Principle #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.
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:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Principle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<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>
</tr>
<tr>
<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>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 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. |
Principle #5 gets at the heart of school improvement work by focusing on the actual plans for how local education agencies (LEAs) and their schools will improve outcomes for students in low-performing schools and within low-performing subgroups. Although the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) shifted from top-down federal approaches to what must be the content of improvement plans, the new law nevertheless established some requirements about how comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) and targeted support and improvement (TSI) plans must be developed (e.g., needs assessments, stakeholder engagement) and what they must include (e.g., evidence-based interventions and, for CSI and additional targeted support (ATSI) schools, ways to address resource inequities). ESSA also allocated specific responsibilities among state education agencies (SEAs), LEAs, and schools.2

SEAs committed to ensuring every identified school has a high-quality improvement plan will go beyond these ESSA requirements and design an approach to plan development and review that fully manifests Principle #5. Indeed, Principle #5 is the key fulcrum for each SEA’s school improvement theory of action to reach schools, classrooms, teachers, and students. To the extent an SEA’s theory is to be “loose” about the specifics of the CSI and/or TSI planning process, the SEA must determine how best to support LEAs and schools in developing high-quality plans. To the extent the theory is to be “tight” about the specifics of these plans, the SEA must decide what is most important and how best to advance those priorities through the planning process.

Principle #5 also encourages states to consider how certain cross-cutting perspectives or themes play a role in CSI/TSI planning, regardless of which level of the system takes the lead. Specifically, states should ensure plans reflect (i) lessons learned from prior effective and ineffective school improvement efforts, (ii) insights from the science of learning and development including what we know about how poverty, trauma, and other adverse childhood experiences impact learning, and (iii) the best available evidence of what practices, policies, and interventions work, for whom, and under what circumstances. Whether through guidance and resources, direct technical assistance, statewide improvement templates or processes, or any number of other approaches, SEAs should explore multiple ways of integrating all three into improvement plans.

Additionally, Principle #5 emphasizes the significant and often underappreciated role of LEAs in improvement planning. LEAs have formal roles under ESSA to develop CSI plans and approve the plans that TSI schools develop. In practice, though, many LEAs may play a broader and deeper role in plan development for all their identified schools. But Principle #5 also pushes...
SEAs to identify if there are gaps at the LEA itself that may contribute to identified schools’ low performance. To pursue a vision of high-quality improvement plans, SEAs must widen the aperture of the planning process to include within it not just the identified schools, but also their LEAs. SEAs can ensure support for LEAs is part of school improvement through technical assistance, the design of needs assessments, the required elements of an improvement plan template, or even the questions asked during a plan review and approval process.

Finally, of the ten principles of effective school improvement systems, Principle #5 carries the heaviest load because not only are the principles meant to inform how SEAs design their state systems, but also every other principle should manifest in the design of each school-level CSI and TSI plan. For example:

- LEAs and schools must guard against trying to use their plans to address everything at the expense of making real progress on the most important things (Principle #1).
- Plans must be based on high expectations for each and every student and question long-held assumptions if the status quo at the school and LEA levels is designed more with adult interests in mind (Principle #2).
- Authentic, ongoing stakeholder engagement and strategic partnerships are essential to crafting and implementing a high-quality school-level plan (Principle #3).
- Comprehensive needs assessments and individual school/community contexts must inform the selection of strategies to include in the plans (Principle #4).
- No matter which substantive areas are prioritized, high-quality plans must address the role of school leaders and educators (Principle #6).
- Budgets are a critical component of any improvement plan and should reflect a strategic and equitable approach to resource allocation and alignment to the plan (Principle #7).
- Improvement plans should reflect a strategic and equitable approach to allocating both financial and non-financial resources and should align school budgets with the plan (Principle #7).
- Plans should include a thoughtful sequence of short- and long-term benchmarks (Principle #8).
- LEAs and schools must not only identify the right strategies, but also prepare for how best to implement, continuously improve, monitor progress, and evaluate those strategies (Principle #9).
- Sustainability should be purposefully included in any quality planning process, rather than be considered only once the school arrives at the precipice of a funding cliff (Principle #10).

SEAs must therefore take full advantage of all available opportunities, leverage points, and resources to ensure every CSI and TSI plan is a high-quality plan that reflects the ideas animating all of these principles.
Questions To Ask Yourself

1. Does your theory of action about school improvement include setting **statewide expectations for the content of improvement plans**? If so, what are the key priority areas that you will require LEAs and schools to address in each plan?

2. What, if anything, must those plans include regarding **support and improvement for the LEA** itself?

3. If you are using statewide versions of any components of the planning process—or even just encouraging LEAs/schools to use models developed by the SEA—do your **designs align with your theory of action** about what truly drives improvement in low-performing schools? For example, how are you advancing your priority areas through a statewide needs assessment, the process for conducting a resource equity review, the CSI or TSI plan templates, the required components of a school improvement grant application and/or scoring rubric, and the scoring rubrics used to review and approve CSI/TSI plans?

4. How does your methodology for **allocating the 7 percent set-aside** for school improvement (e.g., competition, formula, hybrid) support the development of high-quality improvement plans?

5. Are you providing technical assistance, funding, and/or time (e.g., a planning year) to **support the planning process**? How are you ensuring any such resources are aligned to your theory of action, are themselves high-quality, and are effectively used by local leaders?

6. Will you require that improvement plans draw explicit connections between the results of **needs assessments and the chosen improvement strategies**? How are you helping LEAs/schools make these connections as they develop their plans?

7. In addition to funding, what other **dimensions of resource equity** will you require, support, and/or encourage LEAs to include in the reviews required by ESSA for each CSI and ATSI school, such as access to effective teachers and leaders? Will you require that improvement plans explicitly explain how any identified inequities will be addressed through implementation of the plan?

8. How are you requiring, supporting, and/or encouraging LEAs and schools to reflect in their plans the **science of learning and development**, including what we know about the impact of poverty, trauma, and adversity on learning?

---

3 Education Resource Strategies has identified nine “dimensions of equity” to consider when reviewing the allocation and use of resources across and within schools. Travers, J. 2018. What is resource equity? A working paper that explores the many dimensions of resource equity that support academic excellence. Watertown, MA: Education Resource Strategies.
9. How are you leveraging ESSA’s requirement that every CSI/TSI plan must include evidence-based interventions to increase the quality of improvement plans? How can you make it easier for LEAs/schools to access and understand the existing evidence base? How can you support LEAs/schools in making thoughtful selections of evidence-based interventions that take into account whether interventions under consideration
- align to your overall theory of action,
- cohere with the rest of the CSI/TSI plan,
- respond to the results of the school-level needs assessment,
- are supported by the strongest available evidence,
- are appropriate for the context of the school or subgroup of students, and
- can be implemented by the particular school with fidelity and with any necessary but reasoned adaptations to account for the school context?

10. Given how many improvement efforts fail during implementation (see Principle #9), what are you expecting LEAs/schools to state in their plans and/or applications for funds about how they will approach implementation of their plan? How will LEAs/schools demonstrate their plans will be used in practice and not just sit on a shelf?

11. How are you ensuring the CSI plan review and approval process (and the same process for reviewing/approving applications for school improvement funds) reinforces your expectations for quality (e.g., thoughtful selections of evidence-based interventions)?
- What role do experts across the SEA play in reviewing/approving the plans? For example, how do program offices responsible for literacy, special education, etc. participate?
- Is the process iterative in that LEAs/schools who do not initially meet your bar for quality receive specific feedback and the opportunity to revise and resubmit their plans?

State Spotlights

Several SEAs’ theories of action include establishing statewide priority areas that must be addressed in school improvement plans and then aligning guidance and technical assistance around those priorities. Some examples (with links to their frameworks or plan templates) include Connecticut, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Tennessee. Other SEAs
have adopted frameworks through their new ESSA plans. There are of course key differences among these frameworks—substantively and how “tight” or “loose” SEAs use them—but some priorities frequently appear across this sample of states, such as standards, curriculum, and instruction; climate and culture; school leadership; talent management; student supports; and data-informed decision making.

Through a longstanding partnership with the American Institutes for Research, Massachusetts has closely studied its prior school improvement efforts, ultimately identifying four key school turnaround practices—Leadership, Shared Responsibility, and Professional Collaboration; Intentional Practices for Improving Instruction; Student-Specific Supports and Instruction to All Students; and School Climate and Culture—along with necessary systems to support each practice. The practices and systems identified were then used to inform the SEA’s school improvement plan template and an associated rubric of 32 evidence-based indicators, which the SEA uses to evaluate the quality of school improvement plans and to monitor progress during implementation. Before awarding grant funds through a competitive process, the SEA’s turnaround officials also interview representatives from both the school and LEA so they can explain and defend their improvement plans.

Rather than create a framework specific to schools identified for improvement, Louisiana has established a statewide set of key “non-negotiable” elements of effective schools—Core Academics, Educator Workforce, LEA Structures, Direct Student Services, and Subgroups of Diverse Learners—that are the same for all schools in the state. Because CSI schools do not have a track record of successfully addressing all of these elements, they must develop an improvement plan that is approved by the SEA to be awarded competitive improvement funds. Additionally, the SEA is establishing and maintaining a high bar for quality. In its first set of plan reviews (Louisiana identified its first ESSA cohort this year), the SEA did not initially approve a significant number of submitted plans and then worked with LEAs and schools to develop stronger plans before resubmission and review.

In partnership with AdvancED, Kentucky plans to conduct simultaneously in-depth diagnostic reviews of both the school identified for improvement and its LEA to get a holistic picture of the conditions contributing to low performance. Based on these reviews, the SEA will work with schools to

---


identify three to five priority areas to concentrate on during their first 30-60-90 day plan of improvement. The SEA then will work with the school and LEA to develop a comprehensive improvement plan that addresses the chosen areas identified in the diagnostic review and the needs assessment. As schools show measurable progress, they can choose to identify new focus areas over time.

Kentucky will also support the development of high-quality TSI plans by connecting each TSI school to a regional **Hub School**, which is a school previously identified for improvement that has shown significant, lasting student gains. Hub Schools will share their data-informed best practices with TSI schools through peer-to-peer learning, professional development, and site visits.

**Ohio** plans to focus on building LEA capacity to support struggling schools through a state system of **regional support teams**. The support teams assist LEA and school leadership with analyzing data to surface root causes and developing school improvement plans that address key areas of influence. The regional system of support and each step in the school improvement process are integrated with the **Ohio Improvement Process**, a statewide framework that supports shared leadership team structures through a five-step improvement process and continuous feedback loops. By working with LEAs rather than directly with schools, the SEA can support LEAs in building aligned leadership and support systems for their schools, thus developing mutual trust across all levels of the system.

To raise the bar on quality and ensure statewide ownership of school improvement, **Connecticut** will use a collaborative, cross-divisional approach to review improvement plans. In addition to school improvement specialists, SEA content experts will review the relevant sections of the submitted plans to ensure the strategies and goals are both ambitious and realistic. Through an iterative process, the SEA will provide feedback to the schools and LEAs as many times as needed to produce a high-quality improvement plan.

To help LEAs and schools make wise selections of evidence-based interventions, **Indiana** is curating the existing evidence base to create the Resource Hub, an “Indiana-specific version of the What Works Clearinghouse that illustrates how and where evidence-based interventions for school improvement have been successful in Indiana” (p.62 of **ESSA Plan**). Further, technical assistance will help LEAs and cohorts of schools make more systematic connections between the results of needs assessments, a framework for school improvement, and potential evidence-based interventions that meet the specific needs of the school and LEA.

---

Common Mistakes

Don’t assume what’s good for the goose is always good for the gander. As states contemplate how to produce quality improvement plans, it bears remembering the thrust of Principle #4: one size does not fit all. CSI strategies may not be appropriate in a TSI school context. An intervention with prior evidence of impact in one setting may not be as effective in another. Not all CSI schools are facing the same challenges. What helps a school in crisis establish the conditions for learning may not be sufficient for a school that is more ready to consistently improve academic outcomes. States should share and, where appropriate, scale best practices, but everyone involved should keep in mind the close interrelationship between Principles #4 and #5.

Don’t even think about the kitchen sink. As discussed in the introduction above, high-quality plans will focus on the most important changes necessary to support improved outcomes at a particular school, as identified through the needs assessment and in alignment with SEA/LEA/school priorities. Plans that instead try to address everything all at once will inevitably collapse under their own weight. That is not to say that a multi-year plan must only focus on the same few priorities. To the contrary, strategic sequencing is a critical attribute of a quality plan. But LEAs, school leaders, stakeholders, and SEA staff must work together to focus first on the highest-impact priorities.

Don’t just check the (evidence) box. Even if your state is developing a list of pre-approved evidence-based interventions and practices from which LEAs/schools must select, you must support wise selections.
Some LEAs/schools may simply pick something off a list without carefully considering their needs and what the intervention offers and requires. SEAs can mitigate this risk through technical assistance, guidance, thoughtful design of any such lists, and careful review of plans (and applications for funds).

Don’t let the tail wag the dog. SEAs should carefully review whether how they ask LEAs to submit CSI plans may unnecessarily limit what is in those plans. For example, several states use a single online platform to receive both LEAs’ federal program plans (e.g., for Title I formula funds) and their school improvement plans. If such a platform restricts the type and richness of information that LEAs can submit, SEAs may have unintentionally erected a barrier to high-quality plans. SEAs with this challenge should either revise their platforms to accept the types of plans contemplated by Principle #5 or identify a work-around until they can make the necessary changes (e.g., a separate document to supplement the online submission).

Recommended Resources

**School Interventions that Work**, a report from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2017), concentrates on identifying school needs, developing an improvement plan, and choosing appropriate evidence-based interventions as the key parts of the school improvement process. The report includes action steps and research-based improvement activities that SEAs, LEAs, and schools can use as they design their school improvement system.

**Four Domains of Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework**, developed by the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd (2017), provides a research-based school improvement framework to guide SEAs, LEAs and schools as they engage in this challenging work. The framework lays out four “domains” or areas of focus that have been found to be crucial to a successful turnaround. The discussion of each domain includes a series of recommended practices and SEA, LEA, and school examples.

**Better Evidence, Better Choices, Better Schools**, written by Steve Fleischman, Caitlin Scott, and Scott Sargrad and published by the Center for American Progress and the Knowledge Alliance (2016), clarifies ESSA’s definition of evidence-based and how this definition differs from the definition of NCLB’s “scientifically based research” requirements. Additionally, this report includes a framework to support SEAs as they work to support LEAs and schools in choosing the best evidence-based school improvement practices for their specific context.

**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 SEA plans to take advantage of the 13 Leverage Points in ESSA identified by Results for America to drive strong evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement practices. Leverage Points #4 through #10 are particularly relevant to Principle #5.

**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. These ideas align with several of the CCSSO principles and have implications for how SEA, LEA, and school leaders manifest them.