



The Essential Role of Ohio's Educational Service Centers in the ESSA Era

Recommendations for Action in Supporting
Student, School and District Success

An Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

The reauthorization of ESEA, the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), creates a fundamental shift in the focus and control of public education systems. States, districts and schools are now empowered to drive local engagement and decision-making to improve educational outcomes for all students in all schools. *This is the ESSA era, and we welcome it.*

We believe ESSA creates an opportunity for Ohio to set a new, bold vision for its education system that focuses on high quality local implementation of evidence-based practices for educational improvement. However, local implementers require significant support. This is a challenge the state simply cannot manage alone. Reaching every corner of the state, Ohio's Educational Service Centers (ESCs)—are ready to help make Ohio's new vision a reality. As the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) designs and implements the state's ESSA plan, ESCs must be key collaborators in advancing the state's efforts to raise student achievement.

This report offers eight strategic recommendations for how the state can partner with ESCs to ensure the continuous improvement of every school and district in Ohio. By working together, the students of Ohio—our future—can emerge as informed citizens, drivers of the state's economic growth and prosperity, and essential contributors to realizing Ohio's opportunities.

Recommendation 1 Develop a unifying vision and actionable strategic plan for Ohio's public education system.

The time is right for Ohio to develop a unifying vision and strategic plan for education in the state, which benchmarks Ohio against the highest performing states and nations. ESSA's stakeholder engagement requirements create an ideal opportunity to examine Ohio's progress and challenges and gather input to chart a bold path forward. At a minimum, this plan should also clarify 1) the role of the state as setting the direction and creating the conditions necessary for schools and districts to succeed, 2) the actual work of improvement within schools and districts, and 3) the critical support and guidance provided by ESCs and other regional partners to ensure sustained success.

Recommendation 2 Prioritize the creation of a culture of continuous improvement at all levels and among all key players.

ESCs are well-positioned as part of the statewide system of support to communicate, shape and expand this culture consistent with the state's priorities. Ohio must emphasize that continuous improvement is everyone's responsibility, every day, and not only in low-performing schools.

Creating a culture of continuous improvement requires effective communication across all levels in the state's education system—to exchange ideas, celebrate successes, roll out initiatives and policies, discuss common challenges and brainstorm solutions.

Recommendation 3 Focus improvement activity at the school level.

With this target in mind, the state should leverage ESCs to both provide direct supports to schools and enable districts to align multiple school-based improvement efforts into a cohesive, sustainable plan for district improvement. We know from experience that no two schools are alike. The work of educational improvement must therefore have one destination—an excellent educational program for all students of all abilities—but many paths to get there. ESCs have a strong track record of delivering high-quality services to help schools and districts make progress on their unique improvement journeys, all aiming to reach the one destination.

Recommendation 4 Designate and resource ESCs as the state's "go-to" regional support providers, a role that needs to be reflected in the state ESSA plan.

ESCs provide schools and districts with strategies, resources and tools to drive improvements in school-level performance at scale. ESCs are uniquely positioned to partner with the state to support improvement efforts in districts and schools. They are flexible thought partners and solutions developers, with experienced staff, leadership and expertise in key instructional and operational areas. They also bring deep knowledge in each area of ESSA implementation, such as school improvement, and the capacity to have an increasing impact.

Recommendation 5 Establish a revitalized working relationship between ODE and ESCs that includes clear communications, well-defined expectations, and active and continuous collaboration.

The partnership between ESCs and ODE should be based on a shared commitment. ODE and ESCs should revisit existing structures to ensure maximum impact on the continuous improvement of schools and districts, including the parallel support structures of ESCs and State Support Teams, performance agreement structures and the methods for allocating school improvement funding. ESCs should also serve as critical thought partners to ODE, helping to identify and promote the evidence-based approaches and interventions most successful for achieving strong student outcomes.

Recommendation 6 Utilize ESCs as key partners in the various opportunities created by ESSA to drive educational and school improvement.

ESCs should be a key voice in the design and implementation of the state ESSA plan, as they are best-positioned to coordinate and support initiatives designed to have impact at the local level. In particular, they can help provide direct student services and ensure the effective use of federal grants and other funding to improve educator effectiveness and support students in and out of the classroom.

Recommendation 7 Commit to developing and adopting a flexible, but meaningful, system of ESC accountability in partnership with the state.

The accountability system should be fair, reasonable and directly aligned to the roles and responsibilities carried out by ESCs.

Recommendation 8 Fund ESCs at appropriate levels of state and federal funding commensurate with the expectations for their levels of service as defined by state law and the state ESSA plan.

The state should align this funding distribution beginning in FY 2018 consistent with implementation of the next biennial state operating budget and the ESSA state plan.

As the state and ESCs begin to define the new roles and responsibilities previously outlined in this report, the state must ensure ESCs have the funding levels necessary to effectively conduct their work. ESCs can help the state make the best use of available resources and new funding opportunities at the federal level to support implementation of educational improvement strategies as part of ESSA.