



## STATE REPORT MINNESOTA

### 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?

This is an area of significant strength for Minnesota. Equity is a common theme throughout Minnesota’s school improvement documentation and it is clear that it is a state focus. However, there is an opportunity to dive deeper into the drivers that cause systemic inequities. For example, Minnesota’s plan encourages districts to evaluate strategies to counter systemic inequities by increasing underserved students’ access to experienced and qualified teachers.

Equity is a main pillar of the theory of action for school turnaround. In the comprehensive needs assessment, “schools must disaggregate the data by ethnicity and special student populations and examine for gaps and inequities in student achievement/outcomes.” In the school improvement plans, the state instructs districts to include strategies that are appropriate to the needs of the student populations.

**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?

Minnesota’s grant funding approach to only those districts with the highest proportion of identified schools is a smart, thoughtful way of targeting limited resources, though it will be important to ensure that other schools that are struggling have other avenues for support. As mentioned above, Minnesota’s focus on equity and underserved groups of students is also strong.

Minnesota’s needs assessment is also particularly strong. The “PLC Roadmap” is an exemplary piece of guidance and professional development that can be applicable to all educators and schools, regardless of whether or not they are comprehensive or targeted support.

The review process for district and school turnaround plans is thorough, and it is wise for the state to make use of third party expertise to aid in the process. Alignment between state legislation, the MDE

### TURNAROUND COMPONENT OVERVIEW

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

accountability system and the theory of action for comprehensive and targeted support districts/schools is very strong and leads to greater likelihood of implementation with fidelity.

**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?

Minnesota could utilize its authority to a far greater degree to drive the outcomes and systems-change it wants to see from districts and schools. The state’s approach seems to be mostly bottom-up, with the needs assessment being completed by the district or school and then submitted to the agency for approval as long as it meets the established criteria. Throughout many documents and the ESSA plan there is language indicating “working within the system,” or selecting an initiative “that is a best fit for the system,” yet it is the current system that led to the need for turnaround plans in the first place.

Given the strength of the state’s ESSA plan, the state should create materials based on the substance of what is in the ESSA plan so that stakeholders — namely educators — can obtain and utilize state guidance. Although the documents created are clear and easy to follow, much of the specific guidance and intervention strategies are difficult to find.

Minnesota could also improve its long-term evaluation approach in order to better learn what works and what doesn’t in school improvement. This may be happening, but it was not clear from the available documents. The state could also provide more guidance to districts on evidence-based practices. Although this may be coming in the form of a list, it would be most helpful to provide more detailed guidance for how to make use of evidence, rather than simply a list of interventions.

## 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

Minnesota’s theory of action is exceptionally clear, concise, and incorporates all the required components of ESSA as well as state priorities. There is a clear focus on equity and eliminating achievement gaps, and the final results from the theory of action are both clearly articulated and stated to apply to all schools, not just low performing schools.

Further, the theory of action is stakeholder-authored and includes an expectation that districts and schools engage in ESSA-required comprehensive needs assessments to “identify, name and eliminate inequities.” Minnesota has developed a detailed template for comprehensive and targeted support and intervention schools that includes a list of resources, materials and workshops available to districts supporting their needs assessment process.

The state’s theory of action would be strengthened further by linking it directly and explicitly to the statewide accountability system. While increased student outcomes are stated generally, the field would benefit from aligning the work the state and districts with the specific outcomes emphasized in Minnesota’s North Star Accountability System.

**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 appears that Minnesota is allocating improvement funding to those districts that have the highest proportions of schools identified for comprehensive and targeted support, which could be an effective way of targeting resources. However, states utilizing formula grants may bear a slightly higher burden to help districts develop creative ways to allocate resources across programs to fulfill their goals. In addition, Minnesota indicates that, for schools identified for improvement, districts should articulate the resource inequities that their plans will address. Minnesota has also made available grant opportunities for regional service centers to assist districts and schools in implementing research-based interventions, and the process through which these grants are accessed seems well-documented.

However, it appears that the state has not finished determining the criteria it will use to allocate funds. No evidence could be found to help the field understand whether funding would be prioritized based on number of schools or number of students being served by schools in improvement, for example.

The factor holding this back from having a strong rating is that the state’s grant opportunities do not include an identified list of high-impact interventions or areas of focus that the state hopes districts and schools will employ. Unless it does so, Minnesota could be missing an opportunity to influence behavior systemically. Clarifying for districts and schools how the state hopes they will engage in evidence-based turnaround efforts, and then asking them to plan accordingly, would allow Minnesota to allocate funds based on the right plans, not simply the most thorough plans.

**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

Minnesota’s review process seems strong and includes all of the appropriate checkpoints along the way, beginning in the classroom, through the district system and then to the state, and reviewed by an external evaluator. The state is clearly prioritizing districts with a high percentage of comprehensive and targeted support and intervention schools by awarding grants to those districts, but without a specific rubric it is not clear what changes and priorities the state is most interested in seeing.

**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

Minnesota appropriately dedicates the lion’s share of its focus on those schools showing the lowest performance, with comprehensive and priority schools — the lowest performing 5% of schools in the state — receiving heavy involvement and monitoring. A small sampling of plans will also be reviewed regularly as a check on whether districts are faithfully reviewing improvement plans from their schools, though there is a concern over whether this will make districts more likely to check school plans for compliance rather than quality.

Districts are required to submit progress updates to the state and their regional center in which they describe progress on their goals. Beyond this, there is little detail on the degree to which the state will provide feedback to districts on plans for schools not in improvement status.

Minnesota’s guidance for continuous improvement, monitoring and evaluation is included in the state’s ESSA plan, however, the agency has not developed robust materials to guide district’s in creating effective strategies to continuously improve.

**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

Evidenced-based strategies are mentioned throughout Minnesota’s ESSA plan, as well as the accompanying documents, and this is clearly a focus of the state. Through statute, the state of Minnesota has identified 3rd grade reading and 8th grade math as key content areas of focus, both of which are supported by national research as being pivotal checkpoints. However, the state is not incentivizing particular strategies, tied to funding, to target those areas.

Minnesota’s school improvement plan guidance requires at least one strategy or intervention that is supported by the strongest level of evidence available and is appropriate to the school’s needs. The needs assessment process appears strong, and likely to provide adequate evidence to make decisions on strategies to pursue. However, there does not appear to be space for the district to explain the evidence or demonstrate that there is evidence for a chosen strategy, only a box to check. The state says it will provide a list of evidence-based interventions, but that list could not be found.

**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

Capacity building is included in Minnesota’s stated theory of action for school improvement, but so far it is not clear how that is operationalized after plans are submitted. At this point the responsibilities for the state, regional centers, and districts in capacity building are not defined in available school improvement materials. Minnesota states that an external evaluator reviews comprehensive support school plans

Minnesota sets the guidelines and processes that districts and schools must follow for their turnaround efforts, but consistently does not direct or incentivize certain strategies or intervention. The state has a strong comprehensive needs assessment tool for schools to use, but aside from the lowest performing schools it is uncertain the extent to which districts will ensure that schools are using the tool faithfully. No mention was found of a process for evaluating external state partners aside from the regular state review of school and district plans.

**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

Minnesota’s improvement plan tool clearly states that “plans describe stakeholder involvement that is meaningful during needs assessment, plan development and plan implementation.” The plan asks specific questions about when and how stakeholders will be engaged. Furthermore, the state’s theory of action includes that “educators and stakeholders will be meaningfully engaged in the improvement process.” Minnesota also requires schools to make plans and progress publicly available for review.

This component could be strengthened with some state guidance on best practices for stakeholder engagement and tools for districts and schools to use. Including, but not limited to, exemplar engagement practices and district stakeholder engagement vignettes.

**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

As part of the school improvement process, districts are required to submit progress updates for each goal at the end of the year to both the state and their regional center. Through this, Minnesota appears to plan to review school improvement efforts on a district or school-level basis, with an initial year and three-year review, both of which include a student achievement and equity component.

However, there is little evidence of a process to maintain support and growth upon exiting interventions as required by the state, though the state’s regional centers could play a role. In addition, Minnesota does not appear to describe a statewide plan to review efforts and evaluate impact toward established state goals.

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