



STATE REPORT MASSACHUSETTS

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?

While Massachusetts has created a well-defined structure for school improvement, it does not include a component that focuses squarely on equity. There are references within various tools and resources to underserved students and achievement gaps, and sometimes prompts to describe how they will they be addressed through state, district, and school efforts, but the equity thread through the school improvement system is hard to find.

The state’s improvement targets under ESSA set higher expectations for underserved groups as required, but these are targets, not explicit strategies for approaches for achieving them. Given that the needs assessments and root cause analyses in underperforming schools will inevitably uncover areas of need among underserved student populations, it is incumbent on the state to create a stronger, more coherent equity focus throughout all of its school improvement efforts.

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?

Massachusetts has been consistent in its approach to school improvement, specifically for its lowest performing schools, for several years, and that approach is regarded by many as the best currently utilized by any state. For those schools, the state does a good job helping districts and schools understand what their roles are and what the state’s involvement will be.

The state does a good job of leveraging local autonomy and accountability by providing a range of quality resources, documents, processes, and plans to districts and schools. Massachusetts’ emphasis on interim benchmarks and long-term goals that are derived from available data should be emulated by other states.

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?

Massachusetts needs to create more urgency around closing opportunity and achievement gaps by designating or prioritizing more concrete strategies specifically describing how it will do so. The state is

TURNAROUND COMPONENT OVERVIEW

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

clear that it will use its authority if a district or school is failing to meet accountability targets. However, it must be just as clear how a district with a Level 1 school that shows a large achievement gap will be held accountable, even if it is a relatively small student population.

The state has more work to do to adapt its established accountability system to the ESSA era. It is not clear how and when the state will extend supports to low-performing schools going forward under its ESSA plan or when schools can be exited from comprehensive or targeted status.

Massachusetts would also benefit from a more explicit focus on feedback loops: how these frameworks, processes, procedures, and needs assessments working for all schools, districts, and the state.

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

Massachusetts has identified four strategies for school improvement: establish a school-wide community of practice through leadership, shared responsibility, and professional collaboration; employ intentional practices for improving instruction; provide student-specific supports and instruction to all students; and provide appropriate social, emotional, and behavioral supports in order to create a safe, orderly, and respectful learning environment for students and teachers. The theory of action is grounded in “strong authority” and “sufficient autonomy and flexibility to empower school leadership within a context of accountability.” These strategies seem relatively well established in the state.

Likewise, Massachusetts has a strong and consistent track record of setting goals and expectations for schools and districts, then giving authority and autonomy to schools and districts who are not low performing to meet those expectations.

Even so, the state can do more to connect the state’s improvement strategies and theory of action to school improvement under ESSA in order to bring coherence to state expectations under the law, especially through an equity lens. For example, in the improvement and turnaround documentation, there is no mention of comprehensive or targeted schools. Level 3, 4, and 5 schools are in the lowest 20% of schools based on a combination of data and other evidence, which appears to mean that there will be both comprehensive and targeted schools in Level 4 and could lead to confusion. It would benefit schools, districts, and the state to ensure common language around status and expectations in the ESSA era.

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

Massachusetts expects districts to align funding and resources to the lowest performing schools, and the state’s ESSA plan details how it will allocate federal school improvement funding to comprehensive and targeted schools based on need and strength of plan. However, further details are sparse at this point, and it is not clear what criteria the state will use to make to make fund allocation decisions based on the plans.

The state has set a clear expectation that districts use their autonomy and funding flexibility to make decisions about how funding is being maximized to target the needs of students that are struggling.

Again, however, the framework for doing so is not clear. In their improvement plans, schools and districts are required to identify turnaround strategies specifically for low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities, yet the rubric focuses on the overall budget proposal and its scope.

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 is evident that the state employs, and expects districts to use, rigorous criteria and review processes to ensure effective school improvement efforts are employed. Massachusetts has a number of rubrics and processes documented, but there appears to be a missed opportunity to create cross-district learning, especially those that have demonstrated the ability to meet accountability targets or have made strong progress in closing opportunity and achievement gaps.

Funds have been identified for districts that are in need of priority assistance, such as Level 3 grant funding and Level 4 technical assistance. The rubric reviewed for Level 3 indicates the expectation that districts describe how resources will be used to support effective school improvement, including the capacity of school principal and the utilization of time to improve teaching and learning. However, there is a lack of detail around the review for Level 4 plans and, as stated above, while Massachusetts intends to focus resources on those high need schools with the clearest vision for success, it is not clear how that will happen in reality.

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

In Massachusetts, it is clear that Level 1 and 2 schools and districts are entrusted to take action and responsibility for improvement with very little involvement from the state. The state becomes increasingly involved from Levels 3-5, but there is not a lot of documentation provided beyond Level 3. Massachusetts expects that districts with Level 3-5 schools develop measurable annual goals, including those that target English learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students. Districts are also required to have interim benchmarks that must be submitted to the state periodically. Guidance is provided on particular priority areas that annual goals should address and sample goals, and the turnaround plan for Lawrence on the state website provides good evidence of the state's role with at least these districts and schools.

That aside, there are hints and indirect evidence of the state's active involvement in monitoring and ensuring improvement in Levels 1-3, but there is very little specific detail available. There does not appear to be a mechanism through which the state engages formally with schools or districts about their school improvement plans if they are not identified for intervention as part of the underperforming criteria identified in state statute. There is evidence of resources for district and school improvement planning called Planning for Success, which was piloted by districts in Massachusetts and is based on the Massachusetts Planning and Implementation Framework, but it does not seem to dive deeply into closing opportunity and achievement gaps.

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

Massachusetts has clearly established the four strategies for improvement in its theory of action, which the state asserts are evidence-based, and has invested in providing a repository of information and resources for schools and districts to use in implementing those strategies. The four strategies are part and parcel with Level 3 turnaround guidance. The state’s “How Do We Know” initiative is a solid example of how a state can provide resources on evidence-based practice to its districts. For Level 4 and Level 5 districts, the state plays a well-established, hands-on role in the improvement process.

Massachusetts stresses local autonomy and flexibility for schools and districts not in need of improvement, and it is unclear where the state’s role ends and the local district’s role begins in establishing and maintaining evidence-based interventions in those cases. The state provides resources, guidance, and training from the state level and, to at least some degree, professional development services through its District and School Assistance Centers. However, whether schools in Levels 1-3 are expected to take advantage of these services is not evident.

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

Massachusetts has an established history of taking state-level action to improve the lowest performing schools and districts. For Level 5 schools, the state has the authority to do full takeovers through receivership, to assign third-party organizations to manage a school on behalf of the state or the district, or to support districts in establishing alternative governance structures for specific schools or clusters of schools. Each of these authorities have employed at least once.

For districts not in the highest levels of intervention, resources are made available but expectations can be unclear. It is clear that autonomy is a key lever utilized in the school improvement strategy, and for this reason little guidance is provided to schools and districts not in turn around status (Level 3-5). Discrepancies in student outcomes within districts not identified for improvement appear to receive little attention from the state, and there is concern that district planning tools do not adequately prompt districts to analyze these outcome discrepancies for themselves.

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

For schools in Levels 3-5, Massachusetts has clear requirements for stakeholder engagement. It is less clear what the state expects from schools in Levels 1-2, although the state’s “Planning for Success” initiative may address this.

Even for schools in Levels 3-5, the state could do more to provide guidance and resources to districts and schools to effectively engage stakeholders. Guidance does not take into account the cultural and linguistic diversity of students and families. For example, translation and interpretation removes barriers to strong and meaningful participation of parents and community stakeholders, but that expectation is missing. There is also no description in how the state assists the districts and schools in fostering local buy-in and promoting sustainability. For example, the state could introduce or broker relationships with high impact opportunities between districts and local businesses, universities, and city entities.

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

Massachusetts is clearly committed to evaluating its approach and has completed multiple studies of its improvement and turnaround strategies. That said, the extent to which those studies have informed changes to the state’s approach is not apparent.

The state offers a sustainability toolkit for districts and schools online, and the sheer amount of self-help and directed resources, tools, frameworks, grant funding, and other supports lends significant strength to sustainability of improvement efforts. It’s not clear, though, how all of this work and support aligns to schools in comprehensive and targeted status and when those schools exit those identifications. Again, alignment between Massachusetts’ existing approach and ESSA would bring more coherence.

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