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What Are They Talking About When They Talk About Equity? A Content Analysis of Equity Principles and Provisions in State Every Student Succeeds Act Plans

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Abstract: Despite numerous education reform efforts, disparities between more privileged students and students from marginalized and minoritized groups still persist in U.S. education. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) passed in 2015 indicates greater commitment of the federal government to advancing equity in education and gives state educational agencies more autonomy and flexibility in policy making. This article analyzes the content of 52 approved state ESSA plans to examine how the concept of equity in education is defined and applied in state-level ESSA policies and provisions. Results of a qualitative content analysis reveal that all but four state ESSA plans adopt a stance on equity centered on equitable access to educational resources—including funding and effective educators—and less than half state plans attend to equity in outcomes. Most of the state plans do not include a clear definition of what they mean by “equity”. In addition, the accountability systems used to evaluate the impact of equity policies in the plans are predominantly outcome-oriented using student standardized test performance as the key indicator. Incoherent policy principles, coupled with the market-oriented, standards-based policy solutions, may exacerbate the structural inequities facing schools and students that

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these policies aim to ameliorate. Implications for education policy and research are discussed.

Keywords: Every Student Succeeds Act; equity; content analysis; accountability

¿De qué están hablando cuando hablan de equidad? Un análisis de contenido de los principios y disposiciones de equidad en los planes estatales de la Every Student Succeeds Act

Resumen: A pesar de los numerosos esfuerzos de reforma educativa, las disparidades entre los estudiantes privilegiados y los estudiantes de grupos marginados y minoritarios aún persisten dentro de la educación estadounidense. La Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) aprobada en 2015 indica un mayor compromiso del gobierno federal para avanzar en la equidad en la educación y brinda a las agencias educativas estatales más autonomía y flexibilidad en la formulación de políticas. Este artículo analiza el contenido de 52 planes estatales aprobados por la ESSA para examinar cómo se define y aplica el concepto de equidad en la educación en las políticas y disposiciones de la ESSA a nivel estatal. Los resultados de un análisis de contenido cualitativo revelan que todos menos cuatro planes estatales de ESSA adoptan una postura sobre equidad centrada en el acceso equitativo a los recursos educativos, pero menos de la mitad de los planes estatales atienden a la equidad en los resultados. Además, la mayoría de los planes estatales no incluyen una definición clara de lo que quieren decir con “equidad”, y los sistemas utilizados para evaluar el impacto de las políticas de equidad en los planes están predominantemente orientados a los resultados utilizando el rendimiento de las pruebas estandarizadas de los estudiantes como el indicador clave. Los principios de políticas incoherentes, junto con las soluciones de políticas orientadas al mercado y basadas en estándares, pueden exacerbar las desigualdades estructurales que enfrentan las escuelas y los estudiantes que estas políticas pretenden mejorar. Se discuten las implicaciones para la política educativa y la investigación.

Palabras-clave: Every Student Succeeds Act; equidad; análisis de contenido; rendición de cuentas

Do que eles estão falando quando falam sobre equidade? Uma análise de conteúdo dos princípios e disposições da equidade nos planos estaduais da Every Student Succeeds Act

Resumo: Apesar dos numerosos esforços de reforma educacional, ainda persistem disparidades entre estudantes mais privilegiados e estudantes de grupos marginalizados e minorizados na educação dos EUA. A Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), aprovada em 2015, indica um maior compromisso do governo federal com o avanço da equidade na educação e dá às agências educacionais estaduais mais autonomia e flexibilidade na formulação de políticas. Este artigo analisa o conteúdo de 52 planos estaduais aprovados pela ESSA para examinar como o conceito de equidade na educação é definido e aplicado nas políticas e disposições da ESSA no nível estadual. Os resultados de uma análise qualitativa do conteúdo revelam que todos os planos estaduais da ESSA, exceto quatro, adotam uma postura de equidade centrada no acesso equitativo aos recursos educacionais - incluindo financiamento e educadores efetivos - e menos da metade dos planos estaduais atendem à equidade nos resultados. A maioria dos planos estaduais não inclui uma definição clara do que eles querem dizer com “equidade”. Além disso, os sistemas de prestação de contas usados para avaliar o impacto das políticas de patrimônio nos planos

são predominantemente orientados a resultados, usando o desempenho padronizado dos alunos como o principal indicador. Princípios de políticas incoerentes, combinados com soluções de políticas orientadas para o mercado e baseadas em padrões, podem exacerbar as desigualdades estruturais enfrentadas pelas escolas e estudantes que essas políticas visam melhorar. As implicações para políticas e pesquisas em educação são discutidas.

Palavras-chave: Every Child Succeeds Act; equidade; análise de conteúdo; prestação de contas

Introduction

Issues pertaining to equity, or inequity, on the basis of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, able-ness, gender, sexual orientation, and immigration status remain central in the United States, including its education system, despite numerous education reform efforts since the inception of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the 54-year-old U.S. federal education law. While the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion has been underscored in federal and state education policies and reforms in the past five decades (Allbright et al., 2019; Bertrand, Perez, & Rogers, 2015; Thomas & Brady, 2005), a plethora of research (Harris & Leonardo, 2018; Hill, 2017; Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006) has documented the persisting and exacerbating disparities in educational opportunity and outcome between more privileged students and students from marginalized and minoritized groups.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA. It replaced the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) and was passed by the Congress and signed into law in December 2015. ESSA carries much of the market-driven, standards-based school reform policies from NCLB, such as high-stakes standardized testing, alternative routes for teacher certification, and outcome-based, consequential accountability (Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz, 2013; Lipman, 2011; Thomas & Brady, 2005). Such policy initiatives are built on the widely embraced yet unchecked belief that public education in the United States largely “fails” to adequately educate its students and insufficiently prepares them to compete in a global knowledge economy (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Zeichner & Conklin, 2017). Unlike NCLB, however, ESSA shifts much of the policy-making power from the federal government back to the state level and grants more autonomy and flexibility to state educational agencies (SEAs) in developing individual state ESSA plans and accountability systems (Egalite, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2017; U.S. DoE, 2016). By the end of September 2018, the 52 ESSA plans for all 50 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) and Puerto Rico (PR) have been reviewed by the U.S. DoE and approved by the Secretary of Education.

ESSA boasts its greater attention on equity and excellence by focusing on the achievement and opportunity gaps among students within and between schools and districts, especially students who have been historically underserved in terms of educational achievement. Therefore, SEAs are mandated by U.S. DoE to explicate in their consolidated ESSA plans how they are planning to use federal funds and funded programs to reduce equity gaps and monitor, evaluate, and report the progress through an accountability system. The greater flexibility granted by the ESSA, however, leaves room for states to determine their own equity principles, policy priorities, and strategies and provisions to advance equity, and thus makes variations among state ESSA plans inevitable. An examination of how SEAs define and approach equity in their state ESSA plans is therefore very much warranted.

This study aims to answer two research questions: how is educational equity defined and interpreted in state ESSA plans? And relatedly, what policy provisions and strategies do SEAs adopt to enhance equity in their ESSA plans? This paper analyzes relevant content in all 52 approved state

ESSA plans with respect to their definitions of equity and associated strategies to promote equity in schools, including resource allocation, effective educator preparation and distribution, and accountability measures. To frame the analysis, various perspectives and theories of equity in education policy literature, as well as the work on critical policy studies are consulted. In what follows, an examination of how the concept of equity is understood and applied in educational research and practice, in particular under today's standards-based accountability policy context is presented. This literature reveals the tensions around the conceptualization of equity and the interpretation and implementation of equity-oriented policies among educational researchers and policy makers. Using qualitative content analysis, the equity positions and provisions of state ESSA plans are read and examined. Findings of the analysis are presented with a focus on various equity positions adopted by state plans, state strategies to improve students' equitable learning opportunities and outcomes, and the accountability systems measuring and monitoring states' progress towards the equity goals. Implications for policy making and future research are also discussed.

Conceptualizing Equity in Education Policy

There has been a long history of and an ongoing debate among educational researchers and policy makers about what constitutes an equitable education, what it looks like in practice, and how to achieve it (Jordan, 2010; Verstegen, 2015). While there is a much larger body of literature examining equity from a variety of philosophical, sociological, historical, and economic perspectives (e.g., Anderson, 2007; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1968; Howe, 1997; Rawls, 1971), most definitions of equity in education literature include equity in access to educational resources (input, such as funding and educators) and equity in learning outcomes (output, often measured by high stakes test scores); and with a lesser extent, equity in process, e.g., pedagogy (Bertrand, Perez, & Rogers, 2015; Bulkley, 2013; Jordan, 2010). For example, Baker and Green (2015) define equity in education as "primarily variations or relative differences in educational resources, processes, and outcomes across children" (p. 231). In a similar yet more detailed way, Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercer, and Roc (2016) define equity as "the policies and practices that provide every student access to an education focused on meaningful learning—one that teaches the deeper learning skills contemporary society requires in ways that empower students to learn independently throughout their lives" (p. 1). Cook-Harvey et al. (2016) further contend that such an equitable education requires "competent and caring educators...who are supported by adequate resources" so that "each student can develop his or her full academic and societal potential" (p. 1). In education policy research, however, much of the discussion on equity has centered on (in)equitable access to educational resources (Bulkley, 2013), in particular funding disparities and unequal distribution of high-quality educators, across schools and districts and among student groups (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2015; Knight, 2019; Rivera & Lopez, 2019; Verstegen, 2015). For instance, Knight (2017, 2019) reports that schools and districts serving high poverty and high minority students on average receive less funding but are disproportionately impacted by state funding cut. Additionally, students of color and low-income students are repeatedly found to be taught by experienced, certified-in-field, and effective teachers at a lower rate than their White or more affluent peers (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Goldhaber et al., 2015; Knight, 2019).

Verstegen (2015) notes that a principle of equity focusing on providing equal opportunity for all children to learn has been upheld in U.S. education policies. Berne and Stiefel (1984) distinguish between horizontal and vertical equity in distributing educational resources. Horizontal equity is

concerned with providing equal treatment and provisions to all schools and students whereas vertical equity is concerned with ensuring that students with greatest needs or in disadvantaged conditions will receive more resources (Berne & Stiefel, 1984). What is implied in the horizontal vs. vertical distinction is the difference between equality and equity. Although inequity often involves unequal or different treatment of individuals or groups, equity does not necessarily require—or even desire—an equal supply of resources and support because, as numerous research has revealed, students and schools are not equal in terms of characteristics and needs, nor do they start with the same resources and social and cultural capital in an even playground (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Goldhaber et al., 2015; Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017; Yosso, 2005). The idea of vertical equity recognizes the unique school contexts and diverse student needs and consequently differentiates the amount and type of resources and support to meet the divergent educational needs of students, especially those who are in the greatest need (Berne & Stiefel, 1984; Bulkley, 2013). The horizontal perspective of equity is similar to what Cochran-Smith et al. (2017) call a “thin” equity that prioritizes individuals’ equal access to educational resources and opportunities. In contrast, a “strong” equity recognizes the historical, socioeconomic, and racial inequities in education and calls for a structural, transformative approach to stop and uproot inequity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2017).

Horizontal and vertical views of equity differ in their approaches of how educational resources (input) should be distributed yet do not necessarily demand an equity in outcomes as a result of equitable access (Allbright et al., 2019). Guiton and Oakes (1995) propose a typology including three conceptions of equity: libertarian, liberal, and democratic liberal. While the libertarian and liberal positions focus on equitable distribution of educational resources and educational processes, the democratic liberal view places a greater emphasis on whether the educational inputs and processes lead to students reaching adequate learning performance, i.e., outcomes, as indicators of equity. This outcome-oriented, adequacy-based view of equity has been favored by court rulings and embraced by many policy makers and district and school leaders (Allbright et al., 2019; Baker & Green, 2015; Bulkley, 2013). Closely related to outcome equity is accountability measures used to monitor and evaluate equity in education. Accountability has been given increasing weight in education policies since the 1980s and especially after NCLB as a result of the standards-based movement (Thomas & Brady, 2005). The standards-based accountability system under NCLB is centered on student academic achievement measured almost exclusively by high stakes, standardized test scores (Ambrosio, 2013; Cochran-Smith et al., 2017). It also links school and educator evaluation and federally funded programs to student academic achievement and progress (Adams, Forsyth, Ware, & Mwavita, 2016) and assigns consequences to schools and districts failing to reach expected standards and improvement (Fusarelli, 2004; Thomas & Brady, 2005), which have significantly influenced state and district policies in funding, curriculum, and educator distribution and evaluation in order to meet the outcome requirements (Dee et al., 2013; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). ESSA carries over this standards-based, consequential accountability system yet delegates states to create their own accountability benchmarks for equity as long as they meet key U.S. DoE requirements, such as reporting disaggregated data and defining teacher effectiveness, student performance measures, and school improvement indicators.

Analyzing equity conceptions and provisions is not new in education policy research (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Allbright et al., 2019; Jordan, 2010; Kornhaber, Griffith, & Tyler, 2014; Saultz, White, McEachin, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2017). For example, in Cohen-Vogel and Hunt’s (2007) analysis of federal documents and talks on teacher education after NCLB, equity was referenced in 24 of the 41 reviewed documents. The equity language was primarily present under the context of inequitable access to highly qualified teachers that NCLB aimed to address (Cohen-Vogel & Hunt, 2007). Kornhaber et al. (2014) examined the meaning of equity in Common

Core State Standards by interviewing key policy entrepreneurs and noted that they shared an understanding most aligned with a horizontal view of equity focusing on equal distribution of educational resources. After surveying and interviewing a sample of influential national education experts, policy makers, and advocacy group and organization representatives, Bulkley (2013) found that these policy stakeholders differed on their conceptions and definitions of equity, approaches to achieve equity, and which student groups should be included in equity discussions and policies. A similar finding was reported by Bertrand et al. (2015) at the state level. Allbright et al. (2019) further revealed that district administrators' different conceptions of equity had impact on how they interpreted and implemented a state equity-oriented reform. Cook-Harvey et al. (2016) and Saultz et al. (2017) both analyzed equity provisions and opportunities afforded by ESSA. The study by Saultz et al. (2017) was most close to the current study in terms of scope and method. They analyzed content in ESSA and post-NCLB federal education policies containing such key words as "equity" "teacher" "distribution" to examine how teacher equity and distribution were defined and evolved in federal education laws. However, both groups of researchers relied on either pre-ESSA policies and related research (Saultz et al., 2017) or federal ESSA documents (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016) in their analyses because ESSA was in the early implementation phase at the time and specific state ESSA plans were not available. The present study was the first of its kind to analyze equity conceptions and provisions in all 52 final, approved state ESSA plans.

The consensus of the reviewed literature is that while advancing equity is repeatedly presented as an important goal for education policy reforms in the United States and consistently highlighted by policy makers at all levels (Cohen-Vogel & Hunt, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Saultz et al., 2017; Thomas & Brady, 2005), answers to the questions of what educational equity entails, to what end, and equitable for whom remain contentious among educational practitioners, researchers, and policy makers (Bulkley, 2013; Jordan, 2010; Kornhaber et al., 2017). This body of literature also shows that while an understanding of equity centered on equal access and opportunity remains prevalent (Bulkley, 2013; Verstegen, 2015), outcome equity has been given more attention in recent education policy in the era of standards-based, consequential accountability (Bulkley, 2013; Cochran-Smith et al., 2018; Thomas & Brady, 2005). From a policy history perspective, ESSA maintains NCLB's equity commitment by improving the educational experiences and results of historically disadvantaged student populations yet shifts the policy making power back to the state education agencies to develop policies and accountability measures in enhancing equity in their schools (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; Egalite et al., 2017; Knight, 2019). Therefore, it is important to establish a clearer view of state education policy makers' understandings of equity and provisions in support of such equity visions in their ESSA plans. Drawing on the various definitions and conceptions of educational equity reviewed above, this study explored whether state ESSA plans adopted a stance in equity that focused on students' equitable access to high quality teachers, programs, and financial resources, or one that prioritized the equitable learning outcomes among student groups, or both, by analyzing relevant content in these plans. The second objective of this analysis was to examine the initiatives and strategies illustrated in state ESSA plans in realizing the equity goals. This analysis is in particular timely as these plans unfold given the decisive roles states play in policy making in the ESSA era.

Method

This study adopts qualitative content analysis to examine state ESSA plans' equity positions and relevant strategies in achieving equity (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). Content analysis has been widely used in education policy analysis (Cohen-Vogel & Hunt, 2007; Shaheen & Lazar, 2018;

Smith, Smith, Osborn, & Samara, 2008). A qualitative approach is chosen because the purpose of this study is to provide a meaningful description and interpretation of state equity positions and associated content within their specific policy contexts (George, 2009). As such, this analysis follows the theoretical and epistemological assumptions of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) by recognizing that policy texts and narratives are socially constructed and value-laden, and that whose meanings are open to interpretation in order to reveal what equity perspectives are valued and legitimized in state ESSA plans (Schreier, 2012). In this study, the state consolidated ESSA plans are viewed as policy documents containing words and narratives constructed in particular ways to deliver certain possibilities of thought and action and examined as “representations which are encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromise, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations) and decoded in complex way (via actors’ interpretations and meaning in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context)” (Ball, 1993, p. 11). It is through the deconstruction of the policy content by a close reading of the documents that policy makers’ values and beliefs about equity can be extracted (Krippendorff, 2018; Young & Diem, 2017).

The 52 approved ESSA plans from all 50 states and D.C. and PR, and the original ESSA policy documents from the U.S. DoE—which was included for contextual information—were gathered and imported into MAXQDA, a mixed methods data analysis software, for analysis (Schreier, 2012). A search was performed within MAXQDA using the key words “equity” and “equitable” and text units containing the key word(s) were read and coded within the contexts where these units occurred using a self-developed coding scheme. Limiting the analysis to content these two words being explicitly used not only offered insights about policy makers’ definitions and interpretations of equity, but also revealed the policy specifics and contexts where these equity perspectives were applied (Schreier, 2012), in the form of policy strategies and programs outlined in these plans. The unit of coding was a sentence or a clause that constituted a complete statement, which ranged from as short as a bullet point to an entire paragraph. In addition, the paragraph that included the units and sentences immediately before and after the one that contained the key words were also read in order to capture the background and additional equity-related information, if any. Units containing the key words but did not directly pertain to educational equity in the respective state were not included for coding. For example, all state plans included the original U.S. DoE ESSA template and guidance that contained equity-related regulations. Many state plans also listed partners and organizations they consulted during the policy making process and many of which had equity in their names. These text units were excluded from the analysis if no specific information on equity principles, policies, or provisions was mentioned.

A combination of deductive and inductive coding approaches was used: text units were first read and deductively coded with a list of theory-driven codes created in light of relevant scholarly conceptions of and approaches to equity reviewed above (Schreier, 2012). For example, such instances as “provide equitable resources to meet the needs of all students to ensure that they have access to quality educational opportunities” and “equitable access to, participation in, and appropriate educational opportunities for all individuals served” were coded as “access oriented” while units such as “we strive to provide equity in result” and “formulating and advocating for policies that enhance education, empower districts, and ensure equitable outcomes for all students” were coded as “outcome oriented.” An example of content that considered both positions was “we value equity so that all of our students will have the opportunity to graduate from high school with the education and skills they need to go to college or start a career of their choice” because of its twofold emphasis on opportunity and result. And if an equity in access position was identified, whether a vertical or a horizontal approach (Berne & Stiefel, 1984) was adopted was further distinguished. The aforementioned codes were later clustered into the larger category of “state

stance on equity.” The original coding book was reviewed by a panel of university professors and researchers who were experts in content analysis and education policies to improve its validity (Schreier, 2012). The coding book was revised in light of the recommendations of the panelists before it was applied to the dataset by the author.

Open codes and *in vivo* codes emerged from the data were added to the evolving coding list during the data-driven, inductive coding phase (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Schreier, 2012). Some examples included “external PD partners” “alternative certification” and “grow your own program”. These codes were then categorized and organized in an iterative fashion—adding new codes when new content was coded, merging overlapping ones, and eliminating redundant and ambiguous ones—using the constant comparative analysis strategy (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For instance, both “alternative certification” and “grow your own program” were later clustered under the categories of “teacher preparation” and ultimately “equitable access to educators;” and the former was grouped along with “external PD partners” under the category of “market-oriented solutions.” Once the coding book was finalized, plans were recoded to ensure consistency and check for rival explanations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analytic and reflective memos were written throughout the data collection and analysis process to record preliminary interpretations and keep an ongoing record of the author’s coding choices and personal reflections (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Limitations

A number of limitations of this analysis have to be acknowledged. This study was an analysis of state ESSA plan content returned by the search using the two key words “equity” and “equitable.” Although segments before and after the returned results were examined, it was possible that other parts in the plans that did not contain these terms also included content illustrative of the SEAs’ equity stances and equity-related strategies despite not explicitly labeled as so. As such, this analysis was limited by focusing on content where these terms were directly used in the plans. That said, policy makers’ decision to frame certain issues, approaches, and groups with the “equity” marker while not for others in such policy documents as ESSA plans may suggest their positions on equity and set a limit on what can be counted as “equity”, which likely have significant implications for practice (Bulkley, 2013). Therefore, it is worth first asking what “equity” and “equitable” really mean when they are used by policy makers in state ESSA plans.

An additional caveat was that as a content analysis, this study viewed the ESSA plans as written documents that can be analyzed to infer SEAs’ policy intent and policy makers’ thinking on equity (Krippendorff, 2018). In reality, these ESSA plans were likely constructed out of a contentious negotiation process due to the wide range of stakeholders within and beyond SEAs involved in the policy making process and the divergent conceptions of equity they may bring to the table. Furthermore, the political pressure to meet federal ESSA regulations and federal and state accountability goals may also influence state policy makers’ decision on how to compose equity-related content in ESSA plans. The degree to which these policy narratives accurately reflect state education officials’ and policy makers’ perspectives on equity (Bertrand et al., 2015) is thus unclear from this analysis. Nevertheless, analyzing state policy documents has important implications because of the impact these state ESSA plans are likely to have on local policy stakeholders and educators as they interpret the policy messages and implement the policy mandates (Sampson, 2019).

Relatedly, this analysis did not take into consideration how equity-related policies in state ESSA plans would be interpreted by local policy stakeholders. Researchers have reported that leaders and educators at local education agencies (LEAs) and schools often make sense of the policy

intent and goals in light of their prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences about equity that are situated within their specific socio-cultural, -political, and professional contexts (Allbright et al., 2019; Hill, 2001), which have impact on what aspects and components of the policy they resonate and choose to implement (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). In this way, an analysis of the local interpretation and buy-in of the state equity positions and associated initiatives is as significant as that of the policy content, though beyond the scope of this study.

Findings

ESSA plans from all states included some visions, statements, and regulations and provisions on equity, yet with varied degrees of clarity and specificity. Almost all state plans held a view of educational equity focusing on access to education resources while less than half attended to equity in outcome. Most state plans included content about improving equitable learning for low-income students and minority students with varied coverage on other student groups. Consistent with their emphasis on equitable access, state strategies in promoting equity were centered on equitable distribution of funding and educators among schools and students. Many states also referenced to or incorporated in their ESSA plans information contained in their Equitable Access to Excellent Educators plans previously submitted to the U.S. DoE in 2015, months before the passage of ESSA. However, states overwhelmingly adopted an accountability system with student learning outcomes on the basis of standardized test performance as the primary indicator of equity policy impact.

In this section, findings will be presented around categories emerged from the analysis, with a focus on different stances and principles of equity in state ESSA plans, focal groups, strategies to improve equity in funding, educator quality, and learning environment, and accountability systems used to measure and report equity progress and outcomes. Excerpts reproduced from the state ESSA plans will be used to support the analysis, labeled by state abbreviations and page numbers in parentheses.

State Stance on Equity

In defining and describing equity in the context of ESSA, state plans primarily adopted an access-oriented view of equity focusing on ensuring students' equitable access to educational resources and opportunities while not necessarily demanding equity in outcomes. The majority of the state plans favored a vertical approach to equity that recognized the needs to provide more resources to disadvantaged groups and students with the greatest needs. Meanwhile, an attention to equitable outcomes was also suggested—despite in a relatively subtle way—in state plans by naming eliminating discrepancies in educational achievement among various student groups as the ultimate goal of equity policies and interventions. Although all but four of the state plans mentioned equitable access, less than half maintained an outcome-oriented stance on equity. Slightly more than one third of the state plans were found to hold a dual emphasis on equity in both access and outcome. Table I summarizes states and their respective stance on equity found in their ESSA plans.

Table I
State ESSA Plans by Equity Stance

Equity Stance	State
Access-oriented (48)	AL, AK, AZ, AR, CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, GA, HI, ID, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NE, NV, NH, NJ, NM, NY, NC, ND, OH, OK, OR, PA, PR, RI, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, WA, WV, and WI
Outcome-oriented (23)	AR, CO, D.C., DE, HI, IL, IA, KY, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, NE, NJ, NY, OR, TN, UT, VT, WA, WI, and WY
Access and Outcome (19)	AR, CO, DE, HI, IA, KY, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, NE, NJ, NY, OR, TN, UT, WA, and WI

Seven states were found to give some definitions of what they meant by “equity” in their ESSA plans: Kentucky, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, Tennessee, Vermont, and Wyoming. For example, Oregon defined equity in education as “the notion that each and every learner receives the necessary resources they need individually to thrive in Oregon’s schools regardless of their national origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, home language, or family income” (OR, p. 11). Similar definitions of educational equity that primarily centered on equitable access and opportunity were found in the plans of Kentucky, Minnesota, and New York. Minnesota’s ESSA plan explicitly distinguished equity from equality by stating that “equity is different from equality; equity is a principle that is based upon justness and fairness, while equality demands everyone be treated at the same level” (MN, p. 5), which unambiguously indicated the vertical approach to equitably distributing resources considering varied needs of schools and students (Berne & Stiefel, 1984). The vast majority (48 out of 52) of the states shared this access-oriented conception of equity, though most of them did not include a clear definition of equity in their ESSA plans. For instance, Louisiana mentioned equitable per pupil expenditures, distribution of educators and staff, and access to high quality programs in its ESSA plan, which indicated its access orientation towards equity. However, an explicit definition of “equity” or “equitable” was not found in the plan.

Wyoming, however, took a different stance that defined equity from an outcome perspective as “a school measure of academic growth for any student who scores in the bottom quartile in reading or math or both based on scale score cut points identified during the baseline year” (WY, p. 21). This understanding of equity explicitly focusing on learning outcomes of student was found in 23 of the 52 state ESSA plans. For example, Illinois aimed to “enhance education, empower districts, and ensure equitable outcomes for all students” (IL, p. 8). Vermont also committed to using the plan to “guide and shape our improvement efforts as we seek ever more equitable outcomes.” (VT, p. 12). This finding was illustrative of previous research showing a shift in education policy after NCLB that placed an increasing emphasis on student learning outcomes as indicators of equity, notwithstanding a still strong hold of the principle of equal opportunity (Bulkley, 2013; Verstegen, 2015), which was shared by the vast majority of the states in this study. Similarly, the majority (16) of the 23 states did not clearly define what they meant by “equitable outcomes”, while five (AR, HI, MA, MN, and NE) framed it from the perspective of closing achievement gap. For example, Hawai‘i highlighted key initiatives to “close the achievement gap and support equity and excellence in student outcomes” (HI, p. 5) while Nebraska adopted a framework that provided “a fundamental focus on achievement and opportunity gaps and [ensured] strategies produce equitable outcome for each and every learner” (NE, p. 36). Maine was the only exception

who claimed to be “committed to providing equitable opportunities for students to learn and demonstrate understanding at a level of competency that supports continued learning and preparedness for productive citizenship” (ME, p. 75). This statement implied a competence-based view of equity in outcome that expected all students to achieve a performance threshold deemed adequate.

Nineteen state plans mentioned both equity in opportunity and equity in outcome in their ESSA plans. For example, Iowa aimed to “provide equitable access and challenge to all students...[and] strive[s] to provide equity in result” (IA, pp. 3-4). Kentucky defined equity as “equitable availability to research-based student experiences and school factors that impact student success” (KY, p. 51) and maintained that all schools and districts should strive to “achieve equitable and comprehensive success for all students.” (KY, p. 10). Both examples showed an attention to whether equitable access to educational opportunities was leading to equitable learning outcomes. The definition included in Minnesota’s ESSA plan is worth quoting at length:

Education equity is the condition of justice, fairness, and inclusion in our systems of education so that all students have access to the opportunity to learn and develop to their fullest potential. The pursuit of education equity recognizes the historical conditions and barriers that have prevented opportunity and success in learning for students based on their race, income, and other social conditions. Eliminating those structural and institutional barriers to educational opportunity requires systemic change that allows for distribution of resources, information, and other support, depending on the student’s situation to ensure an equitable outcome. (MN, p. 5)

Central to this definition were the ideas of justice, fairness, and inclusion and the emphasis on equitable opportunity and—though to a less extent— equitable outcome. Compared with conceptions found in other states’ plans, especially those emphasizing equal access to school resources as the solution to the inequities, this view of equity recognized the out-of-school “structural and institutional barriers” that contributed to the disadvantaged learning opportunity for students from historically marginalized groups and called for a systemic change of the broader inequitable social structures in order to remove barriers causing inequity within schools. This position was reflective of what Cochran-Smith et al. (2017) called a “strong” equity. Such a clear and thorough position statement on equity, however, was a rarity in the reviewed state ESSA plans.

Focal Groups

SEAs were mandated by U.S. DoE to delineate in their ESSA plans strategies and provisions to ensure an equitable education for a variety of historically underserved students. In particular, the U.S. DoE required SEAs to “provide students from low-income families and minority students with greater access to effective teachers, principals, and other school leaders” (U.S. DoE, 2016, p. 21) and to delineate in the state ESSA plans “how low-income and minority children are not served at disproportionate rates by ineffective, out-of-field, or inexperienced teachers” (U.S. DoE, 2016, p. 21). Other student groups required in the federal ESSA regulations and template provided by the U.S. DoE included English learners, migratory children, LGBT students, children and youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at-risk, and homeless/foster children (U.S. DoE, 2017). All 52 state plans incorporated information about these mandatory student groups, yet the majority of them focused only on low-income students and minority students and used verbatim words from the U.S. DoE template with few or no substantial, state-specific modification for the other groups. This

practice suggested that, instead of maximizing the policy flexibility afforded by ESSA (Egalite et al., 2017), SEAs still chose to follow the federal prescription and did not go beyond what was minimally required.

English learners and —with a much lower rate— students with disabilities were also frequently mentioned by state ESSA plans after low-income and minority students. For example, “ensuring equity for historically disadvantaged students” was one of the six guiding principles of Iowa’s ESSA plan. It further specified “historically disadvantaged students” as “students with disabilities, students who are economically disadvantaged, students from diverse ethnic and racial groups, English learners, students of military connected families, as well as students who are migrant, homeless, or in foster care” (IA, p. ix). A few states elaborated in their plans how students with limited English proficiency would be supported and monitored for accountability purposes yet the majority did not articulate how English learners would be accommodated with equitable learning opportunities, such as learning materials or assessment in their native languages. LGBT students were the least mentioned group by only three states.

Additional student groups were found in select state ESSA plans, such as gifted students, female students, Native American students, and students in remote and rural areas. For instance, Native American (American Indian and Alaska Native) students and their communities were mentioned in nine of the 52 ESSA plans: either highlighted as an individual focal group or cited as one of the students of color groups. These variations showed that although the principle of vertical equity of attending to the needs of the disadvantaged students was observed by most states, states seemed to have their own priorities in terms of which groups of students were considered “underserved” in their states and thus entitled to the equity policies and provisions.

Equitable Access to Educational Resources

The majority of state ESSA plans adopted a position on equity that focused on equitable access to educational opportunities and resources, which can be classified into three broad categories in the reviewed plans: equitable funding, equitable access to effective educators (including teachers and school leaders), and equitable learning environment including school resources and facilities (e.g., curriculum programs, library, technology, and counseling), discipline practices, and school climate. Provisions and strategies for all three categories were discussed below, with an emphasis on equitable access to effective educators. This emphasis was mainly because states drew heavily in their ESSA plans on the Equitable Access to Excellent Educators plans (“Equity Plans” thereafter) they submitted to the U.S. DoE, which, as its name suggested, focused on educators.

Equitable funding. In education literature, equity is often discussed from the school finance perspective (Malen, Dayhoff, Egan, & Croninger, 2017; Odden & Picus, 2014; Rivera & Lopez, 2019), i.e., the funding structures and monetary resources available to districts and schools. Resource gaps within and between districts and schools were identified by almost all state ESSA plans as a major source of inequitable educational opportunities among students. A notable exception was Hawai‘i, who claimed that funding and resources were equitably distributed among its schools and instead identified inadequate funds as a main barrier for a high-quality education. This may explain why Hawai‘i chose a twofold view of equity attending to both access and outcome and viewed the latter as a key indicator of equity. Because of the identified resource discrepancies, equitable distribution of federal and state funds among schools was mentioned by most state plans. However, the language used by state states made it challenging to tell with certainty whether a horizontal or vertical equity approach was applied. For example, New Jersey claimed to “create a fair and equitable process for distributing such funds” (p. 30), yet no further information on how this “fair and equitable process” would look like was found in the plan.

Connecticut was the only state that unambiguously specified the principle of “funding based on equity and not equality” (p. 149) in its state plan, which indicated a vertical approach allocating more resources to students with the greatest needs as opposed to evenly distributing resources regardless of relative wealth of the districts. In addition, a few states included in their ESSA plans language suggestive of a vertical approach attending to specific school and district needs in funding. For example, the Minnesota plan stated that the state department will review school improvement funds and state fund annually to ensure that “resources are distributed between districts and support providers equitably based on planned activities to support schools and based on school needs” (p. 3). This approach was consistent with Minnesota’s distinction between equity and equality and its upholding of a vertical vision of equity discussed previously. Several other states also mentioned using fund according to “identified needs” (NE, p. 124), “documented needs” (NH, p. 56), “community’s identified need” (OR, p. 92), “student-and district-level characteristics” and “schools with the greatest needs” (PA, p. 6), and “identified needs of each region” (PR, p. 147); to support “those students with the greatest needs” (NY, p. 7) and “provide more dollars for historically disadvantaged students” (ND, p. 105). However, what constituted the “need(s)” were not clearly explained in these examples, except the last one of North Dakota. Such vague wording was not dissimilar to the unclear definitions of equity found in the state plans.

The principle of “supplement, not supplant” required by the U.S. DoE in utilizing federal dollars was also observed in state plans. This principle regulated that schools serving large percentage of students living in poverty and with the greatest needs should not be denied of funding they would have received from the state should they not receive federal Title I fund. This strategy aimed to offset the inequities created by the unequal relative wealth of the districts. However, as Adamson and Darling-Hammond (2012) observed, such strategies helped little to decrease the disparities of resources among schools as a result of school’s heavy reliance on local property taxes and the small percentages of federal and state funds in school budget. In addition, the categorical fund tied to particular programs does not always allow districts to use the money flexibly according to the local needs due to their strictly defined purposes and the rigid requirements of equalizing funding across schools (Knight, 2019). The decentralized approach adopted by ESSA, however, may have the potential to ameliorate funding inequities due to relative local wealth by giving states more flexibility over allocating state and local resources.

In sum, almost all states recognized in their ESSA plans the resource disparities among districts and proposed more equitable funding structures based on needs of students, schools/districts, and communities, which suggested the vertical approach to equity. None of the state plans was found to explicitly maintain a horizontal view of equally distributing resources across schools and districts.

Equitable access to educators. Inequitable access to effective teachers and school leaders among student groups exists both within and between districts and schools (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Goldhaber et al., 2015). Schools serving higher minority and low-income student populations often face severe teacher shortage and lower teacher retention rates, which consequently lead to a disproportionately high percentage of students of color in low-income schools taught by teachers who are unlicensed, inexperienced, or teaching outside of their certified fields (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). The Excellent Educators for All initiative of the U.S. DoE aimed to address this inequitable access to educators and asked each SEA to submit an Equity Plan delineating their definitions of effective teachers and steps SEA would take to increase equitable distribution of teacher quality for all students—especially students from low-income families and minority students, and strategies to measure and publicly report the progress.

Definitions of effective teachers. Unlike NCLB, which stipulated states to comply with the federally defined “highly-qualified teachers” (HQT) — teachers who have full state certification or licensure, at least a bachelor’s degree, and demonstrated knowledge in the subjects they teach— requirement and report students’ access to HQT, ESSA instead asks each state to come up with their own applicable state definitions of experienced and effective teacher, as well as certification and licensure requirements. This policy change, in addition to giving states more policy autonomy, indicates ESSA’s shift away from NCLB’s input (“qualified”) mandate to a dual-focus on both input (“experienced” and “in-the-field”) and output (“effective”) dimensions of teacher quality and accountability (Saultz et al., 2017). In other words, under ESSA the quality of teachers is not only defined by their qualifications/ credential and content and pedagogical knowledge, but also tied to certain student learning outcome teachers are expected to produce, which are used to evaluate the extent to which high quality educators are equitably distributed.

All states included in their ESSA plans definitions of certified (in-the-field), experienced, and effective teachers. Despite some variations discussed below, the majority of states used the length of teaching to determine teacher experiences. States identified teachers as “out-of-field” if they did not have the certification or endorsement to teach the subjects. The “effectiveness” of teachers was defined by most states based on their performance on SEA- or LEA-determined evaluation system and/or their students’ achievement on national or state assessments.

Some important differences were found in states’ criteria and approaches in determining teacher effectiveness in their ESSA plans. For example, California defined “ineffective teacher” as:

A teacher who is: (a) misassigned (placed in a position for which the employee does not hold a legally recognized certificate or credential or a certificated employee placed in a teaching or services position in which the employee is not otherwise authorized by statute to serve), or (b) teaching without a credential (CA, p. 77).

This definition seemed to equate “effective teacher” with “certified teacher” by using the qualification—the teaching credential as the defining characteristics of an effective teacher. This contrasted with definitions adopted by many other states. See, for example, Arkansas’s definition of effective teachers:

An effective teacher is a teacher who through training and experience (more than 3 years of teaching) exemplifies the state’s teaching standards, as demonstrated by consistently high performance ratings within a state-approved evaluation and support system that includes multiple measures of student growth (AR, p. 109).

This definition was more explicitly focused on the measurable outcomes of teaching demonstrated by student learning and growth than the input, i.e., credential and experience. Some indicators of effective teachers included in Arkansas’ definition were:

Consistently plans and prepares to meet the needs of all students;
Establishes an environment most conducive for learning;
Uses highly effective instructional practices;
Communicates and collaborates effectively with all stakeholders; and
Seeks continual professional growth and ethical professional practices. (AR, p. 109)

All the examples excerpted above can be considered as observable and measurable (to varied extent though) instructional, social, and professional practices of teachers presumably indicative

of their effectiveness beyond teaching certification or qualifications. Arkansas also defined “unlicensed teacher” and “out-of-field teacher” in its ESSA plan as “a person teaching a class under a licensure exception” and “a teacher who is teaching out of license area while on an Additional Licensure Plan” (AR, p. 110) respectively, which were closer to California’s “ineffective teacher” definition. California, however, defined “out-of-field teacher” as “a teacher who has not yet demonstrated subject matter competence in the subject area(s) or for the student population to which he or she is assigned” (CA, p.77), which adopted an outcome-oriented approach.

Variations were also found among states’ definitions of “experienced teachers.” While almost all states used the number of years teaching as the criterion, they varied on the specific numbers: the most states (24 out of 52) considered at least three years of full time teaching as “experienced”, others had the threshold as low as two years (e.g., AL, CA, CO, and OH) or one year (e.g., AK, D.C., HI, KY, and LA); and as high as four (e.g., CT, DE, FL, and NJ) or five years (WA). A few states also used or added certification requirements to years of teaching in their definitions. For example, “inexperienced teachers” were defined as those with “preliminary license in the subject area they teach” (OR, p. 77) in Oregon and as having less than four years of teaching experiences or holding a temporary certificate in Florida.

The definitional differences found among states have important implications because ESSA stipulates that state ESSA plans must identify and analyze students’ equitable access to educators using the defined terms and describe the steps that SEAs will take to ensure that disadvantaged students, especially low-income students and minority students, will not be taught at higher rates than other students by uncertified, inexperienced, out-of-field, and ineffective teachers. Because practitioners’ and implementers’ understandings of the policy are directly influenced by the ways policy narratives are constructed and organized (Sampson, 2019; Stein, 2001), the severity of inequitable distribution of teachers and the strategies SEAs and LEAs choose to enforce may vary due to the different definitions and standards adopted. In fact, one unintended consequence of NCLB documented in research was that states tended to lower their standards in order to meet the equity mandates (Adams et al., 2016; Fusarelli, 2004). Although it is too early to evaluate the impact of equity policies proposed in state ESSA plans, varied levels of standards and implementation are likely to occur as a result of the different interpretations of policy and definitions of key terms held by educators and educational leaders as indicated in previous research (Allbright et al., 2019; Sampson, 2019).

Strategies to improve equitable distribution of teacher quality. The SEAs are mandated by the U.S. DoE to describe in their state ESSA plans interventions used to ensure that low-income and minority students are not taught in a higher rate by inexperienced and ineffective teachers teaching outside their certified fields and strategies to support educators for the students who need them the most. Strategies included in state ESSA plans were focused on teacher/leader preparation, recruitment and retention, novice teacher support and professional development, and recognition and advancement. For instance, the Maine plan recognized that

equitable access to excellent teachers and leaders is a complicated endeavor, and that achieving teacher and leader equity goals will require an integrated and coherent approach to human capital management.....including educator preparation and certification, recruitment and selection, induction and mentoring, evaluation and professional growth, compensation and career advancement, and so on..... (ME, p. 55)

One example of state initiatives on educator preparation was Missouri's equity lab, which was a Grow Your Own program for LEAs to produce a sustained supply of teacher candidates needed in the local school community. Other examples included Kentucky's New Teacher Institute that offered a 24-month professional learning to new teachers coming to the profession with industrial and technical working experiences; the Innovative School District of North Carolina created to establish innovative conditions in local communities for continually low-performing elementary schools "where accountable, data-driven partnerships can come together with a single vision for equity and opportunity for all students" (NC, p. 11); and Pennsylvania's Inspired Leadership Program, which was a two-year program for novice principals and school leaders focusing on equity and leadership and additional professional development opportunities according to their specific needs. These initiatives and programs were situated in local LEA contexts and aimed to provide educators with knowledge and strategies specifically tailored to meet the needs and challenges of local districts and schools, which reflected a vertical equity principle. Similarly, many states also noted the needs to provide novice teachers mentorship and professional learning opportunities. For instance, Alabama provided funding to train and compensate mentors for every first-year teacher in the state and Connecticut specifically mentioned support to "early career teachers teaching in high-poverty, high-minority schools including extended time with a mentor.....to support their induction into the profession" (CT, p. 71).

A few state plans noted that teachers were not sufficiently compensated in general and in high poverty and minority districts in particular and consequently proposed incentives for recruiting teachers, such as differential pay. Maine, for instance, mentioned its experiences in "working with teachers and school leaders on innovative pay practices" and encouraged LEAs to explore "alternatives to the conventional, fixed-cost pay program" (ME, p. 61). Other states recognized the needs to create teacher advancement and leadership career pathways. For example, North Dakota mentioned professional learning opportunities "offered to principals, teachers, and administrators to support school leadership mentoring, provide professional support for a multi-tiered leadership opportunity" (ND, p. 99); and Washington proposed to "promote professional growth and emphasize multiple career paths, such as instructional coaching and mentoring (including hybrid roles that allow instructional coaching and mentoring while remaining in the classroom), school leadership, and involvement with school improvement and support" (WA, p. 123). These policy solutions shared in their reliance on financial incentives to attract high quality teachers to schools and districts with greater concentrations of students of color and low-income students; and retain and promote effective and experienced teachers through diversified career pathways and human capital management systems.

Although not required by the U.S. DoE, approximately half (23 out of 52) of the state plans mentioned strategies aiming to diversify teacher workforce and develop teachers' cultural competency and culturally responsive practices as part of their educator Equity Plan. For instance, Minnesota noted the need to "diversify our teacher workforce for every Minnesota district, so that our students learn from teachers who reflect their experiences and cultures" (MN, p. 2), in particular teachers of color and Native American teachers. Pennsylvania's Black Male Educator Convening Fellowship was an initiative aiming to recruit and support aspiring men of color to enter teaching profession. Other approaches identified in state plans included partnership with educator preparation programs to recruit culturally and linguistically diverse educators and "foster district and school cultures that promote diversity as an asset" (OR, p. 70) and providing educators "opportunities for continual professional development in the areas of equity, anti-bias, multicultural, and culturally responsive pedagogies" (NY, p. 6). These diversity-related educator preparation and

professional development initiatives were often presented as strategies to improve the learning opportunities of minority students and English learners.

Complying with federal ESSA regulations, SEAs explained in their ESSA plans definitions of effective teachers and strategies to enhance students' equitable access to such teachers. Despite a general consensus on criteria and indicators, states varied—sometimes substantially—on their definitions of teacher qualification, experience, and effectiveness. In terms of strategies to improve equitable distribution of teacher quality, states focused on innovations in educator preparation and professional support and development in order to recruit and retain teachers and leaders in high-need schools and districts. Some states also noted the income disparities across districts and offered competitive salaries and leadership opportunities to retain experienced teachers. Perhaps most surprising was the finding that almost half of the states were committed to improving students' equitable access to teachers by diversifying their teacher populations and recruiting culturally diverse educators. These efforts reflected a race- and culture-conscious policy approach to addressing inequity in education that has not been given sufficient attention in education policy discussion (Milner & Howard, 2013), which made this piece of finding in particular encouraging.

Equitable learning environment. State plans also noted SEA and LEA initiatives and programs designed to establish equitable learning environment by improving school services and facilities, including curriculum programs, library, technology, and counseling services, discipline practices, and school climate. Educational technological tools, such as distance or virtual learning, were mentioned in several state plans as a means to offset the inequitable access to effective teachers in high-poverty and high-minority districts (AL and NC), provide professional development for educators (ME and OR), and improve students' access to high quality digital learning materials (MN and NE) and digital literacy (NY and ND). Other programs and services identified by states as essential to promote an equitable learning environment included “equitable access to rigorous courses for ALL students” (KY, p.31, capital in original), such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses (NJ), STEM/ STEAM programming (IA, ID, and PA), and early learning and preschool programs (IN, MN, NE, and NJ); equitable access to school library programs (NY, OK, and SD); “strategic school counseling to provide equitable student access to the full curriculum” (DE, p. 104) and school counseling programs preparing students for college and career (MN, OR, and UT); discipline practices “equitable and proportionate to the incident” (NY, p. 116); as well as services targeting specific groups, such as curriculum and extracurricular programs for English learners (CO and IN) and gifted course and programs (KY, and MD).

States' proposed strategies to improve school climate focused on cultural inclusiveness and were aligned with those on educators' cultural responsiveness discussed above. For example, Oregon regulated that LEAs should

Apply an equity lens and culturally responsive practices throughout the continuous improvement process to ensure that the needs of historically and traditionally marginalized students and historically underrepresented populations are addressed in a respectful and inclusive learning environment and that outcomes for these students improve. (OR, p. 22)

Wisconsin, similarly noted the needs to “establish equitable, safe, and conducive school environments, including diversity in staffing patterns, diversity in community and parental involvement and universality in student codes of conduct that support respect and equitable achievement for all students” (WI, pp. 129-130). In addition, ensuring that “cultural responsiveness informs all school policies and practices and guides interactions among all members of the school community” (NY, p. 8) was listed as one of the 13 main strategies to

increase equity of outcomes in New York State's schools. All three examples suggested that these states viewed culturally responsive and inclusive environment not only an equity issue but also one that could have direct impact on equitable student learning outcomes.

Accountability System

Accountability policies, especially the post-NCLB high stakes accountability system (Dee et al., 2013), aim to directly influence equity in outcomes by holding educators at state, district, school, and classroom levels accountable for student achievement measured by high-stakes standardized test scores; and assigning punitive consequences to schools and districts failing to meet the expectations (Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Figlio & Ladd, 2015; Ro, 2019). The analysis of accountability policies in state ESSA plans revealed that they kept the emphasis on student meeting academic standards and achievement goals from NCLB (Dee et al., 2013; Thomas & Brady, 2005) as the primary indicators of equitable learning outcomes and accountability requirements. Also included in the accountability policies were relevant stakeholders and strategies used to monitor, evaluate, and publicly report districts' and schools' progress in meeting equity goals.

Fifteen states were found to describe in their accountability measures specific state academic or content standards students expected to meet and learning outcomes measured by student performance on national or state tests. Among the fifteen states, Nevada and Tennessee also included standards specifically for English learners. Some state ESSA plans moved away from the heavy reliance on high-stakes, standardized tests performance as the primary indicator of student achievement. For example, Kentucky included in its accountability system measures of "a rich curriculum – including the visual and performing arts, health and physical education, cultural studies and/or world language – along with equitable access and school quality under the opportunity and access indicator" (KY, p. 20). Other states included in their accountability systems progress and growth data in subjects other than the required ELA and mathematics, such as "career- and college-readiness program participation and outcomes for high schools" (MN, p. 4), in order to "equitably and accurately assess school needs and appropriate target strategies" (ND, p. 57). Massachusetts claimed to commit to "a more well-rounded view of school performance and to encourage schools and districts to focus on increasing equitable access to educational opportunities" (MA, p. 24). Oregon additionally included social-emotional learning in its measure of student access. This flexibility to add additional indicators for student performance and school improvement is made possible by ESSA' decentralized approach (Egalite et al., 2017) and provides opportunities for states to create a more comprehensive and equitable accountability system including multiple forms of measure of student success (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). However, only 14 of the 52 state ESSA plans included such information on multiple measures of student learning beyond achievement and growth scores and even these states still heavily weighted on student achievement tests in their accountability systems. For example, Massachusetts weighted 90% on academic indicators and Oregon gave eight out of nine points to academic achievement and progress in its accountability index.

According to ESSA plans, LEA and school administrators and educators were the primary stakeholders in meeting equity policy goals. Districts and schools were held accountable for ensuring that disadvantaged students—primarily low-income and minority students—and schools that served these students were provided monetary and educational resources comparable with their more privileged counterparts in order to meet these standards. For example, Maryland maintained that the SEA would hold "all local school systems accountable for ensuring equitable access and will require that the local school systems explain their methods

for doing so as part of their application to the State for federal (and State) fund” (MD, p. 95). In addition, per the requirement of U.S. DoE, state plans also explained how they engaged additional stakeholders—students, families, communities, and educational professionals—in developing and refining the equity policies and the ways to communicate the equity data to the general public for accountability purposes. The majority of the states listed stakeholders and organizations consulted during the ESSA plan development process in appendices and committed to reporting the process on designated SEA webpage for public review.

All state ESSA plans mentioned providing technical assistance and training to LEAs and schools—especially those labeled as not meeting the equity goals in terms of student learning outcomes—on evaluation and data systems through state agencies, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and external partners, such as research centers and non-profit educational organizations. For example, the Western Educational Equity Assistance Center, one of the four regional Equity Assistance Centers funded by the U.S. DoE, partnered with Alaska in delivering eLearning training modules to its educators at no cost. Other external partners mentioned in state plans included the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium (MD), the Talent for Turnaround Leadership Academy and the Great Lakes Comprehensive Center (IN), and WestED and Understanding Language - Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity (OR). Examples of IHE partnerships were the George Washington TELL program and the online ESL endorsement program through George Mason University (VA) and the Utah System of Higher Education (UT). This finding of SEAs’ reliance on intermediary, third-party contractors to outsource technical assistance and professional support to LEAs and schools has been previously observed by other researchers (Ambrosio, 2013; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). This practice of using non-public and external service suppliers, along with a focus on standardized test scores and test-driven curriculum and instruction (Au, 2016), collectively constitute an accountability system grounded in the neoliberal, market principles of standards, outcomes, competition, and effectiveness (Ambrosio, 2013; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014), which has substantial impact on state and district policies on resource allocation and teacher preparation and evaluation (Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Malen et al., 2017; Wronowski & Urick, 2019).

Discussion

A critical analysis of state consolidated ESSA plans revealed that the majority of the state plans adopted a position on equity emphasizing access to learning opportunities including monetary resources and high-quality educators, with a smaller number of state plans paid attention to equity in outcomes. Consequently, the strategies proposed by states to address the equity gaps focused on developing more equitable funding formulas and producing and placing experienced and effective teachers and leaders in classrooms and schools in order to reduce the resource and opportunity disparities among districts and the students they serve. Meanwhile, the accountability policies included in the ESSA plans overwhelmingly focused on outcomes where educators were held accountable for producing state-mandated results, such as student achievement and growth scores and graduation rate, as the primary indicators of equity policy impact. The apparent mismatch between access-oriented equity policies and the outcome-driven accountability systems may be attributed to the underlying assumption that once educational resources and opportunities are equitably distributed across districts and schools, equity in learning outcome in the form of adequate student assessment performance will be achieved.

This theoretical assumption, however, is questionable as mounting evidence from previous education reforms has suggested (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Ambrosio, 2013; Fusarelli,

2004; Zeichner & Conklin, 2017). From a school finance perspective, numerous researchers have noted that fiscal inequities between schools in the United States are largely due to the fact that public schools are primarily funded by local property taxes (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Allbright et al., 2019), which benefits the more affluent districts and students they serve. The economic disparities, or income segregation, between districts and schools have been further complicated and exacerbated by the racial segregation that is still prevalent in the U.S. society (Owens, 2018). The equity policies and provisions found in the state ESSA plans still largely fall into what Cochran-Smith et al. (2017) called a “thin” equity centered on “individuals’ equal (or same) access to ‘high quality’ teachers, curriculum, and school opportunities” (p. 581) yet leave the broader economic, social, and political structures that cause and reproduce inequity, such as school finance systems (Baker & Weber, 2016), racism (Au, 2016) and poverty (Berliner, 2014), intact.

In addition, requiring all students to meet the same minimal achievement threshold does not guarantee equitable learning opportunities or outcomes, and may even exacerbate the existing inequities. This is because while students in more privileged districts are likely to have enriched curriculum and learning programs, schools that are struggling to meet state standards or having a large percentage of students who are deemed as “falling behind” the achievement expectations are likely to limit the curriculum to teach state-mandated standards and focus on test-preparation in instruction in order to meet the bottom line outcome goals and produce the required accountability information. These strategic choices by schools and districts have been documented in previous education reforms including NCLB (Harris, 2012; Jordan, 2010; Ro, 2019), which create new inequities beyond minimal level of adequacy determined by the federal and state governments. As Ladson-Billings (2006) reminds us, focusing solely on closing achievement gap on the basis of test scores is misleading and distracting if no sufficient attention being paid to the larger “education debt” accumulated in history that created the inequitable conditions among students in the first place. These narrowly conceived understandings of teaching and learning, unfortunately, are justified and reinforced in the reviewed ESSA plans under the rhetoric of equity. The limited conception that equates learning to standardized test results embedded in the equity and accountability policies also leaves little room for a more complex and multi-dimensional measurement of student learning and denies students’ opportunity to experience learning situated in authentic contexts (Jordan, 2010). As Jordan (2010) contended, instead of teaching all students to the same achievement level, an equitable education should provide “transformative learning experiences for students who require such experiences for social mobility, as well as social and cultural reproduction for students already on top” (p. 151).

A careful reading of federal ESSA law and state plans reveals that it inherits many of the standards-based, test-driven policy solutions and accountability measures of NCLB, whose own impact on promoting educational quality and equity is still inconclusive at best (Dee et al., 2013; Lee, Shin, & Amo, 2013). ESSA also continues emphasizing the significance of teacher quality and framing teacher effectiveness as the key to reduce inequities and to achieve the desired equitable outcomes. This “teachers matter” discourse has become a catchphrase among education policy makers and politicians in the US (and the around world) to justify the market-oriented education policies and reforms, such as school choice, alternative teaching certification pathways, value-added measurement, and growing roles of private sectors on teacher preparation practice and policy making (Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Zeichner & Conklin, 2017). ESSA’s demand for “effective teachers” as an equity provision pushes the outcome-driven reform agenda one step further from NCLB’s “highly qualified teachers” mandate by explicitly linking teacher effectiveness with measurable student performance outcomes. Therefore, by regulating that every student should be equitably taught by experienced and effective teachers who are certified to teach in the subject areas,

the concept of equity is also implicitly tied to the values of productivity, cost-effectiveness, human resources management, and economic return of investment that are essential to the neoliberal, market economy (Ambrosio, 2013; Cochran-Smith et al., 2016). The democratic and social significance of education is thus given less attention under this policy framework centered on economic benefits.

Conclusion

By shedding light on equity-related policies included in state ESSA plans, this study contributes to knowledge of how education policy makers at the state level understand equity principles and provisions as they pertain to distribution of educational resources and opportunities and the expected impact of such equity-oriented policies. Although policy makers across states uphold the principle of equity in education, they disagree on what educational equity calls for, how to achieve it, and by what means. The variations in equity definitions have important implications for related programs and provisions that influence students' educational experiences. The majority of the state ESSA plans favor a stance on equity focusing on equitable access to funding and educators, i.e., educational inputs. This position, however, seems to be at odds with states' emphasis of student learning achievement measured by standardized tests as the primary indicator of equity in outcome. States also overwhelmingly prefer a standards-based, outcome-driven accountability system, which has been dominating education policies and reforms since 1980s despite conflicting scholarly evidence. Contrary to the policy intent, such limited focus and measure of equity may reproduce and exacerbate the structural inequities experienced by students from high-poverty families, students of color, English learners, and other marginalized and minoritized student populations, as well as the schools that serve them. Findings of this study thus have implications for policy makers and researchers aiming to transform education system towards a more equitable and socially just one.

From a historical perspective, ESSA's greater attention on equity in education signifies the disparities in educational opportunity and achievement persist and continue to be the focus of education reform in the United States. ESSA, however, boasts its departure from NCLB's centralized, "one-size-fits-all" policymaking approach and empowers states to develop policies pertaining to funding decisions, distribution of educators, flexibility in accountability measures, and other equity related provisions as they see best fit local needs (Egalite et al., 2017). Results of this analysis, however, suggested that while some states took advantage of the flexibility afforded by ESSA to innovate policy tools and revise and expand their accountability systems; many merely complied with the minimum required by the federal ESSA regulations and showed no clear commitment to advancing equity in their state plans. State policy makers and stakeholders should leverage the autonomy and flexibility afforded by ESSA to identify and adopt research-based and community-initiated programs that are grounded in and responsive to the local school contexts. One example of such programs is the urban teacher residency model (Guha, Hyler, & Darling-Hammond, 2017) that features a collaboration among districts, communities, and teacher education programs to prepare, recruit, and retain teachers for high-needs schools and areas (Roegman, Pratt, Goodwin, & Akin, 2017). States can also use the opportunity to develop a more comprehensive accountability system that captures a broader set of indicators that are most relevant to the equitable learning of their students (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). Such localized programs and innovative initiatives may be more effective in maintaining a diverse and sustainable teacher workforce and leading to transformative and equitable educational experiences for students.

Results of this study suggest that there seems yet to be a consensus around equity, teacher qualification, experience, and effectiveness as currently defined in state education policies; or about what counts as evidence of “equitable” access to educational resources. This finding should not be surprising because no universally agreed-upon definition of equity exists in education policy literature. It is not the intent of this article to advocate for a single, standardized understanding of what equity means and what it means to be equitably educated, or for all states to embrace a uniform set of equity and accountability policies and systems. However, the varied definitions and approaches identified in state ESSA plans and the underlying tensions around how equity is conceptualized and operationalized in various contexts may place practical challenges for the implementation of the ESSA policy and render its impact on advancing equity in uncertainty. Previous studies (Allbright et al., 2019; Hill, 2001) have revealed how the varied interpretations of policy language influenced local stakeholders’ implementation decision and practices. Therefore, policy makers should make it clear and unambiguous what they mean by “equity” in ESSA plans and related policy documents in order to avoid policy confusion and guide policy implementation. District and school educators and community stakeholders should also be engaged to have their input into the development of state equity vision and relevant policies.

The formulation of education policies in general and those pertaining to equity in particular also warrants greater attention in research. This study contributes to building clarity about states’ positions on and approaches to educational equity as revealed in their respective ESSA plans. Because of the contentious nature of policy making, researchers should seek to uncover the process through which equity principles and strategies found in these state ESSA plans were deliberated and determined by policy makers, using what resources and research evidence, and the key stakeholders that played roles in shaping and crafting the policy initiatives and solutions. This line of research will contribute to the endeavors of improving the transparent and democratic process of education policymaking and accountability (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018) and raising the quality of the debate about teacher education policy and practice (Zeichner & Conklin, 2017). Such an ongoing scrutiny and debate will also shed light on a more clarified and transformative understanding of equity towards what Cochran-Smith et al.’s (2017) called a “strong” equity.

One of the limitations of this study is that the results presented in this article were based on coded information returned by the search using the two key words “equity” and “equitable.” Interested researchers can read in its entirety of each of the 52 ESSA plans and seek potential information on equity not presented here. It is also possible that states have other equity related policies and strategies that are not reflected in their ESSA plans. Moving forward, focused analysis can be performed at the state level by including additional state policies and regulatory documents as the state ESSA plans unfold and more details become available. Future researchers can also study the implementation of state ESSA policies at specific districts and schools to investigate local educators and leaders’ sensemaking of the policy mandates, how well aligned of their understandings of equity to those of the federal and state policy makers, and how such conceptions may influence their localized decision-making regarding resource allocation and educator preparation, recruitment, and retention.

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