The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) can become the engine of a new era in education—one limited only by the imagination, ingenuity and willingness to break from long-standing norms of each state’s education community. There is nothing new to the pace and intensity of the work that ESSA requires. ESSA, however, invites states to engage in a different kind of hard work: taking the effort to break with tradition and challenging the bulwark opposed to change, which often keeps us on the seashore instead of diving for ESSA’s pearls. And there are pearls within ESSA. Several are the new and expanded opportunities to meet one of our nation’s schools’ unmet challenges: building a large corps of well-qualified, highly skilled school leaders ready to lead 21st century schools that ensure their students graduate college- and career-ready.

What is ESSA?
The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is 2015’s reauthorized version of 1965’s Elementary and Secondary Schools Act, which established the federal government’s role in funding public education. ESSA succeeds 2002’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which strengthened the federal government’s role in the areas of standards, assessment, accountability and school improvement systems in particular. ESSA, however, shifts control of public education back to state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) and provides them the opportunity to design new systems that are more consistent with each State’s unique context and needs. Equally important are the opportunities in the law to invest in developing the workforce each state needs to best serve the students who are the intended beneficiaries of ESSA.

There are important differences between ESSA and NCLB that allow states to place new big bets. States now have more flexibility in how they meet annual assessment requirements, including the chance to pursue innovative models of assessment. States can also design accountability systems that consider more than assessment scores and implement interventions customized for each school. While ESSA does not require educator evaluations, federal funds can now support evidence-based evaluation systems based in part on evidence of student achievement.

These changes sometimes dominate the conversation. Yet, just beneath the surface, ESSA gives states new ways to make bold, big bets on a critical element of student success: school leadership.

Leaving the Shore: Betting Big on School Leadership
New Leaders’ publication, Prioritizing Leadership: Opportunities in ESSA for Chief State School Officers, reminds us that fully “one-quarter of a school’s influence on student learning can be directly attributed to the effectiveness of its school leaders” and that “an outstanding principal can improve student academic achievement by as much as 20 percentage points.” Despite that, just under five percent of Title II, Part A funds have historically been spent on professional development for school leaders and two-thirds of school districts spend no money on professional development for leaders.

“I feel valued, respected and appreciated for the job I do every day. My principal is the reason I am still teaching. He writes me notes about the things that I contribute to the school and how much he appreciates my effort and expertise.”
- Denver Public School Teacher

Source: Retaining Great Teachers in Denver’s Highest Poverty Schools: A Report of the Teacher Retention Task Force
ESSA is not only an opportunity, it’s an invitation for states to do just that and more. Title II, Part A allows each state to invest almost eight percent of its total allotment to better attract, prepare, develop and retain school leaders. Up to five percent of funds can focus on teacher and leader development, while states have the option to take an additional set-aside only for school leadership.

Title II, Part A lists numerous allowable state activities to support school leaders in three key areas:

- **Preparation**: Improving this weak-link in the pipeline by reforming certification, recertification, licensing and preparation standards and establishing residency programs and academies.

- **Professional Development and other Supports**: Helping LEAs create high-quality programs for principals in general, support the development of instructional leadership in STEM subjects and the integration of career-technical education into academic instructional practices and technology into curricula and instruction.

- **Recruitment and Retention**: Providing general support for recruitment and retention and specifically helping LEAs develop advancement opportunities, differential pay, and school leader induction and mentoring programs.

Title II, Part B allots substantial funding through four competitive grant programs that States can use to improve school leadership:

- **School Leader Recruitment and Support Program** (SLRSC – formerly SLRP): Grants available to SEAs and LEAs to develop and support talented leaders for high needs schools.

- **Supporting Effective Educator Development** (SEED): Grants to nonprofits or institutions of higher education, including collaborations between states and LEAs, to help recruit, select, prepare and provide professional development for educators.

- **Teacher and School Leader Incentive programs** (TSLIP – formerly TIF): For States, LEAs and nonprofits to advance compensation reform and career pathways to help recruit and retain talented educators.

- **Education Innovation Research** (EIR – formerly i3): For SEAs, LEAs and nonprofits to invest in innovative leadership models, especially those that are research-based.

Title I also contains pearls:

- **Set-Asides to Remove Barriers**: Title I, Part A requires states to set aside seven percent of their funding to help school districts support low-performing schools, including help to remove barriers to student achievement. As this guide shows, the quality of a school’s leader can be a critical barrier to student achievement.

- **Evidence-Base Requirements for LEA Plans**: LEAs must demonstrate the evidence base behind the use of funds. There is a strong evidence base that improved school leadership leads to school improvement, and through strong guidance and plan review, states can encourage LEAs to prioritize leadership development.

“Research shows that the demonstrated effects of successful leadership are considerably greater in schools in the most difficult circumstances.”

- How Leadership Influences Student Learning

It’s hard to ignore the opportunities for leadership development embedded in ESSA. Their prominence suggests improving leadership is a priority, but what SEAs ultimately choose to do is up to state policymakers and their stakeholders. We encourage them to leave the shore, at least a little, and use new and enhanced federal investments in leadership to improve their leadership corps. Students are depending on it, especially our nation’s most vulnerable, who attend schools “in the most difficult of circumstances.”