East St. Louis, Illinois, has seen its share of struggles. The Gateway Arch stands in clear sight, just across the Mississippi River. But the endless possibilities and hope for the future that the monument inspires can feel many miles away.

Ninety-nine percent of students in East St. Louis rely on the free and reduced-price meal program. That means that nearly all families in the community earn less than $44,000 per household. Students in East St. Louis, like those in many low-income school districts in Illinois, trail students in wealthier districts when it comes to achievement. East St. Louis students face a 29 percentage-point gap in proficiency compared with their wealthier peers.

Yet the statistics do not tell the whole story. Students are making progress in school and toward their dreams. “You shouldn’t really judge a book by its cover,” says Cynthia Taylor-Cutler, a seventh grader at Mason-Clark Middle School. “Although East St. Louis may not be the best place, some of the best people come out of here.”

Clearly, East St. Louis had a stake in Illinois’s efforts to create a state plan to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). How would the community’s voice be heard? And what ongoing role would education advocates in the state play in maintaining the engagement mobilized in the months leading up to the final plan?

Illinois’s state superintendent launched a transparent, collaborative approach in April 2016 that continued throughout
the year. In Illinois, the governor appoints the
members of the Illinois State Board of Education
(ISBE), who in turn hire the state superintendent.
The governor also appoints a secretary of
education to work in his office, and this secretary
leads the state's P-20 Council. The state board and
the state superintendent's rigorous engagement process included four draft plans
publicly available for comment and a statewide
listening tour to over 50 sites. The meetings
from the listening tour emphasized input from
community members on a variety of ESSA
topics, very much in the spirit of the new law.

But this process did not settle the question
of how to best integrate advocates' input. Local
voices would be heard, but would traditional
advocates and technical experts respond only
through written responses to draft plans? How
would organizations like mine, Advance Illinois,
contribute their expertise to the development
of the biggest education policy change in decades?

Advance Illinois is an independent, objective
voice for a healthy public education
system that prepares all students in Illinois
for success in college, careers, and civic life.
Our advocacy efforts have focused on securing
equitable funding for schools, Common
Core State Standards, high-quality assessments,
and teacher quality efforts. As advocates
for the building blocks of Illinois's education
system, we saw ESSA's passage as a generational
opportunity to develop a more robust, refined
accountability system and improve results for
students—especially students of color and low-
income students—and to ensure that the state's
system of supports and assistance truly helps
struggling schools.

While No Child Left Behind shined a light on
student outcomes and inequity, it fell short in
providing a true measure of student progress,
especially for the students most at risk. It used
proficiency measures that were biased by demo-
graphic factors and was often seen as punishing
rather than supporting schools.

Advance Illinois saw ESSA as a new day for
education. It was an opportunity to evaluate
schools fairly by uncovering true academic
growth and reinforcing the belief that all
students can learn. With ESSA, the state could
develop new mechanisms to assist schools and
lift achievement for every student.

Advocates Seek Deeper Role in Illinois Plan

Advance Illinois regularly collaborates with
ISBE on an array of issues, providing data and
analysis to help inform its approach. We always
strive to understand the board's vision, and we
work with partners to provide input on how
to implement that vision in a way that best
supports all students in the state. We are a criti-
cal friend.

The fact that we had an existing relation-
ship with ISBE proved important as we sought
to provide input to the ESSA plan. Ours was
one of many voices pushing the state educa-
tion agency to establish a process in which
education stakeholders could help define the
accountability measures to be used and provide
technical expertise in building the accountability
system. Advocates were specifically concerned
with technical aspects of metric selection and
the weights to be given to each. Along with
other advocates, we wanted to ensure that those
measures and values would support a balanced
system. We did not want to sit on the sidelines.

Soon after ESSA's passage, a group of our
partners convened to better understand the law.
They, among others, became integral to influ-
encing the state plan—the Latino Policy Forum,
The Ounce of Prevention Fund, Real Learning
for Real Life, Educators 4 Excellence, Stand for
Children Illinois, and Teach Plus Illinois, to
name a few. Each partner brought a wealth of
expertise on issues addressing English learners,
early childhood, and teacher quality. In addition,
all the partners understood how accountabil-
ity systems had affected students and families
over the preceding 15 years and saw ESSA as an
opportunity to change the conversation.

Together, we created three principles
to pursue through our advocacy around
ESSA: Illinois's plan should be fair, clear, and
supportive:

- **Fair**: not significantly biased against schools
  just because of their demographics;
- **Clear**: simple enough for parents and educators
  to understand; and
- **Supportive**: intervening and providing resour-
ces to high-need schools.

Despite clear goals for the outcome, these
groups, like others, lacked a formal way to
collaboration among a diverse set of stakeholders: state agencies, education institutions, local schools, community groups, and school management groups, teachers’ unions, academic experts, and stakeholders. Many P-20 participants were also part of the committee created in statute to design IBAM. Although the P-20 Council was not as engaged at the outset, many stakeholders turned to it as a natural place to help coordinate the myriad ESSA discussions occurring throughout the state.

While the state board needed to make sense of the input it received from local stakeholders during its listening tour, the P-20 Council provided a venue for the Governor’s Office to gather technical recommendations from statewide education leaders prior to the governor signing off on the state plan. P-20 served as an intersection point among stakeholders, the Governor’s Office, and ISBE, as the state superintendent has a seat on the council. P-20 ultimately prepared a presentation of its recommendations to the state superintendent and the Governor’s Office following the listening tour.

With philanthropic support for staffing, P-20 Council committees held multiple meetings, received and reviewed research, learned what other states were doing, and discussed, debated, and ultimately voted on key recommendations. The P-20 committees’ detailed recommendations for the state plan were formally presented to the state superintendent and the Governor’s Office following the listening tour.

Another factor complicated the ESSA process. Prior to the U.S. Congress’s passage of ESSA, the Illinois legislature had unanimously passed a bill to create the Illinois Balanced Accountability Measures (IBAM) system. Many groups of educators across the state, including teachers’ unions and management organizations, had provided input to this legislation. The law emphasized best practices for school improvement.

The law established a committee, which had already begun its work on accountability before the listening tours and working groups began. This committee had a statutory responsibility to provide feedback to the state board on the state’s accountability system. Given the work of the IBAM committee, listening tours, working groups, and the early release of draft plans, it was abundantly clear that many people wanted to get the ESSA plan right but also that there were many venues for input and no single place to convene everyone to discuss and debate the plan.

Coordinating Discussions

The Illinois P-20 Council is a governor-appointed education advisory body, and Advance Illinois has had a seat on it since its inception. Chaired by Illinois’s secretary of education, the P-20 Council fosters
More than two dozen legislators attended, as well as members of the state board and 35 other partnering organizations.

Tony Smith made clear that the board had focused on how the state plan would advance equity. “Our State Board has asked, ‘How and in what ways can we support all of our children, in particular the kids who are the least well served and in the most marginalized districts?’ ” the state superintendent said in his remarks. “How can we create a system that both says all kids need our support and we need to be held accountable for their improvement?”

Equity and accountability were also at the heart of Taylor-Cutler’s concerns. “About 80 percent of students in our school are not ready academically when they start high school,” she said. “How will we make sure our students are ready and prepared? If we’re not PARCC ready, how will you know if we’re not progressing and not ready? How can we work toward that?”

Ongoing Work on School Supports

Advance Illinois is still identifying potential challenges and proactively researching solutions. In addition, we’re working with our community of stakeholders, including the Real Learning for Real Life coalition, to establish our next set of priorities for implementation, including supports/assistance for schools.

While the ISBE formal processes and the work of the P-20 Council debated many aspects of Illinois’s ESSA plan, we noticed that supports and assistance for struggling schools received less attention. This is crucial for us—what will happen on the ground in communities to help schools improve and students succeed?

Advance Illinois leveraged its strong
partnerships with communities throughout the state to get direct feedback from school districts and community partners on how the state could best support student progress. We launched pilot listening sessions on this topic in diverse school districts including East St. Louis and involved superintendents, teachers, curriculum heads, and stakeholders.

We facilitated a consensus-style workshop to answer the fundamental question: How can the state best support your students’ progress? Each educator started by listing their top ten answers and then worked in pairs to refine their lists down to eight. As a group, we created themed clusters that clearly describe the barriers and aids to improvement facing Illinois schools and pointed toward policy changes for state board adoption.

Advance Illinois staff toured two schools in East St. Louis School District 189, a high-poverty district that is currently under state control. The community has experienced the deepest intervention a state can take within a school system but also demonstrated remarkable resilience. Millions of dollars in college scholarships to seniors and strong district leadership are just two of the visible signs of success coming from District 189. Student council members led our tours and told us about their classes, new technology, and supports for struggling students. The highlight of these tours was the PARCC practice room at one of the schools, where Taylor-Cutler proudly told us students go to practice the hardest questions so they can demonstrate their understanding on state assessments. All our student tour guides beamed as they talked about their academic achievements and plans for the future.

The state board is in the midst of further developing the IL-EMPOWER system, which will provide support not only to schools identified through the state’s accountability system but is intended to be a warehouse of best practices for all schools in Illinois. Through the Real Learning for Real Life coalition, we hope to continue to work with ISBE to strengthen the supports that our schools receive.

Not the End

ISBE’s final ESSA plan ultimately adopted many of the recommendations proposed by Advance Illinois and the array of partners that came together through the P-20 Council, IBAM, and ISBE meetings. Yet all agreed the work was not over when the plan was submitted. The partnership, trust, and working relationships built during the ESSA planning process will be the foundation for work going forward as the plan is refined and implementation begins.

As an example, the state’s accountability system still needs to be refined. When the state board convened additional working groups over the summer of 2017 to work out additional details of the plan, coalition partners were given a central role.

We intend to tap into our relationships with the field to help strengthen the system to provide support and assistance to schools. This part of the plan is still being flushed out. The Real Learning for Real Life coalition, the P20 Council, IBAM, and many ongoing conversations with schools, communities, educators will be central to these efforts. But now, unlike when ESSA planning began, there is better understanding of the law, and partners’ roles are more clearly established.

Although Illinois’s process likely differs in important respects from that of other states, advocacy groups across the country will no doubt look to their state boards of education to continue engagement during ESSA implementation. State boards everywhere should keep strong lines of communication with schools and continue to receive their feedback. School accountability measures are sensitive topics, and state boards should ensure data are thoroughly analyzed before being released publicly. While a system may appear strong on paper, its true test will come when it is applied in the real world. State boards should be responsive to their schools’ unique needs, continuing to hear from groups on the ground to understand the system’s implications. Coalitions and advocate groups are important allies in these implementation efforts, as we learned so powerfully in Illinois.

In the end, the truest measure of success is student improvement and a system that helps every kid see the future as brightly as Cynthia Taylor-Cutler does.

Now, unlike when ESSA planning began, there is better understanding of the law, and partners’ roles are more clearly established.