Frequently Asked Questions for Parents and Families on Georgia's ESEA Flexibility Waiver

Please Note: *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) expired in 2007 and while many of its policies remain in effect, the law is now referred to by its original name, Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 1965.*

1. Why did Georgia apply for the ESEA Flexibility Waiver?

In September of 2011, the United States Department of Education invited states to seek a waiver from various sections of ESEA due to consensus from across the nation that certain aspects of the law encouraged some states to set lower academic standards, failed to recognize or reward schools showing growth in student achievement, and did little to promote the teaching profession or recognize the most effective teachers.

Therefore, the Georgia Department of Education applied for the ESEA Flexibility Waiver to allow for greater flexibility in the way the state measures schools for accountability as well as added flexibility in the way schools, school districts, and the state work to improve struggling schools. The waiver allows our state to identify and support schools where students continue to struggle based on student achievement growth or student subgroup performance issues, unify federal law with Georgia's accountability system focused on college and career readiness, and exercise greater flexibility with federal funding.

2. What does the Georgia ESEA Flexibility Waiver mean for students, teachers, parents and families?

The Georgia ESEA Flexibility Waiver affirms the strength of Georgia's education reform initiatives in the areas of improving educational outcomes for all students, closing achievement gaps, increasing equity, and improving the quality of instruction. Under Georgia's own statewide accountability system, all stakeholders will be able to share a common understanding of school and district performance.

In the past, a school either met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) or did not, but many people did not know what this meant or why the school received that rating. Under Georgia's new system, stakeholders will have a complete and comprehensive picture of where a school or district is meeting performance expectations and where it is not, beyond student test scores. Using 2010 – 2011 school year assessment and gradation rate data, a percentage of schools will be identified as Reward, Priority, Focus, or Alert schools. These new school designations will provide all stakeholders with a deeper understanding of what resources schools need in order to be successful in their efforts to prepare students to be college and career ready.

3. Are schools still required to offer Supplemental Educational Services (SES) and public school choice to parents?

No, the Georgia ESEA Flexibility Waiver does not require Title I schools to offer SES or public school choice.

Results from an annual study of SES showed that overall, students receiving SES in Georgia did not outperform other similar students on state achievement tests in any subject area for the entire time they were in the program. However, knowing that students at-risk of failing still need tutoring or other academic intervention services, Title I Priority and Focus Schools will be required to offer Flexible Learning Programs (FLP) in place of SES. FLPs will be extended learning programs tailored to the needs of individual schools with the ability to serve more students in need of additional support.

Georgia Department of Education data also showed that less than 5% of eligible students took advantage of the public school choice option under ESEA. However, in 2009, Georgia introduced a state law which parents can still exercise called the Georgia's Permissive School Transfer Option. This law provides an option for parents to request permissive transfers providing comparable options for parents and students. Parents who had children opt for public school choice under ESEA can still keep that option until the child reaches the highest grade level in the school but school districts are no longer required to pay for transportation.

4. Will AYP still be calculated and reported?

No. AYP is no longer the state's accountability measure. However, some components of AYP, such as attendance and graduation rates, will still be reported to the public as part of Georgia's new statewide accountability system.

5. How will Georgia's schools still be held accountable?

The Georgia ESEA Flexibility Waiver will continue to require schools to raise the bar for performance of all students and will hold schools accountable for the academic growth and gain of all students. When schools fall short, parents can be assured that school leaders will adopt strategies focused on school needs and targeted towards the students most at risk.

Beginning in December of 2012, every school in the state will receive a numerical index score based on 100 points. This score will be considered the school's College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) number and will provide a more complete and comprehensive look at a school's performance. As previously mentioned, schools may also be identified as Reward, Priority, Focus, or Alert schools.

6. How will the waiver affect the standards/expectations of my child's academic achievements?

Nothing in the waiver changes the state's rigorous Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS). The statewide standards will remain in place. What has changed is the way we will measure schools' abilities to help students meet those standards.

In addition, all content areas (English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) will now carry the same weight to ensure all students are ready to enter the 21st century, college and career ready.

7. How long will the waiver be in effect?

The Georgia ESEA Flexibility Waiver will take effect for the 2012 – 2013 school year and remain in place for three years. However, it is important to note that if Congress reauthorizes ESEA between now and the 2014 – 2015 school year the reauthorized law would take priority over Georgia's waiver.

8. How do I know if my child's school has been designated as a Reward, Priority, Focus or Alert school?

The list of designated Priority and Focus Schools can be found on the Georgia Department of Education's Web page. Alert Schools will be posted May of 2012 and Reward Schools will be added September of 2012. To access these lists of identified schools please visit: http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/NCLB-Waiver.aspx

9. Will all schools be eligible for the new school designations?

No. Only schools receiving Title I funds will be eligible for the new school designations of Reward, Priority, and Focus. Schools receiving School Improvement Grants (1003 g) are also eligible for the Priority School designation. Title I schools and non-Title I schools are both eligible to receive the Alert School designation.

10. How is a school designated as a Reward School?

Reward Schools will be identified in September of 2012 and will continue to be announced on an annual basis. There are two ways a Title I school may be identified as a Reward School.

A Title I school may be classified as either a Highest-Performing School or a High-Progress School. Reward Schools cannot be identified as a Priority School or Focus School to be eligible.

To be designated as a Highest-Performing Reward School the school must be in the top 5% of Title I schools (78 schools) and either have the highest performance for all students over three years or is a high school with the highest graduation rates in Georgia.

To be designated as a High-Progress Reward School the school must be in the top 10% of Title I schools (156 schools) and either have the highest progress in performance for all students over three years or is a high school that is making the most progress in increasing graduation rates.

11. What do Reward Schools receive?

Reward Schools will receive public recognition for their success as well as recognition at the annual Title I Programs conference. In addition, financial awards may be available.

12. How is a school designated as a Priority School?

Priority Schools were identified in March of 2012 and will carry the Priority School designation for three years. An option to have the designation removed early if the school shows dramatic improvement is available. The list of Priority Schools can be found on the Georgia Department of Education's Web page at: http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/NCLB-Waiver.aspx

To be designated as a Priority School the school must in the bottom 5% of lowest achieving Title I schools (78 schools). There are three ways a Title I school may be identified: 1) by having a school improvement grant (1003 g), 2) by having a graduation rate lower than 60 percent for the past two years in a row, or 3) by having a lack of progress on student achievement for the past three years in a row.

13. What will Priority Schools have to do?

Priority Schools are Title I schools and will receive assistance from the Georgia Department of Education staff to implement interventions that will respond to the specific needs of the students in the school. They will work collaboratively with parents, their communities, and their school districts to develop school turnaround plans. These plans will consist of interventions that include but are not limited to assessing the performance of the school principal, having teachers and school administrators participate in professional learning, screening teachers, providing additional learning time for students, hiring an instructional coach, providing time during the day for teachers to plan instruction collaboratively, offering Flexible Learning Programs, developing a plan for student, family, and community engagement, and analyzing student attendance.

14. How is a school designated as a Focus School?

Focus Schools were identified in March of 2012 and will carry the Focus School designation for three years. Focus Schools cannot also be designated as a Priority School. An option to have the designation removed early if the school shows dramatic improvement is available. The list of Focus Schools can be found on the Georgia Department of Education's Web page at: http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/NCLB-Waiver.aspx

10% of Title I school (156 schools) will be designated as Focus Schools. There are two ways a Title I school may be identified: 1) by having a graduation rate lower than 60 percent for the past two years in a row or 2) by having the largest in-school achievement gap between the highest achieving subgroup of students and the lowest achieving subgroup of students.

15. What will Focus Schools have to do?

Focus Schools are Title I Schools and will receive assistance from the Georgia Department of Education staff as well as Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) specialists to implement interventions that will respond to the specific needs of improving the performance of their low-performing student subgroups. They will work collaboratively with parents, their communities, and their school districts to develop school turnaround plans. These plans may consist of interventions previously mentioned for Priority Schools, but Focus Schools have the ability to develop their own plans as long as they are appropriate to the school's needs and the needs of its students.

16. How is a school designated as an Alert School?

Alert Schools will be identified in May of 2012 and will continue to be announced on an annual basis. Title I and Non-Title I schools can be designated as Alert Schools. Once announced, the list of Alert Schools can be found on the Georgia Department of Education's Web page at: http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/NCLB-Waiver.aspx There are three ways schools may be identified: 1) by having low graduation rates, 2) by having low achievement in a particular student subgroup (such as English Learners or Special Education), or 3) by having low achievement in a particular subject content area (such as math or science). The state will use a formula based on the state's percentage of students meeting and exceeding or the graduation rate to determine the cut off percentage to qualify as an Alert School.

17. What will Alert Schools have to do?

Alert Schools will be treated the same way as Focus Schools. They will be required to develop school turnaround plans based on the particular needs of the school and its students.

18. Is parental involvement still required under the Georgia ESEA Flexibility Wavier?

Yes, parental involvement was not waived and therefore, Title I schools are still required to engage parents and families in their child's educational process. In addition, Priority Schools, Focus Schools, and Alert Schools will be required to notify parents of their school's designation, share data and information with parents used to support programming decisions, provide opportunities for engagement in the school planning process, and invite parents to participate in the school's turnaround or improvement activities. Priority Schools are also required to complete ongoing additional work in the area of family and community engagement.

19. What should I do if my child's school is named as a Priority, Focus, or Alert school?

Parents, families, and community members are crucial to the school improvement or school turnaround process. If your child's school is named as a Priority School, Focus School, or Alert School, take advantage of the opportunities the school offers to become more informed about what these designations mean and what in particular the school needs from you as it works to increase student achievement and success. If you have not heard of opportunities, do not wait to get involved. Contact your school's parent organization, parent involvement coordinator, or even principal to share your interest in helping with this important process as schools begin to develop and implement these new plans. Most importantly, know that your help, regardless of how much or how little time you have either at home or at school is critical to your child's success in school. Therefore, with parents, families, schools, students and communities working together, over time, these designated schools will see improvement.