



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

MA praised for vision, taking a leadership approach to school improvement efforts

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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 Massachusetts, 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.

Massachusetts received a "Strong" rating in 3 out of 8 categories: vision, evidence-based interventions and capacity building; and an "Adequate" rating in all other categories. The panel of experts believe that Massachusetts is using a "State Leadership Approach" and 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. Peers believe that Massachusetts' emphasis on interim benchmarks and long-term goals that are derived from available data should be emulated by other states. These strengths will make it more likely that districts and schools will make sustained, long-term improvement. Read more 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 as well as 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.

Massachusetts’ Analysis:

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

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

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

Strengths:

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.

Where the Plan Can Improve:

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 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.