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# LEVERAGING INSTRUCTIONAL CHOICE **UNDER ESSA**

State Leadership on Direct Student Services

## Leveraging Instructional Choice Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: State Leadership on Direct Student Services

### Introduction

School choice has been the most prominent element of the Trump Administration's education platform to date. Education leaders are investing significant energy debating the future of charter schools and vouchers. But there are two issues with focusing our national attention so much on these options: First, this vision of school choice leaves many high-need students, such as those in rural areas, largely untouched. Second, this definition of choice leaves some powerful—but rarely discussed—new tools out of the conversation, including fostering instructional choice, not just school choice.

School choice as part of a comprehensive strategy to support greater equity is undoubtedly important, and there is clear evidence that some charter schools have made enormous contributions, especially for traditionally underserved students.

But across the country, charter schools serve only about 5% of our nation's public school students<sup>1</sup>—and it is highly unlikely that this will more than double in the near future. Even in such an ambitious scenario, this leaves a large number of students who may have few schools to choose from, especially in rural areas where one school often serves the entire community.

### Beyond *School* Choice

How then do we create real options for students to have greater instructional choice? The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes a provision championed by Chiefs for Change that will address the access gaps that exist in far too many of our highest need schools and provide students and families with meaningful instructional choices to support their learning. The provision – Direct Student Services (DSS) – allows states to set aside 3% of Title I funding and award this to districts with a high number of schools identified for improvement that are committed to offering more meaningful learning opportunities, activities, courses, and services not otherwise available to students.

Consider advanced course access as one such important opportunity. A 2016 [report](#) from the US Department of Education found that nearly 70% of high schools with high black and Latino student enrollment do not offer calculus, more than half do not offer physics, a third do not offer chemistry, and nearly a third do not offer Algebra II, which means that many students do not even have the chance to be prepared for post-secondary options. In addition, Advanced Placement (AP) and other

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<sup>1</sup> 2013-2014 Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools by School Type. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences:  
[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15\\_216.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_216.20.asp)

accelerated courses or programs are not accessible to students in many schools. And a [report](#) from the Education Trust found that more than half a million low-income students and students of color who would benefit from AP or International Baccalaureate (IB) are not doing so or do not have the opportunity to do so.

DSS can also be used for numerous other instructional choice options such as innovative new personalized learning opportunities for students. These approaches can allow students to have greater agency in developing their own academic pathways and be more engaged and empowered learners.

Through DSS, there is significant flexibility in which strategies educators can pursue to address these and other challenges. Increasing access to advanced coursework, supporting personalized learning, providing high-quality individual tutoring, or offering other services that help foster students' college and career readiness are among the most promising examples, all of which are outlined in the Chiefs for Change [policy brief](#) on DSS. Ultimately, however, it is up to state leaders to decide how best to leverage the funding, which would be awarded to districts based on their applications and number of schools with significant underperformance. These strategies can help concentrate resources toward the students most in need and support states in targeting their school improvement funds toward the most promising interventions.

### **From Design to Implementation**

Several state leaders have already taken bold steps forward by indicating their intention to set aside funding for Direct Student Services. As with any new initiative, however, the success of DSS depends on the quality of its design and implementation. Chiefs for Change members met in fall 2016 as part of a workgroup to refine their DSS strategies and create a toolkit to enable DSS to be successful in their own contexts, as well as to encourage other states to better understand and leverage the opportunity. The outcomes of that work are accessible to all [here](#).

In partnership with this cohort of states, Chiefs for Change developed a [model application](#) that states can customize based on their priorities for DSS and overall school improvement strategies. They also developed a list of [Frequently Asked Questions](#) that address administrative requirements of DSS, the process for how funds are awarded, and outreach and communications to schools and families. As part of this suite of resources, Chiefs for Change also developed a list of [provider application criteria](#) for states and districts to evaluate, select, and monitor the most qualified service providers that will deliver measurable outcomes. Providers could be the district applying for funds for DSS itself; other districts; community colleges or other higher education institutions; non-public entities; community-based organizations; or in the case of high-quality academic tutoring, a variety of providers that are selected and approved by the state.

Many states have already released frameworks and drafts of their ESSA plans, and the interest in DSS outlined in these is encouraging. To date, the DSS model application has been downloaded



nearly 300 times by users across 23 states. If all states participate, approximately **\$425 million** in DSS funds would be available for innovative programs each year, based on current appropriations levels. State-specific funding ranges from approximately \$1 million to \$54 million based on state Title I allocations (this [map](#) shows the estimated amount per state). By seeking the best ways to design and implement DSS, states are demonstrating their commitment to empowering families by offering a variety of instructional choice options. DSS provides an opportunity to broaden the conversation on choice and integrate it as part of a larger strategy on how DSS funds and programs could complement other education reform efforts across states and throughout the nation.

### **About Chiefs for Change**

Chiefs for Change is a coalition of state education Chiefs and district superintendents dedicated to excellence and equity for all students. Learn more on our website: [chiefsforchange.org](https://chiefsforchange.org).

For questions about the content of this brief, contact Chiefs for Change at [info@chiefsforchange.org](mailto:info@chiefsforchange.org).