



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

ND praised for supports and trainings provided but lacks vision and details on how real improvements will be made

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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 North Dakota, 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.

North Dakota received an "Adequate" rating in 1 out of 8 categories: capacity building; and received a "Weak" rating in 2 out of 8 categories: their rigorous review process and engagement. The panel of experts believe that North Dakota 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 North Dakota, in particular, for assigning coaches to their improvement schools who play an active role in leadership training, data coaching, and other professional development designed to improve how the school serves its students. 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.

North Dakota’s Analysis:

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

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

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

Strengths:

North Dakota is providing each comprehensive and targeted support and intervention school with improvement funding, and all schools receive continuous improvement support from AdvancED.



Comprehensive support and improvement schools are assigned coaches who play an active role in leadership training, data coaching, and other professional development and technical assistance designed to improve how the school serves its students. All told, North Dakota seems to provide a suite of third-party improvement assistance to its districts and schools. The state also assigns staff liaisons who help to direct resources to districts that need them.

Where the Plan Can Improve:

North Dakota's ESSA plan presents a compelling vision of a state that drives continuous improvement, and anecdotal accounts from the state corroborate that good work is happening. However, its current structures and documentation for school improvement appear entirely compliance-oriented. For instance, the application and rubric appear to be focused on whether elements of the plan were present, rather than the quality of the plans proposed. The questions and level of detail asked of districts and schools are surface-level and do not prompt deep planning for school improvement.

This is a missed opportunity for districts and schools to use the application as a coherent tool to guide their improvement planning and turnaround efforts. The role of AdvancED and the alignment with the multi-tiered system of supports is unclear, while it could be interwoven throughout the school improvement plan and guidance from the state. The materials available do not fully explain how districts and schools are using the framework and data systems to drive their improvement efforts.

In short, there is too little publicly accessible information about how the state is implementing their vision for improvement as outlined in the state's ESSA plan.