



SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

Four State Policy Levers for School Turnaround

ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit - 2020

In the 2018-19 school year, 5,664¹ U.S. schools were identified as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), meaning that thousands of students attended schools that performed in the bottom 5% of their state's accountability framework and/or had a graduation rate below 67%.

Across the nation, states, parents, educators, principals and communities work tirelessly to support students within these schools, and many emerging bright spots demonstrate the achievement and growth that is possible. But school turnaround *is* hard—arguably one of the hardest things to do in education. Stakeholders require appropriate state-level guidance and support to enact change.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plans offered states the opportunity to continue existing effective school turnaround strategies and to introduce new innovative practices. This year, state education agencies (SEAs) are well into implementing their ESSA plans, and they have a new opportunity: to step back and reflect on what elements of their school turnaround supports are—and aren't—working.

This brief identifies three recommendations for states to consider that can be implemented across the four main state-level policy levers for supporting school turnaround. It also examines how three states—Wisconsin, Louisiana and New Mexico—are implementing the recommendations.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATES

The three recommendations for states to consider—integration, coherence and guardrails—provide a framework to think about how to strengthen the main state-level policy levers to support school turnaround.

Ensure School Turnaround Funds and Initiatives Are Integrated in Existing Structures and Across Workstreams

Implement one continuous improvement cycle for all districts and schools, with additional requirements for identified schools. Then integrate the grants application and funding process to this continuous improvement cycle across multiple state and federal grant opportunities. This allows districts to complete one thorough needs assessment and align their funding requests to the greatest need(s).

Guarantee There Is Coherence to Select Priorities in Funding and Support

Develop coherence through a department-wide set of priorities and align all funding requirements and supports (such as approved vendors, technical assistance, and training) to these priorities. The priorities should be based in the greatest need for the schools, such as the implementation and support for high-quality curriculum.

Implement Guardrails on Statewide Systems and More Rigorous Turnaround Initiatives

Implement guardrails in the types of providers, turnaround options, and statewide supports that are provided to turnaround schools. Providers must have an evidence-based track record of supporting high-needs schools. Guardrails, however, should not be so restrictive to deter high-quality support providers or innovation within the schools.

¹ [Number of Low-Performing Schools by State](#)



4 STATE-LEVEL POLICY LEVERS TO SUPPORT SCHOOL TURNAROUND

State education agencies have four main policy levers to support school turnaround. SEAs must consider each lever and how it works in tandem with the others to create a comprehensive approach. Pulling too firmly on one, without strengthening the others, however, can result in an incomplete support structure.

Lever 1: Effective Turnaround Options

SEAs should identify strong turnaround options that are based on effective practices and actionable metrics, are clearly defined and provide appropriate choice for school districts within guardrails. And SEAs should consider requiring guidance or incentives for this lever to ensure new or different strategies are taking place within turnaround schools, especially in regard to more rigorous turnaround options such as redesign, charter conversion or closure.

Lever 2: School Turnaround Funding Process

Each state is required to use 7% of their Title I budget for school improvement supports—totaling \$1.1 billion nationally in 2017-18.² These funds have the power to support significant changes for students, but these changes are contingent on *how* the funds are spent. SEAs are increasingly integrating school improvement funds with other initiatives and/or placing guardrails on how districts can spend the funds. This alignment and these guardrails help to ensure that the funds address the true root cause and avoid spreading the funds too thinly across multiple areas, therefore diluting their potential for impact.

Guardrails can also take the form of approved/recommended partners, strategies and programs. States are increasingly shifting to a more rigorous vetting process of partners who can support turnaround work. By creating the vetting process, states can ensure that turnaround providers have the expertise, track record of success, and data expertise necessary to drive transformation. But states must apply balance to guardrails, as not to deter high-quality support or providers from participating.

Lever 3: Turnaround Guidance, Technical Assistance and Monitoring

States can see across their districts and schools to highlight best practices and provide resources that time-strapped district and school leaders may not have the opportunity to find on their own. States can help avoid wasted time and funds by providing a structure of coherence—including concrete guidance, appropriate and aligned trainings across stakeholder groups as well as on the ground support staff to provide feedback loops between policymakers, SEAs and practitioners.

By having a coherent guidance, technical assistance and monitoring plan and *then* taking the time to go to districts and schools, SEAs can help to parse out if a strategy isn't working because it is not the right strategy, it hasn't been given enough time or it isn't being implemented with fidelity.

Lever 4: Statewide Support Systems

The final policy lever can ensure integration options across the previous three. Many states are implementing support networks across their states to provide year-round, tailored support to districts and select schools. These statewide support systems take many different approaches—such as customized support for identified high-schools or turnaround principals. Sometimes mandatory, often up to district choice, these systems provide integrated support and funds around a specific element of turnaround.

² [Department of Education, Grants to Local Education Agencies](#)



STATE SPOTLIGHT: WISCONSIN

Wisconsin's School Turnaround Strategy



Based on stakeholder feedback, Wisconsin has strategically integrated the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) and ESSA's grant applications, continuing support, and monitoring.

Wisconsin's Lever 2 and Lever 3 Focus: Integration

Wisconsin integrates the planning and funding process across IDEA and ESSA. The annual identification for districts and schools designated in need of improvement and schools identified for significant disproportionality happens at the same time. Districts then only complete one high-quality needs assessment with one evidence-based intervention plan.

This plan is a part of, not separate to, the [continuous improvement plan](#) required for all Title I districts and schools. By having school improvement integrated into the comprehensive improvement planning process, districts can all see themselves as part of the continuous improvement cycle. School improvement isn't an "add on" but an authentic part of school support.

Additionally, ongoing technical assistance and guidance, through a combination of both funding sources, is integrated across IDEA and ESSA. Wisconsin contracts with the Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESA) to provide the ongoing supports for both types of identified schools. This streamlined approach allows for deeper root cause reflections, planning and implementation supports, and it also removes the risk of mixed messages being communicated to districts and schools.

Districts and schools have a wide spectrum of requirements placed on them from state and federal laws, policies and requirements. Wisconsin's SEA has taken an important step in creating the integration and helping to remove unnecessary duplication across work.

Key Decision Point
What are the central elements of a continuous improvement plan and grant application?

For the continuous improvement plan and grants application to be integrated, states must collaborate across departments to develop the central elements of the plan and grant application processes.

By having school improvement integrated into the comprehensive improvement planning process, districts can all see themselves as part of the continuous improvement cycle. School improvement isn't an "add on" but an authentic part of school support.



STATE SPOTLIGHT: LOUISIANA

Louisiana's School Turnaround Strategy



Louisiana has taken Wisconsin's integration approach one major step further. There is coherence in priorities and grants across the entire department.

Louisiana's Lever 2 and 4 Focus: Coherence

Louisiana combines all state and federal grants into one application—the [Super App](#). This herculean undertaking began a few years before ESSA and has grown into a department-wide alignment and focus. Districts complete one in-depth needs assessment and aligned grant application. The SEA then awards the grant funds on the back end based on eligibility, requirements and needs. This enables a truly comprehensive and coherent plan to be funded and implemented.

Through this, Louisiana can ensure coherence across all areas of funding and state-provided guidance and supports. CSI or not, schools need to focus on a few foundational elements, starting with instruction.

All teams across the department focus their work around the four planning framework domains (1) Core Academics, (2) Students with Diverse Needs, (3) Workforce Talent and (4) LEA (district) Systems. The focus narrows for Comprehensive Intervention Required (CIR) districts and schools (Louisiana's term for CSI schools) down to:

- 1) High-quality curriculum;
- 2) High-quality professional support for that curriculum;
- 3) High-quality assessments in ELA and Math;
- 4) Building school-based expertise;
- 5) Developing a professional development plan;
- 6) Partnering with postsecondary planning partners to support graduation plans; and
- 7) Partnering with a teacher preparation provider.

Key Decision Point What are the statewide priorities?

In creating a statewide system of priorities, states must consider items that can truly move the needle to impact change. This, however, does mean letting go of items that are also important or rethinking how they align to home in on the priorities.

Especially within turnaround, where there are so many challenges to address, this leadership from the SEA provides a backbone of support and alignment for districts and schools to leverage.

The SEA's statewide supports to CIR schools align to the foundational elements. Across Louisiana 11 field-facing Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) teams provide tailored support to a specific group of Parishes (districts). Having this on the ground contacts, allows the SEA to provide direct guidance and supporting, ensuring a coherence across implementation supports.

Louisiana combines all state and federal grants into one application—the Super App.



Additionally, Louisiana ensures that teachers, leadership teams and vendors are aligned to the LDOE vision and are driving toward the same priority work. Strategically, the SEA invites teacher prep providers to supports offered to CIR schools, like the School Support Institutes. This is to ensure alignment between the universities' expectations of newly certified teachers and priorities they will be expected to focus on once they enter the classroom.

Louisiana's 3 Annual Curriculum-Focused Events

The SEA offers three state-wide, curriculum-focused events throughout the year—the School Support Institutes, Teacher Leader Summit and the Vendor Convening.

• One principal and two members of each school's leadership team attend three days of training on curriculum implementation. Attendees can choose to focus on one of three pathways: observation and feedback, effective common planning or developing building leaders.

School
Support
Institutes



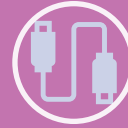
• 7,000 teachers received professional development on curriculum implementation.

Teacher
Leader
Summit



• The vendor convening ensures that all curriculum vendors are in alignment with Louisiana's priorities.

Vendor
Convening



All vendors, both those that attend the Summits and those approved in the Super App, must be located on the SEA's curated list. Vendors must prove that they support implementation of Tier I curriculum and for CIR schools must meet the evidence-based requirements. Having the state curate the list allows for economies of scale to support its districts and schools, removing the burden of each district having to research independently.³

Teacher's now have the curriculum and observations conducted by the LDOE show that teachers are using the curriculum—so the next big step is harnessing the power of common planning time to ensure teachers have the opportunity to unpack the unit and unpack the lesson. The vendor summit helps to create coherence in vendor support, but the SEA feels that it should be even more direct and targeted in what it asks of vendors.

Louisiana's department-wide priorities permeates all areas of their work; ensuring that districts and schools can focus on the items that will result in positive changes for students across the state.

³ The option exists for districts to propose a vendor not on the list, but then the ownership is on the district to conduct the review and show eligibility.



STATE SPOTLIGHT: NEW MEXICO

New Mexico's School Turnaround Strategy

Lever 1
Turnaround Options

Lever 4
Statewide Supports

Providing statewide supports for turnaround schools is an allowable but often underutilized element of ESSA. New Mexico is one of the states that has leveraged this flexibility to provide robust supports that bolster the guardrails it is placing on turnaround options.

New Mexico's Lever 1 and Lever 4 Focus: Guardrails

In New Mexico, all CSI schools are required to select **at least** one of four pathways for intensive improvement⁴:

- NM DASH-Plus (Data, Accountability, Sustainability and High Achievement);

Web-based action planning tool for developing school improvement plans and identifying evidence or research-based interventions

- State-sponsored, school-based interventions;
- High school transformation partnership; and
- Competitive grant application partnership.

The second option—state-sponsored, school-based interventions—provides the option for CSI schools to participate in external partner or state-developed supports. These supports include the University of Virginia Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education, National Institute for School Leadership Executive Development, New Mexico Leadership Innovation Program and Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE). By limiting to partners with proven track records of supporting holistic school turnaround, New Mexico has placed strong guardrails on schoolwide interventions.

PPE, a New Mexico only initiative, focuses on building leadership capacity in schools through multilayered professional learning and coaching. All participating principals receive ongoing coaching and monthly onsite visits. The support focuses on the development of a robust needs assessment as well as annual and 90-day plans to drive the work forward. Superintendents and district leadership also participate in executive education convenings to support the development and implementation work of the turnaround leaders.

Key Decision Point How strict should guardrails be?

States, however, also need to consider the impact of the guardrails and ensure that they are not too stringent as to deter high-quality providers or actions. For example, if a guardrail is time, there is a balance of understanding the time it takes to turnaround a school (between 3-7 years) and implementing a system that imparts a sense of urgency in the work.

By limiting to partners with proven track records of supporting holistic school turnaround, New Mexico has placed strong guardrails on schoolwide interventions.

⁴ [FAQ Regarding CSI, DSS, and Evidence-Based Interventions](#)



Even with robust support structures, school turnaround takes time. By having strong guardrails, the goal is to help ensure that the turnaround can happen and that the strategies are implemented with fidelity. But if a school continues to be identified as CSI, all states have outlined their more rigorous intervention strategies. New Mexico's ESSA plan outlines the following options: (1) closure, (2) restart as a charter, (3) champion and provides choice and (4) significant restructure and redesign.

Getting Districts to Consider All Intervention Strategies

In 2018, all four of the New Mexico schools designated for more rigorous intervention selected to undertake the significant restructure and redesign. New Mexico's four options—(1) closure, (2) restart as a charter, (3) champion and provides choice and (4) significant restructure and redesign—mirror what many other states have selected. And like New Mexico, many other states are also experiencing challenges with supporting districts in electing closure, charter restart or choice.

In Florida, the [Schools of Hope](#) legislation shows an example of how states can encourage districts to invite high-quality charter schools into the turnaround space. Per the legislation, Hope Operators in Florida must: (a) prove student achievement in school as well as college attendance and (b) be in good standing with existing authorizers and finances while (c) serving at risk students. If operators meet these criteria, they are then eligible for additional startup funds and grant opportunities.

Florida's legislation provides a two-fold support. Firstly, it ensures that the charter operators in the turnaround space have the experience and data to demonstrate their successes. Secondly, it gives districts increased peace of mind in selecting the charter conversion option by knowing the quality of the partners who would be coming in.

New Mexico's school turnaround efforts highlight the power of quality and guardrails in supporting school turnaround.

WHAT'S NEXT?

States can look to examples from Wisconsin, Louisiana and New Mexico to learn how states can:

- **Integrate** school turnaround funds and initiatives into existing structures and across workstreams;
- Provide **coherence** to select priorities in funding and support; and
- Implement **guardrails** on statewide systems and rigorous turnaround initiatives to improve student outcomes.

If you have questions about school turnaround policies in your state, please contact Adriana@ExcelinEd.org.