

VIEWPOINT

Local approach benefits education

By Kristen Wilcox
and Janet Angelis

The recent reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as ESSA — Every Student Succeeds Act — acknowledges that past attempts (e.g., Race to the Top) by government to tell educators how to improve their schools have fallen short.

Studies suggest that's not surprising. While we commend the attention and efforts the federal government has shown for the nation's school performance, we applaud the shift to localized, statewide accountability. A great deal of research, including our own, has found that what works in improving performance in schools is allowing educators to use evidence to guide locally determined, continuous improvement efforts that take into account every child's well-being.

While maintaining the requirement that schools annu-

ally assess students to measure progress, the Every Student Succeeds Act no longer dictates specific and mostly impracticable steps that schools, districts, or states must take if student achievement lags.

Rather, it calls for states to target resources to their lowest-performing schools, schools with high dropout rates, or schools with large achievement gaps, requiring only that they develop their own systems for school improvement based on evidence.

Other significant changes create an approach to school improvement similar to that of successful organizations of all kinds, in which leadership teams:

- Measure their strengths, weaknesses and priorities with attention to specific targets for growth. In schools this is best done using a variety of assessments and other measures of well-being conducted consistently over time.

- Use these measures to iden-

tify areas in need of improvement. For educators this often means looking at the performance of subgroups of students using gauges such as attendance patterns, which influence outcomes such as graduation rates.

- Turn to programs and practices associated with better outcomes that have been identified through research, with an eye toward appropriate adaptations for local needs.

- Facilitate systems-change thinking among staff to promote research-based programs and practices to boost overall performance.

- Acknowledge that employees who receive sufficient mentoring within an environment of trust in leaders and their peers perform better.

Race to the Top forced participating states and the schools and districts within them to enact policies without prior evidence of success. The most striking example of this was mandating the inclusion of state standardized test

scores in evaluating and ranking teachers.

In contrast, we have found that in schools where educators consistently engage in "systems-improvement" work, making local decisions about how to use research-based programs and practices in a trusting and collaborative environment, they are able to improve their own and every students' performance, and sustain it over time.

Although outside support might be needed to get the ball rolling, once collaboration in this way becomes the norm, it also becomes self-sustaining. It is the capacity for evidence-guided continuous improvement with the focus on every child that will be key to the success of this latest iteration of federal policy.

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