



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

*Texas' 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 Texas, 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.

Texas received an "Adequate" rating in 4 out of 8 categories: vision, funding, rigorous review and capacity building; and a "Weak" rating in 1 out of 8 categories: evidence-based interventions. 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, and Texas is taking a more compliance-oriented approach. Overall, peer reviewers praised Texas for their thoughtful alignment of their school improvement process with the goals outlined in state legislation. 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.

### **Texas’ Analysis:**

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

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

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

### **Strengths:**

Texas was very thoughtful in aligning its school improvement process with the goals outlined through state legislation. Whereas the relationship between state statutes and federal funding



streams can be confusing, this should help school districts understand and use available state-funded resources for school improvement. Furthermore, the state's strategy includes some bold measures such as creating a new staffing model and closing and reopening schools. Districts have flexibility in selecting a model that fits the local context of any given community. The state has also created flexibility around funding by providing planning grants to districts. These planning grants should allow time and resources for engagement of stakeholders and allow for districts to engage in more strategic discussions prior to full implementation.

The "Lone Star Governance" program for school board members may be the strongest piece of Texas' school improvement efforts, a potential model for other states. Among other things, the program emphasizes the development of a clear theory of action, awareness of how board time is used, and evaluation of the superintendent. In addition, the state's six transformation models will be worth watching.

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

Based on the materials reviewed, the biggest improvement would be to help clarify the state's overall approach beyond grant-specific requirements. Currently, it is hard to evaluate the quality of the state's efforts because there are no details provided about the nature of the support provided by the regional Education Service Centers with only the application and rubric for school improvement plans available. Better alignment between support for planning and for implementation would be helpful. The grant applications indicate that districts cannot apply for both a transformation planning and a transformation implementation grant for the same campus, which seems like it would defeat the purpose of a planning grant. While the state has provided many useful tools and resources for districts in planning for improvement, those available for review are somewhat disorganized and disconnected, placing the burden on district leaders for weaving together the various pieces of the state's broader improvement approach.