

Let's Continue this Conversation:

**How to Turn New Stakeholder Connections into
Long-Term Relationships**

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The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

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COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

Carey Wright (Mississippi), President-Elect

Chris Minnich, Executive Director

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Council of Chief State School Officers
One Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20001-1431
Phone (202) 336-7000
Fax (202) 408-8072
www.ccsso.org



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Let's Continue This Conversation: How to Turn New Stakeholder Connections into Long-Term Relationships

Your state education agency (SEA) has spent the past few years actively engaging with stakeholders to inform the development of your state's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan. Now that the plan has been submitted, and the time has come to turn the focus to implementation, the engagement can stop, right?

Wrong. Your state has sent an important message to stakeholders over the past 12 months: Their voices – including those of community leaders, diverse families that include families of color, non-English speakers and parents of students with disabilities - count, and there are ways for them to continue to not just get information from the state, but to ask questions, provide input and generate new ideas to help shape the state's public schools. Whether your state's past engagement efforts involved webinars, town hall forums, surveys, advisory committees or all of the above, now is not the time to grind it all to a halt. Continued active engagement with stakeholders will only help ensure the success of each state's ESSA plan. **In fact, as implementation begins, now is the time to reiterate your commitment and turn these new connections into long-term relationships by establishing sustainable ways to continue to listen to, inform and learn from your stakeholders.**

4 Reasons to Continue to Focus on Engagement

1. Your state plan's success relies on the continued buy-in and support of your stakeholders.
2. It's important to keep hearing from all sides: Proactively talking to stakeholders – even those who don't agree with you – will give you a preview of implementation issues ahead.
3. State policymakers and elected officials place a lot of value on stakeholder feedback. Being proactive and soliciting feedback from all audiences will allow you to show these leaders that plans and policy decisions are being made with comprehensive public input.
4. You've connected with stakeholders beyond your usual network – implementation provides an opportunity to further strengthen that relationship and continue to expand your reach.

This guide is intended to help states assess the engagement strategies used during the ESSA development stage, identify the ones to sustain or refine, and develop a long-term plan that will continue to create opportunities for stakeholders to be heard on this and other education issues. The guidance in this document builds off of resources previously published by CCSSO on stakeholder engagement, including [Let's Get this Conversation Started](#), and [Let's Keep this Conversation Going](#). Both guides highlighted the 10 key principles for effective engagement, which will continue to be relevant as states turn their focus to long-term efforts; this guide will focus specifically on the 10th and final principle.

1. Clarify your goals
2. Work with partner organizations to identify and engage with your stakeholders
3. Speak to your audience
4. Use multiple vehicles
5. Identify your best ambassadors
6. Ask for input before decisions are made, and use it
7. Keep your materials simple and brief
8. Communicate early and often
9. Keep your team informed
- 10. Turn these new connections into long-term relationship**

Getting started: Sustainability

Most states drastically changed their engagement habits for the better during the ESSA plan development phase, creating advisory committees and working groups, establishing reliable communication vehicles like newsletters and websites, using social media outlets, providing summaries of feedback, and building strong partnerships with stakeholder groups. This took people, time and money, but it was – and continues to be – a critical part of the process: Most state plans clearly reflected the input of a wide array of stakeholders that went far beyond just the “usual suspects.” These state engagement efforts created a sense of shared ownership of the plan among stakeholders and the state that has tremendous potential to transform into shared responsibility to deliver on the plan outcomes during implementation.

And without question, this wide-reaching input made state plans better. State ESSA plans represent not just the best thinking of each state’s education leadership, but the best thinking of stakeholders representing different communities, income levels, cultures, ethnicities, demographics and political leanings. In many cases this was the first time that some stakeholders have been engaged in this way, particularly those from traditionally underserved, marginalized, or hard-to-reach communities, including parents, tribal leaders and students. Having all of this input led to plans that better reflect the *actual* needs of the regions and communities in each state.

Now that these connections have been made, it’s in each state education agency’s best interest to stay connected. Stakeholders will rightly expect to remain engaged, and states need to start thinking long-term to sustain engagement throughout implementation. What worked during the ESSA planning phase may not be feasible going forward, so states will need to identify what effective strategies they can sustain to keep their stakeholders meaningfully engaged without slipping back into old habits.

In developing this long-term strategy, take time to first reflect on the roles and perspectives each stakeholder group can provide, how their input can continue to be helpful over the next 6-12 months and beyond, and the different roles that stakeholders can play as the plan is implemented. (e.g. development of guidance to districts, designing how to communicate about ESSA using data/report cards, reviewing implementation and/or plan amendments after the close of the 2017-18 school year, etc.) Similar to an hourglass, as illustrated Figure 1, the intensity and depth of engagement will likely ebb and flow from wide-reaching, “10,000 foot-level” discussion to much more focused and detailed, and back again. Throughout each phase it will remain important to continue to communicate about the broad/high-level plan goals, to keep the implementation details tethered closely to state plan’s larger purpose and focus.

Consider the process each state has followed over the past year: Most started with broad discussion on big picture topics like the state’s overall vision for public education, and then moved to narrow, more precise discussion as the details of new policies were hammered out. Now that states have submitted their plans, engagement will initially need to remain narrow as states work out the details on implementation, and then

will broaden out again over the next year as states connect with a wide range of stakeholders to gauge the impact and success of implementation, to get input on adjustments or changes that need to be made, and to hear about any new issues that need to be addressed.

Going forward, engagement will need to follow a similar pattern that will ebb and flow, and needs to continue to be both sustainable and beneficial to the SEA and its stakeholders.

States should take time now to reflect on and learn from their experiences over the past year to determine what efforts worked well, what didn't work, and what over-taxed the SEA staff. This reflection will help to determine what successful efforts are sustainable, what capacity is needed and what else could be added to a long-term engagement strategy.



Figure 2: Cycle of Continuous Improvement

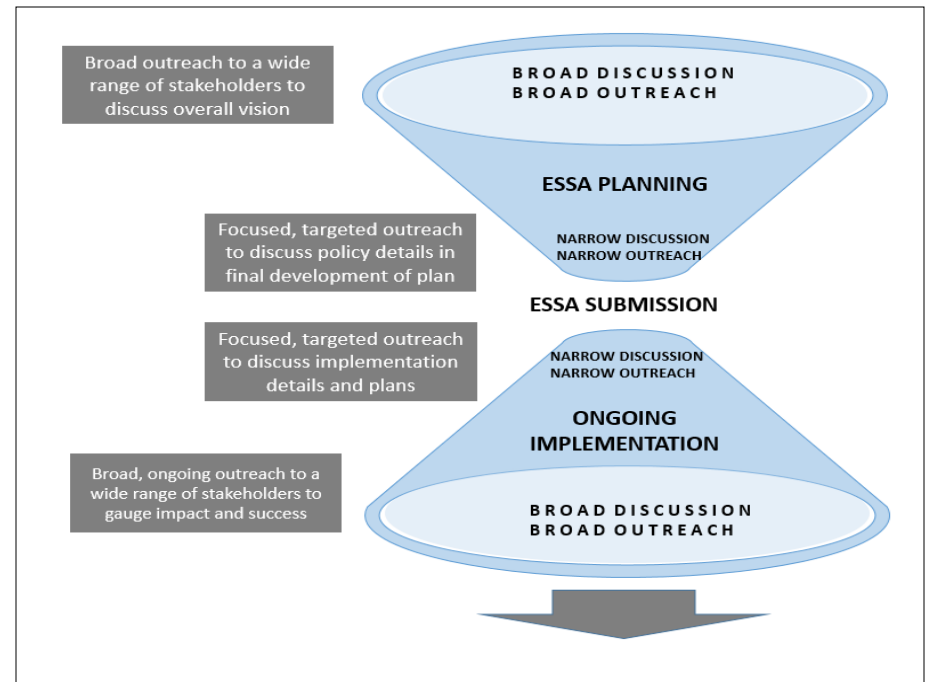


Figure 1: Ebb and Flow of Engagement

One approach to conducting this comprehensive look-back/look-ahead planning is detailed below, including questions for consideration to help drive your thinking and internal decision making.

These five key steps, starting with the internal reflection (see left) should be thought of as a **continuous cycle of improvement**, which SEAs can—and should—repeat again and again as their engagement strategies shift, evolve and improve over time.

Ongoing Strategies for Continuous Improvement

Action step	Overview	Questions for consideration	Who should be involved
Reflect internally on the process.	Use the 10 key principles in Let's Get this Conversation Started as a guide to conduct an internal reflection on the past year's engagement efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What worked? What didn't work? • How did we keep our internal staff engaged? • What stretched our capacity beyond our sustainable limit? • What partnerships expanded our capacity successfully? • Was internal engagement inclusive? • Who did you reach that the SEA has not reached in the past? • What stakeholders and communities were not reached, and what is your plan to reach them? <p>Who didn't you</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who didn't you engage that you want to engage? • Were materials available in multiple languages and in an accessible format? • How transparent was our process? • Does our definition of success need to change based on what we learned? 	Internal senior leadership team and all internal staff who were involved in outreach during the ESSA planning phase
Reflect externally on the process.	After gaining a sense of what worked and what didn't work internally, conduct an external	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What worked? What didn't work? • What engagement efforts were the most successful? 	All stakeholders who were reached during the ESSA planning phase

Action step	Overview	Questions for consideration	Who should be involved
	<p>reflection with key stakeholder groups and other communities through targeted focus groups, online surveys, and individual conversations with partners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What outreach vehicles had the greatest impact? • Which stakeholders were easiest to access? • What topics did stakeholders find most engaging? • How would stakeholders like to be engaged in the future, and on what topics? • What voices were under-represented or missing from the discussions? 	<p>Long-time partners with whom the SEA has a trusting, open relationship to ensure feedback will be honest and direct</p>
<p>Define clear goals for future engagement</p>	<p>Meet internally to clarify the purpose behind future engagement, and try to define the questions that stakeholder engagement can help you to answer. This doesn't have to define your work indefinitely, but try to develop some goals for the next 6-12 months to ensure stakeholders will understand how their continued input will be used.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the goals for the engagement? • What are the specific topics? • What are the questions your stakeholders can help you answer? • What decisions have already been made on this topic that are non-negotiable? What's still negotiable? • Who should be engaged? • What vehicles and strategies will you use to conduct the engagement? • What role will feedback play when evaluating and adjusting implementation? • When can input be most helpful? • What existing materials can be refined or what new materials need to be 	<p>Internal staff</p> <p>Stakeholder groups who are closely tied to the specific topics up for discussion</p> <p>Consider forming a key stakeholder advisory subgroup who provide insight when monitoring implementation from a policy and programmatic perspective.</p>


Action step	Overview	Questions for consideration	Who should be involved
Create a sustainable action plan	Create a long-term engagement strategy that is sustainable, and staffed and funded appropriately. Plan for and decide internally how you're going to use stakeholder feedback, what topics will be up for discussion and what decisions stakeholders can help the SEA to make.	<p>developed to support this engagement?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many hours each month will need to be devoted to engagement efforts? • How can we incorporate engagement into our work culture? • Does anyone on staff have the expertise, interest and time to lead this effort? • If not, can responsibilities be reallocated to free up someone with the expertise and interest to lead this effort? • If not, can a position be created to lead this work? • How can you use external partners to extend the reach of your staff and add new perspectives? 	<p>Internal senior leadership team and human resources</p> <p>External partners who can give honest feedback, respond to ideas and provide insight into planning for long-term sustainability.</p> <p>Local governance partners who are responsible for overseeing local plans aligned to the state expectations.</p>
Communicate regularly	Communicate with the stakeholders you engaged over the course of ESSA plan development to thank them for their help. Share a link to the state plan, a summary of what's going to come next and a sense of what future opportunities will be available for them to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who on staff can manage and oversee this ongoing communications strategy? • What is the best way to reach your stakeholders on a regular basis? • How will you let stakeholders know how their input was used? • What existing communications vehicles can be leveraged to reach all 	<p>Internal communications team</p> <p>Key stakeholders who can advise on communications strategy</p>



Action step	Overview	Questions for consideration	Who should be involved
	<p>remain engaged. Once this has been shared with your stakeholders, share this information more broadly, using multiple vehicles, including social media. Translate materials into languages other than English and consider accessibility issues for parents with disabilities. Try to be consistent and regular (eg. Aim for at least monthly or quarterly) and disseminate widely.</p>	<p>stakeholders and keep them informed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What new vehicles can be created and sustained to keep stakeholders informed? 	


Long-Term Strategies that Work


State long-term engagement strategies will differ based on capacity and need. These five strategies represent different ways to build on existing efforts, lean on your partners and continue to improve.

- Maintain, reconfigure, create, and/or bolster advisory groups
- Stay in touch
- Continue to collaborate with partners
- Establish and maintain feedback loops
- Be open to new ideas and ways to improve

Long-term strategy	State examples
 <p>Maintain, reconfigure, create, and/or bolster advisory groups.</p> <p>Review the working committees or advisory councils that were most effective during your state’s ESSA planning phase and redefine their role and focus to inform the state’s efforts going forward. Review membership to ensure all key stakeholder groups are represented, and if needed, create additional seats and bring new members up to speed to ensure the groups are fully representative of the state’s stakeholders. Where you can, streamline your groups to reflect the new programmatic and/or policy implementation focus. Be intentional at including district-level representation to retain a connection to local levels of governance.</p>	<p>Arkansas’ Steering Committee has continued to meet following the submission of their state plan, and have prioritized continuing conversations on the most effective ways to keep their stakeholders engaged and implement the plan.</p> <p>The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction established an ESSA Planning Committee to represent stakeholder groups and used three issue-specific subcommittees to help develop the state’s plan. For implementation, the state created nine new implementation subcommittees to provide ongoing, two-way feedback. The state even made specific requests in its ESSA plan for stakeholders underrepresented during plan development to be on these new subcommittees, such as stakeholders representing the arts, music and school counselors.</p> <p>Oklahoma held a community convening in October 2017 with stakeholders including tribal leaders, representatives from nonprofits, education leaders, and business representatives, to discuss key elements of the state’s ESSA plan. As a result, the state established community working groups focused on four key areas: food insecurity, chronic absenteeism, reading readiness and supporting traumatized students.</p> <p>The Washington, DC State Board of Education created an ESSA Advisory Task Force comprised of parents, community leaders, education agency leaders, students, teachers, school leaders and nonprofit personnel who work in relevant fields who are representative of the backgrounds of the students in the district. Over the course of two years, four subcommittees</p>

Long-term strategy	State examples
	<p>will address school report cards, an access and opportunity measure, a high school growth measure and school climate pilots. Task Force meetings will continue on a monthly basis.</p>
 <p>Stay in touch.</p> <p>Provide a reliable, consistent source of information, solicit input and promote opportunities for more active engagement through social media, newsletters and email updates that are accessible to individuals with disabilities and translated into multiple languages. Provide short summaries and key information to stakeholder groups to use in their publications. States should also commit to regularly meeting with key stakeholder groups (such as advocacy groups and associations), and holding a regular in-person “roadshow” to connect with stakeholders across the state. Look for unique opportunities to connect with stakeholders, such as securing time on the agenda at local school board meetings.</p>	<p>The Colorado Department of Education created a comprehensive website for ESSA plan development as part of their stakeholder outreach. It includes plan updates, resources, a blog and a link to the department’s ESSA newsletter. In a recent newsletter, the department noted that it plans to continue updating the ESSA website and sending out newsletters.</p> <p>The Delaware Department of Education is updating its report cards as part of its ESSA implementation. The new report cards must be complete by October 2018. The department outlined the development process between now and then and showed how stakeholders can get involved. The department is collecting feedback through focus groups, online surveys and held five community conversations around the state.</p> <p>The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education plans to send out a survey to all of its ESSA stakeholder to get input on the department’s parent-focused school and district report cards. The survey will ask parents what they think constitutes a great school, what they’d like to see on a report card and how they’d like to receive the report card.</p>
 <p>Continue to collaborate with partners.</p> <p>States have leaned on partners over the past year to serve as ambassadors for them, to help make connections to other stakeholder groups, to help generate input and to share information. Going forward these partners and others can continue to be critically</p>	<p>Oklahoma worked with tribal leaders to develop a Tribal Consultation Guide to provide district leaders with guidance and tools to collaborate more effectively with local tribes. They are continuing to collaborate to develop professional development focused on cultural responsiveness to ensure that teachers understand, respect and address the cultural differences that students are bringing into the classroom.</p> <p>The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction created an Equity Council to bring diverse perspectives together and help DPI create its ESSA plan. The council, made up of representatives from education organizations, community groups and state policymakers,</p>

Long-term strategy	State examples
<p>important and can help to keep their members and communities informed, identify and share their priority issues with the state and build relationships between the SEA and stakeholder groups. Involve local governance, such as local school boards and superintendents, as key conduits.</p>	<p>weighed in on ESSA issues related to equity during plan development. Now that the plan is complete, council members will serve as ambassadors by collecting feedback from their communities while also informing their communities of important implementation developments.</p> <p>The Illinois State Board of Education used stakeholder groups, including the state’s P-20 Council, to discuss ESSA issues as part of plan development. The council split into issue-based committees and invited dozens of stakeholder representatives to the table. Illinois will continue to use the P-20 Council to collect feedback and recommendations on implementation details and policy issues not resolved in the state’s ESSA plan.</p>
 <p>Establish and maintain feedback loops.</p> <p>States should create and maintain clear feedback loops to ensure stakeholders have a consistent, reliable way to get information, have their questions answered, provide input, and find out how, when and if their input has been used. States can use their ESSA websites as one of several methods to keep stakeholders informed and to be transparent about changes in policy, upcoming meetings and decisions that are made. In addition, states can maintain a public email account and promptly respond to questions and requests, use in-person meetings to answer questions and provide updates; SEAs can also leverage social media channels as a way to share information, drive traffic back to the website, and engage with stakeholders.</p>	<p>The District of Columbia ESSA Task Force sought nominations from the public to join a task force of parents and education stakeholders to work on four sub-committees over the next 2 years on implementation issues. The task force is designed to enhance engagement of community in development of policy, and will be hosting a series of focus groups on reports later this year.</p> <p>The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) created advisory committees and working groups during ESSA plan development. These groups will be part of this feedback process during implementation. The department committed in its ESSA plan to exploring other ways for stakeholders to provide meaningful feedback during ESSA implementation. In addition, the department recently published an online Implementation Guide that provides all stakeholders with clear, transparent information on how the SEA plans to deliver on the work in its ESSA plan.</p> <p>The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) is will convene new implementation workgroups for multiple aspects of the plan such as the comprehensive needs assessment. The teams will review plans and give MDE feedback on proposals prior to full implementation. MDE is also planning to hold regional community forums, hosted in partnership with local community foundations, to help inform and guide the MDE’s ESSA transition and implementation planning efforts and the development of technical assistance materials.</p>

Long-term strategy	State examples
 <p>Be open to new ideas and ways to improve.</p> <p>States probably won't get their long-term engagement strategy right the first time, and that's OK, so long as they remain open to suggestions. States should invite stakeholders – particularly those who haven't been deeply engaged in the past - to suggest ways they could be more involved, gather regional input on new ideas and how and when they can communicate about the issues most important to their communities. States can enable this type of input by offering to have 1:1 conversations with stakeholder groups and by creating and communicating about opportunities for stakeholders to provide the SEA with specific feedback on engagement.</p>	<p>The New York State Education Department (NYSED) created an ESSA Think Tank to advise the department on ESSA issues and how best to engage stakeholders around the state. The Think Tank members were also encouraged to attend public ESSA meetings and provide their thoughts on how the meetings were conducted. NYSED will continue working with the Think Tank on the operationalization of the plan and how best to communicate the new requirements and initiatives to a diverse set of stakeholders.</p> <p>The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) is planning to expand its stakeholder outreach during ESSA implementation to include direct family engagement. ODE is working directly with partner and community-based organizations to engage parents and families, particularly those who have been historically underserved or underrepresented in conversations relating to public education, in report card redesign focus groups.</p>

Appendix I: Frequently Asked Questions

As implementation begins, staff will be responsible for continuing to engage, inform and listen to stakeholder perspectives. You'll likely get a lot of questions and hear some reasons why stakeholder engagement should no longer be a priority at the SEA level. Some of the most frequently asked questions and answers about ongoing engagement are below.

Question	Answer
Why should we continue comprehensive stakeholder engagement now that the ESSA plan is complete?	You're accountable to an expanded stakeholder base and state policymakers. They will expect you to continue to engage with them and listen to their feedback as they implement the state's ESSA plan. The plan's success relies on their continued buy-in and help.
Stakeholder don't understand the technical issues of implementation. So why should I engagement them on those issues?	Your stakeholders will be leading the charge on implementation for most of your state's ESSA plan. While they might not be technical experts, they need to be involved in the ongoing decision-making that directly affects them and the communities with whom they regularly engage. . Instead of diving into complex, technical issues, frame the engagement around the root policy issue in question. Create different venues for general and detailed feedback. Work with key stakeholder constituencies to "translate" areas of the plans that may not be well understood into clear, relevant language.
What do I do if my stakeholders stop attending meetings and responding to surveys?	It's normal to have some feedback fatigue, but stakeholders always want to have a say during policy discussions. If response seems to be slowing down, it may be that your engagement strategy needs to be adjusted. Ask select stakeholders for feedback on your engagement approach and timing. Make sure you are engaging a wide range of stakeholders and not just the same people again and again. Be sure to communicate how you're using their feedback. Also, switch up modes of communication, and do more to include the local media.
What do I do if we don't have the capacity to continue engagement at this level?	Try to make stakeholder engagement part of how you do business. Think about how you can restructure internal roles and processes to allow more time for the appropriate staff to manage and sustain two-way engagement routines. Identify, train and empower external ambassadors to extend your capacity and reach. Rely on local governance partners to clearly understand the state plan in their role, and be able to equally convey information to other stakeholders at the local level.

<p>What do I do if stakeholders want to discuss issues that are outside of my control, like issues in federal and state law?</p>	<p>You should engage on issues your stakeholders care about, regardless of who is responsible for the policy. Other state policymakers and elected officials place a lot of value on stakeholder feedback, and they'll be happy to listen to their concerns if you don't. Stakeholder support around issues that the SEA doesn't control can still help. Stakeholders can advocate for the removal of or adjustments to state legal barriers. If the issue is a result of federal law, then outreach can help explain why the agency can fix the issue.</p>
<p>Should I still engage our stakeholders on policies they don't support, such as accountability, if they're unlikely to offer constructive feedback?</p>	<p>You will benefit from engaging with stakeholders even if they disagree with you. Proactively talking to unhappy stakeholders gives a preview of larger implementation issues that are coming. Ask them for their suggestions and proposed solutions, and have a frank discussion about what's possible. You also don't have to defend the policy alone. Bring together stakeholders with varying perspectives to discuss the issue as a group, and use this as an opportunity to identify and dig into specific points of contention. When possible, consider making a compromise to address their concerns; when a compromise isn't possible, make sure they understand why, and at minimum leave feeling like they've been heard.</p>
<p>We've already heard from a lot of stakeholders, and we're starting to hear the same feedback. Does this mean we can scale back our engagement efforts?</p>	<p>Remember to include parents, tribal education directors, and students. Think broadly about who your stakeholders are based on your demographics, enrollment patterns and issues unique to your state that impact the public schools (e.g., immigrant population, tribal communities, high needs communities, etc.).</p>

Appendix II: Stakeholder Engagement Resources

There are an array of guides, tools and resources available to help states develop and implement long-term engagement strategies, including but not limited to the resources listed below.

- [Let's Get this Conversation Started](#), CCSSO
- [Let's Keep this Conversation Going](#), CCSSO
- [Making Sense of it All](#), CCSSO
- [Guidelines for SEAs on Engaging Parents](#), CCSSO, Learning Heroes and National PTA
- [Framework for Meaningful Parent Engagement Under ESSA](#), CCSSO, Learning Heroes and National PTA
- [Meaningful Local Engagement Under ESSA: A Handbook for LEA and School Leaders](#), CCSSO and Partners for Each and Every Child
- [Leading by Convening: A Blueprint for Authentic Engagement](#), The IDEA Partnership
- [ESSA Parent Advocacy Toolkit](#), National Council on Learning Disabilities (NCLD)
- [Take Action Toolkit](#), NCLD
- [10 Minute Meeting Guide](#), National Education Association
- [Building Relationships with Tribes: A Native Process for Local Consultation Under ESSA](#), National Indian Education Association (NIEA)
- [A Native Process for Evaluation of State and Local Plans for Native Education Under ESSA](#), NIEA
- [Process and Protest](#), Partners for Each and Every Child
- [The District Guide to ESSA and the Importance of Meaningful Engagement: Participation, Preparation, and What Comes Next](#), Partners for Each and Every Child
- [6 Keys to Engaging Families in ESSA](#), National PTA
- [From "Inform" to "Inspire": A Framework for Communications and Engagement](#), The Reform Support Network
- [Strategies for Engaging Latino Parents in Assessment Advocacy](#), UnidosUS