

Leadership Profile of Jim Cowen of Collaborative for Student Success

Will Freske 20 January 2020



In 2014, the Collaborative for Student Success (CFSS) was established to defend high academic standards, high-quality assessments, and strong systems of accountability, to ensure that all kids are prepared for college or a career. The non-profit organization's work would later include the preparation of policymakers, states, communities, teachers, and parents for the introduction of landmark education legislation known as the "Every Student Succeeds Act" (or ESSA). This bipartisan law put forward the idea that states and districts are in the best position to realize the goal and vision for our nation's students. With that, however, comes the responsibility of taking the hard steps of ensuring it will happen, which is where CFSS steps in. CFSS shines a spotlight on the importance of this hard and complicated work, helps states and schools traverse the complicated law, determines how to account for student achievement

and holds them accountable for meeting the proposed standards.

Jim Cowen joined CFSS as deputy director and director for military outreach when it was first established. As a new nonprofit specifically created to adapt, interpret, and influence state policy, CFSS needed someone who could traverse the policy and succinctly communicate its complex message to a national audience. Having spent 10 years as an officer with the U.S. Navy including roles as Deputy Public Affairs Officer for Chief of Naval Operations and Congressional Director for Secretary of the Navy, and with more than 20 years of experience in outreach and marketing, Mr. Cowen's policy and communications background was ideal for CFSS. Mr. Cowen took over the Executive Director role for CFSS in 2016 and has been leading a small but dynamic team of five collaborators ever since. That team created various initiatives to support their mission. Some of these initiatives were designed to help schools and states interpret ESSA like their *Check State Plans* initiative and *Understanding ESSA* initiative which help states meet ESSA requirements and provide insight on ESSA updates in each state. Their *Educators for High Standards* initiative gives a voice to teachers to ensure the educators have the tools and training necessary to meet state requirements. The *Honesty Gap* initiative acts as their watchdog program and ensures schools report honest information to families and states.

Mr. Cowen was instrumental in the implementation of one particular program that combined his military background with the organization's education initiatives. The *Military Families for High Standards* program is a spouse-led initiative to advocate for high academic standards that limit the hardships faced by military students. With a majority of their other programs putting focus on the states and schools in major cities, this program targets schools located near military bases and looks to establish consistency not only for military students and their families, but for those schools and their communities. Mr. Cowen and CFSS ask the question: what happens to the schools when a military base closes or a majority of its student body leaves? This initiative aims to hold states, schools, and families to the same fair and high standards as other schools.

One of Mr. Cowen's greatest strengths and contributions to CFSS is his ability to connect with their constituents and build coalitions. He is a leader, supporter, and teacher. He credits his military background for his ability to not only work as part of a team but assess what the team needs in any particular moment and act accordingly. When searching for new partners, Mr. Cowen looks for open collaborators who work hard, listen, and adapt. Mr. Cowen is a self-aware and empathetic leader who does not lack motivation or confidence. He recognizes his own strengths and strengthens those around him. By tapping into those strengths, he maintains a small but efficient

team that collaborates towards fulfilling the organization's mission.

Author bio

Will Freske is currently Class Giving Director for the 25th and 35th reunions at University of Pennsylvania. He has worked at various art- and education-based nonprofit organizations in Philadelphia and focuses on advancement through fundraising, communications, and engagement. Will is a graduate of DePauw University and is currently pursuing a master's degree in nonprofit leadership from University of Pennsylvania.