



EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES  
**SPECIAL REPORT**



## ESSA's Well-Rounded Education

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As questions regarding the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) flow in to Education Commission of the States, one frequent inquiry

**ESSA EMPHASIZES THE NEED FOR ALL STUDENTS TO HAVE ACCESS TO A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION THAT INCLUDES THE ARTS, HUMANITIES, SCIENCES, SOCIAL SCIENCES, ENGLISH AND MATHEMATICS.**

is about the concept of a “well-rounded education,” referenced more than 20 times and included within the majority of Titles in the Act. State education leaders want to know what constitutes a

well-rounded education, how can they ensure students across their state have access to it, and how, if at all, the U.S. Department of Education plans to hold their state accountable to it.

Although concerns surrounding a well-rounded education have not received the same degree of attention as hot-button issues like equitable funding and accountability indicators, it could be considered a foundational element of the new federal law.

This paper provides a brief overview of what is included in a well-rounded education and the opportunities that ESSA opens for states and districts to provide such an education to their students.

ESSA opens up many opportunities for states and districts to invest in activities that support a well-rounded education, including the **NEW STUDENT SUPPORT AND ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT GRANTS.**

With ESSA, districts are asked to conduct a **COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT** to identify the needs of their unique populations and make investments to address those needs.



## MOVING BEYOND ENGLISH AND MATH

A common criticism of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the federal education law from 2001 to December 2015, was its overemphasis on English language arts and mathematics as the only measures of student success. Many felt that the result was a national trend in K-12 education towards a narrowing of curricula and instruction towards these two subjects and subsequent teaching to the test.

With the passage of ESSA, lawmakers sought to encourage states to re-establish what has been coined a well-rounded education for all students, which covers a wide selection of academic subjects, including the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences, in addition to English language arts and mathematics.

In his 2010 speech at the Arts Education Partnership National Forum, then-Secretary of Education Arne Duncan remarked that by offering students a well-rounded education, they are able to make connections “which ultimately empower[] students to develop convictions and reach their full academic and social potential.” He explained that:

*...the study of history and civics helps provide that sense of time beyond the here and now. The study of geography and culture helps build a sense of space and place. And the study of drama, dance, music and visual arts helps students explore realities and ideas that cannot be summarized simply or even expressed in words or numbers.<sup>1</sup>*

**– Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, April 9, 2010**

It is with this sentiment in mind that congressional lawmakers from both sides of the aisle reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in a way that strongly encourages states and districts to embrace an educational model that offers a comprehensive educational program to meet each student’s unique academic needs, learning styles and interests.

*States now have the opportunity to broaden their definition of educational excellence, to include providing students strong learning experiences in science, social studies, world languages, and the arts, as well as AP and International Baccalaureate classes – and even supporting students’ socioemotional development. That’s a huge and welcome change.<sup>2</sup>*

**– Secretary of Education John B. King, April 14, 2016**

## FROM CORE ACADEMIC SUBJECTS TO A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION

First introduced in 1994 as part of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, the term “core academic subjects” covered nine subject areas in which students were expected to demonstrate competency over challenging subject matter.<sup>3</sup> The core academic subjects included in this definition were: English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history and geography. Although core academic subjects served an important role in clarifying how federal funding could be used, the only requirements linked to the term related to teacher qualifications rather than student success.

In ESSA, however, lawmakers expanded this definition by shifting from core academic subjects to a well-rounded education. This new well-rounded education includes 17 subjects covering the commonly tested subjects of English language arts and mathematics, as well as a wide variety of other subjects covering the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences. The specific subjects identified within a well-rounded education are:

### Previously included in definition of core academic subjects:



**English, reading or language arts**



**Science**



**Civics and government**



**Foreign languages**



**Mathematics**



**Economics**



**History**



**\*Arts**



**Geography**

\*For clarification on the term “arts” in ESSA, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions did release a report to accompany their original bill (The Every Child Achieves Act of 2015). Although not an official part of the final legislation, this **committee report** states that the committee intended that the arts “may include the subjects of dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts, and other arts disciplines as determined by the State or local education agency” (pg. 52).

**New to ESEA, and included in ESSA's well-rounded education definition:**



**Writing**



**Technology**



**Engineering**



**Computer Science**



**Music**



**Career and technical  
education**



**Health**



**Physical Education**

Unlike the definition for core academic subjects in previous iterations of ESEA, ESSA not only provides a detailed list of subjects in the definition of a well-rounded education, it also allows states to add additional subjects to the definition: "...and any other subject, as determined by the State or local educational agency, with the purpose of providing all students access to an enriched curriculum and educational experience." It also identifies the interconnectedness of these subjects by allowing in Title IV for programs or activities that integrate multiple subjects.

## **PROVIDING ACCESS TO A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION**

Throughout ESSA, states are encouraged to emphasize the need for every child to receive a well-rounded education when providing support to districts and schools. The intention is to underscore the newfound flexibility states have to support student learning in subjects beyond English language arts and mathematics.<sup>4</sup>

### **Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants**

It is in Part A of Title IV, however, that the law creates some accountability around incentives for providing a well-rounded education. Part A is home to the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants meant to improve student success by increasing state and local capacity to provide, among other things, students access to a well-rounded education.

The grant program is a consolidation of several smaller, targeted NCLB grants into a single formula-funded flexible block grant program. This frees local educational agencies (LEAs) from having to select a specific subject area or type of program and allows them room to create their own unique program. However, for a district that receives a grant of greater than \$30,000, the law requires that it conduct a comprehensive needs assessment every three years to identify how the district can increase opportunities for students to access a well-rounded education and how funding can be used to support these efforts.

Through this needs assessment process, LEAs have the flexibility to tailor investments to meet the needs of their unique student populations, particularly for minority groups including women, English language learners, students with disabilities and low-income students. Programs and activities states might consider include English, reading or language arts, writing, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, geography, computer science, music, career and technical education, health, physical education, and any other subject, as determined by the state or LEA, with the purpose of providing all students access to an enriched curriculum and educational experience.

LEAs must prioritize the distribution of funds to schools with the greatest need including those that have high numbers of children eligible for free and reduced price lunch and those identified for comprehensive or targeted support and improvement plans.

### **Appropriations**

When passed in December 2015, ESSA authorized \$1.65 billion in fiscal year 2017 and \$1.6 billion for the 2018-2020 fiscal years for the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants. However, the 2017 fiscal year budget submitted to Congress by President Barack Obama requested \$500 million in funding which many advocates argue is “woefully inadequate.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite these calls for increased funding, Secretary of Education Dr. John B. King Jr. insists that the proposed \$500 million is a meaningful investment given that this funding serves as a significant increase (\$222 million more) over the combined funding for all the individual programs that were rolled into the block under ESSA.<sup>6</sup>

### **Opportunities for Innovation**

The purpose of rolling large numbers of individual grant programs supporting a well-rounded education into a single block grant was to offer flexibility to states in how and where they spend the money, thereby creating opportunities for experimentation and innovation. By not being limited to a specific subject area for which to apply for grant funding, LEAs are free to emphasize any of the multiple subjects listed in ESSA, select their own or integrate across subjects. Outside of funding concerns, the possibilities are endless in how states can utilize this program to make a meaningful investment in their students.



## Elsewhere in ESSA

Outside of the Student Support and Achievement Grants, ESSA also clearly opens up a well-rounded education to include both in-school and out-of-school learning opportunities in Titles I, II and IV. For example:

- **Title I** includes a requirement that all districts provide a “well-rounded program of instruction that meets the needs of all students.”
- **Title II** allows funds to be used to help teachers “integrate comprehensive literacy instruction into a well-rounded education.”
- **Title IV** encourages districts and local partners to provide “well-rounded education activities, including activities that enable students to be eligible for credit recovery or retainment.”

The increased flexibility to use funds to emphasize a variety of subjects in both in- and out-of-school programs helps ensure that LEAs are able to meet the unique needs of their students and communities.

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## ENDNOTES

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