



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

*GA praised for approach to equity and evidence-based strategies, but hands-off approach considered high risk*

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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 Georgia, 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.

Georgia received a "Strong" rating in 3 out of 8 categories: vision, evidence-based interventions, and engagement; and a "Weak" rating in 1 category: sustainability. Overall, reviewers praised Georgia for a strong, equity-focused vision for school improvement, and for providing more supports to districts in choosing evidence-based strategies than most. The panel of experts were concerned, however, 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, and Georgia 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. 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 network also 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>.

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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.

### **Georgia’s Analysis:**

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

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

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

### **Strengths:**



Georgia has done well in creating a flexible framework for local decision-making. The planning tools use the data elements in the comprehensive needs assessment to enable root cause analysis in the district planning tool, then ask districts to set goals and determine relevant activities based on the trends in the data and identified root causes. The comprehensive needs assessment is referenced throughout the planning process and is consistently driving questions about the connection of the school improvement tool to specific data elements and pages, providing clear alignment of the data to the proposed strategy.

In addition, Georgia's approach to equity is solid as described above, and the state's theory of action for continuous improvement and capacity building is also very clear and consistent throughout all of the state's guidance to districts and schools.

Georgia's support systems and resource repository for evidenced-based strategies provide an opportunity for all educators to learn best practices and find opportunities for increased student achievement that matches the needs of the population served.

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

Georgia could improve its monitoring and evaluation efforts by focusing its monitoring on results rather than strictly on compliance. The current monitoring approach poses risks of continuing a business-as-usual compliance focus within districts. The state could also develop a statewide evaluation plan that includes building the capacity of districts to evaluate their own efforts and build an evidence base for the state.

The high quality planning tools that Georgia has developed could more closely align with the processes and systems in its ESSA plan, including more information about how comprehensive and turnaround schools will be included in these processes and explicit connection to ESSA's long-term goals, interim targets, subgroup focus, and exit criteria.

More detail is needed to articulate role of the state. Without a defined action plan from the state, the districts and the schools will continue to view the state as compliance-focused instead of instructional improvement partners.