



FOR EQUITY-ORIENTED STATE LEADERS: 9 Ideas for Stimulating School Improvement Under ESSA

By Craig Jerald, Kati Haycock, and Allison Rose Socol | March 2017

As state education leaders redesign their school accountability systems under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), there's been a lot of attention to the fundamentals of school ratings. That's a good thing: In education, as in almost everything else, what's measured ends up mattering. And rating systems that are careful about prioritizing the most important things for students and their futures — and that make sure that the performance of vulnerable groups of children isn't swamped by schoolwide averages — are helpful in creating the urgency necessary to fuel improvement efforts.

But ratings are only part of the story. States have an obligation to prompt improvement in schools that, according to the ratings, are not making progress for all students or for a group of students. And while ESSA grants states latitude on school improvement, some features of the law (as well as current practice) are leading to severely truncated thinking, both about the breadth of gains needed to assure that all children are prepared for post-high school success *and* about the needed features (beyond school ratings) of an improvement system that will produce those gains.

At this moment, most of the students who are not on track to meet state standards for post-high school success do not attend the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state; they attend the other 95 percent. And many of these schools are not currently giving their students — especially low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners — the opportunities to develop the critical academic skills they need for success in college and careers. Improvement systems must thus be designed to stimulate and support broad-based improvements, including in schools that are underperforming for individual groups of students.

Here are nine important ideas worth considering:

1 **Honestly identify *all* schools that truly need to improve, rather than artificially limiting such identification to the number of schools that the state itself has the capacity to assist.** To do otherwise sends a chilling message: that most schools are doing fine by low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities; that school communities have no capacity or expertise that can be summoned to action; that improvement itself always requires outside resources; and that state employees have all of the requisite expertise.

Schools in need of improvement vary widely in the nature and extent of their challenges and in their ability to address those challenges. Yes, a relatively small percentage of “chronically underperforming schools” (those with multiple, deep-seated problems) will require intensive assistance and greater attention from the State Education Agency (SEA). But many other schools will face a narrower set of challenges and have a greater capacity to improve. For example, one school might be serving some groups of students very well while serving other groups poorly; another might have a strong school culture and relatively effective leadership but unaddressed weaknesses in its academic program.

Parents and the public have a right to know when all is not well, even if only for one group of students. Moreover, more than a decade of research shows that identifying such problems — publicly, through school ratings and identification systems — has a galvanizing effect that leads to improvement in student achievement and other important outcomes.¹

That is not to say that schools with fewer challenges or more capacity should just be left to “sink or swim.” Rather, states should put in place policies that differentiate pressure and support for improvement based on schools’ varying levels of challenge and need. That begins with putting in place a sound

infrastructure that can benefit all schools identified for improvement, along with supplemental forms of voluntary and mandatory assistance for schools that require more resources or outside expertise.

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2 **Use the year between adoption of a new accountability system and the production of its first ratings to cull through data, identifying schools and school leaders that have successfully tackled common challenges.** That includes schools and districts that have successfully turned around low performance; those that have successfully closed long-standing achievement gaps; and those that have reduced chronic absenteeism, disproportionate discipline, or any of the other measures prioritized in the new rating systems. This expertise needs to be mobilized during the improvement process and can be leveraged in multiple ways.

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Effective schools and educators — getting strong outcomes for low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities — represent the single largest untapped resource for improvement in American education. Most states have policies in place to identify top performers, but most do little to leverage that expertise to help others improve.

That’s a mistake. Recent research from England shows that “performance partnerships” between carefully matched higher and lower performing schools can significantly improve student outcomes.² Such partnerships work best when both schools perceive benefits and when they collaborate on a limited and clearly defined set of improvement challenges.

Tapping into existing expertise addresses two of the biggest challenges in school improvement: First is the long-recognized lack of capacity among SEAs and state-funded entities to serve all schools identified for improvement; second is a less-recognized “credibility gap” often faced by external assistance providers. Research and experience have taught us that educators in schools identified for improvement respond best to external coaching provided by current or recent peers who have achieved credible success in similar geographic and socioeconomic circumstances.³ The credibility gap is one reason often-expensive external experts fail to help generate significant improvement in client schools.

States can leverage latent expertise in other ways as well. For example, states can ramp up the credibility and impact of their regional assistance centers by staffing them with school leaders and educators who have recent track records of success in the local region.⁴ Or they can leverage economies of scale to connect networks of schools facing a specific challenge — such as closing achievement gaps or reducing chronic absenteeism — with one or more schools that have successfully solved that challenge.⁵ They could even enlist high-performing teachers from high-performing schools — getting strong outcomes for low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities — to serve as peer reviewers to provide feedback on samples of school improvement plans.

3

Hold districts accountable, too — but don’t treat them as if they are just big schools. For the first time, ESSA squarely involves school districts in the improvement of their own schools. But it doesn’t implicate them in the success

of those efforts. State leaders should. For years, the weight of accountability has fallen mostly on schools — neglecting the significant roles that districts play (including staffing and funding) in their quality, and allowing district leaders to point the finger of blame at the school (or the children). That needs to change, with districts evaluated at least in part by the progress of schools that need improvement.

Massachusetts state leaders showed one way to do that in the educational accountability system they adopted in 2010, which established a five-level rating framework.⁶ In defining this new system, Massachusetts joined only a small number of states that rated districts as well as schools and — uniquely — directly tied district-level ratings to school-level ratings. For the most part, districts received the same performance rating as their lowest performing school. For example, if a school was rated Level 4 (the state’s “turnaround” designation for chronically underperforming schools), its district received the Level 4 rating until it had successfully exited the school from turnaround status. And one criterion for exiting a school from turnaround status required the district to demonstrate that it had the capacity to continue to help the school improve.⁷ This policy, which *implicated* rather than merely *involved* districts in school improvement, was based on a stated philosophy that “districts are only as strong as their weakest school.”⁸

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Recognizing that districts vary in their own capacity to support serious school improvement, Massachusetts also provides support to districts. In addition to monitoring district efforts and providing direct support through the SEA, Massachusetts provides technical assistance and coaching through a network of regional District and School Assistance Centers. Through DSACs, successful recently retired superintendents partner with district leaders to use the state’s “District Standards and Indicators” for self-assessment, planning, and supporting school improvement efforts.

An external study of several cohorts of turnaround schools in Massachusetts identified increases in district capacity as an important factor. “Districts are moving away from monitoring school improvement plans to monitoring actions that drive improvement,” the research found. “Districts now have systems capable of effectively monitoring and supporting schools and increasing the spread of innovative ideas and strategies across schools and among district leaders.”⁹

Such an approach to district accountability and improvement offers a powerful way to significantly expand a state’s capacity to support school improvement well beyond what SEAs and SEA contractors can provide. “We’re not structured and staffed to intervene in scores [of schools] throughout the state,” Commissioner Mitchell Chester explained to *Education Week* in 2015. The chances of a successful turnaround “are greatly diminished if a school district isn’t part of that capacity and effort.”¹⁰

4 Adopt a framework for effective schooling to drive and focus improvement efforts. Over the past two decades, independent researchers have amassed considerable insights into the key organizational features necessary for schools to improve, allowing education leaders to really focus on what turns out to be a set of pre-conditions for improvement. Just as most states have defined a research-based framework for effective teaching, it makes sense to define a research-based framework for effective schooling and to embed that framework in all elements of school improvement policy, from diagnostics to support to monitoring.

Experience suggests that by adopting an evidence-based framework for effective schooling, states can help avoid two of the biggest pitfalls that doom school improvement efforts from the start: providing so little guidance that “anything goes” or micromanaging the improvement process through a highly scripted set of required activities. A framework of this sort allows schools flexibility to address their own unique needs while guaranteeing they don’t ignore the most basic fundamentals for school

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improvement and performance, such as strong leadership, positive climate, and schoolwide supports for effective teaching and learning.

However, experience has also shown that it’s not enough just to adopt and recommend that schools use such a framework. To maximize its power, states must be sure the framework is put to active use by embedding it in multiple policies and programs across the state’s school improvement infrastructure. Among other steps, states should:

- Create a self-assessment tool based on the framework and require it to be used during the needs assessment stage, either by the school itself or by external diagnostic teams;
- Require that improvement plans address needs identified based on the framework;
- Monitor whether schools are adequately addressing the fundamentals of the framework during the first years of the improvement process;
- In addition to substantial gains in student achievement, consider evaluations based on the framework when determining whether schools should no longer be identified as needing improvement under ESSA; and
- Use the framework as a basis for pairing and focusing school-to-school performance partnerships of the kind described above.

States can rely on an abundance of readily available research on school performance and improvement to create such a framework. Short-staffed state leaders could shortcut the process by borrowing a high-quality framework from another state.

Later in the process, some states might also want to conduct in-state research as a basis for supplemental frameworks that provide additional credibility and relevance for different types of schools identified for improvement. For example, after adopting a statewide “Conditions for School Effectiveness” framework in 2010, Massachusetts commissioned researchers to track and study its first cohort of chronically underperforming turnaround schools identified the same year. The researchers capitalized on variation in progress to understand why some schools made significant improvement and ultimately met exit criteria while other schools stagnated.

Based on that research, the state then developed an additional framework called “Turnaround Practices,” which is now used for needs assessment, planning, assistance, and monitoring of turnaround schools. While no state has yet done so, states could conduct similar cohort studies of schools identified for Targeted Support and Improvement under ESSA as the basis for developing frameworks that address how such schools can squarely and effectively address equity issues and raise performance for groups of students.

5 Enrich the needs assessment phase of school improvement. Unlike No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which required struggling schools to craft and implement improvement plans almost immediately, ESSA provides a year for a needs assessment and planning process. But state leaders would be wise not to leave what happens during that year to the whims of schools and districts, instead designing needs assessment and planning tools that support thoughtful planning with richer information and that are organized around critical pre-conditions for improvement.

To be successful, school improvement efforts must be based on a needs assessment that frankly and accurately diagnoses specific problems and challenges causing underperformance. Unfortunately, too often needs assessments have been conducted in only a cursory or incomplete way, creating a diagnostic gap that undermines the improvement process at its

start. For example, one study of schools identified for improvement under NCLB found that “only one of the 17 schools specifically addressed the question of ‘why are we failing?’ by clearly identifying problem areas that may lead to low-performance outcomes and linking these to the [improvement] initiatives.” Often the schools engaged in circular thinking by considering low test scores themselves the “cause” of underperformance.¹¹

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An effective needs assessment begins with student achievement information, then digs deeper to understand patterns in student progress across grade levels and classrooms and over time — both overall and for individual student groups. And it widens the lens to assess core educational factors that matter for student learning: aligned curriculum, effective instruction, strong leadership, supports for students and for teachers, a positive learning climate, family and community engagement, and equitable access to resources — including strong teachers. Research consistently shows that, even within schools, some groups of students are less likely to have access to expert teachers, a positive learning environment, and an appropriately challenging curriculum.¹²

ESSA provides a new opportunity for states to provide schools with the time, the tools, and the support to get needs assessments right. State leaders can:

- Require a comprehensive needs assessment for all schools identified for improvement, including schools identified for Targeted Support and Improvement;
- Establish criteria for conducting a thorough needs assessment, including the types of educational factors that must be examined to identify school- and district-based “root causes”;

- Provide tools, templates, or practical guidance to help districts and schools identify between-school and within-school inequities in each of the key areas described above;
- Make available research-based survey instruments that support needs assessments (such as the University of Chicago’s 5Essentials or Tripod Education Partners’ 7Cs surveys), and/or provide for external diagnostic reviews of identified schools; and
- Ensure that districts and schools have timely access to all necessary data for a thorough needs assessment.

6 Make planning less frustrating and more useful by adopting sensible timelines and replacing multiple required plans with a single improvement plan.

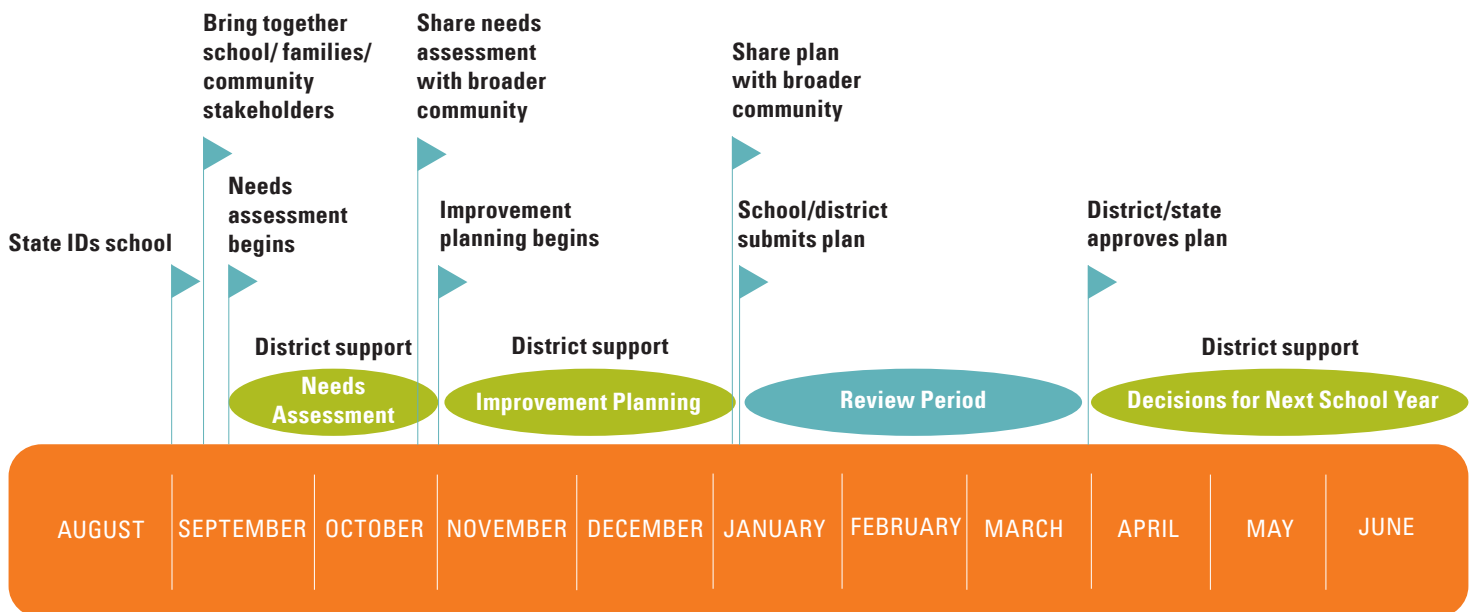
If schools and districts take the full planning year allowed under ESSA, many won’t finish improvement planning until *after* they make critical springtime decisions regarding next year’s budget, staffing, and scheduling; and students will have to wait yet another year for meaningful change. By adopting sensible timelines and streamlining multiple plan

requirements, states will allow schools to focus their efforts and create improvement plans that can inform key annual decisions about time and resources.

School leaders traditionally have had good cause for complaint about policies and procedures for improvement planning. Schools needing improvement have been typically identified in August, after which leaders had about a month to create a plan — often when teachers and parents were not available. Schools have been expected to implement plans immediately, even though critical decisions about the school budget, personnel, and master schedules had already been made the preceding spring. And federal and state requirements meant they have sometimes had to write multiple plans to cover different programs or funding streams.

State leaders can begin to fix this messy state of affairs by adopting a sensible timeline for schools to write and submit their improvement plans. States should adopt a timeline that identifies schools by the end of August; engages stakeholders in a rigorous needs assessment during September and October and in drafting a plan during November and December; permits the plan to be shared for community

Figure 1: A Sensible Timeline for a School's Improvement Planning Process



feedback and internal review during January and February; obtains state approval by the end of March at the latest; and uses the plan to inform key budget, staffing, and scheduling decisions made during April through June (Figure 1).

At the same time, states should look for every opportunity to reduce the number of plans schools must submit under different federal and state policies and programs, streamlining planning requirements into a single (or at least fewer) required documents. They also should provide plan templates that support and encourage school teams to create diagnostically driven, evidence-based plans that focus on meaningful change, rather than a laundry list of disconnected activities. For example, states could direct district and school leaders to the new Evidence for ESSA website developed by the Center for Research and Reform in Education.¹³ Finally, they should establish clear criteria for plan approval and provide annotated examples of high-quality plans that meet those criteria.

7 Stretch the improvement dollar by leveraging all sources of funding. ESSA requires that 7 percent of Title I funding be set aside to support school improvement. Wise use of these dollars will certainly help support improvement in the lowest performing schools, but they are insufficient for broader improvement efforts. State leaders should provide clear guidance and assistance on how to leverage other federal funds to support improvement plans in both the lowest performing schools and schools that are consistently underperforming for one or more groups.

ESSA's "7 percent set-aside" amounts to more than \$1 billion nationally and provides significant latitude in how states make subgrants to Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Over the past 15 years, many states distributed the similar 4 percent set aside under NCLB as a straightforward formula subgrant program with little thought to quality control or oversight; others targeted funds more strategically by constraining how formula subgrants could be spent or by distributing

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funds through competitive subgrants aligned with state priorities for school improvement. Before defaulting to a straightforward formula approach, states should consider whether their prior approaches worked and at least consider other options.

Moreover, ESSA makes clear that nothing in the law restricts states from allocating subgrants to consortia of districts or to regional education service agencies that are considered LEAs. Therefore, states could distribute a portion of the set-aside funds through competitive subgrants, giving priority to consortia of LEAs that focus on a particular improvement challenge (such as closing achievement gaps or tackling chronic absenteeism) and partner with higher performing schools or credible assistance providers.

Finally, states should consider making second-year allocations contingent on demonstrated progress documented by leading indicators of improvement. And they can ensure that districts avoid funding "cliffs" by requiring that local applications include a budget for both the period of the subgrant and for subsequent years — with clear explanations of how other federal funds will be leveraged to support planned improvement activities.

Encouraging smarter use of existing federal dollars, especially Title I and Title II funds, to support school improvement plans is just as important as any decision states make about the 7 percent set-aside. Unfortunately, too many schools still do not understand the great flexibility they have to use Title I and Title II funds to address problems identified during the needs assessment and improvement planning process. The disconnect is so bad and so

wasteful that both the U.S. Department of Education and the Council of Chief State School Officers have issued multiple documents encouraging states to address the problem over the past three years. According to the CCSSO, some states even place unnecessary — and often unintended — restrictions on the spending of federal funds that further limit their usefulness for improvement.¹⁴

The Title I, Part A Schoolwide Program option is the biggest, most applicable, and most flexible source of federal dollars to support school improvement plans. It requires a needs assessment and a schoolwide improvement plan, allowing Title I dollars to be spent on a wide range of improvement activities (from school climate interventions to family engagement to non-academic supports for students) as long as they align with the needs assessments.¹⁵ Many schools identified for improvement will meet the federal criteria to spend Title I dollars in a schoolwide program, and ESSA even provides states with new flexibility to waive those criteria for other schools with good cause.

8 Give leaders in identified schools the authority to staff schools effectively. The newest and least effective teachers and leaders are disproportionately assigned to children in low-performing and/or high-poverty schools. That won't change unless districts put proven leaders in place and ensure they have the authority to build the leadership and teaching team they need to create a culture of responsibility and improvement.

Extensive research demonstrates that school improvement requires strong leadership; indeed, it is second only to teaching in its impact on student learning.¹⁶ One of the most important things effective school leaders can do is to create a culture and climate where teachers want to work, thus attracting an effective, stable teaching staff. Teachers want to work in schools with strong leaders who create a strong instructional culture that allows teachers to collaborate on continuously improving their teaching.¹⁷

Recognizing the importance of school leadership, districts around the country are working on improving the way they recruit, train, induct, evaluate, and support their leaders.¹⁸ The importance of quality professional development should not be underestimated: New research conducted in Ohio shows that a thoughtful program of professional

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development and support can help existing leaders of underperforming schools improve their skills in ways that boost school outcomes.¹⁹

However, even the most effective principals need sufficient authority over personnel decisions to ensure that every student is taught by an effective teacher. First, although staff replacement is not always necessary, research suggests that, in schools where it is necessary, it can lead to higher rates of successful school improvement. A study of schools in California receiving federal School Improvement Grants found that most of the improvement was concentrated among those using the turnaround option, which required replacing the principal plus at least half of the teaching staff.²⁰ And a study of turnaround schools in Massachusetts revealed that high-gain schools were much more likely than stagnating schools to replace at least 45 percent of teachers during the first year of turnaround.²¹

Second, leaders need the authority to recruit and hire the most effective teachers who are a good fit for the school's individual needs and mission. States can help by promoting two proven mechanisms: early hiring and mutual consent. A good example comes from Boston. Prior to 2014, the district required schools to accept existing teachers who had lost positions at other Boston schools through "forced placement,"

which frequently prevented principals from hiring more promising candidates. Most new hires were made during July, August, or after the beginning of the school year, when the best candidates had already taken positions elsewhere.

In 2014, Boston Public Schools adopted a Human Capital Initiative that allowed schools to start hiring in March and replaced “forced placement” with a requirement that teachers can only be hired with mutual consent of the teacher and the school leadership team. Late hires have since dropped from 65 percent to 25 percent. Teachers hired before June are twice as likely to receive an “exemplary” evaluation rating than those hired later, while those hired after June are three times more likely to be evaluated as underperforming.²²

9 **Ensure that students attending the lowest performing schools get the high-quality instruction they need to succeed.** School improvement is challenging, and it takes time. But the students in the lowest performing schools don’t have time to spare. State and district leaders thus must ask themselves the question: “What can we do for the students in low-performing schools right now, while the improvement effort gets fully underway?”

School choice is by no means a panacea, and in many places, it is not an option at all. But where within- or cross-district public parental option programs exist, state and district leaders should make absolutely sure that children who attend the lowest performing schools get top priority for admission to higher performing schools. Some states already have open enrollment policies that require or encourage districts to give top admissions priority to students in low-performing schools.²³ Over 100 districts around the country are acting on the extensive evidence that attending socioeconomically diverse schools improves long-term outcomes for low-income students (with no negative impact on outcomes for affluent students) by implementing enrollment strategies to increase school diversity.²⁴ And when NCLB was in effect,

the parents of students in Title I schools labeled as “needing improvement” had the right to choose another public school for their children. But the NCLB process typically occurred after most districts had already filled available seats at their higher performing schools, and few parents availed themselves of that choice.

To make public school choice a viable option for students in the lowest performing schools, state leaders must notify parents of their options before the official enrollment period begins, provide them with the achievement and opportunity data they need to make an informed decision, and ensure that these students have “first dibs” on any open seats in higher performing schools. Moreover, the state or district must cover all transportation expenses.

But students shouldn’t have to move schools to get a better education. Whether switching schools is an option or not, states and districts should offer students supplemental instruction to help accelerate learning. While NCLB’s “supplemental services” provisions were often not well-administered, the basic idea is the right one: When students who are behind get the extra instruction they need, it helps them catch up. Research shows that high-quality supplemental instruction that is aligned with the school or district curriculum can help accelerate learning for students who are behind. Properly organized, this could be a powerful use of the up-to-3 percent set-aside for Direct Student Services.²⁵

The bottom line is that there isn’t one best way to get immediate help to the students who need it. But there is a worst way: not getting them any help at all.

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