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ESSA's Success Requires Stakeholder Engagement

By **Martin J. Blank & Kent McGuire**

The Every Student Succeeds Act returns significant management authority over K-12 education to the state and local school district levels. While the details for implementing this new federal law, known as ESSA, are still falling into place, this is a time in which garnering input from everyone with a stake in the law is key.

ESSA does not explicitly reference stakeholder engagement, but it is crucial, in our view, to its successful implementation. We are pleased that the Council of Chief State School Officers is encouraging its members to craft processes to listen carefully and respond to the wide array of groups with a stake in our education system. Grassroots organizing entities and a wide range of advocacy groups and service organizations want their voices heard in the state, local, and school planning mandated by ESSA. There wasn't much widespread engagement in national education law when the law's predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act, was adopted by Congress in 2001. So how do we increase the likelihood that we have genuine engagement this time around?

One of the challenges is figuring out what genuine stakeholder engagement means. The more widely accepted definition of "stakeholder engagement" is the process by which an organization involves people who may be affected by the decisions it makes or can influence the implementation of its decisions. But Margaret Wheatley, the renowned leadership and management expert, put it differently with her first principle for growing healthy communities: "People will support what they create."

Thinking about stakeholder engagement in this way is pivotal to moving beyond the narrow accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind, a law which assumed that educators alone could ensure that every young person thrived. Genuine engagement broadens the constituency for public education to include a much wider range of people and organizations, some of whom we enumerate below. If we want support for effective implementation of ESSA and shared responsibility for ensuring that all students succeed, we need a much broader view of stakeholder engagement than we have experienced in the past.



—Richard Mia for Education Week

Policymakers, administrators, and educators at all levels need to create opportunities for people and organizations that are both supportive and critical of public education to participate in ESSA. Planning should be seen not as the domain of a single group of individuals sitting around a table, but as a dynamic process that intentionally engages diverse stakeholders whose views are really listened to and considered from multiple perspectives.

Here are four principles to guide stakeholder engagement:

Inclusion. Engage a wide range of people and organizations with a stake in education to recognize the value of diverse perspectives.

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

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

Focus on results. Use engagement as a steppingstone toward building long-term partnerships that can help school systems get results that matter—from improved attendance and school climate to more extensive parent and student engagement.

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Which groups should be engaged in ESSA implementation?

- **Educators.** The new law is most specific about the importance of involving educators, explicitly naming teachers, principals, school leaders, paraprofessionals, specialized instructional-support personnel, charter school leaders, and administrators.
- **Parents.** The law also requires parent voice. School leaders will want to include well-established organizations like the PTA to **engage parents affiliated with education advocacy groups**, parent-leadership programs, and disability groups. The key is finding organizations or groups that help parents develop the skills to communicate their concerns and interests while also providing the necessary support to keep their constituents well informed.
- **Students.** At the secondary school level, young people must have a voice in ESSA planning. Look for students who are involved in **youth-organizing initiatives** or have participated in programs that teach them leadership skills. Listening to recent high school graduates as well as high school dropouts will also yield important information.
- **Community-based organizations.** Affiliates of national groups like the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the YMCA, 4-H, and Metropolitan Family Services with grassroots expertise in youth development and family support have valuable relationships with immigrants, English-language learners, and children and families of color.
- **Faith-based institutions.** Churches, synagogues, and mosques are filled with caring adults who can help address young people's basic needs, such as hunger and a lack of books at home, and serve as tutors and mentors.
- **Colleges and universities.** These institutions offer the expertise from within their schools of education, as well as opportunities for student internships, needs assessments, and action research that can address specific school and community issues such as food deserts and student mobility.
- **Municipal leaders.** These individuals have bully pulpits and often control programs serving

youths and their families, which could better align the work of public agencies—physical and mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice—that they finance.

• **United Way organizations, community foundations, corporate funders, and other philanthropic groups.** These groups involve local community leaders and funder programs in addition to collective-impact efforts that can unite a community together to support young people and public education.

Engaging all of these stakeholders is by no means easy, and many public school districts have limited capacity to do so successfully. But there are community groups, local consultants, and other intermediaries who know

how to mount effective stakeholder-engagement processes. Their expertise can be marshaled.

What is most vital is that education leaders at all levels recognize and act on the belief that people will support what they create—that engaging an array of stakeholders in an inclusive and sustained way will not only lead to better ESSA plans with strong public support, but also to the success of more young people.

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