Deep Dive into Principle #3 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems

Principle #3

Engage early, regularly, and authentically with stakeholders and partners so improvement is done with and not to the school, families, and the community.

• Work with schools, families, and community members to build trusting relationships, expand capacity, inform planning, build political will, strengthen community leadership and commitment, and provide feedback loops to adjust as needed.

• Integrate school and community assets as well as early childhood, higher education, social services, and workforce systems to, among other things, help address challenges outside of school.

If you want to go far, go together.
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<td>1</td>
<td>Elevate school improvement as an urgent priority at every level of the system—schools, LEAs, and the SEA—and establish for each level clear roles, lines of authority, and responsibilities for improving low-performing schools.</td>
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<td>Make decisions based on what will best serve each and every student with the expectation that all students can and will master the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college, career, and civic life. Challenge and change existing structures or norms that perpetuate low performance or stymie improvement.</td>
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| 3           | Engage early, regularly, and authentically with stakeholders and partners so improvement is done with and not to the school, families, and the community.  
- Work with schools, families, and community members to build trusting relationships, expand capacity, inform planning, build political will, strengthen community leadership and commitment, and provide feedback loops to adjust as needed.  
- Integrate school and community assets as well as early childhood, higher education, social services, and workforce systems to, among other things, help address challenges outside of school. | If you want to go far, go together. |
| 4           | Select at each level the strategy that best matches the context at hand—from LEAs and schools designing evidence-based improvement plans to SEAs exercising the most appropriate state-level authority to intervene in non-exiting schools. | One size does not fit all. |
| 5           | Support LEAs and schools in designing high-quality school improvement plans informed by  
- each school’s assets (and how they’re being used), needs (including but not limited to resources), and root causes of underperformance;  
- research on effective schools, successful school improvement efforts, and implementation science;  
- best available evidence of what interventions work, for whom, under which circumstances; and  
- the science of learning and development, including the impact of poverty and adversity on learning. | Failing to plan is planning to fail. |
| 6           | Focus especially on ensuring the highest need schools have great leaders and teachers who have or develop the specific capacities needed to dramatically improve low-performing schools. | Talent matters. |
| 7           | Dedicate sufficient resources (time, staff, funding); align them to advance the system’s goals; use them efficiently by establishing clear roles and responsibilities at all levels of the system; and hold partners accountable for results. | Put your money where your mouth is. |
| 8           | Establish clear expectations and report progress on a sequence of ambitious yet achievable short- and long-term school improvement benchmarks that focus on both equity and excellence. | What gets measured gets done. |
| 9           | Implement improvement plans rigorously and with fidelity, and, since everything will not go perfectly, gather actionable data and information during implementation; evaluate efforts and monitor evidence to learn what is working, for whom, and under what circumstances; and continuously improve over time. | Ideas are only as good as they are implemented. |
| 10          | Plan from the beginning how to sustain successful school improvement efforts financially, politically, and by ensuring the school and LEA are prepared to continue making progress. | Don’t be a flash in the pan. |
Introduction

*Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.*

—Helen Keller

Going together to go far in school improvement requires state education agencies (SEAs) to design systems that manifest both components of Principle #3—**stakeholder engagement** and **partnerships**—in authentic, meaningful, ongoing, and strategic ways at the state, local, and school levels.

SEAs have made great strides since the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to improve **stakeholder engagement** efforts in the development of ESSA state plans. Many organized their approaches to align with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) principles of effective engagement listed in Figure 1.1 For several reasons, stakeholder engagement—in general, and in the context of school improvement in particular—is also critical as states shift to the implementation of their ESSA plans. Authentic input from stakeholders helps improve policy and practice. It also means SEAs (or local education agencies (LEAs) and schools) can tap into additional capacity, build the buy-in and political will needed to make difficult choices and sustain improvement efforts, and form long-term relationships to support continuous improvement over time. Stakeholder engagement is especially important at the school level. Since research shows that students benefit in academic and non-academic ways when their families are meaningfully engaged2 families are a powerful “force multiplier” for in-school supports.

This Deep Dive into Principle #3 addresses how best to incorporate stakeholder engagement into the design of a state system of school improvement. With respect to state consolidated plans,

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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 relationship

**Figure 1**

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1 For more information and resources about these principles, see [this three-part series of resources](http://flamboyanfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Outcomes-research-11-12-10.pdf) produced by CCSSO and a number of national partners.

ESSA required SEAs to engage substantially with stakeholders, in part to ensure that the voices of communities and advocates would inform how SEAs used the expanded decision making authority ESSA shifted to states. In the school improvement context, however, ESSA provides SEAs, LEAs, and schools more flexibility about how best to engage and partner with their stakeholders. SEAs should go beyond the minimum required by law and continue to integrate a wide range of stakeholders in designing and executing their school improvement system. Additionally, SEAs should require, encourage, and/or support LEAs and schools to do the same.

In addition to manifesting the stakeholder engagement component of Principle #3, SEAs must also design how best to approach the partnerships component. Many SEAs, LEAs, and schools have worked with partners of all types in prior school improvement efforts, including but not limited to technical assistance providers, vendors, and research institutions. The key to integrating partnerships as a critical element of an effective state system, though, is ensuring those partnerships are valuable and lead to improved student outcomes. This means the partners themselves do quality work that is aligned with the school improvement theory of action and responsive to local needs, in ways that build school and LEA capacity to yield sustainable improvement. ESSA’s evidence provisions nudge decision makers toward paying more attention to the quality component by asking potential partners for evidence of prior impact on student outcomes. But SEAs, LEAs, and schools must also be rigorous in examining the alignment, responsiveness, sustainability, and overall value of any potential partner. Additionally, Principle #3 also recognizes how much student performance and well-being is impacted by factors beyond school, especially in the absence of effective wraparound services. School improvement systems, therefore, must also be built to maximize collaboration across government agencies, with entities in other sectors, and across key transition points in students’ lives.

Questions To Ask Yourself

Stakeholder Engagement

1. As you plan for and conduct stakeholder engagement, how are you adapting the key steps used in state ESSA plan development to the school improvement context (see Figure 1 above)? As described more fully in Figure 2 below, how are your approaches maximizing representation, transparency, sustainability, collaboration, and alignment?

2. What can you leverage from your approach to ESSA consolidated state plan stakeholder engagement, including policies, practices, partners, and relationships? What missteps can you avoid repeating?

ESSA requires only that LEAs developing CSI plans and schools developing TSI plans do so “in partnership with stakeholders (including principals and other school leaders, teachers, and parents).” ESSA §1111(d)(1)(B) (CSI) and §1111(2)(B) (TSI). There are no specific stakeholder engagement requirements for SEAs in the school improvement provisions.
3. **For which decisions about how to design your state system of school improvement are you engaging stakeholders** (e.g., the requirements discussed on pp. 6-7 of the Roadmap to Implementing the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems)? Are you working with the same groups to inform each of these design decisions (e.g., a standing committee), or are you differentiating who contributes to what?

4. **What expectations do you have for LEAs and schools** for engaging stakeholders throughout the school improvement process, and how have you communicated those expectations? As with your own state-level design process, are your expectations for LEAs and schools different for different parts of the process? Are there specific stakeholders that must be engaged?

5. **What resources, guidance, and/or technical assistance** will you provide to help LEAs and schools meet your expectations or navigate areas where additional clarity is needed?

6. How will you know if your **expectations are being met** for LEA- and school-level stakeholder engagement?

7. What role, if any, will **evidence of stakeholder engagement** play in your state-level review and approval of CSI plans? Of applications for school improvement grants?

8. **Is stakeholder engagement itself a required (or recommended) improvement strategy** in CSI and TSI plans—to involve families and other stakeholders not just as providers-of-feedback but also as additional capacity for the day-to-day improvement efforts? What resources and technical assistance can you provide to help build the awareness, motivation, and capacity of LEAs, schools, and the stakeholders themselves to engage in these (likely unfamiliar) ways? Are there opportunities to engage reciprocally by leveraging LEA/school staff to support stakeholders’ improvement efforts in the community beyond the school?

**Partnerships**

9. How are you **coordinating statewide efforts** to improve outcomes for students in CSI and TSI schools with your peers at other state agencies and the state’s early childhood, higher education, social services, and workforce systems?

10. How can the state **support LEAs and schools in identifying and engaging in valuable partnerships** across agencies and with other entities in the community? What role, if any, will such collaboration play in how the state designs requirements and templates governing the development, approval, funding, and monitoring of CSI and TSI plans?

11. **Is your school-level (and LEA-level if applicable) needs assessment** designed to diagnose root causes that exist beyond the school walls and outside the school day and year? Does it point toward partnerships to help address any identified challenges?
12. How can you support LEA and school efforts to inventory school and community assets that can be leveraged in improvement efforts, including but not limited to state, county, and municipal agencies; private and not-for-profit providers (e.g., child care, afterschool, and summer enrichment providers); philanthropies; research institutions; tribal organizations; employers; and other potential partners?

13. How are you working with LEAs and schools to surface and resolve any bureaucratic barriers to connecting students and communities to the supports they need? Are there state policies or practices that need revising to facilitate these partnerships?

14. How are you linking government data sets—with appropriate privacy protections—to support more effective partnerships, decision-making, and allocation of resources?

15. What requirements, guidance, and/or technical assistance will you provide to LEAs to help them “use a rigorous review process to recruit, screen, select, and evaluate any external partners with whom the [LEA] will partner” in school improvement efforts, as required by ESSA §1111(e)(1)(D)?

16. What process will be followed if directly engaging at the SEA level with school improvement partners or vetting them on behalf of LEAs?

17. How will you hold any SEA partners accountable for results?

18. Are you leveraging better performing LEAs and schools as partners for CSI and TSI schools (and their LEAs) that serve similar groups of students?

**State Spotlights**

**Illinois** established the Healthy Community Incentive Grant which provides low-income school districts (via a formula) and organizations serving predominantly low-income students (via competition) with funding to support the development of cross-sector partnerships between schools, local governmental entities, education organizations, faith-based organization, civic organizations, and philanthropic groups. These partnerships will both promote the coordination of efforts to support the needs of the whole child and align with the Illinois State Board of Education goals and the vision and mission outlined in Illinois’ ESSA Plan (p. 9 of ESSA Plan).  

Illinois is also focusing on improving the quality of partnerships that LEAs and schools enter into by taking a leading role in recruiting, vetting, and approving potential school improvement partners and providers. IL-EMPOWER is the SEA’s new statewide system of differentiated support that helps match LEAs and schools with a network of these vetted professional learning

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partners. The partnerships forged in IL-EMPOWER are designed to be “strengths-based, collaborative, and inquiry-driven.”

**Colorado’s** approach fosters peer-to-peer learning through collaborative efforts such as its [Connect for Success](#) grant program, which pairs schools in need of improvement with schools that are serving similar students but with greater success. The SEA also operates the [Colorado Turnaround Network](#), a network where schools identified for improvement and senior staff members from their LEAs collaboratively engage in efforts to support school improvement, including “specialized professional development and on-site performance management sessions.”

Colorado also emphasizes the importance of engaging communities and stakeholders in the school improvement process. Colorado’s Accountability System lists the required stakeholder groups, and the role each of those groups play in providing accountability and support, including both LEA and school accountability stakeholder committees that support the improvement plan development and implementation (pp. 4-6 of the [District Accountability Handbook](#)).

In addition to the examples in Figure 2 below of SEAs implementing best practices for engaging stakeholders, several others have included strong commitments in their ESSA plans aligned to Principle #3:

- **Georgia** will create new or strengthen existing partnerships with other state agencies that interact with students in high-needs communities to address both external and internal school factors impacting student outcomes (p. 52 of [ESSA Plan](#)).

- **New York** will support the adoption of a Participatory Budgeting Process in each of its CSI schools to allow parents and students the opportunity to identify and vote on projects that schools will fund (p. 93 of [ESSA Plan](#)).

- **Wyoming** will require TSI schools to develop their improvement plans in consultation with school leaders, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders (p. 25 of [ESSA Plan](#)).

- **South Carolina** created an Office of Family and Community Engagement to help facilitate and sustain positive school-family partnerships, foster connections with community stakeholders to support schools in engaging families, and promote family engagement as an indicator of student academic achievement and success (p. 88 of [ESSA Plan](#)).

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Figure 2

Partners for Each and Every Child® reviewed state ESSA plans and talked with officials and advocates from across the country about how engagement with stakeholders is informing efforts to advance equity and excellence, particularly in the development of state plans and now in the school improvement process. They found that the most promising approaches are built upon five interwoven themes, described below with some examples of how these practices are put into action across the nation. SEAs should ask these additional questions and consider these additional state spotlights as they design their approach to stakeholder engagement in their own school improvement systems.

1. **REPRESENTATION:** Are you “reaching the unreached” by prioritizing the needs, participation, and leadership of communities that have historically been marginalized and underserved by political decision-making processes?
   - Prioritize the disbursement of school improvement funds to LEAs in part on the basis of their use of stakeholder engagement and community partnerships to drive improvement. (Oregon)
   - Include family and community engagement as a discrete element of LEA and school improvement plans. (Maine)

2. **TRANSPARENCY:** Are you “showing your work” by making your decision-making process transparent? Can all communities easily see when and how to participate, as well as how their participation is valued and is having real impact?
   - Clearly articulate differences in federal, state, district, and local roles in school improvement, and highlight the use of data in decision-making. Co-convene meetings with partner organizations and collaborate with them on jointly reporting out from these meetings. (New Jersey)
   - Break down the state’s ESSA plan into a few core substantive areas and then convene stakeholders from different organizations and representing different constituencies around each of those areas. This increases procedural transparency and helps build broader community investment in school improvement. (Colorado and Georgia)
   - In public materials, identify decision points, present the decisions in ways that are easily understood, and clarify legal and regulatory requirements. Clearly articulate expectations for LEAs and schools. (Illinois and Ohio)

3. **SUSTAINABILITY:** Are you “sticking with it” by not only engaging stakeholders at the outset of planning your school improvement systems but also continuing to engage meaningfully throughout implementation in structured, regular ways?
   - Consult ESSA advisory group members on the school improvement plan development process and on implementation. (Nevada and North Dakota)
   - Assign staff to support parent and community engagement efforts. Coordinate engagement efforts across federal and state programs. (Washington and Oklahoma)
   - Collaborate with state-based “think tanks,” advocacy organizations, and membership organizations. (Tennessee)

4. **COLLABORATION:** Are you “maximizing your resources” by working with outside partners to strengthen your engagement efforts with additional resources, staff, intellectual capital, and new perspectives?
   - Enlist outside organizations to advise on programming in LEAs and program evaluation. (Massachusetts)
   - Seek support from national and community foundations for discussions with underserved and historically underrepresented communities about school improvement. (Michigan)

5. **ALIGNMENT:** Are you “doubling down” by aggregating and analyzing community feedback from separate and parallel efforts by different entities or state/local agencies to identify areas of agreement, amplify the voices of the underserved, and build support for reform?
   - Analyze the input gained from separate stakeholder engagement efforts to gain insight into shared priorities. (New Mexico and Louisiana)
   - Work with statewide and local educational policy leaders to find common themes and develop complementary plans for stakeholder engagement. (California)

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9 A project of The Opportunity Institute, Partners for is a collaborative, nonpartisan network of education researchers, advocacy organizations, and policy experts who are committed to educational excellence for each and every child. The network grew out of the work of the Congressionally chartered national Commission for Equity and Excellence in Education.
Supporting Targeted Support and Improvement Schools

- **Identifying the right stakeholders to support a TSI school** requires a careful balancing act. On one hand, it is critical that stakeholders with direct relationships to the “consistently underperforming” subgroups of students are deeply engaged, especially given the specialized knowledge and perspective they can bring to the table. On the other hand, over relying on subgroup-specific stakeholder groups could lead to an actual or perceived shift of responsibility for the improvement effort from the entire school and community to just those with personal connections to the particular students.

- By contrast, when identifying partners and opportunities for collaboration, SEA, LEA, and school leaders should intentionally enter **partnerships with agencies, providers, and other entities with specialized expertise** that is relevant to meeting the needs of the particular group(s) of students. This is especially true when specialized LEA and school capacity may be limited.

Common Mistakes

**Don’t turn a floor into a ceiling.** Stakeholder engagement is critical in the implementation of ESSA, particularly around school improvement. Do not be limited by the requirements of the law, but consider what will help best meet the needs of students in that particular school and community. Policies, practices, and plans will always be better as a result of extensive, regular, and more authentic engagement with a diverse group of stakeholders, especially those you may not have traditionally engaged with in the past.

**Don’t accept a gift horse without first looking it in the mouth.** Some SEAs and particularly some LEAs and schools may struggle to find willing partners (e.g., vendors, technical assistance providers, researchers) to support their school improvement efforts. Others, however, will be flooded with opportunities and offers. Given how critical alignment and coherence are to sustaining an improvement process, leaders of those systems should be careful not to overextend themselves by saying “yes” to every potential collaboration. Instead, look for strategic, high-quality partners and providers who will provide needed and high-quality capacity, align with your theory of action, be held accountable for results, and offer sustainable support.
Recommended Resources

Let’s Continue This Conversation, published by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2017), is the third in a series of tools supporting stakeholder engagement through ESSA implementation. It provides an array of engagement strategies and successful state examples of stakeholder engagement around ESSA, with a focus on continuing efforts launched during the development of ESSA state plans. (The first and second tools in the series are also helpful resources as the focus turns to school improvement, and this additional guide can help SEAs, LEAs, and schools think about effective ways to integrate feedback from stakeholders.)

Meaningful Local Engagement Under ESSA: A Handbook for LEA and School Leaders, published by Partners for Each and Every Child, a project of the Opportunity Institute, in conjunction with the Council of Chief State School Officers (2017), provides tools and strategies to assist LEA and school leaders as they engage stakeholders in ESSA implementation.

The School-Wide Family Engagement Rubric, developed by the Flamboyan Foundation (2011), includes a series of research-based effective school-wide family engagement practices that schools (and their LEAs) can use to self-assess and improve. The rubric supports efforts to leverage family engagement itself as a driver of school improvement.

Community Schools: A Whole-Child Framework for School Improvement, published by the Coalition for Community Schools and the Institute for Educational Leadership (2017), describes the community schools framework with a particular focus on the benefits of this model for school improvement. This report also provides clear suggestions for ways SEAs can support community schools.

The following are additional, more targeted resources that may inform SEAs, LEAs, and schools on how best to engage specific stakeholder groups:

- ESSA Parent Advocacy Toolkit (National Council on Learning Disabilities (NCLD))
- 10 Minute Meeting Guide (National Education Association)
- Building Relationships with Tribes: A Native Process for Local Consultation Under ESSA (National Indian Education Association (NIEA))
- 6 Keys to Engaging Families in ESSA (En Español) (National PTA)
- PTA ESSA Local Roadmap (National PTA)
- Engage for Equity: A Toolkit for School Communities on ESSA (Dignity in Schools Campaign, NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF), Partners for Each and Every Child)