



## Recommendations on the *Every Student Succeeds Act* Pennsylvania Consolidated State Plan

*On August 2, 2017 the Pennsylvania Department of Education released the draft Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state plan for public comment. As an organization Trying Together (then known as PAEYC) submitted a response with recommendations on the early learning components of the plan. While Pennsylvania has a state plan to guide efforts for the state education goals and to support school districts, many of our recommendations highlight aspects of opportunities the federal law presents for early learning. The following document the response of Trying Together to the Pennsylvania ESSA state plan and is meant to be a resource for early learning providers, schools and districts, parents and families, and community members.*

Trying Together is excited by the promise of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* to envision a preschool through twelfth grade continuum. ESSA strongly supports early learning more clearly than previous versions of the federal law. This presents a critical opportunity for Pennsylvania to continue efforts to expand access to high-quality early learning, encourage alignment and collaboration in the birth-through-third-grade continuum, and support early childhood educators.

Trying Together commends the Department of Education on its inclusion of early learning in the vision, values, and goals of the state education plan. We recognize PDE efforts to promote high-quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood education experiences throughout the plan:

- positive school climate and social emotional learning (Section 6);
- non-academic accountability indicator, chronic absenteeism (Section 4);
- early learning preparation for principals (Section 5 and 6);
- transitions to kindergarten (Section 6); and
- OCDEL support and intervention with Comprehensive Support and Improvement elementary schools (Section 4).

PDE makes great strides for our youngest learners by including pre-k in the continuum and pushing best practices of early childhood education (pre-k through third grade for the purposes of ESSA and this document) to school districts. Research shows high-quality, developmentally appropriate, early education provides a foundation for future educational achievement, social competence, improved health, and greater productivity.

Trying Together respectfully submits comments to strengthen the early childhood components of the plan. We believe these changes will better reflect the commitment to young children and early childhood educators as well as support the academic goals and the non-academic accountability indicator of chronic absenteeism. Thank you for this opportunity to provide public comments on the Pennsylvania consolidated state plan.

Trying Together recommendations for early learning in the Pennsylvania ESSA plan:

1. Include more opportunities to measure positive school climate and social emotional learning:
  - a. Monitor rates of suspension and expulsion, specifically in pre-k through third grade.
  - b. Encourage family engagement as a component of positive school climate.
  - c. Consider an additional non-academic measure for accountability indicator and the dashboard that includes students in pre-k through second grade.
  
2. Connect early childhood educators across settings:
  - a. Highlight and strongly encourage districts to take advantage of the federal ESSA law's opportunity for joint professional learning and planning activities for early learning programs and schools.
  
3. Provide more details on kindergarten transition best practices:
  - a. Encourage collaboration between early learning programs and schools.
  - b. Emphasize the importance of engaging families as their children enter kindergarten.
  - c. Consider a plan for proactive partnerships between OCDEL and elementary school teachers and administrators.

## 1. Include more opportunities to measure positive school climate and social emotional learning

Trying Together sees great opportunity for early childhood education and developmentally appropriate practices through the priority of promoting positive social climate and social-emotional learning. We look forward to the road map for embedding social-emotional competencies within school districts' curriculum, instruction, professional development, and school climate mentioned in Section 6 of the plan. This is an important step to advance developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education.

Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) are grounded in research on child development and learning. Child-centered DAP goals are challenging and achievable, embrace children's individual differences, encourage active learning, and promote deep understanding. DAP engages children in all domains: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. (Geist and Baum, 2005). Our comments highlight the potential to strengthen components of positive school climate and social emotional learning.

### ***a. Monitor rates of suspension and expulsion, specifically in pre-k through third grade***

- School climate presents an opportunity for P-3 alignment in regards to developmentally appropriate expectations and discipline practices throughout the early childhood years. As a response to a federal policy statement, OCDEL released an announcement on the reduction of expulsion and suspension in early learning programs. State funded early learning programs, some of which may be in school districts, will need to develop policies to support children, families, and teachers in the prevention, reduction, and elimination of suspensions and expulsions. Pennsylvania should consider monitoring rates of suspensions and expulsions, especially in pre-k through third grade, as an indicator of school climate. The goal should be to reduce and ultimately eliminate the use of exclusionary discipline practices.
- *We believe this recommendation is essential for student success:*
  - Data from the US Education Department indicates that racial and gender disparities exist: African American boys make up 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschoolers suspended more than once. A disproportionate impact for African American students persists throughout the K-12 years (U.S DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014).
  - Young children who are suspended or expelled are 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarcerations. Suspensions during the early years may increase likelihood of students being suspended throughout their school career (U.S. HHS and DOE, 2014).
  - Suspensions or expulsions are not developmentally appropriate ways to address negative behaviors. Rules and expectations might be developmentally inappropriate for young children, resulting in mistaking a typical behavior as problematic. When a child is suspended or expelled from school at a young age, the family won't have access to intervention or services they may qualify for.
  - Often young children who are pushed out of the classroom are in need of intervention. Some children may have undiagnosed behavioral or developmental disabilities mislabeled as a "challenging behavior". This impedes the intervention process to get children the services they are entitled to under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Schachner et al., 2016).

### ***b. Encourage family engagement as component of positive school climate***

- We recognize parents and guardians are included in the PA School Climate Survey, however, the state plan presents an opportunity to intentionally emphasize effective family engagement strategies for districts. The federal law offers a more comprehensive approach to family engagement and, we believe, it is crucial to support our youngest learners. Several other state plans dedicate considerable attention to defining family engagement, emphasizing its impact on child outcomes, and highlighting ways for effective family partnerships.
- *Family engagement has the potential to impact academic and non-academic goals of the plan:*
  - For instance, research shows benefits to family engagement appear across multiple domains in early childhood development: literacy and language, social and emotional skills, and cognition (Bierman et al., 2017). Pennsylvania should consider the impact of family engagement on the academic achievement goals.
  - Family engagement is key to successfully addressing chronic absence (Dahlin and Squires, 2016). Since of chronic absenteeism is an accountability measure, it is important to highlight ways schools can proactively support good attendance. Including families in good attendance habits is developmentally appropriate for our youngest learners.

### ***c. Consider an additional non-academic measure for accountability indicator and the dashboard to that includes students in pre-k through second grade***

- We understand school districts have to balance limited resources to ensure equity and college and career readiness for all students. When we think about increasing achievement on tests, we must think about the early educational experiences that lead up to children reaching (or not reaching) proficiency and growth goals. As Pennsylvania promotes a pre-k through twelfth grade continuum, accountability indicators need to include the early years prior to testing to reflect the importance of the pre-k through second grade years. Trying Together strongly supports the consideration of a developmentally appropriate indicator as part of school accountability and reporting for students in the years prior to testing. The state of Illinois, for instance, chose an early childhood education indicator in its state plan. The Illinois “P-2 Indicator” (pre-k to second grade) involves the development or identification of P-2 indicators for inclusion in the accountability system. Although the plan does not explicitly identify the indicator, Illinois will convene a workgroup to meet and make recommendations.

## 2. Connect early childhood educators across settings

We recognize Pennsylvania's efforts in promoting early learning preparation for educators in both Section 5 and 6 of the state plan. We look forward to the impact of the current and new initiatives on early childhood educators and the children and families they serve. However, with the reauthorization of the federal education law, Pennsylvania should more strongly promote the opportunity for early childhood educators to connect across settings on a professional level.

### ***a. Highlight and strongly encourage districts to take advantage of the federal ESSA law's opportunity for joint professional learning and planning activities for early learning programs and schools***

- The preparation and continued professional growth of principals and educators needs to include opportunities to connect across all early childhood settings: community-based early care and education, home-based child care, early intervention and home visiting programs, and elementary schools. In pursuit of a pre-k through twelfth grade continuum for our children, we must establish a pre-k through twelfth grade continuum for the educators who work with them each day. The state plan should highlight and strongly encourage districts to utilize the new opportunity for joint professional learning and planning for school districts and early learning programs.
- Pennsylvania should strongly encourage this opportunity because Title II, Part A of the federal *Every Student Succeeds Act* allows:
  - “supporting opportunities for principals, other school leaders, teachers, paraprofessionals, early childhood education program directors, and other early childhood education program providers to participate in joint efforts to address the transition to elementary school, including issues related to school readiness” (Section 2101).
  - “the ability of principals or other school leaders to support teachers, teacher leaders, early childhood educators, and other professionals to meet the needs of students through age 8, which may include providing joint professional learning and planning activities for school staff and educators in preschool programs that address the transition to elementary school” (Section 2103).
- This is an important opportunity because collaboration between pre-k teachers and kindergarten teachers is a best practice for transitions which we will discuss in the following section.
  - A study on kindergarten transition activities found the individual transition activity of pre-k teachers connecting with a kindergarten teacher about curriculum and/or the children had the strongest and most consistent associations with children’s adjustment as perceived by kindergarten teachers (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008).

### 3. Provide more details on kindergarten transition best practices

Trying Together strongly supports the goal to reach 182 future principals through early learning focused educator preparation programs in Section 6 of the plan. We believe it is essential that elementary school leaders have an understanding of child development and developmentally appropriate practices to best support teachers and students in the P-3 continuum.

However, the other goal-- at least 80 percent of third grade students achieving proficiency in English language arts and reading by the 2022-23 school year--does not directly address the needs of pre-k students transitioning to kindergarten. While it is a critical end goal in the P-3 continuum, we are concerned it is only one of two goals in the plan to support transitions since testing occurs three years later. Given the flexibility provided by the federal law, Pennsylvania should take advantage of the opportunity to strongly encourage local education agencies to implement successful transition activities. The goals need to directly address the needs of students, families, teachers, and schools in the process of the critical transition period.

#### ***a. Encourage collaboration between early learning programs and schools***

- The Pennsylvania state plan needs to strongly encourage districts to strengthen relationships between early learning programs and elementary schools. Activities with the potential for greatest impact on easing the transition process include: transition teams comprised of early care and education professionals, school district personnel, families, and community based organizations; joint meetings between pre-k and kindergarten teachers; and kindergarten classroom visitations for pre-k students. For example, Illinois state plan encourages within and between school collaboration to smooth out transitions between grades and buildings in its state plan.
- *The following evidence supports our recommendation:*
  - A study of kindergarten transition practices and children's academic outcomes at the end of the year found more transition activities were associated with academic gains throughout the year as measured by a standardized test. The gains were greatest for children from low- and middle- income families who experience social and economic risks and enter school behind their peers (Schulting and Dodge, 2005).
  - Findings from the Abecedarian Project indicate children who received additional support as they moved into and through Kindergarten and the early elementary grades performed better in reading and math (Bohan-Baker, 2002).
  - Another transition study found a positive association between the number of transition activities and with kindergarten teachers' perceptions of children's social and emotional adjustment (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008).

#### ***b. Emphasize the importance of engaging families as their children enter kindergarten***

- Kindergarten can be a challenging (and exciting) leap for children and their families. Partnerships between early learning programs, elementary schools, and families that support children's progress are the foundation of successful transitions. We urge PDE to emphasize family engagement in the transition of children from early childhood programs to kindergarten. Referring to Title IV in the federal ESSA plan, the Massachusetts' state plan points to opportunities for joint professional networking between pre-k and kindergarten teachers and families during kindergarten. New Jersey plans to use Preschool Expansion Grant funds to establish transition teams made up of administrators, families, and teachers across early grade levels.

- This matters for Pennsylvania school districts as it impacts one of the *accountability indicators: chronic absenteeism*.
  - Research on pre-k attendance suggests habits are developed early. Poor attendance during the early years can set the stage for poor attendance later on. Kindergarten transition can support good attendance habits by helping children adjust to elementary school and engaging families to support their children’s development as they adapt to school (Dahlin and Squires, 2016).
  - The 2005 kindergarten transition study showed more transition activities were linked to increased parent-initiated school involvement during kindergarten (Schulting and Dodge, 2005).

***c. Consider a plan for proactive partnerships between OCDEL and elementary school teachers and administrators***

- The state plan acknowledges that partnerships among K-12 schools, early learning programs, and families positively impact both academic and non-academic student outcomes. We are encouraged to see this acknowledgement included in the accountability, support, and improvement section of the plan. One of the strengths for early learning in our state is the inclusion of OCDEL throughout the plan. We strongly support OCDEL’s involvement with elementary schools (as outlined in Section 4) as a way to help improve outcomes for the youngest learners transitioning to kindergarten. The partnership between elementary schools and OCDEL offers the potential to strengthen the linkages between birth through age three and pre-k-3rd grade. While the readiness tools and manual of CIZ P-3 alignment strategies provides a solid foundation, we believe these strategies can serve as prevention rather than only intervention.
- Washington state published two resources focused on early learning (1) *Funding Early Learning in Washington State with Title I, Part A, birth to five* and (2) *Early Learning in ESSA: Expanded Opportunities for School Districts*.
  - Trying Together strongly supports the consideration that OCDEL, in partnership with PDE, plan to release early learning guidance in ESSA for school districts in Pennsylvania. We look forward to more detailed, rigorous guidance for elementary schools to support young children. We recommend sharing successful CIZ initiatives with all districts as part of supporting alignment.

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