CCSSO Principles *of*
Effective School Improvement Systems

CCSSO
Council of Chief State School Officers

THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

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Melody Schopp (South Dakota), President

Chris Minnich, Executive Director

This memorandum introduces a set of 10 principles—*from* states and *for* states—to inform the design and management of effective systems to improve or replace low-performing schools. The principles are derived from what we know based on current research, evidence, and experience, and the input of state leaders, key stakeholders, and other experts. To identify the principles, we began with what must be true at each level of the public education system—from what students must experience as learners to the critical roles played by schools, districts, authorizers, partners, and states. The principles also build on the [CCSSO next-generation state accountability system principles](#) that highlight the inextricable link between accountability and school improvement, including a focus on diagnostic reviews, targeted support for the lowest-performing schools (and their districts), and systems of continuous improvement to sustain progress over time.

MORAL AND ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES

As chief state school officers, we are deeply committed to providing the high-quality educational opportunities, resources, and supports necessary to improve outcomes for *each and every* student in *each and every* school. We are cultivating systems to advance continuous improvement in all schools and districts. Yet we feel a special urgency to drive dramatic improvement for students in our lowest-performing schools and schools with the most significant achievement gaps. Accordingly, the principles laid out in this resource target improvement for these schools and ultimately better serving communities where students have traditionally been underserved.

We know that each year a school does not meet a child's needs lowers his or her chances of success later in life. Addressing the schools that are struggling the most is fundamental to advancing our [collective commitment to educational equity](#). And because the future health of each state's economy will depend on how prepared all of our students are, we also have an economic imperative to ensure that each and every child is ready to participate meaningfully in the workforce.

> We approach this work with *resolve* to do whatever is necessary to help students succeed, with *optimism*, because much has been and continues to be learned that can inform and accelerate this undertaking, and with *humility*, recognizing the success of school improvement efforts has been uneven to date. Improving or replacing the schools most in need will take courageous, persistent commitment and action from us as state leaders in partnership with communities, families, educators, and other stakeholders.

NEW OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD

In addition to the moral and economic imperatives, states have a new responsibility and opportunity under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to lead in this critical work. In contrast to the more top-down approaches to school improvement of the No Child Left Behind Act and Elementary and Secondary Education Act flexibility waivers, ESSA establishes some federal guardrails and then

empowers each state—working in close partnership with its local education agencies (LEAs), schools, principals, teachers, parents, students, civil rights leaders, community members, tribes, and other key stakeholders—to design its own system of school improvement. This includes the state system's vision and theory of action; its architecture and policies; its implementation, supports, incentives, and consequences. Further, not only are there state-level roles and responsibilities to fulfill, the state also must ensure—as a matter of both state leadership and federal law—that all other levels of the system are fulfilling their specific roles for the benefit of improving student outcomes in our lowest-performing schools and in our schools with the greatest achievement gaps.

USING THE PRINCIPLES

We intend these 10 principles to articulate the core *components* of an effective school improvement system—a common *vision* across states that can support both individual system design and cross-state collaboration and learning. But we do not intend them as a common *theory of action* for how best to improve outcomes for students enrolled in schools identified for support.

Similar to our accountability principles, the school improvement principles presented here are neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. The particular choices we make in applying the principles to our systems should align with our particular theory of action. Some may be fully committed to improving existing low-performing schools under current governance structures. Others may pursue strategies that focus more on school choice, closing and replacing the lowest-performing schools with new schools, or governance changes (e.g., chartering or state-led takeovers). Further, each state's design should also reflect its unique set of conditions, including but not limited to current levels of student and school performance; the degree to which local control constrains or complements the SEA; and the existing politics, resources, and capacity at both the state and local levels.

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Regardless of the particular theory or the specific conditions, each state's system should still reflect these principles in meaningful ways. The principles will help guide us in our initial design, through implementation, and as we continuously improve our systems and approaches over time. The principles can also help clarify the essential roles and responsibilities that actors at each level of the system must fulfill. Finally, by being transparent about our aspirations, the principles should help our partners and stakeholders hold us accountable for addressing all the key elements of effective school improvement.

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The following table presents the principles of effective school improvement systems. To succeed at this hard work, each principle must be manifest at all levels of the school improvement system. Note that the principles are all important, and the order they are presented in the table below does not connote a ranking or prioritization among them. Accompanying each principle is a set of illustrative examples of key roles that states can play.[1]

Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems	Sample Key State Roles to Manifest Each Principle
1. **Elevate school improvement as an urgent priority at every level of the system—schools, LEAs, and the SEA—and establish for each level clear roles, lines of authority, and responsibilities for improving low-performing schools.** *If everything is a priority, nothing is.*	• Establish a clear state vision and theory of action; identify, based on evidence and lessons learned from past state and local efforts, what must happen at the school, LEA, and SEA levels to create the conditions for success; and codify a focused strategy and defined state role that is understood and shared across the SEA and among education stakeholders. • Prioritize school improvement with a specific focus on equity by emphasizing it in the agency's strategic plan, organizing and dedicating sufficient SEA resources (time, staff, funding), placing the school improvement lead on the SEA's senior leadership team, highlighting efforts and data internally and externally, and using the chief's public communications and political capital to maintain focus on this issue.

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1   Leaders at the school, district, and regional level—as well as those working outside the education system in ways that impact young people—must fill their own key roles. Identifying these roles is beyond the scope of this brief introduction to the principles, but they are essential for actually driving better student outcomes in our lowest-performing schools. CCSSO plans to supplement this initial memorandum with additional details, examples, and resources, including information about the roles leaders at each level must play in an effective state system.

Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems	Sample Key State Roles to Manifest Each Principle
2. **Make decisions based on what will best serve each and every student with the expectation that all students can and will master the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college, career, and civic life. Challenge and change existing structures or norms that perpetuate low performance or stymie improvement.** *Put students at the center so that every student succeeds.*	• Rigorously review and revise state and local policies and practices to remove existing barriers to effective school improvement and create new enabling conditions that can accelerate progress. For example, provide additional authority and flexibility to the SEA and/or LEAs to take additional direct actions when identified schools do not improve. • Explore new approaches, including changes to funding or governance, that could better serve students even if they require changes to the existing system. • Establish a direct connection from every state office, program, and policy, and those already implementing school improvement strategies—including those that address specific subgroups of students such as students with disabilities and English learners.
3. **Engage early, regularly, and authentically with stakeholders and partners so improvement is done *with* and not *to* the school, families, and the community.** • **Work with schools, families, and community members to build trusting relationships, expand capacity, inform planning, build political will, strengthen community leadership and commitment, and provide feedback loops to adjust as needed.** • **Integrate school and community assets as well as early childhood, higher education, social services, and workforce systems to, among other things, help address challenges outside of school.** *If you want to go far, go together.*	• Regularly and authentically engage key stakeholders— especially school staff, families, civil rights organizations, and community members—as partners in decision-making on needs assessments, school improvement plan development, monitoring, and continuous improvement. • Arrange or provide capacity-building support to families and community members to help them engage meaningfully in school improvement efforts and to support student learning. • Bolster state and local capacity by vetting and collaborating with strategic partners (e.g., technical assistance providers, research institutions, tribal organizations, and other service providers) who are aligned with the system's priorities, implement evidence-based approaches whenever possible, and have a track record of improving outcomes especially for low-income students and students of color.

Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems	Sample Key State Roles to Manifest Each Principle
4. Select at each level the strategy that best matches the context at hand—from LEAs and schools designing evidence-based improvement plans to SEAs exercising the most appropriate state-level authority to intervene in non-exiting schools. *One size does not fit all.*	• In order to differentiate support and interventions appropriately, elevate the role that high-quality, comprehensive LEA- and school-level needs assessments play in the school improvement process. The needs assessment should inform how the state approves school improvement plans, distributes funds, provides technical assistance, takes action in LEAs with many identified schools, and pursues more rigorous action in any lowest-performing school that does not exit improvement status. • Differentiate whenever practicable how the SEA structures and delivers improvement support and monitoring to best match the context, needs, and assets of the students, schools, and LEAs involved. • Select the most appropriate strategy from a comprehensive continuum of state actions, which might include support for locally-driven improvement, creating networks of practitioners across schools and LEAs, aligning and prioritizing regional services, increasing student options, creating state-authorized turnaround or innovation zones, closing and replacing existing schools with new schools, state takeover of individual schools, state takeover of LEAs, and other extraordinary state authorities. Consider a wide array of factors in making selections—especially when taking more rigorous action for non-exiting schools—including but not limited to LEA and SEA capacity as well as local and state political conditions.

Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems	Sample Key State Roles to Manifest Each Principle
5. Support LEAs and schools in designing high-quality school improvement plans informed by • **each school's assets (and how they're being used), needs (including but not limited to resources), and root causes of underperformance;** • **research on effective schools, successful school improvement efforts, and implementation science;** • **best available evidence of what interventions work, for whom, under which circumstances; and** • **the science of learning and development, including the impact of poverty and adversity on learning.** *Failing to plan is planning to fail.*	• Ensure school improvement plans focus on both creating the conditions for learning and strengthening the instructional core to help students master the full range of essential knowledge, skills, and mindsets. • Expand support and oversight to include a focus on the role and capacity of LEAs and LEA leaders in improvement planning. • Support LEAs and schools to identify and implement the most appropriate evidence-based interventions to address specific challenges a school faces. Where the existing evidence base is lacking for a particular context, support LEAs and schools in studying the effects of promising or innovative approaches. • Establish SEA policies and processes (e.g., timelines, needs assessments, and planning templates) that ensure improvement plans are comprehensive, actionable, and can function as "living documents" responding to changing circumstances and progress on implementation and impact. Where appropriate, support planning periods that promote alignment between needs assessments, stakeholder engagement, selected strategies and interventions, and plans for implementation.

Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems	Sample Key State Roles to Manifest Each Principle
6. **Focus especially on ensuring the highest need schools have great leaders and teachers who have or develop the specific capacities needed to dramatically improve low-performing schools.** *Talent matters.*	• Support school leadership initiatives—including through Title II's 3 percent set aside for school leadership—to ensure that identified schools are able to attract, develop, and retain effective school leaders with the specific competencies and skills needed to improve student outcomes in these schools. • Examine SEA education workforce initiatives to attract, prepare, develop, and retain teachers and leaders in schools and districts identified for improvement (and within those schools for students who have historically been assigned less experienced or effective teachers). For example, support the development of systems of ongoing, embedded, individual, and collective professional learning to develop more effective teachers, especially in low-performing schools. • Reimagine the SEA role in reviewing local Title II plans and develop teacher equity plans to promote the strategic and (where applicable) evidence-based use of Title II funds and other incentives to prioritize and support school improvement (e.g., reviewing Title II plans and school improvement grant applications together).
7. **Dedicate sufficient resources (time, staff, funding); align them to advance the system's goals; use them efficiently by establishing clear roles and responsibilities at all levels of the system; and hold partners accountable for results.** *Put your money where your mouth is.*	• Tightly align and focus all available SEA and LEA resources—across federal, state, and local formula and competitive funding streams—to support and sustain improvement plans. • Streamline requirements when possible to avoid duplication and mixed messages that obstruct progress at the school level. • Dedicate sufficient resources to manage effective school improvement processes at the SEA itself, including rethinking how existing staff across the SEA can prioritize their time to support schools in greatest need of improvement and identifying funds for continuous improvement and rigorous evaluations.

Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems	Sample Key State Roles to Manifest Each Principle
8. **Establish clear expectations and report progress on a sequence of ambitious yet achievable short- and long-term school improvement benchmarks that focus on both equity and excellence.** *What gets measured gets done.*	• Set benchmarks to measure whether school improvement efforts are being implemented thoughtfully, schools are making progress on a range of leading indicators, and schools are ultimately exiting improvement status. Provide LEAs with guidance and support for doing the same with schools identified because of low-performing subgroups of students. • Be transparent with all stakeholders, including family and community members, about school improvement progress throughout the process.
9. **Implement improvement plans rigorously and with fidelity, and, since everything will not go perfectly, gather actionable data and information during implementation; evaluate efforts and monitor evidence to learn what is working, for whom, and under what circumstances; and continuously improve over time.** *Ideas are only as good as they are implemented.*	• Maintain a consistent focus with LEAs, schools, and partners on implementation based on what is known from implementation science. • Regularly use data and continuous improvement routines (including clear milestones, feedback loops, and data cycles) to intervene appropriately when progress stalls and to inform the allocation of resources and supports across all identified schools. • Apply lessons learned from internal and external evaluations of both successful and unsuccessful school improvement efforts to identify which strategies are the best match for a particular school and LEA. • Regularly reflect on and continuously improve the SEA's school improvement policies and practices themselves.
10. **Plan from the beginning how to sustain successful school improvement efforts financially, politically, and by ensuring the school and LEA are prepared to continue making progress.** *Don't be a flash in the pan.*	• To ensure sustainability and success of a school improvement effort, focus on building capacity for continuous improvement in LEAs (not just in schools) and support and buy-in among educators, families, and community members. • Allocate school improvement funds strategically to avoid a "funding cliff" and support LEAs and schools in identifying new and existing funding streams to sustain improvement efforts after schools exit improvement status.