Principle #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.*
THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

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<td>1</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td><em>If everything’s a priority, nothing is.</em></td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td><em>Put students at the center so that every student succeeds.</em></td>
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| 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.* |
Introduction

There is no magic to achievement. It is really about hard work, choices, and persistence.

—Michelle Obama

To sustain a significant undertaking like school improvement, state education agencies (SEAs) must design systems that are “durable, adaptive and persistently focused on goals for improved student growth in the face of changing conditions.” SEA leaders must also ensure the commitment to integrating sustainability is equally shared by the SEAs themselves, their local education agencies (LEAs) and schools, as well as stakeholders throughout the system. School improvement is already a daunting challenge. But it is near impossible if we allow those schools and LEAs making significant progress to backslide—an unfortunately common and fairly predictable consequence of not paying thoughtful and persistent attention to sustainability.

As articulated in the Reform Support Network’s Sustainability Rubric, SEAs seeking to manifest Principle #10 must deeply embrace the following three realities:

• **Implementation is just the beginning.** Sustainable reform outlives the completion of specific projects or initiatives and often calls for substantial organizational change that may not have been anticipated in early phases of implementation. By definition, a project is not sustainable, as it has a defined beginning and end. …

• **Today’s context will change.** … Organizations and resources, including people, time and money, will change over time and so will the context in which they operate. Sustaining reform does not mean simply maintaining or replicating a specific program or policy innovation. It requires clear goals grounded in a theory of action, data to track and evaluate progress toward them and commitment by reform leaders to adapt—including policies, funding streams, organizational structures and work routines—as the reform moves forward.

• **Sustainability planning begins early.** States realize the full benefits of education reform years after the initial enthusiasm, commitment, and program investments. … Managing sustainability is an ongoing process that begins at the start of the reform and evolves as circumstances change and lessons are learned.

There are multiple entry points for SEAs in this work. Indeed, SEAs should think about sustainability as part of their commitment to manifest each of the other nine principles. It is not enough, for example, just to be strategic about resources to avoid “funding cliffs” (Principle #7). SEAs and their LEAs and identified schools must also plan for how to sustain stakeholder engagement (Principle #3), ensure succession plans are in place to maintain effective leading and

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Deep Dive into Principle #10 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems

teaching (Principle #6), and so on. (See the “Questions to Ask Yourself” section below for more on how sustainability must be part of manifesting each principle.) Just as schools need more than a one-time magic bullet, so do state school improvement systems need ongoing, sustainable efforts to build and strengthen the structures, processes, and culture necessary to improve outcomes for students enrolled in identified schools.

As many of the Deep Dives emphasize, school improvement is also about LEA improvement. Thus, while most sustainability planning tends to focus on ensuring schools continue to make progress after exiting improvement status, **SEAs seeking to manifest Principle #10 must also attend to sustaining improvement at the LEA level.** This is especially, but not solely, true for any schools whose successful improvement has been driven by an infusion of significant but temporary new resources and/or who have benefited from time-limited interventions led by the SEA (e.g., achievement school districts).

Finally, maintaining momentum through political and leadership transitions is a critical but often overlooked aspect of sustainability planning. SEAs must assess which elements of the school improvement system—at each level of the system—are most at risk during any potential political or leadership change and seek opportunities to mitigate those risks in advance. Strategies for this will be heavily context-specific: in some instances, SEAs may need to codify important but informal practices, while in others the key mitigating strategy might be cultivating champions among key stakeholders.

### Questions To Ask Yourself

**Principle #1**

1. What are you doing to ensure school improvement remains a top priority not just at the beginning, but also through the implementation of initial improvement plans, the implementation of “more rigorous” state-led interventions for non-exiting schools, the identification of additional cohorts of schools, and the repeat of the entire school improvement cycle for those newly identified schools?

2. How are you ensuring that the organizational and cultural changes within the SEA necessary to manifest all the principles take hold and become the new “way we do business”?

**Principle #2**

3. Have you established a regular practice of systematically reviewing state policies and practices—including any new ones implemented as part of your effort to manifest Principle #2—to ensure your school improvement system continues to align with your theory of action, help students graduate prepared for success, and not only drive initial improvement in identified schools but also sustain that growth over time? Are there SEA-level policies, mindsets, silos, initiatives, funding sources, etc. that in practice undermine sustainability?
4. How are you inviting feedback and suggestions from those responsible for making progress in identified schools about what they need to sustain and extend their successes?

**Principle #3**

5. Does your SEA’s approach to stakeholder engagement—and your expectations/support for LEAs and schools—explicitly emphasize ongoing consultation and partnering?

6. To the extent you have state-level school improvement partners, are they focused on helping build SEA, LEA, and/or school capacity, so that new practices can be implemented in perpetuity?

7. As you consider potential partners and/or vet them for LEAs and schools, are you investigating their track record of sustaining improvements?

**Principle #4**

8. Beyond the initial planning process, how frequently do you and your LEAs and schools assess needs, analyze root causes, and check the fit of their strategies for improvement?

9. To the extent the SEA is significantly involved in school improvement efforts (e.g., managing non-exiting schools as part of an achievement school district), have you worked with the relevant parties and stakeholders to map out the eventual transition from the current model to whatever long-term approach to authority and governance will be in place? To help sustain progress, are there LEA-level readiness criteria to consider in addition to school-level exit criteria?

**Principle #5**

10. Do you require that CSI plans explicitly address sustainability, so LEAs and schools have to plan for it from the beginning and not just as they approach exiting improvement status? For example, do you ask an LEA to explain whether each part of their improvement plan needs to be sustained beyond the improvement plan (i.e., it is addressing an underlying need that will continue to exist indefinitely) or is by design a temporary, transitional investment needed to jump start the improvement effort (and thus a wise investment of federal school improvement funds)?

11. Is sustainability part of your technical assistance for the planning process and your scoring rubrics for approving plans and awarding grants?

**Principle #6**

12. How are you supporting the retention of effective teachers and leaders in identified schools, especially after a school exits improvement status when (unwanted) turnover can quickly lead to backsliding?
13. Are there pipeline initiatives specifically targeted to backfill vacancies at those schools with staff who are prepared from day one to be effective in CSI/TSI settings and sustain the progress that has been made?

14. Are you requiring or supporting succession planning for key roles related to school improvement in LEAs and schools?

Principle #7

15. How can you leverage and align federal, state, and local funds and other types of resources to promote sustainable improvement for LEAs and schools after the expiration of their federal school improvement grants?

16. What other SEA resources can you leverage (e.g., time, guidance, technical assistance, partnerships, networks with other LEAs/schools) to help mitigate the impact of any “funding cliffs”?

17. Have you considered structuring school improvement grants to taper over time, so that even during the grant period LEAs and schools begin identifying other funds to help sustain any essential supports and interventions?

18. How are you ensuring that LEAs and schools continue to address resource inequities identified during the school improvement process? If the resource equity reviews surface broken cost structures or inequitable policies at the LEA level, how are you making sure LEAs are addressing those systemic issues to increase their ability to sustain school-level improvement?

Principle #8

19. Does your progress monitoring system includes measures of sustainability?

20. What can you learn from prior school improvement efforts—those that have and have not sustained progress—to inform how you measure LEAs’ and schools’ readiness to sustain their improvement after exiting improvement status?

21. What early warning indicators will you track, within and beyond your annual accountability system, to identify schools that may be heading toward identification as CSI or TSI?

Principle #9

22. Are you building SEA, LEA, and school capacity along the way during plan implementation in order to sustain improvement over time?

23. Which parts of the school improvement implementation and continuous improvement processes should continue after a school exits?
24. How are you intentionally learning lessons about successes and challenges to sustain improvements with current and future cohorts of identified schools? What structures, processes, and culture must be built?

25. After schools exit improvement status, who at the SEA has responsibility for tracking their continued progress and flagging early signs of backsliding?

**Principle #10**

26. Do the exit criteria for CSI and additional targeted support and improvement (ATSI) schools that you established in your ESSA plans set a high enough bar for school improvement to give you confidence that exiting schools will not backslide into being identified again once the improvement supports are removed? For example, do you expect significant growth? In consecutive years? As part of your process, do you review a comprehensive sustainability plan for the school that addresses key issues like budgeting and succession planning?

**State Spotlights**

As part of its school turnaround grant application, Massachusetts explicitly requires schools identified for improvement to explain how they plan to sustain improvement once any additional funding and support expires after the school exits improvement status. The application also requires schools to review current interventions and determine which they plan to continue to implement once they exit, why they chose these interventions, and how these choices are financially feasible. LEAs and schools also can use the SEA’s Sustainability Planning Toolkit, which includes, among other resources, a four-step framework for sustainability planning, case studies, and sample resource allocations.

There is a strong emphasis on sustainability in Illinois’ request for application for potential providers/partners in its new statewide system of support (IL-EMPOWER, which is spotlighted in Principle #4). The SEA asks about, and awards points specifically based on, applicants’ ability to (i) build capacity within an LEA or school, (ii) decrease the reliance on them as an outside provider over time, and (iii) conduct systematic reviews to inform sustainable improvement.

Kentucky requires a school and its Education Recovery Team members to develop a sustainability plan before exiting improvement status. Sustainability plans concentrate on eight key areas identified by the SEA as critical to sustainability: academics and instruction, school safety, school culture, school council, instructional leadership, assessment and data, professional development including teacher evaluations, and technology. Schools also must identify a person responsible for each area and for each subtask for a given area, accompanied by timelines that include status checks.
This approach to sustainability planning has helped Kentucky avoid re-identifying any schools for improvement since 2010.

Indiana is one of several SEAs to incorporate sustainability planning into the exit criteria for CSI schools. Further, Indiana has established a bar for exiting that it believes will be high enough to judge whether a school has made sufficient progress over time to indicate the improvement efforts have taken hold and the growth is sustainable. Specifically, CSI schools in the state must earn at least a “C” score in the annual accountability system for two consecutive years (p. 58 of ESSA plan).²

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**Supporting Targeted Support and Improvement Schools**

- Some schools may be identified as TSI because of the performance of a relatively small number of students. One consequence may be that some of these schools bounce in and out of TSI status each year. Yet the students involved likely need sustained support whether or not their performance is just under or just over the TSI threshold in a given year. Accordingly, **SEAs should require, support, and/or encourage LEAs to drive sustainable improvement in their TSI schools rather than declare a quick but fleeting victory after a one-year bump in performance.** One specific opportunity to do this is by influencing how LEAs establish their TSI exit criteria, which should be rigorous enough to separate the “noise” in year-over-year data from a strong “signal” of sustainable improvement.

- In reviewing TSI schools’ progress and evaluating the effectiveness of TSI plans, **SEAs must carefully consider disaggregated data to determine if apparent progress is the result of students’ actual growth, changes in the makeup of the schools’ subgroups, or some combination of the two.** For example, a TSI school identified on the basis of English learners’ performance may appear to have improved by some measures, but, in reality, the only change has been that the school now serves fewer students who are newly arrived immigrants. Such demographic or cohort changes might mask continued challenges at the school that need sustained focus.

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Common Mistakes

Don’t steer toward the cliff. One way to help schools and their LEAs avoid a funding cliff at the end of a school improvement grant is to help them make wise investments in the first place. A temporary infusion of resources—such as federal school improvement grants—should be used to support interventions can be scaled back based on success before the funds expire. For example, building the capacity of a school’s leader and teachers might require significant investments up front (e.g., new instructional coaches), but less support should be needed over time once the capacity is built and stabilized. On the other hand, if temporary funds are instead used to address student or school needs that are likely to be ongoing, the school is setting itself up from the beginning to face a funding cliff. Consider the case of extended learning time, where the intervention might improve outcomes while the intervention is in place but may not lead to sustained progress for the school once funding expires and the intervention disappears. SEAs should include these sustainability considerations—alongside other key questions of evidence of effectiveness, responsiveness to local needs, etc.—in their guidance and technical support for improvement planning and their reviews of proposed CSI plans.

Don’t underestimate reform fatigue. In “5 School-Improvement Tips for Civic and Community Leaders,” Rick Hess articulates an important lesson for SEAs to keep in mind as they design school improvement systems to be sustainable at all levels:

Too much reform breeds reform-resistant schools. While it may not always be evident to outsiders who are eager to shake up schools and school systems, educators are buffeted by an endless whirlwind of programs, policies, and reforms. This fosters cynicism, causes educators to suspect that it’s more about appearances than real change, and leads them loath to take any new reforms seriously. After all, while the new superintendent can insist that this is about “REAL! LASTING!” change, a veteran teacher has likely already heard this same speech again and again. And, while the teacher may have believed it the first time, the experience of pinwheeling from one curriculum, technology adoption, program, or turnaround strategy to another has usually beaten that out of them. Delivering reform that will count requires breaking that cycle.

SEAs should heed this advice in their actions and decision making as well as in the support they give LEAs and schools. Of course, this perspective must be carefully balanced with the recognition in many situations that the status quo is responsible for a school’s identification in the first place and demands change (see Principle #2). Similarly, leaders must be willing to adjust improvement efforts along the way, in response to progress monitoring.

See Investing for Sustainable Turnaround by Education Resources Strategies (2011) for more on how to “prioritize turnaround resources toward capacity building...to break the cycle of failure and build capacity for sustained improvement.”
Recommended Resources

**Sustainability Rubric: A Tool to Help State Education Agencies Assess their Current Efforts to Sustain Reform Strategies to Meet Student Achievement Goals**, published by the Reform Support Network (2015), enumerates 19 “elements of sustainability” and allows SEAs to evaluate and improve the sustainability of school improvement efforts. For SEAs, the Reform Support Network also published a **Sustainability Rubric Summary** and a **Sustainability Self-Assessment Workbook**. There is also a similar set of tools for the LEA context (**rubric**, **summary**, and **self-assessment**).

In 2011, Education Resource Strategies convened a group of school districts and national partners for the **Sustaining Turnaround at Scale Summit** and later published two briefs about it. The first, **Series Overview**, provides a summary of the key points from the conversation at the Summit, including a “district strategy for sustainable turnaround at scale.” The second brief, **Investing for Sustainable Turnaround**, discusses five key practices LEAs and schools can use temporary school improvement resources to allow for sustainable improvement and overall system change.

**7 Tenets for Sustainable School Turnaround**, written by Scott Sargrad, Samantha Batel, Karen Hawley Miles, and Karen Baroody, and published by the Center for American Progress and Education Resource Strategies (2016), draws on conversations with current and former SEA and LEA leaders, as well as state and federal officials, to outline the tenets SEAs should consider as they develop their new school improvement systems under ESSA. Following the descriptions of each of the tenets, the authors suggest roles to support school improvement across federal, SEA, LEA, and school levels.

**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 areas for states to consider as they design their systems of school improvement. In particular, the third recommendation focuses on holding LEAs, in addition to the schools themselves, accountable for low-performance to encourage LEAs to evaluate what within their structure may be contributing to the low-performance of certain schools or subgroups and thus undermining sustainability.