

Why Communication is Critical for the Implementation of ESSA

The Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law at the end of 2015, requires that states outline state-wide accountability systems, support low-performing schools, respond to new data reporting requirements, and submit to the Education Department (ED) consolidated state plans. The ED has stated that desired outcomes for ESSA include providing greater flexibility to state and local authorities, creating greater cross-program coordination and service delivery, eliminating unnecessary duplication, and supporting collaboration rather than planning and implementing in silos.

It has been a number of years since states have addressed this type of major policy change, and communication will be a critical factor as states go through the process of planning and implementing required state plans. With the opportunities and flexibility provided to states by ESSA also comes greater responsibility for State Education Agencies (SEAs) to become a more public-facing organization skilled in engaging stakeholders, working collaboratively across departments, and communicating clearly to internal and external stakeholders.

What ESSA requires?

The major provisions in ESSA that states must address include accountability, data reporting, and consolidated state plans. Communication is critical to these provisions in the following areas:

- Engaging diverse stakeholders in the design of development of the State plan.
- Coordinating plans across multiple programs that originated both from and before ESSA such as IDEA, Head Start Act, and the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act.
- Creating clear and concise report cards that are easily understandable and accessible to various stakeholders
- Streamlining and simplifying reporting requirements
- Supporting under-performing LEAs

How BSCP can support SEA Communication for ESSA?

BSCP has been focusing on helping SEAs shift to more systemic communication practices tied to agency goals through a process called Strategic Communications. The Strategic Communications approach marks a departure from traditional SEA communication strategies in that it employs a holistic agency-wide process tied to agency goals; addresses the needs of both internal and external stakeholders; focuses on clarity, alignment, and coordination; proactively controls key agency messages; and employs a continuous feedback process (see Figure 1). Within our strategic communication work over the past two years, we have curated a number of tools, resources and expertise that can support states in as they make plans around ESSA in the following areas:

Involving and Engaging Stakeholders

How states invite and engage various stakeholders in the planning and feedback process while building state plans will be critical for gaining stakeholder support for those plans. BSCP is currently documenting the stakeholder engagement process of several states in response to ESSA, and has tools and resources available to assist RCCs and SEAs in areas like creating meaningful and interactive engagement sessions and how to interpret and respond to feedback from diverse stakeholders.

Communicating and Clarifying Information on ESSA

As states begin to communicate around their state plans, it will be important that they are able to provide internal and external stakeholders with information that is clear, timely, and aligned in a manner that can be accessible to SEA and LEA staff members, parents, and community organizations that can support the plans through strategic partnerships. BSCP's Strategic Communication Framework, tools, and resources are designed to help RCCs and SEAs achieve those communication goals at all organizational levels and with various external audiences. Collaborate on a broad, prolonged set of strategies targeted toward SEA Strategic Communications Processes;

Strengthening Cross-Program and Partnership Collaboration

ESSA was designed as a systemic approach that requires collaboration across various SEA departments, programs, and partnerships. BSCP can support RCCs and SEAs by sharing processes and tools that can help them collaborate and leverage partnerships around state plans while also ensuring that duplication of work is eliminated.

Networking RCCs through the Strategic Communication Collaborative

In 2014, in collaboration with the South Central and Central Comprehensive Centers, BSCP help create and sustain an ongoing network of what is now 11 Comprehensive Centers that engage in monthly calls to discuss how to support SEAs with their current communication needs. The focus for Year 5 for the Collaborative will be in identifying tools and solutions to help SEAs implement ESSA.

Continuous Curation of Tools, Content Experts, and Partners

To ensure SEAs and Regional Comprehensive Centers have adequate support to create a coherent and sustainable Strategic Communication approach, BSCP, with the help of the Strategic Communication Collaborative, continues to vet and post tools that can be used by SEAs and Centers, and find content experts that can provide support in specific areas of Strategic Communication. <http://www.bscpcenter.org/communications/>

BSCP Strategic Communication Framework

