

To: Promise to Practice Peer Network

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Subject: Check State Plans: Promise to Practice Initiative

Thank you for agreeing to act as a peer reviewer in the Check State Plans: Promise to Practice initiative. The purpose of this memorandum is to provide you with background, instructions, and expectations as a participant in this initiative.

Driving Equity

The transition to new accountability systems provides states and districts with a significant opportunity and responsibility to leverage their authority to dramatically improve equity and outcomes for students. This is especially evident in the manner that states allocate funding and resources to improve schools identified for support and intervention. ESSA requires states and districts to develop and approve their own school improvement plans – providing more than \$1 billion per year of federal funds to implement those plans. While ESSA outlines some provisions, states have significant discretion over how the funding is allocated, as well as the timeline and criteria districts and schools must meet in order to receive the funding to intervene in the lowest performing schools.

The 2018-2019 school year marks the deadline that states must identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support under the new system; yet many states continue to wrestle with how to leverage their flexibility and implement promising and evidence-based practices within their schools and districts. How states use their autonomy and resources to support their districts and schools is one, of many, fundamental components to addressing chronically underperforming schools. While we recognize the inherent difficulty in overcoming longstanding underperformance, and the need for dramatically better results in struggling schools, we believe states should embrace the opportunity to implement strong school improvement strategies that meet their students' needs.

Check State Plans: Promise to Practice

Last year, the Collaborative for Student Success and Bellwether Education Partners conducted the only independent peer review of every state's new accountability plan under ESSA. The review – titled Check State Plans – included over 50 peers who represented bipartisan viewpoints and were former state policymakers, members of the civil rights and disability communities, and education experts with state and national policy expertise. The review highlighted best practices in states so that information could be used as a resource as education officials fine-tuned their state plan.

The heart of strong accountability lies in ensuring that *all students* get the education that they deserve. A fundamental element are the mechanisms that states utilize to support low performing schools. Therefore, building on the knowledge gained in Check State Plans, the Collaborative for Student Success, in partnership with HCM Strategists (HCM), is embarking on a new phase of work called, *Promise to Practice*. The purpose of this endeavor is to ascertain:

- 1) if states are utilizing their autonomy to implement strong, comprehensive, and effective approaches to intervene in low performing schools;
- 2) the trends in how states are approaching school improvement and highlight best practices; and
- 3) the progress states have made implementing the school improvement provisions under ESSA.

Throughout the spring and summer, HCM and the Collaborative recruited a new cohort of peer reviewers including state and district leaders, school improvement experts, advocates, researchers, members of the civil rights and disability communities, and education experts with state and district expertise. As a participant in this cohort, you will evaluate a subset of state's efforts to drive school improvement.

Promise to Practice: Methodology and Rubric Development

This spring, HCM and the Collaborative partnered with Education First, a national education policy research and strategy firm that has worked closely with many state agencies, to survey and interview state education leaders to document the activities states have set in motion to work with struggling schools under ESSA. That information was used to create objective, one-page snapshots on each state that summarizes key facts, decisions, promising state resources and next steps for school improvement strategies. The state snapshots are intended to serve as a resource regarding states approaches to school improvement and uncover the efforts states have undertaken to drive improvement. Ultimately, 35 states participated, and Ed First will be releasing this full set of snapshots as a package in late September.

We have included Ed First's state snapshot as one data source in the package of material you are receiving. Please note that, while Ed First is asking states individually to review and confirm the information presented, not all states have finished their reviews at this point—and so many of the snapshots are still in draft form and may change slightly as Ed First receives additional information or details from states. (If any information presented on the snapshots for states you are reviewing subsequently changes significantly, we will alert you.)

Concurrently, HCM conducted a comprehensive literature review and interviewed school improvement experts as well as state and district leaders to uncover the levers and mechanisms states can utilize to strengthen their turnaround efforts. This research was benchmarked with the principles of school improvement developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers, Chiefs for Change, Center for American Progress, The Foundation for Excellence in Education, and the Center for School Turnaround at WestEd, among others.

With this as our foundation, HCM and the Collaborative developed a rubric to evaluate states approaches to school improvement. The rubric was reviewed by three former state

chiefs, multiple school improvement experts, and national policy experts to ensure that the rubric encompassed the right levers of change and is aligned with the school improvement requirements of ESSA.

While the research regarding best practice for school improvement at the state level is mixed, there are some fundamental principles of action that can support a district and schools' ability to turnaround a low performing school. Therefore, we are looking for states to take an evidence-based approach as required under the law but go further with rigorous criteria and processes to ensure that school improvement funds will support the most effective strategies. We are also looking for a coherent state vision that informs and aligns its strategies, with high expectations matched by supports and guidance to grow districts' and schools' capacity.

Promise to Practice: Peer Review Process

Each peer will review a subset of state portfolios which, pending on publicly released information, will consist of:

- 1) the state's application to receive school improvement funding under ESSA section 1003a;
- 2) the state's scoring rubric for the application; and
- 3) the state's guidance for districts or schools to develop and implement their school improvement plans. The guidance could include, but is not limited to: the state's school improvement manuals, a needs assessment, regulations, or guidance regarding evidence-based interventions, a state's school improvement theory of action, or a model exemplary plan.

Each of these documents represent one, of many, pivotal opportunities states have to leverage their authority to ensure districts are implementing strong school improvement strategies. Following the peer's individual analysis of their respective portfolios, HCM and the Collaborative will convene the Promise to Practice peer network this September. Using the rubric as a guide, the peers will discuss their findings and evaluate the states efforts. In addition, the peers will collectively identify the school improvement trends, identify best practices, and develop recommendations for states to consider.

Deliverables and Timeline

Following the peer analysis, HCM and the Collaborative will compile the findings into a national report presenting states' collective strengths and areas for improvement, along with the peer recommendations for states to consider as they refine their school improvement strategies. The report will not grade or rank states. In addition, the Collaborative and HCM will release the peer's analysis of each state. The report and the state reviews will be released later this Fall.