



SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

School Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act *ExcelinEd Policy Brief - 2019*

The State's Role in Connecting Districts with High-Quality School Turnaround Partners

ESSA'S REQUIREMENT OF EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. This federal law requires the states to design accountability systems and intervene in their lowest performing schools, termed “comprehensive support schools” (CSI), and schools with very low-performing subgroups, termed “targeted support schools” (TSI).

Under ESSA, state education agencies (SEAs) must approve districts' school improvement plans and reserve 7 percent of their Title I, Part A funds for interventions in CSI and TSI schools. These 7 percent funds can be used only for interventions that meet the law's evidence-based requirements, defined as an “activity, strategy or intervention that demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes” based on strong, moderate or promising evidence.¹

The U.S. Department of Education released [non-regulatory guidance](#), and a number of organizations created a variety of vital resources on how states and districts can leverage ESSA's evidence-based requirements to guide schools toward more effective turnaround strategies.² What has received less attention is how states can help districts select the right partner to help their schools successfully implement those strategies.

The Turnaround Challenge for Districts and Schools

Turning around the lowest performing schools, especially schools that have been low performing for years, is widely recognized as one of the greatest challenges in the education world. Often, these schools lack the internal expertise or capacity to implement the turnaround strategies they need, and they are frequently located within low-capacity districts struggling to serve multiple low-performing schools.³

Low-performing schools and districts, therefore, can benefit from partnering with high-quality, external organizations that are experts in implementing and sustaining evidence-based turnaround strategies.⁴ Unfortunately, there are few opportunities for schools and districts to engage with educational experts, organizations specializing in school turnaround or other potential partners. Further, the needs of each school and district are unique based on location and the students they serve. ***This is where SEAs can play a supportive role.***

¹ See ESSA, Sec. 8101 (21)(A)(i).

² See, e.g., Chiefs for Change, [ESSA and Evidence: Why it Matters](#) (July 2016); Getting Smart, [The Impact of ESSA: Identifying Evidence-Based Resources](#) (June 2018); Florida Center for Reading Research, [An SEA Guide for Identifying Evidence-Based Interventions for School Improvement](#) (November 2016).

³ <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/04/04/satisfying-essas-evidence-based-requirement-proves-tricky.html>

⁴ In 2018, ExcelinEd issued a [Playbook](#) describing strategies for attracting high-performing charter management organization (CMOs) to help districts and schools with school turnaround. This brief answers the next, key question: How can states help districts and schools identify which external providers (including CMOs) are the right partner for a particular district?



THE OPPORTUNITY FOR STATE LEADERSHIP

States should embrace the opportunity - and the responsibility - to help their low-performing districts and schools identify and partner with the organizations that can provide the specific, evidence-based turnaround services they need.

This brief outlines the key strategies for connecting districts with high-quality school turnaround partners. It also spotlights three states that have successfully implemented these strategies.

Strategies for Connecting Districts with High-Quality School Turnaround Partners

Due to differences in governance and the availability of resources, each state's approach to connecting districts with high-quality partners will look different. Effective approaches generally include four strategies, as evidenced in the state spotlights below:

- **Rigorously vet potential partners** using a criterion-based process and create a repository of vetted organizations and the evidence-based services they can provide;
- **Create opportunities for meaningful engagement** between districts and potential partners;
- **Empower districts** to make the final decision to select a partner; and
- **Support partnerships** with state funds and federal school improvement funds ("7 percent funds") and use up to 5 percent of federal school improvement funds to facilitate partnerships, summits, etc.

State Spotlight: Louisiana's School Redesign Summit

Early in the 2016-17 school year, Louisiana Superintendent John White identified the need to connect district leaders seeking evidence-based strategies for improving their lowest performing schools with national organizations with proven records of success in school turnaround. The result was a full-day convening, the School Redesign Summit, held in New Orleans in January 2017.

The Summit was a statewide effort to support all Louisiana districts—not just the New Orleans Recovery School District, where the state has played a substantial role in school turnaround for more than a decade. The Summit was attended by more than 500 leaders representing all 60 districts across the state plus 50 representatives from external organizations.

Based on interviews conducted by the Louisiana Department of Education, district leaders came to the Summit seeking proven frameworks and strategies as well as capable partners that could help build local capacity and differentiate their services based on a district's needs. External organizations came seeking opportunities to expand their national footprint, building district capacity to implement and sustain their turnaround strategies. The external organizations were eager to work in Louisiana, in particular, because the state sets high expectations for its districts and provides support for meeting those expectations.

By the close of the one-day Summit, a full 75 percent of districts reported that they had identified a potential turnaround partner. How did the Louisiana Department of Education pull off such a successful event?

Vetting Potential Partners

To ensure the organizations attending were high-quality and could help districts meet ESSA's evidence-based requirements, Louisiana issued a criterion-based response for information (RFI) seeking organizations with expertise in one (or more) of three specific categories:



1. Comprehensive Whole School Re-Design
2. Strategic Specialties in High-Leverage Elements of School Redesign (such as assessment design, talent pipelines, etc.)
3. Whole School Operations and Governance Innovation

To participate in the Summit, external organizations had to meet the following minimum criteria showing a track record with:

- positive outcomes with similar student populations;
- development of needed internal capacity; and
- successful partnerships and the ability to offer unique and innovative programming for the Louisiana context.

Opportunities for Engagement

The School Redesign Summit agenda was purposefully designed to create opportunities for district teams to learn from each other, interact with potential partners, hear about innovative turnaround efforts from across the nation and create a plan for moving forward.

The agenda included:

- **Plenary Session:** Superintendent White and other national education leaders spoke about the need to embrace new partnerships and innovative approaches.
- **District Huddles:** District teams met three times throughout the day to work on developing plans based on what they were learning.
- **Partner Huddles:** Potential partner organizations met with state leaders to get a better understanding of the state's context and vision.
- **District/Partner Explorations Rounds (aka "speed dating"):** In first round, district teams met with multiple organizations for ten minutes each. During the second round, districts and organizations spent 30 minutes working through a short, real-life problem of practice written by the district.

To ensure participants gained the most from their Summit experience, the Department provided pre-reads and conducted pre-Summit webinars. They also required that districts complete a needs assessment to ensure every team arrived with a deep understanding of the root causes for low-performance in their district. Further, the Department also asked partner organizations to come prepared with some basic background information on all the districts.

Lessons Learned from Louisiana

Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, as 86 percent of participants agreed it was an effective use of their time. Participants also wanted continued support for partnership opportunities established at the Summit.

Following the Summit, the Department invited districts to apply for state funds to support unique partnerships targeting their lowest performing schools. (The timing of the Summit, in January, was disconnected from the availability of federal school improvement funds, which are generally distributed in the summer or early fall.) The state-based awards, ranging from \$10,000 to \$50,000, were designed to support the initial phases of a partnership, including site visits and needs assessments.

To improve in the future, Louisiana would adjust the timing of the Summit to better align with the availability of the ESSA 7 percent school improvement funds that will be used, in large part, to pay for the partnerships. Also, they would inform districts of the availability of resources prior to the Summit as a way to inject additional focus and even greater energy into the conversations with partners.



State Spotlight: Nevada's Partnership Network

Inspired in part by Louisiana's School Redesign Summit, Nevada's then-Superintendent of Public Instruction, Steve Canavero, created the Nevada Partnership Network. The Network is a collaboration between the Nevada Department of Education, Clark County (the state's largest district) and a set of national organizations with expertise in school turnaround. The Network operates independently from the state's Achievement School District (ASD) through which the Nevada Department of Education authorizes charter management organizations to transform a subset of the state's persistently lowest-performing schools.

Ongoing Engagement with Multiple Partners

To begin its work, the Nevada Partnership Network included 30 Clark County schools identified as CSI under ESSA. Each school then partners with a set of organizations selected for participation in the Network, based on their program's track record of success through a rigorous RFI process. For example, each partnership school is matched with a nonprofit specializing in professional development and also given access to funding to provide before- and after-school learning opportunities for their students. The schools also partner with the College Board to expand course offerings and prepare more teachers to teach Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Further, the schools partner with the University of Nevada to ensure every school has a social worker on campus and access to a community health center.⁵

Members of the Network convene regularly to problem solve and share practices, with the goal of creating a sustainable community of practice that can continue to support Network schools for years to come.⁶

Use of State and Federal Funds

To participate in the Network, schools must be eligible for state improvement funds and for ESSA's 7 percent school improvement funds. Schools use these funds to buy into the Network.

State Spotlight: Texas Partnerships

In Texas, both the legislative and executive branches have acted to reduce the number of low-performing schools by leveraging high-quality turnaround partners. Through the Texas Partnerships initiative, districts authorize a partner to operate a low-performing school, giving the partner authority over personnel (hiring, firing and management), curriculum, calendar and assessments. The district then holds the partner accountable via an academic and financial performance contract.⁷

Incentivizing Partnerships

In 2017, the Texas legislature enacted SB 1882, making districts eligible to apply for additional state funding if they are partnering with organizations to turn around their lowest-performing schools. These schools may also receive a two-year exemption from other potential state interventions.

A Different Approach to Vetting

Non-profits (including state-authorized charter schools), institutions of higher education and other government entities are eligible to be partner organizations. However, unlike in Louisiana and Nevada, Texas does not play a significant

⁵ See Brett Barley and Mike Barton, Collaboration between state and Clark County School District aims to improve local schools, Las Vegas Review-Journal (Nov. 25, 2017), available at <https://www.reviewjournal.com/opinion/commentary-collaboration-between-state-and-clark-county-school-district-aims-to-improve-local-schools/>.

⁶ See Brett Barley, New Partnership Network aims to boost student achievement at local campuses, Law Vegas Review-Journal (April 14, 2018), available at <https://www.reviewjournal.com/opinion/commentary-new-partnership-network-aims-to-boost-student-achievement-at-local-campuses/>.

⁷ For additional detail on Texas Partnerships, see [Texas Partnership Guide \(2018-2019\)](#).



role in vetting potential partners at the state level, instead relying on districts and back-end accountability mechanisms.

To identify a turnaround partner, districts are responsible for publishing a call for applications that describes the district's unique needs and priorities as well as the criteria that will be used to evaluate applications. The local school board must approve a partner's application, and the district must negotiate and execute a performance contract with the partner in compliance with the district's local authorizing practices. The Texas Education Agency then reviews the contract to ensure compliance with SB 1882 and the [Texas Partnership Guide \(2018-2019\)](#).

A School Gains a Partner

Midland Texas' Travis Elementary has been a low-performing school for many years. In the 2017-18 school year, just 38 percent of Travis' students passed the Texas STARR exam. Knowing that a change was needed, the Midland Independent School District reached out to IDEA (Individuals Dedicated to Excellence and Achievement) Public Schools to partner in turning around the school.⁸

IDEA was founded in Texas in 2000 with the mission of preparing all students for college success and good citizenship by focusing on small campuses, a rigorous curriculum and academic interventions to help every child flourish. Their results have been extremely impressive. Since IDEA's first graduating class in 2007, 100 percent of seniors have been accepted to college, and three of the IDEA schools located in the Rio Grande Valley were among the top 25 high schools in the state, according to U.S. News & World Report.⁹

Travis will reopen as a charter school run by IDEA in August 2020, with Hailey McCarthy as principal. Ms. McCarthy currently runs IDEA South Flores Academy, a school with similar demographics to Travis but with STARR passage rates of 78 percent (more than twice that of Travis Elementary). In her meetings with Travis parents and the larger community, Ms. McCarthy has promised similar results for the students and families of Midland.¹⁰

⁸ See Gianni Windahl, CBS 7 News, [By August of 2020, Travis Elementary will be a tuition-free charter school](#) (June 12, 2019)

⁹ <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/texas/rankings>

¹⁰ Brandi Allison, mrt.com, [IDEA hosts meeting for Travis parents, community](#) (June 12, 2019)