Let's Get This Conversation Started:

Strategies, Tools, Examples and Resources to Help States Engage with Stakeholders to Develop and Implement their ESSA Plans

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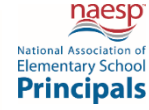

THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

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COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

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Contents

Overview **4**

Stakeholder Engagement Checklist **6**

Part I: Getting Started **9**

1. Clarify your goals 9
2. Work with partner organizations to identify and engage with your stakeholders 10

Part II: Engagement Best Practices **11**

3. Speak to your audience 11
4. Use multiple vehicles 13
5. Identify your best ambassadors 14
6. Ask for input before decisions are made, and use it 15
7. Keep your materials simple and brief 16
8. Communicate early and often 17

Part III: Sustaining Engagement **18**

9. Keep your team informed 18
10. Turn these new connections into long-term relationships 19

Planning Tools **20**

Timeline (July 2016-Jan 2017) 21

Timeline (Feb-August 2017) 22

Influencer Map 23

Relationship Map 24

Action Plan 25

List of Stakeholders for ESSA Engagement 26

Additional Resources 27

Let's Get This Conversation Started: Strategies, Tools, Examples and Resources to Support States in Developing and Implementing their Stakeholder Engagement Plans

Overview

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers states an incredible opportunity to develop or refine a strategic vision for education to chart their own path forward. The new federal law allows education leaders and stakeholders to rethink their own accountability, funding, school improvement and grant-making systems by gathering input from the people who know their state best. ESSA requires extensive outreach and engagement efforts to everyone from policymakers to educators to tribal organizations to parents, prompting many states to rethink their definitions of meaningful engagement.

"There is a big difference between engaging people and having a meeting."

- National Education Association

This is an opportunity for state education agencies (SEAs) to not only connect with current education advocates, but to seek out those who feel disconnected or who have not been historically engaged in a public education dialogue. SEAs should not engage stakeholders simply out of compliance, structure discussions as a one-way conversation, or seek input long after it can be used to inform decision making. That approach leaves stakeholders feeling like their time has been wasted and less likely to seek out engagement opportunities in the future. ESSA creates an opportunity for stakeholders to play a more active role in the creation of state policy and for SEAs to build new relationships they can continue through implementation, evaluation and into the launch of new initiatives. States can use ESSA stakeholder engagement strategies to get communities excited about statewide education plans and committed to continuous collaboration with state and local leaders to improve student outcomes.

Why this work matters

If states…	Then…	Resulting in…
Create opportunities for an array of stakeholders to help shape the state's vision for education and provide feedback on how the state's early thinking on its ESSA plan can help to achieve that vision	Stakeholders will feel a sense of ownership in common vision and the state's ESSA plan and be more likely to support it	Every state will be positioned to achieve its guiding vision and address the needs of all students through the implementation of its ESSA plan
Use stakeholder input to inform the state's ESSA plan, and tell them how their input was used	Previously under-engaged groups will feel more connected to the state's work	
Create systems and opportunities to keep them engaged through the implementation process and beyond	The state's plan will reflect the best thinking of all stakeholder groups	

SEAs committed to making the most of this engagement opportunity should first reflect on how they *currently* work with stakeholders. The goal of ESSA engagement should be for stakeholders to leave feeling heard, informed and aware of how they can stay involved—is that what is happening now? SEAs should consider who they connect with regularly, who those stakeholders represent, and how their input is used, as well as who has not been historically engaged in a public education dialogue. This is no easy task, especially in already stretched-thin SEAs. This resource is meant to provide SEAs with detailed guidance on how best to plan for, launch and carry out this effort with a wide range of stakeholders.

This guide was developed in consultation with 15 national advocacy and civil rights groups, and contains specific strategies on how best to connect with, speak to and learn from stakeholders with a unique perspective. This tool expands the guidance on 10 engagement steps first provided in "Let's Get This Conversation Started: Steps Every State Should Take to Map Out Its ESSA Engagement Strategy[1]," and provides:

- Detailed guidance on stakeholder engagement strategies;
- State examples of effective strategies;
- Stakeholder-specific tactics;
- Planning templates and tools;
- A breakdown of stakeholders states are required to engage under each ESSA program; and
- Lists of additional stakeholder engagement resources.

[1] This guide contains many hyperlinks in its examples and resources. You can access a digital version of this guide on CCSSO's ESSA website: http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Programs/Every_Student_Succeeds_Act.html

Stakeholder Engagement Checklist

This guide contains a detailed roadmap for engaging with a range of different stakeholder groups. Use this checklist as a reminder for key elements to incorporate into your work, to assess your current engagement approach, and to document your evidence.

	Engagement Strategy	Strategy Checklist	Evidence	✔
Part I: Getting Started	1. Clarify your goals.	▪ Have you used your state's education vision to drive your approach to stakeholder engagement?		
		▪ Do stakeholders know why they are being engaged?		
		▪ Who are the key communities you want to reach?		
		▪ Have you shared your broad policy views with stakeholders in advance so they can come prepared?		
		▪ Have you identified a member of the SEA staff to oversee the state's engagement efforts?		
		▪ Have you built an internal system to ensure that input is reviewed and that decision makers know what input is received?		
	2. Work with partner organizations to identify and engage with your stakeholders.	▪ Have you reached out to diverse partner organizations, community leaders and the legislature to discuss how they can help?		
		▪ Have you compared who is required to be at the table under ESSA regulations against who has and has not been actively engaged in the past?		
		▪ Have you leveraged national and state organizations to reach out to new stakeholders?		
		▪ Have you talked to the governor's office about ways they can help, such as hosting a convening?		

	Engagement Strategy	Strategy Checklist	Evidence	✔
Part II: Engagement Best Practices	3. Speak to your audience.	▪ Have you created different, accessible materials for different stakeholder groups aligned to their interests, needs and expertise?		
		▪ Have you had your materials translated into multiple languages?		
		▪ Have you had your materials reviewed by advocacy or community organizations at the state or national level to check for cultural competency?		
	4. Use multiple vehicles.	▪ Have you identified the best way to reach and stay in touch with each stakeholder group?		
		▪ Have you identified locations that are easy for your stakeholders to reach and will keep them at ease?		
		▪ Have you identified locations in diverse geographic locations?		
		▪ Have you identified an array of vehicles and tools you can use to connect with different stakeholder groups?		
		▪ Have you scheduled meetings at times when your stakeholders will be able to attend?		
	5. Identify your best ambassadors.	▪ Have you identified trusted, well-respected community members to serve as ambassadors for some stakeholder groups?		
		▪ Have you provided your ambassadors with training, guidance and tools so they know to help you and their community?		
		▪ Have you thought about how best to engage with stakeholder groups that have been traditionally under-represented?		
	6. Ask for input before decisions are made, and use it.	▪ Have you identified some specific areas on which input from stakeholders will be helpful?		
		▪ Have you documented specifically what is—and is not—on the table for discussion?		
		▪ Have you developed a system or set of tools to allow easy reporting back to your stakeholders?		
		▪ Have you built in time to revisit decisions along the way to ensure that new information and feedback can be used to inform them?		

	7. Keep your materials simple and brief.	▪ Have you created materials to help your stakeholders hold conversations with their peers?		
		▪ Have you built visuals, graphics and/or animation into your materials?		
		▪ Have you solicited feedback from stakeholder organizations to check for clarity and cultural relevance?		
	8. Communicate early and often.	▪ Have you created a timeline you can update regularly and use to ensure your outreach is consistent and built around key milestones and decision points?		
		▪ Have you created vehicles to continue to provide your stakeholders with substantive updates on where you are in the planning process, key decisions and next steps?		
		▪ Have you created a stakeholder communications advisory group to continually gauge the effectiveness of your outreach strategy?		
Part III: Sustaining Engagement	9. Keep your team informed.	▪ Does your staff know how to access internal and external ESSA materials or where to direct their questions?		
		▪ Have you scheduled meetings to update all internal offices on ESSA planning and to solicit their input?		
		▪ Have you provided your staff with talking points and guidance on ESSA so they can be prepared to answer questions when working in the field?		
	10. Turn these new connections into long-term relationships.	▪ Do you have a regular schedule for meetings with stakeholders during the development of your state's ESSA plan and after the state begins implementing it?		
		▪ What steps have you taken to reassure stakeholders that this engagement effort will differ from previous, unsuccessful attempts to engage with them?		
		▪ How frequently will you review your engagement strategies to ensure you are still getting input from and working with a representative array of stakeholder groups?		

Part I: Getting Started

An engagement effort of this magnitude and importance can't be everyone's responsibility. **SEAs should quickly designate an internal owner to lead the work and get started, but recognize that one person will not be able to do it all.** In addition to the internal owner of outreach coordination, staff from across the agency will need to be involved to ensure the process runs smoothly and that feedback is used to inform the state's plan.

States will likely have to submit plans in early 2017, which means an owner needs to be identified so that the stakeholder engagement process may start immediately.

> **"There is a lot that has to be done, and it's going to take everybody to figure this out."**
>
> - National Conference of State Legislatures

1. **Clarify your goals.** Before communicating with any stakeholders, states must be clear on what they want to say. Start at the top, with your state's overall strategic vision for education, and determine how stakeholders can help you define the goals and the work that needs to be connected to that vision. Keep in mind why you're engaging stakeholders in the first place, and develop goals and a detailed plan to guide your engagement efforts. This isn't about compliance, or about making the most people happy—it's about seeking input from the people most closely tied to the public education system and facilitating community-based implementation supports for state and local education policy objectives.

Kentucky Commissioner of Education Stephen Pruitt is holding a series of 11 education town hall meetings across the state to determine how Kentuckians define school success.

Vermont established four lenses that it will use to review proposals and guide the development of its plan: equity, alignment, efficiency and practicality. Vermont also identified more than 40 key ESSA decision points for stakeholders to consider.

Washington D.C.'s Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) released a set of principles for what an accountability system should look like in early April 2016 and used them to guide stakeholder discussions.

North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction (DPI) released a detailed timeline of all ESSA-related outreach, including DPI-sponsored outreach events, presentations at stakeholder groups' events, convening of external stakeholder advisory groups and the development of the ESSA plan itself.

- *Ask stakeholders how they want to be engaged*. Explain how the SEA is defining meaningful engagement, ask stakeholders what methods work best for them and come to a common understanding so stakeholders know what to expect.
- *Let stakeholders know why they were invite*d. Let them know that their opinions are respected, that they're key partners and that they are there because the state wants to tap their expertise and experience. Lay out the entire engagement process for them, including the other groups involved so they understand where they fit into the process and what other voices will be heard.
- *Make engagement activities public*. People cannot truly engage in a process if they believe the "real" discussion is happening in a backroom, private conversation. Produce a schedule, publish it online and make it easy to find. Consider livestreaming events so those who cannot attend can still engage.
- *Enter conversations with a sense of the SEA's position, but be open to—and even expect—change based on information learned during the stakeholder engagement process.* States should come to stakeholders with a set of key decision points, not a blank sheet of paper, to give stakeholders the

opportunity to provide input and to guide conversations.

2. **Work with partner organizations to identify and engage with your stakeholders.** SEAs too often hear from the same group of 20-30 people to represent stakeholders when input is needed on a policy issue. But without broadening the net and reaching out to leaders from different interest groups, ethnicities, demographics and corners of the state, the SEA is getting only a narrow, predictable point of view that is not representative of the state as a whole. Continue to ask yourself: "Who are we missing?"

Hawai'i Governor David Ige created the Governor's Team on ESSA to assess the current public school system, identify areas of need and develop a blueprint for Hawai'i's public schools. There will be 16 members, in addition to the governor's designee for chair, representing all stakeholders in public education.

Montana created an ESSA Workplan Group to guide the state's ESSA implementation. This group includes a wide range of stakeholders including tribal education leaders, representatives of the state's deaf and blind school, teachers, superintendents and district trustees. They finish their work in November 2016.

1. *Be prepared to feel uncomfortable.* SEAs accustomed to hearing from the same people are likely to get feedback they hadn't anticipated. You may not agree with it all, but it's important to listen and to let your stakeholders know they've been heard.
2. *Leverage existing networks before you create new ones.* Ask partners to connect you with existing community and peer networks, and to encourage leaders in those groups to participate in the engagement effort. Partnering with a stakeholder who the community trusts can put the audience at ease and ensure greater attendance and participation.
3. *Work with your national and state-level associations to identify people to engage.* These groups have connections to people who are already involved in working groups and have some level of understanding of the critical issues covered under ESSA.
4. *Balance out your committees with people who bring a range of perspectives and solutions.* Don't just group people with the same point of view together; guide the discussion by combining differing voices and opinions.

If you're engaging…

Legislators	Reach out to the legislative leaders and education committee chairs and ask which lawmakers have a special interest in ESSA-related issues. Use that outreach to get the conversation started with the leadership and interested lawmakers.
American Indian Tribes	Engaging tribal education stakeholders is different than other stakeholder groups. Tribes are sovereign governments, so start with a government-to-government relationship. Many tribes have an agency for education and a director who can connect you to the parents and community members you need to engage.
Parents	Work with state and local PTAs to identify parents to get involved in the process.
Principals	The issues at play will impact schools so it will be critical to engage with principals as a key stakeholder group. They can bring a unique school-based perspective on programs and policies that address the most compelling challenges in schools.
Educators	Some educators may need convincing to participate, based on past experience. Work with unions and associations to engage with educators, and consider ways to address potential barriers to their involvement by providing compensated release time or reimbursement of expenses for school staff.

Part II: Engagement Best Practices

Now that you've defined your goals and identified your stakeholders, how you engage them *and keep them engaged* is critically important. This section includes a range of best practice strategies that will keep your stakeholders engaged throughout the development of your ESSA plan and build relationships that will enable you to continue to gather input from them through implementation and beyond.

"Guard against trying to communicate too much without substance—don't communicate for communication's sake."
- Partners for Each and Every Child

Use the "Four I's" framework, developed by the U.S. Department of Education's Reform Support Network, as a model as you think about the **purpose** behind your engagement efforts: Is your goal simply to inform? Is it to create opportunities for stakeholders to have their questions answered? Opportunities for your stakeholders to get actively involved? Or is your goal to earn their support and ultimately inspire them to act?

3. **Speak to your audience.**[2]

Remember that engagement strategies that may be successful in one community may not work in another. Not all stakeholders will come to the table with the same level of education, background on ESSA or interest in the details of policy development. That does not mean that their voices should not be heard. Recognize up front that many of your stakeholders will not be education experts and may need context before they can fully contribute to, and engage in, a valuable discussion.

The **Oregon** Department of Education hosted 12 community forums throughout the state to inform stakeholders about the state's education initiatives and help build Oregon's plan for ESSA. Sites for the forums include community centers, an early learning center, a cultural center, community colleges, a hotel conference room, a maritime museum and a few school district facilities.

Illinois held an 8-stop listening tour during the spring of 2016. The Illinois State Board of Education worked with the Regional Offices of Education to set up the local meetings to give stakeholders from across the state an opportunity to provide feedback on ESSA implementation.

Fifteen **nonprofits** collaborated to create www.understood.org to provide online support and information to parents of children with learning and attention issues. The site aims to give parents a direct path to the support they need most to make them feel more confident, capable and able to advocate for what's best for their children.

- *Don't pigeonhole your stakeholders.* Some community groups and stakeholders have expertise in more than one policy area. Ask each stakeholder group what areas are of greatest interest to them, and consider what they can contribute to the state's plan.
- *Anticipate your stakeholders' concerns.* Each group will likely have specific areas that are of interest to them. Be prepared to speak to those topics and answer questions.
- *Have your documents reviewed in advance.* Ask stakeholder and advocacy organizations to review documents, meeting materials and policy positions from their constituencies' perspective. They can help refine your SEA's work and ensure the content will be culturally

[2] Check #7 "Keep materials simple and brief" for more on this topic

competent and relevant to your stakeholders before the engagement begins.

- *Identify a clear point of contact.* Make sure your stakeholders know who at the SEA can answer their questions and can keep them informed about progress along the way.
- *Don't speak over—or under—your stakeholders.* Not all stakeholders will have a background in education. Don't assume they have read the details of the law in advance, but also don't assume they have no information. Speak and provide concise materials that are clearly written, about topics that are relevant to them.
- *Avoid edu-speak.* As much as you can, try to avoid using education jargon or acronyms that non-educators won't understand. If some jargon can't be avoided, include a glossary of terms with your materials.
- *Leave enough time for them to respond.* Don't expect stakeholders to review content and provide input within 24 hours. Acknowledge that you know they're busy and allow them a reasonable amount of time (i.e., 2-3 weeks) to provide feedback in writing.

If you're engaging…

Parents	▪ Parents will be more likely to engage in this process if they see the importance of getting involved and feel like their voices will be heard and valued. Frame the issues around how the changes could impact their children and community. ▪ Provide parents with background materials in advance and keep all presentation materials clear and concise. ▪ Anticipate language barriers. Have materials available in person and online in multiple languages and arrange for translators at public events. ▪ Ask what has and has not been working well in their child's schools. ▪ Try not to use acronyms and educational jargon; define complex words and phrases when they cannot be avoided.
Educators	▪ Explain how this level of flexibility and state control is different from the way the state operated under No Child Left Behind and what that will mean for them.

"Many people want to be involved, they just don't know how to do it."

- National Council on Learning Disability

"People support what they help create."

- National PTA

4. **Use multiple vehicles.** Traditional outreach methods like town hall meetings and press releases are no longer the only—or even the best—ways to reach every audiences. Blogs, websites, social media, webinars, focus groups and surveys are among a myriad of other strategies that SEAs can also employ to connect with specific stakeholders. This means that states will need to adopt a strategy that incorporates more than one vehicle to effectively make the connections they need. Not all people get their information in the same way anymore, so to be most effective—and to ensure that no one is inadvertently left out—states need to intentionally seek out and use the vehicles that work best for the people they are trying to reach.

   - *Meet people where they already are*. Ask to be added to the agenda of community meetings or forums that were previously scheduled instead of creating new ones. Ask partner organizations already meeting with their members to host focus groups.
   - *Leverage communication vehicles people are already using.* Many stakeholders already contribute to, and read, monthly newsletters, e-mail distribution lists, and social media accounts. Seek these out and ask the stakeholders who lead these vehicles to help you spread the word.
   - *Be conscious of your location*. Consider hosting meetings at nontraditional, neutral sites such as community centers instead of at schools or government buildings to make people feel more comfortable.
   - *Cover your state*. Stakeholders aren't likely to travel hours to attend a meeting, so bring the meeting to them. Schedule sessions across the state in easy-to-reach locations in areas with varying income levels and diverse populations.
   - *Schedule meetings around the traditional workday hours.* Remember that most stakeholders are not available from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the week, so host meetings in the early morning, evenings and on the weekend to ensure all stakeholders will be

Pennsylvania developed a strategic approach to engaging with their ESSA workgroup and simultaneously keeping other stakeholders informed on their progress. Interested stakeholders have access to workgroup meeting materials before each meeting and receive content-specific updates after the meeting. During the meeting itself, stakeholders can follow the discussion on social media.

The **Colorado** Department of Education (CDE) hosted a seven-stop listening tour for its ESSA stakeholder engagement. At each stop of the listening tour, CDE held two sessions. The first was at 1:00 p.m. and a second was at 5:30 p.m. so that parents and other stakeholders with day jobs could attend. The morning and evening sessions had the same agendas. An eighth, online session provided an additional opportunity for feedback.

The **Wisconsin** Department of Public Instruction (DPI) scheduled five listening sessions to get feedback on the state's current accountability system and how it can be improved. Three sessions will be hosted in person in different parts of the state. Two of the sessions are virtual. Stakeholders can also use an online feedback tool on DPI's website.

The **Massachusetts** Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) is using multiple approaches to get stakeholder feedback. ESE launched an online feedback form to get feedback on accountability and assistance. ESE will also leverage stakeholder organizations to host focus groups and to present at their convenings. Stakeholders are able to sign up online for ESSA updates and other opportunities to provide feedback.

Possible vehicles to use

- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)
- Websites
- Webinars
- In person forums
- Focus groups
- Roundtable discussions
- Newsletters
- Surveys
- Email listservs
- Personalized emails
- Text messages
- Online chat
- Conferences
- Video conferences
- Livestreaming

able to attend.

- *Don't just put everything online.* Blogs, websites and other online tools are the simplest ways for SEAs to push out information, but can miss people who either don't look for them, or who don't have access to a computer. Be sure that all of the information available online is also made available on paper and to stakeholder organizations to help with dissemination.
- *Ask what works best and do more of that.* At the end of group meetings, collect contact information of participants and ask them what method of communication they prefer.

If you're engaging…

Parents	▪ Remember that what works in one community may not work in another. Work with community and parent leaders to identify the best approach. ▪ Lean heavily on social media. Parents can be reached easily and directly through Facebook and Twitter. Encourage active and engaged parents to share the information on their pages with their friends and followers. ▪ Many parents of students with disabilities may have disabilities themselves. Create accessible materials and consider strategies like holding a webinar instead of sharing a dense white paper. ▪ Offer food, child care and translation services to increase participation.
American Indian	▪ Some Indian tribes are geographically dispersed, and will need time to convene. Set and communicate your timeline well in advance so there will be enough time to get a representative group together.
Educators	▪ Work with district leaders to make arrangements for guaranteed release time so that educators are able to participate in engagement activities.
Local School Boards	▪ Most school board members have full time jobs outside of their local board responsibilities. Work with member state associations to schedule engagement activities that are convenient and accessible.

5. **Identify your best ambassadors.** Some stakeholders will respond more openly when they discuss information that could potentially impact them directly with a colleague, peer or trusted source, rather than with representatives from the SEA. Create a relationship map[3] or draw out a delivery chain to determine the best ways to reach your stakeholders and your best ambassadors to reach each group. States can develop tools and resources such as talking points and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents to support outreach by ambassadors to ensure their communication remains clear and that they are set up to gather

When the **Mississippi** Department of Education (MDE) and U.S. Department of Education partnered to host an "Equity Lab," they used a facilitator to set up the conversations. Some of the participants did not have the best relationship with MDE. The facilitator helped keep the focus on the issues and used breakout groups to let stakeholders drive what became a productive conversation.

Colorado designates "social media ambassadors" for key issues to expand the department's outreach efforts. These ambassadors are typically engaged teachers, district leaders and advocacy organization. The department trains ambassadors on key issues and, when events warrant, sends information to ambassadors encouraging them to share information.

[3] See page 16 for a sample timeline template and pages 18-19 for a relationship map grid and template

meaningful feedback and measure responses.

- *Determine when and how to use ambassadors*. Ambassadors can be a great tool for community outreach, but it's important to think critically about with whom and when ambassadors will be effective messengers. Consider how the SEA has interacted with stakeholder groups in the past and if there is a benefit to making a connection with them directly before relying on an ambassador to get their feedback. While some groups may be more responsive to trusted members of their community, others—particularly under-represented groups—may see it as a sign of disrespect if SEA leaders do not meet with them in person. In these cases, it may be more beneficial to have an SEA leader *and* an ambassador lead the conversation.
- *Let your stakeholders decide who they want to lead the discussion.* The person leading the engagement for a group needs to be someone the group already trusts and respects. Consider identifying ambassadors from each stakeholder group directly or letting the community decide who should play that role.
- *Make sure your ambassadors know what is expected.* Ambassadors have to be a two-way conduit—their role is to convey the SEA's message to the stakeholders, and then to bring the stakeholder perspective back to the SEA. Clarify expectations before they get started, and provide them with the training and tools they need to ensure they are able to be effective.
- *Invite active participants to play the ambassador role.* At convenings and presentations, ask stakeholders if they would be willing to be part of an ongoing engagement effort or act as ambassadors.

6. **Ask for input before decisions are made, and use it.** The intent of ESSA is to make sure the people affected by the law are at the table from the start of the process. Asking for input on issues or policy changes after decisions have already been made leaves stakeholders feeling devalued, and like their time has been wasted. Approach stakeholders with rough ideas to get their reaction, and be clear from the start on which issues have been resolved and are no longer up for discussion.

   - *Clarify what is on—and off—the table.* Let stakeholders know what they will have the authority to help decide, and what is already decided or simply not up for discussion. This level of clarity will help stakeholders understand the role they are being asked to play and help to avoid confusion or conflict.
   - *Come with questions you need answered.* Approach stakeholders with draft policies or rough ideas and present them with specific questions that can be used to inform the SEA's thinking. Provide them with the opportunity to have a direct impact on the plan and make sure their input is reflected on the next draft.

During the 2012-2013 school year, **D.C. Public Schools** Chancellor Kaya Henderson held a series of public meetings throughout the city, inviting parents and activists to help refine the district's school closure plan. The previous round of school closures happened suddenly and without parent and community input. Chancellor Henderson's meetings involved stakeholders sitting down with district officials so everyone could look at the same data and information and try to come up with a solution together. While not everyone was happy with the outcome, the closures did not generate the same outcry as the previous round.

Washington State's Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) created a series of workgroups for the major policy areas of ESSA made up of stakeholders and experts. These groups meet monthly to prepare specific parts of the state's ESSA plan. A steering group, called the Consolidated Plan Team, will finalize the plan once each workgroup's recommendations are complete and oversee the plan's implementation.

- *Ask for better ideas.* If stakeholders do not agree with the initial thinking, ask them to explain why and to provide alternative ideas or solutions. This will ensure the engagement process is results-oriented and productive, particularly when discussing difficult topics where there are varying opinions.
- *Close the feedback loop*. Create a reporting mechanism that goes back to the community after the engagement process and explains what you're using, what you're not using and why. Explain the SEA's thinking and decision-making process so it is clear why some ideas were incorporated and others were not.

If you're engaging…

Legislators	▪ The state's ESSA plan will likely require legislative changes. Keep legislators well informed so statutory change requests are expected. Provide timelines and an early heads up on the issues, and work around legislative timetables.

7. **Keep your materials simple and brief.**[4] All written, online or presentation materials should be concise and easy-to-understand, written to illustrate how the content relates to student achievement and to your state's strategic vision. Differentiate your materials by audience, asking yourself what they really need to know, and what questions and concerns they are likely to bring to the discussion. Keep the in-the-weeds detail about process for discussions with practitioners and those with specific expertise or experience in the topic; frame other content on how individual stakeholder groups will be impacted and how things will change.

The **Colorado** Department of Education (CDE) created an ESSA blog on their website to provide more approachable information on ESSA. Blog topics offer simple explanations of the law, updates on stakeholder engagement and useful resources. The blog complements CDE's extensive library of fact sheets on all major education topics. Usually 2-3 pages with lots of visuals, these fact sheets give general audiences an introduction and overview on specific and topical issues.

The **Ohio** Department of Education (ODE) creates simple, one-page fact sheets on the major parts of Ohio's education system. These fact sheets are designed for parents and community members who are not familiar with education policy. ODE packages these factsheets in its press kits as a resource for reporters covering education issues.

- *Create materials your stakeholders can share*. Written content should be developed to guide your stakeholder discussions, but should also be created with a broader audience in mind. Think about how your stakeholders can use the materials in a conversation with their colleagues, and include talking points to help guide that discussion.
- *Avoid edu-speak.* Watch out for acronyms and education jargon. Define them when they can't be avoided, but aim to keep your materials clear and easy to understand for all audiences.
- *Use visuals*. Some audiences will have an easier time understanding complex topics if they are explained using a graphic, animation or visual rather than through a lengthy white paper or set of bulleted items. Consider ways to incorporate visuals to represent data or complex issues.
- *Have your documents reviewed in advance.* Ask stakeholder and advocacy

[4] Check #3 "Speak to your audience," for more on this topic.

organizations to review documents, meeting materials and policy positions from their constituencies' perspective. They can help refine SEA's work and ensure the content will be culturally competent and relevant to your stakeholders before the engagement begins.

If you're engaging…

Legislators	▪ Assess what information legislators and their staff need and give it to them in a simple format as early as possible in the process. Consider holding legislative briefings with lawmakers and/or their staff at key points, and provide regular, updated materials. When possible, localize to relate back to their districts or regions.

8. **Communicate early and often.** Do not let your stakeholders first hear about changes in education policy from other stakeholders or the news media. The changes you are making could be significant, so proactively take steps to own the message and create opportunities and tools for stakeholders to have their questions answered and provide input along the way. Generate a regular, reliable stream of information that you make available in multiple formats and have translated into multiple languages to keep your stakeholders informed, and to keep the public aware of your process, decisions as they are made, and next steps. Utilize your ambassadors, state level associations and other partners to help disseminate information along the way.

The **New Hampshire** Department of Education created six content-specific stakeholder advisory teams to formulate the state's ESSA plan. The teams began meeting in March and April 2016 and discussed the law, policy research and the goals for the state in each area. The groups will meet often, sometimes multiple times a month, to create the recommendations for the state's plan later in 2016.

The **Rhode Island** Department of Education (RIDE) created nine small groups of LEAs across the state, consisting of three to seven LEAs in each group, to help LEAs to learn from one another, problem-solve thorny issues of implementation and also provide RIDE with valuable feedback. The groups held four meetings a year as they implemented the state's Race to the Top grant.

   - *Create a timeline to plan out your strategy.* Develop a timeline that you continually update to work backwards from your milestones, decision points and deadlines to ensure your engagement and outreach is steady and ongoing.[5]
   - *Create a communications advisory group.* Retain a group of key stakeholders as advisors throughout the ESSA planning process to continually gauge the effectiveness of your communications strategy and suggest course corrections when they're needed.
   - O*nly communicate when you have something to say*. Communicate frequently, but not just for the sake of communicating. Guard against communicating without substance. Communication can include synthesis of feedback, updates on plan development, specific requests for input, reports on status of key decision points, an update on the timeline, etc. If your stakeholders don't feel engaged or that they're learning something, they may withdraw.

[5] See page 22 for a sample timeline and template.

If you're engaging…

Governors	▪ Having the support of the governor's office from the start can make it easier to secure resources and help from other state agencies. Work with the staff in the executive branch to help them understand the state's implementation plan and how it aligns to the strategic vision, and urge them to make it a key part of the governor's education agenda.

Part III: Sustaining Engagement

You've worked hard to build relationships with stakeholders from across your state—don't stop there. States that regularly seek input from a wide array of stakeholder groups are more likely to have widespread support for new initiatives and can benefit from their continued engagement and involvement in policy development and implementation. These new connections don't have to end when ESSA begins—take the time to turn them into long-term relationships that can benefit the students in your public schools for years to come.

"If we don't get this right in the beginning, and we don't take the time to gather input and build understanding, we'll be back where we were five years ago."

- National PTA

9. **Keep your team informed.** Your internal team represents a group of both critical stakeholders and potential ambassadors. Make sure they are included in any outreach you do with other stakeholder groups and provide them with access to information about key themes, dates and decision points. Hold information sessions for your internal team to keep them informed and to seek their input.

The **California** Department of Education's (CDE) publishes a list of ESSA contacts within the agency. CDE keeps its staff informed and leverages them to answer questions for the large state. The list includes directors, administrators, consultants and policy liaisons in 11 CDE offices.

The **Massachusetts** Department of Elementary and Secondary Education holds optional roundtable discussions regularly for their internal staff. These informal sessions are organized by the Office of Planning, Research, and Delivery Systems and are designed to give staff an opportunity to learn more about new initiatives across the agency, discuss policy, ask questions and celebrate successes.

   - *Rely on your internal planning team.* Senior leaders from across the agency should be involved the SEA's internal ESSA planning team. Urge them to share updates with their staff and to solicit input on key decision points at unit meetings.
   - *Be coordinated.* Make sure that stakeholder outreach is coordinated through a single office or person to avoid overwhelming groups with outreach from multiple sources within the SEA.

- *Share your outreach materials.* The materials you create for external stakeholders can be used internally as well. Distribute the informational material at staff meetings, make them available online and reference them in internal newsletters.
- *Provide staff with talking points.* Even SEA staff who are not involved in the detailed ESSA planning may be approached with questions from stakeholders outside of the agency. Provide all internal staff with basic talking points and key dates throughout the process so they can respond to questions if asked. Take special care to equip agency staff who spend the most time in schools with as much information as possible.

10. **Turn these new connections into long-term relationships.** The stakeholder engagement process required under ESSA provides states with an opportunity to create new relationships with stakeholders who have not traditionally been at the table and model how things will be done in the future. Engage with a wider array of stakeholder groups, actively listen to their input, answer their questions and show how their feedback is used to strengthen your plan. Remember that long-term relationships and engagement is not about agreeing 100 percent of the time, but about working through your issues together. Seek to deepen your relationships with civil rights organizations, unions, administrator associations, other agencies and advocacy groups through this process and commit to working together in the future to expand the SEA's reach and support system.

The **Pennsylvania** State Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera created four ESSA work groups, including a wide range of stakeholders, to explore policy questions, and develop draft recommendations in key areas of ESSA. The state has already outlined plans to use the workgroup members for public updates after the work group sessions are complete. In addition to the work group meetings, there are two whole group sessions for all stakeholders. More than 200 stakeholders attended the first meeting in April 2016.

When **Colorado** was designing an educator evaluation system, they created the State Council for Educator Effectiveness to help develop the policy. Once complete, the SEA relied on key statewide associations to help drive the implementation in a way that built credibility for the reforms.

- *Play the long game.* Remember that ESSA's changes are going to take several years to implement and will have a lasting impact on the state. States should use the engagement and planning process to establish strong relationships with stakeholder groups so they can all have a sense of ownership in the final plan and work together on course corrections as they arise.
- *Set up regular check points.* Schedule at least two or three check-ins during the first year of implementation to get stakeholder reaction and suggestions for improvement. These can be in-person or virtual, but they will demonstrate to stakeholders that their input is valued and how you intend to follow up.
- *Report on your results.* After the first year of ESSA, publish a report on the lessons learned and how ESSA implementation can improve. Give credit to stakeholders who suggested improvement strategies you intend to adopt.
- *Create an advisory group but don't just rely on them to represent your stakeholders.* States should develop an advisory group that includes representatives of key stakeholder groups, but engagement with those communities should not end there. Continue to engage and communicate with larger groups of stakeholders to identify areas where improvements are needed and potential solutions.

If you're engaging…

Traditionally under-represented groups	▪ Some groups that have not been effectively engaged in the past may have low expectations for this process. Use the ESSA plan development as an opportunity to create two-way dialogue and build a reciprocal relationship that can lead to ongoing, meaningful collaboration.

Planning Tools

The tools on the following pages can be used to help you organize your thinking, clarify your timeline, identify your ambassadors and map out your engagement strategy. The tools include:

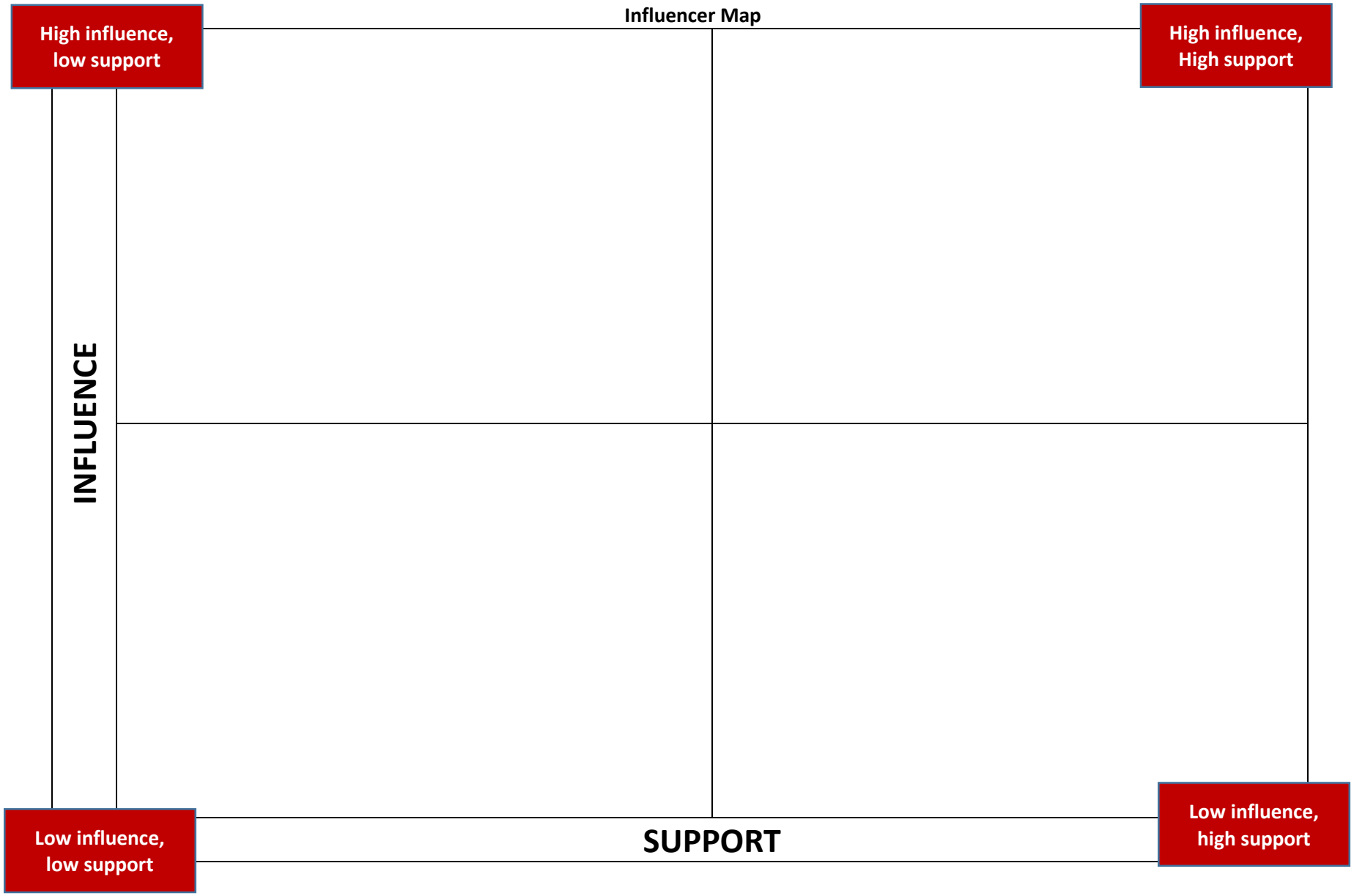
1. **Timeline.** Use this template to map out the milestones, meetings and decision points that are coming over the next year.
2. **Influencer Map.** Use this 2x2 grid to identify your key partners and influencers who support the SEA and have the most influence in the field and among stakeholders. The ones you place in the middle and top right (the ones with the most influence who are the most supportive of the work) are the ones who have the most potential to act as your ambassadors.
3. **Relationship map.** Once you have identified your ambassadors, add them to the grid, identify the stakeholders they can most easily reach and list their best strategies and assets.
4. **Action plan.** Use your timeline and relationship map to develop your action plan, detailing action steps, deadlines, owners, decision points and timeline. Planning is an iterative process, so develop this to be a living document that will be updated regularly.
5. **Stakeholder Engagement List.** This chart details which stakeholder groups states are required to engage for each ESSA program.
6. **Additional Resources.** These stakeholder engagement and outreach guides were created for other initiatives and organizations, but may offer advice for your specific circumstances.

Timeline (July 2016-Jan 2017)

	July 2016	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan 2017
OUTREACH	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
MEETINGS	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
MILESTONES	▪ Proposed federal Title I regs published, comment period begins	▪ 8/1: ESEA flexibility waivers expire ▪ (Aug/Sept) 2016-17 school year begins	▪	▪	▪ 11/8: Presidential election	▪ Final Title I regs published by the end of 2016	▪ 1/20: New president takes office ▪ New administration appointments made (ongoing)
DECISIONS	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪

Timeline (Feb-August 2017)

	Feb 2017	March	April	May	June	July	August
OUTREACH	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
MEETINGS	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
MILESTONES		▪	▪ (Spring 2017) States submit new ESSA plans to USED ▪ USED convenes peer review panels	▪	▪	▪	▪ (Aug/Sept) 2017-18 school year begins; states fully implement ESSA
DECISIONS	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪


Influencer Map
High influence, low support
High influence, High support
INFLUENCE
Low influence, low support
SUPPORT
Low influence, high support

Relationship Map

Use this table to identify who your most powerful influencers are best suited to reach. List the people or groups you plotted in the center and top right of your Influencers Map below, and check off the people or groups to whom they are the most closely tied. Lastly, use the column on the right to list out the tactics these influencers already use or could leverage to reach the stakeholders. Each SEA's list will look different, so use the blank columns to identify any other stakeholder groups that are unique to your state.

	Stakeholders												
Influencers	**Parents**	**Teachers**	**School Leaders**	**Disabilities Community**	**Civil Rights Community**	**English Language Learners**	**Governor**	**Legislators**	**Business Community**	**School Boards or Committees**			**Strategy/Vehicles/Approach**
Ex: PTA	X			X	X					X			Public meetings, newsletters, ties to minority community

Action Plan

Use this grid to frame your action plan.

Action	Owner	Deadline	Obstacles	Solutions	Notes

List of Stakeholders for ESSA Engagement

The stakeholders listed below are the ones that states are **required** to engage with under ESSA. **States should not stop there**, and should consider also inviting representatives of other stakeholder groups who can represent the best interests of your state.

Required Stakeholders For SEA Consultation, by ESSA Programs	Title I State Plans	Annual State Report Cards	Unused State School Improvement Set-Aside Funds	State Title I Reservation for Direct Student Services	Academic Assessments	State Title II Grants Applications	Local Uses of Title II Funds	Literacy For All Subgrants	English Language Learner Services	Activities Support Safe and Healthy Students	21st Century Community Learning Center Grants
State Policymakers and Agencies											
Governor	X										X
State Legislature	X										
State Board, If Applicable	X										
State Education Chief											X
State Licensing Body						X					
Health and Mental Health Agencies											X
Other Youth Development and Adult Learning Agencies											X
Other Before and After School Service Agencies											X
Early Childhood Education Agency								X			
Districts and School Staff											
Local Educational Agencies (LEAs)[6]			X		X	X	X			X	X
Specific LEAs (Rural, Urban, etc.)	X			X					X		
Teachers	X					X			X		X
Principals	X					X			X		
Specialized Instructional Support Personnel	X					X					
Paraprofessionals	X					X					
Administrators	X										
ELL Administrators									X		
Charter School Leaders, If Applicable	X					X					
Families and Communities											
Parents/Family	X	X				X			X		X
Students											X
Community Partners/Organizations						X			X		X
Indian Tribes, If Applicable	X										
Higher Education									X		
Educator Prep Programs						X					
Researchers									X		

[6] *ESSA defines an LEA as: "a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State..."*

Additional Resources

Case for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement
Partners for Each and Every Child, 2016

Communications and Engagement Assessment Rubric
Assessment Rubric State Facilitator's Guide
The Reform Support Network, 2013

Educator Evaluation Communications Toolkit
The Reform Support Network, 2013

From "Inform" to "Inspire": A Framework for Communications and Engagement
The Reform Support Network, 2013

Handbook for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement
Partners for Each and Every Child, 2016

Leading by Convening: A Blueprint for Authentic Engagement
The IDEA Partnership, 2014

Moving Toward Equity Stakeholder Engagement Guide
The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at AIR, 2014

Social Media Tips Sheet: Innovative Engagement
The Reform Support Network, 2014

Stakeholder Outreach and Sustainability Toolkit
BroadBandUSA, 2010

Start a Conversation: Questions PTA Advocates Should Ask About the ESSA Implementation
National PTA, 2016

State Tribal Consultation Policy Manual
National Indian Education Association, 2016

Tribal Consultation Policy
U.S. Department of Education, 2011