

Incorporating Authentic Parent and Family Engagement in State Plans under ESSA

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Parent and Family Engagement under ESSA

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) contains many new requirements and opportunities for SEAs, LEAs and Title I schools to conduct parent and family engagement—especially with parents and family members of low-income students—and includes a set-aside of at least one percent of Title I funds to ensure that districts and schools carry out these activities. In developing their state plans, specifically, the new law requires that SEAs:¹

- Engage in meaningful consultation with parents and other stakeholders
- Allow the public at least 30 days to comment on the state plan before submitting it to ED for review
- Confirm that their state plan will provide districts and schools with effective parent and family engagement strategies.

Despite these provisions, many parents of low-income students and students of color remain skeptical about whether their public schools are really helping their children succeed.² Parents also report that past efforts by SEAs and LEAs to engage them around standards, assessments and other reform initiatives have been largely *inauthentic*—top-down, one-way, one-and-done sales efforts with predetermined outcomes. The result? Missed opportunities to hear new ideas and solutions, poor implementation of many policies and programs, and lack of buy-in or even public backlash around reform initiatives. Supporters of the standards-based reform movement now know all too well the price to be paid when parents aren't engaged properly.

We need to move away from a check-the-box, compliance-based view of engagement and toward *authentic* parent and family engagement, and the ESSA state plans present a significant opportunity to take an important step in that direction. Importantly, to be truly authentic, **these efforts must be decoupled from SEA and third-party advocacy efforts** designed to mobilize the public around a specific education reform agenda.

Why Authentic Parent and Family Engagement?

Authentic parent and family engagement requires time and effort. Yet the ESSA requirement isn't the only reason to engage parents and families the right way. This more thoughtful approach will also help generate fresh ideas and policy perspectives from those who know students best, lead to greater support for the work of teachers and school leaders, and result in improved student outcomes.

Most importantly, in terms of the policies and initiatives included in your state plan, unlike in the past, authentic parent and family engagement efforts that begin early in the process and continue through implementation should generate much greater stakeholder buy-in. And the next time a reform effort faces obstacles when the going gets tough, you will have compelling new voices speaking out in support.

Guidelines for Authentic Parent and Family Engagement

While there is no single approach to proper parent and family engagement, here are some general guidelines to follow that will lead to stronger state plans and far greater buy-in:

Step #1 – Identify and Recruit Participants

Perhaps the most difficult part of authentic parent and family engagement is enlisting participants from all backgrounds and perspectives—especially from traditionally hard-to-reach parents and family members whose children have the highest stake in its outcome. Reaching out to civil rights organizations and other established community partners who work regularly with underrepresented families can help in identifying and recruiting a more ethnically diverse array of participants. However, it's not enough to rely solely on this strategy, because it will likely result in participation by many of the same leaders, representatives and active individuals whose voices have been heard many times before.



To recruit a truly representative cross-section of the populace in racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, geographic and other terms, look also to places where traditionally underrepresented families can be found, such as:

- Parents of children in specific high-needs schools in urban and rural areas
- Neighborhood libraries
- Community gatherings such as street fairs and annual festivals that attract a diverse audience
- State and local government agencies that provide direct services to low-income individuals and may be able to share contact information (for example, state and local health departments that serve individuals registered for federal and state programs who have opted to receive updates).

Step #2 – Prepare Participants

Because many of these parents will be new to such processes where they will be asked for input, it's critical to prepare them before they begin this important work. Prior to your first formal meetings, be sure to communicate that:

- Families know better than anyone what is in the best interest of their local schools and their children, so their input truly matters. They were invited to the table because they bring unique and valuable experiences and perspectives to share. You have no preconceived notion of where you want them to go, and they will not be criticized for their point of view; **whatever the outcomes of their participation, you will honor them.**
- You are there to listen to them, but you also recognize policy issues can be complex and thus need to know what information or resources they might need to help them participate effectively in the dialogue (e.g., a plain-language ESSA state plan primer; key data about the state, student population and education system)
- If any potential barriers to their full participation arise (e.g., meeting timing, lack of transportation or child care, language or cultural barriers, physical limitations), you will identify solutions to maintain their participation.

Step #3 – Execute Engagement Activities

Parent and family engagement activities around developing state plans can potentially take many forms, but at least one element should be a hearing carried out **in-person in their community** on a day and time that makes it easy for them to participate. When structuring the actual discussion or planning meeting:

- Regardless of what format you use, provide plenty of opportunities for each and every participant to have his or her voice heard
- Session moderators should not come from the SEA but rather from the community itself, such as a CBO leader or library staffer who reflects the people in the room. If there is a large, more diverse group participating, then there should be a handful of moderators who reflect that diversity to ensure the dialogue is culturally relevant and respectful.

Step #4 – Sustain Engagement

Authentic engagement cannot be mastered without multiple encounters over time. We build trust when we show up the second and third time, not the first time. Establish the vehicle—more face-to-face meetings; reliable, transparent, predictable email communications—by which you will stay engaged with participants through finalization, dissemination and implementation of the plan. Let them know that there will be regular updates and in-person check-ins so that you can get their feedback and make improvements.

This continuing engagement will not only create a useful feedback loop for the purposes of implementing the plan. It may also encourage your participants to get actively engaged with their school and district in other ways and lead to other productive conversations about how they can support future advocacy efforts.

And while all of the above recommendations are focused on state plans, many of the same principles are equally valid when it's time to plan for LEA- and school-level engagement in the future.

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