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*"In Consultation With..."*  
The Case for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement

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Partners *for*  
Each and Every Child



“The situation is dire, the agenda urgent. From parent associations to Capitol Hill, from classroom teachers to the White House—there is work to be done and passion to be spent by all of us who appreciate the stakes for our children and the nation’s future.”

*-Equity and Excellence Commission Report, 2013*

# The Case for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement

*The Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, enacted by President Johnson in 1965, and reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on December 10, 2015 by President Obama – emphasized the nation's foundational commitment to education as a civil right. And to that end, equity is a fundamental goal of ESSA; that is, taking focused action and protections towards the explicit goal of equal and excellent results for all students regardless of their economic, social or cultural contexts. Given the considerable flexibility for states in determining their priorities and approaches to ensuring equitable access and excellence, however, the stakes for our most vulnerable children are especially high.

ESSA's frequent and consistent call for stakeholder engagement throughout key stages of policy choice and implementation provides a significant opportunity for a new (if not revitalized) process of local democracy in public education and accountability.

As states consider their own contexts, needs and priorities, the voices and experiences of families, students, and communities will be instrumental to shaping the potential and efficacy of the new law. If states do not meaningfully engage families and community stakeholders while designing and implementing ESSA, we may miss a crucial opportunity to advance the interests of students who have been historically underserved and denied the full protections they are entitled to under federal law.

Each of the **Key Decision Points**  within the new law presents an opportunity for states to work with communities to design and implement an effective and equitable education system to best meet the needs of all students. State education leaders will need to develop and strengthen a comprehensive system of accountability and improvement with support from local stakeholders, including, but not limited to: **civil rights organizations, family and community groups, teachers and educator groups, organized labor and education personnel, school board members, researchers and advocacy organizations, elected officials, student groups, teacher educators and others from higher education, and the business community.**

This document examines why the stakes are high, why equity **MUST** drive accountability—and ESSA—decisions, and how an examination of stakeholder engagement promising practices and cautionary tales can help illustrate the need for efforts to be deliberate, strategic and ongoing.

**For detailed guidance on the Key Decision Points , equity questions, and mechanics of developing a robust stakeholder engagement plan under ESSA, see our *Handbook for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement: A Tool to Support State Education Agencies in Planning and Implementation of***



<sup>1</sup> A companion piece to this document titled [Handbook for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement](#) provides State Education Agencies (SEAs) with the framing, context, guidance, and tools to build and implement an equitable stakeholder engagement process that will support the collaborative development of state accountability plans required by ESSA.

# ESSA: The Stakes are High

Our shared expectation is that ALL schools will ensure ALL students are college and career-ready. To fulfill that expectation, we must commit to increasing equity and excellence in teaching, learning, and opportunity. Developing stronger accountability systems to realize that commitment requires that we thoughtfully and deliberately seek *input and support from a variety of stakeholder communities* and design a process grounded in the concept of *continuous improvement and shared responsibility*. In communities where there is comparably less engagement — particularly in communities with fewer fiscal resources and in communities facing significant challenges — efforts to improve systems often stagnate or reverse, leaving many students behind.

We know that in communities with historically less engagement, there is extraordinary urgency in changing these patterns of engagement. Because of the wide and persistent disparities in access to opportunity and educational attainment, **the stakes are high.**

**Our students**—In 2020, a majority of students will be children of color,<sup>i</sup> and of them, nearly a quarter will be poor. Today, children of color are more than twice as likely to be poor as white children with almost half of our black, Latino, and Native American children reading below basic proficiency. Among high school graduates, one in five do not meet the minimum standards for enlistment in the US Army.<sup>ii</sup> Black students are suspended at rates more than five times that of their white counterparts, and students with disabilities are suspended at twice the average rate.<sup>iii</sup>

**Our teachers**—Workforce shortages plague our schools and communities;<sup>iv</sup> churn and lack of strong sustained leadership hobble teachers in their work; many prospective teachers attend preparation programs irrelevant to the work they will be doing in the classroom, and then, professional development resources are not aligned to the actual needs of teachers and their students. Black and American Indian students are four times as likely as white students to be enrolled in a school with more than 20% first year teachers, and Latino students are three times as likely.<sup>v</sup>

**Our parents**—A recent poll found that 83% of Latino and 82% of black parents believe their child's education should prepare them to be college-ready.<sup>vi</sup> Parents also believed that they had a significant role in sharing responsibility for student success, and cited lack of family engagement among their highest concerns, along with insufficient funding for schools and inconsistent quality.

**Our schools**—When state budgets can't, or don't, hold up to their end of the bargain for kids, and when federal programs and enforcement mechanisms fail to ensure that states and district policies provide poorer schools with sufficient funding and other needed resources, as well as the know-how to use resources well, then resource and opportunity gaps inevitably lead to outcome gaps.<sup>vii</sup>

**Our democracy**—Democracy relies on an informed and engaged citizenry. When we fail to provide the necessary resources and supports to ensure the strength and sustainability of a strong public school system, we put this democracy at risk.

**Our economy**—While ensuring that all students in the United States receive access to equitable educational opportunities is a simple matter of fairness, it is also an economic and national security imperative. Recent studies have shown achievement gaps between black and Latino students and white students, account for \$310-\$525 billion in lost GDP (2-4%) with achievement gaps between poor students and their more affluent counterparts costing the United States losses of \$400-\$670 billion (3-5%). With increasing demographic shifts and a widening chasm between income levels, the magnitude of this impact will only rise.<sup>viii</sup>

The success and sustainability of efforts to improve educational excellence and equity, particularly with regard to our most vulnerable students and communities, **requires robust and thoughtful partnership between and among federal and state and local governmental agencies and stakeholders**, to address misconceptions, empower new voices, and ensure shared ownership for the reforms our schools need.

# Principles of a Systems Approach to High-Quality Stakeholder Engagement

In outlining several areas for meaningful stakeholder engagement, the ESSA legislation puts forth a firm belief in democratic decision-making, local control, and the expertise of local families, educators, practitioners, and advocates to understand the nuances of the educational challenges faced by students, schools, and districts, as well as the innovative and collaborative responses that can address persistently outstanding challenges of educational equity.

Beyond the shared values of democratic and distributed decision-making and collaborative process, the legislation presumes that SEAs, LEAs and schools have the capacity and resources to infuse participatory process and values throughout a complex chain of decision-making. Historically, however, such systems have had limited to no incentives or resources to engage a diverse array of stakeholders in understanding, addressing and evaluating educational challenges and solutions. 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 stakeholders and advisors as part of a communications or public relations strategy. These efforts have lacked the consistent leadership or sufficient resources — or worse, the moral imperative — to do more than comply with a bureaucratic mandate.

The following principles should guide the development of a comprehensive and integrated systems approach, so that stakeholder engagement is a seamless and indispensable facet throughout the multiple stages and arenas of state policy and planning.

## Principles of High-Quality Stakeholder Engagement:

**Hold  stakeholder engagement and pursuing equity and excellence as inseparable endeavors** that must be practiced and reflected throughout the full decision-making and implementation process.

- ▶ **Create systemic structures and expectations** to embed stakeholder engagement throughout the policy and planning process, in a regular and ongoing manner.
- ▶ **Prioritize increased equitable outcomes for all students throughout all policy and reform efforts**, considering both the immediate and cumulative impact on classrooms and school practice, and the improvement of key programs and activities.

**Include diverse stakeholders, with a commitment to engaging historically excluded voices.** Such a commitment goes beyond a more diverse invite list, and also considers the structures, norms, timelines, languages, and practices that may unintentionally elevate some voices over others.

- ▶ **Work with key community leaders and networks** to identify and prioritize opportunities for stakeholder engagement, not only to understand and identify program challenges, but also as part of decision-making processes on funding, accountability, supports, interventions, data reporting and assessment.
- ▶ **Assess local community histories, needs, and resources** to develop a map of stakeholders that considers their knowledge, background, and expertise to inform key decisions.
- ▶ **Invest in diverse channels and mechanisms** to build public awareness and solicit feedback. Actively anticipate and support stakeholders to best represent demographic, geographic, language, and political diversity and span a broad community of perspectives and experiences.

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**Support  stakeholder engagement that is well-informed**, by developing and distributing necessary background knowledge and preliminary thoughts about key decision points and implications for program, resource allocation, assessment and accountability.

- ▶ **Be intentional about making time and space** for diverse stakeholder learning and discussion throughout the process of designing, implementing, assessing, and refining reform efforts.
- ▶ **Engage communities** to review information and recommend and design improvements that reflect collaborative approaches towards building consensus.

**Focus on continuous improvement as an essential paradigm/framework** including reflection on key decisions and implementation, as well as the stakeholder engagement process itself.

- ▶ **Commit to transparent, evidence-based decision-making** including establishing and following clear and consistent decision-making processes and timelines.
- ▶ **Establish a cycle of identifying opportunities for improvement**, taking action through planning and implementation, and assessing impact to inform next steps.
- ▶ **Determine how collaboration and engagement will inform an on-going continuous improvement cycle**, regarding state ESSA plans and related state policy; ensure that stakeholder engagement generates input and insight at key reflection and decision points.
- ▶ **Adapt strategies, allowing them to evolve** based on new data, information, needs, and resources; remain fluid and flexible in response to stakeholder input.

**Seek to build consensus pragmatically; effective collaboration doesn't always mean full consensus.**

- ▶ **Strive to find common ground**, be willing to work across the aisle, and build on each other's expertise.
- ▶ **Commit to an understanding that the end product will result in some give-and-take** on all sides.

# Differentiated Roles, Promising Practices, and a Cautionary Tale for Stakeholder Engagement

**The promise of system-wide and cultural transformation regarding stakeholder engagement and collaboration will be incredibly difficult and tedious to realize without clear leadership, explicit attention, and nuanced implementation.**<sup>ix</sup> Specifically, the success of ESSA’s stakeholder engagement mandates will be no different unless we look to promising practices and cautionary tales of existing efforts to build, strengthen, and sustain a system, culture and infrastructure of stakeholder engagement and decision-making. Such a transformation requires vigilant attention to opportunities for engagement, as well as dedicated staffing, policy and resources, long-term investment and accountability, and a strongly held commitment to an iterative process of collective inquiry and reflection.

An informed and adaptive, mutually accountable stakeholder community does not happen overnight, and does require the attention and investment of multiple actors throughout the education policy and decision-making ecosystem. We must build the capacity of state and local education agencies to advance evidence-based, equity-focused pragmatic change. **We all have work to do.**

Promising Practices for Key Roles			
State Education Agencies	US ED	Philanthropy	Advocacy Organizations
<p>Make a strategic assessment of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A statewide vision and implementation plan for the engagement process</li> <li>• Stakeholders to be engaged – who, what, where, how</li> <li>• Existing mechanisms for engagement as well as gaps, particularly re: traditionally marginalized communities</li> <li>• Internal structures for engagement, including staffing, budget, resources, timelines/ processes, and relevant partnership opportunities</li> <li>• Materials for engagement to support informed conversations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarify through guidance effective examples of “meaningful consultation”</li> <li>• Monitor and support – ensure engagement is early, ongoing, open and responsive</li> <li>• Offer technical assistance – offer supports and best practices for a comprehensive approach to policy making and implementation</li> <li>• Enforce regulations – emphasize transparency throughout the process, including measurable outcomes</li> </ul>	<p>Invest in strengthening dedicated public and private infrastructure and staff capacity, including support for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State Education Agency’s engagement process - through direct partnership;</li> <li>• US ED’s role in monitoring, supporting and assisting meaningful stakeholder engagement;</li> <li>• Other core partners and grantees’ efforts to engage in that process; and</li> </ul> <p>Support evaluation and continuous improvement efforts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form alliances, coalitions and networks</li> <li>• Pool resources and find common ground</li> <li>• Help to inform stakeholders</li> <li>• Demand meaningful engagement that adheres to legal requirements and is executed in the spirit of continuous improvement</li> <li>• Take responsibility for ensuring a broad cross section of interests are represented</li> </ul>

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Promising Practices for Key Roles - For Additional Reference:			
State Education Agencies	US ED	Philanthropy	Advocacy Organizations
See Part B of this Handbook; Also, see CCSSO's <a href="#">Stakeholder Engagement Tool</a> for examples of SEA engagement strategies. Also see the Center for Greater Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research (AIR)'s <a href="#">Moving Toward Equity - Stakeholder Engagement Guide</a> .	In a letter to US ED, over 50 civil rights groups and aligned nonprofit organizations called for robust regulations on meaningful engagement in ESSA implementation. The letter can be found <a href="#">HERE</a> . Also see the Sen. Murray, Rep. Scott <a href="#">letter to US ED</a> urging “robust and multiple opportunities” to participate in ESSA implementation.	See the <a href="#">National Public Education Support Fund’s vision and values paper</a> , which emphasizes the need for a collaborative system where diverse groups of actors work with policymakers to create and sustain educational excellence.	See <a href="#">The Ohio Standard Coalition</a> for an example of a statewide coalition that brings together education, business, and community leaders committed to educational excellence and equity.

**Promising Practice: Strong and clear guidance in requiring stakeholder engagement to inform policy development – US Department of Education:** In 2014, US ED offered key guidance to states in developing their Educator Equity plans including: equity gap identification; likely causes of the identified equity gaps; steps to be implemented to eliminate the identified equity gaps; measures used to evaluate progress toward eliminating the identified equity gaps; public reporting on progress in closing the identified equity gaps; and the important role of engaging outside stakeholders to develop and implement the plan. In the interests of offering clear guidance and defining meaningful stakeholder engagement, US ED required that SEAs engage stakeholder groups as a part of the Educator Equity Plan development process. This played out in varying ways state to state.



**Promising Practice: Using data to inform stakeholders of key background knowledge and areas of for further attention – Georgia Department of Education:** In developing its 2015 Educator Equity Plan, the Georgia Department of Education (GA DOE) built a thorough outreach plan that incorporated public input sessions in 16 regional meetings throughout the state conducted by its Regional Education Service Agency (RESA). Stakeholder engagement around the plan was directly tied to the efforts already underway in the state and built upon the opportunities provided by the Race to the Top grant and the “Great Teachers and Leaders Project.”

Georgia’s thorough data analysis enabled it to rank regions by “variables of concern” around educator equity, and to identify specific districts where it needed to conduct additional root cause analyses (conducted via stakeholder meetings). While certain groups of stakeholders felt they received copies of the Plan with short turnaround time for feedback, the state was nevertheless proactive in not only sharing the plan, but creating mechanisms for incorporating stakeholder feedback, and envisioning mechanisms for continuing engagement, including the establishment of a “Virtual Advisory Group.”

In the case of Georgia, these initial data-informed stakeholder engagement efforts are only one component of a successful and sustained collaborative planning effort. With continued attention to the process and fidelity to implementation and reflection, robust engagement efforts may fulfill their potential to enact substantive change.



**Promising Practice: Convening diverse stakeholders to facilitate the development of a shared action agenda – Mississippi Department of Education:** As part of the Mississippi’s Educator Equity plan, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) invited over 400 representatives from districts, schools, and teacher, administrator, parent, and community groups to a discussion of the state’s educator equity challenges, the potential root causes of those challenges, and strategies to advance educator equity.

Implementation of those strategies has begun and the MDE has shown an ongoing commitment to the stakeholders who gave input. Indeed, The Mississippi Equity Lab held on March 29, 2016, featured a number of critical discussions about ensuring equitable access for students to high-quality educators. The day-long Lab brought district, school, and community stakeholders together as locally-based teams to identify their specific educator equity challenges, develop strategic opportunities for collaborative action, and consider what kinds of targeted support they need.

Among the commitments Equity Lab participants made to each other, they agreed to promptly re-convene district teams and the MDE to ensure progress on goals including:

- strengthening collaboration among districts and the MDE to better identify and locate or produce data to better understand local conditions;
- leveraging federal, state, and local funding for improved teacher support strategies in impacted districts;
- building partnerships with Institutions of Higher Learning, especially with regard to teacher preparation and teacher shortages;
- leveraging the expertise of regional and national partners to support teacher induction, mentoring efforts, and support for district leadership; and
- sharing research and resources on best practices.

In both Georgia and Mississippi, by framing stakeholder engagement in terms of strengthening an independent, ongoing system that supports effective input in decision-making to support the least powerful students and communities, states have made strides in developing a decentralized system of guidance and support for districts, schools, and stakeholders interested in advancing equity.



**Promising Practice: Codifying stakeholder engagement in its accountability and resource allocation system – California Department of Education:** Recently in California (CA), persistent advocacy coalitions, a progressive state agency, and decades of research-based ideas came together in the redesign of school funding and accountability for dollars spent, with specific emphasis and “weighted” fiscal support for high-needs students, those in foster care, learning English, and living in poverty. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and its district-led accountability system design, the Local Control Accountability

Plans (LCAPs), represented great promise for students and schools. Codified into this new system was a requirement for district-level stakeholder engagement in the formulation of each District's spending plan, Differentiated Roles, Promising Practices, and a Cautionary Tale for Stakeholder Engagement - continued

that included a district-analysis to understand student needs, corresponding programmatic supports and interventions, and associated budgets intended to meet proposed academic achievement goals for high-needs students. As described by Public Advocates, "at the heart of the new law is a basic bargain that in exchange for flexibility [from categorical mandates], districts would be transparent and accountable to local stakeholders through a rigorous community process." (p. 1)

**BUT a Cautionary Tale: Lack of transparency, follow-through and implementation fidelity in subsequent resource allocation:**

With California districts having had two years of developing their LCAPs in consultation with stakeholders, and with the increased budget flexibility of a weighted student funding formula in the LCFF, the state and community groups are looking to an initial assessment of the impact the new accountability and funding system has had on high-need students. One recent study of implementation offers an important lesson from one of CA's 1,100 school districts. Despite organized and active equity-focused groups participating in local stakeholder engagement efforts, budget analysis of this district's LCAP found that only 18% of the \$820 million (or \$145 million) in additional funding was actually set aside for specific, targeted investment in high-needs students. Without articulating a clear relationship between identified student needs and possible programmatic responses, the district chose reinstating positions cut during the recession without assessing if those positions were aligned to priorities identified by the LCAP process. Other analyses similarly found examples where districts either underspent targeted funds, or spent targeted funds on items without clear explanation of how these efforts would increase or improve services for the intended student groups.

Without the guidance of a consistent equity framework or explicit monitoring to ensure the prioritization of low-income and high-needs children throughout the decision-making process, even the most robust stakeholder engagement conversations around identifying needs have just begun to scratch the surface.

This cautionary tale highlights the complexity of a comprehensive system of decision-making towards equity goals. Engaging community members, students, parents, and educators in conversations to understand the education and other program needs of high-need students is an important beginning. However, a comprehensive sequence of budget and resource allocation, goal setting and impact evaluation, and implementation fidelity at the school and district level require vigilant attention to more than just an inclusive needs assessment conversation, and then separately, implementation of services at the classroom level. Instead, an effective stakeholder engagement process calls into question an interconnected set of actions that provide a clear through-line between and across programmatic, budget, and resource decision-making.

**When it comes to developing and sustaining a shared commitment to equitable outcomes for all students, gathering people across sectors to seek common ground is a valuable investment.** A meaningful process takes time and careful planning, but the end result has enormous potential, particularly in ensuring that the expertise and experience of diverse partners - including those that are traditionally less empowered to advocate on behalf of marginalized communities - are reflected in the final plan.

Building a coalition of partnerships and relationships will serve the state and broader community well on future equity initiatives and change efforts. For a step-by-step guide to help you in planning and conducting effective and meaningful conversations, please refer to our ***Handbook for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement: A Tool to Support State Education Agencies in Planning and Implementation of ESSA.***<sup>x</sup>

## Notes

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- i. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf>
- ii. [http://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ASVAB\\_4.pdf](http://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ASVAB_4.pdf)
- iii. [https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/federal-reports/are-we-closing-the-school-discipline-gap/AreWeClosingTheSchoolDisciplineGap\\_FINAL221.pdf](https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/federal-reports/are-we-closing-the-school-discipline-gap/AreWeClosingTheSchoolDisciplineGap_FINAL221.pdf)
- iv. <http://www.air.org/resource/teacher-workforce-snapshot-infographics>
- v. <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-teacher-equity-snapshot.pdf>
- vi. <http://educationpost.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Ed-Post-2015-Parent-Attitudes-Survey.pdf>
- vii. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/public-school-funding-and-the-role-of-race/408085/>
- viii. [http://mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/achievement\\_gap\\_report.pdf](http://mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/achievement_gap_report.pdf)
- ix. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/05/11/essas-success-requires-stakeholder-engagement.html>
- x. [http://partnersforeachandeverychild.org/P4\\_SE%20Handbook\\_53016.pdf](http://partnersforeachandeverychild.org/P4_SE%20Handbook_53016.pdf)