



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

IN praised for vision, but materials are incomplete and 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 Indiana, 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.

Indiana received a "Strong" rating in 2 out of 8 categories: vision and capacity building; and a "Needs Improvement" rating in 3 out of 8 categories: rigorous review, engagement and sustainability. The panel of experts were concerned that the state is taking too limited a role in leading or supporting school improvement efforts. Indiana has invested its resources in developing a clear improvement framework and stakeholder outreach. However, the framework is not fully implemented or reflected in the state's school improvement materials. 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 network also 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.

Indiana’s Analysis:

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

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

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

Strengths:

Indiana’s use of the 5 Essentials Elements and the state’s articulated theory of action are well developed, thoughtful, and research based. They require adherence to moderate-to-high standards



of evidence for interventions while simultaneously recognizing that some school-specific customization will likely be necessary, and the rubric is extremely robust.

The state has committed to greater coordination across state agencies and worked to identify areas in which they can streamline practice and centralize resources in order to free up districts and schools to focus on the school improvement work. The state is also encouraging districts with more than four identified schools to apply as a district, which will further support shared learning and economies of scale.

Where the Plan Can Improve:

Indiana's standards for allocation of competitive funds for implementation are unclear and potentially too subjective – more information on the how the qualitative and quantitative indicators will be used in funding decisions would be helpful and the inclusion of a readiness or needs assessment could help districts better use the funds. Interventions must meet one of the top 3 levels for strength of evidence, and Indiana allows for customization of interventions beyond that, rather than requiring a more rigorous use of the comprehensive needs assessment.

The state should address sustainability and continuous improvement in the early stages. The state appears to be organizing itself in a way to sustain the efforts and to have a coherent and aligned strategy to support school improvement. It would benefit school improvement efforts across the state if the work to redesign the state education office occurred across districts as well. Districts could benefit from the approach the state has undertaken to create a structure to support school improvement.

Indiana's 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.