

# We, the Media

## *Engage!*

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires state education agencies to file their state implementation plans in “timely and meaningful consultation with stakeholders.” Done well, stakeholder engagement draws in parents, educators, students, civil rights groups, community organizations, local and state policymakers, the business community, and more. States that come to this work from a place of compliance will miss the chance to build lasting public support with those who come to education policy-making from a place of passion.

Many states have already begun this important work. Colorado embarked on a listening tour to gather ideas and support for the design of the state’s ESSA strategy. New York created a “think tank” of teachers, administrators, professional associations, higher education representatives, and business leaders to come up with a statewide accountability plan. Wyoming set up ways for stakeholders to submit comments online and is hosting virtual town hall meetings.

Not every state is as prepared. Early findings from a new NASBE analysis of ESSA stakeholder engagement (due out this fall) suggest that while many states say they seek feedback, they fall short on true engagement. They provide opportunities for input but expect stakeholders to stumble onto the means to give it. The support of parents and teachers, and even savvy civil rights groups, isn’t easily won by creating an online portal and hoping for the best.

Meaningful stakeholder engagement needn’t be difficult. But it must be authentic, inclusive, actionable, and ongoing. Consider three strategies right out of the gate:

**1. Listen as much as you talk.** States may be holding town hall meetings and “listening tours” around ESSA implementation, but are they truly hearing

what stakeholders have to say? In 2015, the Kansas State Board of Education set a vision for the state’s education system where “Kansas leads the world in the success of each student.” They did so with the input of over 2,000 Kansans from many groups, and the state board continues to draw on it to inform tough policy decisions.

**2. Relationships matter.** Lyndon Johnson once said that “the time to make friends is before you need them.” State boards of education should heed President Johnson’s wise words by identifying potential allies early on and seeking common ground with interest groups that will be harder to win over. Cultivating such relationships will be vital to building support for important policy decisions, especially those likely to be controversial.

**3. Good policies lead to better policy-making.** When the Virginia State Board of Education introduced its “Profile of a Graduate” to define the content knowledge, workplace skills, community engagement, and career pathways students need for postsecondary success, it did so with the expectation that this profile would inform policy decisions around diploma types, accountability systems, and competency-based programs. Earlier this year, the Virginia legislature enacted enabling legislation with near unanimous bipartisan support, and Governor Terry McAuliffe signed it into law. This important step will be critical in building support for the state’s ESSA plans.

ESSA offers states greater authority over important decisions that could propel improved outcomes for all students. But to be successful, state policymakers can’t go it alone; they need a little help from their friends—and their not-yet friends. So take the time to cultivate and “meaningfully engage” now. ■



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