

# Every Student Succeeds Act – A Solution to the Issues of No Child Left Behind?

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## **Abstract**

No Child Left Behind, NCLB, brought a variety of issues to the school system, such as unrealistic expectations and a strong importance on the testing system which led to pressure and stress in the school system. Due to the issues of NCLB, the Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA, sought to overcome these issues; however, it is questionable if it truly succeeds in this goal. This paper used a survey to examine teachers' experiences under these two acts and their opinions on both acts to discover if the issues of NCLB have been overcome by ESSA. Unfortunately, the findings indicate the same issues NCLB brought are still experienced under ESSA. Teachers responded there is still too much of a focus on the testing system which then leads to negative experiences in the school system. However, teachers did indicate a few positive influences of ESSA, mainly an increase in flexibility which many indicated was not possible under NCLB. While the teachers still feel pressure in the school system, many believed that while ESSA is not perfect, it is certainly a step in the right direction.

## **Introduction**

Educational acts are an extremely important part of legislation. These acts influence students, teachers, school boards, and society as a whole. Though these acts aim to help improve the education received by children and aim to have a positive influence on the experience of the workers in the school system, they do not always do so.

One act that was often questioned is No Child Left Behind, NCLB. NCLB like most acts, sought to do what the legislators believed was best for society and the education system. It affected multiple aspects of education on both the state level and federal level. NCLB's main goal was to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice so that no child was left behind in school. In order to try and accomplish this goal, this act aimed to shift the focus to all students rather than focusing only on the disadvantaged children and by measuring school performance based on standardized testing. Additionally, NCLB influenced the role of the federal government in education through the federal spending and state mandates. While NCLB intended to overcome the achievement gap, its implementation brought a variety of negative issues as well, such as unrealistic expectations.

In order to overcome the issues of NCLB, the Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA, was created. This act changed various aspects of NCLB. Now, the states have the power in education rather than the federal government. States have the ability to make decisions on education, and they are able to individually decide how to overcome the achievement gap which increased flexibility. Though this act seems to be a shift in the right direction by lessening the idea of a "one-size-fits-all" education act among all the states, is it actually overcoming the issues NCLB contained?

In order to determine if ESSA is a solution to NCLB, this paper will first provide basic

information on the two pieces of legislation to examine the positive and negative consequences of each act. Next, I will survey educators on their experiences under both NCLB and ESSA to determine if the issues that were experienced under NCLB are still an issue under ESSA. Then, I will complete an analysis of the results and discuss the findings as they relate to the question of if ESSA is overcoming the issues of NCLB. Through this project, I seek to discover if the Every Students Succeeds Act succeeds in overcoming the failures of No Child Left Behind.

## **Literature Review**

### **No Child Left Behind**

Educational acts are an important part of our nation's legislation; however, it can be difficult create one that fits the needs of all. In 2001, the educational act No Child Left Behind, NCLB, was passed. NCLB sought to "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (107th Congress (2001-2002): No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 2002). In order to accomplish the goals, NCLB increased the role of the federal government in the education system. This increase of the federal government's role consisted of a "Federal Adequate Yearly Progress mandate to determine whether schools are succeeding or failing," a federal model for "intervening in failing schools," and the "federal definition and requirement that all teachers must be Highly Qualified" ("The Every Student Succeeds Act Returning Control to States and Local School Districts").

Additionally, NCLB aimed to ensure that "high-quality academic assessments, accountability systems, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, and instructional materials" were aligned with the academic standards set by the federal government (107th Congress (2001-2002): No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 2002). In order to accomplish this, NCLB put forth strong, and seemingly impossible, goals that teachers and school systems were to reach. This included a goal of "100% proficiency in reading and math for all students and subgroups by 2014-15" ("The Every Student Succeeds Act Returning Control to States and Local School Districts").

### **Negative Consequences of No Child Left Behind**

However, despite the seemingly positive aspects of NCLB and the goals it set forth, many

believed that it falls short of its aims, and instead of helping to school system, it created issues for the students, teachers, and administration. While the goals were meant to help the educational act, it was the cause of many of its downfalls. It led to unrealistic expectations and high stakes testing; which in turn caused a lack of focus on specific students and school subjects.

### **I. Unrealistic Goals and a Lack of Support**

An overarching issue of NCLB that led to a variety of other issues were the unrealistic goals and expectations of the act. One main unrealistic goal was the 100% proficiency level, and beyond that, there several underlying unrealistic flaws caused by the 100% proficiency requirement. NCLB had a goal of raising standards throughout the country; however, the act had the reverse effect as states had the ability to set what 100% proficiency meant under NCLB, and because of this, “instead of states raising their proficiency standards, some states reduced them” (Ladd 2017, 465). This reduction was the most prominent in states that already had some of the highest initial standards (Ladd 2017, 465). Because states wanted and needed to meet the goals, having high proficiency standard made it difficult for the states to reach the set goals. Due to the unrealistic expectations, many schools were “shamed as failures and made subject to sanctions” due to not being able to meet the standards (Ladd 2017, 465).

However, despite these unrealistic terms, the schools are not simply the only ones to be blamed. The 100% proficiency in reading and math for all students and subgroups is unrealistic without the proper help and support. This support could have come in the forms of services for students who are failing to meet the standards, “high-quality pre-school, better health services, and more high-quality afterschool and summer program,” and unfortunately, NCLB lacked these support services (Ladd 2017, 467). NCLB was an educational act with strong goals, but there was a lack of support that was able to provide the ability for all students to receive the higher

standards NCLB placed on schools. “The NCLB approach of holding schools alone responsible for student test score levels while paying little if any attention to the conditions in which learning takes place is simply not fair either to the schools or the children and was bound to be unsuccessful” (Ladd 2017, 467). The lack of support for schools caused NCLB to fail its own goals.

## **II. High Stakes Testing and Pressure**

Another issue cited with NCLB was the use of high stakes testing. Because NCLB required that schools reached 100% proficiency in reading and math for all students, the testing system was placed under a great importance. However, despite this goal, NCLB did not provide the ability to reach the goals, and schools often fell short of this high student achievement. While some studies found that NCLB led to gains in student achievement, others found conflicting data. One study conducted by Thomas Dee and Brian Jacobs examined the impact of NCLB on student achievement. They found that “NCLB led to more moderate and targeted improvements in the math achievement of eighth graders,” and they state, “the evidence of substantial and almost universal gains in elementary school math is undoubtedly good news for advocates of NCLB and school accountability” (Dee and Jacobs 2011, 419). However, despite this moderate improvement, they were unable to find evidence of an improvement in reading achievement of fourth graders that was linked to NCLB (Dee and Jacobs 2011, 419). Despite NCLB playing a role in increasing the math achievement of eighth graders, the lack of impact on reading achievement of fourth graders represents the lack of ability to fully provide support to reach the 100% proficiency goal.

Additionally, this lack of ability to reach the goals set by NCLB is also represented in another study by Jaekyung Lee and Todd Reeves. Throughout this study, Lee and Reeves found



that “NCLB did not make a significant difference in improving reading and mathematics achievement or achievement gaps across the states,” despite closing the achievement gap being a main goal of NCLB (Lee and Reeves 2012, 211). Additionally, while Dee and Jacobs reported a significant positive outcome in 4<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics, Lee and Reeves found otherwise. Lee and Reeves state that they “found a significant positive effect only in Grade 8 reading based on NAEP data through 2009” (Lee and Reeves 2012, 224). From these studies, it is evident that NCLB was not fully providing students and teachers the ability to reach the goals NCLB set; and thus, pressures on students and teachers were continuously increasing.

Much like how the unrealistic goals created underlying issues, the high stakes testing system caused a variety of issues. NCLB reduced the morale of teachers, and there is evidence of an increase in cheating by teachers due to the pressures NCLB puts upon the teachers (Ladd 2017, 466). Teachers felt the need to cheat in order to meet the goals that were forced upon them. The testing system did not help the schools, and it only added pressure and stress for the teachers and students. Furthermore, because of the high stakes testing, teachers often used multiple choice tests because “test-based accountability gives teachers incentives to “teach to the test” rather than to the broader domains that the test questions are designed to represent” (Ladd 2017, 465). Through this lack of meeting the goals, the issue of pressure caused by the high stakes testing of NCLB becomes apparent in teachers and the actions that occurred because of the necessity to meet the unrealistic expectations of NCLB.

### **III. “Fixing” the Achievement Gap**

Closing the achievement gap for all racial, socioeconomic, and academic subgroups was a main goal of NCLB. Despite this goal of reducing the achievement gap, NCLB did not provide the ability to do so. The progress towards closing the achievement gaps was “mixed” and

“generally negative” in “post-NCLB progress toward closing the achievement gaps between racial, socioeconomic, and academic subgroups” (Lee and Reeves 2012, 216). Instead of focusing on all the children, the “accountability pressure increases inequality between low-and high-performing students on high-stakes math tests” (Jennings and Sohn 2014, 136). Due to the high-stakes testing and the importance on reaching the proficiency levels, “schools may reallocate instructional effort away from high- and low-performing students and toward the “bubble kids” who are most likely, with additional attention, to meet the proficiency standards” (Dee and Jacobs 2011, 420). By using testing systems that rely on meeting a quota, the school systems may focus on those children that would easily help the school reach the standards set by NCLB. The extreme importance of meeting unrealistic proficiency levels caused schools to “perform educational triage on their students, reallocating resources to students most likely to become proficient in the very short-term” (Jennings and Corcoran 2009, 637).

Furthermore, “the flaw of No Child Left Behind-style accountability with its focus on passing rates is that it does not attempt to separate school influences on achievement from out-of-school influences” (Jennings and Corcoran 2009, 637). Because of the accountability that NCLB implemented, disadvantaged children are left behind, and “under NCLB, schools serving advantaged kids got a leg up” (Jennings and Corcoran 2009, 637). Additionally, this narrow focus NLCB brought caused teachers to have more of an incentive to focus on students who are close to the proficiency level; and thus, the students further away from the standards have had a reduction in the amount of achievement (Ladd 2017, 465). While NCLB had positive goals that are extremely important to successfully achieve, NCLB’s flaws caused its downfalls of being unable to fix the achievement gap.

#### **IV. Time Allocation to Other Subjects**

Furthermore, another underlying issue that was caused by the high stakes testing of NCLB was the lack of time allocation to other subjects. “71 percent of school districts had reduced the elementary school instructional time in at least one subject so that more instructional time could be spent on reading and mathematics” (Dee and Jacobs 2011, 441). Additionally, research “has shown [NCLB] has narrowed the curriculum by shifting instruction time toward tested subjects and away from others,” and schools shifted this focus away from other subjects and lessened the amount of time for “social studies, science, art and music, physical education, and recess” (Ladd 2017, 464). Because the standards and testing were placed under such heavy importance, and because NCLB strictly focused on mathematics and reading, reducing time from other subjects was a major consequence NCLB caused. This lack of time allocation to other subjects narrowed the scope of the school system; and thus, students may not have been receiving a quality education in the wide variety of important subjects.

### **Positive Consequences of No Child Left Behind**

While NCLB had a variety of issues that hurt rather than helped the school system, the act did have positive consequences. One of the main positive aspects of NCLB is the amount of data it created for mathematics and reading, which has given researchers and policy analysts plenty of data to examine (Ladd 2017, 463). This can be an extremely important aspect of policies because researchers need to understand and analyze the impacts of policies in order to recognize what needs to be changed and implemented. Additionally, holding schools accountable for the test scores of students and subgroups is another positive aspect of NCLB because it shows what needs to be changed and altered within the school system; however, but even this positive consequence has its own issue as “schools may not be the appropriate unit of accountability for

subgroup performance,” and “students in the designated categories can still be ignored when there are too few of them in individual schools” (Ladd 2017, 464).

### **Every Student Succeeds Act**

In order to overcome the issues with NCLB, the Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA, was passed in 2015. Unlike NCLB, ESSA removed the role of the federal government in education. ESSA “restores responsibility to states and districts for their local schools by providing increased flexibility to design and implement their education programs and systems, while also strictly prohibiting the U.S. Department of Education from dictating to states what standards to adopt” (“The Every Student Succeeds Act Returning Control to States and Local School Districts”). With NCLB, the federal government created the standards and goals and all states were required to demonstrate adherence to these standards or seek a waiver by demonstrating that their state-created standards and assessments achieved a comparable level of accountability. Under ESSA, the states now determine their own goals and the standards they must meet. The states also have the power to establish their own “accountability systems to determine whether schools are succeeding or failing,” “actions for intervening in identified schools,” and the ability to “determine certification and licensure requirements of teachers” (“The Every Student Succeeds Act Returning Control to States and Local School Districts”). Not only do the states have this power now, but ESSA also prohibits the federal government from interfering with the states’ decisions and from exercising authority over the school systems (“The Every Student Succeeds Act Returning Control to States and Local School Districts”).

### **Possible Positive Consequences of Every Student Succeeds Act**

Because of the changes ESSA makes from NCLB, many people are interested in seeing how ESSA will work when fully implemented. However, because it is an extremely recent act, there

is a limited number of studies that have been conducted, but many people argue that ESSA brings a variety of possible positive aspects compared to NCLB and is a move in the right direction.

## **I. Positive Learning Environments**

One main possible positive impact of ESSA is the increase in positive learning environments because ESSA enables more social-emotional learning through the policies it implements. “ESSA allows states and local districts to more broadly define student success and specifically refers to “nonacademic” indicators such as student engagement, school climate, and safety” (Ferguson 2016, 74). This is extremely important because of the difficulty gauging social-emotional skills through testing. Testing does not provide schools with all areas of what should be considered success; and thus, it is extremely important to consider “nonacademic” indicators. Furthermore, ESSA “encourages schools to establish learning environments and enhance students' effective learning skills that are essential for school readiness and academic success” (Ferguson 2016, 74). From these characteristics ESSA encourages, these healthy learning environments may help to “reduce bullying, harassment, improve teaching practices, and provide support schoolwide” (Ferguson 2016, 74).

## **II. Policy Integration Ability**

Additionally, another potentially positive consequence of ESSA is the ability to integrate other policies, such as Charter Schools. Charter Schools are important to education because they have the ability to reduce the achievement gaps through “no excuses schools” that “emphasize high expectations for both academics and behavior, longer school days and years, and frequent observations of teachers to give feedback, tutoring, and data-driven instruction that uses

assessment to frequently update teachers” (Cohodes 2018, 6). Additionally, these characteristics are linked to the positive outcomes Charter Schools experience, such as the increase in the “enrollment in four-year colleges” and increased scores on standardized state exams such as AP, SAT, and ACT scores (Cohodes 2018, 6). Policies of ESSA have the ability to expand Charter School practices into the public-school system, and this implementation would “thus could drive a meaningful reduction in achievement gaps in the United States” due to the implementation of these charter school characteristics (Cohodes 2018, 14).

Because ESSA has a goal of reducing the achievement gaps still present in American school systems, the ability to implement Charter School characteristics into the public-school system allows for one underlying positive outcome of ESSA to become apparent. However, despite the positive impacts many argue Charter Schools bring, it is important to note there are a variety of negative consequences that may arise from Charter Schools and their policy integration into the public sphere. One issue being that charter Schools often contain teachers that “have less experience and are less likely to be credentialed than teachers in conventional public schools” (Zimmer et al. 2003, 179). Furthermore, the representation that parents and families have in Charter schools might not be enough as “the boards of many charter schools—particularly those affiliated with charter school chains—are populated with the corporate and financial elite and sponsoring elected officials and not community representatives, educators, or families of student” (Casey 2015, 25). Though Charter schools bring the ability to integrate positive policies, it is necessary to consider the negative policies they may bring to ESSA.

### **III. Positive Impacts on Children with Disabilities**

Lastly, ESSA has a variety of impacts on students with disabilities, and this includes “inclusion in accountability,” meaning that ESSA “maintains key provisions to ensure students

with disabilities are included in state accountability systems and are held to the same expectations as students without disabilities” (Clyde et al. 2018, 35). Additionally, as states now have the power of accountability and recognizing what they lack, “targeted support for chronically underperforming subgroups can have a considerable impact on students with disabilities” (Clyde et al. 2018, 35). Schools will now be more accountable for their subgroups and ensuring that they reach ESSA’s goals.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, many of the articles discussing NCLB focus on its negatives. Though there are some positive outcomes of NCLB, research portrays more negative aspects caused by NCLB. From this, it is evident that NCLB had a multitude of issues that needed to be overcome. For ESSA, there is a noticeable lack of studies conducted; however, this is because ESSA is a relatively new act that has yet to have many impacts on schools. Despite this, there are positive aspects ESSA can bring to the school systems, such as nonacademic indicators, implementation of charter school characteristics into the public-school systems, a better teaching and learning environment, and better school and state accountability. ESSA is on the right track for overcoming the issues of NCLB, but more time and studies are necessary to determine how much of a positive or negative impact ESSA has on the school system.

## **Research Design and Methods**

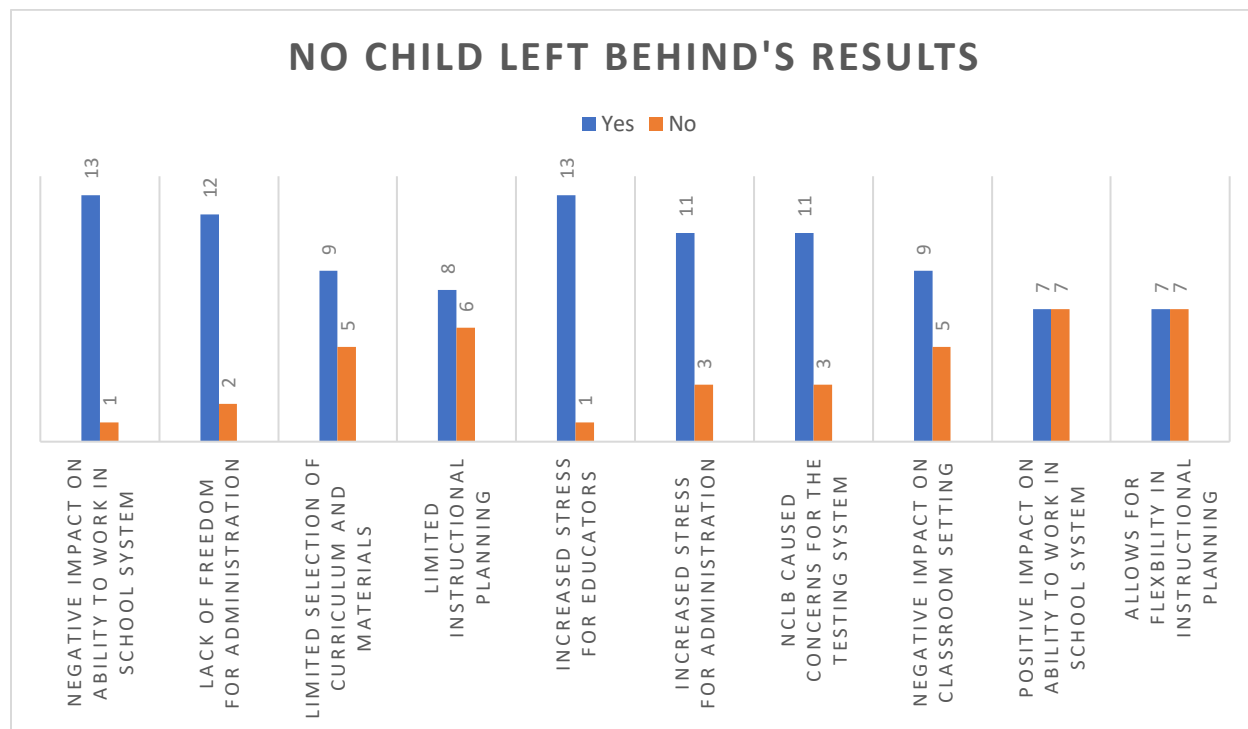
This research used quantitative and qualitative surveys to collect data on the impact of NCLB and ESSA. The survey focused on the impact of each act with regards to flexibility, the pressure and stress each act caused, freedom and limitation in the school system, and other impacts that affected teachers, administration, and students under these educational acts. This form of research was chosen because it enabled a larger sample of participants to ensure a representative sample while also providing the ability to get informed and detailed answers. The questions on the survey relate to the participant's experiences under the educational acts. The questions included positive and negative impacts of NCLB and ESSA as it relates to the participant's own experiences in the school system. Additionally, the survey contained questions where the participant was to relate the experiences under NCLB and ESSA if the participant had worked in the school system under both educational acts. To see the full survey, please refer to 1.1 in the appendix.

The participants of this study were teachers and administrators who attended the Copenhaver Institute that took place on Roanoke College campus. The participants voluntarily offered to take the survey and received a gift card as an incentive to complete the survey. The majority of participants were females, but there were some male participants as well (16 females, 4 males). The participants have all worked, or are currently working as, a teacher in either a public or private school system. 18 out of 20 participants teach in Virginia, and the other two participants teach in Florida and North Carolina. The number of years working as teachers ranges from 3 to 39 years. Additionally, out of the 20 participants, 14 taught under NCLB, and 18 participants indicated they have taught under ESSA.



## Results

### I. Responses Regarding No Child Left Behind



### The Negatives of No Child Left Behind

Many of the concerns of NCLB the participants indicated dealt with the pressure and constraints teachers, administration, and students felt while under NCLB. This was clearly seen through the responses of this survey as 13 out of the 14 (92%) participants that have worked under NCLB stated that NCLB had negative impacts on their ability to effectively work in the school system. These negative impacts came from a variety of sources. 9 (64%) participants that have taught under NCLB stated that NCLB did not allow freedom for the teachers in the school systems with regard to flexibility in the selection of curriculum and materials, 12 (85%) stated that NCLB did not allow freedom for administration in the school system with regard to school decisions, and 8 (57%) stated NCLB limited instructional planning.

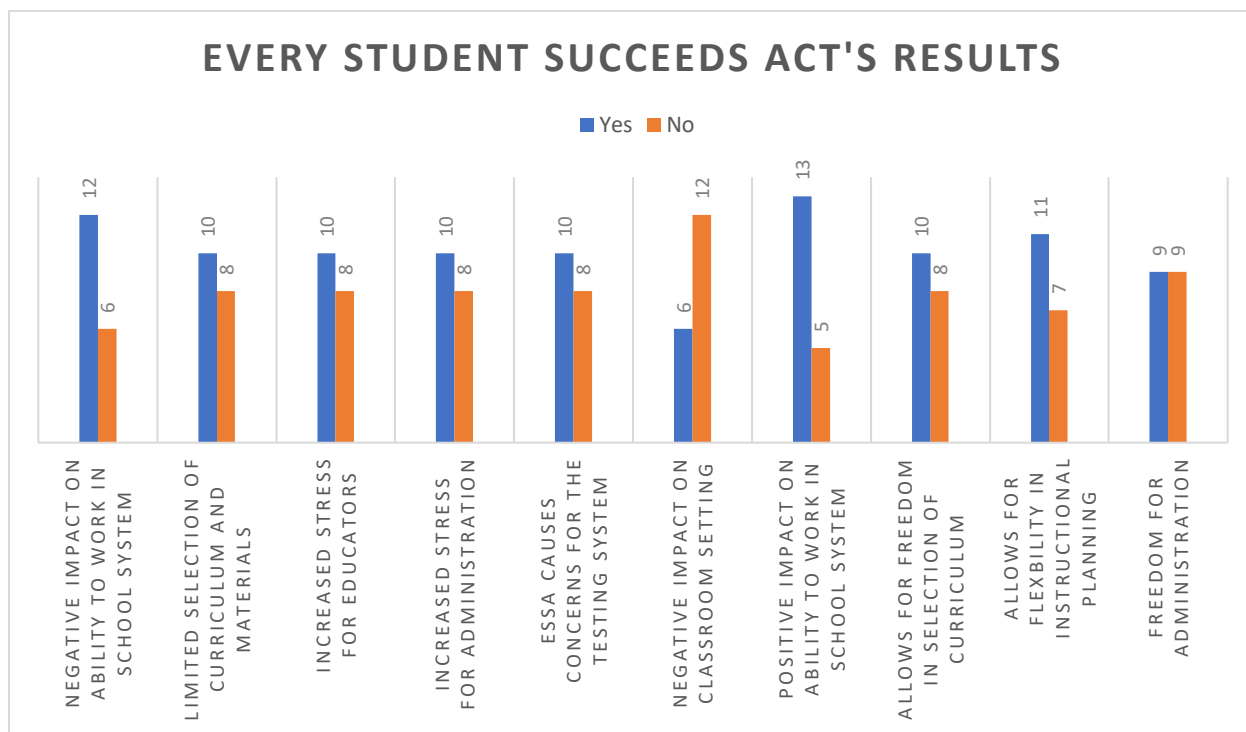
Additionally, these negative impacts are also seen in the responses regarding stress, testing issues, and classroom issues impacted by NCLB. 13 (92%) participants indicated that NCLB led to increased stress for the educators, 11 (78%) indicated that NCLB increased stress for administration, 11 (78%) stated NCLB increased stress for students, 11 (78%) stated the concerns for assessment and testing by NCLB negatively impacted their ability to work in school system, and lastly, 9 (64%) stated NCLB negatively impacted the classroom setting.

Furthermore, when given the opportunity to expand on answers, participants also noted a variety of other issues they experienced with NCLB. This included too much of a pressure to pass is placed on students which then causes teachers to “teach to the test,” and because of this pressure, students are pushed into “cookie-cutter molds”. One participant mentioned that NCLB restricted the school system and as a result, the children suffered because NCLB did not take into account academic records.

### **The Positives of No Child Left Behind**

Although there were many concerns and issues with NCLB based on the responses, there were a few positive experiences that NCLB brought to the school system. 7 (50%) participants indicated that NCLB allowed freedom for the teachers in the school system with regard to flexibility in instructional planning, and 7 (50%) indicated that NCLB had positive impacts on their ability to effectively work in the school system. These positive impacts on the ability to work in the school system stemmed from the support given in the test preparation and the alignment of the curriculum and standards. Additionally, another positive aspect of NCLB that participants mentioned was its effort to try and level the playing field within the school system, and it ensured no student was given up on.

## II. Responses Regarding Every Student Succeeds Act



### The Negatives of Every Student Succeeds Act

Similar to NCLB, the responses regarding ESSA had concerns regarding constraints and stress. 10 of the 18 (55%) participants who have taught under ESSA indicated that ESSA limits the selection of curriculum and materials, 12 (66%) stated that ESSA has had a negative impact on their ability to effectively work in the school system, and 10 (55%) stated this is caused by increased stress for educators, increased stress for administration, and increased stress for students. Furthermore, 10 (55%) indicated the negative impact is also caused by the concerns surrounding assessments and testing, and 6 (33%) stated ESSA has had a negative impact on the classroom setting. When given the ability to expand on the negatives of ESSA, participants responded that ESSA focuses too much on testing and not much has changed from NCLB because SOL testing still causes immense stress all throughout the school system. Additionally,

one participant stated that “ESSA promotes students before they are ready to move on to the next level” which can then negatively impact the student and the school system.

### **The Positives of Every Student Succeeds Act**

ESSA also received a variety of positive responses. 10 (55%) of the 18 participants who have taught under ESSA indicated that ESSA allows for freedom in the school system with regards to flexibility in the selection of curriculum and materials, 13 (72%) indicated that ESSA allows for freedom for teachers in the school system with regards to flexibility in instructional planning, 9 (50%) stated ESSA allows for freedom for administration in the school system with regards to school decisions, and 11 (61%) indicated that ESSA does not limit instructional planning options. Furthermore, 13 (72%) participants stated that ESSA has positively impacted their ability to work in the school system. Participants indicated that this positive impact stemmed from a decrease in stress for educators, decreased stress for students, and a change in the classroom setting. Additionally, participants responded that ESSA is helpful with assessments and testing.

When given the opportunity to expand on answers, participants stated that ESSA is a step in the right direction compared to NCLB. Participants stated ESSA brings less stress and less pressure to the school system because of the difference in the testing system compared to NCLB and the fair expectations that ESSA establishes.

## **Discussion**

### **Discussion of No Child Left Behind**

No Child Left Behind was not a loved educational act. Though people believed it was the right move when enacted, the negatives outweighed the positives, and the survey responses depict this issue. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the participants stated that NCLB negatively impacted the school system. NCLB caused immense stress for the students, administration, and teachers because of the vast amount of pressure that was placed upon those in the school system. With 92% of respondents indicating that NCLB increased the stress for educators, something was evidently wrong with NCLB, and the testing system is most notably an issue with this educational act. The teachers felt they were more influenced to “teach to the test” under NCLB because of the importance placed on the testing system.

This pressure and “teaching to the test” most likely led to the variety of other issues the participants indicated because of the high percentage of participants that responded NCLB led to a decrease in flexibility in the school system for the curriculum, classroom, and school systems. As one respondent stated, “Teachers became restricted and all children suffered. The more regulated classrooms become, the less effective differentiation becomes. Classrooms change from year to year and the adaption should be fluid. NCLB made adaption rigid”. With no flexibility and schools being expected to reach the unrealistic goals, teachers had to make do with what they were given. In order to reach the goals, teaching to the test may have provided the teachers the best ability to do so. NCLB placed too much of a focus on the success of testing and too little of a focus on the people the school system serves. The importance and pressure placed on the testing system ironically hindered the ability to reach the goals of helping of school systems due to the “cookie-cutter molds” the teachers, students, and administration had to fit.

Though the majority of the responses were negative, the responses indicated that NCLB had positive impacts on the school systems; however, these positive impacts are far and few in between. 7 (50%) participants indicated that NCLB allowed freedom for the teachers in the school system with regard to flexibility in instructional planning, and 7 (50%) indicated that NCLB had positive impacts on their ability to effectively work in the school system. While 50% of participants is unable to be representative of the group, this proves to be an interesting aspect of the responses for NCLB. Over half of the questions regarding NCLB led to negative responses when asked if NCLB had any impact, such as questions about stress and flexibility, but yet, half of the participants responded that NCLB positively impacted their ability to work in the school system. While many of these negative responses are due to the stress and pressure teachers and administration felt because of the importance of the testing system, it is this very testing system that most likely impacted the responses and caused half of the respondents to feel as if NCLB positively impacted their ability to work in the school system.

Teaching is difficult. Just as there is no one-size-fits-all educational act, there is no “right” way to teach because students learn through different means. This can cause issues when students in a classroom have difficulty learning because the teacher’s curriculum lacks adequate teaching with the most effective learning method of the student. By NCLB creating a set of guidelines that teachers had to follow and were expected to meet, NCLB may have led to teachers being able to effectively work in the school system because they were aware of the criteria they were to meet. As one respondent stated, “[NCLB] created a minimum which all teachers were expected to meet. (Minimum = Curriculum goals and assessments)”. It is from this minimum and expectations that enabled teachers to know the direction they were supposed to go, which in turn, may have positively impacted their ability and understanding of the school system.

## **Discussion of Every Student Succeeds Act**

Although ESSA attempts to overcome the issues of NCLB, participants still responded that ESSA has similar issues to those in NCLB, and from this, it becomes questionable whether ESSA actually achieves its goals and whether it overcomes the issues of NCLB. Despite the large act of removing the role of the federal government in ESSA, this may not bring enough of a change to the educational act. Many participants stated that ESSA is not vastly different than NCLB, and it simply seems like “just a name change with the same focus on testing and accreditation [rather than] critical thinking/problem solving”. ESSA tries to lessen the stress and pressure school systems felt under NCLB by turning the responsibility over to states and districts, but the responses indicate this is not the case because 66% of participants state that ESSA has had a negative impact on their ability to effectively work in the school system. This negative impact may still stem from the pressure teachers feel under ESSA as 55% stated they feel increased stress for educators, increased stress for administration, and increased stress for students under ESSA.

Furthermore, this pressure may be caused by one issue of ESSA that was seen in NCLB: the testing system. Many of the participants indicated that ESSA still had too much of a heavy focus on the testing system. One participant stated, “SOL testing creates undue stress on students, teachers, and administration”. This complaint of the heavy focus on testing is also seen as another participant stated, “Too much time, money, and focus has been put on data/testing. Data is only one piece of understanding where a student is academically. Too little emphasis is put on social and emotional component[s]”. Despite the fact that testing was one of the main complaints regarding NCLB, ESSA still maintains a testing system, and this was one of the main complaints from participants. There is still too much of a focus on testing which may not be

conducive to the actual academic success of a student. While ESSA attempts to overcome the issues of NCLB by removing the role of the federal government and the unrealistic expectations, it seems to fall short of overcoming one of the main issues of NCLB: the testing system and the pressure it brought to the teachers, administration, and students.

However, while ESSA received complaints about the testing system and stress, there are a few positive impacts ESSA has brought with regards to testing which are important to consider. One participant stated that there has been a shift from standardized tests to Project Based Learning, which they claim is useful because it “holds students accountable for their learning”. Not only does it hold students accountable for their work, it also enables them to delve deeper into the academic and real world. This is an interesting aspect ESSA brings to the table because it enables a type of assessment that was not possible under NCLB. Additionally, another participant stated that ESSA has led to a change in SOL testing for English 10. While in the past the SOL test for English 10 has been a long, 2-day test, now, “the students will be able to write these essays throughout the year to be graded. This should be a positive change”. By creating a testing system that may lessen the stress of a two-day all-or-nothing SOL test, ESSA may lead to greater student academic success when examining testing. Despite the fact that participants indicated that ESSA still has a heavy focus on testing, the ability to change the testing system from NCLB may help produce a healthier school system for administration, teachers, and students.

Furthermore, though participants seemed to question whether ESSA produces major changes compared to NCLB, there were other positive responses regarding ESSA. Most notably, 72% of participants indicated that ESSA allows freedom for teachers in the school system with regards to flexibility in instructional planning. As only 50% of participants stated that NCLB led



to freedom with flexibility, this may indicate that ESSA is doing something right. Despite the fact that ESSA is questionable about whether it overcomes the issues of pressure and testing, it may overcome the rigid curriculum and expectations NCLB brought. One participant stated that under ESSA, “there is more flexibility and support in what works of literature we can teach”. Additionally, another participant stated that they “see more freedom with Every Student Succeeds act. We aren’t as tied to a certain curriculum”. Under NCLB, teachers felt tied to a curriculum because there were set guidelines that were to be met. While these guidelines may have helped teachers understand what was expected of them, it limited what they could do. This is an important positive aspect of ESSA because by increasing flexibility, teachers may be able to teach in a manner that is more conducive to the students without repercussions from the administration.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, though there are mixed responses regarding ESSA, it appears to be a step in the right direction, but it does not completely overcome the issues of NCLB. NCLB brought a variety of issues, and it is difficult to overcome these issues in such a short time span. The testing system is something school systems struggle with because it has become ingrained in society that testing is an adequate and efficient way to measure student achievement. While ESSA hoped to cut down on the pressure and significance of the testing system, it remains questionable about whether ESSA has provided a solution to this issue as teachers still indicate stress and pressure that is placed on the testing system, but they also indicate a new freedom to the testing system. Though ESSA cuts down on federal involvement and thus federal expectations, the impact of NCLB still lingers in school systems. However, it seems to be moving in the right direction in order to improve the school system for teachers, administration, and students because of the freedom it gives to the school systems. As a participant stated, “This is better, but not perfect. Baby steps – but I’ll take it.”

While ESSA is a step in the right direction, it is not perfect, and thus, it is important to consider what might make an educational act “perfect”. Are the beliefs regarding the importance of testing, and therefore the pressure testing brings, too ingrained into our society to fully step away from this practice? Though it may not currently be in the near future to create a whole new educational act based on the issues apparent with ESSA, it is vital to consider how ESSA might be improved in order to successfully create a one-size-fits-all educational act.

## Appendix

### 1.1: Survey

#### No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act Survey

**Instructions:** Please check the box next to your selected answer or write in the space provided.

#### Part I: Social and Teaching Background

Gender:

Male       Female       Other

Have you worked as a teacher?

Yes       No

If yes, how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you worked as an administrator?

Yes       No

If yes, how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you worked a different position within a school?

Yes       No

If yes, please name the position. \_\_\_\_\_

How many years did you work in the position? \_\_\_\_\_

What state do you teach in? \_\_\_\_\_

What type of school system do you work in? Select all that apply.

Public School System       Private School System

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

What age group do you teach? Select all that apply.

High School  Middle School  Elementary School

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

### **Background Information:**

No Child Left Behind is an educational act that was passed in 2001 and introduced into the school system in 2002. No Child Left Behind influenced the role of the federal government in education through federal spending and state mandates.

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act replaced No Child Left Behind. This act changed various aspects of No Child Left Behind. Now, the states have more power in education rather than the federal government.

### **Part II: Responses Regarding No Child Left Behind**

1. Did you work in the school system as a teacher or administrator when No Child Left Behind was enforced? If no, skip to Part III on page 6.

Yes  No

2. Do you believe No Child Left Behind allowed freedom for teachers in the school system with regards to flexibility in selection of curriculum and materials?

Yes  No

3. Do you believe No Child Left Behind allowed freedom for teachers in the school system with regards to flexibility in instructional planning?

Yes  No

4. Do you believe No Child Left Behind allowed freedom for administration in the school system with regards to school decisions?

Yes  No

5. Do you believe No Child Left Behind limited the selection of curriculum and materials?

Yes  No

6. Do you believe No Child Left Behind limited instructional planning options?

Yes  No

7. If you worked as a teacher or administrator in the school system when No Child Left Behind was enforced, do you believe the act had any negative impacts on your ability to effectively work in the school system when the act was enforced?

Yes  No

If yes, please select any of the following relevant to your response:

Increased stress for educators

Increased stress for administration

Increased stress for students

Concerns with assessments and testing

Negative impact on classroom setting

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Feel free to add optional comments of explanation:

8. If you worked as a teacher or administrator in the school system when No Child Left Behind was enforced, do you believe the act had any positive impacts on your ability to effectively work in the school system when the act was enforced?

Yes  No

If yes, please select any of the following relevant to your response:

Decreased stress for educators

Decreased stress for administration

Decreased stress for students

Helpful with assessments and testing

Positive impact on classroom setting

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Feel free to add optional comments of explanation:

9. Overall, did you find that No Child Left Behind achieved its goal of improving children's education? Why or why not?

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### Part III: Responses Regarding the Every Student Succeeds Act

10. Have you taught under the Every Student Succeeds Act? If no, please return the survey.

Yes  No

11. Do you believe the Every Student Succeeds Act allows freedom for teachers in the school system with regards to flexibility in selection of curriculum and materials?

Yes  No

12. Do you believe the Every Student Succeeds Act allows freedom for teachers in the school system with regards to flexibility in instructional planning?

Yes  No

13. Do you believe the Every Student Succeeds Act allows freedom for administration in the school system with regards to school decisions?

Yes  No

14. Do you believe the Every Student Succeeds Act limits the selection of curriculum and materials?

Yes  No

15. Do you believe the Every Student Succeeds Act limits instructional planning options?

Yes  No

16. If you have worked as a teacher or administrator in the school system when the Every Student Succeeds Act has been enforced, do you believe the act has had any negative impacts on your ability to effectively work in the school system since the act has been enforced?

Yes  No

If yes, please select any of the following relevant to your response:

Increased stress for educators

Increased stress for administration

Increased stress for students

Concerns with assessments and testing

Negative impact on classroom setting

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Feel free to add optional comments of explanation:



17. If you have worked as a teacher or administrator in the school system when the Every Student Succeeds Act has been enforced, do you believe the act has had any positive impacts on your ability to effectively work in the school system since the act has been enforced?

Yes  No

If yes, please select any of the following relevant to your response:

Decreased stress for educators

Decreased stress for administration

Decreased stress for students

Helpful with assessments and testing

Positive impact on classroom setting

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Feel free to add optional comments of explanation:

18. Overall, do you believe the Every Student Succeeds Act is successfully working towards its goal of improving children’s education? Why or why not?

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**Part IV: Comparing Experiences between No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act**

19. If you have taught under both No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act, are there ways in which your experience as a teacher been different, such as instructional preparation, availability of curriculum resources and support, etc., with the shift to the Every Student Succeeds Act? Please explain.

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