



STATE REPORT

NORTH DAKOTA

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?

North Dakota uses a multi-tiered system of supports as their primary school turnaround framework, and while the mission of the program includes support for all students, it is not clear how North Dakota is focusing their attention on underserved students either through funding or through the state’s school improvement strategy. North Dakota does expect schools with subgroup disparities to discuss their plan to address the gap as part of their school improvement application. However, beyond the initial explanation there is little evidence to indicate that districts will take this seriously, especially given that the district application scoring rubric addresses the extent to which components are present, and not the quality of the proposed applications. This question on the application appears to be the only place where North Dakota brings attention to the achievement gaps in the state and the needs of the underserved 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?

North Dakota is providing each comprehensive and targeted support and intervention school with improvement funding, and all schools receive continuous improvement support from AdvancED. Comprehensive support and improvement schools are assigned coaches who play an active role in leadership training, data coaching, and other professional development and technical assistance designed to improve how the school serves its students. All told, North Dakota seems to provide a suite of third party improvement assistance to its districts and schools. The state also assigns staff liaisons who help to direct resources to districts that need them.

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?

TURNAROUND COMPONENT OVERVIEW

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

North Dakota’s ESSA plan presents a compelling vision of a state that drives continuous improvement, and anecdotal accounts from the state corroborate that good work is happening. However, its current structures and documentation for school improvement appear entirely compliance-oriented. For instance, the application and rubric appear to be focused on whether elements of the plan were present, rather than the quality of the plans proposed. The questions and level of detail asked of districts and schools are surface-level and do not prompt deep planning for school improvement.

This is a missed opportunity for districts and schools to use the application as a coherent tool to guide their improvement planning and turnaround efforts. The role of AdvancED and the alignment with the multi-tiered system of supports is unclear, while it could be interwoven throughout the school improvement plan and guidance from the state. The materials available do not fully explain how districts and schools are using the framework and data systems to drive their improvement efforts.

In short, there is too little publicly accessible information about how the state is implementing their vision for improvement as outlined in the state’s ESSA plan.

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

There is a significant difference between the vision that can be gleaned from North Dakota’s school improvement application and guidance materials versus the state’s school improvement-related activity in the field. North Dakota adopted the AdvancED Continuous Improvement System (CIS) as their statewide continuous improvement framework. In this model, all schools and districts are expected to consistently, continuously, and holistically evaluate their policies, practices and conditions against research-based standards and factors of school and system quality. This vision was outlined extensively in the state’s ESSA plan.

While this is a promising approach, the materials reviewed did not provide sufficient evidence of this vision being realized in in the actual school improvement process or application. For instance, the state’s application for Title I 1003a funding includes perfunctory mention of some turnaround elements, such as asking districts to describe their strategy and the evidence to support it. However, the application’s questions are surface-level and do not require the districts to differentiate among the issues to which they are responding and how the strategies will support their implementation work.

It is understood that North Dakota is assembling an approach to school improvement new to the state through and partnerships with AdvancED and Ed Direction. Nevertheless, it was difficult to determine how the state was executing on its vision based upon the information available. While good work may be occurring, it remains largely hidden from those who are not a part of it, which is a missed opportunity for the state.

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

North Dakota has indicated that it will provide school improvement funds to both comprehensive and targeted schools. If established correctly, North Dakota could set up a process whereby the state’s limited school improvement dollars can be used to support the schools in most need. North Dakota

noted that they will be allocating funding through a competitive approach, at least at first, however it is unclear from the available documents what priorities North Dakota is establishing through the competitive process or how they are maximizing the funding in a strategic way. For instance, to access the funding, the district or school simply completes the application and includes a budget by spending category such as staff salaries, travel and supplies.

In the state’s school improvement materials, there is no apparent requirement that districts or schools connect programs they will implement to improve with the proposed budget; the budget sits apart from any plan. The review rubric does ask whether the applicant connected the expenditures to the plan, but because the application asks for a narrative by spending category, it is hard to imagine how this will drive real connections between specific interventions and detailed expenditures.

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

While North Dakota is allocating funding through a competitive approach, the rubric appears quite weak because it asks generic questions and provides generic assessments of the quality of the application. In addition, North Dakota’s rubric weighs all parts of a district’s application equally. As a result, the narrative account of “how the school will develop and implement a plan” is worth 10 points, as is the narrative account of “the process used to recruit, screen, select, and regularly review external providers/contractors to assist the school in making improvements.” The equal weighting seems unlikely to tilt the scales in favor of schools or districts who have given significantly more thought to their plans for school improvement. Additionally, the equal weighting of all factors does not create a system that prioritizes elements that are more important for driving significant and meaningful change.

North Dakota should consider giving more weight on indicator 1, which includes the description of how the plan will be developed and implemented in response to being identified for comprehensive or targeted support, as well as a description of “student performance against the state-determined long-term goals.” Instead, the review process feels like a compliance exercise. It is not clear that the review categories will necessarily lead to a system that prioritizes funding to districts who demonstrate the greatest need.

Again, however, the impression from North Dakota’s school improvement materials is different than that from work occurring on the ground. Feedback from the state indicated that state and district staff connect often during the planning process to discuss feedback and ensure that both district plans match needs and the state knows how it can best support the plan. It seems that most guidance is taking place during one-on-one interactions and is not yet codified and accessible to the field at large.

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

According to North Dakota’s ESSA plan, there is a clear focus, with support from AdvancED, on continuous improvement. Every school will be supported on its “Improvement Journey” and each will have its own “roadmap” to get there. Feedback from the state indicated support to all districts from AdvancED, not just schools in improvement, though identified schools receive more. In addition, the state contracts with Ed Direction to provide high-touch coaching and technical assistance to all comprehensive support and improvement schools. These partnerships have the making of a strong support system.

It was unclear however, how these supports, improvement journeys and roadmaps are connected to the state’s accountability system or the interim benchmarks established in the ESSA plan. Given that districts and schools were not required to outline their improvement goals in their application, and the rubric does not assess whether or not a district or school established benchmarks for improvement, it is hard to determine how progress will be monitored by AdvancED or the state. On paper, North Dakota has good pieces in place and is requiring local leaders to consider focus on important issues, but it is difficult to see how they are ensuring that the various checklists and rubrics will drive substantive new thinking at the school and district level.

The state described in its feedback that Ed Direction not only provides monthly progress updates to the state, but also engages in quarterly progress monitoring meetings where Ed Direction and state staff discuss and agree on next steps to support districts and schools that are struggling to improve. This has the makings of a strong process for staying updated on progress in the field and directing resources where they are most needed. It will be interesting to learn from North Dakota as this process continues how the state is able to use it to improve the support it provides to the field.

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

North Dakota’s application asks that districts and schools describe how “proposed interventions and strategies are evidence-based,” and the rubric’s “proficient” criterion says that “the school described how the proposed interventions and strategies are evidence-based. The school demonstrated multiple levels of evidence-based strategies as defined in ESSA.” Asking for the information in this way appears to be a compliance exercise rather than an opportunity to determine whether or not the strategies used are connected to the reason the school was identified.

Based on this documentation, evidence-based interventions seem to play a minimal role in the state’s school improvement work. There is some documentation explaining the different ways in which the state’s education partners can support districts, but nothing that might help a district understand which to choose. Again, without more information about how these resources are used, it is unclear the extent to which the state or AdvancED staff are ensuring districts and schools are helping districts hone in on evidence-based approaches that are connected to their needs.

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 the ESSA-related documentation from North Dakota is currently thin, the state deserves credit for what appears to be the beginnings of a solid set of supports for not only identified schools, but all schools and districts willing to take advantage of them. AdvancED works with all schools, and the state’s regional education agencies also provide assistance.

Identified schools receive dedicated coaching from Ed Direction. North Dakota uses a multi-tiered system of supports (NDMTSS) to support their school improvement efforts. North Dakota notes that this system “is a framework to provide all students with the best opportunities to succeed academically and behaviorally in school. NDMTSS focuses on providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals.” Through this model, districts and schools are paired with a MTSS coach who works with the

identified school to conduct an assessment and develop an improvement plan. The coaches check in with the school leaders three times throughout the year and work with the leaders to evaluate the progress and determine an appropriate path for the following school year. They then report back to the state on progress and also build the capacity of state staff themselves to support school improvement efforts.

The next step will be for the state to codify this support in a way that ensures stakeholders understand what the state is doing to help schools improve and ensure that all students are provided the opportunity to learn. North Dakota should clearly define the role of the coach, the relationship between the coach and district and schools, and the expectations of all parties throughout the coaching process. It is currently unclear, aside from anecdotal description, how the state, district and school work together within the framework provided. In the materials reviewed, there is a lack of intentionality on how the framework is aligned with the school improvement process.

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

Community engagement is not a priority in the state’s school improvement plans. The application to receive funding does not ask whether or not stakeholders were involved in the development of the school improvement plan nor is engagement referenced in any of the guidance materials provided to states or as a part of the multi-tiered system of support. While the scoring rubric asks whether “there is significant evidence to demonstrate an assessment of needs at the school, taking into consideration input from all stakeholders,” this appears to be the only reference to stakeholder engagement. In addition, no guidance could be found for districts or schools on how to engage parents and the community in the development of the plans.

Meanwhile North Dakota’s accountability system includes an engagement survey which AdvancED administers, and the organization almost certainly supports districts and schools in improving their survey results if they are underperforming. Again, information available to the public does not describe the activity taking place in the field. Feedback from the state did indicate that it is participating in a parent and family engagement cohort during which it will build a team of stakeholders and community members who will help carry the state’s school improvement message.

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

There was not enough information to evaluate this category.

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