Change in public education is hard. At least that’s what most believe. And while there are many schools that are doing well, and others that are making important progress, some are chronic underperformers that must be improved.

The problem is that while there are a wide array of programs and reforms intended to increase outcomes, there is concern that the next call for educational change will sweep away what is working in the name of politics. There is also a sense that the professionals working in schools, as well as the communities they serve, don’t have the opportunity to provide input on the programs and policies that are needed to transform teaching and learning for all students.

The result is frustration.

But there are places where it is different, where communities recognize the great things happening in their schools, and where the professionals working in these buildings have ownership of what goes on in them. These places tend to have something in common: a collaborative leadership model that values the unique contributions that all in the community make to the educational endeavor and results in stakeholders coming together in the best interest of children.

Perhaps then it isn’t that change is hard. Perhaps we are just going about it the wrong way. Maybe the way that decisions are made in this sector prevents effective change at scale from occurring.

This suggests that a new approach – an innovative approach to educational decision-making – may be more likely to result in improvements in teaching and learning and yield the improved outcomes for all students that we all seek.

Working collaboratively requires a change in how education policy is developed and how the politics that drive it are managed, which can result in more effective practice.
Stakeholder Engagement

In the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), lawmakers outlined a process to encourage more effective education policies by ensuring that the expertise of those who work with, and on behalf of, students every day—parents, educators and other school leaders—shapes state and local policies and practices. It is called “stakeholder engagement” and is designed to be used at the state, district, and school-building level.

Essentially, what that means is we can encourage sustained engagement from all those with a stake in the educational outcomes of students—particularly those with the expertise needed to transform teaching and learning. With this process, we have an important opportunity to fundamentally change the way that decisions in education are made. It requires states and communities to convene discussions to review their assets and the abilities they have to support the education of their young people—and to assess what they need to be successful. That knowledge will allow state leaders to draft plans that reflect their shared vision. This process can also effectively focus parents, teachers, educational leaders and others on the specific areas they need to address to implement that vision. In addition, it will allow them to continue to work together on the evaluation and revision of their plans and activities. The process also has the potential to minimize the upheavals caused by changes in leadership at the federal, state and local levels, which each result in a series of new initiatives.

For this process to work as intended, states and communities must recognize that stakeholder engagement goes beyond information-sharing—it is a collaborative decision-making process. These are the principles developed by the Learning First Alliance, in consultation with the government relations and advocacy staff of our member organizations, and based on guidance already released to their members.
Principles on Stakeholder Engagement as Required in ESSA

1. The stakeholder consultative process is an **affirmative interaction** between colleagues who have at times specific and overlapping responsibilities, while at other times different responsibilities, to ensure that each child has access to an effective education.

2. The stakeholder consultative process is a collaborative **discussion process** that includes goal-setting and the development of guiding principles aimed at defining and executing policy. While it should include a procedure for reviewing a draft plan or document, that is not its only purpose. It is also not just an advisory process where interested parties are asked their views, with one party deciding what information will be used from the discussion.

3. The stakeholder consultative process should be **sustained**, with stakeholders participating in discussions at the decision-making, implementation and evaluation stages. The consultative process goes beyond gathering input into an overall plan; stakeholders are also discussants in the implementation process and the conversations around how—and the type of—data is used to evaluate the implementation.

4. Stakeholders should initially convene to define how the consultative process will be designed and what the desired outcomes are. Significant effort needs to be made to communicate the requirements and expectations of the process, including the mechanics of how the process will work. For example, conveners should be clear as to announcing where meetings will be held, what specific topics will be covered, and the expected duration of the process. They should be considerate of stakeholders’ other obligations, choose meeting times to facilitate full participation, and provide resources such as leave time, coverage of classes, transportation stipends and other allowances as needed. In addition, the initial convening should address who will act as the facilitator of the process. Early discussions should also define how decisions will be reached.

5. Stakeholders participating in the process should be **representatives of those named in the statute, who are chosen by and accountable to their constituencies**. The named stakeholders should invite others to participate in the process to ensure that it is representative and reflective of the community. This can include stakeholders who reflect an under-represented or unique population, business leaders and community leaders, and can include the recognized expertise of individuals or groups on particular issues as needed.

6. When the stakeholder consultative process has not been initiated, or when the process is stalled, a **named stakeholder may initiate (or re-initiate) the process**. If a named or needed stakeholder is not included in the process, it should be proactive in connecting directly with policymakers and other named stakeholders to ensure that the spirit of the consultative process is respected and that its voice is heard.

7. The stakeholder consultative process should be **transparent and open to the public**. This must include notification of meeting times and places, and of named stakeholders and the constituencies they represent. Part of this transparency should also include posting materials, such as drafts, on state or local stakeholder websites, with information on how to provide input. However, that action alone does not constitute a consultative process.
Simply declaring stakeholder engagement and establishing core guiding principles is not enough. States and districts have limited time and resources. Plus, a new decision-making and communications process requires time for new learning, experimentation and refinement to take place. Engagement cannot be limited to “listening tours” and “town halls”—both are examples of important steps, but they are not examples of what is envisioned and, more importantly, what will make a difference.

The reality is that a new model of policymaking will not be established in just one year; however, this doesn’t mean that state leaders should stop developing their ideas on engagement with the submission of state education plans to the federal government. States should continuously develop better and more interactive ways to bring the various parts of the education community together. This includes convening meetings that discuss how the state plans are implemented, as well as meetings with a range of stakeholders who are encouraged to bring ideas to the discussion—all of which are collected and organized so that they can be more widely shared and adapted to fit changing times.

**Collaborative Leadership**

While these changes are occurring at a policy level, to continue progress at the school and district level, a different model of leadership is needed.

In the spring of 2016, the member organizations of the Learning First Alliance convened a five-week focus group made up of school board members, teacher leaders, principals, teacher educators, school counselors, technology educators, parents, superintendents and other education stakeholders. The group was convened specifically around issues related to college- and career-ready standards implementation, and what it will take for that implementation to succeed, but what they said applies to educational change on all issues and at all levels. And it was profound in its simplicity: School leaders at all levels believe that many of their building-level challenges can be more successfully addressed if the political and policy processes would get out of the way, allowing them to problem-solve as a locally based teams of leaders.

Where We Are and Where We’re Going, the report detailing the conversations of this focus group, further develops this concept, highlighting educators’ frustrations about the politicization of the standards and the resulting instability to their work (but again, these conversations apply to any number of issues). Based on these discussions, it appears that educators recognize and respect the appropriate role of policy in their work. However, they also know that too often policy overreaches—and that it does so in the wrong ways, attempting to legislate the “how” of what happens in the school building. Educators need to be treated as leaders, allowed to solve the problems that exist in their classrooms and buildings as well as identify the areas in which they do need support from policymakers.

This group of educators identified several recommendations that both their colleagues and policymakers can heed to ensure that the education community has the supports it needs to successfully implement college- and career-ready standards—or any other education change initiative.
Recommendations

1. **Continue moving forward with college- and career-ready standards implementation.** Rather than changing standards out of frustration that there have not been more immediate results or out of political concerns, make such decisions based on the needs of students. Continue efforts to ensure that assessments, curriculum, professional learning and the other materials needed to implement high standards are aligned to them. Provide time and resources to support the continuing instructional changes required each year as students bring additional background in the standards.

2. **Emphasize each individual child in instructional decisions.** Adapt the new college- and career-ready standards and locally-implemented curriculums to meet the distinct needs of all learners.

3. **Expand efforts to communicate with the public and governmental leaders about how college- and career-ready standards are improving the number and quality of graduates** and provide examples of how students at all levels are benefiting from higher standards. Communications plans must be forward-looking and student-centered, and they should engage the media. They should emphasize the standards alone, making clear what such standards are and are not, distancing them from assessments, curriculum, instruction and accountability. They must also make clear why these changes are important. Parents and families in particular should be targeted to ensure they understand the benefit the standards offer to each student and feel ownership over the educational process.

4. **Continue expanding the linkages between teacher education and PK-12 programs** that allow for intensive collaboration between the two. Ensure preparation programs – including the English, math and science department faculty – are aware of their state’s K-12 education standards and that their candidates know how to teach to them. Provide new funding to create the curriculum alignments and support needed for better in-service student-teacher practicum, mentoring, and residency programs (including funds for the mentoring teacher). Work to distribute top candidates equitably to ensure that high-poverty schools have access to fully qualified new teachers.

5. **Expand professional development programs.** Teachers and other school leaders need more time and support to sharpen their instructional skills, deconstruct the standards, learn new technologies, and integrate those technologies into regular use. Learning opportunities should be ongoing, differentiated and collaborative. These opportunities must be distributed equitably, so that educators at historically under-resourced schools have the same opportunities as their peers working at more advantaged schools to develop the skills they need to help students succeed under more rigorous standards.

6. **Redesign assessment and accountability programs to make them useful for students and educators** and to ensure they accurately reflect the progress that students, schools and districts are making. The importance of formative assessments should be acknowledged and respected. Accountability programs must include multiple measures and only offer a small role for standardized tests. Data must be available quickly so changes in instructional programs can be made to help each student and so families can support their children at home. In addition, the same tool should be used for assessment and instruction (if a pencil is the tool for instruction, it should be the tool for assessment). Assessment is not the time to introduce new techniques.
Looking Ahead to A New Process

It is clear here that the reform agenda of the education community is not the same as is typically espoused by the political community. But transformational change does not have to involve tearing down existing structures. It can simply involve the development of a new and more effective decision-making process that will allow those with the expertise needed to truly transform teaching and learning in their communities the opportunity to work together to lead it.

That change requires leadership. It requires leaders who embrace collaboration at all levels, including by:

1. Committing to the stakeholder engagement process—and the principles developed to maintain the spirit of the language in ESSA
2. Identifying and removing the barriers that prevent educators and education stakeholders from acting as local leaders on education change
3. Supporting the change agenda developed by the education community, including:
   a. Maintaining college- and career-ready standards
   b. Supporting the implementation of college- and career-ready standards by:
      • Increasing focus on professional learning
      • Curriculum development
      • Distributive leadership
   c. Increasing linkages between teacher education programs, school based teacher development programs, and ongoing professional learning to create a professional continuum
   d. Increasing the number, quality, and type of communications programs to enhance the quality of education programs
   e. Provide support for specialized professionals to work with the individual students who need specialized attention

Education reform is a complex issue. Implementing new top-down ideas coming with every election will not produce the results we all want. By changing the political and policy process and increasing collaboration at the local level, the desired goals will be achieved. It is time to reform the decision-making process, to encourage sustained stakeholder engagement that empowers those in the school building and across the community to make a difference.
District leaders – including school board members, superintendents, communications professionals and other officials – set the pace for academic achievement and inform and engage all stakeholders in the schools. Principals and other school leaders create safe and welcoming school environments that support teachers and students.

Classroom teachers support and challenge students every day, building knowledge of fundamental and advanced concepts and skills while encouraging curiosity and a love of learning. Teacher educators in preparation programs and school districts equip current and future teachers with best practices to help students learn.

Parents, families and guardians support and advocate for their children every step of the way. Community members support students in and out of school and shape a system where every student can succeed.

School counselors and other specialized educators help students develop the behaviors, attitudes, and skills needed to succeed, empowering them to thrive academically, socially and emotionally.

Technology specialists in districts and schools ensure students can access knowledge and tools.

Leaders Establish Conditions for Success
Teachers Inspire Learning and Build Knowledge
Communities Advocate for Every Student
Specialized Educators Provide Needed Supports

Setting the Stage for College and Career Readiness: Who does it take to help each and every student succeed?
Members of the Learning First Alliance

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education  National Association of Elementary School Principals
AASA: The School Superintendents Association  National Association of Secondary School Principals
American Federation of Teachers  National Education Association
American School Counselor Association  National PTA
Consortium for School Networking  National School Boards Association
International Society for Technology in Education  National School Public Relations Association
Learning Forward

About the Learning First Alliance

The Learning First Alliance is a partnership of leading education organizations representing more than 10 million members dedicated to improving student learning in America’s public schools. We share examples of success, encourage collaboration at every level, and work toward the continual and long-term improvement of public education based on solid research. Learn more at http://www.learningfirst.org/.