

Every Student Succeeds Act Stakeholder Engagement Report: March 2017

Introduction

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) is committed to meaningfully engaging and listening to Minnesotans as we put together a state plan that reflects the values of the people in our state. Beginning January 2016, the department has hosted and participated in a broad range of engagement activities, providing multiple means for Minnesota residents to provide input on the Minnesota state plan. These activities included topic specific meetings, public listening sessions, focus groups and community meetings. In addition, we asked the public to participate in five committees to delve into specific topics, including accountability, assessment, English learners, school improvement, and educator provisions identified for submission in Minnesota's state plan application.

In April and May 2016, the department hosted 10 topic specific meetings. The purpose was to share and clarify ESSA, gain input, and better understand stakeholder priorities. The input gathered helped in the formation of the ESSA committees.

Beginning summer 2016, we invited the public to participate in ESSA committees focused on specific topics to provide the commissioner of education with recommendations on what to include in the state plan around a new accountability system, possible assessment changes, values we have for educators, inclusion of English learners in the accountability system, and how to best serve districts and charters in school improvement efforts.

We also convened smaller focus groups with community-identified representatives. Members from Minnesota's major ethnic communities, as well as teachers, parents, youth, and the English learner and special education communities were invited to provide focused feedback on topics such as family engagement, school improvement and well-rounded education.

Public regional meetings throughout the state were held in October and November 2016. The commissioner of education and staff traveled to Duluth, Rochester, Bemidji, Marshall and Burnsville, and offered a virtual option to the public in order to provide an overview of ESSA to answer questions and hear feedback. The commissioner has and will continue to meet and consult directly with American Indian tribal leadership throughout the state. Staff continuously participate in community-hosted meetings, where school districts, community based organizations and advocacy groups have invited the department to share information and listen.

Throughout the process the Minnesota Department of Education website was routinely updated and an emailed newsletter provided approximately 1,300 subscribers with timely information about the process. The department continues to seek input from stakeholders and plans on hosting several more public events throughout summer 2017, and will respond to requests for direct dialogue with the public.

This report reflects an analysis of stakeholder feedback we have heard thus far from diverse stakeholders including, but not limited to, students, families, educators, parents, school boards, librarians, social workers, business associations and groups that identified themselves as representing ethnic and civil rights leadership, with an interest in educational policy. The information contained in this report reflects feedback the department has heard and received through stakeholder meetings, community events, focus groups, letters, emails and phone calls from January 2016 through January 2017. A separate report has been prepared to share recommendations from the five ESSA committees.

Minnesota Department of Education staff gathered and aggregated feedback and several themes emerged. In the accountability and assessment system, stakeholders had clear consensus that the tone for accountability had to be productive and positive to maximize the value of statewide influence. Advocates had concerns about the validity and frequency of existing test administration, and broad confusion was reported by families and community members on what was required by the department as opposed to school districts and charter schools.

Educator quality themes focused strongly on the need to improve the quality of training and leadership pipelines. Stakeholders recommended cultural and intercultural competence be included in the statewide definition of effective teacher. Stakeholders emphasized the need to enhance the professionalization of educators including paraprofessionals and education assistants. Community members emphasized that continuity of those paraprofessionals often supported school diversity and students from marginal communities. Members encouraged the department to increase incentives, such as loan forgiveness, to encourage experienced teachers and leaders to serve high-risk schools.

Civil rights advocates were joined by community members and stakeholders to emphasize the role that systemic bias plays in perpetuating racially predictable disproportionalities. In response, the department was encouraged to actively create unbiased systems, examine root causes of disparities, and drive for equitable outcomes.

School improvement stakeholders revealed concerns with adequacy of resources, and resource allocation. This included distribution of funds and educators and other professionals within districts. The department was also encouraged to actively involve community members and support districts and charter schools in engaging communities.

Student groups, community members and stakeholders working with students clearly reported concerns with school discipline practices and improving school climate. Specifically, exclusionary disciplinary practices compounded academic performance concerns. Many community members also cautioned the department to consider the historical impact of the education system on ethnic communities and American Indians. More broadly, many underserved students reported feeling that schools were not a welcoming place.

Community members provided a wide variety of dimensions to consider for equitable access to a well-rounded education. Many stakeholders defined access to enrichment activities as critical. Others added trauma-informed practice, including acknowledging student mental health needs, as necessary. Finally, advocates recommended considering home culture, access to college-

credit bearing courses, and access to resources outside the classroom as key to providing both a welcoming climate and well-rounded education.

Stakeholder and Community Themes

Accountability and Assessment

Stakeholders had the most to say about the accountability and assessment provisions. By far the most common theme was a general concern about existing test validity. The second most common piece of advice was that the department and others communicate clearly about test results, and roles and responsibilities in the accountability system. Other themes included feedback that there are simply too many tests, the need to set a positive tone, and a focus on equity.

Some stakeholders encouraged the department to weigh the time spent testing against the value of encouraging and ensuring students reach proficiency. Many of these themes suggested the department hold on to systems that measure individual proficiency or growth towards proficiency, and avoid normative models that compare student performance relative to other students.

Make sure tests add value

There was concern that the existing Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA) provide little value to teachers in the classroom, and that performance on the MCAs did not predict future performance. In addition to test scores, many stakeholders strongly encouraged the department to include a measure of school climate as the school quality/student success indicator in the accountability system. Stakeholders noted chronic absenteeism alongside other measurements such as participation in enrichment, or student survey results, provided a reliable climate measure.

Stakeholders working with English learners expressed concern with the accuracy of ACCESS tests, and noted that student groups within the broad category such as students who are new to the country and students with limited formal education skew results for a larger school building. School discipline rates were also suggested as a valuable indicator.

Advocates working within the early learning community suggested the department consider adding kindergarten readiness as a potential indicator and that the Kindergarten Entry Profile could be a tool. They note early indicators of success allow for more effective intervention. Others suggested instead of including kindergarten readiness as an indicator in the accountability system, to report the information on the [Minnesota Report Card](#).

Tests need to be communicated clearly

Many committee and community members reported that the roles of districts and building leaders were unclear in requiring tests and communicating results. Stakeholders shared that parents and families were not educated on what value the tests provide. Protocols and policies were not consistently shared or explained for community members.

Stakeholders requested a narrative or executive summary of results so that information could be digested in a quick and easy way for parents and community members unfamiliar with the

testing systems. Others added that dashboards and summaries both played a role, depending on why a given consumer sought the data.

Participants report that although districts may have access to data, educators did not always have timely access to test results. This was particularly true for screening English learners, but also was reported as true for proficiency results.

Focus on equity

Stakeholders concerned with improving systemic equity recommended aggressive targets be set to close Minnesota's racially predictable outcome disproportionalities. The department was encouraged to set ambitious statewide targets and "best-in-class" school targets for growth. Parents expressed deep concerns for proficiency disproportionalities for students participating in English learner services.

The department was encouraged to also look at students outside the mainstream when reporting graduation rates. Students with disabilities in multi-year individual education programs may graduate at a disproportionate rate. In consideration of Minnesota's wide geographic and demographic diversity, the department was encouraged to count student populations with small numbers of mandatory reporting groups. Some participants suggested cell sizes of 20, or even 10, were necessary for ethically reporting proportionality.

Too many tests

Stakeholders told the department that students spend too much time taking tests. English learners spend extra time in ACCESS testing, which not only occupies their time but may also occupy computer labs and library media centers in their schools. This is compounded for highly mobile students, who may end up repeating tests because results are not shared.

At the same time, stakeholders advised we improve the existing system before investing time, money, and credibility pursuing innovation. If new systems are created, participants asked the department to strive for stakeholder consensus.

Set a positive tone for accountability

Finally, community members encouraged the department to set a supportive growth tone when describing performance for schools. The department has the opportunity to help the system self-define accountability as more than a test score.

Absenteeism should be described as attendance. The complex nature of climate indicators can best be described by specialized support professionals, for example school social workers.

Educator Quality

Community members frequently cited enhancing the quality of training and leadership as the biggest opportunity for improving educator quality. Stakeholders suggested improving connections between the programs that train educators and educators in their first years of service. Once educators were in service, members advised a focus on quality of continuing education and improving pipelines from educator to building leader.

The need for cultural and intercultural competence emerged as another strong theme, along with setting appropriate statewide qualifications. Members encouraged the department to look at supporting educators being responsive to student needs, consistent distribution, and improving understanding of social and emotional learning.

Finally, community members described an urgent need to increase the number of teachers of color. A lack of teachers of color begins in pre-service training. The number of people of color choosing teaching as a profession is influenced by the people of color they see in academia.

Quality of training and leadership

Community members described the need for high-quality ongoing training. Tasks such as curriculum development require current skill and knowledge. Educators need support using assessment to inform instruction. Educators and school leaders could also use support embedding state academic standards in instruction.

We heard a need to focus on building leadership, incentives and support for educators in high-needs schools. Members advised the department to create incentives for educator and principal development.

Cultural competence

Stakeholders observed that educators show a wide range of awareness in valuing diverse cultural backgrounds. Multiracial, multilingual, and teachers from non-majority culture are helpful in creating rapport with students. Grounding the teacher-student relationship allows students to listen, learn and feel safe.

Qualifications

We heard that teachers should be evaluated by more than the score their students achieve. Meaningful family engagement should be considered in credentialing.

Paraprofessional experience should be considered when considering the definition of an experienced teacher. Allow teachers out of their academic field to demonstrate proficiency in their teaching area.

Social Emotional Learning, responsiveness, and consistency

Educators should have incentives to engage communities most impacted by inequitable access. Student outcomes should impact rating of teacher effectiveness.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) needs to be defined at a leadership level. Consider incorporating it into educator training. SEL and school climate affect educator morale, in addition to directly affecting academic outcomes.

Equitable distribution of teachers is a very high priority to stakeholders. Statewide definitions of effectiveness should be coherent across programs and teachers. Similarly a rigorous statewide definition of teacher leadership is necessary.

Equity

Stakeholders spoke on the need for systems to be unbiased, the need to make marginal groups more visible, and the need to drive for equitable outcomes. Community members encouraged the department to examine the root causes of racially predictable outcome disproportionalities.

Create unbiased systems

We heard the need to broaden outreach in Greater Minnesota. Marginal groups, including students who identify as LGBTQ may experience unreported bullying. Stakeholders encouraged the department, districts and charter schools to actively seek and include representatives of Minnesota's vast diversity. Community members should see themselves reflected in the plan, and many community members report they do not feel valued and respected.

New to country and students with limited exposure to formal education may not have families with the same capacity to advocate on their behalf. The existing system treats students inconsistently. For example, graduation standards and English language screening can vary within districts.

Work more closely with communities that are commonly underrepresented

Many stakeholders noted that the state and local school districts and charter schools must engage communities that have been underrepresented in previous engagement processes. Greater Minnesota holds communities that should be engaged. Tribal consultation, engagement with migratory and seasonal communities, are crucial. New to country and highly mobile communities can be especially vulnerable.

Community members recommend the department be intentional reaching out to media that serves ethnic communities, including radio stations and newspapers. The department's process needs to bring community voices into the agency, just as agency staff need to get into community settings.

Reveal root causes and drive for equitable outcomes

Community members encouraged the department to talk about race and Eurocentric attitudes directly, and to consider the historical role of the educational system in assimilating students from marginalized communities.

Data collected should reveal the root causes of outcome disparities. Support a statewide understanding of the role of historical trauma in perpetuating outcome gaps. Drive for equitable outcomes, starting with today's struggling students. Prioritize intervention for students who are at risk, and include specific goals with timelines. Graduate students from marginal communities, including Latino and black students, and English learners at greater rates and ready for college or career.

Recognize the high turnover of school staff and slow turnover of education leadership in greater Minnesota.

School Improvement

Stakeholders encouraged the department examine resource allocation and to encourage community involvement in school improvement plans and systems. The department has an

opportunity to clarify definitions and roles for stakeholders unfamiliar with the system, including districts and schools that may have no experience with the coaching system.

The department was encouraged to set a balanced tone when describing school improvement. Communities and schools should not be “bad” or “good.”

Allocate adequate resources

Many stakeholders described how different programs appear to compete for resources currently. When allocating dollars or staff, special education, English learner services, and other services should not compete with one another. The system should include wraparound service structures for high-needs schools.

Class size is critical for services such as elementary English learner services. Consider also the ratio of educational assistants to population served when allocating resources. All schools should conduct a comprehensive needs analysis.

Involve the community

Families and children need to feel safe, nurtured and welcomed in schools. There is a special need if parents do not speak English. Consider other barriers to access, such as access to transportation or childcare.

Parent involvement creates student success. Consider parent involvement offices and parent academies. Be transparent and fair in engaging parents. Protect advocates from exclusion or retaliation, for example from participation in individualized education program (IEP) meetings or hearings.

Clarify roles and definitions

The definition of a great school should describe shared goals that all Minnesota schools can and should work towards. In conducting the comprehensive need analysis, focus on more than the indicators highlighted in the accountability system. Recognize that there may be tension between district and building leadership and staff.

Set a balanced tone

Stakeholders describe the current system as feeling punitive and one-size-fits-all. Consider the secondary value of highlighting effective practices. Reinforce where the accountability system aligns with state laws such as World’s Best Workforce.

Consider the schools in the middle of performance, in addition to those at the top and bottom. The department should be aware if the tone of interactions with districts and charter schools is authoritarian and intimidating.

Meet the unique needs of each local education agency

Small districts have different student issues and reactions to assessment than large districts. Comprehensive needs assessment should include parent, teacher, and student climate surveys, observation, analysis of staff bias, and a review of current programs and support.

Full service community schools can address wide variety of needs.

Student Focus

Community members encouraged the department to consider school climate and restorative justice practices when considering the student experience. Complex phenomena observed in the accountability system have multiple, situation-dependent causes. All students should feel safe and like they belong in their schools.

School discipline

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) should be used in both general and special education. Exclusionary disciplinary practices should be minimized. Community members encourage the department to support systems that ensure the timely re-enrollment of students placed in the juvenile justice system, including the transfer of credits.

School climate and student and community involvement

English learner services are often stigmatizing, and students report bullying. This and other phenomena may offer insight into voluntary chronic absenteeism. Nonwhite students may experience school culture or climate in a different way than majority peers. Social and emotional learning is different for diverse learners.

All students should feel safe and like they belong. Consider a student bill of rights.

Well-rounded Education

Well-rounded education was a topic of high interest for stakeholders. Access to what can be described as enrichment is closely related to academic outcomes. For example, equitable access to library and media services, physical education curriculum, music and other arts, contributes to student sense of accomplishment and keeps students in school. Access to resources outside the classroom is important.

Community members also described how trauma-informed approaches, and an understanding of social and emotional learning, were necessary for student success. In addition, community members encourage districts, charter schools and the department to affirm student and family home culture.

Finally, stakeholders note that dual-credit programs increase chances that students will go into teaching. Equitable access can address upstream teacher of color shortages.

Access

Access to advanced coursework, enrichment coursework, and extracurricular activities may be impeded by exclusionary discipline, special education, or English learner services.

Transportation is an issue for districts with limited staff or resources. Finally, consider access to summer and other extended programming for students who receive English learner services.

Trauma-informed practice

The department was encouraged by stakeholders to explicitly specify the need for trauma-informed schools in the definition of a well-rounded school. Trauma impacts overall well-being, including academic achievement and emotional and social functioning. Strategies to address trauma should be part of educator training, licensure and re-licensure.

Affirm home culture

Schools need to be aware of and reflect who students are. In working with American Indian and other students, actively affirm culture and identity. For many communities, the traditional system has been used to erase cultural identity. Consider this when developing career and college readiness programs.

Social and emotional learning and school climate

Racial equity, social emotional learning, and trauma-informed approaches should not compete for resources or attention in training. Consider representation from school mental health professionals and social workers in establishing strategies.

Other themes

Advocates for English learners, educators and community members relayed several themes related to inconsistent treatment between and within districts. Several stakeholders referenced failure to “graduate” from English learner services, while others presented evidence that English learner graduates failed to be academically ready. The home language survey as a screening tool was identified as problematic.

Deeper discussions suggest opportunities to value bilingualism and reframe English learner services as supporting academic achievement, and not remedial, in alignment with legislation such as the Minnesota LEAPS act. In outreach, and in setting the climate and tone of English learner services, building leadership including principals with lived experience, are key to good outcomes.

Multiple stakeholders referenced early childhood education, and opportunities to improve English learner growth as well as broader racially predictable disparities. Early learning advocates note the need to implement indicators earlier in a student’s career. Implementation of the Kindergarten Entry Profile can allow effective earlier interventions.

Finally, nonpublic school communities were particularly attuned to provisions in ESSA that provide for more transparent allocation of special education support funds.