



CONTACT:

Blair Mann

(571) 458-7925

bmann@forstudentsuccess.org

Independent Peer Review Finds Lofty Education Goals Untethered to Actual Accountability Plans

With all 51 state education plans now submitted, many still need to meaningfully address equity, school improvement

WASHINGTON (December 12, 2017) – The Collaborative for Student Success, in partnership with Bellwether Education Partners, has [released the results](#) of its independent peer review of the 34 state plans submitted to the U.S. Department of Education in September. The findings – coupled with the results of the first independent peer review of the 17 states that submitted in April – show that states largely squandered the opportunity provided by the Every Student Succeeds Act to create stronger, more innovative education plans.

“State plans have now been reviewed for all 50 states and the District of Columbia – and on the whole, states failed to lay out bold plans for improving education. While some plans did offer innovative ideas for other states to learn from, the lack of focus on ensuring success for all students is not only concerning, but potentially a step backward,” said Jim Cowen, executive director of the Collaborative for Student Success. “We look forward to supporting state advocates in efforts to improve upon these plans and leverage the exemplary practices identified at CheckStatePlans.org to dramatically improve outcomes for all students.”

In total, the Collaborative for Student Success and Bellwether Education Partners recruited more than 45 peer reviewers, representing bipartisan viewpoints, and including eight former state chiefs, 14 former teachers, state education leaders, members of the civil rights and disability communities, and education experts from around the country. **Learn more about our peer reviewers [here](#).**

Contrary to the national trend, some states did stand out on individual rubric categories. A total of 10 states received a 5 (the highest score possible) across four different categories. Five states earned a 5 for implementing high standards and aligned assessments, three more for their plans to support struggling schools, one for its plans to measure student proficiency and growth, and one for the rigorous criteria it has in place for how schools exit corrective action or improvement status. Providing information about how to turn around low-performing schools is arguably the most important aspect of state accountability plans, and as such, peer reviewers were pleased to identify strong plans in several states including Indiana, Rhode Island and New York. These state plans outline a needs assessment to diagnose root causes of underperformance, the successful implementation of evidence-based strategies, and the targeted use of school improvement funds to support turnaround efforts.

While reviewers found the second round of 34 state plans to be more complete than the first 17 plans, the extra time that states had to develop them did not result in overall stronger submissions. Many state plans still lacked definitive statements that would have allowed the peer reviewers, and more importantly the public, to understand the states’ plans of action. This was most evident in states’ school improvement plans. Most states included little or no information about how they would utilize funding set aside specifically for school improvement. Further, most states did not indicate specific steps to improve underperforming schools, nor did they describe concrete, rigorous interventions that underperforming schools should implement.

“The passage of the Every Student Succeed Act in 2016 was hailed as a ‘Christmas Miracle’ for returning authority to the states and promised to significantly improve outcomes for all kids. This review clearly shows that the vast majority of state plans fall short of this promise,” said Marc H. Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League. “Parents throughout our communities are determined to double-down on efforts to hold decisionmakers’ feet to the fire in order to upend inequity and to close opportunity and achievement gaps by addressing the needs of all students, especially those who are most vulnerable and have been historically underserved, including students of color, low-income students, and English learners.”

Peer reviewers flagged similarly troubling themes and omissions across the 51 plans they reviewed.

- **Only 2 states explain how they plan to use all available set-aside funds for school improvement**, taking advantage of the flexibility afforded to them to target these funds to rigorous action and align them to state priorities.
- **4 states do not plan to measure individual student growth**, choosing to look at less accurate school-level growth calculations.
- **12 states leave large gaps between expected graduation rates and proficiency rates**. Most often, states proposed graduation rate goals that far exceed their expected proficiency rates by 20 percentage points or more, creating the potential for states to graduate students that are not adequately prepared for their futures. One state in particular has proposed a more than 40 percentage point difference between the percentage of students graduating and those who are actually ready for college-level work.
- **15 states lack clear, easy to understand ratings for all schools**. By choosing not to include a summative school rating or only provide ratings for schools in need of improvement, states make it more challenging for parents to understand how their child’s school is performing.
- **20 states are silent on consequences for missing the 95 percent participation rate**, and at least one state has left the door open to “game” the system by simply adding a meaningless notation for schools that do not meet the participation benchmark. Peer reviewers are wary that schools may return to a time when some students were intentionally not tested and their performance swept under the rug.
- **24 states do not expect a certain amount of progress in order to exit improvement status**, which, rather than requiring schools to demonstrate meaningful improvement, would allow schools to slide in and out of corrective action based on the weaker performance of other schools.
- **41 states do not incorporate all student subgroups into ratings for all schools**. Failing to include subgroup performance in school ratings has the potential to mask how well each school is serving all of its students.

“We know that state education leaders are committed to doing the right thing, amidst capacity issues and funding challenges – which is why we, as peer reviewers, were careful to provide constructive criticism and not just attack states,” said Terry Holliday, former Kentucky Commissioner of Education. “As states take the next steps to seek approval from the U.S. Department of Education and implement their plans, it is imperative that they learn from the best practices identified through our review and work to ensure that their plans will truly serve all students well.”

Find out more about how each state plan measured up by visiting CheckStatePlans.org.

About the Collaborative for Student Success:

The Collaborative for Student Success is a non-profit organization working to improve public education through a commitment to high standards for all students. The Collaborative believes that state, district and local efforts to implement rigorous, comparable education standards and meaningful assessments are an important and necessary step to ensure all students are prepared to succeed in life after high school—whether that be college or a career.

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