



STATE REPORT TEXAS

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?

Texas does attempt to ensure the districts are focused on supporting underserved students. Texas includes

a sizeable equitable access and participation indicators section as a part of the district application, which prompts districts to choose among strategies that address areas such as gender-specific bias, gang- and drug-related issues, visual and hearing impairments, absenteeism, and mobility. In addition, the grant application materials do indicate that a strong response includes a plan for supporting specific student sub-populations.

However, it’s unclear how these strategies fit with rest of the application or with school improvement efforts beyond the grant. In addition, with a focus on local control it raises the question of how the state will ensure that districts are committed to supporting underserved students and closing the achievement gaps without a clearer equity thread in the school improvement materials.

The state could also give more attention to supporting districts in supporting schools that are consistently underperforming for groups of students.

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?

Texas was very thoughtful in aligning its school improvement process with the goals outlined through state legislation. Whereas the relationship between state statutes and federal funding streams can be confusing, this should help school districts understand and use available state-funded resources for school improvement. Furthermore, the state’s strategy includes some bold measures such as creating a new staffing model and closing and reopening schools. Districts have flexibility in selecting a model that fits the local context of any given community. The state has also created flexibility around funding by providing planning grants to districts. These planning grants should allow time and resources for engagement of stakeholders and allow for districts to engage in more strategic discussions prior to full implementation.

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 **Needs Improvement**

Evidence-Based Interventions **Weak**

Capacity Building and Autonomy . . **Adequate**

Engagement **Needs Improvement**

Sustainability **Needs Improvement**

The “Lone Star Governance” program for school board members may be the strongest piece of Texas’ school improvement efforts, a potential model for other states. Among other things, the program emphasizes the development of a clear theory of action, awareness of how board time is used, and evaluation of the superintendent. In addition, the state’s six transformation models will be worth watching.

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?

Based on the materials reviewed, the biggest improvement would be to help clarify the state’s overall approach beyond grant-specific requirements. Currently, it is hard to evaluate the quality of the state’s efforts because there are no details provided about the nature of the support provided by the regional Education Service Centers with only the application and rubric for school improvement plans available. Better alignment between support for planning and for implementation would be helpful. The grant applications indicate that districts cannot apply for both a transformation planning and a transformation implementation grant for the same campus, which seems like it would defeat the purpose of a planning grant. While the state has provided many useful tools and resources for districts in planning for improvement, those available for review are somewhat disorganized and disconnected, placing the burden on district leaders for weaving together the various pieces of the state’s broader improvement approach.

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

Texas’s theory of action centers on empowering the districts to make the decisions necessary for their identified schools. The state has developed a number of models to support a broad and coherent statewide improvement effort. However, the manner in which these materials are organized makes it difficult to know how they work together to provide additional flexibility to local districts. For instance, the state’s application places more emphasis on each district developing its own theory of action and requires the district to describe how their strategies align with, and accelerate, their broader local strategy. This approach will likely lead to some variability in the boldness and quality of local approach. In addition, without a concerted state effort to build local capacity to take advantage of the autonomy the state has provided to local districts, some districts may continue to struggle.

Texas recently created an “effective schools framework,” and is working to build capacity in implementing it through its Education Service Centers. As a part of its strategy, Texas has created a portfolio of options for planning and implementation for schools receiving school improvement funds. The state has identified a list of models for which districts and schools could select, which is an approach to school improvement that may meet the needs districts. The models are part of the state’s vision for allowing local communities to drive school improvement through the lens of their local context.

It is concerning, however, how disconnected the state’s accountability system seems to be from the statewide school improvement efforts. For example, the materials available for review suggest that roughly 33 schools will receive school transformation grants, whereas the state’s accountability system will identify a much larger number of schools. It’s unclear from the materials reviewed what support

Texas will provide to and what expectations they will set for the schools beyond the few dozen receiving those grants. In addition, the school transformation grant application requires districts to describe how they will evaluate school performance and identify low-performing schools. It is not clear how that will overlap or conflict with the state’s existing accountability system. Because of outstanding issues with the state’s accountability system (i.e., lack of sufficient focus on subgroup performance, lack of comparability across districts), there is room for improvement regarding alignment between accountability and school improvement.

In addition, supporting materials appear to be disparate and may be somewhat cumbersome to locate for local districts. It might be helpful to streamline or simplify access in order for district and school leaders to navigate them more easily.

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

Texas is allocating funding through a competitive process which could allow Texas to prioritize funding by need and efficacy of the proposed improvement plans. Notably, the state is providing a number of planning grants aligned to the state’s multiple improvement models. In total, Texas will award at least 33 grants ranging in amounts ranging from \$300,000 to \$1 million in the form of planning or implementation grants. Given Texas’s emphasis on local control as the primary driver behind school improvement, it will be critical whether the programs that will be funded based on merit or only completeness of the plan. As a part of both grant processes, Texas will support a range of programs including partnerships between traditional and charter schools, programs to implement dramatic staffing initiatives across multiple schools and to close or reopen. Additional information is needed to understand how the state will support districts who are not awarded competitive funds.

The state has established a number of processes to ensure budgets submitted by districts prioritize efforts that address their underlying performance issues. However, the lack of clarity in how these materials are organized makes it more difficult to understand how the state will evaluate the quality of district plans and allocate funding strategically to address district performance issues. In addition, it’s not clear from the application what criteria the state will use to approve or deny improvement plans, which could be a powerful lever for shaping district improvement efforts.

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

Texas’ application includes a needs assessment and project plan. However, the state’s scoring rubric, which assigns points to different elements, reflects whether these elements are present or not in the application rather than their potential quality or efficacy. While the state does provide review criteria with which applications will be evaluated, it is unclear how the final scores will be used to determine which applications receive funding.

The criteria the state will use to award funding to districts do not necessarily ensure that resources will be used to support improvement efforts in the districts and schools with the greatest need. Although the grant criteria awards points to districts that use their funding in a comprehensive or targeted school, the state seems to allow districts to use the funding for schools that are not identified as comprehensive or targeted as long as the district has at least one school identified for improvement. The criteria also

award points to districts with high percentages of comprehensive and targeted schools, but it may not be enough points for the state to prioritize funding in those places. For example, districts can receive three times as many points for partnering with an institution of higher education than for having a high percentage of comprehensive and targeted schools. Finally, the state does not distinguish between comprehensive or targeted schools in its criteria.

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

To Texas’ credit, asking districts to identify success metrics upfront is an exemplary practice. However, it’s not clear whether infrastructure at the state is sufficient to support continuous improvement, monitoring, or evaluation. It is also unclear how the state will use the data from the accountability system effectively to support school improvement. The state application asks districts to describe how they will self-monitor their improvement plans, but is thin on what the state will do to monitor and evaluate implementation.

Texas does identify some performance measures that grant applicants must report on such as student achievement, school operations measures (average daily attendance, student year-to-year persistence, teacher retention), and student growth based on formative assessment, but does not require year on year targets to ensure improvement over time or what the state will do to support schools if they miss their milestones. It appears that instead, this responsibility will lie with the regional support centers (ESCs) who are tasked with supporting the monitoring of implementation at the district level. It is unclear what type of capacity and support the ESCs have or are being provided with, and how they will support the districts in their efforts.

The grant application calls for schools to say how they will implement additional action following unsuccessful implementation of the school improvement plan after a number of years determined by the district. It is unclear which schools this refers to (comprehensive vs. targeted) and the process by which schools will know if they have not hit their milestones. Additionally, having districts determine ahead of time what they will do if schools do not make sufficient improvement prevents districts from using lessons learned during unsuccessful implementation to inform the actions the district will take.

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

There is very little discussion of evidence in the materials available for review. The primary exception is that the grant application asks how district school improvement plans will incorporate one or more evidence-based strategies during implementation. In the materials reviewed, however, Texas does not indicate if — or how — they will support districts in selecting evidence-based strategies that meet their needs and are appropriate for their context. While it is possible that this support is available through the state’s regional Education Service Centers, the materials provided don’t say that explicitly; the only resource clearly offered is in the grant FAQs, which is a link to the USED page on evidence.

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

Texas is very clear that all school transformation grants must be administered in cooperation with a School Transformation Partner (STF), and specifies the percentage of the grant amount that should be reserved for that partner. By doing so, the state recognizes that struggling district cannot reliably improve on its own. Encouraging partnerships that are customized and make sense for the local context could be a promising practice worth emulating. In addition, the “Lone Star Governance” program is a unique and innovative approach that other states should consider as part of a broader school improvement effort.

What is less clear is how those partnerships are formed or how Texas will rigorously vet the school transformation partners. The application guidelines say that Texas will match districts to partners that it selected via a public Request for Qualifications (RFQ) and who demonstrate a strong track record of results, expertise designing and implementing the STF option, and who are a good fit to work with the grantee. However, the application itself calls on schools to describe how they’ll recruit, select, and evaluate any external partners.

It appears that most of the school improvement efforts will be shouldered by districts. It’s unclear what the state will be doing to build capacity and support district innovation through these efforts. While Texas does provide some resources for their districts, including templates and examples of how to implement certain models, it is unclear what the strategy is for enhancing the capacity of the district.

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

Engagement does not seem to feature prominently in Texas’ school improvement process. While districts are required to address how changes in the school will be communicated to stakeholders including parents, there does not appear to be a prompt to describe how stakeholders such as parents and educators were involved in the development of the improvement plan at the school and district levels.

In addition, Texas also indicates that districts will receive the time and support for community engagement. However, this is only true for some grant types. It is also unclear what form that support will take, if there is or will be any guidance as to which types of stakeholders (e.g. parents) to include, and how the state will determine the meaningful community engagement has occurred.

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

To its credit, Texas is requiring districts and schools receiving the funds to participate in an overall evaluation of the program. Furthermore, the state has created a process for making continuation awards at the end of the life cycle for the implementation grants. As a part of its district application, Texas also asks its district to align the models to an overall theory of action. It is unclear from the materials provided if the state has a plan in place to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the school improvement efforts statewide. In addition, the grant materials do indicate that “upon completion of grant period, grantees may be eligible for continuation funding to support continued implementation” but there is nothing about how extensive this funding might be, making it hard for schools and districts to plan.

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