



EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES  
**SPECIAL REPORT**



## Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement

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Hailed as “the largest devolution of federal control to the states in a quarter-century,” the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states greater flexibility to make policy decisions that lead to better outcomes for students.

**HISTORICALLY, STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS HAVE FOCUSED ON INFORMATION SHARING AND GATHERING FEEDBACK, BUT TO ENSURE STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN AND GREATER SUCCESS THROUGHOUT ESSA IMPLEMENTATION, EMBRACING A COLLABORATIVE MODEL COULD BENEFIT STATES.**

Before states implement ESSA, they are required to create a comprehensive and collaborative state plan. ESSA requires that each state education agency (SEA) create the state plan with “timely and meaningful consultation with the governor, members of the

state legislature... and state board of education, local educational agencies...representatives of Indian tribes located in the state, teachers, principals, other school leaders, charter school leaders...specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, administrators, other staff and parents.”

Stakeholder engagement and collaboration are essential to the development of an effective state plan. Yet engaging a diverse group of stakeholders tasked with working together to create education policies that will have a positive, lasting impact on students is not as easy as it sounds. Experts in the field argue that the traditional stakeholder engagement model alone will not produce the long-term outcomes states desire. This report offers a framework for going beyond simply engaging stakeholders for input to collaborating with them to create shared goals and better results.

**Getting the right stakeholders in the room is ONLY HALF THE BATTLE – they need to be armed with strategies to effectively work together.**

**Lack of engagement and bad process can derail or undermine good ideas; conversely, effective collaboration can IMPROVE IDEAS and OUTCOMES.**



## TRADITIONAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT MODEL

Based on an evaluation of 24 states' engagement efforts around educator evaluation, the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality found that states commonly employed the following strategies to engage a wide range of stakeholders on critical education policy issues:

- **Informational websites.**
- **State-led advisory committees including stakeholders as members.**
- **Press releases, and, to a lesser extent, news and social media.**
- **Online surveys.**
- **Online guidance, training materials and FAQ documents.**
- **Regional forums.**
- **Webinars or in-person presentations to local education agencies, professional associations, teachers' unions and more.**
- **Online videos or e-newsletters.**
- **Focus groups.<sup>3</sup>**

States need to take **STRATEGIC** and **PRACTICAL** steps to **CAPITALIZE** on the expertise and valuable resources that stakeholders offer.<sup>4</sup>

### Early Engagement Efforts Under ESSA

As states await the continued release of the U.S. Department of Education's rules and regulations on ESSA, many have already begun stakeholder engagement efforts. States like **Colorado** and **Tennessee**, for example, have kicked off efforts with listening tours around their states. **Pennsylvania** has sought broad stakeholder input followed by smaller, diverse work groups that are digging deeper into individual policy areas and developing draft recommendations. **New Hampshire**, like many other states, is hosting a blog dedicated to ESSA that is updated regularly with progress reports on stakeholder engagement efforts.

## MEANINGFUL COLLABORATION

States have had some success sharing information with and gathering input from key stakeholders using traditional engagement strategies. However, full engagement that fosters stronger support and stakeholder buy-in, greater success throughout implementation and a shared responsibility over results goes beyond traditional stakeholder engagement to a strategy that emphasizes collaboration.



Through meaningful collaboration among a diverse group of stakeholders—including the “unusual voices” that aren’t always actively engaged—states are more likely to achieve long-lasting positive effects in student achievement, educator satisfaction and cooperation from special interest groups. Collaboration expert David Chrislip explains that:

**[Collaboration] is more than simply sharing knowledge and information...and more than a relationship that helps each party achieve its own goals...The purpose of collaboration is to create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party.<sup>5</sup>**

**“Sincere engagement of stakeholders requires compromise and honest, respectful dialogue, which can be challenging and necessitates a significant investment of time and resources.”<sup>6</sup>**

### The Collaborative Premise

A simple, proven framework captured in a single sentence called The Collaborative Premise demonstrates how states can build consensus around goals and outcomes:

**If you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community.<sup>7</sup>**

The Collaborative Premise encompasses the critical elements needed to ensure the success of collaborative efforts.

Successful efforts of collaboration can transform a diverse group of stakeholders into a “constituency for change” that has the influence and credibility to achieve real results. When it comes to ESSA, a constituency for change would be in a position to hold the SEA and other implementing organizations accountable as they create and implement a state plan.<sup>8</sup>

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## principles to guide collaborative stakeholder engagement

**INCLUSION:** Engage a wide range of people and organizations with a stake in education to benefit from the value of diverse perspectives.

**ACCESSIBILITY:** Make it easy for people to participate, to understand what is happening and to be heard.

**SUSTAINABILITY:** See stakeholder engagement as a continuous process involving ongoing dialogue—not as a one-time proposition.

**FOCUS ON RESULTS:** Use engagement as a stepping stone toward building long-term partnerships that can help school systems get results that matter—from improved attendance and school climate to more extensive parent and student engagement.<sup>9</sup>



## QUESTIONS FOR STATES TO CONSIDER

The following questions can help states consider what is needed to create a credible and collaborative stakeholder engagement process and provide appropriate leadership:<sup>10</sup>

### What is there to collaborate about?

From the beginning, frame the conversation in an open and engaging way to build trust in the process among stakeholders. Create open-ended questions around key issues, such as: “How do we address equity for all students?” and “How do we ensure that all students are taught to high academic standards?”

### Whose work is it?

Look for stakeholders who share responsibility for the current situation, are affected by the issues and must be part of the solution. ESSA clearly identifies the interests that should be included in the creation of a state plan.<sup>1</sup> Engaging all stakeholders early and often, including those who bring critical and differing views, is important to creating an open process.

### Who has the expertise to provide the information needed to make good decisions?

Seek out experts who can provide reliable information to help stakeholders build a deeper understanding of complex issues. The experts help to inform the process but do not drive it.

### Who has the credibility to bring stakeholders together?

Find partners with the credibility and influence to bring a diverse group of stakeholders together. Again, ESSA requires SEAs to consult with certain constituencies. Education leaders should build partnerships with groups that reflect the interests of key stakeholders. These partners could help convene meetings and participate in the ongoing work of implementation.

### How do stakeholders work together?

Create a credible, open process that allows stakeholders to learn together, diagnose the situation, explore alternatives, develop strategies and put them into action. State leaders should consider engaging third-party facilitators who do not have a stake in the outcome and who can bring much needed process expertise and build credibility among stakeholders. In addition, make sure sources of information are considered reliable by the full spectrum of stakeholders.

### Who will energize and sustain the work?

Search out stakeholders who are willing and able to provide strong process leadership to help facilitate and sustain the collaborative work. Throughout the implementation process, look for leaders from different interest groups to champion the process, help ensure desired outcomes are achieved and keep stakeholders engaged.

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<sup>1</sup>ESSA Section 1005(a)(1)(A)-(B)



## FINAL THOUGHTS

In 2012, communications scholar Carl Larson reflected on years of experience helping others work together, noting that “a credible, open process” and “strong process leadership” were the two qualities present in all successful examples of civic collaboration.<sup>11</sup>

**When we talk to people who have been involved in a successful collaboration, they always talk about how genuine, or real, or open, or authentic the process was. Always. There is always a theme in their description of the process that has something to do with a connection between credibility and openness. Always. Make the process transparent, out in the open, nothing hidden, as open as you can reasonably be. Above all else, people want to be involved in something that is authentic, real, honest. Not false.**<sup>12</sup>

ESSA creates opportunities for meaningful reforms and better outcomes. By embracing a stakeholder engagement model that emphasizes collaboration, states increase the chances of creating lasting change with the new flexibility granted under ESSA.

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## ENDNOTES

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