



Guidelines for SEAs on Engaging Parents

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presents a unique opportunity for states to meaningfully engage parents as consumers of the public education system. In doing so, there are important guidelines to remember to make the most of parent input and to establish and foster sustained, trusting relationships. The following recommendations are based on qualitative research conducted across 20 states and multiple national surveys¹. This document identifies effective strategies for various types of engagement: in-person events, informative materials, and long-term partnerships, and is designed to help states direct and make the most of their parent outreach efforts. Learning Heroes has been the driving force in highlighting the critical need for evidence-based communications with parents and has funded much of this research. For additional parent-friendly resources, including FAQs, supplemental academic resources and ESSA related materials, visit <http://www.belearninghero.org> and <http://www.PTA.org/essa>.

View parents and families as consumers and partners.

- Do not think of ESSA engagement as an isolated event, but as an opportunity to build ongoing relationships with parents, which can create more positive perceptions about education and a deeper understanding of and more vested interest in the changes taking place.
- Gauge parents’ understanding and perceptions of accountability in order to clarify any disparities or address knowledge gaps in terms they understand or regularly use.
- Continue to listen to parents. Identify additional opportunities for parent engagement after ESSA has been implemented to demonstrate that you value their input. Create an ongoing feedback loop.

State Spotlight: New Mexico is developing a Parent Advisory Council in 2017, which was announced at their ESSA parent engagement sessions in an effort to encourage parents to continue working with the Public Education Department.

Develop evidence-based parent and family friendly messaging.

- Internal jargon should not be used for external messaging. Not only does policy language not resonate with parents, it is often misinterpreted, which can perpetuate misinformation.
- Only use policy language and technical terms when absolutely necessary, and provide clear definitions to avoid misinterpretation. Be cautious in assuming parents have a common

¹ Surveys: “Parents 2016: Hearts and Minds of Parents in an Uncertain World”, Learning Heroes, High Quality Assessment Project Survey on Opt Out (2016). Focus groups conducted in CA, CO, DC, DE, HI, ID, IL, LA, MD, MS, NC, NH, NJ, NM, NV, NY, OH, OR, RI, WA.

understanding of ‘standard’ policy language. Common terms such as ‘student growth’ and ‘accountability’ and ‘standards’ are interpreted differently by different parents.

- Always provide information within the following context: “Why is this important for my child, and how will it help him or her?”
- Information should be written in a basic and factual manner. If it is not, it may be perceived as propaganda and therefore not trustworthy. Make every effort to be as specific as possible. For example, if talking about the interventions that targeted and comprehensive support schools will receive, show with specific examples of what that might look like and how schools will be supported rather than only using the term “interventions.”

Use materials that resonate.

- Parents want clear and concise information. Here are some examples of evidence-based materials that parents react positively to:
 - *Actionable Checklists*: Checklists that identify simple actions and resources to help parents become more informed or help their child are useful. For ESSA, these actions could be taking short surveys, asking for participation in listening sessions, or providing links to more information to read.
 - *Cover Letters*: Cover letters should be shared through as many channels as possible, including email, hard copies, and posted on state, school and district sites and should *always* be included when sharing student or school level report cards with parents. These letters also should be translated into multiple languages.
 - *Supplemental Materials*: When communicating with parents about change, it is critical to provide contextual information to help them understand why it is taking place, why it is important, and what it means for them and their child. This is imperative to help parents feel included in the conversation and to build positive sentiments while mitigating misperceptions.
- To increase readability, use visuals and infographics when possible. Materials should also include plenty of text features, including white space and bolding to help parents easily identify the key takeaways.
- Create materials for parents with parents. Before you release a new tool or resource, allow a diverse group of parents or organizations that represent a diverse group of parents to review and provide feedback.

State Spotlight: Louisiana developed a [“Parent Conversation Guide”](#) for their 2016 state test, answering questions that parents have consistently asked about their child’s test scores in focus groups.

Offer different levels of detail.

- The majority of parents will want high-level information that addresses the impact the changes will have on their child or children. But for those that desire more details and specificity, provide additional links with information specifically designed for parents.

Leverage effective communication channels.

- The majority of parents have said they prefer communications vehicles are email and text, yet some still prefer to receive hard copies sent directly in the mail, including parents in low-income

households. Electronic methods are not appropriate to convey all information, so it is important to use multiple vehicles and consider the density of information in determining the most appropriate vehicle.

- For important information, it is a good practice to use all methods possible to ensure parents get the message. In addition to email and text, this may also include posting the information on a school/district website, using social media, airing radio PSAs, and sending hard copies home through the mail and/or the backpack channel.
- Teachers are parents' most trusted resource; therefore, when possible, information should come directly from teachers. Encouraging teachers to reach out directly to parents implies that it is worthy of their time and beneficial for their child. Also consider other trusted messengers, such as school and community-based organizations like the PTA, United Way, local Urban League affiliates, faith-based institutions, or afterschool providers.
- Be sure all communication materials – whether hard copy or electronic – are accessible to parents with disabilities and available in other languages.

Meet parents and families where they are.

- Meet parents where they are. Consider the various communities across the state and which locations would be the most convenient for in-person parent meetings. If the school is not centrally located, consider a location that is, easily accessible via public transportation, accessible to people with disabilities and known to parents and the community. Or partner with community-based or faith-based organizations to host a meeting.
- To reach parents from all communities within your state, hold multiple in-person meetings at different times of day and days of the week for parents. Be cognizant of parents who work different shifts or hold multiple jobs. Announce the meetings well in advance, through various modes of communication (such as flyers, letters, emails, texts or social media), and send reminders. For example, in addition to the traditional evening meetings, hold a morning or early afternoon session, or consider weekend meetings, such as Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon. For example, consider hosting an in-person meeting before or after a community event that parents and families already will be attending, such as a fair or festival.
- Think about resources and supports parents may need to attend in-person events. Will they need childcare or homework help for school-age children? If it is being held during a mealtime, can you serve refreshments? Can you provide translation services for other languages and American Sign Language? Offering and advertising these services in advance increases parent participation. Be sure to include these costs in your budget, or partner with an organization that can help provide these supports.
- Record or livestream in-person meetings and share the link via text and email for parents who are unable to attend. Consider creating an online form or survey to gather input from other parents as well.

State Spotlight: Texas created this online [“ESSA Public Input Survey”](#) for parents and other stakeholders to share their thoughts on how the state should implement various provisions.

Make school accountability matter.

- For parents, ESSA in isolation is not important; what is important is how the changes will affect their child. ESSA needs to be framed as a tool to develop the goals and expectations we have for our school systems and our students. Parent input into those goals is critical.
- Discuss accountability in terms of how it will be used in a local context—at the district and school level.
- Frame accountability as a tool parents can use to make more informed decisions and advocate for their child. Parents can use school level report cards much in the same manner they use student report cards: to measure progress and advocate for changes when necessary.
- In an effort to create demand for the school level report cards among parents and families, provide context and explain why accountability is necessary—to give parents information about how their child’s school is performing in relation to other schools and where improvement is needed for their child and their child’s school.
- Provide specific information about what the system is going to do for those schools that need extra help and how parents can and should be involved in this process.
- Make accountability actionable. Tell parents who they should reach out to if they have questions, acknowledge that their feedback is valued, and explain what they can do if they are not satisfied with their school’s performance.
- The public sees equitable funding as a major determining factor in schools’ and students’ success. In order to create demand for change, the issue must be acknowledged and discussed.

Effectively prioritize information.

- Parents are most interested in information that directly impacts their child. They prioritize different kinds of data than policymakers and leaders. Parents want multiple measures and to some level, find every type of information useful, including information that might not be part of a state’s accountability system. The difficult task is prioritizing and providing relevant information at a high level without overwhelming them.
- Parents are just as interested in academic data as non-academic measures, so it is important to speak to both when discussing accountability. Parents want to know that their child is in a safe, happy learning environment. Positioning accountability as a tool that measures more than just test scores makes it more relevant to parents.
- Parents value measures that determine their child’s learning experience, including teacher qualifications, the learning environment, and a school’s academic achievement. Even if all of these indicators are not in your state’s accountability system, they are important to parents and should be discussed.
- Parents appreciate seeing how their school performed in comparison to others, but school, district and state comparisons are preferred over national.

Contextualize disaggregated data.

- Overall, the research done to date has found that the majority of parents said they did not prioritize disaggregated data. However, continuing research is being done in this area to better understand it and determine how to communicate its importance to parents. Always remember to know your audience and be sure to talk through disaggregated data with parents who want to know more about it.

- Be intentional and purposeful when discussing disaggregated results. Some parents could perceive it as a shaming exercise, or an implied message that some subgroups of students are not capable of achieving at the same level as others.
- To help parents interpret this information accurately in a manner that effectively creates demand for change and policies, disaggregated data should be put into context. Parents need to be informed that disaggregating data is an effort to identify which students need additional support and resources so they can be put into place.