



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

*TN praised for vision, taking a leadership approach to school improvement efforts*

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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 Tennessee, 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.

Tennessee received an "Exemplary" rating (the highest rating and only given in two states) in 1 out of 8 categories: vision; and a "Strong" rating in 4 other categories: rigorous review, continuous improvement and monitoring, evidence-based interventions and capacity building. Tennessee received an "Adequate" rating in all other categories. The panel of experts believe that Tennessee is using a "State Leadership Approach" and it is clear that the state is requiring districts to rely on data, disaggregated by student groups, to identify needs, solutions, and interventions. These strengths will make it more likely that districts and schools will make sustained, long-term improvement. Read more 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 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.

### **Tennessee’s Analysis:**

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

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

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

### **Strengths:**

Tennessee seems to have done well balancing the need to set a theory of action and establish a set of guiding strategies, along with clear district guidance, with allowing districts flexibility to make



decisions for their schools. There's a lot of useful information that provides guidance while respecting the professional knowledge of district leaders.

The state's school improvement materials in general are well crafted, with clear descriptions helping to establish expectations and guide districts and schools through the planning process. All materials focus on the state's four levers of improvement, and the School Turnaround: An Evidence Guide is an excellent resource. It appears that Tennessee has been purposeful in carrying over some lessons learned from past accountability paradigms.

**Where the Plan Can Improve:**

There are many moving parts to Tennessee's thoughtful, albeit complex, approach to accountability and school improvement. The state has used the experience from previous ESEA implementations to inform its approach, but nevertheless additional complexity runs the danger of compliance being prioritized over faithful implementation and a culture of improvement. Much time and energy will need to be devoted to ensuring that the field is able to use the tools for real school improvement. In referencing Tennessee's school improvement documentation, it is hard to get a sense of the whole from the many pieces.

Tennessee use of dual accountability system raises issues with school improvement implementation as it can cause confusion about which schools are being identified and how to prioritize efforts.