

Ensuring Every Student Matters: What Is N-Size and Why Is It Important?



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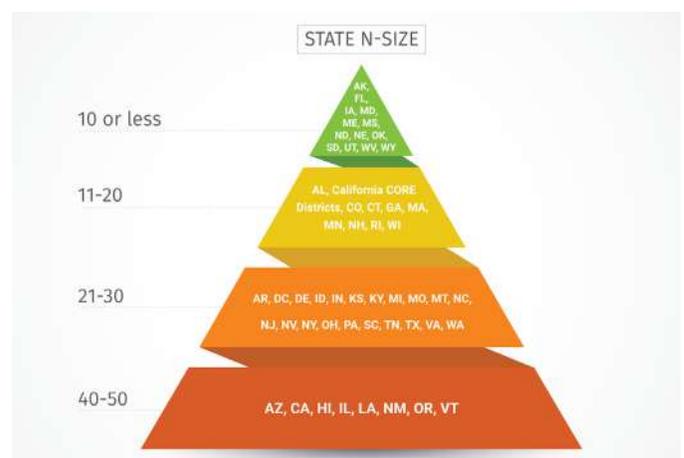
The new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, requires states, districts, and schools to monitor and report the academic performance of historically underserved groups of students based on their racial/ethnic status, socioeconomic status, English-language ability, and disability status.

States then must intervene when these categories of students, known as student "subgroups," consistently perform poorly. Yet more than half of U.S. states potentially are ignoring the academic needs of large numbers of African American and Latino students, students from low-income families, English language learners, students with disabilities, and other groups of traditionally underserved students because the state accountability systems fail to capture these student subgroups.

Under ESSA, as under its predecessor the No Child Left Behind Act, states set the minimum number of students necessary to include one of these student subgroups at the school, district, and state levels. This number, referred to as "n-size," also triggers improvement actions for low performance among students in that group. If a subgroup at a school has fewer students than the state-set n-size, then that school does not have to report the academic performance or high school graduation rate of that subgroup of students or provide resources targeted specifically to that group.

For example, if a state sets its n-size at 30 students and a school has only twenty-nine African American students in a given grade, that subgroup does not exist in the school's accountability system. If the high school graduation rate or academic performance of that group of African American students is low or lags behind the performance of other students in the school, a glaring achievement gap exists. Yet the school would not have to report this disparity in achievement nor would it receive any federal support to address the gap.

Under ESSA, states must set their n-size high enough to protect personal information about individual students and also yield statistically reliable data. However, a significant number of states set their n-size higher than necessary to satisfy these requirements. According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics,¹ a state can set an n-size of 10 students, and even as low as 5 students, and still protect student privacy and ensure statistical reliability. Currently, though, only thirteen states set an n-size of 10 or fewer students, as shown in the graphic below. Nine states and California's nine CORE Districts,² which include the state's largest school districts, set the n-size between 11 and



20 students. Twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia set the n-size at 21 or more students. Of those twenty-eight states, eight set the n-size at 40 or more students—*four times higher* than necessary to satisfy ESSA's requirements for student privacy and statistical reliability.

States should set their n-size at 10 or fewer students to capture the greatest number of student subgroups for reporting, accountability, and improvement purposes under ESSA. In fact, by lowering their n-size, several states and California's CORE districts already have been able to identify and support substantially more schools and students:

- The California CORE Districts use an n-size of 20 students—much lower than the state's n-size of 50 students—and, collectively, include an additional 150,000 students in their accountability and support systems.
- By lowering its n-size from 40 to 30 students, Mississippi increased the number of schools responsible for the academic performance of students with disabilities from 234 to 872 and those accountable for English language learners from 15 to 447.
- When Virginia lowered its n-size from 50 to 30 students, the number of schools responsible for the academic performance of African American students increased from 353 to 451 and those accountable for Latino students increased from 122 to 183. Similarly, the number of schools responsible for the performance of students with disabilities increased from 105 to almost 400.

More states should follow these examples and structure their accountability and support systems to expand, rather than limit, the number of student subgroups included in those systems. By setting an n-size of 10 or fewer students, states can identify and support the most underserved students and ensure they receive the interventions and services afforded under ESSA they need to succeed.

For additional information about n-size, read the Alliance for Excellent Education report *Ensuring Equity in ESSA: The Role of N-Size in Subgroup Accountability* available at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/n-size/>. For additional fact sheets and videos about ESSA, visit www.all4ed.org/essa/.



Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Statistical Methods for Protecting Personally Identifiable Information in Aggregate Reporting* (NCES 2011–603), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011603.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2016).

² CORE represents nine member school districts in California, including Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco, Sanger, and Santa Ana Unified. Combined, these districts serve more than 1 million students.