



STATE REPORT ARIZONA

OVERALL APPROACH

Equity: How well does the state’s approach to school improvement include focused attention on supporting underserved students and closing the achievement gap? Does the state require LEAs to maintain an equity focus in their school improvement plans, activities and resource allocations?

Arizona’s theory of action makes no mention of equity. That said, the state includes some equity-oriented language throughout their comprehensive support and improvement guidance documents. This indicates a disconnect between the theory of action and the state’s school improvement materials, calling into question Arizona’s focus on supporting underserved students. For instance, Arizona does require schools and districts to address some of the factors of equity in their root cause analysis however, there is no follow up to this in the school improvement application calling for strategies for addressing difficult and often deep systemic inequities in areas like human capital, graduation rates, engagement, and discipline. Districts are asked to analyze data by demographic group and to review academic achievement gaps by these groups, yet there is no specific requirement to address them in the integrated action plans as required by the state.

To be clear, it is encouraging in the root cause analysis to see a specific tool for breaking down assumptions and preconceived biases that could be inhibiting student performance. The directions and guiding questions are very strong and should be effective for guiding district and school leaders through toward some conclusions. It is a missed opportunity, then, that the plan itself does not ask for those conclusions. Schools and districts would benefit from a strand of questioning that promotes equitable solutions and strategies.

Arizona needs to monitor plan implementation to ensure that the solutions are effectively addressing achievement gaps. Additionally, funding should be prioritized for improvement efforts that are obtaining positive results in addressing systemic inequities resulting in the closure of achievement and opportunity gaps. The state should highlight and celebrate successful approaches to equity as part of its attempt to encourage and scale equitable strategies.

Strengths: How is the state thoughtfully leveraging ESSA’s flexibility to put in place the necessary policies and procedures that create an enabling environment for effective and sustained school improvement, and that consider state/local lessons learned from past efforts? What parts of the state’s turnaround strategy or guidance to LEAs were strongest or exemplary?

TURNAROUND COMPONENT OVERVIEW

Coherent and Aligned Vision for Improving Outcomes	Needs Improvement
Strategic Use of Funding and Alignment of Resources	Needs Improvement
Rigorous Review Process	Strong
Continuous Improvement, Monitoring and Evaluation	Needs Improvement
Evidence-Based Interventions	Weak
Capacity Building and Autonomy	Adequate
Engagement	Weak
Sustainability	Weak

Arizona’s school improvement guidance for comprehensive support and improvement schools is strong and thorough, taking local leaders through the process step by step. The processes for completing improvement plans is detailed and hits on many important components of meaningful school improvement. The state requires these plans and other documents to be uploaded into a state database for transparency and tracking progress, meaning the state has the ability to maintain a firm understanding regarding the field’s progress.

The state is putting a premium on local flexibility so that district plans match district and school needs, which can be a strength, especially if monitoring visits prioritize true dialogue to enable continuous improvement and not compliance. Arizona’s plan to create and support effective leadership, which is based on the findings of the state’s educator effectiveness equity plan, builds the capacity of local leaders, which is critical.

Improvements: How can the state improve its turnaround efforts? What parts of the state’s strategy or guidance to LEAs were unclear? What risks and challenges might the state face with its current approach?

Arizona does not appear to have a strategy in place to ensure that districts and schools remain out of comprehensive support and improvement once exited. Continuous improvement efforts must be central to the state’s vision and take a wider look at the issues and challenges preventing long-term and sustained improvement. As schools improve from being in comprehensive status, the state must plan to ensure that the resources are there to maintain and accelerate successful efforts. One component to this would be to strengthen the engagement of the stakeholders both at the local and state levels.

The state is currently not adequately addressing the issues and challenges causing inequities in its school improvement materials. In addition, the approach does not include a framework to identify strategies that work, how to replicate and scale them, and how to sustain them with limited resources, and the state provides no guidance or incentives around specific strategies.

Overall, the documents available focus on compliance and not on driving the type of school improvement work that gets significant increases in student outcomes. It could well be that work on the ground in Arizona tells a different story, but the state is nevertheless missing an opportunity to positively affect the discourse around school improvement efforts statewide.

TURNAROUND COMPONENTS

Coherent and Aligned Vision for Improving Outcomes: How well does the state articulate a coherent vision or theory of action that drives their school improvement efforts? Is this vision aligned with the state’s accountability system and goals for closing the achievement gap?

N/A Weak **Needs Improvement** Adequate Strong Exemplary

Arizona’s theory of action leaves significant room for improvement. It uses language directly from ESSA requirements, which makes it feel based in compliance and not improvement. Further, it does describe the levers the state will use, nor clear goals, to guide improvement efforts at the state level and in the field.

Schools receiving an F and D in the state’s accountability system are required to submit comprehensive needs assessments, along with root-cause analyses to identify high impact strategies. However, the link between the theory of action and the accountability system is not clearly articulated, and while the theory of action states it will result in improved outcomes for all students, not all schools will be undertaking the activities it describes.

Strategic Use of Funding and Alignment of Resources: Is the state allocating funding in a way that is strategic and maximizes resources? Are LEAs expected to prioritize improvement efforts that address the underlying performance issues?

N/A Weak **Needs Improvement** Adequate Strong Exemplary

It does not appear that Arizona is taking advantage of the opportunity to encourage districts and schools to pursue a specific set of state-supported or high-leverage strategies, and instead relies on ESSA’s definition of evidence-based interventions. The state appears to be agnostic regarding the strategies submitted in school improvement applications, and there also does not appear to be a state-provided resource for districts to find even suggested strategies to choose from.

The application for school improvement funds is competitive, but it is unclear how the competitive use of funds is aligned with the states vision of improving outcomes. For instance, there seems to be little emphasis on the quality of the application as a whole or the extent to which the district has shown that it is addressing the needs determined through the comprehensive needs assessment. In addition, Arizona does not appear to consider the capacity of the district leadership team to create a competitive application. As a result, it is hard to see how funds will be distributed in a strategic manner or reach the schools and districts with the greatest need.

Rigorous Review Process: Is the state applying rigorous criteria and review processes to ensure resources will be used to support effective school improvement efforts? Is the state prioritizing funding to LEAs who demonstrate the greatest need for school improvement funding (including LEAs with a high percentage of CSI and TSI schools) and the strongest commitment to school improvement?

N/A Weak Needs Improvement Adequate **Strong** Exemplary

Arizona has developed a coherent set of guidelines and processes for comprehensive support and improvement schools, which are those schools that received a D or F accountability rating. The actions a school must take are logical and strong: comprehensive needs assessment; identification of three to four primary needs based on the comprehensive needs assessment; root cause analysis of the identified primary needs; the Five Why’s method for each of the primary needs. The documentation and artifacts from these processes are required to be uploaded into a state portal, along with measurable goals to track progress. Furthermore, districts are also required to upload integrated action plans on how they will support campuses in their identified support areas.

However, there is concern that the lack of attention to funding, both in the school improvement application and in these tools, will not result in effective use of those funds both at a state and local level. Further, there does not seem to be consideration given to non Title-I schools who received a D or F but cannot receive federal school improvement funds from the state.

Arizona uses an on-site support and progress monitoring review process to help gauge the effectiveness of the improvement efforts. It will be interesting to see whether the state has the resources and capacity to conduct these visits as a continuous improvement exercise and not simply a compliance review.

Continuous Improvement, Monitoring and Evaluation: Does the state have a robust, data-driven process to monitor LEAs’ implementation of the school improvement plans within their district? Did the state establish clear milestones to ensure improvement over time, and within four years?

N/A Weak **Needs Improvement** Adequate Strong Exemplary

While districts use the state’s system to upload their needs assessments and improvement plans, there is no evidence that this system is then leveraged to monitor the plans and help districts improve their approach. The monitoring activities that are described seem compliance-focused. While districts and schools do need to submit substantial amounts of information, the information is being checked for

compliance, not quality or effectiveness. On the other hand, the data review performed with the school or district during the on-site and progress monitoring visits is potentially a high-impact strategy.

The comprehensive needs assessment requires measurable goals which are monitored by the state, however, the goals are set for the upcoming school year alone and are not year over year targets. “Improvement” is going to be defined differently in almost every case because goals are entirely determined by the local districts and schools, making it more difficult for the state to assess the impact of its school improvement system.

Evidence-Based Interventions: To what extent is the state mandating LEAs use evidence-based strategies in their improvement efforts? Does the state provide guidance and supports to LEAs to help them identify and implement the most effective strategies based upon their needs?

N/A **Weak** Needs Improvement Adequate Strong Exemplary

Arizona uses ESSA’s language around evidence-based interventions verbatim, which meets the letter of the law but does little more to provide support to districts and schools, which could quickly result in practices that do not meet the legal requirements for evidence-based strategies. The state has missed an opportunity to designate the evidence-based strategies it would like districts and schools to prioritize. The strategies being employed are reported to the state, but there does not seem to be any attention paid to the merits of each approach aside from the tiers of evidence described in ESSA.

Capacity Building and Autonomy: How well does the state articulate, delineate or set parameters around which interventions and responsibilities belong to the state, LEA and/or school? Does the state provide support or guidance to help LEAs identify and reduce barriers to school improvement? Does the state have a framework or process to support and monitor outside entities who partner with the state, LEAs or schools in school improvement efforts?

N/A Weak Needs Improvement **Adequate** Strong Exemplary

Arizona does not clearly articulate the responsibilities for which the state, districts, and schools are responsible as a part of the state’s school improvement system. The state has provided a clear framework for comprehensive support and improvement schools, however, and there are some activities assigned explicit to the state, districts, and schools. Even so, the state does not provide any guidance to districts regarding priority interventions or ways to reduce barriers to school improvement.

The state has implemented the “Elevate — Arizona’s Executive Leadership Network” program, which focuses on the “knowledge, competencies and skills of leaders as they work toward systemic change within schools and LEAs.” This opportunity seems to be an exception to Arizona’s otherwise compliance-driven approach and is designed for true systems change. The state subsidizes the cost for leaders to apply, and while this is promising, the program is certainly not touching all of the leaders it needs to be impacting, and especially not at the scale articulated in the state’s theory of action.

Engagement: Does the state require LEAs to engage with stakeholders such as parents and community members in the development and implementation of their school improvement plans? Does the state provide sufficient guidance and resources to LEAs to effectively do so, helping them foster local buy-in and promote sustainability?

N/A **Weak** Needs Improvement Adequate Strong Exemplary

The state’s theory of action does not include a mention of involving the community or stakeholders — not even educators. It is difficult to see how the level of community engagement Arizona asks of their districts will result in a healthy culture of improvement.

Additionally, it is clear from Arizona’s school turnaround process and documentation that community engagement is not a priority in the development of school improvement plans. The only stakeholder engagement required is a public presentation of the plan that was developed — it is important to note that this requirement is not even worded as a workshop or public comment period, but rather a presentation to the public on what has already been decided. This again is only a compliance exercise, not meaningful dialogue.

Sustainability: Does the state have a plan in place to review the school improvement efforts statewide and evaluate the impact and effectiveness? Does the state have a process in place to support LEAs and schools by enhancing their capacity to maintain their improvement efforts upon exiting identification and intervention?

N/A **Weak** Needs Improvement Adequate Strong Exemplary

The state does not require districts or schools to describe or design interventions that are sustainable over time, and there are no concrete processes and practices in place to review and evaluate practices across the state. There appears to be no long term strategy to address the continuing support needs of schools and districts as they exit identification status, and there are no common metrics with which the state would define success. Evaluation of sustainable strategies is going to look different for each school, and that will make progress difficult to benchmark over time.

Arizona’s approach does not appear to leverage the district information and planning documents being collected in the state’s online system. The state should develop a process to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the individual district and school improvement plans and strategies. This is another missed opportunity, since theoretically this repository could allow for the state to begin to support the scaling of effective practices and strategies or at the least provide more guidance to districts and schools about strategies that are achieving positive results.

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