May 25, 2016

John B. King, Jr.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20202

Re: Recommendations for U.S. Department of Education on stakeholder engagement for ESSA Non-Regulatory Guidance

Partners for *Each and Every Child* (Partners *for*) is pleased to respond to the United States Department of Education's (ED) request for recommendations on non-regulatory guidance for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Partners *for* is an organization focused on advancing equity and excellence for all children in the United States' educational system. Using the recommendations in the Congressionally-commissioned Equity and Excellence Commission's final report - entitled *For Each and Every Child* - as a polestar for collaborative education reform, we advance equity in education by supporting and connecting non-partisan stakeholder communities around the country.

Given the considerable flexibility in ESSA for states in determining their priorities and approaches to ensuring equitable access and excellence, the stakes in the implementation of the law for our most vulnerable children are especially high. As states consider their own contexts, needs and priorities in ESSA implementation, the voices and experiences of families, students, and community will be crucial in protecting and advancing equity. Congress agreed as the new law explicitly includes 22 mentions of decisions and plans that State Agencies should make and develop "in consultation with" key stakeholder groups.

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 to which they are entitled under federal law. To this end, Partners *for* has created a set of **principles** for high quality stakeholder engagement to help guide states and their partners in these efforts.[1]

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[1] Please see Appendix A, on page 6 of this document.

Accordingly, this letter captures our recommendations for guidance ED should issue on stakeholder engagement at the state, local, and school levels. Partners *for* also submitted a letter to ED on January 21, 2016 containing our recommendations for proposed regulations to Title I. We encourage ED to issue regulations on the recommendations in that letter. In addition, we have incorporated those recommendations into this letter in the event ED chooses to offer non-regulatory guidance on these issues.

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, state and local governmental agencies and stakeholders. Regular and ongoing stakeholder engagement should be a systemic priority for states across all areas of ESSA implementation and other education efforts. The law's stakeholder engagement provisions are robust and appear across the Titles, implicating the need for states to build systemic structures for high quality stakeholder engagement, improving on existing efforts and mechanisms. One of the most significant provisions in the law is the requirement for states to conduct "meaningful stakeholder engagement" throughout.

ED should issue guidance on "meaningful consultation" with stakeholders, defining what constitutes a "meaningful" process, clarifying what activities should be included within "consultation," and indicating the breadth and scope of "stakeholders" that should be included in meaningful consultation.

State Education Agencies (SEAs) should be guided to include stakeholder groups in the planning and design phase of the stakeholder engagement process, to engage communities on an ongoing basis for the **development and** review of relevant information, and to make design and implementation improvements reflective of stakeholder feedback.

Defining a "Meaningful" process

ED should establish expectations, through clarifications and best practice examples, that SEAs should keep stakeholder groups 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. SEAs should focus on continuous improvement as an essential paradigm/framework for stakeholder engagement. This includes not only incorporating stakeholder feedback on key decisions into ongoing implementation decisions, but designing the stakeholder engagement process itself so that community-based

voices are consulted in early design and initial planning stages. Partners *for* would welcome the opportunity to share with ED further information on efforts in our 7 partner states to advance the quality and sustainability of their stakeholder engagement efforts.

In sum, guidance from the US Department of Education should encourage state agencies to develop a comprehensive and system-wide framework for intentional, strategic and meaningful stakeholder engagement that prioritizes underserved communities. Within that framework,[2] ED should guide SEAs to consider:

- Creating a sustainable ongoing infrastructure for stakeholder engagement throughout the state;
- Ensuring that stakeholders have the information and background they need to engage in an informed and meaningful way;
- Being intentional about making time and space for diverse stakeholder learning and discussion throughout the process of designing, implementing, assessing, and refining reform efforts;
- Engaging communities to review information and recommend and design improvements that reflect collaborative approaches towards building consensus;
- Creating feedback loops that provide opportunities for those voices typically left out of the engagement process to offer input.
- Committing to transparent, evidence-based decision-making including establishing and following clear and consistent decision-making processes and timelines;
- Establishing a cycle of identifying opportunities for improvement, taking action through planning and implementation, and assessing impact to inform next steps;
- Determining how collaboration and engagement will inform an on-going continuous improvement cycle for state ESSA plans and related state policy;
- Ensuring that stakeholder engagement generates input and insight at key reflection and ESSA decision points;
- Developing flexible strategies that can evolve based on stakeholder input, new data, information, and resources.

Defining "Consultation"

For ESSA to serve the interests of equity, state education agencies will need to be in robust, and ongoing, dialogue with local communities. In a state system with plural, distributed leadership

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[2] The Partners for Network (LINK) has developed a draft framework for SEAs to design, implement, and evaluate their stakeholder engagement efforts. An outline of that framework is included in Appendix B, on page 8 of this document.

and activity, local communities and their SEA can develop an infrastructure in which state- and locally-based education agencies and stakeholders coordinate efforts to anticipate, respond to, and prioritize the educational needs of the most underserved students. To ensure this, SEAs should develop a statewide vision and implementation plan for a robust, ongoing stakeholder engagement infrastructure, including:

- A list of stakeholders to be engaged, with information on how and where conversations with stakeholders will take place, the specific topics for engagement and any background information necessary, and how multiple methods will be used to support stakeholder engagement;
- An impact analysis of existing mechanisms for engagement, including an analysis of where existing mechanisms fall short with regard to the engagement of historically marginalized communities;
- Organizational and staffing details for engagement, including budget, resources, processes and timelines for implementation, and opportunities for partnership with relevant community-based organizations;
- Examples of substantive materials to support informed conversations across diverse groups.

Defining a Broad Scope for "Stakeholder"

SEAs should be guided to engage a diverse group of stakeholders throughout the ESSA implementation process, and to prioritize the engagement of historically **excluded voices.** This approach to stakeholder engagement should consider the structures, norms, timelines, languages, and practices that may unintentionally elevate some voices over others.

ED should guide SEAs to consider::
- Working 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;
- Assessing local community histories, needs, and resources, to develop a map of stakeholders that considers their knowledge, background, and expertise to key decisions.
- Investing in diverse channels and mechanisms to build public awareness and solicit feedback;

- Actively engage stakeholders across a broad span of demographic, geographic, language, and political perspectives and experiences.

Thank you for your attention to this. We look forward to continuing to partner with ED on matters pertaining to equity and ESSA implementation. If you have any questions, please contact Guy Johnson, our Senior Program Manager for Strategy, at guy@theopportuynityinstitute.org, or (510) 214-6786.

Sincerely,

Christopher Edley, Jr.
Chair, Partners for Each and Every Child
Co-founder, The Opportunity Institute

Appendix A: Principles of a Systems-Approach to High-Quality Stakeholder Engagement

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

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 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.

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.

Appendix B: Stakeholder Engagement Framework for State Education Agencies

The following framework is intended to guide SEAs to develop a thoughtful, comprehensive, and system-wide approach to meaningful and continuous stakeholder engagement.

STAGE 1: GETTING STARTED AND SETTING THE STAGE

Step 1.1: Identify an internal SEA team

Step 1.2: Create a "big-picture map"

Step 1.3: Identify SEA roles and stakeholder groups

Step 1.4: Identify internal capacity and diverse mechanisms for stakeholder engagement

Step 1.5: Articulate an approach to decision-making

STAGE 2: PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS AND PLANNING -- UNDERSTANDING THE OPPORTUNITY

Step 2.1: Translate ESSA Key Decision Points into concrete positions

Step 2.2: Prioritize the Key Decision Points and stakeholders for engagement

Step 2.3: Address stakeholder information and capacity gaps to avoid their exclusion or to prevent disengagement

Step 2.4: Outline a thoughtful set of mechanisms to engage stakeholders

Step 2.5: Develop a stakeholder engagement "ground game"

STAGE 3: INVESTING IN STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT PRIORITIES AND DESIGN

Step 3.1: Build the capacity of internal SEA staff ("Internal stakeholders")

Step 3.2: Determine the legal, regulatory, or organizational structure to support stakeholder engagement

Step 3.3: Ensure that engagement activities are executed with fidelity

STAGE 4: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AS A CORE COMPONENT OF ITERATIVE DESIGN

Step 4.1: Synthesize the information received from stakeholders and connect it back to Key Decision Points and positions

Step 4.2: Report out on synthesized information received during engagement

Step 4.3: Incorporating additional feedback received from stakeholders

STAGE 5. ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN FINALIZING, SUBMITTING, AND IMPLEMENTING

Step 5.1. Finalize the State Accountability Plan for submission

Step 5.2. Determine how the Stakeholder Engagement Strategy will be used moving forward

STAGE 6. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT – OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT