



Bringing ESSA Title IVA to Life: How School Districts Are Investing Student Support & Academic Enrichment Funding

Memo of Preliminary Findings

by

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Summary of Preliminary Findings

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the most recent iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), previously known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In writing and passing ESSA, Congress updated an outdated and broken NCLB, that had come to be widely perceived as heavy-handed and too focused on test scores, too restrictive about accountability, and filled with too many top-down and ill-fitting policy mandates.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle designed ESSA to return decision-making authority to education professionals at the state and local levels, and to recognize that education policy must support the education and development of the total child by providing support for a broader set of educational subjects and for non-academic programming and services.

Lawmakers designed Title IV of ESSA, the Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) program, to help serve those broader objectives. This memo provides an initial review of the first nationwide survey of schools, asking how schools plan on spending their Title IV Part A funds in support of the law's broader objectives.

Title IV, Part A: Background

Title IV of ESSA, the Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) program, is a flexible funding block grant focused on the work of ensuring students and schools have access to the programs that support safe and healthy students, provide well-rounded education, and expand the use of technology in schools. Between NCLB and ESSA, Title IV transformed from a collection of small, stand-alone siloed programs that had been all but zeroed out (ultimately totaling less than \$300 million) into a flexible funding block grant, allocated via formula to states and available to all schools, authorized at \$1.6 billion.

The program has broad support from education leaders and practitioners and is perhaps best captured in this elevator pitch submitted in response to this survey:

No two schools are the same. Our need is not your need, but both needs are relevant to each specific demographic and climate. Increased flexibility increases the likelihood of spending with efficacy. I know you don't always trust me to do the best thing for my kids (although I am confused as to why), but proximity to the need is important to weeding out appropriate supports and solutions. I appreciate your support of my school, and I understand your desire to earmark some funds for specific needs that we share nationally, but I need some spending flexibility if I am to always match support to the need.

Relatively simple in design, ESSA Title IV allocates flexible block grant funding to each state based on the ESSA Title I funding formula, which targets federal funding based on need, where schools and states with a

"The availability of Title IV funds has allowed the school district to help build student success in areas that were not allowed with other Title funds. A well, rounded education involves much more than the basic core courses. Character building programs, assistance with AP fees, fine arts training....these are but a few of the area that we have seen success. With additional funds, we would be able to continue to provide a broader, well rounded experience for our students."

higher share of students in poverty receive greater funding. Funding flows from the federal to the state and the state to the local level in amounts that are proportional to the distribution of Title I funds. Any school district receiving more than \$30,000 is required to conduct a needs assessment and submit an application to its state educational agency describing how the district will spend not less than 20 percent of its grant on safe/healthy school initiatives, not less than 20 percent on well-rounded education, and at least a portion on the effective use of technology, with a 15 percent cap on the section's funding for purchasing "technology infrastructure" (as defined in the law).

Title IV was a central element of ESSA's focus on expanding the scope of federal education policy beyond test scores and had strong, bipartisan support. Congress paired the flexible, broad program with a significant increase in funding authority, quadrupling the potential funding in the program to \$1.6 billion. ESSA was first implemented in the 2017-18 school year, which was funded with federal fiscal year 2017 (FY17). FY17 funding for ESSA Title IV totaled \$400 million. A bi-partisan vote to provide more funding overall in FY18 led to a significant increase in funding at the U.S. Dept. of Education, and included a \$700 million increase to ESSA, bringing Title IV funding to \$1.1 billion.

Preliminary Results:

AASA, The School Superintendents Association, the National Association of Federal Program Administrators, and Whiteboard advisors spearheaded a national survey of school districts in May 2018. To date there are more than 622 respondents describing how they will use the new funding opportunity.

When asked if they expect an increase in Title IV funding for the 2018-19 school year, 41 percent of respondents replied 'Yes' and 59 percent replied 'No'. (Q1) Initial data runs on ESSA Title IV allocations, accounting for approximately 13,200 school districts, indicate that even when funded at \$1.1 billion, less than one-third of all schools will be funded at a level exceeding \$30,000, meaning they will have more autonomy over how the dollars are spent, will not be required to conduct the needs assessment, and could invest their full allocation into one of the broad funding buckets. More than 5,500 districts would receive an allocation less than or equal to \$10,000; more than 6,800 would receive an allocation less than or equal to \$15,000; more than 7,700 receive an allocation less than or equal to \$20,000, and just over 8,900 would receive \$29,000 or less, under the \$30,000 threshold.

Digging deeper into how districts are spending—and plan to spend—these dollars, respondents reported:

- When Congress created Title IV, Part A, lawmakers folded prior federal investments into the grant, including the AP Exam fee program, safe and drug-free schools, programming, school counseling, and physical education. When asked if they planned to use federal funds to support any of these items, respondents reported safe and drug free schools (63 percent); school counseling (43 percent); other (37 percent); AP/IB/CIE exam fees (27 percent); and physical education (17 percent). (Q2)
- When asked to identify specific investments within the well-rounded education opportunities of Title IV, respondents reported: science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (61 percent); social emotional learning (SEL) (53 percent); college/career counseling (37 percent); music/arts (32 percent); accelerated learning programs such as AP/IB (28 percent); high school redesign with dual or concurrent enrollment (22 percent); foreign language instruction (12 percent); other (8 percent); civics instruction (7 percent); environmental education (7 percent); and none (4 percent). (Q3)

Our school is an urban school with 75% poverty. The more we are able to support STEM to give them insight of science, technology, engineering and math, allows them to dream of getting a well-paying job. We also have to support Trauma education for our staff and students. Most teachers come from a middle to upper class homes. That is not the case for most of our students. We need to be continuously aware of where our students come from, to give them tools for being prepared for a 21st century labor market. Our students need our support with emotional needs while receiving a well-rounded education.

- When asked to identify specific investments within the safe and healthy student opportunities of Title IV, respondents reported; positive behavioral interventions (61 percent); safe and supportive learning environments (54 percent); violence prevention, crisis management and conflict resolution (45 percent); school based health and mental health services (45 percent); trauma-informed classroom management (37 percent); school safety equipment (26 percent); preventing use of alcohol/tobacco/marijuana (23 percent); none (5 percent); and other (5 percent). (Q4)
- When asked to identify specific investments within the effective use of technology opportunities of Title IV, respondents reported: implement system-wide approaches to support teacher professional development/collaboration (55 percent); implement blended learning strategies (44 percent); buy digital services (42 percent); develop or provide personalized learning pathways for students (37 percent); discover, adapt and share high quality resources (23 percent); none (11 percent); and other (5 percent). (Q5)
- When asked if their district's work to plan and prepare for Title IV programming includes efforts to ensure the activities, strategies, or interventions are evidence based, 95 percent responded 'yes'. (Q7)
- ESSA Title IV comes with program transferability, meaning districts have the option of spending their Title IV dollars for Title I, II or III purposes. This option makes sense when Title IV allocations are very minimal and/or are more likely to experience a higher return on investment when leveraged in coordination with other Title funding. More succinctly, when Title IV funding is so low as to not support full and appropriate implementation of supports or services, districts may transfer the money to Title I, II and/or III, to complement that work. More than three quarters (76 percent) of respondents indicated they do NOT plan to transfer any of their Title IV dollars to Titles I, II or III. Sixteen percent indicated they may roll the money into Title I; 7 percent indicated they would roll the money into Title II; and 0 percent indicated they would roll the money into Title III. (Q8)

Looking Forward:

There is broad support for ESSA Title IV in schools across the country and educators remain optimistic that Congress will continue to support and fund the program, and work to reach the fully authorized amount of \$1.6 billion. Their support for the program is tempered by the concern about Congress' inability—or lack of willingness—to continue to adequately and appropriately fund ESSA Title IV. This influences how they plan and decide how they use the funds, and whether they spend on one-time investments or plan for long-term sustained federal support.

Educators are familiar with federal funding tensions, including funding caps and a hyper-focus on debt and deficit reduction which disproportionately impact the portion of federal funding available for schools. As such, school districts are balancing their support for the funding and interest in investing it with common sense experience and a pragmatism that comes with the responsibility of having to balance their local school district budget in both the short and long term.

Districts are grateful for the additional funding, however, the instability of the funding is a huge obstruction to making meaningful, sustained, and institutional progress. Not knowing if you will have the funds from year to year means that most districts look for one shot programs. If we knew this funding was guaranteed for three to five years, then it would allow us to plan, hire staff, and find ways to institutionalize programs in terms of training, etc.”

The data from this survey indicate a strong need for and commitment to putting this money to good and immediate use for the myriad intents the program supports. Survey respondents detailed their interest across all three of the intended investment areas, all of which complement more traditional academic experience and support the development and needs of the total child, beyond annual testing. Educators are deeply appreciative of the significant funding increase allocated in FY18—in part catalyzed by the Parkland, FL school massacre—and made countless references to the opportunity to provide mental health supports, services, programming and professional development for students and staff in the open-ended survey items.

Mental health, such as physical health and academic health, is not a one-time investment. It is a process that spans years for any individual, and it will be a constant and persistent need of schools. Laying the foundation of support to allow state and local education agencies to proactively and appropriately plan to offer critical mental health supports—like those afforded under ESSA Title IV Part A—makes it absolutely critical that ESSA Title IV remain both a policy and funding priority in federal education policy and that Congress work to fund ESSA Title IV Part A at its fully authorized, \$1.6 billion.

If your district has not yet responded to the survey, please take a few minutes to do so. Your insight will help Congress better understand the benefit of the program.

AASA, The School Superintendents Association, NAFEP, and Whiteboard Advisors conducted this nationwide survey in May/June 2018. The survey collected 622 responses from 40 states, two territories and the District of Columbia. Respondents reported job titles associated with school and district level leadership, including superintendent, federal program coordinator, principal, director, district administrator and business manager.