

National Association of State Boards of Education

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## ➔ ESSA Stakeholder Engagement: Early Challenges and Promising Practices

By Rachel Man and Chris Hofmann

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires state education agencies (SEAs) to collaborate with school districts, civil rights organizations, principals, teachers, “other school leaders,” parents, and “stakeholders representing the interests of children with disabilities, English language learners, and other vulnerable children” as they create state education plans. Although each state faces unique challenges, all face five common challenges in engaging this extensive list of stakeholders: identifying diverse stakeholders and casting a wider net, overcoming time and resource constraints, communicating effectively with stakeholders, maximizing the impact of meetings, and organizing and incorporating feedback into the state plan.

As classroom teachers, we were drawn to this work on effective stakeholder engagement for two reasons. First, we know that we are at our best when we are truly listening to our stakeholders—our students and their families—and we believe a strong ESSA state plan should be based on the same principle. Second, in our own ESSA advocacy experiences, we found that although states were providing stakeholders with opportunities to participate in the process, these well-intentioned efforts were falling short.

For these reasons, we set forward to study promising practices in stakeholder engagement. We wanted to determine what challenges states were facing and how states were addressing those challeng-

es. We began our project by analyzing 51 SEA websites for evidence of engagement with stakeholder groups. Then in July and August, we conducted in-depth interviews with representatives from 15 SEAs in order to hear their perspectives on the challenges and learn from the states’ early successes.<sup>1</sup> During the summer of 2016, not one state was confident they were doing everything right on stakeholder engagement. Even as states prepare to submit ESSA plans in April and September 2017, these challenges persist, and states continue to identify strategies to engage stakeholders meaningfully and sustain these efforts throughout ESSA implementation.

### IDENTIFYING DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS AND CASTING A WIDER NET

Reaching out for new perspectives presents a major challenge for many SEAs and state boards of education. “We have to try different ways to reach people,” said Karl Eakins, communications director for the Wyoming Department of Education. “If we keep reaching out in the same ways, we’re only going to reach the same people.” SEAs also struggle to ensure they hear from advocates who truly represent key groups. “How many actual parents are represented, and does the feedback represent them?” asked Shanita Burney, interim chief of the Office of Family and Public Engagement in Washington, DC.

Many SEA staff cited parents as a particularly difficult group to engage. Interviewees said SEAs have less experience reaching out to parents than they do to teachers and administrators. Traditionally, schools and districts, not SEAs, have engaged parents and community groups on school matters, so this type of engagement is something new for many SEAs. In communities with many English language learners, language barriers

add to this challenge. “Accessing ELLs across the district has been a real struggle,” said Burney. “Creating spaces that they feel comfortable coming to and engaging with us at the district level has been a challenge.”

**Promising Practices.** While many states are struggling to determine who needs to be included, how many people from one interest group constitutes “engagement,” and how to connect meaningfully with people far removed from the intricacies of the federal law and education policy, some have hit on strategies that work.

First, **use existing networks to expand the pool.** “Part of every discussion is, ‘If you know of someone else we should include, let us know,’” said Donna Brown, federal program monitoring and support director in the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Many stakeholders who would have otherwise been overlooked have been included in North Carolina’s process because they asked this simple question, she added. Similarly, Washington state sought out as many groups as possible, asking, “Whom are we missing? Whom have we not invited?”

Second, **allow for a dynamic process.** The state asked about absent stakeholders throughout the process. They added new members even after working groups were established—despite the challenges inherent in changing membership midway—so policymakers would not miss important input.

Once important stakeholder groups are identified, states still need to determine whom to invite. Simply having one representative from a group at a meeting is not enough for those groups to feel they have been heard. There will be important subgroups within every stakeholder group. For example, when dealing with parents or teachers, state policymakers may consider reaching out to representatives from different socioeconomic statuses, school types, grade levels, disciplines, and minority groups. A teacher from a high-income, high-performing school

will have valuable input, but she does not represent the needs and perspective of a teacher at a low-income, low-performing school. Nor will a first grade teacher have the same opinions as an eleventh grade teacher. The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, for example, intentionally included teachers from elementary, middle, and high schools in the state's working groups.

### **OVERCOMING TIME AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS**

Although all state education officials value face-to-face connections, many struggle to find the time and funding. "We have 58 county offices in 11 regions. Time constraints and a limited travel budget only allowed us to visit 6 regions," said Barbara Murchison, ESSA state lead at the California Department of Education. Samantha Koch, executive policy analyst at the Pennsylvania Department of Education, asked, "Do we have the manpower to engage with 500 districts with 3,000 school buildings and 1.7 or 1.8 million students with a handful of ESSA dedicated staff?"

**Promising Practice.** Limited time, staff, and resources is a common complaint in education, and it defies simple solutions. States have nonetheless used strategies to get around some resource constraints. One is to **identify community partners with the needed resources.** Alaska's Department of Education and Early Development partnered with the state's National Education Association (NEA) affiliate; the union paid teachers' travel costs to attend the SEA's spring leadership meetings. While NEA affiliates cannot pay for meetings in every state, every SEA has organizations it works with regularly. Community partners may not have extensive resources, but they can alleviate some burdens, even if it is just coffee for working group meetings.

If partnerships are not an option, virtual focus groups can provide meaningful yet less costly discussions where access to technology and internet service permit. Partners may also help with publicizing an SEA's planned meetings. Michigan, for example, partnered with a public relations firm to begin their stakeholder engagement process, and they are conducting virtual focus groups to reach parents.

Absent the resources for in-person engagement, there are valid alternatives. Almost

every state has created an online survey about ESSA. There are other technology options as well. Hawaii's Department of Education is using social media website Tumblr to reach teachers, parents, and students. They asked, "What does student success look like?" Individuals or groups are posting pictures of themselves with a thought bubble cut-out and a comment. The website directs stakeholders to offer direct feedback on their draft state plan.<sup>2</sup>

### **COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH STAKEHOLDERS**

SEA officials described ESSA provisions as complex, abstract, and "weedy," and many struggle with explaining ESSA to groups not familiar with education policy language. "Describing how that all fits to parents is hard," Murchison said. For this reason, SEA officials consistently expressed the need for accessibly written, visually appealing ESSA materials. Fact sheets abound, said a senior official at the New Jersey Department of Education, yet "even the best one pagers still have the word accountability across the top."

SEAs also struggle to clarify which areas under ESSA fall to states and are thus open to discussion versus which are federal requirements. If they don't understand the difference, "people will advocate for things that weren't the state's decision," said Donna Brown, federal program monitoring and support director in the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Or groups may come to the table with misinformation or different interpretations on ESSA provisions. Working through these misunderstandings can be challenging, but SEAs realize that without a common understanding of the law's requirements and options it is difficult to maintain stakeholders' trust in the process.

**Promising Practice.** The need to inform without overwhelming is crucial. Some states have found it helpful to **begin from a point of finding out what is critical to the stakeholder** and then explaining how the state plan might or might not be able to address it. For instance, Oklahoma started the dialogue with stakeholders by asking these questions: "What impact have you seen or experienced, if any, from funding challenges facing public education? What attributes describe a successful school? What is missing and in short supply? How is your school doing? How do you know?" Other states have chosen to ground conversations

using stakeholders' prior knowledge of No Child Left Behind. Vermont, for example, proactively tries to clarify misconceptions by taking the first minutes of presentations to compare and contrast the provisions of ESSA with NCLB.

### **MAXIMIZING MEETINGS' IMPACT**

Many SEAs and state boards have conducted regional meetings or "listening tours" to engage stakeholders in the design of ESSA state plans. SEAs have found it challenging to balance presenting necessary background information in these meetings with providing time for authentic discussion. "ESSA is 449 pages long. How do you distill that to an audience who wants to know in 5 to 10 minutes what it's all about and what the personal implications are?" said Vermont education project manager Patrick Halladay. Pennsylvania's Koch added, "We want to inform without prescribing."

**Promising Practice.** Nearly everyone interviewed cited face-to-face meetings as the most meaningful form of engagement. However, those meetings are only meaningful if they are well structured. Stakeholders are turned off by didactic meetings in which they sense that presenters have already determined their preferred direction and are simply checking off a regulatory box. Moreover, state policymakers miss out on innovative ideas when they limit stakeholder discussions to option A or B. Perhaps option C, which the SEA had not conceived, is the better solution.

Every teacher has had to learn this lesson: Getting rich input from students means allowing them to fully engage. This is not an easy task, said Edutopia blogger Todd Finley, who said, "A preponderance of evidence demonstrates that many teachers mistakenly conflate discussion with recitation."<sup>3</sup> Recitation seeks a predetermined response; discussion involves questions that may have more than one right answer and that get students to challenge each other and think more critically. The application to stakeholder engagement is clear.

### **ORGANIZING AND INCORPORATING FEEDBACK INTO A STATE PLAN**

Some states have labored to structure and report feedback so it is digestible and actionable. "We're getting a lot of comments," said Sondra Meredith, administrator at the Alaska

Department of Education and Early Development. “Processing the information that is coming in is challenging.” And states need to show people that their contributions were valued and impactful. “If we waste their time, we’ve forever lost them as an engaged stakeholder,” Wyoming’s Eakins said.

**Promising Practice.** Whether feedback is collected via listening tours or surveys, it must be documented and publicly available and then turned into actionable recommendations. **Transparency is critical.** Whether or not the recommendations are included in a final plan, stakeholders must see their comments have been seriously considered. In collaboration with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the American Institutes for Research synthesized feedback from stakeholder working groups into recommendations organized by key components. This structured process provided tangible evidence of stakeholder contributions and promotes the continued credibility of the state’s stakeholder engagement.

## CONCLUSION

Although it is challenging, stakeholder engagement is critically important work that can give voice to concerns, make ESSA state plans better, and foster greater commitment and buy-in for the new state system. Moving forward, we urge SEAs to continue to be proactive and transparent in their communication with stakeholders. Maintaining this trust and openness will be vital in overcoming the inevitable disappointments stakeholders will feel when certain provisions they advocated for are not included in the final state plans. By learning from early SEA experiences, all SEAs can meet the challenges of stakeholder engagement and build collaborative networks that will sustain the hard work of implementation in the months and years to come.

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## NOTES

1. The 15 included Alaska, California, Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Vermont, Washington, and Wyoming.
2. <http://hiqualityed.tumblr.com/>.
3. Todd Finley, “Rethinking Whole Class Discussion,” Edutopia blog, (June 24, 2013), <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/rethinking-whole-class-discussion-todd-finley>.