



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

CT praised for evidence-based interventions but lacks vision and consequences for districts not making real improvements

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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 Connecticut, 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, evaluators 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.

Connecticut received a "Strong" rating in 1 out of 8 categories for their evidence-based interventions; and received an "Adequate" rating across all other categories. The panel of experts believe that Connecticut is using a "Partnership Approach" with districts, trying to walk the line acting as both a coach and a referee. States taking this approach generally work to enhance district capacity for school improvement and to make decisions that will serve all students. The peer reviewers praised Connecticut, in particular, for developing a comprehensive set of evidence-based guides for districts to use to develop their improvement strategies.

"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, education experts from around the country as well as 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>.

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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.

Connecticut’s Analysis:

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

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

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

Strengths:

Connecticut’s school improvement framework, the connection between the needs assessment, resource inequities, and root cause analysis process, and the alignment with the identified



strategies and interventions to the results of the needs assessment are all strong. The scoring rubric itself is also high quality. Acknowledging the importance of the district role as a change agent is also commendable. The evidence guides are also a great resource; one which many other states do not yet offer their districts and schools.

Where the Plan Can Improve:

Initial review indicated that Connecticut is leaning heavily on district capacity and presuming that local staff will be able to do the needs assessments, the equity and root cause analysis, and develop solid plans for improvement. Feedback from the state has indicated that it is engaging in more technical support, guidance, and resource development to support districts with the needs assessment and school improvement application. The area of largest confusion continues to be the cohesion and consistency of expectations across the state's multiple school improvement funding streams, cohorts of districts and schools, and competitive versus formula funding

The state has developed a theory of action for school improvement, but it is buried and unlabeled in its ESSA plan. Connecticut should consider featuring its theory of action more prominently in its school improvement materials.