Open Educational Resources Planning Tool: Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants Program

Introduction

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, P.L. 114-95) authorized an important new, formula based funding source for states and school districts interested in using openly licensed digital content and related professional development to support teaching and learning. ESSA's Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants (SSAEG, Title IV - Part A) program expressly permits grantees, independently or through voluntary consortia, to use program funds for developing and using openly licensed educational content and making instructional content widely available through open educational resources ("OER"). Congress embedded SSAEG's OER provisions in the program's technology element – one of three program focus areas – which creates a natural connection to the digital education transition underway in many leading states and school districts.

Communities that wish to use SSAEG funding for OER initiatives should begin planning now. First time program funding will not be available for states and school districts until 2017, but given the program's structure, varied uses, and possible limited funding levels, early and careful planning is needed to maximize the initiative's potential as a tool for supporting the development, adoption, and use of high quality open educational resources. With that goal and timeline in mind, this primer briefly describes the SSAEG's overarching elements to provide context for the planning process, but focuses on the program's OER features. The paper also includes initial guidance to communities interested in using program funds for launching, strengthening, or scaling OER initiatives.

The paper's recommendations focus on three action steps, which communities should consider to begin preparing for the program's first funding distribution next year:

- Connect SSAEG's OER provisions to the broader ESSA implementation process at the local and state level

- Conduct a robust SSAEG needs assessment and make OER a core focus area of the analysis

- Establish an SSAEG OER planning group and develop a shared strategy

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Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant Program Overview

The Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants program authorizes up to $1.65 billion in annual formula funding for states and school districts. The program offers a relatively flexible funding source for activities in three policy and practice areas:

- Providing all students with access to a well-rounded education;
- Improving school conditions for learning; and
- Improving the use of technology in order to improve the academic achievement, academic growth, and digital literacy of all students.

State SSAEG funding allocations are determined based on ESSA's Title I formulas. States and districts must provide statutorily specified assurances to receive their SSAEG funding, including – in most cases – conducting a needs assessment, promoting equitable access to the activities supported by the program, and more. Following the U.S. Department of Education's allocation of program resources to states, most program funding (ninety-five percent) flows from states to school districts. States may reserve one percent of the state's aggregate formula allocation for administration and up to four percent for state activities.

With a limited exception for school districts that receive less than $30,000 through the program's formula, grantees MUST use at least twenty percent of their SSAEG funds for well-rounded educational opportunities; and at least twenty percent of funding for school conditions for learning programs. The remaining sixty percent may be used for activities to support the effective use of technology – including permissible OER activities - and at least a "portion" must be used for at least one activity supporting the effective use of technology. No more than 15% of funds may be used for purchasing technology infrastructure, such as devices, equipment, and software applications (we believe this cap applies to the district's overall SSAEG allocation, but further information may become available when the U.S. Department of Education implements the program).

Open Educational Resources Provisions - States and School Districts

State Program Activities and Related OER Provisions

State SSAEG plans, which must be filed with the U.S. Department of Education before program funding is released at the federal level, must describe how the state education agency will use SSAEG funds for state-level activities and ensure district awards are used consistent with program requirements. States must also provide assurances that they will: (1) review existing resources and programs and coordinate them with initiatives supported by the program; (2) monitor program implementation and provide technical assistance to districts; and (3) provide for equitable access to the activities supported by the program.

States must use their SSAEG set-aside funds (up to four percent of the total provided to the state) for school district monitoring, training, technical assistance and capacity building. States must also use the funds for public reporting about how school districts use program funds, including noting progress toward meeting program objectives and outcomes. Importantly, states may use their funding to support districts in delivering SSAEG related programs and activities, specifically including, but not limited to:

- Making instructional content widely available through open educational resources, which may include providing tools and processes to support LEAs in making such resources widely available.

- Supporting schools in rural and remote areas to expand access to high-quality digital learning opportunities (the law defines "digital learning" to include openly licensed content).

- Developing or using strategies that are innovative or evidence-based for the delivery of special or rigorous academic courses and curricula through the use of technology, including digital learning technologies and assistive technology, which may include increased access to online dual or concurrent enrollment opportunities, career and technical education courses, and programs leading to a recognized postsecondary credential.

- Providing teachers, paraprofessionals, school librarians and media personnel, special instructional support and administrators with the knowledge and skills to use technology effectively, including effective integration of technology, to improve instruction and student achievement, which may include coordination with teacher, principal, and other school leader preparation programs.

School District Activities and OER Provisions

School districts, including charter schools considered districts under state law, receive SSAEG funding through their states based on the Title I formula. No eligible district may receive less than $10,000, and they may form multi-district consortia to combine program funds and jointly conduct program activities. School districts must consult with stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, principals, school leaders, and community based organizations) in developing their SSAEG applications, which must be submitted to states prior to the release of program funds. As part of the application process, districts must conduct a needs assessment, including examining access to personalized learning experiences supported by technology and professional development for the effective use of data and technology (a needs assessment is not required for districts that would receive less than $30,000 through the formula). The needs assessment is required every three years. School districts may apply to their states for SSAEG funding through a common application submitted as part of a consortia with other surrounding districts.

School district applications must describe the activities and programing they will carry out, including describing any partnerships they have with institutions of higher education, businesses, nonprofit organizations and other entities. The application must also include assurances the school district will prioritize funding to schools with the greatest needs, set aside 20% of program funds for well rounded education activities and 20% of funding for school conditions activities (these set aside requirements do not apply to districts that will receive less than $30,000 in funding under the formula.) Among other areas, school districts, or voluntary district consortia, may use SSAEG technology funds to:

- Develop or utilize effective or innovative strategies for the delivery of specialized or rigorous academic courses and curricula through the use of technology, including digital

learning technologies and assistive technology (the law defines "digital learning" to include openly licensed content).

- Provide students in rural, remote, and underserved areas with the resources to take advantage of high quality digital learning experiences, digital resources, and access to online courses taught by effective educators.

- Provide educators, school leaders, and administrators with the professional learning tools, devices, content, and resources to discover, adapt, and share relevant high-quality educational resources.

- Build technological capacity and infrastructure, which may include: (1) procuring content and ensuring content quality; and (2) purchasing devices, equipment, and software applications in order to address readiness shortfalls.

Recommended Action Steps

Given the SSAEG's importance to the overarching ESSA implementation process, and its broad and flexible uses, communities should begin planning now to ensure program funding is well used. OER champions should consider the following three action steps to begin the planning process:

- **CONNECT SSAEG'S OER PROVISIONS TO THE BROADER ESSA IMPLEMENATION PROCESS AT THE LOCAL AND STATE LEVEL.** State and local leaders should include SSAEG planning - especially issues related to the initiative's digital learning and OER provisions - on the agenda for ESSA stakeholder discussions, which, by law, must include teachers, leaders, families and other community voices. SSAEG spending at the state and district level should be thoughtfully connected to other major elements of ESSA implementation, including ways the program's OER provisions can help further – and be strategically connected to the law's accountability, school improvement, and professional development requirements.

- **CONDUCT A ROBUST SSAEG NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND MAKE OER A CORE FOCUS AREA OF THE ANALYSIS.** SSAEG requires, in most instances, a school district needs assessment, which must be submitted to the state before program funding may be released and must include stakeholder involvement. State and district leaders should include an examination of available digital learning resources among the needs assessment's core focus areas. This step will help leaders develop a clear understanding of the educational resources needs of their schools, school district, and state, including related professional development gaps. It also provides a basis to demonstrate how OER can help meet those needs, including by making planning connections between SSAEG investments and other ESSA requirements, programs, and activities.

- **ESTABLISH AN SSAEG OER PLANNING GROUP AND DEVELOP A SHARED STRATEGY.** Educational resources decisions often require input and authorization from a range of officials and stakeholders to ensure alignment with state standards, promote quality, and to satisfy other requirements. They also connect directly to other ESSA equity goals and activities. Developing a team now will contribute to comprehensive planning and

securing stakeholder buy-in, and will also set the stage for collective school district consortia SSAEG activities – if appropriate – as permitted by ESSA.

Links to Additional OER Policy Materials

State and local leaders interested in using SSAEG to support OER initiatives, should also consider examining existing OER projects underway nationally. The following websites highlight key OER concepts, initiatives, and repositories, which might help inform the state and local SSAEG planning process:

- **Council of Chief State School Officers - Open Educational Resources Stories, Policies and Resources**

- **Creative Commons – Open Educational Resources Definitions**

- **Creative Commons – Open Educational Resources Project**

- **Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education – OER Commons**

- **K12 OER Collaborative**

- **State Educational Technology Directors Association – OER Case Studies**

- **State Educational Technology Directors Association – Digital Instructional Materials Acquisition Policies for States**

- **The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation – Open Educational Resources Project**

Conclusion

These recommendations represent only a first step toward successfully using SSAEG as a source of support for open educational resources projects. State and local leaders should consult Title IV of the Every Student Succeeds Act for further information about the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant program and monitor the U.S. Department of Education's SSAEG implementation activities. For further information about this memorandum, please contact Reg Leichty at (202) 499-6996 or Reg.Leichty@FLPAdvisors.com, or Amy Starzynski at (202) 499-6996 or Amy.Starzynski@FLPadvisors.com.