

Making Sense of it All:

How to Incorporate Stakeholder Feedback into Your State's ESSA Plan

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THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

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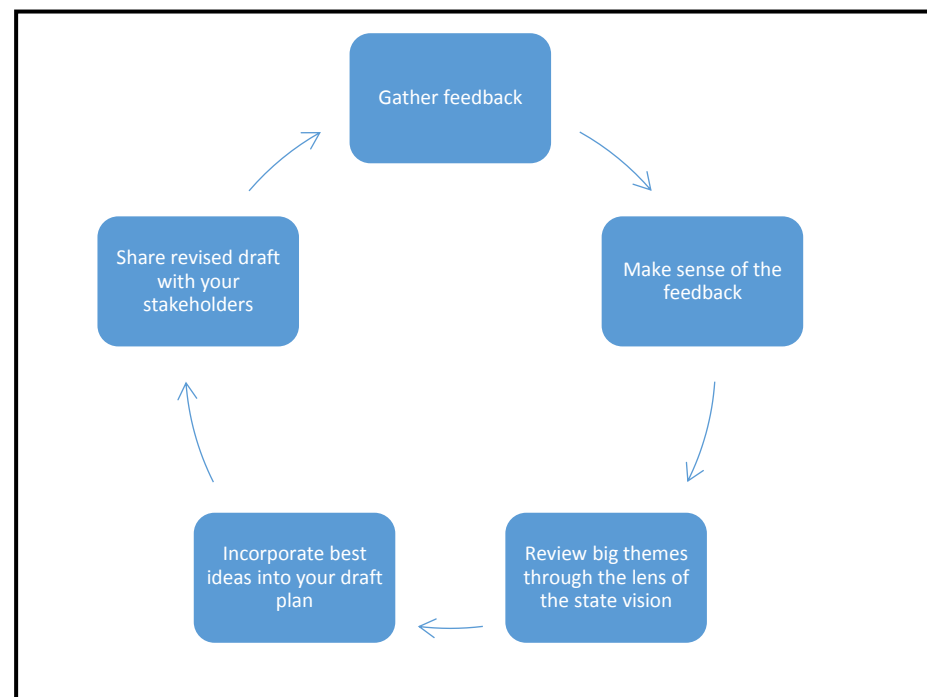
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As states move forward on the development of their Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plans, incorporating the best of the feedback received from stakeholders along the way is a critical step in the process. All states are required by law to meaningfully engage with a wide array of stakeholders as they develop their plans to ensure that new policies and procedures truly reflect the needs of all students, regardless of their ethnicity, poverty level or zip code. Once the online surveys, public forums and focus groups are over, it’s up to the state ESSA leads to make sense of the hundreds of ideas, suggestions, questions and comments they’ve received and use the key themes that emerge to inform the details of the plan.

The guidance in this resource is broken into the five basic steps of an ongoing engagement cycle (as illustrated at right), and is meant to help states do two things simultaneously: (1) incorporate the best of the feedback they receive from their stakeholders in a way that strengthens and refines their ESSA strategy; and (2) ensure stakeholders know they were heard and can recognize their imprint on the state’s plan.



Basic steps of continuous engagement cycle

Step 1: Gather feedback

This guide is meant for states that have either completed a meaningful engagement process or states that are midway through that process and have already gathered a significant amount of feedback. States that have not collected much input yet should refer to CCSSO’s previous stakeholder guides [Let’s Get this Conversation Started](#) and [Let’s Keep this Conversation Going](#) for tips on how to develop, strengthen and carry out a robust and effective engagement strategy. Both guides are based around these 10 key steps to effective engagement:

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 relationships.

Questions to consider

- Have you reached out to and connected with every stakeholder group at least once?
- Does the feedback you've received truly reflect the needs of all of your students?
- Have you reached out to every possible partner to connect you with additional stakeholders?
- Have you created multiple vehicles to maintain two-way communication with your stakeholders?
- How can you keep your stakeholders engaged, informed and involved once your ESSA implementation begins?

Step 2: Make sense of the feedback you've received

Successful feedback sessions, surveys and focus groups can generate a seemingly-endless amount of new ideas, but the effort that goes into collecting that input is only helpful if the feedback is put to use. Thousands of survey responses, index cards and flip chart notes can be overwhelming if there isn't a plan in place to collate, organize and review each suggestion and identify how they will be used to strengthen and inform the state's ESSA plan.

Action steps

- **Read everything:** Review every suggestion that has been made one by one. Review meeting notes and collect notes from co-hosts or others who were tracking the discussion. If stakeholders took the time to attend a meeting, submit an email or complete a survey, their ideas deserve to be reviewed.



Colorado has had more than 250 in-person [meetings](#) with stakeholders from every corner of the state, hosting two rounds of sessions in multiple languages, and at different times during the day to ensure all interested stakeholders could find an opportunity that works for them to be engaged.

New Mexico partnered with [New Mexico First](#), a statewide non-profit community organization, to organize and host all of its town hall meetings, and to take and summarize notes. As a well-known community organization, they were able to gather stakeholders representing every community.

- **Categorize and collate:** Sort all of the suggestions into broad categories that align with the major elements of your state ESSA plan, with sub-categories of suggestions around major themes contained under each element. Pull out suggestions that were made that are not relevant to the state ESSA plan and catalogue them in a separate file so they can be addressed separately.
- **Look for areas of agreement:** As you review the input you've received, pay attention to overlapping comments that are made by multiple stakeholders, especially evidence of agreement coming from multiple stakeholder groups.
- **Connect suggestions to the stakeholders who made them:** As you collate the feedback, be sure to clearly indicate how, when and from whom the suggestions were made. This level of detail can be built into your ESSA plan to illustrate the depth of the feedback you received, and to show stakeholders that their feedback was heard and informed the plan.



Massachusetts and Idaho both created an internal spreadsheet to track every piece of feedback they received throughout their engagement processes. Each suggestion was tagged to indicate how it was relevant to the plan; in cases where it was not relevant to the state plan, which office within the SEA received the suggestion. These spreadsheets helped them track the input they receive and ensure none of the ideas were lost.

Questions to consider

- Are the proposed ideas allowed under ESSA? Would they require any changes to existing state laws?
- Are any of the proposed ideas promising ones, but don't fit under the specific needs of the state ESSA plan? If so, how can the state address these in another way?
- How are you categorizing feedback so you can reference it in the plan as it is being drafted?
- Which of the proposed ideas would require significant investments in building local capacity to be successful?

Step 3: Review big themes through the state vision lens

Every state plan should be built around a clear vision for public education, but not every suggestion or idea will reflect that vision. Review suggestions carefully to ensure the ones that inform your plan maintain the focus established under the state's overall vision, mission and strategic plan.

Action steps

- **Pull out the big themes:** Once all of the feedback has been reviewed and categorized, identify the big themes or takeaways that emerge that can be used to inform key decisions or areas within your state's ESSA plan.

- **Stay aligned to your state’s vision:** Compare the big takeaways to your state’s vision to determine if they are aligned, and if they will help move the state closer to achieving the stated goals.
- **Make adjustments as needed:** Clarify, refine and adjust the takeaways that do not align and share them with a subset of your stakeholders to determine if they still reflect their perspectives.
- **Document everything:** Clearly record each suggestion that is used to inform the plan and document how it is used. Also document ideas that are not used, defining why they were not incorporated at this time.



Delaware held two rounds of community conversations and wrote up a [summary](#) of each session, identifying the big themes that emerged through each discussion.

Tennessee has consistently presented their ESSA plan as a continuation of their current strategic plan, using this as an opportunity to dig deep on equity. The key themes and goals within their strategic plan have served as the [organizing factor](#) used to guide their feedback questions.

Questions to consider:

- Which proposed ideas advance the state’s goals for student success after high school?
- Which proposed ideas would advance or set back the state’s goals for increasing equity?
- Which ideas could accelerate or slow down progress and achievement for different sub-populations?

Step 4: Incorporate the best ideas into your draft plan

Steps 1-3 are meant to help elevate suggestions, refinements and new ideas that can be used to strengthen and sharpen the focus of the state’s plan. The impact of the feedback you receive through your engagement process should be evident throughout your state ESSA plan, not just limited to one section. Once the best ideas are identified, work with the ESSA plan development team to incorporate their intent into the draft plan.

Action steps

- **Put your team to work:** Share relevant feedback with the appropriate ESSA plan developers. They are most familiar with the draft content and will be best positioned to incorporate the feedback in a way that strengthens the plan.
- **Track your changes:** Revise the draft plan using track changes or a similar mechanism to indicate where adjustments have been made.

4 Ways to Highlight Changes As You Make Them

1. Use “Track Changes” or a similar tool to highlight edits
2. Annotate changes in the margins
3. Put a table at the front of each section summarizing the feedback included in that section
4. Keep track of feedback and where it came from in an Appendix

- **Use the Appendix:** Keep a running list in the Appendix of feedback, its original source and how it is used in the state plan.
- **Identify the source:** Annotate each major change to indicate the source of this shift, identifying supportive stakeholder groups and/or individuals if possible. This will make your draft cumbersome to read, but will allow stakeholders who review it to see how and when their input was used.
- **Use tables:** Add a table to the start of each section in your plan to summarize the relevant feedback you received and how it was used.
- **Create a duplicate:** In addition to the marked up version, create a “clean” copy without tracked changes or comments for public review.



Illinois posted every draft of its plan [online](#), along with all of the stakeholder comments they have received on each draft. Their website also includes an [online form](#) that stakeholders can use to continue to submit feedback.

Iowa has summarized the stakeholder feedback at the start of each section of the draft [state plan](#), making it easy for readers to scan the overall feedback and dive deeper into section-specific feedback.

Wisconsin has established a 30-member [Equity Council](#) that meets monthly to discuss and provide feedback specifically on the evolving Accountability and School Improvement sections of the state plan.

Questions to consider

- Does your stakeholder feedback confirm any of the assumptions that were made in the draft plan?
- Are there areas that can be strengthened by adding new suggestions or nuance suggested by stakeholders?
- Are there any elements in your draft plan that conflict with suggestions from multiple stakeholder groups? If so, can adjustments be made to reflect the perspective of the stakeholders?

Step 5: Share a revised draft with your stakeholders

Once the draft plan has been revised to incorporate your stakeholder feedback, offer your stakeholders another opportunity to review the content. Revisit your initial feedback gathering strategy and use some of the same strategies to gather this final round of input, and to ensure your stakeholders know how their feedback was used. Most will not want to dig into the 100+ pages of your actual ESSA plan, so develop a more concise summary document that highlights the key features of your plan and indicates how stakeholder input helped to shape the final proposal. This will not only enable stakeholders to help you to continue to refine the state’s plan, but will reinforce how much the state values their input, and provide them with an opportunity to see how their initial feedback was used.

Action steps

- **Summarize it all:** Create a concise, easy-to-read document that summarizes the highlights of the state’s plan and how stakeholders were engaged to help in its development.

- **Summarize each topic:** Create a summary document for every ESSA topic that can be shared with stakeholders that clearly documents what was heard, what was used in the state’s plan, how the original draft has changed based on the input, and input that informed the plan.
- **Pull people together:** Reconvene working groups that were formed to develop the initial draft to share revisions.
- **Solicit more targeted input:** Post the revised draft on the state’s ESSA website with an online tool to enable stakeholders to provide additional input on targeted areas. Be clear about decisions that have been made that are final and highlight the areas where input will still be considered.
- **Publicize:** Post links to the online tool on social media to proactively solicit additional feedback.



Louisiana created a dynamic ESSA [website](#) that includes all versions of their draft plan, minutes from every meeting, all stakeholder input and summary documents for each section of their plan.

North Dakota posted a simple [feedback form](#) on its website with the second draft of their plan to enable stakeholders to continue to provide input.

[Illinois](#), [Colorado](#) and [DC](#) set up surveys to help gather specific input from stakeholders on their draft plans.

[Ohio](#), [Oregon](#) and [Illinois](#) created summaries of their draft ESSA plans to send to stakeholders to help gather input.

New Jersey created a [PowerPoint presentation](#) with a voice-over to walk stakeholders through key aspects of the state’s draft ESSA plan.

Questions to consider:

- Have you created a jargon-free summary that will be accessible to your stakeholders and give them the highlights of your state plan?
- Have you identified the specific questions that you still need answered, or specific areas in which additional input will still be useful?
- Have you reached back out to your stakeholders to let them know that a draft is ready for their review?
- Have you created vehicles to enable your stakeholders to provide additional feedback?