



STATE REPORT TENNESSEE

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?

One of Tennessee’s guiding principles is “all means all,” and the state’s ESSA plan includes several groups of strategies aligned to this principle such as, prioritizing talent management to ensure that students in low-performing schools have access to the best educators, safe and healthy learning environments, addressing bullying and harassment, and family resource centers. School improvement documents are not heavy with equity-oriented language, however it is clear that the state is requiring districts to rely on data, disaggregated by student groups, to identify needs, solutions and interventions. Tennessee’s accountability system has specific consequences for schools that fail to make progress on closing the achievement gaps. Still, the state could improve with a clearer equity strand throughout its school improvement application and guidance. States be specific about how they expect districts and schools to address the needs of subgroups of students when developing and implementing school improvement plans.

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?

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.

TURNAROUND COMPONENT OVERVIEW

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

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?

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.

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**

Tennessee’s theory of action is clear and compelling, especially with regard to its four guiding principles, which are manageable and actionable. The theory of action is woven into the state’s school improvement application, and districts are required to address each guiding principle as part of a root cause analysis. All guidance documents provide practical statements about how the theory of action applies to what schools and districts should be doing; the four levers and emphasis on evidence-based strategies are what the state expect to drive implementation. Also encouraging is that it appears that the theory of action draws from lessons learned in implementing Tennessee’s Achievement School District.

Districts are not required to include all four guiding principles when prioritizing areas of high need, which is a double-edged sword. On one hand, this should provide local leaders with some flexibility within the state’s framework. On the other, this makes it less clear how well-aligned school and district plans will be to the state’s vision. This a natural tension that Tennessee will need to keep an eye on as plans are being implemented in the field.

The school improvement application is essentially a step-by-step primer for districts in how to do a detailed needs assessment, identify common themes, do a root cause analysis to identify then prioritize the areas of greatest need, and then develop goals and an implementation plan to address each high-priority area. While the actual work that districts need to engage in is a lot harder than the step-by-step primer, this is an exemplary approach to getting all districts to think strategically about supporting their low performing schools.

The state has an intricate process mapped out in its accountability plan for identifying schools for improvement. That process does not seem fully reflected in the school improvement application. For example, there are various tracks for categorizing comprehensive schools as described in the ESSA plan, but that is not referenced in the application. There are also multiple departments within the state education agency that have a role in this process, and the accountability system can read quite complicated.

The theory of action and vision are strong, and bring together multiple departments within the Tennessee Department of Education to ensure that there is consistent and collaborative operations internally and externally.

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

Districts in Tennessee receive a base funding amount tied to the number of schools served, and an additional allocation for each comprehensive support and improvement school. Ensuring that districts are given more resources to support more schools is promising considering it is the districts that the state holds accountable for school improvement, and may also allow districts to take advantage of economies of scale to address common issues across its schools with a district initiative. The state prompts districts with good questions around organizational structure, intervention approach, and distribution of funds across district efforts and interventions without necessarily expecting or the same answer, maintaining some flexibility.

Tennessee uses a rubric to assess the quality of school improvement applications. It does not appear that a plan’s score on the rubric determines the amount of funding on a sliding scale, but instead that each plan must meet a certain standard of quality, completeness, or both in order for the state to distribute the funds for that school. The concern is then whether lower capacity but higher need districts must make multiple rounds of corrections to their plan before approval, potentially taking capacity away from the work of school improvement. This will likely result in lower capacity but higher need districts making multiple rounds of corrections to their plans before approval. Assuming that these districts get support in their planning and eventually meet the quality bar, the hope is that stronger planning at the front end will improve outcomes for students at the back.

The rubric does encourage funds to be used for centralized support, which it describes as dedicated resources and personnel who are charged with setting the strategic vision for improving comprehensive schools, implementing, monitoring, and revising plans as needed. A question remains regarding whether this leaves enough resources for individual schools with different needs. That said, the state has clarified that the “district strategies” portion of the grant, which is the majority of the funding, is designed to be used to support at the school level. Through previous school improvement efforts, evidence indicates that strategies needed for successful turnaround include elements like curriculum implementation and talent incentives that, while occurring at the school level, are supported by the district. However, these strategies are still taking place at the school level.

The materials available are focused on districts with multiple comprehensive schools, so it seems that this was the first priority for Tennessee’s school improvement efforts. The school improvement application states, “Needs that are specific to an individual school or small number of comprehensive schools should be addressed in the school-level grant application that will be available this fall.” It would be beneficial to get more explanation and understanding of this focus.

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

Tennessee is using teams of three people — two internal and one external — to review each plan. The scoring rubric is high quality and makes the state’s expectations for each school improvement

application clear. There is some concern that the rubric weighs all indicators equally, though some may actually be more important than others.

While Tennessee indicated that funding would be allocated competitively, it is unclear exactly where the competitive aspect is factored into funds awarded. Specific intervention approaches and alignment to the state’s theory of action do not seem to receive additional consideration. Information about a competitive grant awarded at the school level was released in late September. This came after the review materials were collected and is not included here.

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

Tennessee requires that schools and districts use a variety of data points that are both quantitative and qualitative, including assessment results, surveys, and information from observations. As part of school improvement planning, districts and schools are required to set multi-year SMART goals for improvement.

There is potentially less clarity around how Tennessee will monitor plan implementation. The state’s ESSA plan contains more detail, but proof of execution at this point is hard to come by. The Achievement School District schools and iZone schools, which are subsets of the lowest performing schools, receive more monitoring from the state, and the newly created School Improvement Support Network will work with districts and low performing schools on monitoring progress.

The state requires districts to explain their evaluation and monitoring system, but the available documents do not describe how the state will monitor the districts. There is a document on the state website that describes the monitoring process required by ESSA, however it is compliance-oriented and seems disconnected from the initiative supporting comprehensive support and improvement schools. It is not clear how the state will ensure their monitoring efforts are improvement-oriented rather than focused on compliance.

It appears that the state plans to leverage its eight regional field offices to monitor and support improvement, along with their research office and a newly created school improvement office, but those roles are not clearly delineated in the available materials.

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

Tennessee is directing districts towards four levers to organize their improvement strategy, activities and budget. The evidence behind these levers is strong and easy to understand. The state requires evidence-based strategies, but is not mandating specific approaches.

The state asks for descriptions of evidence, by tiers as required in ESSA, within the school improvement application, and also provides a high quality resource in the Tennessee Education Research Alliance’s School Turnaround: An Evidence Guide. The guide provides clear information and resource recommendations for the use of evidence-based interventions. Interestingly, while the state itself does not offer intervention recommendations, this resource does provide examples and recommendations of interventions that support different aspects of each of the four levers of improvement.

Tennessee expects districts to know and be able to reference evidence of effectiveness for any chosen intervention or approach. The state specifically directs districts to select a particular governance structure: iZone, Partnership Network Model, Empowerment Zone or other. It is not clear why a district would select a particular model, nor is it easy to find a definition or explanation about the benefits of either.

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

Tennessee sufficiently delineates the roles and responsibilities for schools, districts, and the state depending upon a school’s rating and the length of time a school has received a particular intervention. Taken together, the school improvement application, example of a completed plan, and rubric are helpful, high quality tools for districts and seem to balance district autonomy. That said, there are numerous state initiatives underway and agencies involved, meaning roles becomes that much more difficult to define and adhere to.

There does not appear to be a framework or state approval process set up for outside partners, though districts are encouraged in their funding applications to think through the uses of, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of, external partners. The state appears to have the authority to replace external services providers that are not able to show improved results in schools.

Tennessee state law allows for schools to remain in its Achievement School District for a maximum of ten years, which gave the reviewers pause. It is understood, however, that the vast majority of schools in Tennessee’s ASD will receive rigorous intervention, such as the replacement of school operators for charter schools, within three years if no improvement is made.

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

Tennessee requires the identification and engagement of various stakeholders in the development of school improvement plans. However, it is not clear that the state provides guidance and training on the role that stakeholders can play during implementation. Improvement efforts would be strengthened if the plans expanded upon the ability for stakeholders to be champions for creating a culture that will sustain the work.

On the state’s planning website, there are several documents related to parent and family engagement, for traditional and “innovative” schools and districts. The Innovative School Parent and Family Engagement Policy Guide to Quality seems more compliance-oriented than not, and these documents are not generally for comprehensive or targeted support and improvement schools. From other external sources it is clear Tennessee takes engagement seriously, but it isn’t reflected in school improvement documents.

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

Tennessee is capturing a wealth of information that could be leveraged to look across the state for the most impactful interventions. However, available documents do not appear to address the sustainability of improvement efforts. The state asks districts and schools how they intend to sustain their progress as they move out of school improvement status and no longer will receive 1003a improvement funds from the state. This is a light touch approach, and the information could benefit other districts as well, as it may include creative uses of other federal or state funding streams.

The state’s ESSA plan describes that it will review schools on an annual basis through a series of three “milestone” reviews. This includes an annual report from the state to districts that is then used to inform grant renewal decisions.

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