

PUBLIC POLICY COMMENTARY



On Louisiana's Implementation of the Federal Every Student Succeeds Act: The State Should Include Meaningful Workplace Experiences

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Since State Superintendent of Education John White began a summer tour around Louisiana to discuss the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), news stories have focused primarily on feedback from union leaders seeking to use the ESSA review as an excuse to advocate for [reducing state testing and eliminating school letter grades](#). The Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) strongly urges the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) to reject any effort to water down accountability.

Rather than devising ways to leverage the ESSA review process to turn away from the strategies that have yielded success and growth for Louisiana's students, BRAC instead suggests that the LDE consider using this review as a constructive opportunity to improve students' college and career readiness. BRAC recommends that LDE incorporate into its ESSA implementation a plan to increase student engagement in relevant and valuable workplace experiences, thereby better preparing students for life after high school.

In the era of school accountability and reform, initiatives that do not get measured and for which schools are not held accountable often get ignored, or as the business adage goes, "you get what you measure." While many educators agree that meaningful engagement in the workplace is highly beneficial to students, Louisiana currently does not have any accountability measures in place regarding workplace experiences. Fitting succinctly into BRAC's five-year strategic plan for economic development in the Capital Region, meaningful engagement in the workplace, a powerful strategy for cultivating the state's talent, should be added as a measurement of school quality at the high school level.

Every Student Succeeds Act

ESSA reauthorizes the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and revises many of the provisions of 2002's No Child Left Behind Act. The bipartisan bill became law in December 2015 and covers many policy areas that states will use to increase education quality and equity. These policy areas span the gamut from assessments and state-adopted standards to teacher support and school funding. ESSA provides greater flexibility to states in designing their accountability models than did the national education laws preceding it. This flexibility presents a meaningful opportunity for the Louisiana business community to partner with state policymakers in ensuring that our state maintains high expectations for students and schools and has a plan in place to both measure and achieve them.

The accountability provisions under ESSA require states to define and measure at least one non-academic indicator of school quality. Louisiana already measures several of these indicators, including a dropout

accumulation index for middle schools, Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate/Dual Enrollment as part of the strength of diploma index, and Industry-Based Credentials for high schools. BRAC believes these existing measures are meaningful and should remain in place, but also recommends that LDE consider adding — perhaps to the strength of diploma index — a measurement of meaningful workplace experiences. Doing so would both increase the employability of Louisiana’s students and provide greater equity in access to meaningful out-of-school engagement with the world of work.

ESSA’s Framework for Measuring School Quality

ESSA requires that states create a system of school accountability that includes four indicators of quality. Three of these indicators are focused on academics, while the fourth is an additional *non-academic* indicator of school quality — and the focus for a potential new measure of workplace experiences. The law requires that each indicator be given “substantial weight,” and that together, the three academic indicators must carry much more weight than the fourth measure alone.



The four indicators together make up the total measure of school quality. They include:

1. An indicator of academic achievement based on long-term goals established by the state, proficiency on annual statewide assessment, and (at the state’s option) growth at the high school level;
2. An indicator of academic achievement that varies based on grade, in that for elementary and middle schools the indicator will include student growth or another valid and reliable statewide indicator, while for high school the indicator will be based on graduation rate;
3. An indicator measuring state-defined progress on English proficiency for English Language Learners (ELL); and,
4. *An indicator of school quality that must be a valid, reliable, comparable and statewide measure.*

This fourth indicator of school quality is where BRAC suggests including the additional measurement of meaningful workplace experiences. No matter the eventual changes to this non-academic indicator of school quality, it is important that our state focus on outputs instead of inputs, to ensure continued growth in student achievement. [Indicators suggested, for example, by the Louisiana Association of Educators](#) include *access* to advanced coursework, fine arts and physical education, or *the availability* of counselors or nurses, all of which are reflective only of inputs, rather than indicative of student success.

The Value of Workplace Experiences

Workplace experiences are opportunities for students to engage in a real-world business setting, gaining an invaluable understanding of the soft skills and characteristics necessary for success after graduation. The lack of soft skills among workers is a top concern of Capital Region business owners, and was their number one concern when surveyed by BRAC for its [2016 annual economic outlook report](#). Although the most valuable type of workplace experience at the high school level is part-time work in a job or internship, meaningful workforce engagement can also occur when students are held to workplace-like standards and expectations through a school-based enterprise (i.e.: serving as a teacher's aide for a semester, working on a school newspaper, acting as an assistant manager for the football team). These offer students a leg up in securing and keeping full-time employment upon graduation because they allow students to build a network of professionals and they train students in appropriate workplace behavior.

For instance, a [recent study](#) showed that 44% of unpaid interns and 72% of paid interns receive a job offer after completion of their internships. Another study found that students who worked regularly during high school, and kept their working hours under 20 per week, were more likely to enroll in college than both students who did not work and students who worked more than 20 hours per week.¹

Further studies show that the reasons behind the college and career success of students who have engaged in meaningful workplace experiences is related to attitudinal and motivational variables, likely learned during their engagement in the workplace. These variables include the ability and tendency to think about the future, set goals, and carry out plans, as well as persistence, initiative, outgoing character, ability to tolerate discipline, and emotional stability.^{2,3} One large study of more than 15,000 men found that personality traits evident in 18 to 19-year olds had a strong effect on wages and employment at ages 32 to 41, and that the lower on the wage scale a person fell, the larger the effect their personality traits had on earnings.⁴

Meaningful engagement in the workforce is arguably the best tool available to teach students those attitudinal and motivational skills that will most affect their success after high school. It should therefore be a goal of the LDE to motivate schools to provide such engagement, and to validly and objectively measure the soft skills learned during those experiences. Such measurement could be completed via an instrument similar to that of the [National Academy Foundation's Supervisor Assessment of College and Career Readiness](#).

Equitable Access to Workplace Experiences

The saying, "it's who you know, not what you know," carries an unfortunate truth when considering student access to workplace experiences. [Students of affluent parents have greater access](#) to workplace experiences like internships because of the professional networks to which their parents have access. Further, [students from low-income families are less likely to undertake unpaid workplace experiences](#) because they are unable to rely on a parent or guardian for financial support. This contributes to an inequitable system in which workplace experiences become a privilege denied to the disadvantaged. Addressing the inequitable access to internships, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, wrote in the *New York Times*:

The stakes of America's broken internship program are high. As report after report reminds us, this generation of students faces significantly worse job prospects than its predecessors. Without the short-term opportunities to help them learn, grow, connect with mentors and begin climbing the earning curve, [many promising young people with limited means are denied the chance to rise as high as their talent will take them](#).

¹Adolescent Work and the Early Socio-Economic Career, Mortimer, J.T., Staff, J., & Oesterle, S. (2003).

²Adolescent Competence and the Shaping of the Life Course, Clausen, J.S. (1991).

³The Labor Market Returns to Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Ability: Evidence from the Swedish Enlistment, Lindqvist, E., & Vestman, R. (2011)

⁴Lindqvist, et. al.

Holding schools accountable for providing workplace experiences is an important step in leveling the playing field for students of all backgrounds. Although students from low-income households may not have access to the business networks needed to obtain meaningful workplace experiences, schools and districts do have access to local business leaders, provided they have the motivation to prioritize and leverage these relationships. LDE may determine what qualifies as a meaningful workplace experience by including this measure in its accountability model; further, it should utilize its accountability model as a motivator for schools and districts to partner with businesses in creating meaningful workplace experiences for all students.

LDE has already recognized the value of workplace experiences coordinated by schools through grants related to its Jump Start program. These grants, funding Regional Workplace Experience Exchanges (RWEE), offered opportunities for students and teachers to engage in the workplace via job shadowing, internships, externships, live and virtual guest speakers, worksite visits, and more. Despite state funding, the value placed upon these workplace experiences by district and school leaders varied greatly, with some districts engaging diligently and others letting the opportunities pass unused. This underscores the need for statewide accountability measures.

Further, the LDE has also recently revamped requirements for internships that qualify for high school credit, establishing new standards for student engagement, teacher oversight, and business/industry evaluation. The revised internship requirements apply to a newly-created Virtual Workplace Experience course, which offers students who cannot access a worksite in person the opportunity to engage in the workplace without requiring they have the means or resources to transport themselves to and fro — they only need internet access. The Virtual Workplace Experience, while not a replacement for an in-person workplace experience, is a step forward in providing equitable access to the world of work. It becomes tremendously more meaningful if schools and districts are held accountable for participation rates and successful outcomes.

Conclusion: Using ESSA to Drive Student Engagement in the Workplace

If the ultimate and utilitarian aim of schooling is preparedness for participation in the workforce, we do Louisiana's students a disservice by not offering each of them significant access to the workplace before they enter it. The expectation that students will be prepared with workplace skills learned solely within an academic environment is unrealistic. To truly embrace and portray the soft skills necessary for success in the workplace, students must have exposure to those skills in the environment and context in which they are used.

As our state works toward college and career readiness for all students, we are faced with an opportunity to lead the nation in soft skills training and equitable access to meaningful workplace experiences. LDE should design ESSA's fourth required indicator of school quality to motivate schools to provide high-quality workplace experiences for students. BRAC's recommendation is that these workplace experiences take the form of part-time work in a job or internship, Virtual Workplace Experience, or school-based enterprise, and that satisfactory soft skills assessment by a supervisor serve as the primary measure of completion. Accountability value should be weighted to reflect the status of part-time work in an in-person job or internship as the gold standard for workplace experiences, so that schools and districts are incentivized to avoid the path of least resistance.

Louisiana's implementation of ESSA gives LDE the chance to ensure students are gaining real-world training in critical career-readiness skills via enriching workplace experiences. LDE should consider incentivizing districts and schools to place a priority on forming and fostering the necessary relationships with the business community to provide students the opportunities to witness and internalize these vital workforce abilities. Engagement in workplace experiences, and the skills imparted through such engagement, will make Louisiana students more employable and more successful, no matter the eventual college or career path they pursue.

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