



STATE REPORT CONNECTICUT

OVERALL APPROACH

Equity: How well does the state’s approach to school improvement include focused attention on supporting underserved students and closing the achievement gap? Does the state require LEAs to maintain an equity focus in their school improvement plans, activities and resource allocations?

Connecticut uses a solid approach to resource inequity and root cause analysis in their application, though guiding questions related to equity could be more robust, especially in the needs assessment process. Additional materials and explanation regarding what state means by “equity” would benefit districts and schools.

Some language in the school improvement application and rubric implies the need to address equity issues. This is strongest in the allocation of resources portion of the application and in the priority setting for interventions and strategies for improvement.

Strengths: How is the state thoughtfully leveraging ESSA’s flexibility to put in place the necessary policies and procedures that create an enabling environment for effective and sustained school improvement, and that consider state/local lessons learned from past efforts? What parts of the state’s turnaround strategy or guidance to LEAs were strongest or exemplary?

Connecticut’s school improvement framework, the connection between the needs assessment, resource inequities, and root cause analysis process, and the alignment with the identified strategies and interventions to the results of the needs assessment are all strong. The scoring rubric itself is also high quality. Acknowledging the importance of the district role as a change agent is also commendable. The evidence guides are also a great resource; one which many other states do not yet offer their districts and schools.

Improvements: How can the state improve its turnaround efforts? What parts of the state’s strategy or guidance to LEAs were unclear? What risks and challenges might the state face with its current approach?

Initial review indicated that Connecticut is leaning heavily on district capacity and presuming that local staff will be able to do the needs assessments, the equity and root cause analysis, and develop solid plans for improvement. Feedback from the state has indicated that it is engaging in more technical support, guidance, and resource development to support districts with the needs assessment and school

TURNAROUND COMPONENT OVERVIEW

Coherent and Aligned Vision for Improving Outcomes	Adequate
Strategic Use of Funding and Alignment of Resources	Adequate
Rigorous Review Process	Adequate
Continuous Improvement, Monitoring and Evaluation	Adequate
Evidence-Based Interventions	Strong
Capacity Building and Autonomy	Adequate
Engagement	Adequate
Sustainability	Adequate

improvement application. The area of largest confusion continues to be the cohesion and consistency of expectations across the state's multiple school improvement funding streams, cohorts of districts and schools, and competitive versus formula funding.

The state has developed a theory of action for school improvement, but it is buried and unlabeled its ESSA plan. Connecticut should consider featuring its theory of action more prominently in its school improvement materials.

TURNAROUND COMPONENTS

Coherent and Aligned Vision for Improving Outcomes: How well does the state articulate a coherent vision or theory of action that drives their school improvement efforts? Is this vision aligned with the state's accountability system and goals for closing the achievement gap?

N/A Weak Needs Improvement **Adequate** Strong Exemplary

Connecticut has a clear and simple vision for school improvement, and the state's framework includes four logical components: Culture and Climate, Academics, Operations, and Talent. The vision and framework's permeation throughout Connecticut's school improvement documents and tools seems inconsistent, however, and it is unclear how exactly the state will provide the supports to districts in order to implement them with fidelity. Districts are asked to rely upon it for the needs assessment, but not for interventions. The state indicates that districts need not select strategies and evidence-based interventions in each of the four Framework elements, which gave some reviewers pause, but the state explained that it would be unreasonable to ask districts and schools to focus on everything at once, which is a rational approach.

Equity and excellence are clearly stated in the vision, but it is difficult to evaluate the overall alignment with the rest of the system without more detail on how this work actually occurs or equity-related elements in Connecticut's school improvement materials. The goals, including closure of achievement gaps, are not clearly articulated and must be assumed.

Strategic Use of Funding and Alignment of Resources: Is the state allocating funding in a way that is strategic and maximizes resources? Are LEAs expected to prioritize improvement efforts that address the underlying performance issues?

N/A Weak Needs Improvement **Adequate** Strong Exemplary

Connecticut seems to have a well-defined, differentiated system of identifying schools and districts, and the annual review of resource allocations is also strong. The state allocates 70% of its school improvement grants through a formula based on concentration of improvement schools in its Alliance districts, and the remaining 30% is allocated on a competitive basis to Commissioner's Network districts. Initially, it appeared that Connecticut would be awarding new school improvement funds to a very small subset of schools that were not already receiving funds through the state's prior school improvement grant program. While the state has clarified that its 33 Alliance districts are in fact receiving new school improvement funds, the fact remains that current publicly available materials do not address the lion's share of federal funds going out to districts.

Connecticut's materials indicate that the state does not allow schools in Alliance districts that are already receiving school improvement grants or state funds through its Commissioner's Network to receive new money through this process. The state has indicated that it has changed its approach

here, however, and will award additional school improvement funds to schools still receiving a school improvement grant.

Connecticut’s school improvement application is high quality, but it is unclear how funding is tied to efforts that address needs districts and schools have identified. Feedback from the state indicates that this is due to the fact that most of the school improvement guidance and coaching is occurring on the ground through technical assistance provided by the department of education. While it is unclear how the state’s various initiatives work together, allocating at least some of the available resources competitively will help to ensure district willingness and capacity to implement school improvement interventions.

Rigorous Review Process: Is the state applying rigorous criteria and review processes to ensure resources will be used to support effective school improvement efforts? Is the state prioritizing funding to LEAs who demonstrate the greatest need for school improvement funding (including LEAs with a high percentage of CSI and TSI schools) and the strongest commitment to school improvement?

N/A Weak Needs Improvement **Adequate** Strong Exemplary

Connecticut’s application review materials appear to be high quality. The state’s accountability plan describes a thorough peer review process and cut score for successful school improvement grant applications. However, this process isn’t referenced in the school improvement application or rubric. In the rubric, the only reference is to the number of points available, but not to a minimum number of points required for funding. Therefore, the threshold at which the state will fund applications is unclear, leading to concerns about the degree to which the state will implement the competitive funding process with fidelity. In addition, the points are tied to completeness as much as quality, indicating that a district may receive funding for a complete plan, but not necessarily to a high quality plan. That said, feedback from the state indicates that the state has been willing to ask for significant plan revisions if chosen strategies are not adequately tied to needs identified in the district needs assessment.

It is also unclear what the review process is for the schools that are part of the competitive school improvement grant versus Alliance districts, in part because an application for Alliance districts is not publicly available. While the state has indicated that it will use different applications for the two school improvement programs it is unknown whether they are evaluated the same way, how expectations compare, or how the fidelity of implementation is assessed.

Continuous Improvement, Monitoring and Evaluation: Does the state have a robust, data-driven process to monitor LEAs’ implementation of the school improvement plans within their district? Did the state establish clear milestones to ensure improvement over time, and within four years?

N/A Weak Needs Improvement **Adequate** Strong Exemplary

If Connecticut implements the proposed monitoring plan in its ESSA application, it is promising for the schools and districts that are part of the Opportunity and Alliance Districts. Yet, Connecticut has provided inconsistent language between the state’s ESSA plan and school improvement application with respect to monitoring, evaluation and milestones. The ESSA plan describes a robust system with multiple site visits within a year and expected milestones. The application speaks to an annual review, yet describes that the state “may” require changes if there isn’t progress. That said, the state has indicated that it has and will ask for significant revisions to district plans based on performance. The application rubric identifies various indicators that schools must use to demonstrate readiness, but they do not appear to be aligned with the state’s school improvement framework that focuses on Culture and Climate, Academic, Operations, and Talent.

The state’s intention of implementing a cross-department team to monitor progress, which includes education agency representatives from academics, assessment, performance, turnaround, and federal programs, is commendable and should result in more cohesive supports for the schools and districts.

The state describes a robust process through which districts submit data aligned with their plan, the state reviews the data internally and both the state and district suggest agenda items for a check in with the district, and then the state and district come together to discuss progress and next steps. This cycle occurs three times annually, in addition to regular consultant-provided technical assistance for Alliance districts. Districts that apply for the state’s competitive improvement funds will also receive some direct assistance, but less frequently. Ensuring that additional information on the details of this cycle are publicly available to district, school, and community stakeholders would strengthen the state’s approach by increasing the transparency of expectations.

More detail on the expected milestones for all identified schools and districts would be useful. Connecticut has indicated that all school districts will be expected to set milestones that are aligned to the state’s ESSA goals and accountability indicators, though evidence of that process is not available.

Evidence-Based Interventions: To what extent is the state mandating LEAs use evidence-based strategies in their improvement efforts? Does the state provide guidance and supports to LEAs to help them identify and implement the most effective strategies based upon their needs?

N/A Weak Needs Improvement Adequate **Strong** Exemplary

Connecticut has complied with ESSA regarding their expectations for evidence-based strategies and interventions. The evidence-based guidance documents, which include links to the research in key areas, are clear and easy to navigate.

The state’s school improvement application rubric requires the applicant to note the level of evidence for chosen interventions, but full points on this element seem like an accounting exercise. The state provides the information and expects the district to make the connections between school needs and effective strategies, though state feedback indicates it is willing to offer support if the district struggles. Additional support in how to connect local needs to the strategies and interventions, such as including some guiding questions to help determine if an evidence-based intervention is appropriate for a school’s demographic, would be useful on the front end.

Capacity Building and Autonomy: How well does the state articulate, delineate or set parameters around which interventions and responsibilities belong to the state, LEA and/or school? Does the state provide support or guidance to help LEAs identify and reduce barriers to school improvement? Does the state have a framework or process to support and monitor outside entities who partner with the state, LEAs or schools in school improvement efforts?

N/A Weak Needs Improvement **Adequate** Strong Exemplary

Based on the materials available, it appears that Connecticut has provided sufficient information regarding roles and lines of authority. The state clearly articulates each district as the change agent and supports are designed around this belief. Each district is required to explain, in detail, how it is supporting schools in the development of school improvement plans. Connecticut could more clearly describe the types of changes that might be needed to ensure that each domain of the school improvement framework is implemented with fidelity.

There does not seem to be much support or guidance related to reducing barriers to improvement, nor a process or framework from the state to help district screen outside partners. That said, outside providers are expected to provide evidence that their interventions meet ESSA’s evidence-based tiers. The state’s rubric requires each district to explain how it is vetting partners using evidence of effectiveness, but information related to how to vet the effectiveness of external providers was not evident in the materials available for review. In addition to Connecticut’s comprehensive support schools completing needs assessments, the state also requires needs assessments from its targeted support schools. This is certainly a promising practice and supports the idea that all identified schools should utilize the same

continuous improvement cycle, and may result in more districts and schools feeling prepared to make decisions about evidence-based interventions.

Engagement: Does the state require LEAs to engage with stakeholders such as parents and community members in the development and implementation of their school improvement plans? Does the state provide sufficient guidance and resources to LEAs to effectively do so, helping them foster local buy-in and promote sustainability?

N/A Weak Needs Improvement **Adequate** Strong Exemplary

Stakeholder engagement is a component of the state’s school turnaround framework under Culture and Climate. It is also included as a component of the school improvement application and rubric, however it isn’t given much weight. Considerations around engagement also seem to be limited to developing the plan, not implementing or monitoring it. Connecticut could improve by including engagement supports throughout the school improvement work, especially since engagement is embedded within one of the three pillars of Connecticut’s school improvement framework.

On the other hand, Connecticut state statute requires that low performing schools have a school governance council that includes diverse membership, including parents and community members. The state has also developed and made available an evidence guide for stakeholder engagement. It’s a well-resourced and well-organized guide. Unfortunately, this guide does not seem tied to the school improvement application.

Sustainability: Does the state have a plan in place to review the school improvement efforts statewide and evaluate the impact and effectiveness? Does the state have a process in place to support LEAs and schools by enhancing their capacity to maintain their improvement efforts upon exiting identification and intervention?

N/A Weak Needs Improvement **Adequate** Strong Exemplary

Sustainability is an element of Connecticut’s school improvement application and rubric, and the state does plan to perform annual reviews of school improvement efforts statewide. The has also indicated that it prompts districts to start thinking about sustaining improvement efforts when they check in roughly half way through the grant cycle.

Districts may need additional support to understand what those autonomies may look like in practice, and how schools and districts will continue to maintain improvements without additional funds or support is unclear.

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