

Effective Communications for Stakeholder Engagement Checklist

This checklist outlines the key steps that state educational agency (SEA) and local educational agency (LEA) staff can take to successfully plan and implement stakeholder engagement efforts in rural settings.

This checklist also supports flexible implementation options for SEAs and LEAs with limited staff or capacity by highlighting the most critical steps around effective stakeholder engagement (highlighted in **blue*** below¹). SEAs and LEAs with limited staff or capacity can create a more gradual timeline for implementation by focusing first on the critical steps, allowing a small group to accomplish more over a longer period of time.

| Getting Started: Engagement Guidelines |
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| <i>Rural engagement requires an intentional beginning, with conversations grounded in awareness of local needs and how your work intersects.</i> |
| <p>* 1. Clarify your goals. Resist the temptation to communicate until you articulate your goals. Remember that word choice matters; often, words have several meanings depending on where they “live” locally, especially in a rural context.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Crystallize what you want to say and say it in a way that it rings true to the language of the unique rural setting where you are working. Test your messages with trusted local partners who speak the language—those who know the dialect, words that work, and charged words to avoid. <input type="checkbox"/> Align your stakeholder engagement goals to your state’s strategic and the district’s local vision for success. Be clear on what you want to accomplish, how stakeholders can inform the work, and what action you want stakeholders to take from a discussion or forum. <input type="checkbox"/> Write your goals with tangible outcomes and real people in mind. Give them personal meaning to drive local impact and resonance. For example, instead of writing about impacts for students in a county, use the specific names of communities in that county and pair goals with student photos sourced from LEAs to personalize your intent. |
| <p>2. Work with partner organizations to identify and engage your stakeholders. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) asks states and districts to engage with a range of stakeholder groups throughout the planning and implementation process, but don’t stop there.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Think of other voices that could add to the conversation. Look beyond the people with whom you typically engage. Think about perspectives that may be missing and proactively engage traditionally underserved or underperforming communities. <input type="checkbox"/> Identify stakeholders who understand local needs and can articulate potential solutions, not just problems around what they may be against. |

¹ Steps 1, 3, 5, and 10 are the most critical for SEAs and LEAs with limited capacity to pursue first.

- Remember that you don't have to do this work alone. Leverage regional and local civil rights organizations, unions, advocacy groups, and networks that the community trusts to communicate with stakeholders, organize feedback, and provide translations and childcare services for parents attending meetings.
- Initiate formal and informal conversations. Based on recommendations from your local contacts, consider sharing messages via flyers distributed at stores, community centers, and other local places where people gather on a regular basis. Offer contact information to follow up with questions and feedback. Don't be shy about announcing the opportunity to connect in local meetings and informal gatherings (e.g., picnics, fundraisers, craft/arts fairs, festivals).

Getting It Right: Engagement Best Practices

High-quality engagement involves providing multiple opportunities for stakeholders to inquire and be informed about your efforts.

- * **3. Speak to your audience.** Each stakeholder group has different needs, and every stakeholder has a different story to understand and a different role they want to play.
 - Strive for transparency and answer questions when they are asked, but don't flood your audiences with needless details.
 - From the start, be clear about your intent by defining the role stakeholders are being asked to play and the decision-making process that will come next.
 - Consider each group's unique interests and perspectives to determine the right level of detail that your stakeholders need.
 - Convey culturally and regionally relevant information that best responds to stakeholders' interests, concerns, and questions. Prepare materials that will provide each group with the most relevant information.
- 4. Use multiple vehicles.** Outreach methods, such as newspaper announcements and ads, are *not* the best ways to reach multiple audiences. When possible, meet stakeholders where they already are by attending their community meetings or events.
 - Carefully consider meeting locations. For example, the local school district or other government offices may appear intimidating.
 - Partner with a stakeholder whom the community trusts to host and/or facilitate your meeting to ensure greater attendance and participation.
 - Augment your outreach and engagement strategy by incorporating social media, blogs, video, surveys, webinars, etc. to reach some audiences. Remember that low Internet bandwidth may be an obstacle for accessing online vehicles; consider televising or broadcasting events on local television and radio stations to guarantee your reach.
 - Build your strategy to employ a mix of communications vehicles to target specific stakeholders and reach the largest possible audience.
 - Engage trusted community members to serve as human information hubs that lend credibility to the story from a local perspective. More than technology or communications tools, they are your best vehicles to spread the word.

- * **5. Identify your best ambassadors.** Parents, educators, and community groups often respond more openly when discussing information with their friends and neighbors, rather than with representatives perceived as authority figures.
- Create a relationship map to determine who would be best positioned to engage with specific stakeholder groups and use it to identify your best possible ambassadors. Be sure to connect with any local chambers of commerce, Farm Bureau, extension office, regional service agency or cooperative, board of education, and county commissioners. Consider recruiting 4-H, Future Farmers of America, or other student leaders to play this role. When the community hears from local students about how education is preparing them for life’s next steps, it has more relevance and meaning.
 - Tip for SEAs: Develop tools and resources that LEAs can share, such as talking points and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents, to support outreach by ambassadors to ensure their communication remains clear and that they gather meaningful feedback. Suggest that LEAs talk through how to use the resources to make sure they are trained in spreading the word.
 - Explore the possibility of identifying shared ambassadors to communicate information to help multiple districts in a region.

- 6. Ask for input before decisions are made and use it.** There is no benefit to asking for input on issues that have already been addressed or resolved.
- Approach stakeholders early so their feedback, questions, and comments can inform and improve plan development, but come with potential ideas to help facilitate and prompt discussion.
 - Prepare draft materials and discussion questions tailored to stakeholders’ areas of expertise. Even if you do not integrate all of their feedback, hearing their questions, priorities, and concerns will help you better understand their perspectives, and identify potential areas of alignment and disagreement.
 - Once decisions are final, share with stakeholders how their feedback was used. Everyone wants to be recognized. Don’t mistake a humbler approach for not wanting to see oneself in the work.

- 7. Keep your materials simple and brief.** Present messages and materials in an easy-to-understand format and written to illustrate how the content relates to and directly benefits student success.
- Use clear, concise messaging that reaches most stakeholders at a high level, and keep the in-the-weeds detail for discussions with those who have expertise in the area.
 - Focus on the end goal and how your stakeholders will be impacted rather than on details about process.
 - Stay ahead of the curve. In today’s global economy, this is even more relevant for rural citizens who work remotely with those from all over the world. Make the content locally relevant and innovatively informed by global views.

- 8. Communicate early and often.** Help your stakeholders first hear about changes in education policy from you—not the news media.
- Tell your story by providing stakeholders with regular, reliable, and relevant information in multiple, easy-to-access formats.
 - Participate in local meetings when possible to present updates and collect feedback on course corrections. Maintain a group of key stakeholders as advisors and ambassadors throughout the implementation process to continue the two-way engagement.
 - Be a timely, direct news source for your rural audiences. If presented in an approachable way, you can take the “word of mouth” and “heard it through the grapevine” concepts to

the next level through in-person and social media interaction—keeping in mind that Internet access may be limited depending on rural location connectivity.

Keeping It Going: Strategies for Sustaining Engagement

Building capacity for shared ownership of the plan and its implementation over time will support ongoing success.

9. Keep your team informed. While states and LEAs should prioritize reaching their stakeholders, remember to keep internal staff engaged. Staff can be powerful ambassadors if they have the right information.

- Develop and share a list of key themes, dates, and decisions with staff.
- Hold information sessions for the internal team to keep them informed and to seek input.
- Be mindful that word spreads fast. If conversations about the work have unfolded in certain forums, but not others, be sensitive that word is out. If you elect to share information with a selected audience, it will go beyond faster than you think.

*** 10. Turn new connections into long-term relationships.** Use this engagement process as an opportunity to build new connections and strengthen existing relationships with stakeholders.

- Set the tone for ongoing conversation by listening to stakeholder feedback, answering their questions, and showing that their input has an impact on the decisions that are made.
- Remind stakeholders that in addition to helping with the district plan, they can continue to assist the state as it implements ESSA in the next few years.
- Deepen your relationships with broader regional partners, including trusted civil rights organizations, unions, education associations, and other agencies and advocacy groups to continue open engagement and expand reach to all stakeholders. Use technology to bridge the divide of geographic distance but prepare for any challenges with connectivity.