



White Paper

Rethink Ed and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

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Executive Summary

While educational reforms have prioritized educational disparity for many years, there continues to be inequity in educational practices and outcomes for certain populations, including students with disabilities. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) intends to improve accountability, accessibility, and availability of resources to better address this continued disparity in education. ESSA allows for increased flexibility in assessment and reporting of outcomes in special education while increasing the accountability of schools to provide quality instruction and assessment that mirrors standard educational practices. As part of the initiative to increase the accessibility of quality educational instruction, ESSA allows increased resources for states to focus on early childhood education and inclusion of students with special needs. It allows for funding to improve the training and professional development of teachers and paraeducators. The implementation of these initiatives is proving to be difficult for many schools due to limited resources, lack of funding, and inadequate professional learning. The use of technology may provide a viable solution to support schools in meeting the accountability, social-emotional, inclusion, intervention, and professional development goals of ESSA. Improving outcomes, awareness, and acceptance for all students increases equity and better prepares students for higher education, employment, and independent living upon graduation.

KEYWORDS

Educational Reform, Student Achievement, ESEA, IDEA, ESSA, Educational Disparity, Accountability, Equity, Social-Emotional Learning, Special Education, Assessment, Early Childhood, Inclusion, PBS, SSIP, Professional Development, Data Management, Reporting, Curriculum, Disability Awareness, Technology, Inclusion, Paraeducators

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Educational Reform

Educational reform is an iterative process that has been present throughout the history of education. Many reforms focus on curriculum, standards, and teaching practices while others focus on disparity or issues with equity in education. The design and delivery of preservice and in-service training for educators is also a component of the educational reform process. Reforms may focus on the assessment of student achievements or on school restructuring, which addresses school structure (e.g. which grades attend elementary, middle, high schools or classroom-grade combinations, etc.). Historically, educational reform is politically driven and political agendas greatly impact educational policies.

Educational reform continues to adjust to changing societal issues

In the 1950s, concerns about students' ability to compete internationally in the arenas of math and science led to federal reforms focused on advanced curriculum and programs for gifted students (Fritzberg, 2016). In 1965, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was established to ensure educational equity for low-income students (Zascavage, 2010). Funds were authorized under

ESEA for instructional materials, professional development, parental involvement, and additional resources to better include students with low incomes (Social Welfare History Project, 2016). "A Nation At Risk," which was published in 1983, brought up concerns about U.S. economics compared to other countries (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This led to reforms focused on educational excellence and equity in education. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was authorized in 2001 to make schools and

students more accountable for outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). These various versions of ESEA led to the current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015.

ESSA

Under ESSA, states have increased flexibility in the design and delivery of curriculum but must demonstrate the presence of college and career assessments and standards, and have school accountability systems implemented for their lowest-performing schools (Social Welfare History Project, 2016). The overall goals of ESSA are similar to the ones originally laid out in ESEA, which are to improve outcomes and equity for students from lower-income families (Education Post, 2016).

ESSA requires states to provide standardized testing for math, reading, and science. ESSA does not require states to use Common Core Standards specifically but does posit that states must use “challenging standards” (Education Post, 2016). Schools are held accountable through the measuring of school quality, including academic and non-academic outcomes (Education Post, 2016). Examples of non-academic outcomes are absenteeism, suspensions, and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills. Districts are also held accountable through the monitoring of school progress assessed by measuring lower achieving schools’ improvement. One of the biggest advances in educational reform under ESSA is the requirement for districts to disaggregate their outcome data (Fritzberg, 2016). In other words, schools must document the performance of specific populations, not just report overall outcomes. Reporting targeted

Non-academic outcomes under ESSA include things like absenteeism, suspensions, and social-emotional learning skills



outcomes for specific populations including ethnicity, socio-economic status, first-language, and special education students more accurately assesses equality in education.



Ethnic and racial disparities in education are greatest for African American students

Equity in Education

Despite ongoing educational reform, there continues to be a vast achievement gap between specific school populations. Ethnic and racial disparities manifest in the education system through test scores, graduation and dropout rates, participation

in gifted and talented programs, enrollment in higher education, and behavior issues such as suspension, detention, and expulsion (Sablich, 2017). This disparity is greatest for African American students but is similarly problematic for lower-income students. For example, in many states, lower-income schools continue to perform much lower than higher-income schools. There is still a great concern that educational equality is not being addressed for socioeconomically disenfranchised students (Semuels, 2016). English Language Learners (ELL) are the fastest-growing student population today and they are over-represented in special education due to a paucity of teacher training and preparation to give these students equal learning opportunities (Alrubail, 2016). Some studies cite that African American children are also over-represented in special education and are more likely to be identified with a disability compared to their peers (e.g. Harper & Fargus, 2017) while other studies claim that these students are under-represented in special education (Barshay, 2019). Either way, there is a bias, and equity remains problematic. The requirements under ESSA to document outcomes for these specific populations increases accountability for

schools and is meant to improve equality in education for those students at higher risk.

Equity and Non-Academic Outcomes Through Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) can improve academic outcomes (e.g. graduation rates, college acceptance) as well as non-academic outcomes (e.g. absenteeism, disciplinary actions) and help build skills for students to be successful throughout their school years and beyond. CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) (2020) identifies the core SEL competencies as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. ESSA requires that schools utilize evidence-based interventions. SEL has been shown in a large number of research studies to improve academic and non-academic outcomes. CASEL (2017) identifies 4 evidence-based strategies that promote SEL including:

- 1) Free-standing lessons that give educators step-by-step instructions for teaching SEL that have a scope and sequence and include active learning techniques and generalization strategies.
- 2) General teaching practices that support social and emotional development in classrooms and schoolwide. Interventions should build independence in students over time and incorporate real-life applications.
- 3) Integration of SEL instruction into academic instruction.
- 4) Guidance to school leaders on schoolwide and districtwide SEL implementation.

ESSA supports improving school conditions for student learning, peer relationships

and interactions, non-academic outcomes such as absenteeism and disciplinary actions, promoting social contributions such as community involvement, and providing a well-rounded education that prepares students for college, employment, and independent living. SEL addresses all of these objectives. Title I allows for funds that focus on improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged and Title IV allows funding for 21st century schools that improve academic and non-academic outcomes. SEL fits well into both of these categories of funding.

Rethink Ed SEL is a comprehensive K-12 SEL program that meets the standards for ESSA and CASEL intervention quality. Our SEL program advances equity for disadvantaged and high-need students including lessons for school readiness, special education, and college preparation.

Our evidence-based model includes SEL assessments, student lessons for all tiers of intervention, scope and sequence across grades, on-demand professional development, comprehensive reporting, and parent/caregiver access. Beginning in the fall of 2020, we will launch a 3-year research study evaluating the effectiveness of the SEL platform. This study will include a control group and will evaluate the usability and outcomes of our on-demand professional development and student SEL lessons. This study has received IRB (Internal Review Board) approval - exempt status, from the University of Delaware and results will be publicized at the end of each school year. This study meets Tier 1 requirements for ESSA research as well as CASEL SElect research criteria.



Rethink Ed SEL advances
equity for disadvantaged
and high-need students

Special Education Students

Students in special education have received fewer resources and have had less access to best practice programs than students without identified disabilities (Alvarez, 2016). Before 1975, only 1 out of 5 children who experienced a disability attended school (American Institutes for Research, 2017). IDEA and other educational reforms increased access to education for these students and ESSA is intended to further lessen the disparity for them. ESSA increases accountability, puts heightened pressure on states to more adequately train educators, and requires increased access to effective instructional practices (American Institutes for Research, 2016) to improve outcomes for all students, including those enrolled in special education.

ESSA allows for a more individualized assessment of student outcomes and gives special educators more flexibility in using assessments and curricula that are developmentally appropriate for their students (Spiker, Hebbeler, Cate, & Walsh, 2017). Rather than forcing students in special education to take the same standardized measures as other students and fail, their progress can be monitored in a system that is appropriate for their skill level. ESSA does require that states set limits for the number of students who use alternate assessments and makes schools more accountable for transitioning these students into standard assessment systems and/or ensuring that alternate assessments align with state standards (Alvarez, 2010).

Like previous educational reforms, ESSA emphasizes the use of preventive strategies to increase equality for all students over time. One example of this is encouraging states to invest more in improving inclusion practices. The inclusion of students with disabilities has improved significantly over the years in large part because of educational reforms such as ESSA. Today, approximately 6 out of 10 students are included in general education for at least 80% of their time in school and about 95% of special education students spend at least some of their day in general

education (Heasley, 2016). In 2004, this was true for about half as many students with disabilities (Heasley, 2016). ESSA emphasizes the importance of inclusion during early childhood and improves funding options for states to accomplish this goal more effectively (Spiker, Hebbeler, Cate, & Walsh, 2017). Including children with disabilities at a young age improves communication and the cognitive and social skills needed for these children to participate in the same instructional programs as typically developing students (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999). Research supports the use of specific techniques for inclusion to be effective, such as embedded interventions, curriculum and environmental modifications, assistive technology, and having quality control over the program, professional development, and appropriate resources (Soukakou, et al., 2015).



95% of special education students spend at least some of their day in general education

ESSA specifically focuses on Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISPs) (i.e. paraeducators) to help build the necessary skills to support special education students' transitions from special education classrooms into general education classrooms (Alvarez,

2016). Because of 95% of special education students spend at least some of their day in general education, shortages of special educators and increasing demands on teachers, SSIPs are becoming increasingly essential in providing students with disabilities with opportunities to participate in equitable educational practices.

Professional Development

Under Title II, ESSA specifically allows for increased funding for states to prepare, train, and recruit high-quality teachers, principals, and other school

leaders. This includes academic and non-academic outcomes (e.g. SEL). ESSA also allows for schools to more adequately train general education teachers and SISPs to include students with disabilities (Spiker, Hebbeler, Cate, & Walsh, 2017). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of training opportunities for educators, and even more so for SISPs. There is limited time in the workday for educators and paraeducators to receive training and finding quality training can be difficult.

Although SEL has been shown to improve academic and non-academic outcomes, training and professional development is a challenge for schools that are already inundated with responsibilities.

On-site training is expensive, time-consuming, and during COVID-19 and other disasters that prevent schools from providing in-person training, it can be nearly impossible to meet this need. On-demand, remote training gives educators flexibility, accountability, and safe spaces for learning what they need to know to embrace an SEL culture. Rethink Ed's SEL platform provides over 30 SEL modules to help educators learn, embrace, and develop SEL skills in themselves and to use with their students.

Despite the efforts of educational reform and the increased time special education students are spending in general education classrooms, there are still issues with program quality, measurement of outcomes, and addressing behavioral issues. Educators and paraeducators are not receiving the training, resources, and support necessary to effectively include special education students (Goodman & Burton, 2010). Teachers who do receive appropriate support have better attitudes about inclusion than those that do not (MacFarlane & Marks Woolfson, 2013). Similar to the SEL platform, the Rethink Ed special education platform provides on-demand training for educators with resources, webinars, video modeling, and strategies.



On-demand professional development is essential for anyone in education today

One of the biggest obstacles for inclusion is preparing teachers and paraeducators to address challenging behaviors. It is frequently the behavior of special education students that prevents them from fully participating in general education rather than issues related to their disability (Lauderdale-Litten, Howell, & Blacher, 2013). Behavior plans are often not carried out effectively and can lead to poor student outcomes (Goncy, Sutherland, Farrell, Sullivan, Doyle, 2014). Training teachers to effectively manage challenging behaviors can be expensive and timeconsuming and the ability to continue effective behavior management tends not to hold up over time (Sanetti, Collier-Meek, Long, Bryron, Kratochwill, 2015).

Although many agree that inclusion is philosophically the right thing to do and leads to improved outcomes, without effective implementation, these outcomes are unachievable (Cook & Odom, 2013). To successfully improve inclusive practices, schools must teach educators and paraeducators to work more effectively and efficiently and prepare them for implementing inclusion models and other practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Training models often rely on ineffective workshop models; the “train and hope” model does not work (Cook & Odom, 2013). To solve the issue of time, cost, and efficiency, technology may serve as a viable option for schools and online training modules used in conjunction with in-person consultation are effective (Motoca, et al., 2014). On-demand, remote delivery of professional development has become more than a nice thing to have, educators must receive the necessary professional training that they need when it is convenient and cost-effective for them.

Improving Accountability

While states are held accountable for documenting and reporting student outcomes, schools are still struggling with developing effective and systematic data management tools. While more and more schools report that special education students

have access to general education, this “access” can mean different things. In some cases, this may mean students have the same access as other students to information and materials, or it may mean that the curriculum is aligned with general education standards, or it may mean they have access to all experiences included in general education (McLaughlin, 2010).



Professional development **does not necessarily have to be time intensive or expensive to be effective** and virtual models may be a viable solution

The majority of published studies on student outcomes in general education classrooms reported pre-teaching or training of special education students in self-contained classrooms or resource rooms (Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013). Research indicates that teaching independence, fostering peer

relationships, adapting the general education curriculum, and providing additional learning opportunities for special education students are effective strategies for inclusion (Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013). However, unlike general education, there are few instructional tools available for teachers to use and teachers often must develop their own lessons, materials, and adaptations which can be tedious and difficult for general education teachers who have little background in special education. Again, technology may serve as a solid solution for schools in providing curriculum, lesson plans, materials, and resources. Using an online model that includes the necessary components for instructing special education students provides general education teachers the support necessary to more effectively teach these students. In addition, this kind of tool can provide teachers with effective instructional strategies for accommodating varying skill levels in special education students.

ESSA holds schools accountable to demonstrate student improvement for all students, including those with disabilities. Unfortunately, data collection and management

are difficult and time-consuming and few general education teachers have training or experience in the kind of data management that is necessary for special education students (Cornett & Knight, 2009). Using a mobile application or other digital application can streamline this process for teachers and improve the accuracy, frequency, and meaningfulness of student outcomes. In addition, using technology can decrease the training and coaching time needed to get teachers collecting and reporting outcomes.

Conclusions

Educational reform has focused on closing the achievement gap for at-risk, low-income, minority, and special education students for several decades. Unfortunately, this gap still exists and indeed, has worsened over the years. ESSA was established to more effectively address this gap through increased accountability and requiring specific student outcome data. ESSA provides funding and guidelines to improve outcomes for all students including encouraging equity and inclusion and allowing for flexibility in instruction and reporting outcomes. Online platforms offer a cost-effective solution for professional development, curriculum, lesson plans, materials, resources, behavior support, and data collection and reporting. In addition, online platforms save schools time and money on professional development by using online training modules for teachers and paraeducators. To bridge the gap, Rethink Ed adheres to ESSA standards and provides tools for supporting all students through SEL and offers the additional tools necessary for inclusion and meeting the goals and objectives of special education students.

Rethink Ed and ESSA Summary

Rethink Ed’s SEL and Special Education platforms support ESSA funding priorities in a variety of ways. Both platforms present equity, professional development, and technology benefits for students and education staff. In addition, the implementation support offered by Rethink Ed for both platforms ensures that schools are maximizing funds and minimizing staff time to fully benefit student outcomes. See the chart below for more information on the Rethink Ed SEL and Special Education platforms ability to be used for ESSA funding opportunities.

ESSA Funding Allocations	Rethink Ed SEL	Rethink Ed Special Education
Title I: Improving basic programs operated by state and local agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEL, equity and mental health lessons, professional development, and resources for Tiers 1, 2, and 3. • Preventative supports for problem behavior, absenteeism, and suspensions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizes technology to assist teachers in individualizing instruction, behavior plans, and IEPs for special education students. • Lessons, activities, videos, professional development, data collection, and progress monitoring of skills and behaviors for students with developmental disabilities such as autism and emotional disturbances.
Title II: Preparing, training, and recruiting high-quality teachers, principals, or other school leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40 on-demand professional development modules for <i>SEL</i>, <i>Equity</i>, <i>Mental Health</i> (suicide prevention, bullying, anxiety, and depression), and <i>Trauma</i> to support students social and emotional competencies. • Direct supports for coaching and PLC groups in a blended learning environment. 	<p>The importance of ensuring all teachers know how to manage behavior and screen for learning and attention issues makes Title II a strong fit for the Rethink Ed curriculum and professional development services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large library of on-demand professional development tools for special education including over 1500 video modeling resources, checklists, and other tools. • Multiple on-demand training modules around disability awareness, fundamentals of special education and ABA principles for educators, staff, paraprofessionals, and caregivers. • Direct supports for coaching and PLC groups in a blended learning environment.
Title III: Language instruction for English learners and immigrant students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development and student videos available in English and Spanish close captioning. • Home connection letters, lessons, activities available in English and Spanish. • Differentiated and scaffolded lesson plans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of ensuring that LEP students have the supplemental behavioral supports necessary to focus on the language instruction needed for their academic success are addressed through differentiated and scaffolded lesson plans. • Training center on-demand modules available in English and Spanish close captioning.
Title IV: 21 st Century Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web-based platform provides all stakeholders with access to SEL lessons in the classroom and through remote learning for college and career readiness. • Lessons can be taught as part of the school day, remote, or in after-school programs. • Technology allows for streamlined parent/caregiver engagement. • 40 on-demand professional development modules for <i>SEL</i>, <i>Equity</i>, <i>Mental Health</i> (Suicide Prevention, bullying, anxiety, and depression) and <i>Trauma</i> to support students social and emotional competencies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizes technology to assist teachers in individualizing instruction, behavior plans, and IEPs for special education students. Lessons can be implemented by teachers and support staff or other service providers in school or in the home. • Technology allows for easier parent/caregiver engagement. • Multiple on-demand training modules around disability awareness, fundamentals of special education, and ABA principles.
Title V: State innovation and local flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web-based platform allows for flexibility and cost-effectiveness in instruction for rural students and educators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web-based platform allows for flexibility and cost-effectiveness in instruction for rural students and educators.



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About Us

Rethink Ed was founded on a simple, yet powerful idea: To re-think education. To make it better and easier. To unburden school districts and empower educators. To improve outcomes and elevate accountability. To promote collaboration and inspire learning. And most importantly, to make a difference in the school day for everyone – administrators, educators, and students.

The Rethink Ed solution is part of Rethink First, a global company that is transforming behavioral healthcare. Similar to Rethink First's other solutions that are innovating and improving outcomes for clinicians and employers globally, Rethink Ed is pioneering EdTech with our relentless pursuit of innovative methods that put evidenced-based, data-informed, digitally delivered instruction and assessments into the hands of educators, clinicians, and parents who share our singularly minded focus: To power the potential of all children and to work together to help them succeed.

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