student success. The school quality indicator and others are most amenable to addressing early learning.

Opportunity 2: Interventions and Supports for Low-Performing Schools

Once a state differentiation system identifies schools in need of support, states will oversee school district improvement processes and provide general support to all schools and districts with low-performing schools. In that capacity, states should help schools and districts identify strengths and weaknesses via a comprehensive needs assessment, and then create effective improvement plans. Examples of how early learning could be addressed in supports for low-performing schools, including needs assessments, exit criteria, state support and funding, and special school categories are described in the B-3 Indicator Toolkit.

Opportunity 3: Transparency and Public Reporting

ESSA requires states to report a wide variety of data in publicly available school report cards. These report cards are a crucial vehicle to define school quality and engage the public on the attributes of a high-quality school, including high-quality early learning experiences.

Opportunity 4: School District Accountability and Improvement

While ESSA sets a minimum framework for school accountability, states and school districts have the option to look beyond compliance as they design school accountability and improvement systems. Many decisions on resource allocation, goal setting, and improvement strategy around early learning are made at the district level, not by individual schools, and state accountability systems could take this into account. The B-3 Indicator Toolkit identifies specific district-focused approaches that could address early learning, including district accountability systems, district continuous improvement systems and performance management systems.

Early Learning Indicators

Many indicators are available that states could use to measure and encourage high-quality early learning, some of which would not require additional data collection. Potential early learning indicators states might consider are grouped into three categories, which represent different aspects of educational quality:

1. **Access indicators**, which measure student access to learning experiences both in and out of school;
2. **Academic indicators**, which measure instructional quality or student learning outcomes; and
3. **Engagement indicators**, which measure school climate, environment, and/or culture.

The B-3 Indicator Toolkit dives deeply into 13 potential early learning indicators that represent all three indicator types, and focus on Pre-K to third grade. Each includes a rationale as to why and how an indicator might be valuable, selected key research and resources, potential measures, and examples of states and school districts already using these indicators in various ways.

Early Learning Indicators, by Type of Indicator (click on an indicator name to jump to more detailed information about that indicator)		
ACCESS	ENGAGEMENT	ACADEMIC
Chronic Absenteeism	Chronic Absenteeism	Teacher Qualification/Effectiveness
Student Discipline	Student Discipline	Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Results
Teacher Absenteeism	Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)	Teacher Observations, Instructional Quality Reviews, Teacher/student Interaction Measures
Teacher Qualification/Effectiveness	School Climate Measures	Formative or Diagnostic Assessments of Academic Progress
Access to Resources	Social and Emotional Learning	
Access to Full Day Kindergarten		
Access to Publicly-Funded Pre-K		
Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)		

Conclusion

The early years of child development offer a still-untapped lever for states to address achievement gaps before they start to grow, and to accelerate school improvement efforts with evidence-based interventions. While there are political, fiscal, and technical challenges to doing so, there are a variety of steps states can take today, aided by the flexibility and opportunities presented by ESSA. States can build bridges among state and local education agencies to enhance alignment between early education providers and K-12 schools, and to create more high-quality learning opportunities for all children, regardless of age. CCSSO and CELO look forward to supporting states throughout this process.

If you are interested in technical assistance to use or adapt the *Birth to Grade 3 Indicator Framework: Opportunities to Integrate Early Childhood in ESSA*, *CCSSO/CELO Toolkit* or have any questions please contact Rolf Grafwallner at rolf.grafwallner@ccsso.org or Lori Connors Tadros at ltadros@nieer.org