

Improving Early Learning Through the Every Student Succeeds Act

BY MATT WEYER

Low-income and minority students are showing up to kindergarten anywhere from six months to over a year behind in math and reading skills on average when compared to their higher-income and white peers. These gaps in school readiness can be partially attributed to [the opportunity gap](#), the disparity among certain population groups in access to quality schools and the resources needed to be academically successful. The opportunity gap can then develop into an achievement gap as students progress through the rest of their education. These gaps [rarely close, and can even widen in some cases](#). The risk factors associated with living

in poverty—such as parents' education or violence in the community—can negatively impact a child's school readiness.

High-quality prekindergarten (pre-K) has been shown to effectively reduce the opportunity gap, yet low-income and minority students are [less likely to be enrolled in high-quality pre-K settings](#).

State Action

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law December 2015 and provides significant authority and autonomy to states to redesign their educational systems. Under ESSA, every state is required to submit plans detailing how they will

Did You Know?

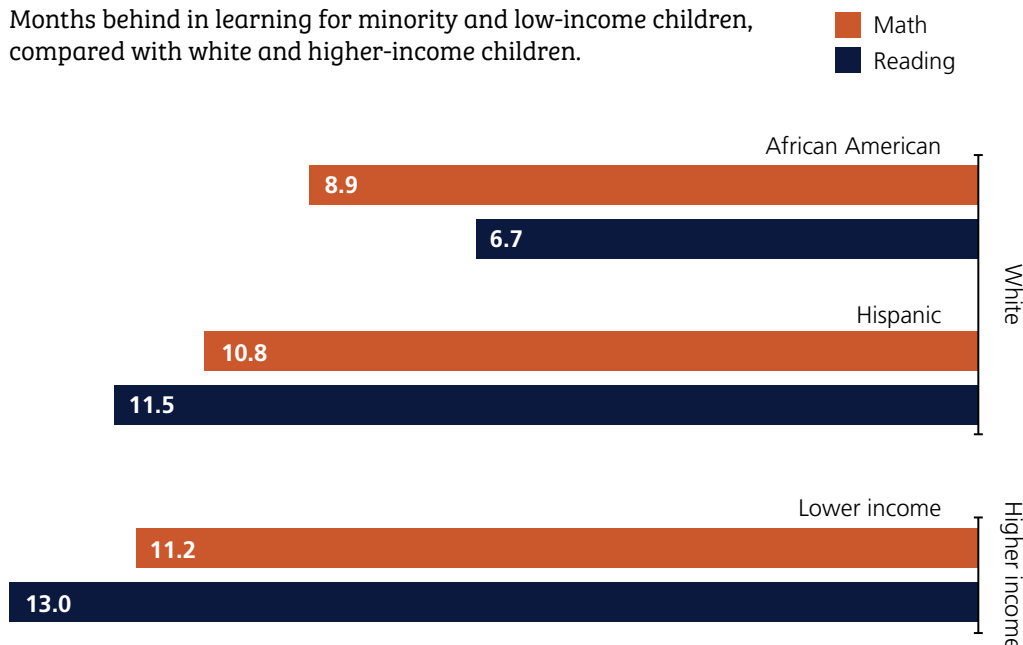
- Forty-eight percent of low-income students are ready for school at age 5, compared to 75 percent of children from families with moderate and high incomes.

- High-quality prekindergarten (pre-K) [has been shown](#) to reduce placement in special education by 8.1 percent, decrease grade retention by 8.3 percent and increase high school graduation rates by 11.4 percent.

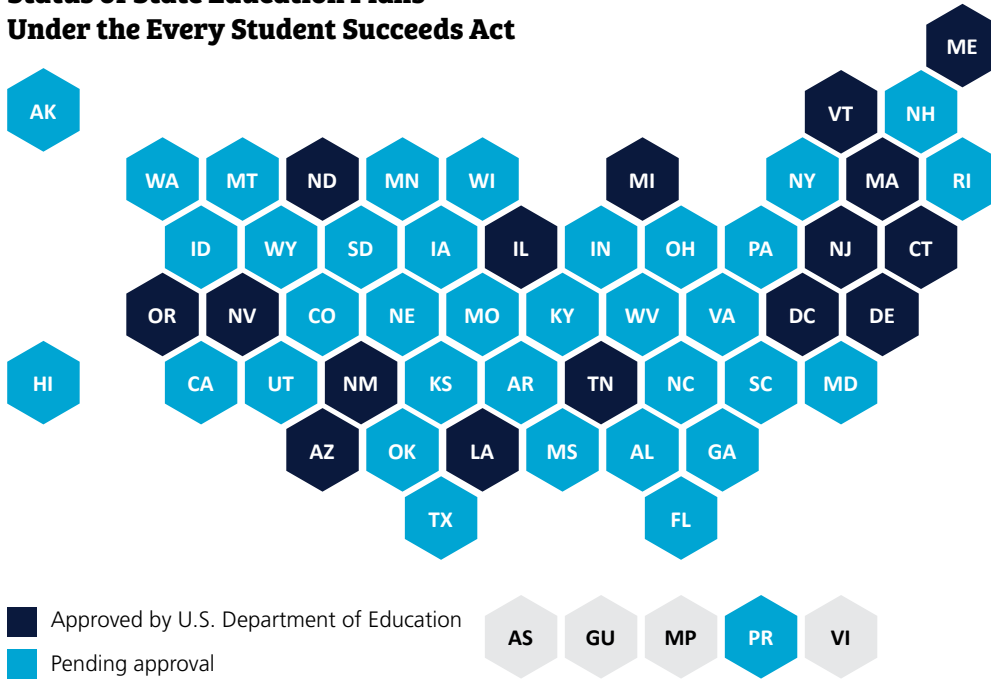
- High-quality pre-K is especially effective at placing low-income students and English learners on a positive developmental trajectory.

School readiness at kindergarten entry

Months behind in learning for minority and low-income children, compared with white and higher-income children.



Status of State Education Plans Under the Every Student Succeeds Act



comply with the law, providing state legislators the opportunity to support their state and local education agencies in improving outcomes for the youngest students.

The U.S. Department of Education provided states with the choice of meeting one of two deadlines for submitting their state plans detailing how they will comply with ESSA. The first was in April 2017 and the second and final was in September 2017. Below are some examples of early learning elements from the September round of submissions.

■ Increasing Access to High-Quality Programs.

[Kentucky](#) has developed a Preschool Partnership Grant designed to incentivize partnerships between local school districts and child care providers to develop full-day, high-quality early learning programs for at-risk children. [Nebraska](#) set a long-term goal as part of its strategic vision that 95 percent of elementary schools will be able to identify at least one high-quality early childhood educational program accessible to all of the school's preschool-age population.

■ Including Early Learning in School Improvement Strategies.

[Indiana](#) will include access to high-quality early learning as part of a larger plan to analyze how resources are being allocated to schools identified for improvement. [Connecticut](#), [Maryland](#) and [Rhode Island](#) have included access to and supports for early learning as part of their school improvement strategies.

■ Addressing the Opportunity Gap. In [Washington](#),

the Legislature tied concerns about the

opportunity gap to increased access to high-quality early learning by expanding the availability of full-day kindergarten.

■ Encouraging Early Learning Indicators in State and Local Report Cards.

[Maryland](#) has charged its state education agency with identifying measures of kindergarten readiness and academic growth through third grade to be included in state accountability systems when feasible.

■ Supporting Professional Development for Pre-K Teachers.

[Alaska](#) will support district efforts to provide professional learning opportunities to pre-K educators. [Mississippi](#) will provide professional development and training for pre-K educators on developmentally-appropriate practices in schools and community-based settings.

■ Supporting Transitions from Pre-K to Kindergarten.

[New Hampshire](#), [North Carolina](#), [Pennsylvania](#) and [Rhode Island](#) will require or encourage local districts to create transition plans to support young children as they move from early childhood programs into elementary schools.

Federal Action

All states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have submitted their ESSA plans to the U.S. Department of Education. As of Dec. 1, 2017, 15 states' and D.C.'s plans have been approved. Plans from the remaining 35 states and Puerto Rico have been cleared for review by the secretary of education and are currently pending. The education department keeps an [updated list](#) of state's approval status.

Additional Resources

- [State Accountability Under ESSA: Fall 2017 Submissions \(American Institutes for Research\)](#)
- [NCSL webpage, Early Learning and Support](#)
- [Official State ESSA Plans \(AIR\)](#)

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