



Illinois State Board of Education

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FACT SHEET

Flexibility under the NCLB Waiver

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It's a new school year and in many ways, a new day in terms of teaching and learning to higher standards as well as a new day in accountability with a new assessment system, new teacher and principal evaluations and the development of a Multiple Measures Index (MMI) that will make its debut on school and district report cards in fall 2015.

Educators, parents and community members have long voiced concerns about the punitive language, sanctions and one-size-fits-all expectations of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), also known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). At the same time, many agreed that NCLB helped put a much-needed spotlight on student performance data and ensured that schools share performance metrics publicly to keep local districts and states accountable, especially in terms of educating our most vulnerable students.

In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education announced that states could request flexibility from specific NCLB mandates that stifle reform, but only if states transition students, teachers and schools to a system of college-and career-ready standards, differentiated accountability and classroom reforms to support effective instruction and school leadership. At the time, Illinois was well on its way to implementing all those changes and more.

For the past couple of years, schools have worked to align their curriculum and assessments to meet new, higher learning standards that encourage a greater depth of knowledge in English Language Arts and Mathematics and emphasize critical thinking, problem solving and sharp verbal and written skills. Note that under these new standards, teachers still write the lesson plans and determine the best instructional approaches to reach students.

Read ISBE's full plan under its ESEA flexibility waiver [here](#).

A new state testing system will be administered this school year to third- through eighth-graders and high school students to gauge how well students have mastered these new learning standards at each grade level and whether they're on track for college and careers. Illinois received its federal waiver in spring 2014 and now will work with districts and schools to report more meaningful data about school improvement. Multiple measures will be used to determine school and district effectiveness, and these measures

will help the state promote effective teaching and leadership while also implementing the best intervention practices for the neediest schools.

Schools will be asked to meet state and federal accountability benchmarks that also go beyond test scores. Under this new lens, schools will be measured by multiple measures, such as how much academic growth students are making and how well educators are able to narrow achievement gaps or improve graduation rates. All the while, the focus will be on showing improvement, recognizing that even though students and schools vary in their current performance levels, all must show progress. The Illinois plan calls for each school cutting their specific achievement gaps by half and also reducing by half the percent of students not meeting standards over a period of six years.

Districts will receive support services, from general to more intensive, depending on their need from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), their Regional Offices of Education or Intermediate Service Center and the [Illinois Center for School Improvement](#). Those schools and districts that need the most support will undergo comprehensive changes and be listed in “priority” or “focus” status for at least three years.

Districts will enjoy more flexibility under this more meaningful accountability system. Specifically, districts are free from rules that regulate how much of Title I funds must go toward specific interventions. Instead, district leaders now have the freedom to apply federal funds to the programs and services they determine will best help their students learn and show improvement.

It’s important to note that Illinois has been working to raise the bar for teacher and leader effectiveness with policy changes that focus on ensuring that educators meet some basic performance criteria before they enter their education preparation programs and that principals are experienced as instructional leaders, not simply building managers. These efforts have received wide local and national acclaim and complement the flexibility waiver, which calls for a gradual rollout of comprehensive teacher evaluations.

Under state law, districts can choose the best assessments, from a pool of national, state, district-wide or classroom-specific tests to measure student growth as part of teacher evaluation. Illinois, in fact, did not receive the waiver until this year due to the fact that state education officials were not willing to move up our timeline on implementing the new teacher evaluation requirements. We stand behind the timeline that was approved in state law calling for a gradual, phased-in application of such evaluations until 2016-17, when student growth must be a part of all teacher evaluations. Under law, the state requires that 25 percent of teacher evaluations are tied to student growth during the first two years of implementation and then increase to at least 30 percent in the following years. Districts can pass policy allowing student growth to be a larger factor, but state law still allows teacher practice to make up the majority of a teacher’s evaluation. We believe that a strong, comprehensive and reasonable evaluation system best supports principals and teachers as they do their important work with our more than 2 million public school students in classrooms each day.

These changes mean that we should no longer be hearing talk of “failing” schools or schools making “Adequate Yearly Progress.” Instead, we will focus on how well educators, schools and states are doing in terms of helping our students grow academically and ultimately graduate prepared to succeed in college and careers.

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