

Articulate Your Purpose

Question: What has been the biggest (non-COVID) struggle? How did you find a solution?

Answer: It was challenging to go from a collection of leaders to a TEAM that has the strength to impact education in PA. We had to first understand one another's leadership styles. Then, with so many issues to address, it was difficult to come to a consensus regarding which problems to tackle/tackle first.

Identify Leaders and Core Partners

Question: How did you select your "dream team"?

Answer: We began with a handpicked diverse team that included professionals who are easy to work with and complement one another.

Establish A Governance Structure

Question: How did you get started?

Answer: We began with a "coalition of the willing" - we selected the "dream team" based on their relative efficacy. As the work increased in complexity, the interplay with the governing structure needed to address this complexity as well.

Gather Stakeholder Input

Question: Ecosystems have always been focused on the hyper-local (problems, needs, and solutions) and international learning and collaboration. What has been the value-add of this middle layer, that you weren't getting locally or from the SLECoP?

Answer: We strongly suggest NOT making the "value-add" of the Ecosphere simply one more chore or administrative layer; but instead, work to support those mechanisms "above" and "below" the Ecosphere functions. The key for PSSE has been finding a broad value proposition - adding a level of administration and not duplicating what individual Ecosystems are currently implementing. For example, we only publish notices that are relevant to statewide (vis exclusively local) audiences; we often refer people back to their local Ecosystems; we do not focus on individual programmatic metrics; and we concentrate on efforts that truly need a statewide approach (such as our PA Biden Memo).

Decide on the Work

Question: Is there an understanding of or dependency on each Ecosystem having a certain level of authority to execute and implement shared concepts? What are the criteria or expectations for each Ecosystem, when being considered to join an Ecosphere? I'm trying to understand building out the Ecosphere with a collection of Ecosystems that include differences in capability and sustainability.

Answer: This is the struggle when pulling together multiple Ecosystems into an Ecosphere. This is especially true when some are and are not recognized by the national network, or are recognized locally, or are organized by entities such as the National Governors' Association (or Next Generation Partnerships). We are still trying to unpack what it means to be officially involved. PSSE is formalizing its stakeholder engagement strategies to dispel the perception that this is an "elite" group. That said, we currently have nearly 1000 members that sign up for the conversations and represent diverse systems across the state (not just Ecosystems).

Promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Question: What is one Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) strategy your Ecosystem currently employs?

Answer: Customize your approach based on the service region and population.

Question: How would you think about using your DEI Ecosystem strategy at an Ecosphere level?

Answer: Ask the vital question, “Who is at the table?”...or just as important “Who is not at the table?”

Regionalize and empower leadership that champions DEI. Confirm that teams are ready for the intentional disruption that powerful equity work brings. A diverse leadership team helps us find out what “we” don’t know.

Question: Who is “at the table” but is not being heard? How can we work to capture all stakeholder perspectives, and ensure everyone has a voice?

Answer: Doing so takes a lot of intentional practice. While moving forward, effective leaders pause frequently for feedback from diverse stakeholders - especially those that may not speak up right away. Make sure that voices aren’t simply heard, but are included in actionable moments.

Develop a Sustainability Plan

Question: Do you have any “must have” ideas in terms of garnering funding?

Answer: Sustainability goes beyond funding. It includes enlisting thought- partners who have the creative capacity and a common purpose to get the work going in a forward direction. While it is a messy process, forward-thinking teams must also return back to their stakeholders. Stakeholders will tend to leave a group if they feel like they are not included in the genesis and results of the work. Celebrate the coalition of the willing! And finally, we will share this last important sustainability strategy: Pennsylvania purposely did not put its PSSE center of gravity in the PA Department of Education. Rather, we distributed responsibility and authority across the state, so that the work will not simply go away with a new administration.