

## from the Director's Desktop

### *Keys to the Car*

I remember the first time I got the keys to the car, shortly after my 16th birthday. I had taken driver education and had driven with my parents in the car, but this was different. I was behind the wheel and in charge.

It was not, as I recall, a glamorous errand. My mom needed something from the store. Or perhaps my sister needed to be picked up from a piano lesson. I drove s-l-o-w-l-y and carefully, making sure I didn't leave a dent. (That would come shortly afterward.)

You probably recall your first time behind the wheel as well. It's one of those rites of passage that mark our evolution to adulthood.

Education policy is also growing up. After 14 years of an approach to educational accountability that was top-down and federally driven (pun intended), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has changed drivers. ESSA transforms accountability from a compliance-driven model (have we checked all the boxes?) to one in which states have the latitude and authority to make key decisions in four big areas:

**Accountability.** When President Johnson signed the first Elementary and Secondary Education Act, he said it was designed for quality and equality. Those purposes should be the foundation of any state accountability system. While the law does require continued annual testing, states can add other metrics that they believe more accurately reflect state goals. So consider metrics for social and emotional learning or for access to more rigorous coursework.

**Assessment.** State boards have major responsibilities in state assessments. In

31 states, the board has the authority to select the state summative test, and in six more states, that responsibility is shared with the state education agency (SEA). Boards can make other key decisions: Do they want to give a single test at the end of the year, or do they want to administer smaller assessments throughout the year? Do they want to allow districts to use a nationally recognized test like the ACT or SAT instead of the state test in high schools? Do they want to be part of a pilot to develop alternative assessments such as competency-based or performance-based assessments?

**Teacher and Leader Development.** Elimination of the "highly qualified teacher" requirement opens up opportunities for states to define what constitutes good teaching. Particularly in areas like CTE or the arts, this should make it easier to bring practitioners into the classroom to share their expertise with students. States will also want to take advantage of the opportunity to devote some Title II funding to teacher and leader development and professional learning.

**School Improvement/Turnarounds.** ESSA offers real flexibility here. Working with districts, states need only craft an "evidence-based" plan to improve student achievement in persistently low-performing schools or in schools where achievement gaps for one subgroup persist. Naturally, with increased flexibility will come increased responsibility to monitor schools and districts as they develop and implement their plans.

Don't wait for a self-driving version of educational accountability. ESSA handed you the keys. So get behind the wheel. ■



**Kristen Amundson**  
Executive Director