Deep Dive into Principle #2 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems

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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.

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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.	*If everything's a priority, nothing is.*
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.*
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.*
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.*
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.*
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.*
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.*
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.*
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.*
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.*

Expert teachers believe that all students can reach the success criteria. Such an expectation requires teachers to believe that intelligence is changeable rather than fixed. It requires teachers to have high respect for their students and to sow a passion that all can indeed attain success.

—John Hattie, Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning[1]

[Y]ou would not rely on outdated tools to confront new challenges and opportunities. The first step in responding would be to emancipate your thinking from ossified mantras long enough to simply ask: Given the tools and resources available, what are the smartest, most promising ways to answer the challenges?

—Rick Hess, The Same Thing Over and Over[2]

Principle #2 comprises two related but distinct components that must both be addressed by states to design truly student-centered school improvement systems.

First, states must set high expectations for all students and ensure adults throughout the system believe that each and every child is capable of meeting those expectations, especially students enrolled in CSI schools and those in TSI schools' low-performing subgroups. There is an increasing understanding of the powerful effect an adult's expectations for a student has on that student's progress and achievement. One study found that "teacher expectations were more predictive of college success than many major factors, including student motivation and student effort" ([Boser, Wilhelm, and Hanna, 2014](#)).[3] Too often, adults' expectations are markedly lower for students of color and low-income students.[4] Because these groups of students are typically overrepresented in CSI schools and are the focus of improvement efforts in TSI schools, low expectations and low performance can combine to form a vicious cycle that exacerbates achievement and opportunity gaps. Countering these dynamics must be part of any effective state system of school improvement. This will require making both adaptive, cultural changes as well as practice and policy shifts including (i) adopting a definition of student success that includes the *full* range of knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed in the modern world, and (ii) ensuring students in low-performing schools have access to the rigorous coursework and opportunities essential to mastering them.

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1   Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning.* London: Routledge.

2   Hess, R. (2010). *The same thing over and over: How school reformers get stuck in yesterday's ideas.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

3   Boser, U., Wilhelm, M., & Hanna, R. (2014). *The power of the pygmalion effect: Teachers expectations strongly predict college completion* (Rep.). Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.

4   Ibid.

Second, states must ensure the school improvement system's policies, practices, and resources are all designed to help these students graduate ready for postsecondary success, even if that means challenging and changing the status quo. With some important exceptions, most existing school improvement systems have not yielded the dramatic improvements we need for students in low-performing schools. To meet this moment of increased authority over school improvement, states must overcome any inertia or pull toward politically palatable status quo approaches. They must instead carefully consider what new approaches are necessary to help meet the needs, interests, and abilities of each child, including addressing the effects of adversity on learning and development. Because low-performance is often the manifestation of some inequity or other systemic problem, addressing the root cause(s) will likely require unearthing and addressing deeply-embedded policies and practices. This work may call for changes both big (e.g., making changes in governance for a persistently struggling LEA) and small (e.g., providing technical assistance to help LEAs braid state and federal funding sources to implement an evidence-based intervention).

States considering this component of Principle #2 will likely have to overcome two challenges. First, leading a change process is always hard, but it can be especially difficult when it involves unwinding deeply-held assumptions and changing the way people must approach their work. Second and perhaps more challenging, states will have to guard against the natural inclination to believe they are already truly putting students at the center of their decision making. For Principle #2 to have any real impact on student outcomes, states must be completely honest with themselves and their stakeholders. State leaders should consider creating forcing events to reckon with the status quo and surface gaps to address.

(?) Questions To Ask Yourself

Setting High Expectations

1. Have you **defined the full range of knowledge, skills, and mindsets** necessary for students to succeed in college, career, and civic life?

2. Are the **components of your school improvement system aligned** to that definition, including but not necessarily limited to identification and exit criteria, needs assessments, planning templates and frameworks, scoring rubrics, and progress monitoring?

3. Do your **public communications** about school improvement (see Principle #1) consistently include references to this definition as applied to students in identified schools?

4. Do staff at the SEA, LEA, and school level share your commitment to **holding equally high expectations for all students**, including students in CSI schools and those in subgroups leading to TSI identification? Do adults throughout the system—especially those working in identified schools—**believe all students are capable of meeting those expectations**?

5. What steps are you taking to **build and sustain those expectations and mindsets** throughout the state? For example, when hiring staff (and providing technical assistance to LEAs on hiring), do you **explicitly screen candidates for their beliefs** about what all students can achieve?

6. Have you reviewed state policies impacting **students with disabilities and English learners** to ensure students in these populations have access to the academic supports and educational opportunities necessary to meet those expectations?

Challenging the Status Quo

7. Have you **systematically reviewed or audited state policies and practices** to identify barriers to executing your school improvement theory of action? To surface opportunities to create new enabling conditions? What external partner can you involve in the process to provide a fresh set of (objective) eyes?

8. Have you **asked school and LEA leaders with a track record of successful school improvement efforts** to identify constraining policies and practices and to share how they overcame those constraints (e.g., seeking waivers or relying more on partners' resources)?

9. How can you **make it easier for identified schools and their LEAs to focus more time and resources on their improvement plans**? Can you waive certain requirements? Reduce paperwork? Align timelines? Give preferential treatment in SEA processes?

10. Are you taking full advantage of **existing state authorities** (e.g., achievement school districts) to intervene in schools and/or LEAs at the beginning of the improvement process? After a school fails to exit? Are there **additional authorities** you could seek?

11. What **autonomies** could you grant to identified schools and/or their LEAs to support improvement efforts, including autonomies related to hiring, placing, and replacing staff, budget, curriculum, professional learning, the length and use of the school day and/or year, procurement, grading, and discipline and school climate?

12. For areas beyond state control, how are you educating and **encouraging LEAs to grant needed autonomies** to identified schools?

13. Is your state's **methodology for allocating financial resources** aligned to your commitment to helping each and every student meet your high expectations? How does the methodology explicitly take into account what students need to succeed and how does it account for all sources of funding? Does the methodology reduce or exacerbate inequity?

14. What role do **LEA consolidation, school closure, and school choice** initiatives play in the state? What are you doing to ensure those strategies are fairly considered when deciding what is in the best interests of students?

Nevada could continue to leverage its existing Achievement School District as the primary means for challenging the status quo in identified schools. But instead the state has designed a second-generation approach to improve upon its current effort. The new "Partnership Network" will work collaboratively with a network of identified schools to implement and share best practices. Funding for the network will come from an innovative approach of braiding federal Title I, Title II, and Title IV funds and state funds.

Further, before asking LEAs to change their own longstanding approaches, the state realized it had to lead by example and first change the way the SEA itself does business. New organizational structures (e.g., a Superintendent's Cabinet), new processes (e.g., regular performance management "stock takes" and other improvement routines), and an emphasis on vertical alignment to the strategic plan's priorities and theory of action are all driving a new culture at the SEA focused on dramatic growth in achievement for all students.

Mississippi has changed how it provides professional development in response to student needs. Specifically, the state now requires special education teachers and general education teachers to attend professional development together, so both can better support students with disabilities. To break down similar silos (and to address an ESL teacher shortage), Mississippi is now planning to include training for *all* preservice teachers on specific strategies to support English learners.

In addition to redesigning underlying structures, Mississippi is also manifesting Principle #2 by

- Expanding the state's toolbox with a new achievement school district and convening a task force to ensure the legislature crafted an authorizing law that sets the state up for success when using it to intervene in struggling LEAs and schools; and

- Making an unprecedented commitment to expanding quality early learning opportunities to help reduce achievement gaps before students even enroll in CSI or TSI schools (MS Strategic Plan, Goal 3).[5]

Tennessee has rethought the way teacher compensation works in the state to increase the number of high-quality educators in high-needs schools. A new strategic compensation model requires LEAs to develop a new compensation plan that includes a pay incentive for teachers meeting at minimum one of the following criteria: serving in high needs subject areas and schools, taking on additional responsibilities within the school, or performing at high levels.[6]

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

6   Tennessee State Board of Education. 2017. *Strategic compensation policy 5.600.* Nashville, TN: Author.

Louisiana has embraced a variety of alternative governance structures that provides families with school choice and that increase principals' autonomy to make decisions that best fit their school's needs. These models range from the state-run [Recovery School District](#) in New Orleans, which restarted low-performing schools as charter schools after Hurricane Katrina, to the [Baton Rouge Achievement Zone](#), a public-private partnership providing choice options, to the [Transformation Next Zone](#) in Shreveport, a network of the lowest-performing schools in the district. Louisiana also gives all low-income students attending schools rated at a C or below the option to enroll in Louisiana's non-public school choice program.

Supporting Targeted Support and Improvement Schools

- One of the biggest challenges in TSI schools—especially in otherwise high-performing schools—is likely to be **adults' mindsets** about what students in the low-performing subgroup(s) can achieve (and the degree to which adults are responsible for student achievement). Addressing this explicitly can be difficult, but doing so is a precondition for progress. SEAs should consider how to help LEAs and schools address this throughout the improvement process, for example by adding screening mechanisms into needs assessments and hiring practices.

- Because states have less leverage over TSI schools (at least under ESSA), **SEAs should think creatively about how to challenge the status quo** for students in these schools. From state policy levers to new incentives to the bully pulpit, SEAs can use different levers to push and pull school and LEA leaders to do what's necessary to improve outcomes for these students.

- Although states, LEAs, and stakeholders are increasingly paying attention to resource inequities *across* schools as part of the school improvement process, there is a second layer of analysis needed for TSI schools to surface **inequities *within* schools** that may be contributing to the particular subgroup's underperformance (e.g., how a principal assigns effective teachers to particular classes).

Common Mistakes

Don't be an easy grader. No one sets out to put the interests of adults ahead of students, but too often the status quo does just that. Unless you are rigorous in your review of existing approaches and honest about what needs to change, manifesting Principle #2 will not actually help improve student outcomes. States should seek input from different and external perspectives, such as stakeholder groups or national experts, to take a fresh look.

Don't only look for smoke when searching for fires. There is an instinct to pay the most attention to the aspects of the status quo that are most obviously in need of repair. But your review must also look at the less obvious, quieter corners of the system that may be operating smoothly but in reality are not meeting students' needs. For example, your special education processes may be meeting compliance benchmarks, but they may be completely missing the critical question of whether students have *quality* IEPs. You may meet every federally required reporting deadline, but there may be a persistent disconnect between your grant managers and your programmatic leads. Engaging your stakeholders—especially families of students who are struggling the most—may be helpful in surfacing challenges that the SEA cannot or does not see.

Don't assume different is better. Although Principle #2 encourages challenging the status quo, students will not benefit simply by replacing one ineffective approach with another. Especially when considering exercising new state authorities, SEAs should carefully select, plan, and execute new strategies to mitigate risks and build off lessons learned from the past. New approaches such as Achievement School Districts need to have certain conditions in place to be more effective than what they are replacing.

Recommended Resources

State Education Policy Checklist, developed by CCSSO, The Aspen Institute, Education Commission of the States, and the State Legislative Leaders Foundation (2015), offers a clear framework for developing new education policies, including changes to the status quo necessary to make progress in identified schools.

The Turnaround Challenge, by Andrew Calkins, William Guenther, Grace Belfiore, and Dave Lash of Mass Insight Education & Research Institute (2007), articulates a comprehensive approach to rethinking "policies, structures, and incentives surrounding state and local systems" in order to dramatically improve low-performing schools.

For states pursuing a school improvement theory of action based on *local* innovation, How States Can Promote Local Innovation, Options, and Problem-Solving in Public Education, by Jordan Posamentier, Robin Lake, and Paul Hill of the Center for Reinventing Public Education (2017), provides not only substantive analysis and recommendations, but also a self-assessment tool to help guide a review of existing policies and practices.

So You Think You Want to Innovate?, by Lisa Duty of The Learning Accelerator and Todd Kern of 2Revolutions (2014), defines the "necessary components of an innovation culture" through which student-centered approaches can be developed, tested, improved, and spread at all levels of the educational system. The framework incorporates a rubric and self-assessment tool.