



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

*CO praised for innovative menu of supports to districts, but 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 Colorado, 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.

Colorado received a "Strong" rating in 5 out of 8 categories: vision, funding, rigorous review process, continuous monitoring, capacity building, and engagement. Overall, peer reviewers praised Colorado for providing innovative menu of supports to districts. However, 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 Colorado is taking a more compliance-oriented approach. 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 panel 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.

### **Colorado’s Analysis:**

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

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

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

### **Strengths:**

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.

**Where the Plan Can Improve:**

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.