

“ESSA Implementation in States and School Districts: Perspectives from Education Leaders”
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP)
February 23, 2016

Oral Remarks of Tony Evers, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Wisconsin

Thank you Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and Members of the Committee for the allowing me to testify today.

In addition to being Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction, I currently serve as the President of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). As President, I am working to help CCSSO promote equity for all of our students. Successful implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is fundamental to my equity platform.

This body is well aware of CCSSO’s strong support of ESSA. Now that the bill has become law, we remain committed to ensuring successful implementation.

I have spent my entire career as an educator. I have learned many things along the way, most importantly that when it comes to policy implementation, a strong state-local partnership is critical. The role of the Federal government should be to ensure accountability for student achievement and to provide states and local districts the resources necessary to innovate, create equity, and improve outcomes.

In Wisconsin, we are referring to this transition as moving from NCLB-prescribed to ESSA-informed. To leverage the flexibility available, Wisconsin is beginning with stakeholder engagement. While Wisconsin has many existing collaborations, we will expand our outreach by bringing together many education groups, and others who have a major stake in our success such as business leaders, civil rights groups, parents, tribal reps, legislators, our governor, and others to help design a strategy that will improve education for all children.

We also will expand our outreach this spring with statewide listening sessions, a virtual discussion, and online feedback for all of the stakeholders in crafting our state’s plan. To that end, we hope that the Department of Education is able to finalize any implementation regulations this fall so we have a clear understanding of their vision.

Of equal importance, we will use this ESSA outreach effort to create permanent avenues for multiple stakeholders, to not only weigh in on ESSA, but other issues that are important to our state and local schools. Thus, ESSA will make Wisconsin’s education system stronger. We cannot forget that the original ESEA represents a seminal piece of civil rights legislation. The chief state school officers are committed to this legacy. We share a common goal to make sure every child graduates ready for college and career.

In Wisconsin, we have a lot of work to do. We have one of the largest achievement gaps among the states between students of color and their peers. We plan to use the flexibility of the new law to infuse the work of my Promoting Excellence for All initiative into the improvement work of our most struggling schools. Under ESSA, we will no longer need to impose a one size fits all solution upon our most struggling schools. Instead, we will work collaboratively with local schools to find state and local solutions to our problems.

Wisconsin is at the forefront of developing an accountability system that is reflective of the needs of our various partners. Wisconsin's has been praised for having one of the nation's most transparent report cards by the Education Commission of the States. We look forward to using the new flexibility ESSA provides to create even more useful report cards which could include information regarding college and career readiness, new equity measures, and other metrics.

A final word on accountability. All state chiefs are united to maintain strong accountability systems that will clearly identify the achievement of all students and in particular, subgroup performance. New ESSA flexibility will not change our determined focus on equity.

In states like Wisconsin, we welcome partnership with the Federal government to oversee and the progress we are making.

The success we envision under this new law will only be possible if we do not face new regulations from Washington. In the recent months since the law passed, the Department of Education has demonstrated a good partnership with states, providing helpful guidance on key issues. I applaud these positive steps.

Going forward, the Department of Education's role in providing states with guidelines and guardrails on the new law remains important. I and my fellow state chiefs are open to guidance that clarifies the expectations for states under the new law. How we achieve these expectations is a state and local responsibility.

Thank you for allowing me to testify, and thank you for your role in passing this new law. States are ready, willing, and able to lead.