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Key Policy Letters Signed by the Education Secretary or Deputy Secretary

June 23, 2016

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for the work you are doing to transition to the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which President Obama signed into law on December 10, 2015, and which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The reauthorized law replaces the one-size-fits-all approach of its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; creates a new Federal-State partnership that provides greater flexibility for States and districts; and supports educational equity for all children to help prepare them for college and careers. I look forward to continuing to work with you and your team to realize the goal of the new law—to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality well-rounded education.

As President Obama noted when he signed the ESSA into law, we know that the law's real impact on children depends on high-quality implementation at every level. At the Federal level, we are committed to supporting States, districts, and Indian Tribes to improve opportunity for all students, invest in local innovation, build evidence on what works, ensure transparency, and protect students' civil rights. To carry out this responsibility, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) has sought input from a diverse group of stakeholders, including holding more than 200 meetings in locations spanning the country from Washington State to Florida, receiving comments from over 700 organizations and individuals, and consulting with Indian Tribes. These stakeholders include parents and educators, principals and other school leaders, State and district officials, business groups, and civil rights groups. We now are working hard to incorporate their feedback into our efforts to effectively and successfully implement the ESSA.

The purpose of this letter is to highlight the importance and utility of stakeholder engagement as States and local school districts transition to and, eventually, implement the ESSA, and to provide guidance, resources, and examples of stakeholder engagement for States and districts to consider. Many of you are already beginning your work with this in mind, and I appreciate that you are approaching planning and implementation in the spirit of true collaboration --- ensuring diverse stakeholders are at the table from the start. As you know, meaningful and ongoing stakeholder engagement helps ensure that stakeholders are able to provide feedback and inform continuous enhancement of State and local strategies to improve student outcomes and meet State-established performance goals. It also produces valuable information that will help States and districts design the best possible education systems for students, and increases public buy-in throughout the stages of implementation.

On May 31, 2016, the Department published a notice of proposed rulemaking

(https://web.archive.org/web/20160626103627/https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2016/05/31/2016-12451/elementary-and-secondary-education-act-of-1965-as-amended-by-the-every-student-succeeds?utm_content=header&utm_medium=slideshow&utm_source=homepage)^[1] on accountability, State plans, and data reporting.^[2] Although many ESSA requirements do not take effect until the 2017-2018 school year, it is not too early for States and districts to begin engaging with stakeholders on how they will ultimately implement the new law.^[3] Meaningful stakeholder engagement starts at the beginning of the process, when initial planning is getting started; not at the end, when a plan is nearing completion.

For States and districts preparing for stakeholder engagement, the Department recommends that, as a starting point, they design their engagement strategies to include representatives of the many stakeholders affected by the law, including the professionals who will implement policies, representatives of all students, including subgroups of students, and representatives of families affected by the law. Specifically, the Department recommends engaging in a meaningful way with stakeholders including:

- The Governor or appropriate officials from the Governor's office;
- Members of the State legislature;
- Members of the State board of education (if applicable);
- Representatives of Indian Tribes;^[4]
- Mayors, local school board members, and other local elected officials;
- Teachers from geographically diverse areas (urban, suburban, rural and tribal areas) who serve different grade levels (e.g. early education, elementary school, secondary school) and who are serving the diverse students served by the law, including students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, English learners, and students with disabilities;
- Principals from geographically diverse areas who are representative of the diverse set of schools served by the law;
- Representatives of districts from geographically diverse areas that are representative of the diverse set of districts served by the law;
- Parents from geographically diverse areas who are representative of *all* students served by the law, including:
 - Parents of students from subgroups identified in the law;
 - Parents of students from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds;
 - Parents of students with disabilities;
 - Parents of migrant and immigrant families; and
 - Parents of English learners;
- Related service professionals, paraprofessionals, and specialized instructional support personnel;
- Charter school leaders, if applicable;
- Community-based organizations;

- Civil rights organizations, including those representing the interests of students with disabilities, English learners, students of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and other historically underserved students;
- Appropriate private school officials;
- Institutions of higher education;
- Early childhood education leaders, including the directors of Head Start programs;
- Employers and business organizations;
- Students in secondary school; and
- The general public.

Supporting High-Quality Stakeholder Engagement and Removing Barriers to Genuine Stakeholder Engagement

Generally, the Department recommends that States and districts design processes that allow stakeholders the opportunity to provide meaningful feedback throughout the development of plans and policies related to ESSA implementation as well as throughout the implementation of the law. To facilitate continuous feedback, States and districts should develop and support high-quality systems of engagement and remove systemic barriers that could prevent meaningful and broad engagement. In particular, States, districts, and schools should seek to enhance participation by:

- Holding meetings or hearings at varying times during the day, including after the work or school day or on the weekends and, if possible, offering child care, so that working parents, teachers, school leaders, and other professionals are best able to participate;
- Holding multiple meetings or hearings across the State or district, rather than only in the State capital or district headquarters, which can limit the ability of stakeholder groups from across the State to participate;
- Ensuring meetings or committees include a broad range of stakeholder voices, including those who have been traditionally left out of such conversations;
- Facilitating broad participation beyond the representatives that will be attending the meetings or hearings in person (for example, by working with trusted stakeholders to gather input from other stakeholders who may not be able or inclined to attend a hearing);
- Making publicly available the name and contact information of officials and stakeholders who will be working on State implementation;
- Allowing all stakeholders who are participating in meetings or hearings to provide substantive input;
- Providing accommodations and supports to ensure meetings or hearings are accessible (e.g., translators, interpreters, materials in alternative formats for use by persons with disabilities); and
- Ensuring transparency on the process, timeline, and opportunities to engage at different levels of policy development by providing advance notice and clear descriptions of the opportunities for feedback on implementation of the new law, including by sharing information on the State's website.

In general, the Department encourages you to provide multiple and ongoing opportunities for engagement from policy development through implementation. Engagement does not end when States and districts move from the initial input phase into the policy development stage of the process. Not only does an open process help create better policy that serves the needs of all students, but a transparent and inclusive atmosphere is conducive to creating buy-in from the public, which is foundational to successful implementation.

Throughout all stages of policy development and implementation, continuous feedback is essential to creating buy-in from stakeholders. As States and districts hold public meetings, draft policies, and ultimately make decisions about how they will implement the law, it is beneficial to provide updates to stakeholders. States and districts should think through a communications plan that identifies who needs to be informed, at what stages, and how they are best reached.

Resources

A number of resources may provide help in the development of a meaningful stakeholder engagement plan, including “Let’s Get This Conversation Started: Strategies, Tools, Examples and Resources to Help States Engage with Stakeholders to Develop and Implement their ESSA Plans” (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160626103627/http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2016/ESSA/CCSSO%20Stakeholder%20Engagement%20Guide%20FINAL.pdf>) from the Council of Chief State School Officers.^[5] That publication, developed in partnership with over 15 organizations,^[6] provides guidance to assist with the planning and execution of stakeholder engagement strategies, and gives examples to help States with engagement at all stages of policy development, design, and implementation. The guide also provides best practices on the dissemination of information from States to the public in an open and fair manner.

The Communications and Engagement Assessment Rubric (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160626103627/http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/communications-and-engagement-assessment-rubric.pdf>), developed as part of a Stakeholder Communications and Engagement Community of Practice supported by the Department’s Race to the Top Reform Support Network, is a tool to help States assess their current efforts to communicate and engage with stakeholders and consider options for improvement.^[7]

In 2013, the Department released a framework for designing family engagement initiatives that build capacity among educators and families to partner with one another to promote student success. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160626103627/http://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf>) is designed to lay out the goals and conditions necessary to achieve effective family engagement efforts that are linked to student achievement and school improvement. This resource could help States and districts think about how to partner with parents and families during implementation. Another useful tool, *Leading by Convening: A Blueprint for Authentic Engagement* (https://web.archive.org/web/20160626103627/http://nasdse.org/DesktopModules/DNNspot-Store/ProductFiles/237_3acc0b8e-42c8-40ad-91c0-6a7672bfb224.pdf), was developed through the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services’ investment in the IDEA Partnership Project. This manual provides a guiding framework and useful tools for creating partnerships across a variety of stakeholders to ensure meaningful changes in practice to meet a State’s long-term goals.

A robust communications plan leverages relationships with stakeholder groups and their members to reach a broader audience; provides clear and concise information in an easily understandable format that is, to the extent practicable, in a language that families and other stakeholders can understand; upon request by a person with a disability, is provided in an alternative format accessible to the individual; and reaches people where they are by delivering information through multiple communications vehicles, including through digital media. The Reform Support Network shared resources and best practices (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160626103627/http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/stakeholder-communications-social-media.html>) from Race to the Top States for social media use, which may contain information that is useful for all States.

Conclusion

I appreciate all the hard work you have under way in preparing for the shift to the ESSA. I believe that the ESSA provides a framework for improving education systems across the country. To make that a reality, we all need to work together and include all of our stakeholders in the transition to and implementation of the ESSA. The suggestions and resources in this letter are not meant to be an exhaustive list but to provide a starting point for States and districts as they consider how to begin meaningful engagement at the beginning of implementing the new law. For more information on the ESSA, visit <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/index.html> (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160626103627/http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/index.html>). Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to your contact in our Office of State Support.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to improving educational outcomes for all students. I look forward to our continued partnership as we move ahead with this critical work.

Sincerely,

/s/

John B. King, Jr.

Footnotes

1. Additional information on the notice of proposed rulemaking can be found at: www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/index.html. [[Return to text](#)]
2. In particular, the proposed regulations would emphasize that, for consultation to be meaningful, it must include a diverse, representative group of stakeholders; be transparent; and take place at multiple points during the design, development, and implementation of the State's plan. [[Return to text](#)]
3. Note that the stakeholder engagement that is the subject of this letter does not address all of the requirements for consultation in the ESSA. For example, sections 1117(b) and 8501(c) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA, specifically require a school district or other eligible entity to engage in timely and meaningful consultation with appropriate private school officials before providing equitable services to eligible private school students, teachers, and parents. [[Return to text](#)]
4. Note that a new provision in the ESEA requires that certain school districts—those with 50 percent American Indian/Alaska native student enrollment, or that receive a Title VI (Indian Education) formula grant from ED in excess of \$40,000—must consult in a timely and meaningful way with local Indian Tribes prior to submission of a local plan or application under any ESEA-covered program or Title VI. (20 U.S.C. §7918.) [[Return to text](#)]
5. This information is provided for the reader's convenience; it is not an exhaustive list of materials to which a State may refer when developing and implementing a stakeholder engagement plan. The Department does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of outside information. Reliance on these materials does not guarantee that a State is meeting its statutory requirements. Further, the inclusion of information, such as addresses or Web sites for particular items, does not reflect their importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered by these organizations. Note that, although some of these resources were designed specifically for Race to the Top grantees, or to aid in the implementation of special education programs, the Department believes that the information they contain may be useful more generally to all States and districts. [[Return to text](#)]
6. The American Association of School Administrators, The School Superintendents Association, American Federation of Teachers, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Center for Learning Disabilities, National Education Association, National Governors Association, National Indian Education Association, National Parent Teachers Association, National School Boards Association, National Urban League, Partners for Each and Every Child. [[Return to text](#)]
7. Additional resources can be found at: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/resources.html#sce> (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160626103627/http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/resources.html#sce>). [[Return to text](#)]

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Loan Servicers (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160626103627/https://studentaid.ed.gov/repay-loans/understand/servicers?src=ft#who-is-my-loan-servicer>)

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