



STATE REPORT ILLINOIS

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?

Illinois’ IL-EMPOWER platform and Illinois Quality Framework for school improvement include a strong equity focus. The framework is designed to encourage an equitable, coordinated, and focused school-wide approach to ensure that all students are provided an opportunity for academic success. However, these high quality materials and tools seem completely disconnected from Illinois’ actual school improvement application process or guidance. It is not clear when an equity analysis is conducted, or if it is mandatory as part of receiving school improvement funds. Based on existing information, the state does not appear to require districts to maintain an equity focus in their school improvement plans and resource allocations.

The state’s framework also does not seem to prioritize the examination of data. Illinois leans on subgroup data for any sort of analysis leading to the reduction or elimination of an achievement gap. Other important equity indicators, such as attendance and personnel, do not appear to be included in the school improvement guidance. The equity resources available for review reference other school district approaches to equity, like Boston Public Schools, which is better than nothing, but this is not a tool or template to help district leaders dissect their own data, understand the root causes of their achievement gaps, or how to build a plan specific to the needs of the students in a specific school.

The state provides a Racial Equity Toolkit from the Government Alliance on Race and Equity on its website. It is certainly a comprehensive set of tools. However, this document appears to be standalone and not aligned to the states school improvement guidance and process.

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?

To date, Illinois has clearly invested most of its resources and person power in developing a clear improvement framework and delivering trainings to orient districts and communities to the state’s new approach. The IL-EMPOWER materials are designed for the average person to understand them and

TURNAROUND COMPONENT OVERVIEW

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

take away how the state plans to use school improvement funds. The state has also developed a clear process to support districts in identifying and utilizing external partners for school improvement, which is important because the state is encouraging districts to use these partners to a large degree. Illinois is facilitating an RFP process, aligned to the Illinois Quality Framework, through which districts may select service providers that fit their needs. The state looks to assist districts and schools by documenting the service providers that have shown success in the 31 IL-Empower pilot sites.

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?

Illinois has not yet developed guidance for districts to use when allocating school improvement funds or to design and implement school improvement plans. The state also does not provide districts with a guide to identify the schools in the greatest need or implement evidence-based interventions. Illinois ESSA and federal programs materials in no way resemble the robust nature of the Illinois Quality Framework, and there is not yet available a school improvement application. These things indicate that the state has not yet finished developing its school improvement guidance.

Illinois could help districts in connecting the multiple state and federal mandates into one effective plan with embedded equity opportunities and achievement gap reductions. Additionally, the state should look to redesign its school improvement tool to be a true performance management plan with clear expectations for all internal and external stakeholders. All school materials and supports should align to the state’s vision of the whole child.

Illinois has provided autonomy to school leaders but has given most of the oversight responsibility to outside entities. The state has some responsibility for guiding and overseeing districts in school improvement, including providing more resources and technical assistance on how improvement plans can implement the vision, as well as stakeholder engagement and sustainability. The state should consider focusing funding on more than just adequacy and consider a formula that incorporates highest need and most effective use of funds.

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

Illinois articulates a clear vision for a whole child, whole school approach to school improvement called the Illinois Quality Framework. This vision permeates all of Illinois’ school improvement materials, and the state’s school improvement website is replete with documents, infographics, and tools aligned with this framework. The state’s Illinois Quality Framework school improvement guidance and support materials are housed on its IL-EMPOWER website, which is clean and easy to navigate. The materials found here are very high quality. The framework itself has equity-related questions woven throughout, and when used rigorously in districts is sure to prompt useful conversations among school and district leaders. That said, it seems light on prompts specifically to examine the data to search for root causes to address in order to close achievement gaps.

The state does not appear to have articulated in its school improvement documents a theory of action that indicates the roles of the state, districts, and schools in applying this framework. In addition, the framework is not articulated in the guidance or the application for funds, which is a missed opportunity. In fact, the state’s ESSA-specific school improvement materials seem to bear little connection to the high

quality materials on the IL-EMPOWER section of the website. Federal program grant applications are housed in a different section and seem much more compliance-oriented than IL-EMPOWER. Illinois' Title I 1003a grant application is not available yet, though some screenshots of the online application portal were available, and guidance to districts for completing their plans is also online. It seems that the state has not finished aligning its federal programs activities with its school improvement work.

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

It is difficult to determine how Illinois plans to allocate improvement funds because the state's school improvement grant application is not available and current guidance is thin. It appears that the state will allocate school improvement funding with a formula that weighs student enrollment and percentage of "adequacy." However, the state does not provide a definition for "adequacy" and it is not clear whether school need is prioritized in any way. The state's guidance does require districts to detail how improvement funds will be used and work in tandem with other provisions and funding available under ESSA. The state does require districts to submit a budget that includes references to timelines, state and federal requirements, management, interest payments, indirect costs, etc. However, there are no requirements for districts to justify or demonstrate how funds will be used to maximize resources, prioritized to schools most in need, or how funds are aligned to the overall vision.

Illinois seems to be targeting most school improvement funds to be used by districts to receive services from "education partners" that they select. The state has provided a model contract that districts can use to procure services, which will be a helpful tool, and also provides lists of approved partners, categorized in alignment with the Illinois Quality Framework. It will be important for the state to ensure that districts are partnering with service providers for services aligned with the needs determined using the Illinois Quality Framework.

The state's existing materials do explain minimum funding amounts for districts with comprehensive or targeted support and improvement schools. The fact alone that Illinois is providing improvement funding for targeted schools is encouraging, as many states are not or are unable to do so.

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

Illinois has not aligned its school improvement application, federal program guidance, or information with a vision of whole child, whole school, whole community. Again, the difference between the IL-EMPOWER materials and the state's federal program guidance is stark. The review process appears to be compliance-oriented in which a complete plan with "adequate" responses will be deemed substantially approved. State guidance to districts regarding plan development is centered entirely around compliance. It is not clear what additional assistance will be provided to districts with plans that lack interventions sufficient to turn around the performance of the lowest performing students.

The state does require districts to develop a set of criteria based on the use of an external partner to assist in developing and implementing the school improvement efforts, and these criteria must be aligned with the needs assessment data. It would be useful to know the extent to which the state will review plans along with selected partners for each district to ensure alignment of partnerships with determined needs.

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

A plan for monitoring and evaluating progress was not articulated in the documents reviewed. Because the state's grant application is not yet available, it is not yet clear what school improvement goals and milestones districts will set. While the Illinois Quality Framework could be a powerful tool to help districts have rigorous school improvement conversations, there does not yet seem to be an opportunity for the state to learn from districts their concrete school improvement targets in order to monitor progress.

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

Illinois provides districts with a list of state approved providers and programs from which the districts can select on its IL-EMPOWER website. In reviewing the application process to become a provider, it appeared to be more in line with a request for proposal process rather than one focused on evidence in working with low performing schools and the evidence of success in student achievement and closing achievement gaps.

It is also unclear how the state will determine if the interventions implemented at the recommendation of the approved providers are evidence-based or which interventions are the most effective at closing achievement and equity gaps. The application does ask districts to provide a description of how the proposed interventions are evidence-based. It does not make clear that the state is planning on providing assistance to districts in determining which interventions are the most effective at closing achievement gaps and equity gaps. This assistance may be coming in the form of the current IL-EMPOWER pilot, though there is not much detail yet on how the state will document the successes or challenges of that work, or whether vendors will be removed from the approved list if they are not able to show improvement.

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

While Illinois school ESSA-related school improvement applications and guidance is un- or underdeveloped, the state has clearly invested the lion's share of its resources so far in creating a structure for school improvement activities at the local level. The state seems to be providing near-complete autonomy to districts for them to use school improvement funds to partner with service providers, and has developed programmatic guidance to help them do so.

Illinois' documents indicate that representatives from the state has held five public forums across the state to orient schools and communities to expectations under IL-EMPOWER and using the Illinois Quality Framework. The state has also hosted and posted webinars with this information. IL-EMPOWER materials are crystal clear and designed to be understandable by the layperson, and the Illinois Quality Framework is at its core a capacity building tool.

The state is providing school support managers to each comprehensive school, and this is also an option for targeted schools. From the information available, these individuals seem to be school improvement coaches that will work with district and school leadership and staff. Illinois' website also hosts a peer finder tool with which district leaders can find other similar districts to connect with and learn from.

Illinois deserves credit for this structure, yet the fact remains that so far there appears to be little state involvement directly with districts, and the responsibilities of the state, district, school, and partners are not articulated. There is concern that without more support from the state, districts will not be able to use their autonomy to maximum effect.

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 included in the Illinois Quality Framework to a strong degree, with a whole section entitled Family and Community Engagement. Again, without knowing the expectations for districts as they apply for school improvement funds, it is unclear the degree to which districts will use the framework with fidelity. In the state's ESSA-specific guidance on district improvement plans, engagement is included only as a compliance component.

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

The state appears to have little reference to sustainability. A systematic review of school improvement efforts was not observable. There does not appear to be a plan for how schools are to sustain improvement once they exit school improvement status. The state's heavy reliance on third party providers makes it difficult to know how schools would sustain improvement efforts upon exiting identification and beyond the length of the contract with the third party.

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