

## Deep Dive into Principle #1 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems



### 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's a priority, nothing is.*

## 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. <http://ccsso.org/>

## EDUCATIONCOUNSEL

EducationCounsel is a mission-driven education consulting firm that works with leading nonprofit organizations, foundations, and policymakers to help significantly improve education opportunity and outcomes. We do this by leveraging policy, strategy, law, and advocacy to help transform education systems, from early learning to K12 to higher education. We work with partners at the state, federal, and local levels to advance evidence-based innovations and systems change, with a central focus on equity. <http://www.educationcounsel.com/>

### Suggested Citation:

Council of Chief State School Officers and EducationCounsel. 2018. *Deep Dive into Principle #1 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems*. Washington, DC.

## COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

Carey Wright (Mississippi), President

Carissa Moffat Miller, Interim Executive Director

One Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20001-1431

Phone (202) 336-7000 • Fax (202) 408-8072 • [www.ccsso.org](http://www.ccsso.org)



© 2018 CCSSO. *Deep Dive into Principle #1 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems* is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

<b>1</b>	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.	<b><i>If everything's a priority, nothing is.</i></b>
<b>2</b>	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.	<b><i>Put students at the center so that every student succeeds.</i></b>
<b>3</b>	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"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>	<b><i>If you want to go far, go together.</i></b>
<b>4</b>	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.	<b><i>One size does not fit all.</i></b>
<b>5</b>	Support LEAs and schools in designing high-quality school improvement plans informed by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• each school's assets (and how they're being used), needs (including but not limited to resources), and root causes of underperformance;</li> <li>• research on effective schools, successful school improvement efforts, and implementation science;</li> <li>• best available evidence of what interventions work, for whom, under which circumstances; and</li> <li>• the science of learning and development, including the impact of poverty and adversity on learning.</li> </ul>	<b><i>Failing to plan is planning to fail.</i></b>
<b>6</b>	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.	<b><i>Talent matters.</i></b>
<b>7</b>	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.	<b><i>Put your money where your mouth is.</i></b>
<b>8</b>	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.	<b><i>What gets measured gets done.</i></b>
<b>9</b>	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.	<b><i>Ideas are only as good as they are implemented.</i></b>
<b>10</b>	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.	<b><i>Don't be a flash in the pan.</i></b>

## Introduction

*Priorities are fragile and high-maintenance. Without frequent, repeated clarification, we start to drift from them. The priorities inevitably start to mean different things to different people. If priorities aren't incessantly simplified and clarified, they are always at the mercy of the next new thing, our natural forgetfulness, and . . . the encroachment of new, but less effective, practices or programs.*

—Mike Schmoker, *Focus*<sup>1</sup>

At every level of the public education system, leaders must identify, champion, pursue, and sustain their key priorities. Nowhere is this more important than in the context of improving our lowest-performing schools and schools with the lowest-performing student subgroups. This work is always hard. It is often resource-intensive. At times it may even require destabilizing changes to the status quo. For all of these reasons, state chiefs must elevate school improvement as an urgent priority and lead their state education agency (SEA, also referred to in this document as “state”) and all of their stakeholders to do what is needed to deliver better, more equitable outcomes for the students currently enrolled in these schools.

This is a natural role for chiefs, who are “uniquely positioned to create urgency, galvanize state action, and instill optimism in educators and other stakeholders that significant progress can be accomplished through their collective efforts” ([Leading for Equity](#), p. 4).<sup>2</sup> To do this well, though, chiefs must do more than generate urgency—they must also harness it across all levels in support of a *vision* for what is possible and a clear *theory of action* for how to realize it. Indeed, states can only be successful with school improvement if there is a shared understanding of what each person and organization in (and out of) the system are responsible for and the supports available to help them succeed.

In other words, chiefs must prepare their teams, districts, schools, and stakeholders for an improvement effort that needs to be sustained over time and possibly through state political transitions. Leading authorities on change management commonly point to elements including the following three as critical to effectively elevating a key priority and launching an improvement effort:

1. Set a clear vision and measurable goals to achieve that vision. Make sure stakeholders and those responsible for doing the work are aligned behind the vision and committed to achieving it.
2. Decide what needs to be changed by taking stock of current internal processes and systems to determine what is advancing and what is impeding progress.

<sup>1</sup> Schmoker, M. J. 2011. *Focus: Elevating the essentials to radically improve student learning*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

<sup>2</sup> The Aspen Education & Society Program and the Council of Chief State School Officers. 2017. *Leading for equity: Opportunities for state education chiefs*. Washington, DC: Authors.

3. Communicate the necessary changes—including the associated rationale, benefits, and costs—to all individuals in the organization and key stakeholders beyond it. Listen and respond to concerns.

Although each state will approach this work according to its chief’s personal leadership style, the state’s theory of action, and state/local political contexts, this Deep Dive shares some specific, concrete considerations to keep in mind while elevating school improvement as an urgent priority.



## Questions To Ask Yourself

1. Have you created a **shared vision and sense of urgency with key state-level leaders** (e.g., governor, key state legislators, state board of education)?
2. Have you articulated and shared widely the **theory of action** that drives your approach to school improvement? Can you show how your systems, plans, and budget have been **aligned** to that theory of action?
3. Have you clarified in writing the **division of roles and responsibilities** for school improvement within the SEA and also among the SEA, local education agencies (LEAs), and schools?
4. Is there a **school improvement lead** who wakes up every day focused on executing your vision for school improvement? Does this person report directly to you and have the necessary authority and resources to elicit needed information and make necessary changes? How are you ensuring this person effectively collaborates with other SEA offices?
5. At the same time, how are you **ensuring that all members of your team are invested in improving these schools**? What processes are in place to maintain individual and collective focus on this priority?
6. To what extent is your state’s approach known by key **stakeholders** throughout the system and are stakeholders aware of how their input informed this approach? How have you engaged stakeholders and put structures or feedback loops in place to continue to engage them through implementation?
7. Does your **strategic plan** specifically prioritize school improvement?
8. What is your **communications strategy** to effectively and proactively share your vision, raise awareness and build support? For example, are you elevating school improvement as a priority in your public remarks such as your **State of the State address** or **testimony** in oversight hearings? Is it consistently featured in your communications with superintendents and school leaders? Are you meeting regularly with members of the media to discuss your plan and also maintain realistic expectations for success?

9. What “real estate” does school improvement occupy on your SEA’s **website**? Can visitors to your website easily locate information about school improvement?
10. Are you allocating a significant portion of **your own time** to this work? For example, does your **school visit schedule** reflect the importance you are placing on school improvement? How often are you **receiving updates** or **engaging with stakeholders** on school improvement efforts compared to other strategic priorities?
11. Have you **identified specific practices or initiatives the state will stop doing** to help focus on school improvement as a priority?



## State Spotlights



Last year, schools in **Mississippi** that received the lowest annual rating were required to present their improvement plans to (and get approval from) a state panel that included representatives from multiple offices. Over the course of two months, SEA staff held 120 of these review panels, asked hard questions to district and school teams, and pushed for revisions to strengthen the plans. (The presentation template is available [here](#).) Additionally, the superintendent and her executive leadership team held interviews with six school improvement grant recipients, establishing a review protocol that will be used going forward.

This process also helped surface common challenges facing schools that the state could begin addressing and even some areas of disconnect across SEA departments that were impeding progress. For example, the reviews helped the state realize that, despite prior efforts to publicize the SEA’s on-demand professional learning supports, the LEAs and schools that could most benefit were not aware of the help available to them. Perhaps most of all, the direct involvement and substantial time commitment of the chief and her senior team reinforced for leaders at all levels how much school improvement is a priority for the state.

Other ways that Mississippi is elevating school improvement as a priority include



### COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT AND IMPROVEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

SEPTEMBER 2017

#### School Has Primary Responsibility

- ❑ Complete comprehensive needs assessment to determine root cause(s) focus areas: Achievement, Fiscal and Human Resources, Instructional Capacity, Early Warning Mechanisms, Multi-Tiered System of Support Implementation effectiveness
- ❑ Develop plan to address identified areas and resource inequities; must be board approved and aligned with Title I Schoolwide Plan; document plan and implementation progress in Indistar (MS SOARS); all activities in plan must be based on the required levels of evidence (Strong, Moderate, Promising)
- ❑ Create a school leadership team to regularly address progress toward areas causing underperformance
- ❑ Reserve 20% of its Title I allocation to support evidence-based interventions for areas causing underperformance (all activities must be based on the required levels of evidence (Strong, Moderate, Promising))
- ❑ Present monthly progress update on plan implementation to District Leadership team and local school board (must be a standing item on the District Leadership Team and School Board Agenda)

#### District Has Primary Responsibility

- ❑ Review and provide feedback on plan prior to submitting for board approval (Instructional and Fiscal Review)
- ❑ Track progress of school, quarterly, to ensure fidelity to plan implementation
- ❑ Ensure district leadership team engages schools in professional learning through collaborative discussions on current and relevant achievement data, school culture/climate, and instructional decisions
- ❑ Conduct end-of-year summative review of school’s progress for the school year (may be revised once accountability results provided in the subsequent year)
- ❑ Establish and regularly engage P16 Community Engagement Council (Monthly) - *school or district level*

#### MDE Has Primary Responsibility

- ❑ Approve, monitor, and review plan
- ❑ Funding to support evidence-based interventions for improving student achievement
- ❑ Provide technical assistance as requested/needed; (Level 1-provide face to face job-embedded coaching support; Level 2-provided virtual coaching support)
- ❑ Provide professional development that is focused on key areas for improvement/aligned to comprehensive needs assessment areas (Quarterly regional leadership meetings and webinars) – **participation required**

Figure 1

- Dedicating a section (“Goal 6”) of the state’s [strategic plan](#);<sup>3</sup>
- Articulating a clear theory of action in its [ESSA plan](#) (p. 32);<sup>4</sup>
- Codifying in straightforward, bulleted lists who is primarily responsible for what across the SEA, LEA, and school (see Figure 1; p. 35-36 of [ESSA plan](#));<sup>5</sup> and
- Using disaggregated data to draw attention to low-performing subgroups in otherwise high-performing schools to broaden support for school improvement.



**Tennessee** has established a new Office of School Improvement to oversee the state’s school improvement work. To avoid creating a silo effect, the office sits within the commissioner’s office atop the organizational chart to help it work across divisions. Further, the commissioner has made it clear that school improvement must be a priority for *all* SEA departments and staff. For example, at the SEA’s most recent leadership retreat, each department director was asked to reflect on what it would look like and what it would take to allocate 20 percent of their time to supporting identified schools and their students. As part of the SEA’s performance management system, every division will include SMART goals relating to supporting the state’s efforts to improve the lowest performing schools, state special schools, and the Achievement School District.

Other ways that Tennessee is elevating school improvement as a priority include

- Dedicating a section of the state’s [strategic plan](#) (the “All Means All” priority area);<sup>6</sup>
- Articulating a clear theory of action (see Figure 2; p. 111-112 of [ESSA plan](#));<sup>7</sup>
- Identifying for comprehensive support and improvement any school performing in the bottom 5 percent, not just the Title I schools required by ESSA; and
- Articulating a detailed school improvement strategy that makes clear the support structures and accountability mechanisms for schools in need of improvement (p. 106-132 of [ESSA plan](#)).<sup>8</sup>

3 Mississippi Board of Education. 2016. *5-Year strategic plan 2016-2020*. Jackson, MS: Author.

4 Mississippi Department of Education. 2017. *Mississippi consolidated state plan: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Jackson, MS: Author.

5 Ibid.

6 Tennessee Department of Education. 2015. *Tennessee succeeds*. Nashville, TN: Author.

7 Tennessee Department of Education. 2017. *Tennessee consolidated state plan: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Nashville, TN: Author.

8 Ibid.

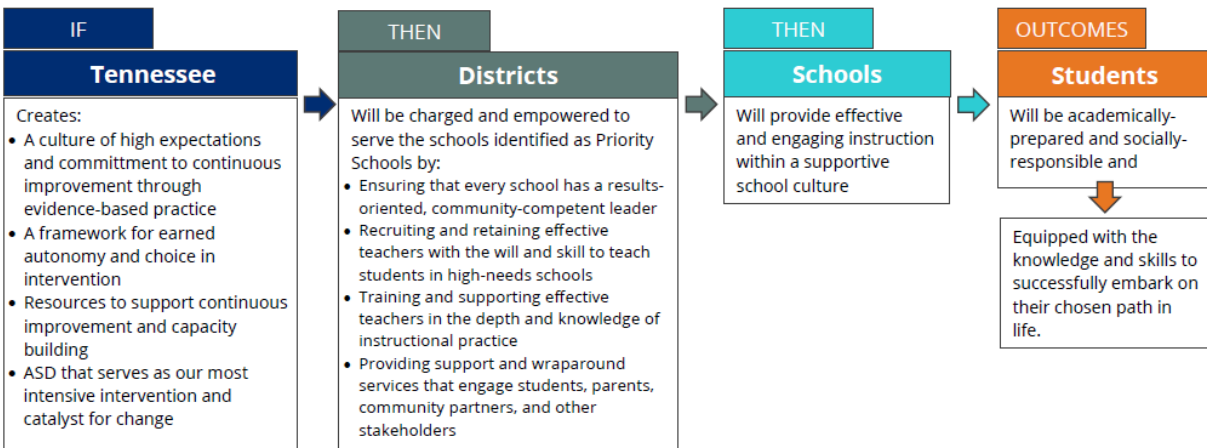


Figure 2

## Supporting Targeted Support and Improvement Schools

While acting on Principle #1, states will have to grapple with **whether and how to prioritize CSI and TSI schools differently**. Because ESSA places most of the legal responsibility for CSI on states and for TSI on LEAs, there is an argument for chiefs and their teams to elevate CSI as *the* key state priority. Yet the moral and economic imperatives apply equally to supporting low-performing students in TSI schools. The question then becomes whether elevating both CSI and TSI improvement as equal key priorities sets the state up for doing neither well.

Ultimately, states will resolve this tension in different ways especially because there is a

continuum of how they might prioritize TSI relative to CSI. To work through the potential trade-offs, a state should

- Use available data to estimate the likely magnitude of its CSI and TSI lists;
- Make an honest assessment of the state’s capacity, resources, and leverage (especially to affect change in TSI schools); and
- Think creatively about potential sources of currently untapped capacity (e.g., school leaders in the state who have had success with similar subgroups of students).





## Common Mistakes

**Don't cordon off school improvement** in a silo within the SEA. It is not a “boutique” initiative but must instead be the responsibility of all parts of the system.

**Don't underestimate the role of LEAs** when defining the school improvement challenge and articulating everyone's roles, including LEAs' influence on the past (contributing to the schools' underperformance), the present (setting the conditions for improvement), and the future (sustaining gains once state support, attention, and resources are reduced after schools meet exit criteria).

**Don't exaggerate the success of the status quo**, unless there is solid evidence that existing school improvement approaches under SIG or ESEA Flexibility are working (or are truly poised to).

**Don't exaggerate the potential of the new strategies**, which will need time to be identified, planned, implemented, improved, and sustained. Promises of quick fixes may stir more excitement in the short term but are unlikely to build lasting buy-in and commitment.



## Recommended Resources

[Sustainability Rubric](#), a self-assessment tool produced by the Reform Support Network (2015), was designed to “help SEAs assess the sustainability of a specific priority reform” such as school improvement, with guiding questions and “look-fors” across 20 elements. (A summary version is available [here](#).) This tool is also directly relevant to several other principles (especially #7 through #10).

[The Power of Persuasion: A Model for Effective Political Leadership by State Chiefs](#), by Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim of the Center for Reinventing Public Education (2017), provides concrete recommendations for chiefs to “make a difference by wielding their powers strategically, to build coalitions and persuade others.”

[For Equity-Oriented State Leaders: 9 Ideas for Stimulating School Improvement Under ESSA](#), by Craig Jerald, Kati Haycock, and Allison Rose Socol of The Education Trust (2017), identifies nine ideas for states to consider as they design their systems of school improvement. EdTrust's ideas align with and implicate several of CCSSO's 10 principles, but the brief is particularly relevant to Principle #1.

The change management literature may inform efforts to manifest Principle #1, from John Kotter's seminal 1996 article, [Leading Change](#) (updated in 2012 [here](#)), to books such as [Switch](#) by Chip and Dan Heath (2010).



One Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20001-1431  
voice: 202.336.7000 | fax: 202.408.8072