



# ESSA THINKERS MEETING INSIGHTS: Process is key to developing state plans

In December 2016, Education Commission of the States convened representatives from state education agencies (SEAs), legislatures, governors' offices and state boards of education with national experts to discuss how state leaders might leverage the opportunities of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to achieve state-specific education goals. Education Commission of the States captured the recommendations that emerged from that meeting in a [policy paper](#) published in January 2017. Over the past six months of ESSA plan development, state policy leaders and national experts have reiterated the importance of many of these recommendations. This brief summarizes some of the key recommendations for education policymakers and leaders as they continue ESSA planning and implementation.

## Vision

- **Vision comes first:** States need a common, unifying vision for education in the state. A well-developed and articulated vision will not simply emerge from goal-setting and planning; instead, it needs to be carefully cultivated.
- **Get a different perspective:** Engage a wide variety of stakeholders in developing the vision. Consider who traditionally participates in vision-setting conversations and which voices are missing.
- **Use the vision as a north star:** Return to the state's overall vision and priorities when developing education goals and ESSA state plan specifics, as well as throughout implementation, to ensure alignment within and across programs and initiatives. Better alignment can encourage more efficient and effective policy planning and implementation.

## Leadership

- **Work across silos:** Break down traditional barriers to achieving the state's education goals. Ask each policy leader to shift their focus from siloed goals and roles within the system to a broader view of achieving the state's vision throughout the system. Replace the question "What should I do about ESSA?" with "How can we collectively achieve our education vision?"
- **Empower the right people:** Consider the roles of each policy leader or agency, with an eye to whether current structures further the state's vision. Authority may need to shift to the individual, organization or agency that is best situated to achieve the state's goals. Keeping the focus on a shared vision can lessen the struggles that come with changes to established systems.

## Stakeholder Engagement

- **Follow the core principles:** Stakeholder engagement should be: 1) ongoing and sustainable, 2) inclusive and 3) worthwhile for state leaders and stakeholders.
- **Communication goes both ways:** Evidence that concerns were heard and addressed in a reasonable manner should follow stakeholder engagement opportunities. During ongoing stakeholder engagement, explain the technical constraints around a decision, the data that went into decision-making and how the decision will affect different groups.

## Implementation

- **Start small:** 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.
- **Work with the locals:** Work with local-level leaders and agencies to ensure effective implementation of new policies and programs. To best support local leaders and agencies: 1) ensure simplicity, stability and sustainability of programs, 2) let local leaders and agencies solve their own problems where possible and 3) provide a continuous feedback system, adequate training and appropriate resources.
- **Give it time:** Give new programs adequate time to take hold and potentially make a positive impact.

## Continuous Improvement

- **Learn what works, efficiently:** Program research and evaluation are essential to continuous improvement but can be time and resource intensive. To limit costs, seek out existing internal, external and local resources — such as state universities — for data collection and analysis where available.
- **Evaluate and reevaluate:** Regularly and honestly assess whether your work aligns with and furthers the state's education vision, and be prepared to course correct when it does not.
- **Pass it on:** As new leaders rotate into leadership positions, pass on institutional knowledge about why the state is taking a specific path.