



Districts can benefit from the lessons states have learned so far in stakeholder engagement around ESSA.

by Molly Mauer

Helping Districts Build Great Schools through Great Engagement

This year's submission of consolidated state plans for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) revealed two things: New ideas made it to the table, and many people—including those who had not before engaged in education policy conversations—contributed to the process. But what is still hazy as the dust settles is whether this once-in-a-decade opportunity for states and districts to engage stakeholders will help move the needle toward equity and toward giving every child an excellent education.

Undergirded by a firm belief in the power of democratic decision making, local control, and the expertise of families, educators, practitioners, and advocates to solve challenges that schools face, ESSA required stakeholder engagement. It requires it first of states and then of the districts. The law explicitly directed states to engage constituents, mentioning it at least 95 times compared with the 15 instances in No Child Left Behind. The challenge for state boards of education now is to help districts leverage this required engagement into meaningful local conversations that can ensure that every child has equitable access to a great school.

Defining Great Schools and Equity

If you ask a room full of people to describe a great school, you'll get similar responses. Great schools have caring and smart teachers, engaging classrooms, and opportunities for curiosity, laughter, and fun. They are places where kids feel seen, safe, and appreciated, and teachers love their jobs, co-workers, and students. Families and teachers and principals communicate often and respectfully. Teachers feel valued. Great schools expect much from students, but they are also rich with valuable assets—academic and nonacademic—for student success and achievement, and they are responsive to student needs. They offer students rigorous coursework and prepare them for their next steps in the adult world.

You might also hear, "You'll know it's a great school when you feel it." Although that quality can feel powerful and near intangible, parts of it can be measured. Parents and teachers alike are able to use data to solve problems in great schools.

Everyone wants to teach in such a school, go to one, or send their child to one. The reality is, great schools are not equitably distributed. They are usually part of the

infrastructure and amenities of well-resourced, affluent communities. Such communities also often have easy access to resources to support students' mental and physical health, enrichment classes, and activities.

More than six decades since *Brown v. Board of Education*, it is clear that equity does not just happen based on people's good intentions. Equity requires courageous, vigilant disruption of the way education has historically been done. These habits and practices cannot remain solely within the confines of education professionals but should allow for broad, meaningful distribution of responsibility and accountability for a shared goal of excellence.

Educational equity means that every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income. Put simply, an equitable system is one where "historic barriers of racism, class, and discrimination don't determine any student's opportunity to succeed."¹ To dismantle these barriers, there must be strong accountability, meaningful engagement, accessible information and data, and equitable distribution of resources based on student need. Such facets are not only essential, they are wholly interdependent, and together make up the critical infrastructure needed to pursue educational equity.

Developing New Accountability Systems

Under ESSA, rewriting and reengineering accountability systems—and developing clear processes for school improvement—has been a 50-state undertaking. A strong, equity-centered accountability system rests on the ability to clearly identify schools and districts that are struggling, especially those in need of targeted support, and then to allocate resources and devote data-driven processes to making that system work in favor of kids and the adults that support them.

With this accountability infrastructure in place at the state level, school and district leaders can meaningfully engage parents, families, and teachers on how they might work together toward improving schools. Parents and caregivers want this accountability. Nearly 7 in 10 black parents and families said that the school's rating from the state is an important piece of

information in determining if the school is effectively educating their child.²

Parents, students, educators and school leaders, community members, elected officials, civil rights and advocacy groups, and many others must all be engaged in building accountability systems and share in the challenge of ensuring educational equity. And the conversations that take place in the districts is where the rubber meets the road.

What Is Next?

After more than a year of planning around ESSA, some states worked hard to include many voices in education policy decision making. Some not so hard. For instance, despite 69 percent of teachers saying it was very important for teacher voice to influence education policy development and implementation, only 23 percent agreed that their state education agency (SEA) had sought adequate teacher input in the state ESSA plan.³

State plans are important. But the extent to which ESSA succeeds in advancing equity and excellence rests with the actions of those closest to students. At the local level, community leaders, parents, advocates, and others should be ensuring that the statewide plan is implemented in ways that meet the needs of the community. As local education agencies develop and implement their local ESSA plans, they must engage stakeholders to think about how ESSA will play out locally.

Most often, when faced with a mandate to "collaborate," "partner," or "consult," agencies and officials have tended to rely on a standard set of easily accessible constituency groups and advisers as part of a communications or public relations strategy. And systems typically lack the incentives, resources, or consistent leadership to do more than comply with a bureaucratic mandate. Yet meaningful engagement requires more: intentional commitment, dedicated resources, and explicit work. To that end, SEAs and local educational agencies (LEAs) need to develop background information and preliminary thoughts about key decision points as well as implications for program resource allocation, assessment, and accountability.

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permanent culture of engagement, districts can learn from the promising practices and cautionary tales that have emerged in my organization's work over the past year in support of efforts at the state level. I offer the following five guiding principles and examples of these principles in action from the work of Partners for Each and Every Child in Illinois to guide state policymakers' ongoing efforts to strengthen their own stakeholder engagement and to encourage districts to mirror these practices at the local level.

1. Reach the Unreached, the Left Behind, and the Left Out

Fundamental to the advancement of equity in schools is the purposeful, targeted distribution of resources to meet and counterbalance the needs of students and families. Similarly, prioritizing the needs of those who have historically been least able to participate meaningfully in policy decisions means creating systems that ultimately work better for all stakeholders. For example, gathering parents can mean inviting PTA members and their well-staffed policy departments. But it also means meeting with church groups, local community representatives, family and youth groups, civil rights groups, and other student and parent advocacy organizations. And it means working hard to make outreach meaningful, engaging, and accessible. At a minimum, such engagement means ensuring that translation and interpretation are available at public meetings, online materials are accessible, and meetings are held with access to food and childcare.

District officials must also reach out to where people live and work, in schools, and at community centers. Groups that do attend must regularly be asked whether there are voices absent from the discussion and what might be done to support their inclusion. Partners for Each and Every Child collaborated with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and Illinois advocacy organizations to support participation of underserved groups. This meant ensuring these groups had a seat at the table, but it also encompassed creating a reader's guide for each draft plan so community members could digest the materials and provide meaningful feedback in statewide roundtables. Our work with ISBE focused on ensuring that the community could engage actively in plan implementation. This

past spring and summer, targeted districts and their community leaders joined all-day workshops on the ESSA plan and its impact.

2. Show Your Work

The articulation of a public, transparent, well-defined decision-making process is critical for advancing educational equity. If their interests are to be honestly weighed, those who are not intimately familiar with state education governance must be able to discover how, when, and to whom they must make their voices heard. Simply sharing lists of meeting dates and invitees is only a small step toward transparency. But capturing and posting feedback, showing how decisions did or did not reflect stakeholder discussion, and providing a rationale for decision points allow stakeholders to follow the logic of policymaking instead of preserving it as a black box of requirements minted somewhere far away. An extensive drafting process (five public drafts!) of Illinois's plan allowed for iterative cycles of feedback and incorporation that ultimately produced a new accountability system. For each draft, ISBE highlighted areas that had been strengthened or modified explicitly because of public comment, providing the community with a clear sense of how the plan was evolving and who had participated in that work. Each draft included direct questions for the public about important topics and areas for further development. ISBE repackaged the final plan it submitted in one-page formats and guides so schools and communities could clearly understand the new accountability system and the process by which supports and interventions would take effect.

3. Show Some Grit

Policy wonks, lobbyists, and career civil servants understand how to register their opinions and advance their interests within an administrative bureaucracy. The broader population often does not. It is incumbent upon SEAs and LEAs to make a deliberate effort to authentically capture input from as broad a community of educational stakeholders as possible. Identifying staff who will organize outreach and respond to feedback is key.

Stakeholder advisory committees or official work groups reflect an investment in authentic, ongoing dialogue and provide a clear point of

access for families and community members who otherwise cannot attend scheduled events. Such a structure for gathering input additionally helps insulate individual stakeholders from retaliation for expressing unpopular opinions. It also yields more granular, actionable feedback compared with submission of letters or online comments.

Even as budgets in Illinois remained tight and hotly debated in the capitol, the state board dedicated staff to engagement planning and outreach. Listening tours, parent workshops, hundreds of meetings, and thousands of emails helped organize and guide the work and clarify expectations around implementation. Working with Partners for Each and Every Child, ISBE significantly repackaged the ESSA plan to include clear timelines and roadmaps for the upcoming school year and developed an ESSA implementation toolkit to support districts and communities in realizing the plan.

4. Maximize Resources, Leverage Partners

Meaningful, authentic, ongoing engagement with a diverse set of people and constituent groups can identify not only community-specific areas of concern but also areas of limited capacity within districts and state infrastructure. Honest acknowledgment of inequities and resource gaps can spur deeper, richer engagement with stakeholders and can also help to indicate areas where the expertise of state and local groups, including nonprofit and private sector groups, can extend and enrich the capacity of SEAs and LEAs. States and districts will bear a greater range of formal responsibilities under ESSA, in many cases without receiving more money to fulfill them. In such cases, time spent building external partnerships can be well spent.

Illinois's leaders recognized early on that instead of creating an adversarial process with constituent groups, they would need as much support as was on offer for planning and execution of engagement efforts and as much background knowledge and experience as the groups could provide. My own organization and that of others ensured that community members had additional context and external resources to inform their feedback.

5. Double Down

America's multilayered governance systems provide ample, diverse opportunities for

individuals to provide input to education decision makers. Particularly in states with significant political divides, separate efforts to engage stakeholders by the governor's office, state board of education, and a state-based "think tank" can be beneficial. When all these inputs are reported and aggregated, they can surface core issues of bipartisan interest and help identify the distinct roles and comparative strengths of community-based groups and the different branches of state government.

Illinois's leaders made successful, repeated use of input from existing advisory boards, including the multisector P-20 Council and the IBAM group. Both offered feedback on the state's student growth metrics as part of the broader accountability system, thereby providing a clearer sense of areas of consensus and areas for further exploration and research. A technical advisory committee will continue to advance the impact of the growth metric.

As in Illinois, the goal of all of these efforts is not to make plans for their own sake. It is to ensure that strong, reliable processes are in place so that communities working together can make great schools. So again, state board members, state education agency officials, and district officials should ask a room full of people what they consider a great school. And then they should return and ask again. They should share what they heard and what they are doing about what they heard. They should share data about great schools—and the less than great schools—and make the commitments necessary to continue to work together.

State boards and organizations like mine must build the capacity of state and local education agencies to advance evidence-based, equity-focused, pragmatic change, and include their communities in the process. We are all stakeholders. We all have work to do. ■

¹Leadership Conference Education Fund, "Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Guide for Advocates: How You Can Ensure ESSA Implementation Helps to Build More Equitable Schools" (December 2016).

²Leadership Conference Education Fund, "The New Education Majority Poll: Black and Latino Parents and Families on Education and Their Children's Future," <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/education/new-education-majority/New-Education-Majority-Quick-Facts-AA.pdf>.

³Educators for Higher Standards, "Teacher Engagement and Perspectives on ESSA: An Eagerness to Engage and Be Heard," survey conducted in November 2016, <http://www.educatorsforhighstandards.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/educators-every-student-succeeds-act-essa-survey-report.pdf>.

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