



**Every Student
Succeeds Act,
Aspirations
and School Voice**



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The purpose of this title is to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps.

— From the Statement of Purpose for Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act

All the titles (I-IX) of the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) begin with a similarly noble statement of purpose. The Quaglia Institute believes that a fair, equitable, and high quality education is necessary for each and every student to achieve their aspirations. Aspirations is the ability to dream and set goals for the future while being inspired in the present to reach those dreams. The future any of us wills or desires must be made by us in the present. In a society founded on ideals of freedom and fairness, every child, every person, deserves an opportunity to live out their aspirations. Our educational system, therefore, has a profound responsibility to equip young people and those who serve them with the resources necessary, whoever and wherever they are. We need to spend less time worrying about where students are *from* and more time helping them think about and work towards where they are *going*.

ESSA is the new educational law of the land in the United States. Though it does not call into question as many of the underlying assumptions of the inherited, industrial model of school as much as some would like, it does contain at least two breakthroughs in how we think about schooling. First, it returns a great deal of decision-making regarding educational policy to the States. Though it prescribes certain requirements that all States must adhere to (e.g., having programs for students with disabilities), it does not dictate how those requirements should be fulfilled in detail. States may develop their own implementation plans, so long as these include measurable objectives and goals.

Second, ESSA broadens the scope of what counts as an indicator of school quality or school success beyond academic achievement as measured by tests in language arts, mathematics, and other core disciplines. This positive development can be paraphrased as follows:

States must annually measure, for all students, not less than one indicator of school quality or student success that may include measures of—student engagement; educator engagement; student access to and completion of advanced coursework; post-secondary readiness; school climate and safety; and any other indicator the State chooses that meets the requirements of this clause.

It would seem logical to conclude that if a State *chooses* to measure student engagement, educator engagement, or school climate and safety, they need to take a further step. While not prescribed by ESSA, States should seek student and/or teacher voice in order to listen and learn from those in schools about whether they are engaged or not, or what their experience of the school's climate is. Adult perceptions of whether or not students are engaged or experiencing school climate positively may or may not be accurate. And a principal's judgment about whether or not teachers are engaged may or may not be on the mark. In our Quaglia School Voice surveys, we often see large gaps in perception between students', teachers' and administrators' views of these same phenomena.

In addition to listening and learning from students and teachers, we believe students and teachers should help lead improvement, not just be the beneficiaries of whatever improvements administrators, school boards, state officials, or policy makers deem advantageous to those they supervise or serve. Nationally, we know that just 46% of students and only 55% of teachers believe they have a voice in school. We also know that students who believe they have a voice are more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not have a voice. When teachers feel they have a voice they are more likely to believe they can make a difference than those who do not feel they have a voice. Think of the impact on school that simply taking seriously the voice of all students and teachers would have!

Putting these two advances—a return of decision-making to the States and an openness to other measures of school quality or success—together, we see that while States *must* include a measure of school quality or student success as part of their accountability systems, they have options besides student engagement, educator engagement, and school climate. There are three alternatives: student access to and completion of advanced course work, post-secondary readiness, and “any other indicator the State chooses that meets the requirements of this clause.” While this latter indicator is up for grabs, certainly access to and completion of advanced course work and post-secondary readiness can be measured without voice and, perhaps, more easily measured than engagement or climate. And though it is allowed, we must ask: How likely is it that a State will choose more than one indicator from this category?

We hope that States will take this as an opportunity to directly involve student and teacher voice in their school improvement accountability systems and plans. Even if States do not, we hope many districts and schools will see ESSA as an opportunity to add student and teacher engagement and school climate data to their improvement plans and to data walls covered in test scores. Many schools and districts have already taken these steps. They are paving the way for their States and for our country to reimagine school and move beyond the inherited, industrial model in which ESSA still seems slightly entangled. At the Quaglia Institute, we have seen time and again, the effectiveness of listening to, learning from, and leading with students and teachers. Student engagement improves, educator engagement improves, school climate becomes healthier, students experience more success, and the overall quality