

6 Keys to Engaging Families in ESSA

Parents and their children are the consumers of our nation's public education system, and parents have always been essential partners in education. However, they haven't always been included at the decision-making table. This has caused confusion, mistrust and backlash when new initiatives—whether at the federal, state or local level—have been considered and implemented. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides a unique opportunity for parents and families to give their input and to hold states and districts accountable for their children's educational experience.

National PTA has identified six critical ways states, school districts and schools should be engaging parents and families as part of ESSA or any new education initiative. Use the rubric on the back to evaluate how your state, school district and school are doing!



Representation

Any education committee, working group or taskforce must include parents who solely represent the parent voice. While other members may also be parents, a parent representative's sole responsibility is to be an advocate for parents and families. This is the only way to ensure committees or working groups are reflective of those who will be most impacted by changes in education policy or practice—students and parents.

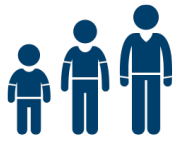
The **Oregon Department of Education** includes **four parent representatives on ESSA [working groups](#) and the [advisory committee](#) for the development of their new state education plan.**



Transparency

States, school districts and schools should provide clear timelines for the development of new education plans or initiatives, identify specific opportunities for parents and families to be involved, and publicly post and distribute this information in a variety of ways. Communications about the ESSA implementation process should include who's involved, specific opportunities for families and community members to participate, and how input and feedback will be incorporated.

The **Michigan Department of Education's [ESSA webpage](#)** has a user-friendly hub for parents and community members to access information about and get involved in the implementation process, including virtual parent focus groups.



Equity

The needs and abilities of parents and families are not all the same. States, districts and schools must ensure any barrier to engagement—such as time, location, language or disability—is addressed. This means that opportunities for engagement must be held at various dates times and locations, and materials must be translated into at least one language other than English. Locations and materials must also be accessible for family members with disabilities. Decision makers must also host events at family-friendly locations—for example, a government building may not be centrally located or the most welcoming for all parents and families.

The **Delaware Department of Education** provides ESSA resources in [English](#), [Spanish](#) and [Haitian Creole](#) to meet the needs of different communities in the state.



Information

Most parents are not experts in education policy, but they are experts on their children. It is important that information about the law is explained in simple terms. At the most basic level, parents want to know how ESSA affects their child, their education and school, and what they can do. It is important to provide families with greater context about how new plans or programs will impact current practices. Materials should be no longer than three written pages, and other mediums should be used to provide clear and concise information to parents and families.

The **Hawaii Department of Education** provides a [video overview of ESSA](#), a helpful [FAQ](#) and an easy-to-understand [fact sheet](#) to explain the new law.



Accessibility

States, districts and schools should provide multiple opportunities and avenues to get parent and family perspectives, including online surveys, webinars and other multi-media presentations and in-person events. When considering in-person events, education leaders should go where parents are, instead of making parents come to them. In addition, stakeholders should look for ways to partner together to bring a diverse set of advocates to the decision-making table. Providing several opportunities for parents and families to share their insight will ensure new policies and programs reflect the needs of all students.

While developing the new state education plan, the **New Jersey Department of Education** conducted online surveys, formed a stakeholder focus group and hosted in-person meetings, listening and learning sessions and webinars.

New Mexico PTA partnered with **Learning Alliance of New Mexico** to conduct ESSA feedback forums around the state so parents could share their views and guide future plans for public education.



Feedback

Systems and structures need to be put in place for parents to provide regular and ongoing input and feedback, and decision makers need to listen when parents share their thoughts. If families are included throughout all stages of the ESSA implementation process, they will understand how it relates not only to their child, but to every child in the community, the state—and across the country. ESSA is just the starting point for education leaders to engage parents and other stakeholders on education issues.

The **Arkansas Department of Education's** ESSA steering committee, that includes parent representation, will continue to meet to monitor and adjust the state ESSA plan to make sure it meets the needs of students and families.

In **Connecticut**, the Superintendent established the [Commissioner's Roundtable for Family and Community Engagement in Education](#), a group of parents, educators, students and community members who will serve as advisors on matters of education, including ESSA.

ESSA Family Engagement Rubric

This tool is designed to help states, school districts, schools and education leaders evaluate how they are engaging parents and family on ESSA implementation. Parents and families can also use this rubric to hold decision-makers accountable to the family engagement requirements in ESSA and other education initiatives.

	Struggling	Emerging	Excelling
Representation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Committees, workgroups or task forces on ESSA implementation do not include a parent representative. <input type="checkbox"/> Families do not have an opportunity to voice their questions and concerns related to ESSA. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Committees, workgroups or task forces on ESSA implementation identify the parent representative as someone from the education system who is also a parent. <input type="checkbox"/> Families who are already “in the know” about ESSA have an opportunity to voice their questions and concerns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Committees, workgroups or task forces on ESSA implementation include “parent-only” representatives. <input type="checkbox"/> Families know who is representing them in discussions about ESSA and have multiple opportunities to voice their questions and concerns.
Transparency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Families find out about ESSA implementation and plans after they have been completed. <input type="checkbox"/> Families have to go through a complex process to find out what is happening related to ESSA. Agendas or major topics for meetings are rarely provided publicly. <input type="checkbox"/> Most families in the community don’t know what ESSA means or how decisions about ESSA are made. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Implementation process and plans include explicit opportunities to engage families in. <input type="checkbox"/> Families find out what is happening related to ESSA planning through a variety of communications outlets. Agendas or major topics for discussion are usually publicly provided. Decision-makers are made obvious to families, though accessing them is difficult for many families in the community. <input type="checkbox"/> Families who are already “in the know” about ESSA understand how decisions will be made and how to engage in the process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Implementation process and plans include multiple, explicit opportunities to engage families. <input type="checkbox"/> Families know how their input will be used to inform ESSA. Issues and major topics related to implementation are debated in public forums, including media and radio outlets. Decision-makers are made obvious to families and they ensure there are strong systems in place to respond to family questions, suggestions and concerns related to ESSA. <input type="checkbox"/> Most families in the community, regardless of socioeconomic status or language, know what ESSA means, how and when decisions about ESSA will be made, and how and when to engage in the process.
Equity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> No efforts are made to engage diverse members of the community in ESSA plans. <input type="checkbox"/> Representatives of families from Title I schools, families of students with disabilities, families who are non-English speaking, and families who attend the most under-performing schools are not represented in ESSA planning discussions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Some efforts are made to engage diverse members of the community in ESSA plans. <input type="checkbox"/> Representatives of families from Title I schools, families of students with disabilities, families who are non-English speaking, and families who attend the most under-performing schools are present in ESSA planning discussions, although they are treated by others in the group more as “token” representatives for diversity than true advocates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Significant efforts are made to engage diverse members of the community in ESSA plans. Inequities in parents’ access and power are addressed openly and honestly. Education leaders help build a culture of trust and actively encourage families to voice their perspectives and challenge assumptions in conversations about ESSA implementation. <input type="checkbox"/> Representatives of families from Title I schools, families of students with disabilities, families who are non-English speaking, and families who attend the most under-performing schools are present, actively engaged in ESSA planning discussions and treated as true advocates by others in the group.
Information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Information about ESSA implementation doesn’t address how the new law will change the current state education system, why it is changing, and what this means for students and families. <input type="checkbox"/> Few or no families understand how ESSA implementation will affect their children and school. <input type="checkbox"/> ESSA documents shared with parents are often multiple pages in length, complicated, filled with education jargon and only available in English. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Information about ESSA implementation addresses how the new law will change the current state education system and why it is changing. <input type="checkbox"/> Some families understand how ESSA implementation will affect their children and school. <input type="checkbox"/> ESSA documents shared with parents are written with a parent audience in mind. If there are families in the community who speak a language other than English, these documents are translated into the next most spoken language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Information about ESSA implementation addresses how the new law will change the current state education system, why it is changing, and how schools, students and families will be affected by these changes. <input type="checkbox"/> Most families understand how ESSA implementation will affect their children and school, as well as what actions they can or should take with this information. <input type="checkbox"/> ESSA information shared with parents is presented in multiple formats with a parent audience in mind and makes use of visuals. If there are families in the community who speak a language other than English, these documents are translated into most or all of these other languages.
Accessibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Where opportunities for parents to inform ESSA plans exist, they happen during work hours, are only in English, and are held at locations convenient for education officials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Opportunities for parents to inform ESSA happen at multiple locations and times of day; these opportunities are sometimes well-publicized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Opportunities for parents to inform ESSA happen at multiple times of day and locations, as well as through multi-media and survey opportunities; these opportunities are always well-publicized. Planning for parent input is done in partnership with community organizations and/or leaders who have deep relationships with the community. <input type="checkbox"/> Accommodations for transportation, interpretation and child care are addressed to remove families’ barriers to participation.
Feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Opportunities for family input into ESSA implementation are limited to a one-time meeting or survey. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> There are up-front opportunities to inform ESSA implementation plans. <input type="checkbox"/> Families have a clear, publicly-accountable outlet to voice their concerns related to ESSA implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> In addition to up-front input to inform planning, there are ongoing opportunities for families to give feedback on ESSA implementation after plans have been established. <input type="checkbox"/> Families have a clear, publicly-accountable outlet to voice their concerns related to ESSA implementation. This outlet tracks parent input to identify trends and reports publicly on what they have heard, what they recommend as next steps and if/how decision-makers have responded to parent input.