



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

MN praised for vision but lacks robust materials with clear guidance for educators

Embargoed until: November 15, 12:01AM (Eastern)

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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 Minnesota, 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.

Minnesota received a "Strong" rating in 2 out of 8 categories: its vision and its rigorous review process; and received a "Needs Improvement" rating in 2 out of 8 categories: capacity building and sustainability. The panel of experts believe that Minnesota is using a "Partnership Approach" with districts, trying to walk the line acting as both a coach and a referee. States taking this approach generally work to enhance district capacity for school improvement and to make decisions that will serve all students. The peer reviewers praised Minnesota, in particular, for its thoughtful approach to targeting limited resources by focusing their grant funding to only those districts with the highest proportion of identified schools. 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, 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.

Minnesota’s Analysis:

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

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

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

Strengths:

Minnesota’s grant funding approach to only those districts with the highest proportion of identified schools is a smart, thoughtful way of targeting limited resources, though it will be important to



ensure that other schools that are struggling have other avenues for support. As mentioned above, Minnesota's focus on equity and underserved groups of students is also strong.

Minnesota's needs assessment is also particularly strong. The "PLC Roadmap" is an exemplary piece of guidance and professional development that can be applicable to all educators and schools, regardless of whether or not they are comprehensive or targeted support.

The review process for district and school turnaround plans is thorough, and it is wise for the state to make use of third party expertise to aid in the process. Alignment between state legislation, the MDE accountability system and the theory of action for comprehensive and targeted support districts/schools is very strong and leads to greater likelihood of implementation with fidelity.

Where the Plan Can Improve:

Minnesota could utilize its authority to a far greater degree to drive the outcomes and systems-change it wants to see from districts and schools. The state's approach seems to be mostly bottom-up, with the needs assessment being completed by the district or school and then submitted to the agency for approval as long as it meets the established criteria. Throughout many documents and the ESSA plan there is language indicating "working within the system," or selecting an initiative "that is a best fit for the system," yet it is the current system that led to the need for turnaround plans in the first place.

Given the strength of the state's ESSA plan, the state should create materials based on the substance of what is in the ESSA plan so that stakeholders - namely educators - can obtain and utilize state guidance. Although the documents created are clear and easy to follow, much of the specific guidance and intervention strategies are difficult to find.

Minnesota could also improve its long-term evaluation approach in order to better learn what works and what doesn't in school improvement. This may be happening, but it was not clear from the available documents. The state could also provide more guidance to districts on evidence-based practices. Although this may be coming in the form of a list, it would be most helpful to provide more detailed guidance for how to make use of evidence, rather than simply a list of interventions.