

Every Student Succeeds Act Stakeholder Engagement

Focus Groups Report



In our commitment to obtain feedback from diverse communities and stakeholders for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) invited students, parents, educators and community members to participate in a series of focus group meetings. Throughout the fall there were a total of 18 of these meetings.

The purpose of the focus group meetings was to ask community members to share their knowledge and experiences as a student, parent, community leader or educator around the areas of family engagement, school improvement and what it means to have a well-rounded education. Information gathered from these focus groups will be used to help inform the work of ESSA committees. The ESSA committees have been established to look at a new statewide accountability system, school improvement strategies, testing, and educator quality, to inform the commissioner of education of stakeholder priorities as she finalizes the state plan and also help implement the new law.

Below is a summary of what we learned from the focus groups.

Well Rounded Education

What does “well-rounded education” mean to you and people in your school building?

- Multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds are reflected in curriculum and extracurriculars.
- Individual student needs are understood.
- Balance between meeting students’ specific needs (such as English Learners and youth with disabilities) and still allowing them to access enrichment activities such as performing arts.
- Need for school flexibility in providing a well-rounded education.
- Focus on student strengths.

What is missing from the content areas listed in the law?

- Social emotional learning. People, social, and teamwork skills are critical to success.
- Trauma-informed approaches.
- Restore basic math, cooking, sewing, shop classes and university transition to curriculum.
- Opportunities to learn in multiple ways.
- Focus on the individual child. One size does not fit all.
- Individualized Education Programs should be person-centered and self-directed.
- Support multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the curriculum.

Family Engagement

What does meaningful family engagement look like in schools and is it happening right now? What would help schools in our community improve family engagement?

- Schools should work with community-based organizations and get out into the community Meet families where they are at. Specifically working with families in poverty.
- Need more resources and staff to be able to fully support family engagement.
- Measure the quality of engagement, not just the number of events or attendees.
- Increase diversity and cultural competence of engagement activities. Understand needs of parents of color and be aware of cultural norms; use translators.
- Family engagement has great potential to empower parents and build relationships with communities. In order to do so, parents need to understand the school system and process. Schools need to be proactive and ask parents what they need and want and how they can help.

What will help schools in your community improve in this area?

- School staff may need cultural competency training.
- Cultural expectations in educational standards.
- MDE should identify best practices and share resources with districts.

School Improvement

What does school improvement look like to you? What you would want to see to know a school is improving?

- Community and staff are engaged in school improvement.
- School is a positive and inviting place; there is a sense of fairness.
- Improvement plans should fit the building and its needs.
- Schools aren't really improving until they address cultural sensitivity and equity.

How can the state best support districts so they build capacity to support their schools?

- Provide a variety of strategies and good data.
- Respect the child and child-centered teaching.
- Share ideas that work - help build positive relationships and emphasize commonalities.

What would be evidence of success in schools?

- Additional indicators: climate (attendance, participation, parent/teacher satisfaction).
- Equity indicators: disparities in discipline, placement of students in special education, integrated student bodies and diversity in school leadership.

What would be evidence of success in schools?

- Change narrative from highlighting failure to highlighting success.
- Recognize community contribution to success of the school.