

Teacher Engagement
and Perspectives on ESSA:

An Eagerness to Engage and Be Heard



EDUCATORS
for High Standards

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Educators for High Standards amplifies teacher voice about improving public education through a commitment to high standards for teaching and learning.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is common knowledge that teachers are the most important factor in educating students, but their voices are often overlooked in state- and district-level policy conversations. Teachers have strong opinions and valuable insights on many important issues, including how school performance and student success should be measured. Fortunately, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presents an opportunity for decision makers at the state and local level to listen and engage with teachers directly, independent of unions or teachers' associations. Passed in late 2015, ESSA reauthorizes No Child Left Behind, returning a great deal of decision making back to the states, and mandating that stakeholders, including teachers, are meaningfully engaged as states make decisions about implementation and develop their accountability plans.

ESSA should not be a stand-alone opportunity for teacher engagement, but instead should set a foundation to establish ongoing communication between teachers and policymakers. But to ensure these conversations are constructive, it is important to understand how teachers feel about our nation's public schools, how they perceive the potential impact of ESSA, and whether they believe their views are valued and taken into consideration.

To this end, Educators for High Standards commissioned the Winston Group to conduct a national survey of 800 classroom teachers and teacher advocacy leaders (classroom teachers engaged in education advocacy work) to solicit their perceptions and opinions on a variety of issues related to the current state of education. The responses we received revealed that:

- ▶ While teachers are generally pessimistic about the direction of America's public schools, overwhelming majorities also acknowledge that they play an influential role in a school's overall performance.
- ▶ Teachers have clear recommendations on how schools should be held accountable for performing across multiple measures.
- ▶ Teachers resoundingly believe that they should be included in policy development and expressed an interest in engaging with policymakers to develop accountability plans, yet few of them feel that they've been afforded that opportunity.
- ▶ The majority of teacher advocacy leaders feel that they understand ESSA reasonably well, but teachers overall are less confident in their — and their colleagues' — understanding of the law.
- ▶ Teacher advocacy leaders are more optimistic about the type and magnitude of impact they believe ESSA will have, but both teachers and teacher advocacy leaders are skeptical whether their own state will actually make significant changes under the law.
- ▶ Teachers think it is important they be included in policy development and express interest in engaging with policymakers. While some are working to take the steps to make sure their voices are heard, they are not particularly hopeful their state or district is listening.

INTRODUCTION

From politicians on both sides of the aisle to teachers' associations and everyone in between, it seems that many have described the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as an opportunity to improve upon the policies of No Child Left Behind, to engage stakeholders in creating plans to ensure that all students receive a high-quality education, and, overall, to improve public education.

For teachers, ESSA presents many promising opportunities, including the requirement of states to gather teacher feedback, and increased flexibility in spending federal funds to support teachers. ESSA also creates a more holistic view of student and school performance — looking beyond test scores to include multiple academic and non-academic measures. Since states began engaging stakeholders, teachers across the country have been working — some for the first time, with their state education agencies — speaking at town hall meetings, offering feedback on draft accountability plans, state report cards, and participating in advisory councils.

To better understand teachers' attitudes towards ESSA and the ongoing efforts to develop and implement state plans, Educators for High Standards commissioned the Winston Group to conduct a national survey of 800 current classroom teachers. The focus of the survey primarily centered on:

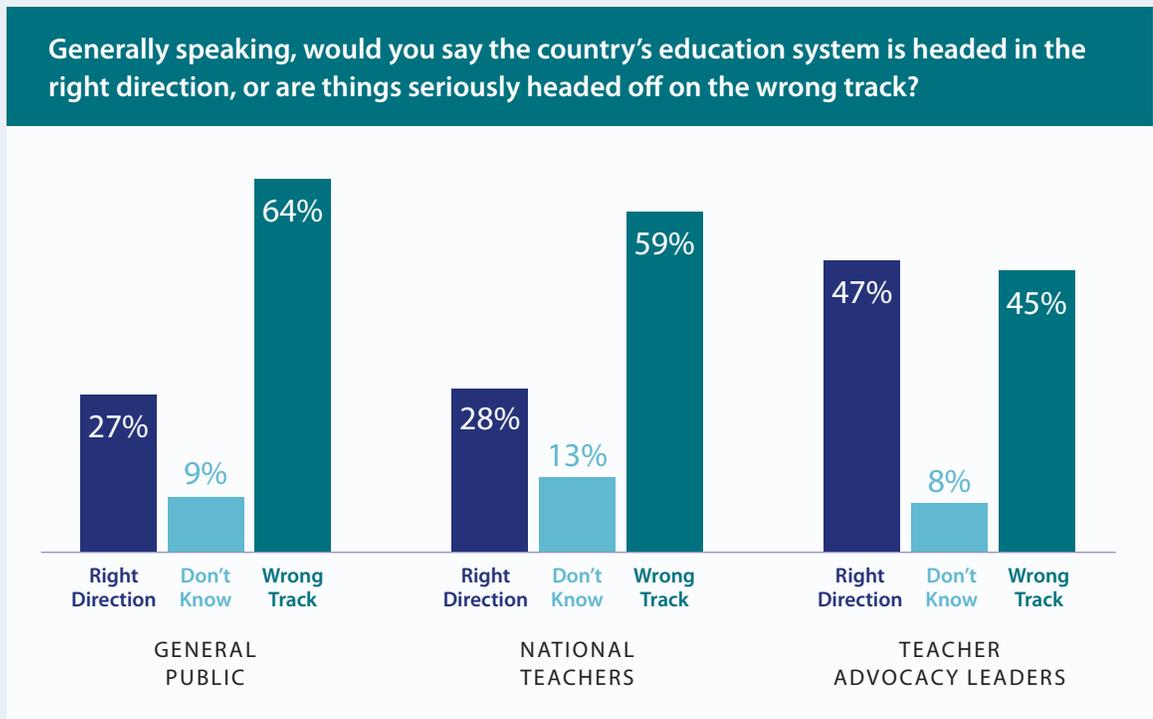
- ▶ Teachers' understanding and perception of ESSA;
- ▶ Teachers' expectations for the impact of ESSA on their classrooms and profession; and,
- ▶ Teachers' perception of their role regarding implementation.

We also wanted to hear from a group of teachers who have a unique perspective — classroom teachers who are engaged in education advocacy work and involved with teacher advocacy organizations — who will be referred to as “teacher advocacy leaders.” The survey design drew upon earlier research that assessed the general public's opinion towards ESSA, allowing for comparisons between teachers, teacher advocacy leaders, and the public.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

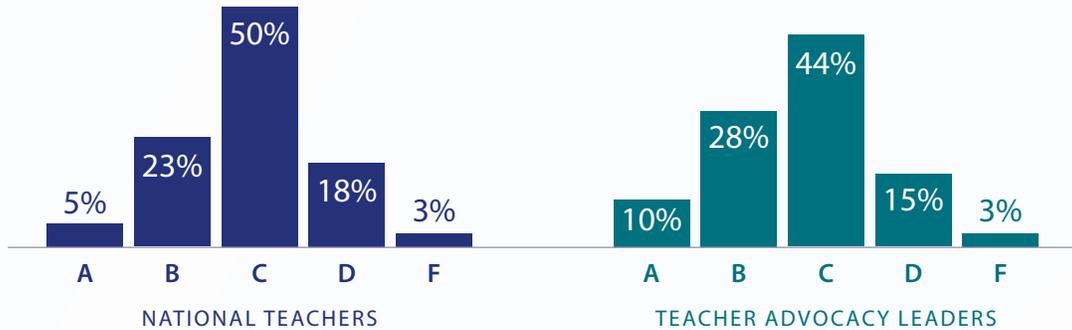
Perception of Education Today

While the overall purpose of the survey was to understand the teacher perspectives on ESSA, we felt it important to first assess their view on the current state of public education as a means to provide context to their perceptions and outlooks.



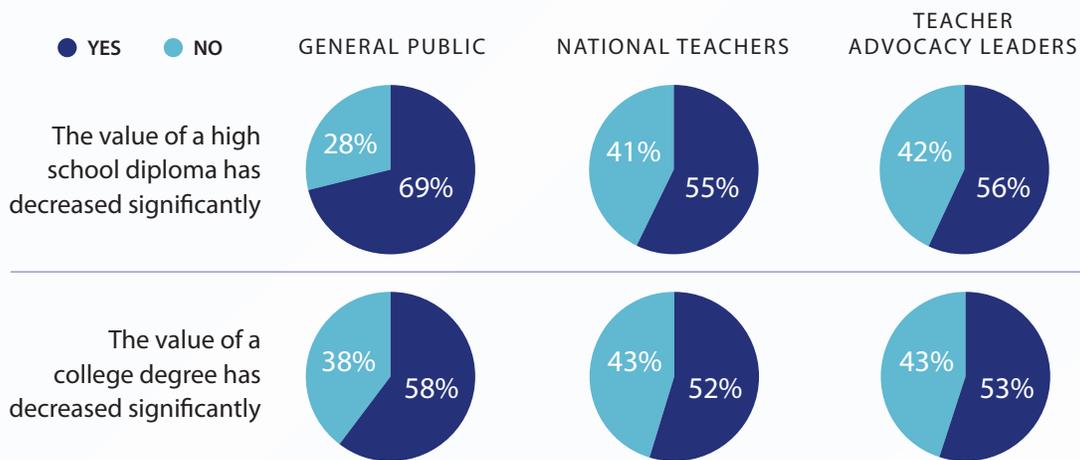
Teachers were not optimistic about the current state of education today, with 59 percent saying the country's education system is seriously headed in the wrong direction. This mirrors the opinion of the general public, 64 percent of whom believe schools are headed down the wrong path. Teacher advocacy leaders were more closely split, with 47 percent saying education is headed in the right direction, and 45 percent saying it is on the wrong track.

Using a grading scale of A to F, where A is excellent, B is good, C is average, D is insufficient, and F is failing, what grade would you give America's public schools, kindergarten through 12th grade?



When asked to grade America's public schools on an A through F grading scale, 50 percent of teachers gave schools a C, as did the plurality of teacher advocacy leaders. Interestingly, they were more favorable toward the school where they teach, with pluralities from both groups grading their own schools a B. Similar to the attitudes of the public at large, the majority of teachers believe that the value of both a high school diploma and a college degree has decreased significantly, indicating that they do not believe students have a clear path for success upon graduation.

Has the value of a high school degree and college diploma changed?



Overall, teachers seemed disillusioned with the current state of public schools, believing they are headed in the wrong direction and that at best, our schools are average. Given this largely negative outlook, it is reasonable to conclude that teachers believe certain changes to the education system are necessary in order to improve schools. If this is the case, what can we do to engage teachers and help involve them in developing and implementing effective policies to put our schools back on the right track?

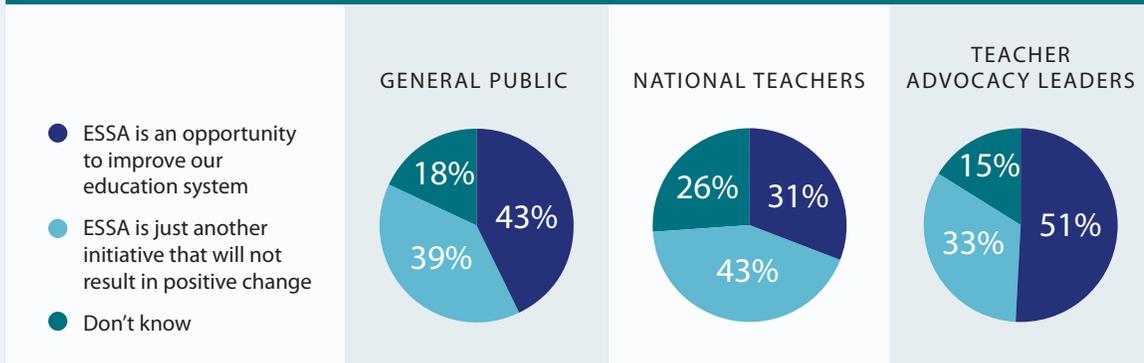
ESSA: A VEHICLE FOR CHANGE?

There is hope that ESSA can be the vehicle that transforms our education system. But how well do teachers understand it, and what do they think about its ability to improve schools?

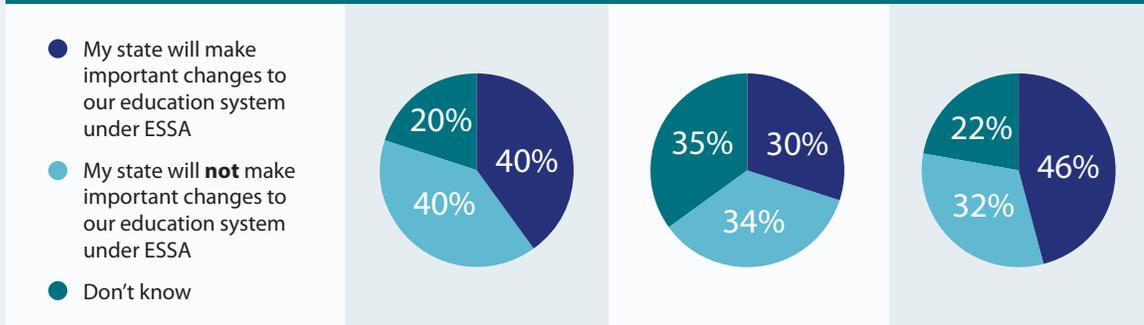
While 72 percent of teacher advocacy leaders reported that they understand ESSA well, teachers overall did not report the same level of confidence. Only 45 percent of the national sample stated they understand ESSA at least somewhat well, while almost the same number indicated that they did not understand it.

To further gauge teacher attitudes toward ESSA, we asked whether they saw the law as an opportunity or simply another initiative, and whether they believed their state would use ESSA to make important and meaningful changes. Teachers were less optimistic about ESSA than the general public, with only 31 percent believing it to be an opportunity and 43 percent just another initiative. Again, teacher advocacy leaders were more optimistic, with over half seeing it as an opportunity and only a third as another initiative.

Some say ESSA is an opportunity to improve our education system. Others say it is just another initiative that will not result in positive change. After hearing all this, which would you agree with more?



Which of the following comes closer to your view?



Similarly, when asked about the changes their states will make under ESSA, teachers again were less optimistic than the general public, and teacher advocates were more optimistic. In neither case, however, did teachers express a consensus opinion about the changes that might take place in their states under ESSA.

TEACHERS AS DRIVERS TO IMPROVE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

ESSA broadens accountability by requiring multiple measures to gauge a school’s performance, including a measure of school quality or student success. Teachers have strong opinions about what measures they believe should be used to determine performance. When presented with a list of potential measures, both subsets largely agreed on the relative value of each, selecting teacher qualifications as most important overall. Student development of social emotional skills and a school’s learning environment were ranked highly as well, mirroring the opinion of the general public.

Please rank the following list of non-academic measures based on how important you think each would be in rating schools, with 1 being most important and 7 being least important.

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	NATIONAL TEACHERS	TEACHER ADVOCACY LEADERS	MOST IMPORTANT
Teacher qualifications	3.34	3.18	1
Whether students are developing social and emotional skills in addition to their academics, such as perseverance or social awareness	3.56	3.63	
A measure of the school’s learning environment	3.51	3.62	
Chronic absenteeism rates, defined as the number and type of students missing more than 15 days of school	3.99	4.05	
School discipline measures, like suspension or expulsion rates	4.39	4.51	
Percentage of students scoring college ready on the SAT or ACT	4.54	4.43	
Participation and success in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate or dual enrollment courses	4.67	4.59	7
			LEAST IMPORTANT

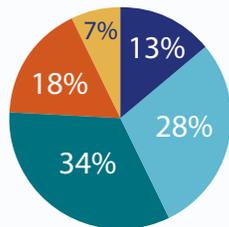
Despite the fact that teachers are in agreement on how school performance should be measured, they are also uncertain if ESSA can actually improve school performance. In keeping with the trend, teacher advocacy leaders were more optimistic than their peers, and more inclined to see ESSA as a way to improve school performance than teachers overall.

When asked specifically about the requirement that school report cards be publicly shared, 60 percent of advocacy leaders believed the report cards would have at least a fair amount of impact on improving school performance, compared with only 41 percent of teachers overall. The majority of teachers thought they would have little to no impact.

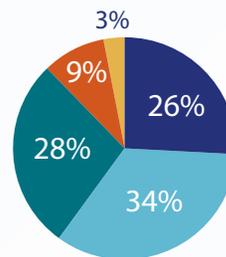
For the first time, ESSA requires school report cards to be shared publicly and directly with parents on an annual basis. How much of an impact do you think this will have on improving school performance?

- A great deal
- A fair amount
- Only a little
- None at all
- Don't know

NATIONAL TEACHERS



TEACHER ADVOCACY LEADERS



As a whole, teachers see themselves as the most influential factor in improving school performance. In weighing potential measures to evaluate school quality and success, teachers expressed a strong favorability for measures that they are in control of — their qualifications, their students' development of social and emotional skills, and the learning environments they create. Notably, overwhelming majorities — 87 percent of teachers overall and 92 percent of teacher advocacy leaders — believed that they play a somewhat or very prominent role in the overall performance and rating of a school. Given that teachers view themselves as having such a prominent influence, it follows that they should play a large role in determining how that improvement and performance is measured.

ESSA: ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS?

Teachers are very clear about the support they need to improve student learning and school success. Numerous studies in recent years indicate that teachers are dissatisfied with their professional learning opportunities, and the increased flexibility under ESSA for states to use federal funding creates the potential to improve and expand learning opportunities for teachers.

Unfortunately, teachers are not exactly hopeful that actual improvement of professional learning opportunities will result from ESSA. When asked whether they believed ESSA would have a positive impact on professional learning, only a third of teachers overall and half of advocacy leaders responded positively. If ESSA is meant to improve student performance, it makes sense that states and districts would want high-quality training to support them in reaching that goal, but teachers are not confident this will happen.

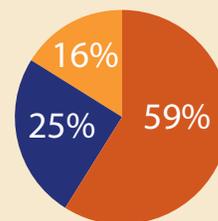
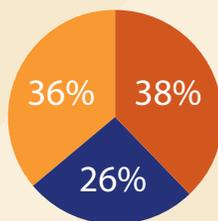
Will ESSA's flexibility around professional learning lead to improvements for educators?

● YES ● NO ● DON'T KNOW

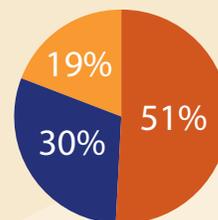
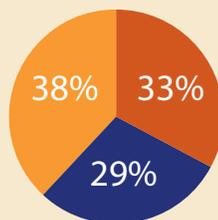
NATIONAL TEACHERS

TEACHER ADVOCACY LEADERS

ESSA gives states and districts significantly more flexibility to provide professional learning for educators and to recruit, train, and retain educators; this change will lead to improvements for educators



The additional flexibility that ESSA gives states and districts will result in improvements to my current level of professional learning provided through my district or state



Teachers were also asked to rank a list of 12 potential ways states could use Title II funding through ESSA to better prepare, train, and recruit high-quality teachers and principals. Both subsets reflected similar priorities throughout the list, agreeing that mentorship programs for new teachers were most important, followed by expanding career opportunities, incentives to recruit and retain teachers in high-needs schools, and professional learning opportunities aimed at increasing teacher effectiveness as well.

Please rank how important you find the following ways funds can be used, with 1 being most important and 12 being least important.

	NATIONAL TEACHERS	RANK	TEACHER ADVOCACY LEADERS	RANK	MOST IMPORTANT
Mentorship programs for new teachers	5.29	1	5.37	1	1
Developing and expanding professional development that leads to career opportunities for teachers (including hybrid roles that allow teachers to stay in the classroom)	5.79	4	5.49	2	
Offering incentives to recruit and retain teachers who are effective at working with high needs populations	5.42	2	5.64	3	
Professional learning on using evidence-based instructional strategies and developing lessons aligned to the state standards	5.44	3	5.79	4	
Developing or improving teacher evaluation systems to use multiple measures and give teachers timely and useful feedback	5.92	6	5.83	5	
Providing training that gives teachers the skills, credentials, or certifications needed to instruct postsecondary courses, including dual and concurrent enrollment programs	6.02	8	5.92	6	
Reforming traditional and alternative teacher certification to ensure teachers have the skills and content they need	5.98	5	6.01	7	
Training to integrate technology in the classroom	6.00	7	6.14	8	
Professional development to improve STEM instruction and strategies, including computer science	6.04	10	6.15	9	
Professional development to integrate career and technical education into academic instruction	6.03	9	6.20	10	
Improving school leadership preparation programs and additional professional development for principals	6.75	11	6.42	11	
Non-academic teacher training on topics including student data privacy and appropriate use of data, and how to recognize and prevent child sexual abuse	7.67	12	7.24	12	12 LEAST IMPORTANT

To better understand the specific training teachers want, they were asked to rank a variety of professional learning topics. Again, both groups were in agreement, stating that engaging, supporting, and motivating students, elevating teacher voice, and classroom and behavior management were the highest need areas.

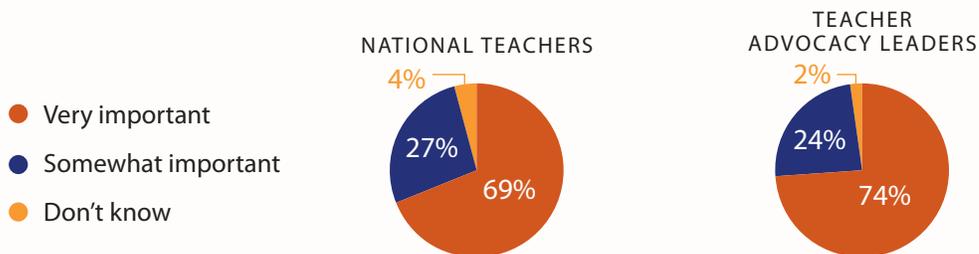
Despite having a clear idea of the type of support and learning they need, teachers are largely cynical about whether ESSA will be a catalyst to improve professional learning. It is clear that teachers want to see schools improve, and that they understand they are vital in making that happen.

However it seems that too many schools, districts and states have failed to sufficiently value teacher voice and input in the past, leading to a detriment in professional learning, school performance, and teacher attitudes.

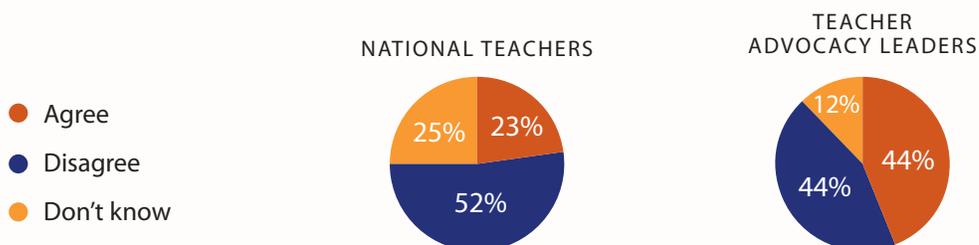
ESSA Teacher Engagement: Overpromised?

Not surprisingly, almost all teachers think it is important that they play a prominent role in education policy and development, and majorities report at least some participation in activities that promote teacher voice, including advocacy, school or district leadership, and participating in fellowships. Furthermore, both subsets of teachers overwhelmingly agreed teachers should play at least a somewhat prominent role in developing a state's accountability plan. However, few teachers feel that there were sufficient opportunities for them to provide input, despite the requirement for states to meaningfully engage with them throughout the process.

How important do you think it is for teacher voice to influence education policy development and implementation?



My state education agency or district has sought adequate teacher input in the development of the state ESSA plan.



RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that teachers have strong, informed opinions about the direction of education in their states — and that they are ready and willing to share them. The following recommendations are not only important to remember as states begin to implement ESSA, but also as states lay out their visions for education moving forward.

States must do more to inform and meaningfully engage teachers in the development and implementation of education policy.

As states and districts continue finalizing their plans to implement ESSA, it is vital that they double their efforts to inform and engage teachers. This research illustrates that teachers agree upon and have clear views when it comes to issues such as the measures used to determine school performance, and how funding for teachers should be prioritized. As one of the greatest factors in student learning, it only makes sense that their views be heard. As states seek to identify the measures that will be included on public report cards, garnering input from teachers will be critical, as they see themselves as having a prominent role in school performance. Informed and engaged teachers are also more optimistic about the ability of policies to result in improvement, which means they are more likely to be supportive and work for effective implementation of the changes.

States and districts should leverage ESSA to improve and expand professional learning opportunities for teachers.

While ESSA certainly offers the opportunity for states and districts to improve professional learning, it is clear that teachers do not actually expect to see improvement. The additional flexibility states have to leverage federal funding should be used to provide a variety of innovative learning opportunities to support teachers. Furthermore, it is important that teachers have a voice in determining the opportunities they participate in, as they are capable of identifying gaps in their current professional abilities and advising on which learning opportunities and programs would provide sufficient support for themselves and their colleagues.

ESSA should be viewed as a step forward on the path to more sustained and meaningful teacher engagement.

Although states are required to engage teachers around ESSA, few actually feel their participation was valuable or solicited to the extent it should have been. But that does not mean the engagement failed or has to end there. Policymakers and local leaders should continue to seek out and use teacher input in the development of policy. Teachers are able to inform decisions that impact schools and students from a unique perspective. States, districts, schools, and advocacy organizations should continue to formalize, offer, and encourage activities that promote teacher voice and participation in the development and implementation of education policy.

CONCLUSION

Every education initiative and policy creates a hope that it will provide the set of circumstances necessary to improve schools, engage parents and communities, support teachers, and ensure all students receive a high-quality education. Although we do not yet know if ESSA will be successful at advancing or achieving any of these goals, we do know that without engaging teachers in critical policy decisions, we are ignoring the voices of the most influential players in student and school success, and sacrificing valuable perspectives and insights. It is urgent that policymakers at every level seek out meaningful and sustained teacher involvement. Those of us who passionately believe that teacher voice should impact policy must work more diligently than ever.

ESSA is an opportunity — one we must work to see through the eyes of teachers if we want to improve our nation's schools.

METHODOLOGY

The Winston Group conducted an online survey of 800 current K-12 classroom teachers in November 2016. An identical survey was fielded to 55 teacher advocacy leaders as identified by Educators for High Standards. Data from this survey were combined with data from 302 self-identified teacher advocacy leaders to form a sample of 357 teacher advocacy leaders. Responses from all teacher advocacy leaders were included in the national sample, with the overall national sample weighted back to 800. Comparisons to the general public were drawn based on research conducted by The Winston Group on behalf of the Collaborative for Student Success (“Grades Not Just for Students”) in September 2016, which included qualitative research and a national survey of more than 2,000 registered voters.

Some charts may not total 100 percent due to rounding.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THANK YOU TO

THE NATIONAL NETWORK OF STATE TEACHERS OF THE YEAR (NNSTOY), TEACH PLUS,
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