

Serpanos Research Paper:

Every Student Succeeds Act

For the audience of Professor Jacoby

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Freedom, Research, and Policy

“Without law there can be no freedom” a profound idea first fashioned by Ancient Greek philosophers. Thousands of years later it was reformed by English and French philosophers who studied democracy. Later American President Ronald Reagan reformed the idea to say "Law makes freedom work." Through thousands of years of iterations around what makes freedom tick, some of the world’s most influential people, and bright thinkers have widely agreed on the value of law’s relation to the idea of freedom. Realizing the influence and power policies wield on education, we look to educational researchers and professors such as Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, who play pivotal roles in informing policy makers about creating equitable reformation. Educational laws and policies are fundamental to the integrity of our education system, they provide institutional structure that uphold the idea of freedom. Policy makers would be sagacious in heeding the counsel of the synthesized research below on the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Every Student Succeeds Act, A Lineage of Acronyms

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed by President Barack Obama in 2015 had several policy predecessors. The first was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, to be later reauthorized and reformed as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), by President George W. Bush. LBJ was a former teacher, and advocated for increasing the federal government’s responsibility and role in education(El Moussaoui

Before the mid 1960s, the federal government's role in public education was timid. After ESEA was enacted, money funneled into the education system: "The main funding provision of ESEA, Title I, allocated over \$1 billion of federal funds to schools serving low-income children in 1965." With federal funds, came federal regulation on vocationally centered curricula (Gross).

Role of Federal Government, and of the States

In 1965, ESEA accomplished two primary goals: distributing money to students in poverty through the vehicle of Title 1 and directing grants to state education agencies to build capacity, resulting in a steady growth in federal involvement in education (Egalite)."

Educational policies at the federal level have demonstrated great reach of power that ultimately affect the education system for everyone involved. When federal policies are enacted, everyone has to adhere, and make way for the reform. With the numerous reauthorizations of federal education policies like the ESEA, comes federal control via money, and with federal money comes federal contingencies. Some of the NCLB contingencies were financially punitive towards "underperforming schools" based on low test scores. Federal policy such as the ESEA had given the power to provide great opportunities and resources, but left a blueprint for disastrous reform, and although derived with good intention, may have also left deleterious effects.

With the strategic use of executive power, the Obama administration pushed for avid reform stressing that the States make significant policy changes towards charter schools, teacher evaluation, testing, and common core (McGuinn). Nearly \$100 billion was funneled to Race To The Top (RTTT) a competition to reward states who altered their policies with grants that had guidelines outlining specific changes (Saultz). With federal policy, comes federal money in the

form of grants and waivers. “Waivers from unduly restrictive federal laws are not uncommon. However, unlike education waivers granted by earlier administrations, the waivers granted by the Obama Administration were significant deviations from federal law and further expanded the power of the executive branch, particularly the U.S. Secretary of Education, over state and local education (Saultz).” With this increased use of executive power came political backlash and was reversed by congress in 2015 by the ESSA which regulated federal waivers and authority of people like the secretary of education over state and local education. By reducing the federal role in education, and placing limits on the executive branch, the ESSA could bring back power to the states (Egalite). Section 1001 from the ESSA states “The Secretary shall not have the authority to mandate, direct, control, coerce, or exercise any direction or supervision over any of the challenging State academic standards adopted or implemented by a State.”

During the NCLB era, conservatives in congress supported Bush’s increased standards and accountability at the federal level that everyone should measure up to. With the passing of ESSA, states now can set their own education goals, removing a “one-size-fits-all goal” (El Moussaoui). As the new policy strives to heal symptoms from NCLB, so does its focus on everyone as a group. ESSA’s focus paves way for more individualized education plans rather than the prescribed no-fail curricula of common core (Dennis). Unlike NCLB, ESSA relieves federal mandates, and places responsibility back to states and local authorities to aid the bottom 5% of schools in devising their own solutions and remedies. Historically since the 60’s we have observed a steady increase in federal involvement in the education system, and with the recent ESSA, States are now being returned a small sense of autonomy over education policy (Franquiz).

Educational Policy at Risk

A Nation at Risk still influences the way we see education today. Jal Mehta, associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, argues the shadow casted by *A Nation at Risk* lasted over 30 years, and perhaps shifted the view of schooling to that of international competition, to productivity, and to education success by comparison (Mehta). The report ignited a cultural, and political shift in the educational landscape, exacerbating the corporatization of education. The report weaponized the use of testing, and scores as a means to quantify the quality of students learning, thus further proliferating performance measuring (Au). Within a few years after the report, standardized testing somewhat dominated the realm of educational policy, and discussion around reform. The impact of the report has significantly altered the way we talk about education today. We love to hate on testing in the education department, yet every teacher will boast the success of Finland on PISA examinations. This paradox is how we measure success: by comparison. It is the reason we have a GPA, and grades, we need to know how we measure compared to other people. It is a sort of educational validation for what is going right and what is not. Tests are not evil, in fact they are necessary, and so are grades, but when educational policy mandates measures of equality, furthermore quality based on testing, they can become quite inequitable. In theory pure equality is great but has proven not be be what everyone needs in education.

Structural inequalities such as those found in NCLB and now ESSA's mandation of testing in grades 3-8 will likely continue to perpetuate opportunity gaps, and institutionalize achievement gaps which threaten public schools today, and stand to increase "educational debt." Dr. Danielle Dennis, a professor of education at the University of South Florida pointed out major flaws with the reauthorization of ESEA in the form of NCLB stating "We don't want to

leave any child behind, but we will hold them back if they aren't successful on the test; we want highly qualified teachers, but we will replace their expertise with paced, scripted curricula; we will only allow schools to adopt no-fail curricula, but the highest stakes will be placed on children and teachers when the programs fail, as they do time and again (Dennis).”

Our education's fundamental founding principle of equality, coupled with NCLB propagated school as being the great equalizer, and reinforced a meritocracy evident in the “American dream” that some might describe as the “bootstrap myth (Au).” Equality sounds great on paper, and in theory, but doesn't always have the best outcomes for our education system. Merit based philosophy that argues everyone has equal opportunity negates the “access” individual students possess whether it be economic, or social capital.

How Might ESSA Impact Education?

ESSA understands the importance of early education with concrete grants, funding the states that offer systems which collaborate with low income students and those in need. By targeting schools that need funding, the Preschool Development Grants attempt to provide equitable access to resources before testing and requesting equal outcomes (Franquiz). Bilingual education also stands to gain from ESSA,

“The new law ensures the inclusion of these students in a state's accountability system, reporting on Emergent Bilingual students with disabilities as well as reporting on newcomer students and on long-term Emergent Bilingual students. The law confirms the importance of standardized entrance and exit procedures for state language support programs to ensure Emergent Bilingual students receive continuity of services (Franquiz).”

The demographics of our classrooms are constantly evolving and are projected to continue changing over the next 30 years. Racial and socioeconomic diversity are on the rise, as are projections of the American population, which indicate it overall double, with Hispanic populations by 167%, and Asian populations by 213% (El Moussaoui). Bilingual education and its resources could play a key role if we are to tackle structural inequalities like the achievement gap, and opportunity gap.

Contrary to NCLB, ESSA delineates no federal policy on teacher evaluations, thus potentially makes the profession of teaching K-12 to be less micromanaged. “This move will likely undo—or at least complicate—the requirement for test-based evaluation of teacher education in regulations the Department had planned to promulgate (Darling-Hammond).”

With less federal oversight and more flexibility, also comes less requirements on teacher quality, which necessitates the States to derive their own means in hiring highly qualified professionals. If the States fail to do so, it is the students that suffer. But the ESSA also allocates funds for teacher and principal development programs and “after a 4-year phase-in period, 80% of professional development funds under Title II 772 Educational Administration Quarterly 53, will be directed to higher poverty districts. This latter provision has the potential to enhance the quality of education for students in historically low- performing schools (Egalite).”

Dr. Wayne Au argues that the ESSA is essentially “Everything Stays the Same Act” with the continuation of high stakes testing being directly linked to school funding in a neoliberal framework. He advocates that parents have their kids opt out of standardized tests as it would be dangerous to the reform industry (Au).

The ESSA isn't solely for K-12 education anymore, and actually might bridge the gap between secondary schools, employment, and colleges. Dr. Debra Bragg, director of community

college research initiatives, argues the policy has several elements of College and Career Readiness (CCR). Bragg states “Numerous strategies are noted in the legislation as a means of bridging educational levels, with some approaches focused extensively on academic and career preparation, including interventions that address fundamental academic knowledge and skills, and others encouraging and easing college entry for already academically prepared students (Bragg).” States are now tasked with incorporating students futures into the mix, with community involvement through a range of opportunities like internships or volunteering. ESSA provides schools with the opportunity to incorporate preparation for higher education, and career preparedness, perhaps shaping the next generation of professionals to be better equipped and more civically engaged.

Concluding Remarks

Perhaps ESSA will leave prescribed curricula in the past and create room for a more equitable education system. Perhaps the continuation of standardized testing will perpetuate structural inequalities and become the “Everything Stays the Same Act.” Educational researchers like Darling-Hammond, and Bragg, now carry extra civic responsibility, and are vital to shaping new educational reform. Educational policies, especially when at the federal level have huge impacts on our society and freedom. President Obama stated, “With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will (Egalite).” To me this is a defining form of freedom, and yet the mandate to be in education is not.

Although my sources are seemingly mixed in stance on how the ESSA will affect education, I now understand a current and vital topic to which educational policy has, and will

play a role in our lives, moreover our freedom. The executive branch has been slightly reformed to reduce the power of federal oversight from the Secretary of Education, and yet we can still see how powerful the branch is in overseeing federal educational policies all the way down to the local level. At the beginning of the quarter I did not realize the power wielded by someone like Betsy DeVos, but now through my educational research can better recognize the potential influence possible with educational policy. An overarching theme through all the resources suggest that policies are a form of control, power, and money. I would like to reform my opening statement to say: without educational policy, there can be no freedom.

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