



# What is a “Low-Performing” School?

## The Implications of Federal Policy Changes and State Implementation Decisions on the Equity of School Accountability Designations



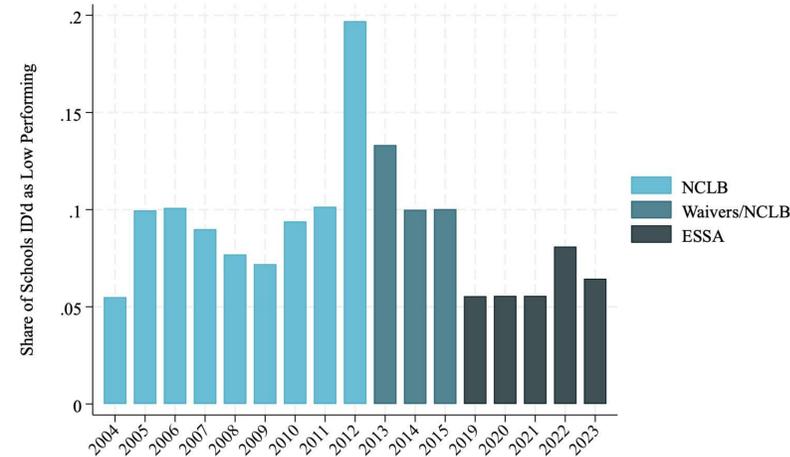
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### Introduction/Background

Federal policy surrounding the definition of a “low-performing” school have changed since the parlance was first introduced into the federal education policy landscape with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001). The proficiency-based measures that underlied school ratings under NCLB disproportionately identified schools serving students from marginalized populations, holding schools accountable for opportunity gaps rather than the quality of education they provided to students (Heck, 2006; Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Reardon, 2007). Congress in 2015 passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which in part changed the definition of “low performing” to emanate from a more holistic assessment of school performance, which could have potentially led to a more equitable distribution of schools designated as low performing. However, states were given broad discretion in how to develop their school accountability systems under ESSA, and the extent to which those systems yielded more equitable low-performing lists is not yet known (Atchison et al., 2023; Harbatkin & Wolf, 2023).

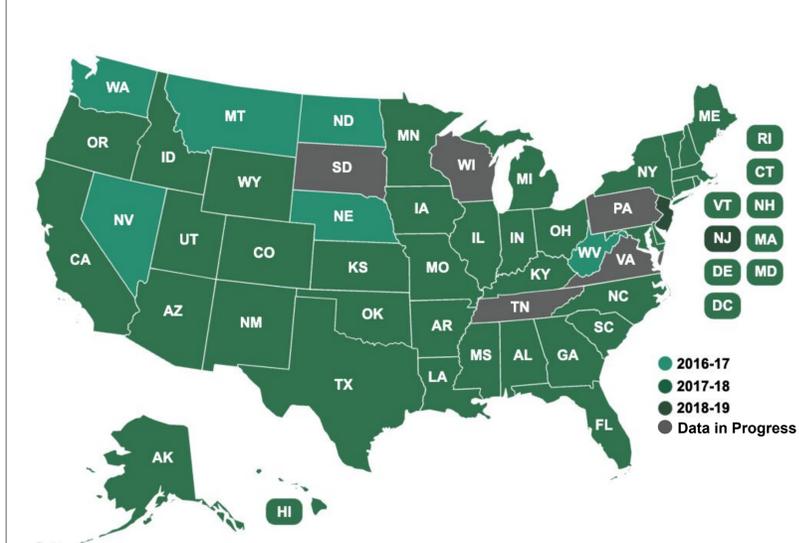
This study has aimed to build a comprehensive national longitudinal database of all federal low-performing designations from NCLB through ESSA via the data collection from federal and state websites as well as outreach to state departments of education. Research assistants have conducted this data collection for several years of designation data and compiled each states’ designation data from 2015 through 2023 into a database. The principal investigators on the project are leveraging these data to examine the extent to which ESSA designated a more equitable list of schools relative to earlier federal policy such as NCLB. The findings have important implications for understanding the extent to which changes in federal school accountability policy have yielded more or less equitable lists of “low-performing” schools over time. Future research will also leverage these data to identify a plausibly causal estimate of the effects of ESSA’s designation on student achievement.

Figure 1: Proportion of Schools Identified as Low Performing



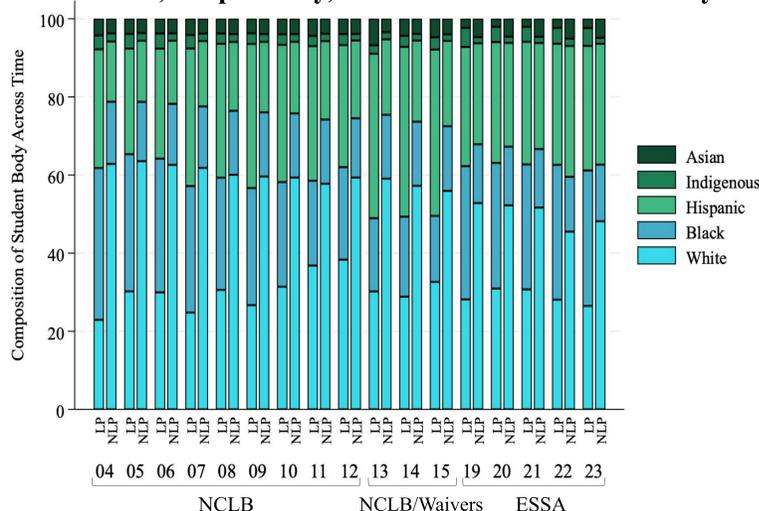
\*Data are based on proportion of all low performing schools; all findings and data are preliminary.

Figure 3: First CSI Implementation Years Under ESSA by State



\*All findings and data are preliminary.

Figure 2: Demographic Composition of Designated and Non-Designated Schools, Respectively, Over Time and Federal Policy



\*Data are based on the composition of the student body throughout different federal policies designating low performing schools over time; all findings and data are preliminary.

Percentage of First CSI Identification and Implementation Years

School Year	Identification Year	Implementation Year
2016-17	12%	0%
2017-18	76%	4%
2018-19	2%	88%
2019-20	0%	2%
Unknown (coding in progress)	10%	6%
Total	100%	100%

\*Data show the percentage of when each state began to collect CSI data and the year they decided to implement this data collection; all findings and data are preliminary.

### Data Collection Timeline & Methods

Individual	Both Researchers		
September	December	January & February	February & March
<b>Collection of Data</b>	<b>Data Management &amp; Tracking</b>	<b>Review of Waivers and Consolidated State Plan</b>	<b>Stata Data Cleaning &amp; Analysis</b>
Zhan: Looked at state department of education websites and downloaded lists of CSI schools and created master Excel spreadsheet.	Organized state school identification lists into Excel spreadsheet for preliminary use. These data will also be significant for future research.	Reviewed NCLB and ESSA waivers and consolidated state plans for government responses to state requests.	Using Stata, a statistical analysis software, data was cleaned and organized. Developed data visualizations using longitudinal school dataset.
Zoya: Downloaded final consolidated state plans and COVID-19 waivers.			

### Conclusions

- Each federal policy disproportionately identified schools serving larger shares of students from historically marginalized populations, though ESSA yielded marginally more equitable designations than NCLB.
- At the height of NCLB, nearly 20% of schools had been identified as low performing, raising serious questions about the designation meaning. Designations climbed again in more recent years of ESSA though to a lesser degree thus far, peaking in 2022 at about 7.5%.
- Most states began implementing turnaround in their first cohort of CSI schools under ESSA for the 2018-19 school year based their identification off of 2017-18 school year data, the latest possible year federal policy permitted. As a result, the first cohort of CSI schools received only one full year of supports before the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered school buildings.

\*Data are based on the composition of the student body throughout different federal policies designating low performing schools over time; all findings and data are preliminary.

### Further Considerations

- Due to the confined collection of data, there are no definitive conclusions presently. Thus, more time is needed to observe effects of new education policy.
- Further research related to this topic will continue based on the raw data collected from the past two semesters.

\* Note: COVID-19 hindered the implementation of collection of data observing the new policy.

### References

