

National Association of State Boards of Education

⊕ Kansas Loops Stakeholders In on Conversation about K-12 Policy

By Anthony Nguyen

Despite widespread calls by states for a return to local control of education policy and praise for the steps made toward that end in the Every Student Succeeds Act, state boards of education still may find it difficult to engage stakeholders meaningfully to get input on local decisions. Kansas is one example of a state that developed an initiative to ensure that Kansas students, parents, educators, and business leaders have a say in the goals and plans for their state's preK-12 system.

ESSA also calls for strong stakeholder engagement. The US Department of

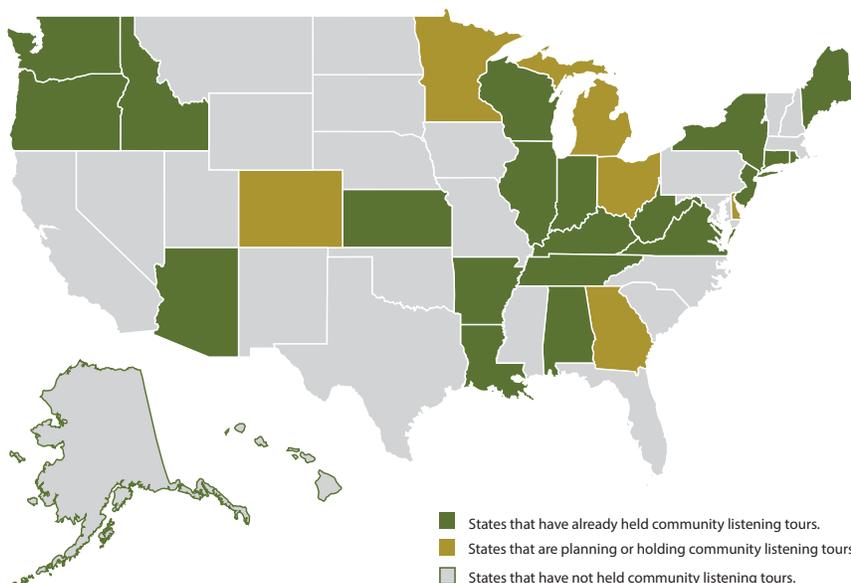
Education has encouraged states to engage communities and local stakeholders before ESSA requirements take effect with the 2017–18 school year. And many states were already doing so, conducting listening tours and regional forums, as Kansas has done (see map).

Through its Kansans Can initiative, state education leaders demonstrated that one way to build community consensus is through local forums and focus groups. By proactively approaching people who make up the education system and listening to their opinions on how to improve, state policymakers in Kansas and elsewhere seek to ensure that all perspectives are considered so they can make better education policy

decisions and build support for them.

Kansas education policymakers identified a key challenge in ensuring that their public schools were preparing students for college and careers, according to Kansas State Department of Education Commissioner Randy Watson. In order to get jobs when they graduate, 71 percent of Kansas's eighth graders in 2015 will need a postsecondary certificate or degree. Of those, roughly half need to be bachelor's degrees, and the other half certificate or associate degrees, Watson projects.¹ "That's so different from a generation ago," Watson said. "Even though we're one of the top ten or top five states in educating students, it's still not good enough for this state."

26 States Have Conducted or Are Conducting Listening Tours*



* Includes tours on education issues, 2010–16.

The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), encouraged by the Kansas State Board of Education, formulated a vision: All Kansas students can be successful if they are given the necessary skills to succeed. KSDE staff then sought input on what was necessary to give students the skills to achieve postsecondary success. Before the initiative began, said state board chairman Jim McNiece, "there were many voices telling the state board and the legislators what they could and could not do, but the voice of parents, business, and local stakeholders wasn't part of the process." To kick off Kansans Can, KSDE invited 2,000 local stakeholders to give their opinions.

"As the board was considering changes to its strategic plan for Kansas education, we charged Education Commissioner Randy Watson with finding out what Kansans want in their state education system," said

McNiece. The KSDE and KSBE planned a series of focus groups in more than 20 communities.

Deputy Commissioner of Education Brad Neuenswander and members of the state board began conducting the focus groups in January 2015. Two-thirds of the participants were current or former educators or administrators; the rest were students, parents, members of local chambers of commerce, and other business leaders.

BUILDING CONSENSUS

A majority of respondents agreed on the need to change the Kansas K-12 education system to better equip students for college, careers, and civic life. The forum attendees wanted schools to teach their students skills beyond the traditional academic core. In particular, local business leaders said it was important for schools to focus more on collaboration with employers through sponsorships, internships, job shadowing, and increased community service opportunities.

Forum participants also expressed support for the following:

- strengthening language and social skills within early childhood education with all-day kindergarten and by establishing parental collaboration early on;
- giving guidance counselors and social workers in schools a more dynamic, active role;
- promoting nontraditional postsecondary options such as technical certification and education within K-12 schools and promoting more technical education and two-year colleges.

Although the forum attendees indicated general support for strengthening academic foundations and in-school support structures, there was also interest in how classrooms could build nonacademic skills to better equip students for postsecondary success. The community forum responses reflected this consensus.

NONACADEMIC SKILLS

KSDE's Research and Evaluation Workgroup—which advises the department, state board, and legislature on education issues and which organized the community forums—formulated additional questions for participants:

- How do the views of educators, community members, and Kansas employers agree and differ on these skill goals?
- How can these sectors better collaborate to reach these goals?
- What are the best measures of progress toward these goals?

Researchers also asked forum participants to identify the characteristics, qualities, abilities, and skills of a successful 24-year-old Kansan and how schools should cultivate those ideal characteristics. The research team categorized the responses into traditional academic skills and social-emotional or personality skills.

Participants largely agreed that traditional skills and academics are no longer sufficient to adequately prepare Kansan students. Seventy percent of the time, the groups cited nonacademic skills such as professionalism, teamwork, and communications as essential to success, whereas academic skills were cited 23 percent of the time. Kansan business groups agreed, citing “soft” skills as essential 81 percent of the time.

The research team also identified points of intersection between the “big five” personality skills—conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness, extraversion, and emotional stability—and forum responses regarding the ideal characteristics of a Kansas graduate. These skills are distilled versions of the social-emotional skills already found on Kansas report cards. The research team determined that comments such as “works quietly without disturbing others” or “listens carefully and follows directions” can be classified under the “big five.”

Because teachers are already reporting progress on learning these personality skills to parents, the team sought to identify which skills are the most important to career, college, and civic readiness. Researchers found evidence for increasing wage returns for both low- and high-skilled work from nonacademic skills and that these skills are associated with higher academic achievement.²

McNiece added that the state board also thought it was important to include civic engagement as part of the definition of a successful high school graduate.

In an October 2015 speech at his department's annual conference, Commissioner Watson told the attending educators and state policymakers that the department would focus on key outcomes for achieving the overall vision: high school graduation rates, postsecondary completion and attendance, postsecondary remediation rates, kindergarten readiness, individual plans of study, and local measurement of social and emotional growth. This new focus reflects community input on how Kansas's education system should change, he said.

NOT “ONE AND DONE”

With researchers from Kansas State University, the KSDE research team discerned common themes for K-12 education emerging from the forum discussions. “We've always assessed and reported nonacademic skills back to parents,” said team member Tony Moss. “What's [been] missing is a systematic identification of what skills are most important for academic, career, and life success.”³

Few representatives from the business community were included in the initial 20 forums, which comprised 287 focus groups with an average of six people each. This prompted Commissioner Watson to reach out to local chambers of commerce and convene focus groups of businesspeople. As a result, seven more focus groups were held.⁴

Upon synthesizing the feedback from the forums and drafting a mission statement, the research team revisited 10 of the communities in September and October and shared their results in order to further refine and tailor the strategic plan. “What we didn't want was a ‘one and done’ mentality; we wanted to methodically change the foundation of where we're going for the next generation,” said McNiece.

With stakeholder feedback from the Kansans Can initiative in hand, McNiece said, the Kansas State Board of Education hopes to set policy to fit the evolving needs of the modern job market and postsecondary institutions and to achieve better outcomes in Kansas high school graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment, remedial rates of postsecondary attendees, kindergarten readiness, individual plans of study, and students' social and emotional growth.

OTHER STATE EXAMPLES

Other states have also conducted listening tours like Kansas's:

The **Illinois State Board of Education** held nine public hearings on ESSA and its implementation over 10 days with stakeholders across the state. Two key issues Illinois is addressing in the listening tour are the inclusion of student growth factors in its accountability system and improvement of state plans to provide coordinated programs and services to schools and districts.

The **Colorado** Department of Education has also finished a statewide listening tour meant to raise public awareness of ESSA and use community input and feedback to form its implementation plan. The department also seeks feedback on potential participation in a pilot program to develop instructionally connected state assessments.

The **Kentucky** Department of Education finished its own listening tour in which Commissioner of Education Stephen Pruitt asked Kentuckians how they defined school success. The input will inform design of Kentucky's new accountability system to make it easier to understand.

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in **Washington** conducted a series of forums across the state to provide an ESSA overview for local communities. The forums were an opportunity for stakeholders to provide feedback and discuss how the new law would affect the state.

If Kansas provides any indication, listening tours and community forums in other states will give policymakers valuable information on what local stakeholders want out of their education system.

CONCLUSION

Education policymakers in Kansas have used the community input to focus on five outcomes by which they can gauge the educational progress of their students:

- increased graduation rates;
- creation of individual plans of study based on career interests;

- local measurement of social and emotional factors relevant to student success;
- increased percentages of students pursuing postsecondary education or completing a credential program; and
- increased kindergarten readiness.

By connecting with the community, the Kansas state board has confidence that the five goals it has set reflect the skills the public has said are most important:

- provide a flexible and efficient delivery system to meet our students' varied and changing needs;
- provide an effective educator in every classroom;
- ensure effective, visionary leaders in every school;
- promote and encourage best practices for early childhood programs;
- develop active communication and partnerships with families, communities, business stakeholders, constituents, and policy partners.⁵

Achieving these goals will help the state board realize its vision of a successful Kansas high school graduate who has attained academic and cognitive preparation, technical skills, skills that make them employable, and civic engagement, McNiece said.

Over the past year, Kansas legislators were embroiled in contentious discussion of the budget for schools, and they considered legislation in March to repeal academic standards based on the Common Core State Standards. The bill, which would have required the state board to get legislative approval for any subsequent standards they would adopt, was defeated 44-78. In this political environment, Kansas education policymakers have nonetheless been able to craft a program in which residents weighed in on policymaking. Rather than become discouraged by partisan gridlock, state education leaders have shown the positive effect listening tours can have.

"What we wanted to do is engage in a thoughtful conversation to work toward a slow and gradual alternative voice in support

of each student," said McNiece. "If you don't see substantive change [in the results], it's not worth it."

Anthony Nguyen was the publications and communications intern at NASBE and is an undergraduate student studying political science and history at The George Washington University.

RESOURCES

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NOTES

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