Equity & The Every Student Succeeds Act: The Organizer’s Packet

Core information for organizers to start taking action for school improvement under ESSA
To Begin: A Vision for Our Children

Our school communities have the potential to make sure all children have everything they need to succeed, including:

- **great teachers**, thoughtful school administrators, and other excellent support staff, as well as ongoing training to support continual learning for staff and leadership;

- **support for families**, including parent organizing and leadership, classes, and regular access to the school’s leadership and classrooms;

- **opportunities for high quality learning** for all children, birth through 12th grade;

- **access to nutrition and healthcare**, including healthy meals, physical education and recess, and mental health services;

- **positive discipline practices**, like Restorative Justice practices, reduced suspensions, or reduced presence of police in schools; and

- **advanced and creative coursework**, including implementing a culturally relevant and culturally responsive curriculum, adding courses like arts and civics, or providing internship opportunities.

The *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* is just one tool for us to refocus our efforts to move toward equity and justice for all students: education is a human right!
Who is Part of a School Community?

All leaders — from students to parents, care-givers, and families to advocates to education agencies — should be involved in making your school a place where all children can learn and grow.

The School Community:

- Parents, families, care-givers, mentors, and peers
- In-school staff, health professionals, and youth program leaders
- Students
- Community centers, local businesses, health organizations, and programs for families and youth

The Broader Education Community:

Outside of your school community, national, state, and local education governing agencies and advocates are supporting schools and students. Use their resources!
What is the Every Student Succeeds Act?

- The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) is the United States' national policy for public education from pre-K through grade 12.
- **ESSA provides states with funding** to support students, teachers, and schools — for things like services for low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities [and/or those with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)].

What’s New in ESSA?

- ESSA gives state and local governments more **flexibility** to decide how to measure student performance and school quality. For example, ESSA requires that all states adopt “challenging academic standards,” but allows states to choose what those standards will be.
- In exchange for that flexibility, ESSA requires that state and local government leaders **engage** with their communities to make decisions that best fit their needs.
- ESSA has kept in place many important policies and opportunities that matter to our country as a whole, including tracking how students are doing academically, looking at the gaps in performance among groups of students, and **making sure that those who need support receive it.**

What is a State ESSA Plan?

- The first decisions under ESSA have happened at the state level, where state leaders engaged with the larger state education community to develop state ESSA plans, which outline how states plan to meet the requirements of the law. **These state ESSA plans include:**
  - Standards for what children should learn in each grade
  - Assessments for finding out if children have met those standards
  - Long-term goals for schools and students
  - A way to measure if schools are on track to meet those goals
  - A system of support for all schools, especially those that are struggling the most

What Does ESSA Mean for My School?

- Every state’s ESSA plan is required to support schools and districts as they write their own local plans for **school improvement** and plans for **use of federal funds**. These local ESSA plans will describe how schools will support students and improve over time.
- In some states, only schools that are identified by the state as lowest performing will be required to submit plans for school improvement. **All schools** that receive federal funding must submit applications for those funds.
- Under ESSA, all local ESSA plans **must** be written in consultation with families and communities — called “stakeholder engagement” — and should be designed to support **education equity.**
A Timeline of ESSA’s Local Impact

All states have submitted their ESSA plans to the U.S. Department of Education, following two years of working with communities to answer the important questions asked in ESSA. Decisions made by the state will now be implemented at the local level. **What can you expect?**

- **April/May 2017 or September/October 2017**
  States submitted their ESSA plans.

- **Starting School Year 2017-18**
  Schools and districts collect data/information about schools and students. States communicate with the state education community about expectations.

- **By Spring 2018**
  U.S. Department of Education reviews and approves ESSA state plans.

- **June 2018 (and each year)**
  Districts submit applications for federal funds (e.g. Title I) to the state.

- **End of School Year 2018-19**
  States identify schools for “Support & Improvement” based on the state rating system.

- **Summer 2019**
  Schools must communicate their ratings to families/communities.

**School Year 2019-20, ongoing:**

**School Improvement**

Districts and schools engage with their communities and write and implement local improvement or strategic plans.

**Find out More From Your State**

Your state will have more information about when schools will be identified under the law for “Support and Improvement” (lowest performing schools) and what that means for you and your school and district. Find out more in your state’s ESSA Plan and on your state’s website. You can also work with a local organization to learn more!
School Improvement Planning Under ESSA

What Is School Improvement?

→ **School improvement** is the process of learning about a community and working to make it better for all students. **School improvement means student success.**

→ School improvement requires that district and school administrators and communities — including students and families — **work together.**

### 3 Ways Your School Is Planning for School Improvement

1. **Support and Improvement Plans**
   - ✅ **ESSA Says:** Required for schools identified by the state as low-performing
   - ✅ **Learn More:** Check out your state’s ESSA plan

Find out if your school has been identified as low performing — called “Comprehensive Support and Improvement,” “Targeted Support and Improvement,” or “Additional Targeted Support and Improvement” schools under ESSA — by checking your school’s report card, starting in Summer 2019. You can find report cards on your state education department’s website.

2. **Funding Applications & Consolidated Local ESSA Plans**
   - ✅ **ESSA Says:** Required by all districts with schools receiving federal funds
   - ✅ **Learn More:** Check out the US ED website: ed.gov/ESSA

3. **Local Strategic Planning**
   - ✅ **ESSA Says:** Not required for all districts or schools in all states
   - ✅ **Learn More:** Check out your state’s ESSA plan or state strategic plan

What this Means for Your School

→ These three processes may be three parts of the same document or be entirely separate efforts. No matter the format, **they should be connected and aligned.**

→ Keep in mind that **school improvement processes are different school to school and district to district,** as well as for charter schools, alternative schools, and schools in “turnaround,” which may include mayor, governor, or other state office involvement.

For more, check out our fact sheet: School Improvement Under ESSA
It’s Your Right to Be Involved

What is Stakeholder Engagement?

→ Under ESSA, state and local officials are required to engage with community members around decisions that impact schools and students. Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement is a process of communicating, learning, and partnering with school communities that acknowledges the unique needs and strengths of those involved.

What is Equity?

→ All students have the right to schools that are safe, healthy and nurturing environments where every student has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

→ Some students need more and different resources than others — resources like funding, excellent educators and mentors, positive behavioral support, and opportunities for engagement.

→ Equality means that all students get the same resources. Equity means that all students have the resources they need to be successful:

Equality

Equity

Justice: No Barriers

→ We must push for schools that promote equity for all students, including low-income students, students of color, English learners, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities.

Engagement for Equity:

→ All community members have the right to take part in decision-making to improve the schools they serve and that serve them. It is essential that local administrators and leaders move away from simply informing stakeholders about decisions, and move toward involving a diverse, inclusive group of school community members in active leadership and decision-making.

For more on engagement, check out What Does an Engaged School Community Look Like?
Getting Involved in School Improvement

These steps are part of every school improvement process. Remember: This is your school community — You can be a part of every step!

1. Learn & Share
   Share Your Story
   Assess Need
   Ask Questions

2. Set Goals
   What Does Success Look Like?

3. Make a Plan
   Decide What Matters Most & Choose The Right Supports

4. Write it Down
   Write it in the School Handbook, Local ESSA Plans, Funding Applications, and Halls of Your School

5. Make it Happen
   Organize Volunteer Work

6. Evaluate
   What Needs to Change?

7. Make Changes to Get Better
   How is it Going?

Check out our fact sheet on Needs Assessments
Check out Examples of meaningful engagement in action from New York, Ohio, and Massachusetts
Check out Improve Your School: What to Advocate
Check out Improve Your School: Where to Write it Down

For a deeper dive with school community members, check out our fact sheet: School Improvement Under
1. Learn and Share
Find out how your school and school community are doing and share that information with your peers and larger community

Where to Start:

✓ Check out your school’s report card. Report cards are available online and can usually be found on your state education department website. Report cards contain information about your school and district that is collected statewide, like demographic data about students.

✓ Find more information about your district and state online through: the federal Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC); national foundations, like the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Kids Count Data Center; and advocacy groups like the Education Trust and the Dignity in Schools Campaign. You can also submit a Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, request at foia.gov. This is a way to ask for any public information from your government officials.

✓ Build coalitions and collaborative relationships to build up the community’s voice. This helps to create an environment for sharing.

✓ Help to package and distribute information to families and students: distribute flyers; develop email or social media campaigns; or host a Q&A with your school community.

Add your own action steps:

✓

Moving Forward:

✓ Information should be collected, aggregated, and analyzed regularly. Your school will collect data annually, but that should not limit you. You can affect what information is collected, when, and how to make sure it is useful and accurate by connecting community members with school officials and staff, and by making information digestible. As you advocate for change, advocate for accurate and actionable information!

Include Students!

Remember that in order to best serve students, students themselves must be included in the conversation!

Check out educationdive.com/news/schools-creating-new-structures-to-encourage-student-voice/509849/ for examples of how communities are doing this!

Check out our fact sheet on Needs Assessments for more information about how school leaders “Learn More”!
2. Set Goals

Decide what you want your students and school communities to learn, experience, and achieve

Where to Start:

✓ Look in your state’s ESSA plan for state goals for all students and student subgroups (e.g. low-income students). Help your community understand how these goals apply to your school.

✓ Co-host family input meetings to share the state goals, as well as and the school goals (look for these in your school handbook) and update them to better reflect what the school community wants.

✓ Help community members to turn their broad vision into actionable next steps for a school to take and help school and district administrators connect current data to long-term goals.

✓ Keep your goals simple and easy to communicate.

✓ Help community members articulate their values so that the goals you create together reflect what the community cares about. Again, be sure to include students!

Add your own action steps:

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Moving Forward:

✓ Your goals can and should change over time. Support regular meetings to revisit and update your goals to accommodate changes in your school’s performance and the needs of your students.
3. Make a Plan
Find out what programs and services are available to students and communities (in and out of school) and choose strategies that will work based on your goals.

Where to Start:

✓ Learn what strategies are available and relevant to your school community. Organizations like the Intercultural Development Research Association (idra.org), Evidence for ESSA (evidenceforessa.org), the Dignity in Schools Campaign (dignityinschools.org), Understood (understood.org), the Center for Parent Information and Resources (parentcenterhub.org/category/topics/eseaessa), and others can also help!

✓ Work with local community groups and national advocates to build a menu of possible programs and strategies for school improvement, and speak with families, in-school staff, and other community members about their vision for how these programs might work.

✓ Engage directly with school and district administrators to push for the practices and policies you want.

✓ Collaborate with other community organizers to raise funds and implement programs outside of schools (e.g. after school literacy workshop at your local library).

Add your own action steps:

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Moving Forward:

✓ While you must give strategies time to be implemented fully and correctly, it is important to also update your plans over time to meet the changing needs of your students. Ask for regular feedback about what’s working and stay informed about new and innovative ideas by continuing to build relationships with advocates, researchers, school staff, and families.

Check out Improve Your School: What to Advocate for for more ideas!
4. Write it Down

Once you have determined which strategies to focus on, seek out and help school and district officials to write down these ideas into action.

Where to Start:

✓ Your school community’s goals and priorities, as well as the strategies used to improve, should be written in the places that matter most: funding applications, local strategic plans or school improvement plans (ESSA), and school handbooks or mission statements (like on the school website). Write sample language and meet with school and district officials to make sure this happens!

✓ Help to ensure that priorities match budgets by working with your local school board.

✓ Talk to other families, students, and the school’s leadership to find out what funding is most needed and help school and community leaders secure additional grants for ambitious projects.

✓ Write down the process! Community members that helped to shape the plans will want to see it documented, and new families and community members will see that their voices count!

Add your own action steps:

✓

Moving Forward:

✓ Make sure that policies, vision, and budgets are aligned and updated regularly.

✓ Remember that there are many documents that can be edited to support the goals and describe plans, and that changes should always be documented so that school leaders can be held accountable to their promises.

✓ It can also be helpful to put up flyers or posters inside schools to reinforce values and remind communities of their plans and goals.

For more about what you can affect in writing, check out our resource Improve Your School: Where to “Write it Down”
5. Make it Happen

Recruit and inform community members and work together to implement the programs and strategies that you have chosen.

Where to Start:

✓ As with every step in this process, see yourself as an organizer. Help new community members be a part of the process by sharing what you have done to-date and helping them to see how they can be a part of the process moving forward.

✓ Show up on school campuses to take tours, talk with students and staff, and to see the school facilities. Help students to know that their community is present and caring.

✓ Volunteer or work at the school site: Ask your school administrators what would be most helpful or offer your talents directly (e.g. work with a teacher, volunteer as an assistant coach, or help to decorate the teachers’ lounge with relevant literature each month).

✓ Join your school’s leadership teams like school site councils, stakeholder engagement teams, teacher leadership committees, etc. If a team is full or does not exist, consider creating a peer leadership role for yourself or others to develop a stronger voice and a body ready for action where needed.

✓ Work together. The strongest coalitions are intersectional - demonstrate solidarity for our human right to education through collective action!

Add your own action steps:

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Moving Forward:

✓ Engagement, like organizing, is not one-and-done. Our students need sustained support to continue to meet their varied and changing needs. Commit to staying involved and help others to do the same.


For examples of Meaningful Engagement in Action, read stories of success in New York, Ohio, and Massachusetts.
6. Evaluate
Measure how strategies or programs are working (or not working)

Where to Start:

✓ Find a trusted messenger to give you the information you are looking for. Program leaders (e.g. school nurse, counselor, or social worker) may have the most recent and relevant information about attendance, involvement, and outcomes.

✓ Look at data from multiple months or years to find trends in improvement. Be honest about what is and is not working.

✓ Share out what you learn to other families and community members by making the data easy to understand and present at meetings and events where families, students, and community members can ask questions about it.

Add your own action steps:

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✓
✓

7. Make Changes to Get Better
Make efforts over time to change and improve

Where to Start:

✓ Set aside time to visit schools, talk with other students, families, and staff, and make an effort to build your understanding over time.

✓ Organize community meetings to review new information and data and discuss any changes and what improvements are needed, be involved in recruitment efforts for new staff, hold or take part in trainings for existing staff, and keep your community up to date with new research, etc.

✓ Help to connect families and school staff with the right change-makers going forward.

✓ Make sure that it is clear to all community members when and how to engage. Help to connect process to outcomes: show what is working over time and help community members to support those successful efforts.
Find more Resources at partnersforeachandeverychild.org/engageforedequity