



Sarah-Jane Lorenzo
Research Associate

On the Agenda

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) dominated the meeting agendas of state boards of education across the country in 2016, according to data in NASBE's new State Board Insight database (see figure 1, page 3). In particular, state boards used their public meetings to focus on assisting students most in need of support and on engaging stakeholders as their states began preparing state plans to implement ESSA.

State boards frequently discussed English learners, homeless youth, and students in foster care in meetings throughout the year. In fact, 15 states focused directly on students in those subgroups on 30 separate occasions. Although many boards heard broad presentations about all three subgroups early in the year, the number of directly related agenda items tripled following the U.S. Department of Education's summer release of Dear Colleague letters urging attention to these subgroups. Four states discussed subgroups before June, but twelve states did in subsequent months.

As board members grappled with which metrics to add to their accountability systems, they focused particularly on chronic absenteeism and social-emotional learning during 2016. But board members went beyond discussions about specific indicators. Often, board discussions about accountability systems morphed into explorations of new ESSA opportunities to boost equity and student growth.

With its strong focus on stakeholder engagement, ESSA pressed state policymakers to confront perspectives they might otherwise have missed. In this respect, the law appeared to strike home: Many state boards regularly received updates on stakeholder engagement in

2016, and some board members took active roles themselves, attending stakeholder forums and reporting back to their boards on what they heard.

The District of Columbia State Board of Education brought stakeholders to their meetings for interactive panels and discussions between stakeholder representatives and board members. John-Paul Hayworth, executive director of the DC board, said he expects those discussions in 2016 to affect board decisions down the road. "As an elected board, engagement is at the heart of our decision making," he said. "The state board is committed to not only doing the talking but taking an active listening stance with every policy decision.... I can certainly say that testimony from students a couple years ago is why we have new health education standards in place today. Testimony from adult learners is why we approved a state diploma as well."

State boards' flurry of activity around ESSA issues in 2016 may foretell a strong commitment to rolling up their sleeves on implementation in 2017. They started early: 65 percent of boards that met in January 2016 learned about ESSA mandates just a month after its passage. The majority of state boards that met monthly considered ESSA, including 84 percent in October alone. ESSA was integrated into board members' deliberations and discussions at two-thirds of all meetings in 2016.

As states finalize their accountability plans and begin implementation of ESSA, NASBE's State Board Insight database will be tracking all ESSA provisions state boards consider in 2017. State Board Insight will feature trend analysis and highlight the critical work of state boards of education. ■