

Let's Get This Conversation Started: Steps Every State Should Take to Map Out Its ESSA Engagement Strategy

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has drastically changed the federal education landscape for the first time in more than a decade. State education agencies (SEAs) have been granted additional flexibility under the new law but first must establish their state strategic vision and evaluate how the new law will affect their accountability, funding, school improvement and grant-making systems. And, thanks to the new law, states will not be doing this alone – ESSA requires that states design their new systems with input from dozens of stakeholder groups, ranging from teachers to parents to community organizations. But before SEAs reach out to their stakeholders, they should carefully plan their approach to ensure each engagement effort is meaningful, the right people are reached, the right questions are asked, and SEA staff are able to get the information necessary to design the best systems for the students in their state. This tool is meant to inform that planning and provide general guidance, successful examples, and questions for SEAs to consider before stakeholder outreach and engagement begins.

ENGAGEMENT GUIDELINES	QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION AND DISCUSSION
<p>1</p> <p>Clarify your goals. Never communicate until you are clear on what you want to say. Align your stakeholder engagement goals to your state's strategic vision and be clear on what you want to accomplish, how stakeholders can inform the state's work, and what action you want stakeholders to take as a result of participating in a discussion or forum.</p> <p> <i>The public originally distrusted Project L.I.F.T., a 2011 initiative to improve schools and close the achievement gap in the Western Charlotte Corridor in North Carolina. Survey results showed that the public did not understand the goals of the effort, incorrectly viewing it as another top-down program. The initiative reframed its messaging to clarify and make it more relevant to parents.¹</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your state's strategic vision, and how do your engagement goals connect to it? • What do you want to learn through the engagement of stakeholders? • What do you want your stakeholders to understand, do or say as a result of this engagement? • How will you know your engagement plan is working? • Who on your staff will be responsible for managing this work?
<p>2</p> <p>Work with partner organizations to identify and engage with your stakeholders. ESSA asks states to engage with a range of stakeholder groups throughout the planning and implementation process, but don't stop there. Think of others whose voices could contribute to the conversation. Look beyond the people with whom the state typically engages—think about perspectives that may be missing and proactively engage traditionally underserved or underperforming communities. Seek out stakeholders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What stakeholder groups do you intend to engage? • What are some stakeholder groups that you have not engaged in the past? • How can you ensure that you are reaching people who truly represent your specific groups of stakeholders? • With whom can you partner to broaden your reach and

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<p>who understand the role of policy and can articulate solutions, not just problems. Remember that you don't have to do this work alone: leverage regional and local civil rights organizations, unions, advocacy groups and networks already trusted by the community to communicate with their stakeholders, organize feedback and even provide translations and childcare services for parents attending meetings. Also, make your contact information readily available so interested stakeholders can be proactive in reaching out and making contact with you.</p> <p> <i>In Illinois, the advocacy group Stand for Children is conducting town halls around the state for the Illinois State Assessment Review Committee. As part of this work, Stand is also creating parent- and public-friendly resources so everyone can get up to speed and join the state's assessment conversation.²</i></p>	<p>ensure you are able to engage with a more diverse group of stakeholders?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can you work in collaboration with your partners to ensure that their outreach remains consistent with yours?
<p>3 Speak to your audience. Each stakeholder group has different needs, and every stakeholder has a different story. Consider the unique interests and perspectives of each group to determine the right level of detail for your stakeholders. Convey culturally-relevant information that best responds to their interests, concerns and questions. Prepare materials that will provide each group with the most relevant information. Strive for transparency and answer questions when they are asked, but don't flood your audiences with needless details. Be clear about your intent from the start by defining the role they're being asked to play and the decision-making process that will come next.</p> <p> <i>The "Be A Learning Hero" initiative creates resources designed to help parents understand the changes in schools. It also provides parents with an online tool they can use to help their children succeed. In Chicago, the initiative is partnering with the League of United Latin American Citizens and the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference to host interactive "Kitchen Tables" that provide parents with actionable information to help their children succeed.³ They're also partnering with Chicago Public Schools to distribute timely assessment resources for 50,000 parents.⁴</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the key issues that matter most to your stakeholders? • What are the questions they are most likely to ask related to the state's implementation of ESSA? • Are there questions to inform the development of your ESSA implementation you can ask these stakeholders that they will be uniquely positioned to answer?

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<p>4 Use multiple vehicles. Traditional outreach methods are no longer the only ways—or even the best ways—to reach multiple audiences. When possible, meet stakeholders where they already are by attending their community meetings or forums. For some audiences, consider avoiding meetings at the local school district or other government offices that may appear intimidating. Partner with a stakeholder that the community trusts to ensure greater attendance and participation. Also, consider how you can augment your outreach and engagement strategy by incorporating social media, blogs, video, surveys, webinars, etc. for some audiences. Build your strategy to employ a mix of these options to target specific stakeholders and reach the largest possible audience.</p> <p> <i>Ohio runs a weekly education chat on Twitter creating a digital forum for teachers, led by teachers. The Department uses this chat to provide information, answer questions and collect authentic feedback.⁵</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which vehicle or vehicles are your stakeholders currently using to communicate? • What new outreach vehicles can you incorporate into your strategy to complement your existing approach? • What additional capacity and/or training would your team need to use new outreach vehicles?
<p>5 Identify your best ambassadors. Parents, educators and community groups tend to respond more openly when discussing information with their colleagues or peers, rather than with representatives from the SEA. Create a relationship map to determine who would be best positioned to engage with specific stakeholder groups and use it to identify your best possible ambassadors. States can develop tools and resources such as talking points and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents to support outreach by ambassadors to ensure their communication remains clear and that they gather meaningful feedback.</p> <p> <i>Houston’s more than 10,000 teachers largely ignored the district’s passive outreach attempts until they created campus representatives to distribute important information, answer questions and act as the district’s primary point of contact.⁶</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What partners do you work with who are closely tied to specific stakeholder groups and could potentially serve as the SEA’s ambassadors? • How can you recruit additional ambassadors to connect with stakeholder groups with whom the SEA is not closely tied? • What can you do to ensure your ambassadors are successful in their engagement efforts?

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<p>6 Ask for input before decisions are made, and use it. There is no use in asking for input on issues that have already been resolved. Approach stakeholders early so their feedback, questions and comments can be used to inform and improve your policy development, but come with rough ideas to prompt discussion. Prepare drafts and discussion questions tailored to their areas of expertise. Even if you do not integrate all of their feedback, hearing their questions, priorities and concerns will give you the opportunity to understand their perspectives, potential areas of alignment and disagreement. Once decisions are final, go back to your stakeholders and let them know how their input was used.</p> <p> <i>Oregon is forming four ESSA implementation workgroups of stakeholders to make policy recommendations to the department. They are opening their membership up to the public, offering an “open call” opportunity for people who want to submit a letter of interest.⁷</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given the ESSA timeline and other issues that require attention in your state, when should you first engage stakeholders to provide input on possible policy changes? • When should outreach begin to ensure that a representative sampling of stakeholders can be engaged? • How will you provide feedback to stakeholders on how their input was integrated in your decision-making?
<p>7 Keep your materials simple and brief. All materials that are distributed or presented should be conveyed in a clear and concise way, using an easy-to-understand format and written to illustrate how the content relates to student achievement. This does not mean you should dumb down your content; states should instead have clear, concise materials that reach some stakeholders at a high level, and retain the in-the-weeds detail for discussions with practitioners and others with a specific expertise or background in the topic. Keep the focus framed on the end goal and how your stakeholders will be impacted rather than on details about process.</p> <p> <i>The National Parent Teacher Association worked with teachers and parents to develop a series of two- and four-page Parents’ Guides to Student Success. These guides detail what students at each grade should be learning under the Common Core State Standards, and what parents can do to help them. There is a different guide for each grade level. They are written in a clear, easy to read format, and include actionable steps that parents can take to help their students succeed academically.⁸</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which groups will be most responsive to the more in-the-weeds discussions? • How can you gain valuable input from other stakeholders without delving into too much detail? • Who can help your SEA ensure materials are clear and concise and appropriate for your stakeholders?

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<p>8</p> <p>Communicate early and often. Do not let your stakeholders first hear about changes in education policy from other stakeholders or the news media. Tell your own story by providing them with a regular, reliable source of information available in multiple formats that is relevant to them. Participate in their meetings when possible to present updates and collect feedback on course corrections. Keep a group of key stakeholders on as advisors throughout the implementation process to continue the two-way engagement.</p> <p> <i>The Dignity in Schools Campaign, a coalition led by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund to end school pushout, organized a series of forums in Ohio to discuss the impact of suspensions on minority students. In Dayton, the district superintendent and a school board member used this opportunity to engage stakeholders attending the forum. As a result of their engagement, Dayton created an Office of Black Male Achievement and updated the district code of conduct to address stakeholder concerns about excessive suspensions.⁹</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would be the best way to provide your stakeholders with an ongoing source of reliable information? • What existing tools can you use? What new ones could you create? • What tools are your stakeholders already using? • Who will lead this work within your state agency, or serve as a point of contact for stakeholder groups? • What additional capacity and/or training would your team need to do this well?
<p>9</p> <p>Keep your team informed. While states should prioritize reaching their stakeholders, it also is important to keep internal SEA staff engaged. They can be powerful ambassadors if they have the right information. Develop and circulate a list of key themes, dates and decision points and distribute to your staff. Hold information sessions for your internal team to keep them informed and to seek their input.</p> <p> <i>The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education holds optional roundtable discussions regularly for their internal staff. These informal sessions are organized by the Office of Planning, Research, and Delivery Systems, and are designed to give staff an opportunity to learn more about new initiatives across the agency, discuss policy, ask questions and celebrate successes.¹⁰</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What internal structures currently exist within the SEA that you could use to gather input from the agency staff? • What would be the best way to provide your internal staff with an ongoing source of reliable information? • How can your leadership team support this across the agency? • Who will lead this internal communications work within the state agency?

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<p>Turn these new connections into long-term relationships. Use this engagement process as an opportunity to build new connections and strengthen existing relationships with stakeholders. By listening to their feedback, answering their questions and showing that their input has an impact on the decisions that are made, they will be more likely to seek out opportunities to inform and contribute to policy discussions in the future. In addition, they can continue to assist the state as it implements ESSA in the next few years. Deepen your relationships with trusted civil rights organizations, unions, administrator associations and other agencies and advocacy groups to continue open, transparent engagement and expand the SEA’s reach to all stakeholders in the long-term.</p> <p> <i>Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland has a long history of working closely with its parent groups. The PTA group has committees that provide real input on everything from nutrition to having a vote on principal candidates.¹¹ The district also builds its parents’ knowledge base by partnering with community groups to run workshops for parents every week and a parent academy during the summer.¹² During PTA meetings, the district provides transportation and high school students volunteer to provide childcare for parents attending the meeting.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What other opportunities exist or are on the horizon that could be informed by stakeholder input? • How else can you keep these stakeholders engaged and informed once ESSA planning and implementation is complete? • Who on your staff can be tasked with building and maintaining these relationships?

End Notes:

¹ Reform Support Network, *Strategies for Community Engagement in School Turnaround* (2014) <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/strategies-for-community-engagement-in-school-turnaround.pdf>

² Stand for Children Illinois, “Illinois PARCC Explainer,” March 25, 2016, <http://stand.org/illinois/illinois-parcc-explainer>

³ National PTA, “‘Be A Learning Hero’ Public Service Partnership Launches With National PTA, Scholastic, GreatSchools, Common Sense Media and Leading Education Organizations As America Heads Back to School,” August 10, 2015, <https://www.pta.org/newsevents/newsdetail.cfm?ItemNumber=4530>

⁴ Be a Learning Hero, March 25, 2016, <http://bealearninghero.org/>

⁵ Reform Support Network, *Using Social Media to More Effectively Communicate Reform Efforts* (2013), <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/oh-twitter-case-study.pdf>

⁶ Reform Support Network, *Educator Evaluation Communications Toolkit* (2013) <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/educator-evaluation-communications-toolkit.pdf>

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⁷ Oregon Department of Education, “ODE Now Accepting Applications for ESSA Workgroups,” March 4, 2016,

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/news/announcements/announcement.aspx?ID=13633>

⁸ National PTA, “Parents’ Guides to Student Success,” March 25, 2016, <http://www.pta.org/parents/content.cfm?ItemNumber=2583>

⁹ Dignity in Schools, “DSC Members Join Racial Justice NOW! for Ohio School Pushout Tour,” March 17, 2016, <http://www.dignityinschools.org/blog/dsc-members-join-racial-justice-now-ohio-school-pushout-tour>

¹⁰ Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, “Office of Planning and Research,” March 29, 2016, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/>

¹¹ Montgomery County Public Schools, “Parent Academy,” March 29, 2016, <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/parentacademy/workshops.aspx>

¹² Montgomery County Council of PTAs, “MCCPTA Committees,” March 29, 2016, <http://www.mccpta.org/committees.html>