

New Mexico Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA Stakeholder Engagement Focus Group Protocol

Guiding Principles

This strategy encourages stakeholder engagement with Local Education Agencies, LEAs, to help inform recommendations for the State Education Agency, SEA, plan. ESSA requires that the SEA submit a state plan for education policy that is developed with timely and meaningful consultation with governors, members of the state legislature, local districts, Indian tribes, teachers, principals and families. Similarly, ESSA requires that LEAs develop plans created with timely and meaningful consultation with stakeholders including teachers, principals, school leaders, specialized support personnel, charter school leaders, administrators and families. The protocol developed in this toolkit aims to collect feedback from all of the above mentioned stakeholders and to be true to the intent of the new federal law.

LEAs can use a common template to host focus groups with students, families and educators to learn about local ideas regarding standards, assessments and accountability. Part of the engagement methodology involves common questions (provided by a template) and common ground rules. These ground rules below will help guide conversations so stakeholders may provide meaningful input grounded in the decisions our state must make under ESSA.

- **The importance of common questions.**
 - We understand that there are pressing issues in all of our communities and that stakeholders may wish to explore other areas. We have created the question template to be a baseline, to collect feedback on common questions across New Mexico. To receive these collective responses, we must at a minimum ask the questions on the template. We do, however, encourage all districts, charter schools and organizations to use this time with their stakeholders to explore additional topics as necessary which could be added to the template at the discretion of the organization. Please be mindful when adding questions.
- **Collaboration means compromise.**
 - Stakeholders may be frustrated with education policy and outcomes in our state. It is important to listen to and validate that frustration. But, as we move forward in New Mexico, we must seek to understand one another and find common ground so we can build a better future for our children.
 - We must be holistic in our vision, keeping the big picture in mind and moving past one or two issues. By not digging in our heels and moving forward now, we can leverage our agreements through this process and make our vision a reality.
- **Certain realities must be recognized.**
 - We have a unique opportunity to direct decisions under ESSA that will have a true impact on our schools. We must honor the good work our state has done and continue to build upon past work. To achieve this goal, we understand:
 - ESSA requires that schools receive a rating on how well they perform; and that in our state that will most likely continue to be something like a school grade. ESSA does, however, ask our stakeholders about what should be included in our school rating systems, what we value in our schools and how we should guarantee those values are reflected in school accountability models. We should focus on those opportunities.

New Mexico Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA Stakeholder Engagement Focus Group Protocol

- Teachers will continue to be evaluated and while ESSA allows states to no longer include student test scores, the reality is that student achievement should matter in how we know if our teachers are performing well. What that specifically looks like, and how we prioritize those components of a teachers evaluation should be something that stakeholders influence.
- Our state has invested in the common core and its implementation. We should build on that past work but should also understand that the common core does not address all our academic needs. ESSA focuses on a well-rounded student. What do we need to do to ensure our students are prepared for the next step of their lives, regardless of what that step may be?
- **Be engaged with all your stakeholders.**
 - We know that each community has different needs from their schools. We encourage local districts and charter schools to leverage the assets their community brings when collecting input and when creating their LEA documents for ESSA. ESSA is revolutionary in its vision to have policy created from the ground up. Indian tribes are specifically listed as education stakeholders critical for a local district to consult with when setting up focus groups. Though not specifically listed, employee organizations are an additional stakeholder that a local district should engage within the parameters of any formal agreements it holds with those groups.

Timeline

- September 1, 2016: Distribution of ESSA Stakeholder Input Toolkit
 - September – October, 2016: Focus groups held throughout New Mexico and schools forward information to their LEA
 - November 2016: LEAs compile ESSA stakeholder information into a district document to forward to Learning Alliance
 - December 2016 – January, 2017: Statewide input compiled by UNM CEPR into the New Mexico Stakeholder Input Report
 - February 2017: ESSA Stakeholder input presented to our SEA, the NM Public Education Department

Input Protocol Overview

Below is a brief protocol overview that will be used to accomplish stakeholder input as outlined in ESSA. For a more comprehensive step-by-step guide, please refer to the Step-By-Step Guide in the Toolkit.

- A template of approximately ten questions will be used with focus groups across the state. Questions are focused on standards, assessment and accountability - the three main topics covered by ESSA.
- The recommended process for education institutions to hold focus groups and create an LEA document follows:
 - Each superintendent/charter school director receives the toolkit and works with principals to facilitate 3 focus groups at each school in their district or network:
 - One focus group with students – high schools only.
 - One focus group with teachers
 - One focus group with families

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- A steering committee, recommended to be the advisory/instructional school council, synthesizes the information from the focus groups to present to district office/superintendent/charter school director. This synthesis should capture the common themes and responses given after each question. It could be as short as a few sentences or longer if necessary. Schools should send raw notes from focus groups in addition to the school document.
- In addition to those groups listed in this document as required to have input solicited from (i.e. Indian Tribes, parents and teachers), Superintendents/charter school directors should determine other stakeholders from whom they feel input is important. Examples may include:
 - Organized parent organizations in addition to families at schools
 - Local business leaders
 - Local unions
 - Local elected officials
- Each district/charter school synthesizes its schools information into one LEA document to forward to Learning Alliance for data collection and summary into a statewide document. The LEA should send its raw notes from focus groups in addition to its LEA document. The LEA document can be used to complete the LEA plan requirements under ESSA.
- Additional, non-education based groups who are encouraged to use this toolkit for input that may be submitted to either its local district or Learning Alliance to be compiled include, but are not limited to:
 - Tribal Leaders
 - Legislative Committees
 - Chambers of Commerce
 - Neighborhood Associations
 - Non-Profit Organizations
- Learning Alliance and UNM CEPR will collect stakeholder engagement information from across New Mexico and create a New Mexico document that displays priorities from stakeholders in the three main topics of ESSA.
- Statewide partners will forward the New Mexico document to the NM Public Education Department for use in development of the New Mexico ESSA plan.

*The above outline to the protocol is meant to be a guide to those using the toolkit, **not a requirement**. The goal of the toolkit is to ensure stakeholders have a meaningful voice as we make decisions that will impact our educational system, our communities and our children for years to come. We believe common questions accomplish this goal in a manageable way for all stakeholders.*