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Researchers: Ed Dept's 'blanket approval' of ESSA plans signals shift in federal-state relationships

Author

4-5 minutes

Dive Brief:

- Even when state education agencies ignored or went against feedback from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in their plans to comply with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), their plans were still approved, according to [a new paper](#) appearing in Educational Researcher that explores shifting “power dynamics” between the department and the states.
- Most feedback focused on states’ accountability plans and the methods they would use to identify schools that need improvement. But Megan Duff and Priscilla Wohlstetter of Teachers College, Columbia University, write that they are “struck by the blanket approval of all plans, even those that remained in conflict with some objectives of the law, suggesting the federal government has, for now, left the carrots and sticks behind.”
- In cases where ED asked for more details on specific aspects of a state’s plan, state officials often provided more information, but they didn’t necessarily change anything, the authors write. Under the previous No Child Left Behind law, states’ plans often remained under “conditional approval,” but the authors’ review of ED’s feedback suggests federal officials are “willing to grant states increased power and flexibility under ESSA; state education leaders simply have to reach out and grab it.”

Dive Insight:

Even though states are now fully implementing their approved plans, revisions and requests for waivers will continue, and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos is [encouraging states](#) to submit waivers, particularly in the areas of assessment. States’ [ESSA report cards](#) — which are meant to provide clear information to parents and the public on how schools are performing — are also likely to cause ongoing implementation challenges, Duff and Wohlstetter write.

They note that as states were crafting their plans, education officials learned from each other. Connecticut, for example, pushed back when ED questioned its use of scale scores on state tests to indicate student achievement instead of proficiency rates, and Colorado’s plan in that regard was influenced by Connecticut’s. States “are taking cues from their peers about how to negotiate for additional flexibility in their new roles,” the authors write.

They suggest that ED in general might be growing more savvy in implementing policy and relying “more heavily on the power of negotiation rather than sanctions to achieve efficient outcomes.” But they also note that the real question is whether states will see improved student achievement as a result of standing up to the federal government.

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