

Deep Dive into Principle #4 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems



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.

THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

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Suggested Citation:

Council of Chief State School Officers and EducationCounsel. 2018. *Deep Dive into Principle #4 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems*. Washington, DC.

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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.	<i>If everything's a priority, nothing is.</i>
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.	<i>Put students at the center so that every student succeeds.</i>
3	Engage early, regularly, and authentically with stakeholders and partners so improvement is done <i>with</i> and not <i>to</i> the school, families, and the community. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<i>If you want to go far, go together.</i>
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.	<i>One size does not fit all.</i>
5	Support LEAs and schools in designing high-quality school improvement plans informed by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<i>Failing to plan is planning to fail.</i>
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.	<i>Talent matters.</i>
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.	<i>Put your money where your mouth is.</i>
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.	<i>What gets measured gets done.</i>
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.	<i>Ideas are only as good as they are implemented.</i>
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.	<i>Don't be a flash in the pan.</i>

Introduction

That's at the core of equity: understanding who your kids are and how to meet their needs. You are still focused on outcomes, but the path to get there may not be the same for each one.

—Pedro Noguera

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasizes the flexibility at the heart of Principle #4. The previous federal approach required school improvement plans to adopt one of four pre-determined school improvement models. Under ESSA, by contrast, state education agencies (SEAs), local education agencies (LEAs), schools, and stakeholders can now reflect on what has and has not worked within their local context and then select school improvement strategies that are tailored to the specific needs of identified schools and their LEAs. This shift provides valuable opportunities to increase the responsiveness, effectiveness, and sustainability of school improvement efforts, but it introduces new risks as well. For example, SEAs must guard against replacing “one size fits all” with “anything goes.” Doing so would both ignore what we know about effective school improvement efforts and minimize SEAs’ critical role in, and responsibility for, improving outcomes for students enrolled in comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) and targeted support and improvement (TSI) schools.

To strike the right balance, SEA, LEA, and school leaders must start with a clear vision of what conditions enable students to succeed, clearly articulate a theory of action for how improvement actually occurs, and share an understanding of the SEA, LEA, and school roles in executing their theories of action (see [Principle #1](#)). With those foundations in place, decisions must then be informed by a deep understanding for the relevant context. High-quality, comprehensive **needs assessments** of schools and LEAs (and even the capacity and effectiveness of SEAs) can surface existing and historical data, assets, gaps, and trends. Then, decision makers at each level must work to continuously integrate the general vision and the specific results of these assessments to drive improvement for students.

Based on its theory of action, the results of thorough needs assessments, and the available “tools” in its state-level toolbox, each SEA should consider a broad **continuum of strategies for supporting school improvement**. The table in Figure 1 below illustrates some but not all possible strategies to consider, along with a brief description and some real-world examples. The table is organized roughly in order of increasing **degrees of state involvement**. It is important to note, however, that there are other, equally valid ways of enumerating and grouping strategies. For example, SEAs might also consider the following two approaches when considering the best fit for a particular context or challenge.

- SEA-level strategies also exist on a continuum of **scale**, from (i) interventions targeted at individual schools to (ii) networks or zones that work with clusters of schools both within an LEA or across multiple LEAs to (iii) whole-district reform models.

- Another continuum exists from **improving to replacing**, with (i) strategies focused on improving identified schools on one end; (ii) on the other end, strategies that emphasize moving students from struggling schools to better options, whether via school choice, new school pipelines, charter restarts, and/or closure; and (iii) along the middle of the continuum, various portfolio strategies that blend the two.

Regardless of how options are organized, SEAs manifesting Principle #4 will make different choices under different sets of circumstances and/or during different phases of the school improvement process (e.g., initial improvement efforts versus taking more rigorous action for non-exiting CSI schools). Additionally, SEAs may assume different postures for the same strategy, sometimes *requiring* it and other times *incentivizing* LEAs or schools to opt in.

Figure 1: Continuum of Strategies to Support School Improvement

Strategy	Description	Example(s)
Support for Locally Driven Turnaround	SEA supports locally designed and driven improvement efforts without providing LEAs/schools with additional authorities.	MA (School Redesign Grants); NC (TALAS)
Required Actions Within Locally Driven Turnaround	SEA maintains LEA supervision of improvement efforts but requires particular actions to be taken (e.g., change in school leadership).	Various
Network Participation	SEA maintains LEA leadership but supports school/LEA participation in a networked school improvement community.	CO (Turnaround Network)
Turnaround or Innovation Zone	SEA maintains LEA control but grants the LEA or certain schools more authority or autonomy to support their improvement work. Participation in these zones may be conditioned on taking certain actions or meeting certain benchmarks.	TN (Memphis iZone); CT (Commissioner's Network)
Partnership Zone	SEA partners with an LEA to support a cluster of schools that remain in the LEA but are managed by a new, independent board with more authority or autonomy to support the improvement work.	MA (Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership)
SEA Takeover of Schools	SEA takes over governance of qualifying low-performing schools, typically as part of a state-run school district or with the support of a receiver or external partner (e.g., a charter management organization).	LA (Recovery School District); TN (Achievement School District)
Mayoral Control	SEA shifts governance of LEA from local school board to mayor, often with additional authorities to support improvement plans.	Various (e.g., New York; Cleveland)
SEA Takeover of LEA	SEA takes over governance responsibility for LEA, typically through a receivership or state appointment of board members.	MA (Lawrence Public Schools)

Two documents served as important sources for constructing and populating this continuum: the Center for Reinventing Public Education report, [Measures of Last Resort: Assessing Strategies for State-Initiated Turnarounds](#) (December 2016), and a Center on School Turnaround presentation in January 2017 at a CCSSO meeting on improving persistently low-performing schools.

Two themes that appear throughout the list of strategies in Figure 1 warrant additional consideration:

- Many of the strategies involve changes in **governance**. Although governance provides a mechanism for catalyzing improvement, it is not an improvement strategy in and of itself. Much depends on what new leaders are ready, willing, and able to accomplish once they assume control. It is also critical that SEAs understand the problem they are solving for—in other words, before making a particular governance change, SEA should account for whether the status quo has been driven by the existing governance model's *unwillingness* and/or *inability* to make the changes needed to improve student outcomes (see [Principle #2](#) for more on questioning the status quo). That diagnosis—aided by the needs assessments discussed above—should inform the ultimate selection of the strategy that best matches the context.
- Another common theme relates to the fact that SEAs, LEAs, and schools sometimes struggle to improve because they lack certain **authorities** to alter conditions or implement new strategies at the LEA and/or school level. In other instances, the authorities exist, but there is a lack of awareness, will, or capacity to take advantage of them. Some of the authorities commonly leveraged as part of effective school improvement efforts include the ability to adjust:
 - o Length of the school day and/or year;
 - o Budgeting processes and resource allocation;
 - o Collective bargaining agreements or other policies governing staffing;
 - o School or district leadership;
 - o Authority of the local school board; or
 - o Additional state or local policies and procedures (e.g., procurement).

These are by no means the only critical improvement drivers, but SEAs should consider whether these authorities are necessary and available to whomever is driving the improvement effort for a particular context. As SEAs consider their available options, as well as others not mentioned in this discussion, one critical step is to make sure the chosen strategy will provide the appropriate leaders with the needed authority and capacity.

Principle #4 holds that states will be most successful in this work if they avoid a “one size fits all” mentality and instead carefully select the strategy that best matches the context at hand. Finally, as emphasized throughout all ten principles, SEAs must also establish the expectations, requirements, incentives, and supports needed for LEAs and schools to manifest Principle #4 in their own decision making about school improvement.



Questions To Ask Yourself

1. Which approaches in the **continuum** presented above (or others not included) are you currently using, whether for newly identified or non-exiting schools? Which new strategies are you willing and able to implement?
2. To the extent you pursue strategies that reflect **greater state involvement** (e.g., SEA takeover of an LEA) or place an emphasis on **replacement** (e.g., chartering), how are you building the capacity, political capital, and stakeholder support at each level of the system involved?
3. Have you reviewed existing state laws and policies to identify the **full range of tools in your toolbox**? Are there additional authorities you should seek (including the ability to grant additional authorities to others)?
4. Are there ways to **leverage the possibility of more direct SEA action** (e.g., an achievement school district or LEA receivership) to inspire more urgent and effective improvement efforts?
5. Given your theory of action about school improvement, where in the school improvement process should you be more **"tight"** and where should you be more **"loose"** (e.g., a statewide needs assessment but *open-ended* guidelines for the content of improvement plans)?
6. Even in areas where you defer to local control or empower local decision making, how can your SEA's templates, processes, rubrics, and other resources **"nudge"** local leaders toward decisions that align with your theory of action? How can you help LEAs and schools avoid adopting one-size-fits-all approaches themselves, or just doing what they have always done?
7. What **capacity** do you need to build at the SEA or through partners to effectively support your chosen strategy or strategies? How can you take the best advantage of the additional capacity available through regional service agencies, regional educational laboratories (RELs), comprehensive centers (CCs), and others?
8. What is your **process for matching** particular LEAs/schools to particular strategies? How does your process account for whether the particular actor (whether SEA, LEA, school, receiver, or other partner) has the capacity to execute the given strategy and take advantage of any accompanying autonomies? Are there lessons you can learn from prior school improvement efforts to maximize the fit between context, need, capacity, and approach?
9. How are you ensuring your **technical assistance** system and any partner providers are aligned with a one-size-does-not-fit-all approach? In delivering these supports, how will you account for differences in LEA and school capacity, results of LEA- and school-level needs assessments, prior improvement successes and setbacks, the number/percentage of an LEA's schools that are identified for improvement, and other factors?

10. How are you ensuring LEAs/schools conduct high-quality, comprehensive **needs assessments**? What requirements, resources, and support can you provide so the assessments surface root causes for underperformance, as well as both gaps and assets beyond the school building?¹
11. If you design a **statewide or model needs assessment**, is it aligned to your theory of action about what causes low performance and what conditions for learning are most important to establish?
12. To what extent is your SEA **reducing the burden on LEAs/schools** conducting needs assessments by pre-populating as much data as is available to the SEA?
13. How are you ensuring LEAs/schools **draw explicit connections** between the results of their needs assessments and the improvement plans they develop?
14. How are you helping LEAs/schools avoid taking a “one size fits all” approach to **selecting evidence-based interventions**? (See [Principle #5](#) for more information about making wise selections.)
15. Do your school improvement processes and deadlines allow for sufficient time, between identifying schools and reviewing/approving plans, for LEAs and schools to complete a comprehensive needs assessment and then use the results to inform plan development? Will you allow for (and how will you support) a **planning year**?
16. In addition to the federally required school-level needs assessment for all CSI schools, are you requiring or supporting **needs assessments for TSI schools**? District-level assessments for LEAs with schools identified as CSI and/or TSI?



State Spotlights

As the continuum of approaches chart makes clear, states like **Massachusetts** and **Tennessee** have leveraged a number of different strategies to drive school improvement, especially for non-exiting schools. Additional state spotlights, including existing approaches as well as new ones developed under ESSA, appear below.



Colorado is adopting the [ESSA Application for School Improvement \(EASI\) Funds and Services](#), a streamlined, single application process for accessing a variety of school improvement opportunities and supports. The EASI process is intended to help schools and LEAs more efficiently access the resources they need for improvement by following a need-based approach that helps the SEA thoughtfully match schools’ or LEAs’ needs with Colorado’s full continuum of school improvement approaches including networks, grant opportunities, support models, and other “rigorous evidence-based strategies.”

¹ See the first two “Recommended Resources” at the end of this Deep Dive for more information on high-quality needs assessments.



New York elevates the role of needs assessments in driving customized improvement plans by using them both as an initial diagnostic tool and as a tool to monitor improvement progress during implementation. The diagnostic looks at the school and the LEA and combines the SEA's research-based [Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness \(DTSDE\)](#), a review of state-specified data indicators, and a resource audit. The progress assessment consists of a review of the school improvement plan implementation, an updated review of data (to compare to the prior year), an updated resource audit (same), and a review of survey results from parents, teachers, and staff. CSI schools that do not show enough progress by the third year of identification will be required to conduct a new diagnostic to inform additional interventions and support (pp. 83-93, 100 of [ESSA Plan](#)).²



Recognizing that any new tool often requires tweaking to be most effective, **South Dakota** chose to pilot its needs assessment with a group of schools likely to be identified for comprehensive support. Throughout the pilot, the SEA received feedback from the LEA and schools, allowing SEA staff to continue to hone the needs assessment. At the same time, the iterative process built LEA and school awareness, preparation, and buy-in for the needs assessment component of the school improvement process. The self-reflective nature of the assessment has thus far helped participating schools look beyond standardized test scores and examine more deeply their instructional practices.



Illinois uses a self-assessment process to guide LEAs' and schools' needs assessments using the Illinois Balanced Accountability Measure (IBAM) Quality Framework Rubric. The framework helps schools and LEAs identified for improvement determine specific areas for growth and is a requirement for CSI schools and LEAs wishing to partner with providers in the [IL-EMPOWER](#) network. The information from comprehensive needs assessments that use multiple data sources is used to help guide a matching process between LEAs and the providers vetted and approved by the SEA. By allowing schools and LEAs to identify their needs and by providing a high-quality pool of potential providers to meet those needs, the SEA hopes to disrupt the existing mindset of SEA-mandated interventions. This process also ensures that schools and LEAs identified for improvement will partner with effective providers and empowers them to choose the provider that best fits their context.



As part of an effort to differentiate the SEA's supports to LEAs and schools identified for improvement, **Oregon** is using a Readiness and Screening Protocol to determine an LEA's readiness to engage in the improvement process. This protocol will allow both the SEA and LEA to gain a better, data-informed understanding of the local context, will support the development of improvement priorities, and will guide further diagnostic review before creating an improvement plan. The Readiness and Screening Protocol will also inform the SEA-LEA relationship in the improvement process, so SEA supports best match LEA needs. The SEA-LEA relationship may take on a variety of forms and intensities ranging from a formal SEA-LEA improvement partnership to SEA technical assistance on select topics to the SEA monitoring schools identified for improvement within an LEA (pp. 56-57 of [ESSA plan](#)).³

² New York State Department of Education. 2017. *Consolidated state plan for The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Albany, NY.

³ Oregon Department of Education. 2017. *Oregon's consolidated state plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Salem, OR: Author.

Supporting Targeted Support and Improvement Schools

- Differentiated approaches may be particularly important in the TSI context** because TSI schools may differ in significant ways. Some may have a single consistently underperforming subgroup but otherwise are high-performing. Others may just miss being identified overall as a CSI school in the bottom 5% but have multiple subgroups that nevertheless place the school on the TSI list. Although both schools must improve the relevant subgroups' performance, the type and intensity of SEA and LEA support needed may be quite different. Similarly, differences at the LEA level—including the number and percentage of CSI/TSI schools in the district, internal LEA capacity, commitment to equity for all subgroups of students—may also require customized approaches.
- LEAs and schools must also **resist considering student subgroups as monoliths** that can benefit from the same supports and interventions. This is rarely if ever the case, especially for students with disabilities and English learners. For example, a TSI school focused on English learners may need different approaches for a newcomer who has had an interrupted formal education, an English learner who also has an IEP, and a child born in the United States but whose family does not speak English at home.
- There may be an impulse to focus all improvement efforts directly on the identified subgroup(s), but SEAs, LEAs, and schools should **examine whether school- or LEA-wide systemic issues are actually driving the underperformance**. There may be "tier 1" improvements that can be made to benefit all students—including the identified subgroups—before jumping to "tier 2" or "tier 3" interventions, which may reduce those students' time learning with their peers.
- ESSA does not explicitly require **needs assessments for TSI schools**, as it does for CSI schools. That said, there is nothing preventing SEAs from requiring, supporting, and/or incentivizing school- and LEA-level needs assessments to inform TSI school improvement planning. SEAs pursuing this should not, however, assume their CSI needs assessment will automatically be appropriate for surfacing the root causes of subgroup underperformance in TSI schools.



Common Mistakes

Don't always start with a blank slate. SEAs should not misread the push to contextualize improvement plans as a claim that we do not know anything about the critical conditions and components of successful school improvement efforts. Principle #4 is about matching the right approach to the right context, not necessarily starting over from scratch with each identified school.

Don't do the same thing over and over again expecting different results. One risk about ESSA's approach to school improvement is that even with more freedom to innovate and contextualize, SEAs, LEAs, and schools will default back to their existing approaches (even ones that have not moved the needle on student achievement). SEAs must plan how to mitigate this risk before granting new flexibility.

Don't see everything as a nail just because you only have a hammer. The prior federal law may have driven much of the one-size-fits-all mentality for school improvement, but it was not the only cause. SEAs need to thoroughly understand what tools are in their toolbox and, if necessary, seek additional tools to ensure a more customized approach is possible and more likely to succeed.



Recommended Resources

[Using Needs Assessments for School and District Improvement, A Tactical Guide](#), developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd (2017), highlights the key elements SEAs and LEAs should focus on when developing and using their school improvement needs assessment. This guide details ESSA needs assessment requirements, the role of a needs assessment in the school improvement process, and key areas for consideration. It also includes worksheets to guide SEAs and LEAs through the process.

[Needs Assessments Survey Options](#), developed by the Cross-State High School Collaborative at the Everyone Graduates Center (2018), outlines 11 different surveys that SEAs (and their LEAs and schools) might consider including in their needs assessments. The resource describes where each survey is used, what it measures, the necessary logistics, and points of contact to learn more.

[Measures of Last Resort: Assessing Strategies for State Initiated Turnaround](#), by Ashley Jochim and the Center on Reinventing Public Education (2016), aims to help SEAs ensure their support is “more targeted, better received, and ultimately, more effective” as they set out to develop and implement new school improvement processes under ESSA. This report highlights a variety of mechanisms to consider when engaging in state-initiated improvement efforts, often but not exclusively for non-exiting schools. The report draws on lessons from eight states’ turnaround efforts, and explores five common state-led turnaround approaches.

[ESSA Leverage Points: 50-State Report on Promising Practices for Using Evidence to Improve Student Outcomes](#), published by Results for America (2017), analyzes all the state ESSA plans to evaluate the extent to which each state takes advantage of the [13 Leverage Points in ESSA](#) identified by Results for America to drive strong evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement practices. Leverage Point #8's focus on needs assessments is particularly relevant to Principle #4.



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