



STATE REPORT COLORADO

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?

Subgroup performance appears to be a focus only in Colorado’s compliance with the ESSA requirements for identification of targeted support and intervention schools. Meanwhile, the state accountability framework does not seem to consider subgroup performance at all. This lack of emphasis carries over into the state’s school improvement materials.

The state’s tools could be more specific about how it will address the needs of particular groups of students, and how it will help districts identify these focus areas. Colorado has different long-term goals for students with disabilities and they are very low compared to their non-disabled peer group. Moreover, English language proficiency is not part of their school-based accountability in the state model that produces four performance levels. Therefore, the progress of English learners is not represented in planning or guidance documents.

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?

Colorado provides a very robust menu of supports for districts and schools identified for improvement. These resources are presented and explained clearly, packaged in a way that will enable local leaders to take advantage of them. The multiple routes districts may use to make improvement is also a strong example of local autonomy being balanced against state-level priorities.

Moreover, each of the pathways described in Colorado’s menu of supports entail differentiated levels of funding depending on the district’s chosen pathway. The state’s guidance materials delineate clear, specific funding bands for each of the available pathways, as well as a description of each. This approach to funding is unique among states so far in its clarity and specificity.

TURNAROUND COMPONENT OVERVIEW

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

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?

Colorado’s use of dual accountability system raises issues with school improvement implementation. The state accountability framework places an emphasis on growth while ESSA emphasizes absolute achievement, and while there are merits to both, the perspective from an equity lens is quite clear, as a student may grow without ever reaching the potential expected of his or her peers.

The state could also have a more robust plan for how it will monitor districts and engage in long-term evaluation of school improvement efforts.

Colorado may benefit from communicating their long-term intent regarding the alignment of their state accountability school and district performance framework and their ESSA accountability system. In particular, subgroup performance as a potential component of the state accountability framework may drive district improvement and focus on students with disabilities and English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and those students in racial minority groups.

The state can provide more information and guidance regarding districts needing to be transparent about ratings for schools in both rating systems.

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

Colorado has a clear mission and vision statement, and its strategic plan includes five core values: strong foundations, all means all, quality schools, more options, and educators matter. “All means all” is clearly component that most directly targets equity issues. The state’s Unified Improvement Plan requires both specific identified root causes as well as strategies intended to address them, which is a strong practice. Equity appears to be a focus throughout the state’s materials. Colorado deserves credit for maintaining an equity strand throughout the documents available for review.

That said, the state has a dual system for school accountability, which undermines coherence and alignment and introduces some uncertainty in regards to Colorado’s equity focus. For example, English language proficiency is not part of Colorado’s school-based accountability system that produces the state’s four performance levels, though it is under the federal accountability system. The state accountability system also includes science and matriculation to college or a certificate program, and the federal system does not. There is not complete overlap between the identification categories and the comprehensive, targeted, and additional targeted support identification under Colorado’s federal accountability system under the two systems.

These inconsistencies may result in confusion about school improvement efforts. Nevertheless, given the reality of the two systems, the state seems to have done what it can to create an aligned vision with an equity focus.

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

Colorado has a strong menu of supports that contains district-designed and -led improvement strategies, state-offered services, and districtwide supports. These funds are requested through the state’s Empowering Action for School Improvement Grant, EASI, which also serves as the school improvement application under Colorado’s federal accountability system. Districts with comprehensive or targeted schools may choose what resources they need, and funding amounts are directly tied to the chosen pathway, which is a particularly clear and strong approach.

The menu of supports is differentiated by improvement tier and specifically indicates which districts and schools may apply for which pathways. It then describes each pathway, its duration, and the funds available. For example, a district selecting Diagnostic Reviews and Planning grant are eligible for a block grant of up to \$50,000, whereas a district selecting Stakeholder and Community Engagement receives up to \$20,000 per school.

The first guiding question that the state considers when evaluating a district level plan asks, “Does the plan investigate the most critical performance areas and prioritize the most urgent performance challenges?” This is a good indication that the state is mindful of the effort districts and schools are making to target their resources. That said, federal school improvement funds are reserved for comprehensive and targeted schools, not necessarily schools in the lower tiers of the state’s accountability system. This means that the state’s ability to target funds to need is complicated, if not mysterious.

Colorado may need to consider adding state funding to support those schools in the lower tiers of their state accountability framework. That way, the state would not need to ask districts to fund some of the supports that have made available in their menu of options for districts. A potential avenue may be using federal Title set-asides at the state level to provide a pool of resources for schools to opt-in to these services and supports at no additional charge.

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

It appears that Colorado has a mix between a competitive and a prioritization process for distributing funds for districts. Districts can choose to apply for a combination of five different routes: exploration supports, district designed and led, state-offered supports, and continuation and districtwide supports. The routes have different criteria and ways of awarding funds geared to a specific intent, and the funding levels vary greatly between them.

The school improvement application rubric covers four areas — needs assessment, implementation, targets & progress monitoring, and budget. Districts with plans scoring less than the designated number of points may be — but are not necessarily — asked to resubmit in order to be eligible for funding. The rubric is strong and seems to be focused on quality, not just compliance, though the degree to which multiple raters at the state calibrate their assessments of the district plans will be important in determining how well the rubric informs the development of high quality, useful improvement work.

The criteria and points are established such that only half of the total points result in a “meets” rating, which the state describes as an “adequate response” in its rubric. “Meets at high level” is defined as “concise, thoroughly developed response.” Based on these criteria, there is concern that Colorado will fund plans that are, on average, only adequate. Colorado may consider raising the minimum requirements for funding, and then providing technical assistance for districts to improve and re-submit plans that don’t meet criteria initially.

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

This area is complicated for Colorado, as the state’s two accountability systems use different criteria for identification and movement out of lower performance tiers. The state has indicated that comprehensive and targeted schools will remain in their status for a minimum of three years in order to continue funding and ensure that schools are able to sustain any improvement efforts. Meanwhile, the state also noted in its strategic plan documents that 97 of 177 schools that were priority improvement or turnaround on their state accountability framework moved to the top two levels of their school performance categories from 2016 to 2017. This appears to mean that schools will simultaneously be able to move within the state accountability system tiers while also remaining identified for comprehensive or targeted support under Colorado’s federal accountability system.

Those considerations aside, the fifth guiding question in the state’s rubric for evaluating school improvement applications is, “Does the plan include elements to effectively monitor the impact and the progress of the action plan?” The state requires that districts set year on year performance targets, identify interim measures, and identify implementation benchmarks. In the state’s strategic plan, it has sections for each focus area on what progress looks like in 2022. The documents available seem to indicate that continuous monitoring is the responsibility of the district, not the state, but these components to planning are strong nevertheless.

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

In their school improvement application, districts in Colorado must use one of the four levels of evidence under Colorado’s federal accountability system and the intervention must fit with the need of the school. To ensure the best fit, selected strategies must also demonstrate an alignment to the contextual fit framework proposed by Horner, Blitz and Ross, which frames fit around need, precision, efficiency, skills, cultural relevance, resources, and organizational support.

Comprehensive and targeted schools may make use of the state’s diagnostic reviews and planning support, as well as engage in the turnaround network, which seem to be strong supports. However, if districts take advantage of state consultation to determine their evidence-based strategies, they must pay for the service. This practice is rare and is puzzling. Many states are making guidance around evidence-based strategies available to their districts and schools free of charge. Because all of the supports offered are optional, assessing fees creates a barrier to districts availing themselves to these supports.

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

Colorado has clearly defined which interventions belong to the state or to the district. In fact, all responsibility for intervention is with the district. Districts and schools that have five consecutive years as “priority improvement or turnaround” on the state accountability framework are subject to the “accountability clock.” The accountability clock prescribes that, once time runs out, the state board of education will direct a local school board to pursue one of a defined set of actions as a more intensive intervention. These actions include a change in governance, a charter conversion, “innovation” status, school closure or district reorganization.

The state’s ESSA plan does mention the accountability clock in the discussion of more rigorous intervention for schools who remain in comprehensive status after three years, though Colorado should make more explicit the link between comprehensive schools under Colorado’s federal accountability system and the accountability clock.

There is no evidence of a framework or process to support and monitor outside entities who partner with the state, schools or districts in improvement work.

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

Colorado’s school improvement application states that “Within all routes, geographic representation (i.e., representative distribution of districts across the state are awarded funds) and meaningful stakeholder engagement will be taken into consideration.” The application also states that “At a minimum in this application, all proposals will need to address how stakeholders are involved in a meaningful and relevant way in the development and implementation of proposed activities. Furthermore, stakeholder representatives are required to sign the proposal to verify support for the proposal.” The application could be strengthened by requiring representatives from a diverse set of backgrounds and roles. Still, requiring signatures is a great way to signal the importance of stakeholder involvement.

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

Colorado’s strategic plan sets a goal that 80% of the priority improvement and turnaround schools on their state accountability metrics will move to the top two levels of their performance framework by 2022, which is certainly a clear bar with which to measure success. The state’s ESSA plan does not mention any formal external or internal program evaluation for their school turnaround work.

The state is offering a robust menu of options for districts and schools, but those are divided among four pathways with some having more opportunities for capacity building than others. To the extent that

districts are left to their own devices to select a pathway, there may not be uniform opportunities for districts to enhance capacity to sustain their work.

The notion of exiting identification and intervention is confusing due to Colorado's dual systems of accountability. No schools can exit comprehensive or targeted status for three years, but the state accountability performance levels are being determined every year. In this environment, schools and districts may get mixed messages regarding what exactly it is that they should be sustaining.

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