

The Impact of CSI Designation in ESSA Accountability Systems: Study Overview



Drew Atchison | Kerstin Le Floch | Umut Ozek | Steve Hurlburt
December 2023

About the Study

For decades, federal policymakers have tried to improve struggling schools by holding them accountable for meeting student achievement goals. The most recent federal law, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) requires states to identify the lowest performing 5% of Title I schools using multiple measures of student outcomes. These schools are labeled “Comprehensive Support and Improvement” (CSI) schools, and they must develop and implement a school improvement plan. States and districts must also provide supports to those schools to improve instructional practices and student outcomes.

The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is conducting a study to examine whether designating a school as CSI improves student outcomes, as well as how state-selected performance measures influence which schools are identified as CSI. The study also examines state and district supports to CSI schools, improvement activities in both CSI and non-CSI schools, and principal perceptions of the accountability system. For this study, AIR partnered with California, Florida, and Ohio to examine four primary research questions (RQs) within the contexts of those states:

- RQ1: What is the impact of the CSI designation on student outcomes measured by the accountability system?
- RQ2: How does the CSI designation influence behavior of school-level stakeholders, including principals’ prioritization and selection of interventions, as well as teacher and student mobility?
- RQ3: How does the design of accountability systems, including the measures used, influence the set of schools identified as CSI?
- RQ4: What is the underlying rationale for the design of the accountability system and associated supports for CSI schools? How do local stakeholders perceive these supports?



Learn More

Visit our project website to find additional briefs and reports documenting our findings from the study.

<https://www.air.org/project/impact-csi-designation-multiple-measure-essa-accountability-systems>

Image by [Jean-Paul Jandrain](#) from [Pixabay](#).

About This Brief

This research brief is one in a series within the broader study of the *Impact of CSI Designation in Multiple Measure ESSA Accountability Systems*. In this initial brief, we provide an overview of the study and describe the theory of action that underlies school accountability systems in the United States. Subsequent briefs in the series highlight key findings from the study.

Research Briefs in the Series

This brief is the first in a series that investigates the steps in the accountability theory of action. The other briefs focus on the measures included in accountability systems, the clarity and usefulness of accountability information, the supports provided to CSI schools, and the selection of interventions and improvement strategies.

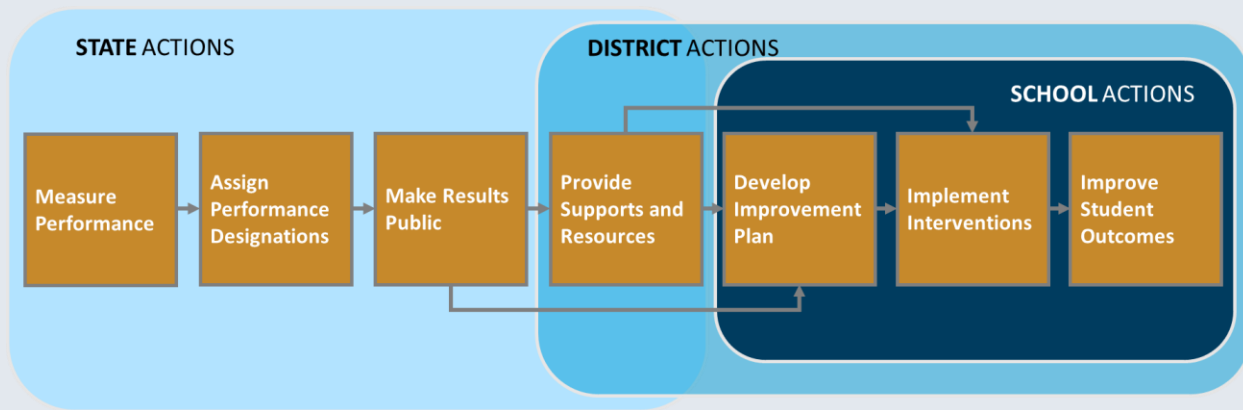
Theory of Action

Following our research questions, we investigate the various steps of the accountability theory of action to understand whether features of the accountability systems are functioning as intended (see Exhibit 1). Accountability policy is supposed to work as follows: (a) States assess school performance through a variety of performance measures, (b) states assign performance designations to schools indicating their level of performance, (c) the results of the measurement of performance and the designations are made public for district and school administrators as well as the broader public to see (the information provided should clearly indicate the areas in which schools are underperforming), (d) states provide supports and resources to schools in need of improvement, (e) districts and schools develop improvement plans for schools in need of improvement, (f) those schools implement interventions to improve student outcomes, and (g) student outcomes improve.ⁱ During the course of this study, we will develop briefs and reports that provide results of our investigations of the steps in the theory of action.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is funded with Research Grant R305A200254 from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Institute, the U.S. Department of Education, or our partner states, California, Florida, and Ohio. Visit <https://www.air.org/project/impact-csi-designation-multiple-measure-essa-accountability-systems> to access all of the research briefs and see more information about the study. We acknowledge the many people who helped make this study possible. We thank the state leaders at the California Department of Education, Florida Department of Education, and Ohio Department of Education who worked with us on this study; the members of the Expert Practitioner Panel who provided input on the study; the staff at NORC at the University of Chicago, particularly Cynthia Simko, who supported the study; and the state, district, and school leaders who participated in this study.

Exhibit 1. Accountability Theory of Action



Why Study CSI Schools Under ESSA?

Since the mid-1990s, federal law has required states to hold schools accountable by measuring and reporting school performance, with the broad and ambitious goal of improving public education for all students. By identifying schools that are persistently underperforming; sharing performance information with administrators, educators, and parents; and providing additional resources to underperforming schools, policymakers hope to stimulate and sustain school improvement.

ESSA is the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the legislative vehicle for federal accountability policy over the past several decades. ESSA brought about several key changes compared with the prior reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act—the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). First, the law placed increased attention on improving the very lowest performing schools in each state—CSI schools. Second, ESSA emphasized that accountability designations should be based on multiple measures of student performance, the intent being to define performance in a broader manner than in prior accountability policies. Whereas NCLB relied heavily on proficiency rates in math and English language arts, ESSA requires states to develop a system of measuring performance that includes at least five performance indicators but gives states substantial latitude in determining the specific performance measures as well as how to combine those measures into an overall performance score. Third, ESSA provides much more flexibility to states and districts in determining how to intervene in low-performing schools, only requiring that at least one intervention be evidence based.

As a result of these changes, states have taken varying approaches to redesigning their accountability systems, including the measures and calculations they use for determining school performance and the actions that they are taking to support school improvement. This variation in state approaches to accountability provides an opportunity to examine the differences across states to better understand which approaches are most successful in improving student outcomes.

Partner States

To address the study’s research questions, AIR partnered with California, Florida, and Ohio. In 2018–19, these states collectively identified almost 1,600 CSI schools: approximately 800 in California, 550 in Florida, and 250 in Ohio.

Study Data Collections

This study includes three primary data collection activities:

- **Administrative data:** The study is collecting administrative data to examine the impact of CSI designation on student outcomes in the first four years since the initial group of CSI schools were identified (2018–19 through 2021–22) and the influence of system design on school identification during the initial years of CSI identification. We also use administrative data to examine teacher and student mobility in response to CSI designation during the first four years since the initial group of CSI schools were identified.
- **Principal survey:** In spring of 2022, the study administered a survey to almost 2,000 principals of CSI schools and of a comparison set of relatively low-performing schools in the three study states. We obtained more than 1,200 completed surveys, for a response rate of just over 60%. The principal survey examined perceptions of the accountability system, the clarity and usefulness of information provided to schools, the focuses of school improvement efforts, and the types of supports received.
- **District interviews:** In the late spring and summer of 2022, the study team conducted virtual semistructured interviews with 41 district administrators responsible for CSI implementation from 20 districts across the three study states. The districts were selected purposively to represent a mix of contexts, including urban and rural districts, districts with varying numbers of CSI schools, and districts representing different populations of students. Through the interviews, we collected detailed information on each district’s approach to providing support to CSI schools. We also asked district administrators about their perceptions of accountability measures, state and regional CSI supports, and the clarity and usefulness of state-provided accountability information.



Analytic Approach

Impact

In our primary approach for the impact analysis, we use a regression discontinuity design, which compares schools just above and just below the cutoffs for CSI designation. As a secondary approach, we use a longitudinal pre-/post-treatment design, known as comparative interrupted time series, to

compare changes in CSI schools relative to non-CSI schools. Using these approaches, we examine student outcomes (RQ1) and, when possible, teacher and student mobility (RQ2).

Influence of Design on Identification

To examine the design of accountability systems and the influence of design decisions on identification of CSI schools (RQ3), we conduct several analyses. First, we conduct descriptive analyses of the number of measures on which schools were rated and types of measures that were most often unrated. We use correlational analyses to examine the relationships among accountability measures and between accountability measures and school demographics. Lastly, we simulate how school CSI designations would change if we were to exclude certain accountability measures from the calculation or make other changes to the accountability formula. Simulations that result in more changes to CSI schools demonstrate which measures are most influential.

Perceptions of Principals

To examine principals' perceptions of accountability systems, the supports they receive (RQ4), and how they focus school improvement activities (RQ2), we conduct descriptive analyses of principals' survey responses. Across many of the items, our interest is whether principals of CSI schools responded differently than principals of non-CSI schools. For example, we analyze whether CSI principals were more likely to focus on certain outcomes or types of interventions (RQ2) or reported receiving different types of supports than non-CSI schools (RQ4). To facilitate the comparisons of CSI and non-CSI schools, we use inverse propensity weighting and multivariate regression to balance and control for characteristics across the two groups of schools, including school demographic characteristics, school grade level, and type (e.g., alternative).

Perceptions of District Administrators

To analyze district administrators' perceptions of the accountability system, the supports from the state, and descriptions of their supports to CSI schools (RQ4), the study team coded verbatim transcripts of the interviews using the NVivo qualitative analysis software program. We then synthesized the coded data using structured data capture spreadsheets to facilitate cross-district analysis. For these analyses, we developed rubrics that specified criteria for classifying districts' responses into a set of study-determined categories. Using those rubrics, multiple analysts independently reviewed the data for each district and assigned the district to the category that best reflected its responses. In cases where analysts disagreed on the categorization of particular districts, we used a consensus-making process to determine the district's final categorization.

End Notes

¹ The accountability theory of action has changed little over the past several decades. For examples, see the following works:

Fuhrman, S. H., & Elmore, R. F. (Eds.). (2004). *Redesigning accountability systems for education*. Teachers College Press.

Hanushek, E. A., & Raymond, M. E. (2001). Does school accountability lead to improved student performance? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 20(2), 297–327.

Le Floch K. C., Martinez, F., O'Day, J., Stecher, B., Taylor, J., & Cook, A. (2007). *State and local implementation of No Child Left Behind Act: Volume III—Accountability under NCLB*. U.S. Department of Education, Policy and Program Studies Service.

O'Day, J. A. (2002). Complexity, accountability, and school improvement. *Harvard Education Review*, 72(3), 293–329.