

School & District Improvement FAQs

Topic 4:

Family and Community Engagement

THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

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.

COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

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School & District Improvement FAQs

The School and District Improvement (formally known as Supports & Interventions) State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards (SDI SCASS) of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) focused its 2015-2016 work on defining effective school improvement strategies and practices. To support themselves and other state education agency staff, the SDI members created this series of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents to define questions, highlight examples, and include any considerations that SEA staff may need to consider as they plan and implement policies and strategies. The FAQs are organized by topic.

The SDI SCASS is considering and reviewing the key components of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and ESEA flexibility to be retained (and possibly even strengthened) for future state work. Additionally, the new version of ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), provides significantly more authority directly to state education agencies (SEAs), and the SDI members seek to

- Gather various approaches from states in one resource,
- Highlight lessons learned and considerations, and
- Codify practices and policies that appear effective.

SDI members are looking carefully at their current work and have determined four critical components for supporting low-performing schools and districts:

1. Identification of Schools (including the lowest performing schools and schools with persistently underperforming subgroups)
2. Differentiated Supports and Interventions
3. Transfer of Funds and Resource Alignment
4. Family and Community Engagement

State-specific examples are provided and hyperlinked (if available). The SDI SCASS hopes these documents will be updated as additional guidance from the U.S. Department of Education is released and as SEAs implement successful practices. Please note that regulations from the U.S. Department of Education are pending and could adjust elements of the law that are discussed within these FAQs. The state education agencies that participated in the creation of these resources include Arkansas, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Staff from the Illinois Center for School Improvement and Virginia's state education agency also contributed.

TOPIC 4: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Family and community engagement is an important component of improving and most importantly sustaining schools and districts identified for low-performance. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requirements enhance this area for a number of reasons. First, under NCLB the term “parental involvement” was used. Under ESSA, the language also includes “parent and family engagement.” While a minor language change, identified schools often have students who live in a variety of home situations and this relatively simple shift validates those alternate family structures, and recognizes the importance of a student’s entire family. In addition, several parts of ESSA encourage — and in some cases require — additional family and community engagement. Examples of these opportunities include

- Broad stakeholder engagement during the ESSA planning process;
- The fifth “school quality” or “student success” indicator could include measures of family and community engagement (as long as the indicator meets all of the other requirements including the ability to disaggregate by student subgroups and is consistently collected across the state);
- The inclusion of family and community engagement in the development of Comprehensive Support & Intervention (CSI) and/or Targeted Support & Intervention (TSI) in school improvement plans;
- Shifting broader authority to state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) and providing those entities with greater autonomy to engage families, communities, and their respective organizations in planning, implementation, and monitoring;
- Similar to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), utilization of at least 1 percent of Title I funds to engage parents in the school community (note that this does not apply to LEAs receiving Title I allocations of \$500,000 or less);
- The ability for parents to select “direct student services” (tutoring, advanced coursework, etc.) for their children if the SEA elects to provide those services;
- The requirement for parents to be involved in the development of a state’s Innovative Assessment and Accountability System, if the SEA elects to develop such a system and submit it for U.S. Department of Education approval;
- The requirement for LEAs to consult with parents on the uses of funds under the new Student Support and Academic Enrichment block grant; and
- The requirement that parents and families must be “meaningfully” consulted during the development of an SEA’s implementation plan.

SEAs must now reexamine their role in supporting family and community engagement and how to move beyond the traditional strategies that have been used for many years – that may or may not have real impact on improving and sustaining student achievement.

This document focuses on SEA support to LEAs and schools with family and community engagement with an emphasis on the lowest-performing schools. For resources on how the SEA can engage with families and communities on state policy decisions, such as development and implementation of an ESSA state plan, please see CCSSO's [Getting Started: A Guide on Stakeholder Outreach](#).

1. What is the SEA role in supporting meaningful family and community engagement?

The SEA could play the role of establishing a universal vision for family engagement and provide resources and supports to districts, schools, community organizations, and parents. The SEA has the ability to model strong engagement processes to show LEAs how to work effectively with communities, and can encourage family and community engagement through the use of CSI/TSI school improvement plan questions. The SEA and state legislatures could also limit barriers to increase family and community engagement (i.e., cross-agency collaboration with parents and families or developing legislation that supports or removes barriers to engagement). SEAs could also collaborate with state-level parent, family, and community organizations to work on issues that trend across the state.

2a. What supports could SEAs provide directly to families and communities?

SEAs have a more limited role providing supports or services directly to families and communities. SEAs often provide resources via the SEA website or handbooks, hold trainings to “train the trainer” for broader dissemination of information and skills, and often hold informational sessions around policies or practice issues (i.e., listening tours).

State Examples

- SEA website includes several resources about what information is useful for families to know. The SEA provides the resources and the LEAs add to those resources and provide training. Some of the resources include documents that describe children’s progress (one for each grade level) (Washington).
- SEA coordinates and provides outreach to civic and community organizations around information dissemination (Utah & Washington).
- SEA hosts “Parent Nights” in each region around the state to support understanding of the College and Career Readiness Standards, provides statewide training for districts, parents, and schools throughout the state, and developed Parent Guides for Family Success and a Literacy Toolkit (Mississippi).
- SEA developed a family toolkit and regional education offices are expected to share resources with families (Michigan).
- In Spring 2016, SEA began family engagement professional development sessions to provide support to districts on creating a family engagement vision, family communication plans, and an assessment of high yielding strategies (Maine).

- SEA developed a “train the trainer” model for Academic Parent Teacher Teams (APTT) using braided Title I funds and some state funds. Participating schools receive an additional \$12.50/student/year in state funds to help cover costs of materials for APTT meetings with parents. Individual school sites that are among the lowest-performing 3 percent of schools (both Title I and non-Title I) receive training at the school sites to support teachers in doing home visits. State funds will be used to pay teachers \$30 per visit (\$50 per visit for teachers who serve in remote Navajo Reservation schools) (Utah).
- Parents are included in the SEA’s ESSA planning work groups (Oregon).

Considerations

- Create family and/or community toolkits and resources directly for parents or for LEAs to work with parents.
- Be sure to consider accessibility for busy family members as transportation can be limited for families (i.e., finding a location accessible to parents and families can be beneficial).
- Consider virtual meetings and multiple engagement opportunities to accommodate families with working parents or guardians including interactive webinars and Twitter town halls.
- Prepare any staff doing parent and family engagement with an understanding of historical bias toward the education system and inclusive language.
- Recognize that the lack of full time staff at the SEA to support family and community engagement can limit the supports provided directly to the families and communities.
- Use public service announcements (PSAs) from the SEA to families and communities as opposed to LEAs acting as the main information disseminator.
- Seek parental input during decision-making at the SEA level, for instance during ESSA workgroups and future ESSA monitoring.
- Provide outreach to community partners.
- Consider utilizing and collaborating with other SEA divisions (i.e., special education) who provide more services, information, and support directly to parents.

2b. What supports could SEAs provide to LEAs to support family and community engagement?

LEA efforts should focus on improving and increasing current practices to develop and enhance family and community engagement efforts, rather than adding these to teachers’ roles and responsibilities. It may be beneficial to have dedicated personnel (LEA staff or external partners) who work specifically to enhance the family and community engagement efforts of the LEA and support the teachers with this work. SEAs can support this work by providing information, toolkits, and resources to the LEAs. SEAs can also encourage LEAs to coordinate their family and community engagement efforts across programs and grant funding streams.

State Examples

- Dedicate staff to research and pull together resources that support family and community engagement to share with LEAs (Illinois CSI).
- Provide training to school and LEA leadership teams for home visits, and consider providing teachers a stipend to conduct home visits (Utah).
- Hold academic parent teacher team training with support from partners (Utah).
- Have a full time staff member that focuses on family and community engagement in addition to a contracted staff person who does outreach to the schools (South Dakota).
- Provide LEAs practical examples and tools that schools/LEAs can use (Illinois CSI).
- Provide family friendly walk-throughs to LEAs/schools (South Dakota).
- Encourage the use of school community councils that meet regularly to determine priorities for the school and provide input into budgets (Oregon and Utah).
- Provide state school improvement (1003(a)) funds to help support family and community engagement efforts in schools (South Dakota and Utah).
- Utilize SEA staff from other divisions to enhance supports to subgroup populations (i.e., ELL, migrant) (Washington).
- Collaborate cross-agency to hold conferences on the importance of attendance (Utah and Washington).
- Engage with Tribal communities to address housing needs (Teacherville) – live where you work, work where you live to increase school staff connections to the community and to support teachers find housing in remote areas (Washington).

Considerations

- Explore the purpose and theory of action around family and community engagement (i.e., What's the purpose? Is it for engagement, outreach, or active participation?).
- Dedicate a full time employee at the state level that provides services and support to LEAs in areas of family and community engagement.
- Develop internal and external communication policies to help share resources and disseminate efforts across the SEA and the state.
- LEAs need tools and resources that are specific to their needs, including a detailed description of the stages of implementation to reach desired outcomes.
- How can the SEA and LEA enhance existing mechanisms in the school/LEA? (i.e., conferences, back to school nights, bus, lunch times, athletic events, extracurricular demonstrations, community sports, faith based organizations)? Explore which families attend which types of events to determine where to put the most emphasis on supports.

- Utilize other school-based programs (i.e., 21st century learning community, athletic events, other extracurriculars) to reach out to parents and families.
- Explore broader community partnerships to bring community members into schools and connect students with other adults.

3. How is family and community engagement different for identified schools (i.e., priority/focus/CSI/TSI/other identified)?

Identified schools often require enhanced supports for family and community engagement and many have a historical lack of engagement from families and communities. CSI and TSI plans must, under ESSA, be developed in partnership with stakeholders, including parents. This is arguably stronger language than the NCLB requirement that improvement plans be developed “in consultation with” parents. Schools are more likely to develop sustainable changes with families and communities involved, but developing that involvement and engagement requires a great deal of trust building and a variety of engagement opportunities. The family and community engagement components of a school’s plan should be differentiated based on the identified school needs (i.e., Do families need support learning about desirable at-home learning environments? Would translation services be useful for families and school staff? How could community organizations collaborate on school and student needs? Could the local business community provide mentors or internships to students?).

State Examples

- Family and community engagement is included in the Guiding Principles that the identified schools & LEAs address. The schools complete a needs assessment and pick three of five principles to address. The LEAs approve the three the schools selected to work on (Oregon and Utah).
- Under ESEA flexibility waivers, Focus and Priority schools must address family and community engagement in their turnaround plans (South Dakota and Utah).
- Ongoing training is provided to coaching staff to understand the expectations of family engagement and to transfer that knowledge to the schools during on-site visits (Washington).
- The SEA has a narrow focus on leadership and the spheres of influence (principal, teacher, student, and parent), which highlights the need for family engagement (Arkansas).
- The SEA’s online planning platform includes family engagement indicators. The SEA also provides optional trainings on family engagement (Maine and Utah).

Considerations

- Require LEAs to include a section on family and community engagement in the required needs assessment.
- Include a description of family and community engagement in the CSI/TSI plan templates and funding applications.

- Provide training to staff that engages families and communities with the cultural sensitivities and the historical implications of the identified schools.
- Provide resources and highlight possible funding streams for schools and LEAs to do this work.
- Provide resources (e.g., toolkits, handbooks) on specific subgroups (i.e., military, ELL, migrant, low-income, specific racial or ethnic groups).

4. How do we provide guidance to LEAs about whom to invite to SEA-provided family and community trainings or workshops?

LEA staff often wear multiple hats in their districts, and family/community engagement is often one of many areas that a specific person may be responsible for. An LEA may want to dedicate personnel, who have decision-making authority, to oversee this work. If the SEA provides services directly to families and communities, it may be useful to identify desired characteristics of the community member who attends an SEA-provided training. It's also useful to diversify the family/community members, so it's not always the same core representatives.

Considerations

- Include specific information on notices and invitations about the content, suggested audience, any background knowledge needed, etc.
- Be careful to not to exclude families, communities, or certain demographic groups.

5. What sources of funding can be used to support family and community engagement work?

There are a number of funding streams that can be used to support family and community engagement work at the SEA level, at the LEA level, and within the schools. It is useful to use a variety of sources of funds to support family and community engagement work to increase alignment across the organization and to coordinate similar efforts. Most often, Title I funds are used to support this work, but additional sources from the various Title funding streams (state discretionary, state dedicated funds, and private foundation grants) can also be utilized. When using Title funds, the state set-aside funds under the various Titles (e.g., Titles IC, II, III, IV-A, IV-B) could be used to support family-and community-engagement-related activities that are relevant to the purposes of each Title (e.g., Title III funds would have to be used for activities related to English learners.). In addition, if the Title IV-F Family Engagement in Education program is funded in the future, this would support family engagement centers with which SEAs could cooperate. Under the statute, the centers would provide training and other assistance to SEAs and LEAs.

State Examples

- The Office of Student Intervention Services receives support from several SEA divisions and various funding streams because the office supports all students and their families (Mississippi).

- A private grant was used to develop pre-K-8 family handouts to explain what each academic standard means and relevant at-home activities to support learning (Mississippi).
- Schools and LEAs applying for and receiving school improvement funds must include three key staff in the applications/plans, including a data coach, a family engagement support person, and a school improvement grant coordinator. This ensures that all funded schools/LEAs appropriately emphasize the need for family engagement (Michigan).
- SEA utilizes Title II funds to provide professional development about how LEAs and schools can better engage with families. Title III supports include a parent committee and school improvement efforts. Additional state funding supports these initiatives and work with the state Parent Teachers Association (PTA) and the Business Roundtable. Family engagement notices are also released on the radio via Title III funds (Washington).

Considerations

- It may be useful to think about coherence within the agency and other SEA-divisions that work with identified schools that also include components of family and community engagement.

6. What are the best avenues of communication to reach families and communities?

To best reach families and communities, it is important to understand the unique aspects of the community, the historical communication between the community and the SEA/LEA/school(s), and the preferred or welcomed methods of information dissemination (including access to technology, value in face to face communication versus written, detailed vs. high-level information). There are a variety of forms of communication that can be used including SEA, LEA, and school websites; community organization websites; text messaging; phone calls; parent/family/teacher conferences; holding family engagement opportunities concurrently with athletic or extracurricular events; public service announcements delivered via radio or television; written notices; email correspondence; SEA or LEA-created report cards; newspaper articles; webinars; and, face to face communication. ESSA statute requires report cards be issued to families, communities, and the public about school and LEA performance. It is recommended that SEAs design user-friendly report cards and provide support on how to use/read the report cards.

State Examples

- The state Public Broadcasting System (PBS) station runs modules on TV (Mississippi).
- SEA staff revised all resources to make them easier for parents to access and navigate, including increasing the use of one-page communications for parents/families (Mississippi).
- LEA gathered a variety of community members and parents to visit multiple schools for short increments of time to observe the school's day-to-day practices 3-5 times during the school year (Washington).
- Developed stronger collaboration within SEA Title programs to share data, strategies, and efforts and to coordinate communication to families/communities/LEAs (Washington).

- LEA staff went door to door to meet families, and in some cases, delivered alarm clocks to address identified tardiness and absenteeism (South Dakota).
- Provides in-person trainings/workshops on specific topics to families and communities (Mississippi).
- SEA reviews plans including family and community engagement sections via Indistar®, Tracker, or other online portals (Maine, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington, and Utah).
- Video newsletters and videos of student activities are posted online (Illinois CSI).

Considerations

- Provide the right amount of communication to the right stakeholders, striving for transparency without overloading.
- Dedicate family/community engagement liaisons, either at a LEA or SEA level to navigate, coordinate, and create resources.
- Check for the accessibility and navigability of SEA, LEA, and school websites.
- Understanding the values of communities can enhance communication and engagement strategies.
- It may be useful to determine the barriers to engagement in an identified school/LEA during the needs assessment process. This could include surveys on how welcoming a school is and a review of protocols/procedures for parent/family contact.

7. How should family and community engagement be measured from the SEA level?

Currently most of the SEAs that contributed to this document review improvement plans and progress monitor the plans, including family and community engagement efforts. Some SEAs collect some data on family and community engagement, but SEA representatives do not believe that data is used very effectively. There is a desire to collect more relevant data and to use it to improve services more widely, moving beyond number of website visitors, number of online downloads, attendance at face-to-face forums/workshops, etc.

State Examples

- SEA monitors family and community engagement work during consolidated program reviews (Washington and Utah).
- SEA holds focus groups of family members (could include Title I onsite, SIG, Focus, Priority) (Arkansas and Utah).
- Annual administration of the Five Essentials Survey from the University of Chicago collects information on effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environments, and ambitious instruction (Illinois).

Considerations

- It can be difficult to separate “Engaged” vs. “Disengaged” – what’s the best way to gather baseline data?
- It is important to define engagement and what is desired from the various levels – SEA, LEA and school(s).
- Establishing relationships and trust with historically disengaged communities can take significant time and resources.
- Identify a need or an opportunity ahead of time and structure engagement around the need.
- If collected, use parent/family satisfaction surveys to drive planning for engagement opportunities. Also, collect information via informal communication with parents/families who may not choose to or may not be able to respond via traditional survey methods.
- Include family engagement information on report cards.

8. If the SEA was to provide a family and community engagement toolkit, what should be included?

Useful items for a family and community engagement toolkit include the following:

- A description of what family and community engagement is and how it could be incorporated into existing plans and work;
- A theory of action on family and community engagement;
- Needs assessment questions;
- Lists of possible strategies to implement, including examples from within the state;
- List of resources that could be used (differentiated by type of population/community and by stakeholder [i.e., parents and LEA staff]) or link to a website that is updated regularly; and
- Rubrics/evaluation tools to monitor effectiveness.

Consideration

- If family and community engagement coordinators exist in each LEA, it may be useful to create a database of contact information to facilitate coordination across LEAs.

9. What are other questions that SEA staff should consider?

- What are other innovative ways to engage family and community members?
- Could the SEA research what works and what doesn’t? What are promising practices?
- How could statewide civic groups or community organizations play a broader role?

Additional resources that may be useful

- Bryk, Anthony. (April 2010). *Organizing schools for improvement*. Phi Delta Kappan (V91, N7). Retrieved August 14, 2016, from <http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Organizing-schools-for-improvement-Bryk.pdf>.
- Communities in Schools, <https://www.communitiesinschools.org>
- SEDL in partnership with U.S. Department of Education. (2013). *Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships*. Retrieved August 15, 2016, from <http://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf>.
- Families & Schools Together, <https://www.familiesandschools.org/>
- Family Check-Up, Arizona State University, <https://reachinstitute.asu.edu/programs/family-check-up>
- CCSSO. (2016). *Guide on stakeholder outreach*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved August 14, 2016, from <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2016/ESSA/GuideonESSAStakeholderOutreach.pdf>.
- Henderson, A., Mapp, K., Johnson, V., and Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. The New Press: New York.
- Joyce Epstein, National Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, John Hopkins University, www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm
- Karen Mapp, Harvard Graduate School of Education, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/faculty/karen-l-mapp>
- Strengthening Families Program, www.strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org/



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