ESSA Thinkers Meeting Insights:
Process is key to developing state plans

In December 2016, Education Commission of the States convened 12 policy experts and representatives from state education agencies (SEAs), legislatures, governors' offices and state boards of education to discuss key policy issues in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act – and how states can use changes in federal law to achieve their education goals.

The conversation that emerged transcended content areas such as assessments and accountability and instead focused on the approach states should take to their ESSA work. The participants emphasized the importance of developing a unified state vision, bringing all the right players to the table and fostering a state's capacity to achieve its education goals. Importantly, they stressed that improvement is an ongoing process and that the conversations started now should continue for years to come.

This report does not represent a consensus among all the participants, nor does it represent their endorsement of all ideas within it. Rather, it presents the big-picture ideas captured during the two-day meeting as well as state examples and additional resources, all of which state leaders can consult throughout their work to improve education in their state.

The 2016 presidential election created uncertainty about the status of ESSA regulations, but the ESSA Thinkers Meeting participants agreed that the law itself is unlikely to change. The new law, like the prior reauthorization, (the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001), requires that SEAs file a state plan with the U.S. Department of Education to receive a Title I grant. State plans serve as the state's application for federal funds and can be submitted for individual programs or as a consolidated plan. States must periodically revise their plans as they make key changes to their assessment, accountability and school

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improvement systems. While newly-released regulations push back ESSA state plan due dates, states still face significant time and resource constraints that can interfere with thoughtful plan development. Despite these constraints, the participants strongly encourage states to move beyond the check-the-box, compliance mentality where the end goal is simply submitting a plan to the U.S. Department of Education. Instead, they recommend that states use the provisions of the new law as an opportunity to develop a comprehensive, long-term plan – one that can guide future state leaders in education policymaking, and, most importantly, guide students toward greater academic success for generations to come.

The state plan process recommended by the participants follows these basic steps:

1. Set a state vision.
2. Develop state goals.
3. Write the state plan.
4. Establish new, or align existing, policies and guidelines as needed to implement the state plan.
5. Implement the state plan and provide necessary support to districts and schools.
6. Evaluate progress toward state goals.
7. Rework state plan as needed.

More important than following each of these steps in order is recognizing certain key components within each step – the why, the who and the how – and viewing the steps as an iterative or cyclical process. Whether a state is in the brainstorming stage, writing the first or second draft of the state plan or even beginning implementation, state leaders must ensure that: 1) the work aligns with the state's vision (Why are we doing this work?), 2) the right stakeholders are at the table and their roles are clearly defined (Who is doing the work?), and 3) the stakeholders have the capacity to do their work, have a fair accountability system in place to measure their progress and have a plan for continuous improvement (How do we do this work?).

This report addresses each of these three areas and provides examples and key resources within each area. While the three components may not fit perfectly within each stage, state leaders are encouraged to use this resource as a guide at any point in the process.

The Why:
What is the purpose of education in my state?

State leaders should start by stepping back to think about the purpose of education in their state. Because ESSA gives greater authority to states and provides greater opportunity for innovation than was possible under NCLB, the participants encourage all states to revisit or generate a strong state vision and accompanying goals for education that can guide the state's work in this new environment.

To develop a cohesive vision, state leaders may need to delve into difficult questions such as:
- What is the purpose of education in our state?
- What are the key levers in our state for achieving this purpose?
- How will we measure success?
- What do we mean by equity?
- What does it mean for our students to be college and career ready?
- What are state leaders' expectations for districts and schools that do not meet goals?

A state vision should be strategic, identifying key needs within the state (for example, building capacity for strong leadership at the school level or providing students access to rigorous course work). States receive limited federal funds, and ESSA funds alone will not meet all of the state's needs or ensure that the state's vision is fully implemented. However, by allocating ESSA resources to the areas identified by stakeholders to be of the highest priority for the state, policymakers can best leverage these funds in service of the state's vision.

Example: New provisions in ESSA authorize local education agencies (LEAs) to administer a locally selected, nationally recognized assessment in high school in lieu of the state-determined academic assessments required for math, English language arts (ELA) and science if the SEA approves and the test meets federal peer review. When deciding whether to take advantage of this flexibility, states should return to their overall vision and priorities. The assessment a state selects, or allows LEAs to select, should further the state's goals and speak to its priorities. As part of the process, a state may need to prioritize among a variety of possible goals: holding high schools accountable, ensuring aligned learning from the middle grades through high school graduation or preparing students to enter college or careers. Additionally, state K-12 leaders need to communicate with state postsecondary and business leaders to ensure that their definitions of college and career readiness align and they agree on steps to achieve this readiness.

Aligned Vision, Goals and Plan
A common, unifying vision of the purpose of education can guide states as they develop and prioritize their goals, and simplify the state plan drafting process. By helping states focus on priority areas, a common vision can allow states to use their limited time and resources efficiently rather than spreading them across myriad disconnected goals and ideas.

Alignment to a common vision should occur horizontally across the P-20 education spectrum, as well as vertically through the many state-, local- and school-level stakeholders who are affected by the vision. By ensuring vertical and horizontal alignment within the state, this vision can serve several key purposes:

- Enable policymakers to work across silos toward a shared purpose.
- Provide a common language for stakeholders and policymakers to use when discussing education policy at any level.
- Provide the scaffolding for the development and prioritization of state education goals.
- Support districts and schools by helping them to understand the purposes behind policies, which can foster shared ownership of the vision and the policies created to achieve that vision.
- Promote the state's future economic success by creating an aligned education system to help ensure a prepared workforce.

Resources:
- State Strategic Vision Guide (Council of Chief State School Officers)

NEXT STEPS: STATE VISION

If your state has already adopted a vision, consider:
- What are the smaller goals the state must meet to achieve its vision?
- Have the goals been clearly communicated at the school and district level?
- What is the state's plan to receive ongoing feedback from the local level?
- How will the state continuously evaluate progress toward the goals?

If your state has not adopted a vision or defined clear goals, but has a state plan drafted, consider:
- Can elements of the state plan inform an overarching vision for the state?
- Does the plan include discrete goals that add up to a unifying vision?
- Can stakeholder feedback on the plan contribute to the state's vision?

The Who:
Roles, silos and stakeholder engagement

Defining the Players and Their Roles: Who should do what ... and why?

Who sets the state's vision and goals?
Everyone, to some extent.

Ideally, the state's education vision represents what all state citizens value in education and hope for it to accomplish. Therefore, the ESSA Thinkers Meeting participants generally agreed that as many voices as possible should contribute to the development of this vision and aligned goals to help ensure that it truly represents the views of the entire state. Before beginning this challenging work, state leaders should consider who is already involved in vision-setting conversations and which voices are missing. Vision setting provides a great opportunity for states to involve a wide variety of stakeholders and that involvement can help engender long-term ownership over the state's goals and the policies implemented to achieve them.

Who helps develop the state's plan?
All education stakeholders, but to varying degrees.

ESSA calls for state plans developed "by the state educational agency with timely and meaningful consultation with the governor, members of the state legislature and state board of education... local educational agencies... representatives of Indian tribes located in the state, teachers, principals, other school leaders, charter school leaders... specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, administrators, other staff and parents" – in short, all education stakeholders.

The new law places significant responsibility and authority on the SEA to develop the state plan. However, the participants emphasized that all stakeholders listed in the law will touch education policy levers and decisions at some point in the chain, from idea to implementation to

evaluation. Each stakeholder is therefore an integral part of fulfilling the state's vision and should engage where feasible in state plan development. While a state plan may not incorporate all feedback, state leaders should ensure that all stakeholders are engaged in a way that allows them to know that their voices have been heard.

Each state's unique governance structure will also affect the level of each agency or stakeholder's involvement, and, to some extent, the opportunities for new roles created by ESSA may allow policy leaders to determine their own level of involvement. For example, in some states, the legislature may request regular updates from the SEA on state plan ideas and development. In other states, the governor's office may establish its own ESSA task force that may work in tandem with or parallel to the SEA's ESSA work. This report recommends a frank discussion of appropriate roles and a willingness to work across agencies and silos.

STATE CONTEXT: GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Each state's governance structure and political interplay create a unique context for education policy. Therefore, in developing their own state plans, state leaders may wish to seek examples from other states that have similar governance structures:

- **State Education Governance Models** (Education Commission of the States).
- **50-State Comparison of Governance Structures** (Education Commission of the States).
- **State Education Governance Models** (National Association of State Boards of Education).
- **State Education Governance Matrix** (National Association of State Boards of Education).
- **Schools of Thought: A Taxonomy of American Education Governance** (Thomas B. Fordham Institute).

Who implements the state's plan?
State education agencies, mostly, but not without the support from other policy leaders.

Education Commission of the States serves all policy leaders who affect education policy at the state level, including: chief state school officers, SEAs, state boards of education, legislatures, governors' offices and unique roles in between. The participants agreed that the duties and activities of each of these state policy leaders, in addition to local stakeholders and agencies, are important to achieving a state's goals and working toward the state vision. However, a general consensus emerged that SEAs play an especially critical role in ESSA implementation. In some states, SEA capacity has been significantly curtailed due to the economic recession or political pressures. These states may want to consider giving SEAs greater authority and more resources so that they can take a lead role in achieving the state's vision.

Even with the necessary authority and resources, the SEA cannot unilaterally implement a state's ESSA plan, nor would many states want to see this happen. Instead, policy leaders need to be open to new and creative ways to remove barriers to state goals. New solutions may involve the difficult work of relieving one agency, office or stakeholder of some authority and investing it in another that is better situated to achieve the goal. If all policy leaders focus on achieving the same goals, this shared vision can lessen the struggles that comes with implementing changes to established systems.

Example: In one state, the governor's office may be well placed to share the state's vision with the public, while the legislature focuses on funding a program that will support a key goal. In another state, the state board may be charged with gathering public feedback about how best to achieve a key state goal, while the state education agency designs the program based on the feedback.

Key Policy Leader Roles

In the participants' discussion of the roles key policy leaders could play in ESSA state plan development and implementation, a few common themes emerged.

State Education Agency

While the SEA undoubtedly has an outsized role to play in the education policy agenda and activities in a state, the participants emphasized that capacity limitations will require the SEA to creatively utilize its newly enhanced authority and seek support from other state agencies and outside organizations. A few key recommendations from the participants specific to SEAs include:

- *Balance flexibility with high standards for all*: Recognize that no one-size-fits-all solution exists for all districts, so the SEA may need to compromise on specific local solutions, while also holding all schools to the same high standards of quality.
- *Recognize that the SEA cannot do everything*: Seek help from districts, outside organizations and networks, and other policy agencies within the state. When the SEA authorizes another stakeholder to take on a role, it should seek to balance holding that stakeholder accountable for progress with trusting the stakeholder to fulfill their role.
- *Provide expertise and research*: Help other policymakers prioritize education goals and activities by collecting and disseminating research and evidence on strategies.
- *Work to rebuild public and policymaker trust in the SEA*: Proactively reach out to stakeholders and other policy agencies to re-establish relationships which may have been compromised for any number of reasons, including lack of internal capacity or a history of excessive emphasis on compliance.

Legislature

Education Commission of the States has heard from multiple policymakers outside of the SEAs requesting information about their role in ESSA planning and implementation. Legislators in particular have expressed interest in more involvement with ESSA planning, so that they can be prepared to legislate as needed to help ideas come to fruition.

The participants' advice to legislators is to work with the SEA to build a sustainable give-and-take relationship. Given the requirements under ESSA and the capacity of various agencies, the legislature may want to consider allowing SEAs to lead the ESSA planning process and look for ways to support the SEA's innovative work.

- **From the SEA:** As a starting point to a mutually beneficial relationship, the SEA can provide the legislature with regular updates on the state planning progress, which allows the legislature – as the entity responsible for effective use of the state's financial resources – to prepare for potential budgeting and legislative needs to support these plans.
- **From the legislature:** Legislators or their staff can participate in ESSA planning committees to help advise those committees about whether new ideas would require legislation and how those ideas might be received in the legislature.

Example: In **Colorado**, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) created a hub committee to "provide oversight of the ESSA state plan development and act in an advisory capacity to the Department" and spoke committees that address specific content areas, such as standards, assessments or accountability. The hub and spoke committees include representatives from key state policy entities, such as the state board of education, legislature and governor's office. Additionally, CDE regularly updates the interim legislative committee on ESSA on the progress of the hub and spoke committees.

Governor's Office

Governors hold both direct and indirect authority for education within the state. In terms of direct authority, governors may be authorized to appoint the state superintendent or state board members or to set the state's education budget. In terms of indirect authority, governors serve as the chief visionary for the state, which may include setting the state's education agenda and possibly influencing the legislative action around that agenda. Therefore, even in states where governors appear to have no constitutional or statutory authority to make direct decisions about the state's education system, governors' offices have an important role to play in the development

of ESSA state plans. ESSA requires SEAs to consult with the governor during state plan development and the governor must sign the plan prior to submission to the U.S. Department of Education. Successful cooperation between the SEA and governor's office can convey that state leaders are pursuing a unified vision.

In addition to these codified duties, the participants suggest that governors' offices:

- Consider the unique functions of their office. What can the governorship do that other leaders and agencies cannot? For example, the governor may be uniquely positioned to work across sectors, such as the business community and civil rights organizations.
- Consider how to leverage current or potential relationships with other policy leaders, agencies, business leaders or other organizations to achieve the state's education goals.

Example: In 2016, Gov. Rick Snyder established **Michigan**'s 21st Century Education Commission by executive order. The Commission is tasked with, among other things, recommending changes to the state's education structure and governance that could help the state better serve its students and overall vision for education. The Commission has conducted a listening tour and, based on feedback received, will produce recommendations in February 2017.

Resources:

- The State Education Agency: At the helm, not the oar (Thomas B. Fordham Institute)
- "Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick": Why chiefs should do both to improve schools and districts (Center on Reinventing Public Education)
- The SEA of the Future series (Center on Reinventing Public Education)
    - Building the Productivity Infrastructure
    - Prioritizing Productivity
    - Leveraging Performance Management to Support School Improvement
    - Building Agency Capacity for Evidence-Based Policymaking
    - Maximizing Opportunities Under ESSA
- The Evolving Role of the State Education Agency in the Era of ESSA: Past, present, and uncertain future (Joanne Weiss and Patrick McGuinn)
- Roles and Responsibilities of the State Education Agency (The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program)

NEXT STEP: DISCUSSION OF ROLES AND AUTHORITY

State leaders should discuss the roles of each policy leader or agency and whether they further the state's vision. While this discussion may be challenging, the participants recommend a basic, three-step process:

1. *Discuss current structure:* State leaders should begin with a frank conversation about the current scope of responsibility and action for each policy leader or agency, explicitly addressing where roles and authority overlap and where gaps and limitations exist.

2. *Establish ideal structure:* State leaders should develop a model for the ideal structure and interaction of policy leaders/agencies required to achieve the state's vision and goals, taking into consideration the alignment of agencies to policy levers based on current or potential capacity.

    Example: Does one organization or office focus more on compliance, while another focuses more on providing services to schools and districts? Could, or should, the same organization or office perform both of these functions?

3. *Remember, consensus is key:* To make this conversation useful, state leaders should aim to reach consensus on the ideal distribution of roles and responsibilities of policy leaders/agencies.

The Importance of Working Across Silos

Given the great diversity of stakeholders and roles in education policy, it is perhaps unsurprising that many individual policy leaders end up working only within their own circle, isolated from other key leaders. While most education policymakers work toward worthy and public-minded goals, many may unknowingly be working at cross-purposes by taking different approaches to the same goal or working toward too many different goals and spreading available resources too thinly.

To make best use of the opportunities afforded by ESSA, the participants discussed the importance of working across silos. These silos may be built into the current education governance structure or may have arisen organically over time as states responded piecemeal to various needs. To work across silos, state leaders will need to shift their focus from their own specific role in the system, or their individual goals in the system, to a broader view of achieving the state's vision. Therefore, while it may seem counterintuitive, policy leaders may benefit from setting aside discussions centered on answering "What should we do about ESSA?" and focusing instead on how best to develop and achieve an overall education vision for the state.

To implement a unifying vision for the state's education system, state leaders should be intentional about ensuring interlocking and mutually supportive agencies and programs. Policy leaders and their agencies may need to break down traditional barriers that can unintentionally hinder the achievement of state education goals. By focusing on their common vision and engaging in honest discussions across agencies and programs, policy leaders can create more efficient and effective systems that have aligned purposes and do not duplicate efforts.

Example: Many state education agencies divide the responsibility for federal funds among designated individuals within the agency, often based on the Title from which the funds derive. The flexibility under ESSA provides an opportunity for states to reorganize these roles and break down the silos that prevent individuals from working together to achieve shared state goals. Rather than overlaying the federal stipulations onto the state, the state now has an opportunity reorganize around its own priorities.

Engaging Stakeholders

In addition to working directly with other state policymakers, state leaders should engage the voices of people with a direct stake in the education system, such as students, parents, teachers, the business community and civil rights organizations, among others. Stakeholder engagement helps generate the will and investment necessary to achieve the state's goals by encouraging everyone involved to own the problems and solutions. Stakeholder engagement can also help ensure a good fit between the barriers to successfully achieving the state's vision and the suggested means of overcoming those barriers because those directly affected by education policy have the opportunity to share ideas and provide feedback. Engaging a diverse group of stakeholders in the policymaking process has the potential to yield more creative solutions to complex education problems.

The participants emphasized that effective stakeholder engagement should be:

- **Ongoing and Sustainable:** While states may be tempted to treat stakeholder engagement as a one and done activity required by ESSA, state leaders and the public can benefit most from ongoing communication and feedback. States should set up a sustainable and reliable system for receiving ongoing public input, as well as for communicating new policies, research and data to the public. In this way, the public can more readily understand the reasons behind policies and policymakers can more readily understand successes and failures in program implementation.
- **Inclusive:** As public education affects everyone in a state, stakeholder engagement on education policies should be as inclusive as possible. The participants emphasized that states should highly engage teachers – who, as practitioners, are most significantly affected by education policies – in the process. In addition, state

leaders should seek out ways of reaching and hearing from stakeholders who are traditionally unheard or disenfranchised, such as parents working multiple jobs who do not have time to be actively involved in their child's education or parents who do not speak English and may not even be aware of stakeholder engagement opportunities.

- **Worthwhile:** One of the difficulties inherent to stakeholder engagement is that the very process of seeking input creates an expectation that all input will have an impact. Although state leaders may not incorporate all feedback into the development of final policy, it is essential that stakeholder engagement opportunities are followed by evidence that concerns were heard and addressed in a reasonable manner. Ongoing stakeholder engagement offers an opportunity to explain the technical constraints around a decision, the data that went into making a decision and how the decision will affect different groups.

Resources:

- **Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement** (Education Commission of the States)
- **Let's Get This Conversation Started: Strategies, tools, examples and resources to help states engage with stakeholders to develop and implement their ESSA plans** (Council of Chief State School Officers)
- **Let's Keep this Conversation Going: Steps to ensure that stakeholders get engaged and stay engaged through the ESSA development process and beyond** (Council of Chief State School Officers)
- **Guidelines for SEAs Engaging Parents** (Council of Chief State School Officers, National Parent Teacher Association, Learning Heroes)
- **Stakeholder Engagement Resources** (National Association of State Boards of Education)

The How:
Capacity, accountability and continuous improvement

Capacity and Constraints: Can we do it?

While ESSA may offer opportunities for states to try something new or untested – either through explicit directives in the law or simply by providing political cover – state leaders are nevertheless unlikely to take these risks given limited capacity and fiscal or political constraints. In particular, SEAs and other program-level designers and implementers are unlikely to be creative if they lack the capacity – or know that ground-level implementers lack the capacity – to see new ideas successfully realized. State leaders are acutely aware that in addition to costing states valuable time and resources, failures can also can negatively affect public opinion and capital.

Moreover, many state or local stakeholders may experience reform fatigue, or, alternately, may believe the state is already headed in the right direction, which can create conflict with reform-minded policymakers. If the state is truly on the right track, risk-taking can take a different form: giving programs adequate time to take hold and potentially have a positive impact. Leaders who are confident in a program that has not yet shown immediate results also take a risk when they endeavor to maintain it.

The participants encourage state and local leaders to be bold in taking advantage of ESSA's opportunities so that they can truly make a difference for students. ESSA offers opportunities not only to innovate, but also to use the more iterative, thoughtful approach outlined in this document.

States or Districts: Where do we work?

Because the stakes are higher for statewide reform, state leaders may find that taking local-level risks may be a better strategy for trying new and innovative approaches. States can encourage innovation by supporting local pilot programs, which can provide the state with feedback on the effectiveness of a new strategy without investing in it statewide.

Many state goals put a serious strain on district-level capacity to implement change, particularly when they involve large, expensive, and oftentimes unfunded directives from the state. To ensure effective implementation, state work with local-level leaders and agencies can be built around three interrelated principles: respect, trust and support.

Respect

From the perspective of local stakeholders, it may seem that state leaders expect miracles on a shoestring budget, and when desired outcomes are not achieved, a new reform is introduced. This leads many local-level stakeholders and agencies to experience reform fatigue. Overly complex, rotating or poorly understood reforms can cause frustration and work against building the local will and capacity to achieve the state's vision.

Given possibly already-existing frustration at the local level, state leaders can embody respect by ensuring simplicity, stability and sustainability for local stakeholders.

- **Simplicity:** Respecting that local stakeholders receive many complex messages from multiple levels, state leaders should ensure that the state's vision, goals and plan are easily understood and communicated at every level of policymaking and implementation. This can help ensure buy-in at every level.
- **Stability:** Respecting that constant change does not lend itself to full, effective implementation of any policy, states should endeavor to provide stability for local stakeholders. The stability of a long-term state vision protects against individuals or agencies that might otherwise move in different directions, creating instability and uncertainty at the local level. Stability also allows for slower roll out of new policies, which can help support local stakeholders.
- **Sustainability**: School and districts are often frustrated that when state funding and support run out, successful programs fall by the wayside. To help support innovative programs, states leaders may wish to increase focus on ensuring sustainability.

Trust

To demonstrate trust in the individuals and agencies implementing the state's education policies, state leaders must have the self-discipline to let local stakeholders and agencies solve their own problems. State leaders may need to regularly assess whether a local stakeholder could or should address a problem instead of the state. Local actors and agencies may need increased flexibility from the state to allow them to make necessary adjustments.

State leaders can help build trust between the state and local levels by setting an expectation of transparency and accountability, and by ensuring that local stakeholders have sufficient training and capacity to implement their roles. The participants emphasized that the basic framework for policy – vision, implementation, review and adjustment – is one that all levels of governance can follow, given the appropriate guidance and support.

Support

Appropriate support from the state should include a feedback system and adequate training and resources.

- **Feedback:** Knowing that many state goals involve huge undertakings at the local level, states should set up a system to receive and respond to regular feedback from the local level. A permanent and regular feedback loop between the state and districts can help the state provide appropriate support and course-correct as districts work toward their goals. Moreover, it can also help ensure that states maintain local buy-in over the long term.
- Training & Resources: To successfully implement and evaluate programs, districts may need additional training, which could come from the state or from outside organizations. The state should consider the limited capacity and resources of the district. If states ask districts to take on the responsibility for successfully implementing and evaluating a new or innovative program, districts will need additional time and resources or will need to be relieved of other responsibilities – perhaps those not aligned to the state's vision – to ensure the availability of time and resources for meeting the state's highest priority areas.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Education policies that hold schools and districts accountable for improvement can often cause unintended consequences, leading stakeholders to game the system. When developing new accountability policies, state leaders may consider how to have an open discussion with local stakeholders about the pressures these policies create and potential unintended consequences.

Ensuring Comparability

One caveat that comes with district-level innovation is that the data produced may no longer be comparable statewide. When giving districts more leeway, states must consider how this will affect the state's ability to measure success statewide and whether other measures can provide the appropriate accountability.

Research and Evaluation: Is it working?

The participants acknowledged that states will need to bolster their internal capacity to select, support and evaluate the effectiveness of new approaches if they wish to support creative policy approaches and risk-taking. This work may involve more serious research, development and program evaluation than states have historically conducted.

The participants also encourage states to look outside of traditional sources to enhance the state's capacity to conduct program research and evaluation, especially given the potential cost of such work. The participants encourage states to be creative here - utilizing outside sources does not have to mean simply hiring an outside firm. State leaders can seek out internal, external and local resources that may already be available to them. For example, university staff and students may offer a mutually beneficial solution to research and program evaluation. Colleges of education can learn from researching and evaluating new programs in schools and districts, while the schools and districts benefit from outside expertise and support.

Regardless of the method they choose, state leaders can help ensure that program evaluation happens by building evaluation funding into the program's budget. One participant suggested that roughly 10 percent of the budget for every program should be set aside for program evaluation.

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

As states look to develop and implement state plans, they can take advantage of existing federal resources such as the IES What Works Clearinghouse, Regional Education Laboratories and Comprehensive Centers. In addition, outside organizations that can serve as partners to improve state capacity include:

- Philanthropic organizations - especially for states that have developed a vision and strategic plan and are seeking to scale innovations.
  - Mathematica Policy Research.
- Universities and Research Centers
  - American Institutes for Research centers, such as CALDER.
  - Fellowships, such as the Strategic Data Project at Harvard University.
  - Institutional research centers, such as CEDR at the University of Washington.
- Regional Organizations
  - SREB.
- Constituent-Based Organizations
  - CCSSO.
  - Education Commission of the States.
  - NASBE.
  - NCSL.

Data Collection and Reporting: If it is working (or not), how will we know?

The participants emphasized that a clear and explicit theory of action should undergird the accountability system proposed in a state's ESSA plan. Starting with a theory of action allows state leaders to help ensure the accountability system fully aligns to the state's vision and goals – from the selection of indicators to the development of ratings to the associated rewards and sanctions. In addition, an aligned system helps stakeholders understand why the state system operates as it does.

When everyone is aligned to the same vision, working toward common goals, and collecting quality data, accountability systems can more accurately and fairly measure progress or areas for improvement and state leaders can respond appropriately to successful or unsuccessful programs. Because everyone is working toward a shared vision, policy leaders and agencies share accountability, which helps foster a culture of shared problem solving, rather than finger pointing, if specific policies fail.

Collection

States collect data for both accountability purposes (tracking school success and schools in need of improvement) and evaluative purposes (determining the effectiveness of teachers, policies and programs). States are required to collect data for accountability to be eligible to receive federal funds. Districts and schools also collect data; this data may fulfill federal accountability needs, but also helps school leaders and teachers improve student learning.

The participants suggested that all states undertake a thoughtful review of the data collected by the state to determine what is truly necessary to help the state measure progress toward its goals. They recommend that states strive to collect data that is: 1) appropriate, 2) useful, 3) timely, and 4) not overly burdensome to collect, analyze and disseminate. States can help relieve the burden of data collection by identifying data points that can serve multiple

purposes. For example, states may be able to use student attendance data, which they already collect, to determine chronic absenteeism. This data can then also serve as the state's required measure of school quality or student success.

Reporting

ESSA outlines requirements for state and district report cards as well as student assessment reports for parents, teachers and schools. In combination, this information provides state leaders, parents and the public a picture of how well goals are being met and how effective various programs or approaches are in various contexts.

State leaders should remember that one report cannot answer all questions or serve all purposes. Parents, teachers, and school, district, and state leaders all have different needs, and reports can come in different shapes and sizes: assessment reports, school report cards from the state, district-developed report cards, etc. Therefore, policymakers should consider how a collection of reports can be used to serve all the needs within a state with a minimum of redundant data collection and reporting.

The utility of any report depends significantly upon the target audience. State leaders need data that will allow them to make informed decisions on policies and programs and answer the questions necessary to measure success toward state goals. Parents need data that can help them make decisions for their children's future. Business communities, civil rights organizations and realtors may all use school or district data for different purposes.

To ensure that parents and the public have access to user-friendly data, states may want to take cues from social media and other organizations that currently report on school quality. In fact, states may seek to partner with organizations that already successfully disseminate this information and are popular among parents, such as schoolgrades.org or greatschools.org.

Final Thoughts:

Working toward continuous improvement

As discussed at the beginning of this report, state leaders are responsible for ensuring that: 1) ESSA work in the state aligns with the state's vision, 2) the right stakeholders are at the table and their roles are defined, and 3) the stakeholders have the capacity to do their work, have a fair accountability system in place to measure their progress and have a plan for continuous improvement.

Continuous improvement will require that state leaders regularly assess their alignment with, and progress toward, achieving the state's education vision. This work will require state leaders to be:

- Diligent, as continuous improvement is, by definition, an ongoing process.

- Flexible, as state leaders may need to course correct while maintaining respect, trust and support for the local leaders implementing aspects of the state's plan.
- Committed to continuous learning, as new research and data are introduced and new voices come to the table.
- Devoted to maintaining and passing on institutional knowledge about why the state is doing this work, as new leaders rotate into leadership positions.

Continuous improvement may present the most challenging task for state leaders, who typically have limited time and resources due to many other responsibilities. Yet, the participants reiterated the importance of viewing ESSA as not only an opportunity to innovate or start anew, but also as an opportunity to develop and stay true to a long-term, shared state vision for education. This vision will guide future policymakers and other state leaders, and, most importantly, guide students toward greater academic success for generations to come.

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