



Issue #4: Certification of Educational Leaders

ESSA Background

On December 10, 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law with strong bipartisan support as the latest reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. ESSA is notable for devolving authority to states, emphasizing the use of evidence-based school interventions, and providing states greater flexibility to design broader school accountability systems while maintaining student performance goals.

Importantly, ESSA offers a renewed focus on school leadership and recognizes the impact of leaders on school improvement and effective instruction. The law provides states and districts new opportunities to fund school leadership and explicitly acknowledges leadership as a legitimate target of educational-improvement activities.

Under the law, states were required to submit a plan to the U.S. Department of Education detailing the goals, strategies, and funding priorities for their education system. To gain greater insight into the treatment of school leadership in state education systems, the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), with the support of state-based review teams, conducted a comprehensive review of the 52 ESSA plans (50 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico).

The Significance of Leader Certification

Effective organizational leaders possess credentials to signal that they have the skills, knowledge, and experience required to be a successful leader in their profession. School leaders are no different. Thus, in order to become a principal, candidates first must become certified. Certification systems vary by state. In most states, to be considered for licensure,

candidates must (a) possess a minimum number of years of teaching experience, and/or (b) hold a master's degree in educational leadership or a closely related field, and/or (c) complete an accredited/approved preparation program.

Quality school leaders are second only to teachers in ensuring student success in the classroom. Additionally, research has shown that knowledge and experience *alongside* pedagogy are needed in order to be an effective principal. Therefore, principal certification systems that carefully certify those candidates who have demonstrated mastery of the skills necessary to be an effective principal are a critical component to improving teaching and student learning.

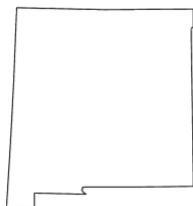
“Our theory of action is that if we effectively support the administration of the teacher tests and build out licensure policies that set a high bar for educators, then educators will be better positioned to affect students on day one.”

– Massachusetts’ ESSA Plan

What Did UCEA’s Analysis Find?

UCEA’s 52-plan analysis determined that 38 out of 52 plans (73%) intend to use Title II, Part A funds to support their state’s certification and licensure system.

LEAs with low-performing schools as identified by the accountability system. These partnerships will identify and train mentor teachers and leaders who work alongside preservice educators prior to certification.



New Mexico stakeholders expressed their desire to have the state's principal certification system improved. In response to this request, New Mexico has elected a portion of their Title II-A dollars

to improve principal certification and training through "establishing innovative principal and school leader programs and enhancing accountability for existing principal and school leader programs."

Implications

Out of UCEA's six main focal areas of analysis, the fewest amount of states and territories intend to use Title II, Part A funds to improve licensure and certification systems. While slightly more than half do plan to use Title II, Part A funds to improve educator certification and licensure systems, states and territories appear to be focusing more of their efforts on improving professional development and preparation programs.

UCEA's qualitative analysis also observed few states included specific strategies related to improving licensure and certification within their ESSA plans. Rather, many states outlined their current certification and licensure system and/or spoke about the desire to improve their system without describing specific details.

This finding is particularly notable because licensure and certification systems is an area strongly within the purview of state responsibility. States have the statutory authority to issue licenses to individuals to serve as principals. Leveraging this authority can be a high-impact tool for states seeking to enhance the quality of school leaders. In fact, Illinois enacted a fundamental reform to the state's principal licensure system in 2014 which holds promise for ensuring the quality of the state's school leaders.

References

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This brief is part of the UCEA ESSA Briefs Series. The intent of the series is to examine the treatment given to school leadership in ESSA state plans. Under the combined leadership of Marcy Reedy and Trevor A. Doiron, the series was made possible through a collaborative research project with contributions made by UCEA policy associates, headquarters staff, and other ESSA Plan reviewers. Based at the University of Virginia, UCEA is an international consortium of research universities with graduate-level leadership programs. UCEA members are marked by a distinguishing commitment and capacity to lead the field of educational leadership and administration.

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