



## Education Policy Experts Release New Independent Analysis of Arizona's Efforts to Date to Improve Low-Performing Schools

*Arizona's hands-off approach considered high risk*

Embargoed until: November 15, 12:01AM (Eastern)

Contact: Ashley Inman Zanchelli  
[ainman@forstudentsuccess.org](mailto:ainman@forstudentsuccess.org)

States have a responsibility and opportunity to create systems to meaningfully address underperforming schools in order to provide all students a strong, equitable education. States have chosen their own approaches to identify and use federal funds to support and turn around their lowest-performing schools, and today, HCM Strategists, in partnership with the Collaborative for Student Success (CSS), released the results of an independent peer review analysis of current school improvement efforts in 17 states. The report highlights best practices being used in these states and identifies areas for improvement. "[Check State Plans: From Promise to Practice](#)," is a continuation of the "Check State Plans" reviews released last year and looks at how states are approaching the allocation of federal funding targeted for school improvement efforts and activities. Moreover, this analysis looks at how well states are providing resources and supports to their districts to target schools that are most in need.

Seventeen states, including Arizona, were chosen to be reviewed in this initial round because they had the most publicly-available information at the start of the peer review process. When considering the full set of eight indicators, peer reviewers determined that four states embraced a strong state role to drive reform, five states are partnering with districts, and eight states are relying heavily on district leaders to improve the results with some oversight and support from the state.

Arizona only received a "Strong" rating in 1 out of 8 categories: rigorous review; and a "Weak" rating in 3 out of 8 categories: evidence-based interventions, engagement and sustainability. The panel of experts were concerned that the state is taking too limited a role in leading or supporting school improvement efforts. Other states are partnering with districts to ensure they are supported in addressing chronic underperformance, Arizona is taking a more compliance-oriented approach. While the peer reviewers recognize that empowering local leaders is a core component of successful school turnaround, they raised a concern that too much autonomy, without sufficient state supports, may not help the students and schools in most need. Overall, peer reviewers were concerned that Arizona does not have a plan for continuous improvement efforts and lacks vision for long-term and sustained improvement for districts and schools. Find more information on the next page.

"Figuring out how to close achievement gaps between our country's highest and continuously lowest performing schools is one of the greatest equity issues of our time," said Jim Cowen, Executive Director of the Collaborative for Student Success. "The federal government provided one billion dollars and significant freedom to state leaders to drive bold, innovative change for their most challenged schools. It's important that states are stepping up to the challenge and being thoughtful and inventive in how they realize results."



“Promise to Practice is intended to inform policy makers of what is happening across states and serve as an advocacy tool to help state education leaders leverage both their newfound flexibility and their federal funds to drive meaningful school improvement,” explained HCM’s Elizabeth Ross, lead author of the report.

The Collaborative and HCM recruited independent peer reviewers that included former state chiefs, members of the civil rights and disability communities, and education experts from around the country. The panel included individuals with dedicated expertise in school improvement at the state, district, and local levels.

Peer reviewers analyzed several state specific documents including a state’s application for districts to receive federal school improvement funding, application scoring rubric, state school improvement guidance and supporting materials, and an independent survey, conducted by Education First, that was commissioned to support this work. Evidence was reviewed and critiqued across 8 different categories: vision, funding, rigorous review process, continuous improvement and monitoring, capacity building and autonomy, engagement, and sustainability. Each was rated as: exemplary, strong, adequate, needs improvement, or weak.

“As with our peer review of state’s ESSA plans, this new independent analysis done by experts aims to highlight best practices across those states that are implementing strong school improvement systems, as well as show states where they can improve in order to provide the best education possible for our students,” concluded Cowen.

To read more about the qualifications of the peer reviewers see [here](#) and the process see [here](#).

To read the full report and national press release visit the “Check State Plans: From Promise to Practice” website at <http://promisetopractice.org>.

###

### **About the Collaborative for Student Success:**

The Collaborative for Student Success is a non-profit advocacy organization that works to defend high standards, high-quality assessments, and strong systems of accountability, to ensure that all kids are prepared for college or career. Through capacity-building efforts with in-state organizations and collaboration with national partners, we promote fact-based public discourse and fight to advance policies that promote best practices and ensure equitable outcomes for all students.

### **Arizona’s Analysis:**

Excerpts below are taken verbatim from the HCM peer review analysis.

To read the entire HCM review for Arizona’s school improvement plan [click here](#)..

To read the HCM national report click [here](#).



### **Strengths:**

Arizona's school improvement guidance for comprehensive support and improvement schools is strong and thorough, taking local leaders through the process step by step. The processes for completing improvement plans is detailed and hits on many important components of meaningful school improvement. The state requires these plans and other documents to be uploaded into a state database for transparency and tracking progress, meaning the state has the ability to maintain a firm understanding regarding the field's progress.

The state is putting a premium on local flexibility so that district plans match district and school needs, which can be a strength, especially if monitoring visits prioritize true dialogue to enable continuous improvement and not compliance. Arizona's plan to create and support effective leadership, which is based on the findings of the state's educator effectiveness equity plan, builds the capacity of local leaders, which is critical.

### **Where the Plan Can Improve:**

Arizona does not appear to have a strategy in place to ensure that districts and schools remain out of comprehensive support and improvement once exited. Continuous improvement efforts must be central to the state's vision and take a wider look at the issues and challenges preventing long-term and sustained improvement. As schools improve from being in comprehensive status, the state must plan to ensure that the resources are there to maintain and accelerate successful efforts. One component to this would be to strengthen the engagement of the stakeholders both at the local and state levels.

The state is currently not adequately addressing the issues and challenges causing inequities in its school improvement materials. In addition, the approach does not include a framework to identify strategies that work, how to replicate and scale them, and how to sustain them with limited resources, and the state provides no guidance or incentives around specific strategies.

Overall, the documents available focus on compliance and not on driving the type of school improvement work that gets significant increases in student outcomes. It could well be that work on the ground in Arizona tells a different story, but the state is nevertheless missing an opportunity to positively affect the discourse around school improvement efforts statewide.