

# How one struggling school can help education policy-makers do the right thing

By [Valerie Strauss](#) July 2

[“OYLER: One School, One Year” Official Trailer](#) from [Amy Scotton](#) on [Vimeo](#).

The passage last December of a new K-12 education law to replace the flawed No Child Left Behind was a certainly a momentous moment in the world of education. The Every Student Succeeds Act did many things, including returning a good deal of policy-making from the federal government back to the states and eliminated NCLB’s national system of judging schools. But equally as important in how well the law works is the way implementation rules are crafted by the federal government and then implemented. That process is underway and already causing controversy. (You can [read about that here](#).) In this post, Elaine Weiss has some advice for federal policy-makers who are drawing up the rules. She wants them to watch a film about a high-poverty school in Ohio to learn what students, teachers and schools really need to succeed today. Weiss is the national coordinator of the [Broader Bolder Approach to Education](#), a project of the nonprofit Economic Policy Institute. Broader Bolder works to promote the idea that the impact of social and economic disadvantage on many schools and students is profound and can’t be alleviated with academic “accountability” systems.

By Elaine Weiss

Now that we have in place a new federal framework for education policy in the form of the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA, which replaced No Child Left Behind as of December 2015), the real work begins. As those charged with implementation know, rule-making is where the rubber meets the road. And given the very different assumptions underlying ESSA in contrast to its predecessor, knowing where to look on that road can be difficult.

One likely overlooked source of that guidance can be found in a quiet, brutal, and hopeful one-hour documentary about a school in the urban Appalachian Lower Price Hill neighborhood of Cincinnati. [“Oyler: One School, One Year,”](#) produced by Marketplace reporter Amy Scott, illustrates the district’s innovative, holistic approach to mitigating the devastating impacts of concentrated poverty through the eyes of Principal Craig Hockenberry and senior Raven Gribbins.

Why would a film about one school in an isolated Ohio neighborhood be helpful to those making rules that affect schools in a diverse set of states and districts across the country? For two reasons.

First, because the economic, social, and emotional challenges to academic success facing teachers, principals, and students across the country are, unfortunately, increasingly similar to those depicted in Oyler. And because, as U.S. Department of Education Director of Strategic Initiatives Joaquin Tamayo asserted at a screening of the film, Oyler is on the cutting edge of where schools need to go if they are to successfully navigate paradigm shifts in what U.S. public education is about and what we are asking our schools to accomplish.

Raven was raised in one of the roughest neighborhoods in Ohio by a drug-addicted mother. Her father, who didn’t live with them, was in and out of jail for most of her life for the same reason. As Raven’s father, with whom she now lives, points out, her tendency to engage in fights with other students that get her in trouble should be no surprise, given her need to physically defend herself from a young age. Thirteen percent of U.S. children today are [growing up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty](#), more than triple the 4 percent living in such circumstances just 16 years ago. [One of every 28 American children](#) now has at least one parent in prison. These are realities that those crafting ESSA rules must take into account if our schools are to be equipped to successfully counter them with the right supports.

Her neighborhood also exists as if on another planet from the colleges and universities that we expect more of our country’s Ravens than ever before to attend, and to graduate from. Raven’s dad can barely read and write, and several neighbors recount not having a single family member who graduated from high school, let alone went to college.

As Oyler high school teacher Joe Saylor noted, “The sad truth is, not only are they not hearing it at home, they may be hearing the opposite at home: ‘You’re not going to go to college. You’re no better than me.’”

Saylor and his fellow teachers thus cannot afford to wait until high school to start talking about college. Principal Hockenberry clearly agrees: in addition to targeted tutoring and mentoring to get Oyler’s students prepared for the ACT college admissions exam and help them navigate the application and scholarship processes, he initiated an annual college day, when every student, starting in kindergarten, learns about where their own teachers and recent Oyler graduates went to college, decorates their classrooms and themselves with bling from those institutions, and discusses what they need to do to follow in those footsteps. You *can* do it, you *will* do it, and we’re here to help you every step of the way. That’s the message at Oyler, and the one we need to help all schools instill through the right rules under ESSA.

Maybe most important, Oyler and the district are constantly engaged in a conversation that 2016 D.C. Public Schools Dunbar High School graduate Jeremiah Islar said would go a long way toward fixing what’s wrong with his school: the impact of poverty on students, teachers, and the community as a whole.

“We see it every day at Dunbar. The kids are not stupid, we know it’s there. But we’re not talking about it, so it’s like a big fat hidden secret and we don’t deal with it,” he said.

ESSA has the potential to encourage these discussions – through parent and community engagement provisions and the “fifth metric” that, if thoughtfully crafted, could become a tool for schools to diagnose root problems and get the supports they need from their district and state to address them.

Hockenberry was principal of Oyler for 14 years — six in a row with no raise and the last with a 10 percent pay cut. During his tenure he not only hired and supported teachers and managed budgets, but checked the underpass for students who were truant because they were high and visited an ad-hoc memorial for a mother of three students to make a personal pledge to see all of them to the “finish line.” Still, he was fired for failing to sufficiently raise test scores and graduation rates.

So if those creating the rules under ESSA take away only one lesson, perhaps it should be ensuring that this kind of devastating and counterproductive loss – all but ensured under NCLB for many schools – never happen again.

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