



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

IL praised for providing clear improvement framework and delivering trainings to districts, but materials are incomplete and 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 Illinois, 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.

Illinois received a "Strong" rating in only 1 out of 8 categories: capacity building; and a "Weak" rating in 3 out of the 8 categories: rigorous review, evidence-based interventions and engagement. The panel of experts were concerned that the state is taking too limited a role in leading or supporting school improvement efforts. Illinois has invested its resources in developing a clear improvement framework and stakeholder outreach. However, the framework is not fully implemented or reflected in the state's school improvement materials. Based on the missing evidence, experts were concerned that the state is taking too limited a role in leading or supporting school improvement efforts. 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.

Illinois’ Analysis:

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

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

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

Strengths:



To date, Illinois has clearly invested most of its resources and person power in developing a clear improvement framework and delivering trainings to orient districts and communities to the state's new approach. The IL-EMPOWER materials are designed for the average person to understand them and take away how the state plans to use school improvement funds. The state has also developed a clear process to support districts in identifying and utilizing external partners for school improvement, which is important because the state is encouraging districts to use these partners to a large degree. Illinois is facilitating an RFP process, aligned to the Illinois Quality Framework, through which districts may select service providers that fit their needs. The state looks to assist districts and schools by documenting the service providers that have shown success in the 31 IL-Empower pilot sites.

Where the Plan Can Improve:

Illinois has not yet developed guidance for districts to use when allocating school improvement funds or to design and implement school improvement plans. The state also does not provide districts with a guide to identify the schools in the greatest need or implement evidence-based interventions. Illinois ESSA and federal programs materials in no way resemble the robust nature of the Illinois Quality Framework, and there is not yet available a school improvement application. These things indicate that the state has not yet finished developing its school improvement guidance.

Illinois could help districts in connecting the multiple state and federal mandates into one effective plan with embedded equity opportunities and achievement gap reductions. Additionally, the state should look to redesign its school improvement tool to be a true performance management plan with clear expectations for all internal and external stakeholders. All school materials and supports should align to the state's vision of the whole child.

Illinois has provided autonomy to school leaders but has given most of the oversight responsibility to outside entities. The state has some responsibility for guiding and overseeing districts in school improvement, including providing more resources and technical assistance on how improvement plans can implement the vision, as well as stakeholder engagement and sustainability. The state should consider focusing funding on more than just adequacy and consider a formula that incorporates highest need and most effective use of funds.