

Deep Dive into Principle #9 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems



Principle #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.

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COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

Carey Wright (Mississippi), President
Carissa Moffat Miller, Executive Director

One Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20001-1431
Phone (202) 336-7000 • Fax (202) 408-8072 • www.ccsso.org



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1	Elevate school improvement as an urgent priority at every level of the system—schools, LEAs, and the SEA—and establish for each level clear roles, lines of authority, and responsibilities for improving low-performing schools.	<i>If everything's a priority, nothing is.</i>
2	Make decisions based on what will best serve each and every student with the expectation that all students can and will master the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college, career, and civic life. Challenge and change existing structures or norms that perpetuate low performance or stymie improvement.	<i>Put students at the center so that every student succeeds.</i>
3	Engage early, regularly, and authentically with stakeholders and partners so improvement is done <i>with</i> and not <i>to</i> the school, families, and the community. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with schools, families, and community members to build trusting relationships, expand capacity, inform planning, build political will, strengthen community leadership and commitment, and provide feedback loops to adjust as needed. • Integrate school and community assets as well as early childhood, higher education, social services, and workforce systems to, among other things, help address challenges outside of school. 	<i>If you want to go far, go together.</i>
4	Select at each level the strategy that best matches the context at hand—from LEAs and schools designing evidence-based improvement plans to SEAs exercising the most appropriate state-level authority to intervene in non-exiting schools.	<i>One size does not fit all.</i>
5	Support LEAs and schools in designing high-quality school improvement plans informed by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • each school's assets (and how they're being used), needs (including but not limited to resources), and root causes of underperformance; • research on effective schools, successful school improvement efforts, and implementation science; • best available evidence of what interventions work, for whom, under which circumstances; and • the science of learning and development, including the impact of poverty and adversity on learning. 	<i>Failing to plan is planning to fail.</i>
6	Focus especially on ensuring the highest need schools have great leaders and teachers who have or develop the specific capacities needed to dramatically improve low-performing schools.	<i>Talent matters.</i>
7	Dedicate sufficient resources (time, staff, funding); align them to advance the system's goals; use them efficiently by establishing clear roles and responsibilities at all levels of the system; and hold partners accountable for results.	<i>Put your money where your mouth is.</i>
8	Establish clear expectations and report progress on a sequence of ambitious yet achievable short- and long-term school improvement benchmarks that focus on both equity and excellence.	<i>What gets measured gets done.</i>
9	Implement improvement plans rigorously and with fidelity, and, since everything will not go perfectly, gather actionable data and information during implementation; evaluate efforts and monitor evidence to learn what is working, for whom, and under what circumstances; and continuously improve over time.	<i>Ideas are only as good as they are implemented.</i>
10	Plan from the beginning how to sustain successful school improvement efforts financially, politically, and by ensuring the school and LEA are prepared to continue making progress.	<i>Don't be a flash in the pan.</i>

Introduction

Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning.

—Benjamin Franklin

Regardless of how well state education agencies (SEAs) manifest the other [principles of effective school improvement systems](#)—including by supporting local education agencies (LEAs) and schools to do the same—that work will stall or fail absent **effective implementation** and **continuous improvement**, which are the focal points of Principle #9. For example, SEAs may help LEAs and schools include interventions in their improvement plans that are supported by a robust evidence base, and that fit tightly with the specific needs and context of each school. But students are not likely to benefit if the interventions are not implemented with fidelity, regularly monitored to inform reasoned adaptations, and ultimately evaluated to measure their impact to help direct future investments. **SEAs must, therefore, build and strengthen the necessary culture, structures, and processes, including systems for implementation support, progress monitoring, continuous improvement, and evaluation.**¹

Each SEA will develop its own approaches to this work that take into account each SEA's theory of action, existing structures and processes, the type of measures selected for progress monitoring (see [Principle #8](#)), local context, internal capacity, available partners, and other factors. Regardless of the particular approaches taken, the key is that each SEA must design, implement, and even continuously improve these components of the school improvement process and ensure they are functioning effectively at the SEA, LEA, and school levels. To succeed in this, SEAs must leverage what we know from [implementation research](#) and [improvement science](#), and align the leadership, resources, and capacity needed to build and strengthen these systems.

Yet to truly manifest Principle #9's focus on effective implementation and continuous improvement—and to give students enrolled in identified schools the greatest chance for success—SEAs must also attend to something more consequential than any particular structure or process. **They must build a culture of learning and improvement.** Indeed, Principle #9 is not just about implementing effective solutions to technical problems; it is also about addressing complex, deeply-ingrained adaptive challenges. No matter how precisely plans and progress monitoring routines are implemented, SEAs, LEAs, and schools will not reach their goals in the absence of mutual trust that encourages all actors to share, give and receive feedback, and try new approaches to their work. If interactions across levels of the system are exclusively oriented toward compliance over learning and improvement, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to create sustainable improvement in identified schools and their LEAs.

¹ Some, but not all, of the content of Principle #9 is required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). As detailed in the [Roadmap to Implementing the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems](#), ESSA requires SEAs to “monitor[] and periodically review[]” the implementation of CSI plans. ESSA §1111(d)(1)(B)(vi). Further, under §1003(b)(2)(B), SEAs must also “monitor[] and evaluat[e]” the use of any school improvement grant funds that LEAs receive, which could thus extend an SEA's progress monitoring responsibilities to any TSI schools supported by the seven percent set-aside of Title I funds. Note that SEAs may reserve five percent of that the set-aside to, among other things, conduct the required progress monitoring and evaluating.

Instead, thoughtful implementation and continuous improvement must be “the way we do business” throughout the school improvement process. LEAs and schools must develop comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) and targeted support and improvement (TSI) plans that not only identify strategies and interventions, but also include plans for *who*, *when*, and *how* the content of the plans will be implemented and *who*, *when*, and *how* the implementation will be monitored, improved, and evaluated. At the same time, SEAs must determine how to best support implementation and improvement, including but not limited to through progress monitoring.

With the right culture, structures, and processes in place, staff (and stakeholders) at all levels will feel empowered to engage in implementation and improvement work. Further, with progress monitoring and evaluation data in hand, leaders of a learning culture will go where the data lead, armed with the collective willingness to revise or shed even popular practices, policies, and programs that are not driving improvement (see also [Principle #2](#)). Manifesting Principle #9 can represent significant shifts for SEAs, LEAs, schools and how they interact with each other, but the shifts are essential to realizing our shared vision for students enrolled in identified schools.²



Questions To Ask Yourself

1. Do your approaches to implementation and continuous improvement align with your **theory of action** for how the SEA drives improvement in LEAs and schools? For example, if your theory of action and, accordingly, your needs assessment and your grant application, emphasize the importance of building LEA capacity, are your implementation and progress monitoring supports also aligned to that same focus?³
2. Conversely, do the **other aspects of your school improvement system** manifest a commitment to implementation and continuous improvement? For example, does your needs assessment include inquiries into LEA/school structures and processes for continuous improvement? Does your CSI plan template require a description for how the LEA/school will improve the plan itself over time in response to data?
3. How are you **building a culture of learning** at the SEA, especially among staff involved in the school improvement process, such as your progress monitors, grant administrators, and technical assistance providers? For example, do you screen for and intentionally develop learning-oriented mindsets in your staff? How are you supporting a learning culture among LEAs, schools, and their stakeholders? Where does distrust exist in the system, and how can you begin to address it? Are there policies or practices that serve as barriers to making these shifts?

² For more on why the shifts described here are essential, what they might include, and some initial ways to leverage ESSA to advance them, see EducationCounsel’s 2018 issue brief, [Shifting from Compliance to Continuous Learning: Leveraging ESSA to Advance a Learning System in Education](#).

³ One important source for this Deep Dive in general and this list of questions in particular is [Leverage Points: Thirteen Opportunities for State Education Agencies to Use Their ESSA State Plans to Build and Use Evidence to Improve Student Outcomes](#), a 2017 report by Results for America and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

4. How can you design the mechanics of your implementation and monitoring structures and processes to **emphasize learning and improvement over mere compliance**? For example, do the same people conduct monitoring of and provide support to LEAs and schools? If so, how do you signal their role in the school improvement process, and how do you clarify what “stakes” are attached to the results of the monitoring? Do your monitoring routines generate actionable and timely feedback for LEAs/schools?
5. How are you striking the right balance between the benefits of gathering useful data (see [Principle #8](#)) at frequent enough intervals and the burdens on LEA and school staff of collecting that data and participating in monitoring activities? Are there ways you can **reduce the administrative burden** by, for example, pre-populating data reports with data the SEA already collects?
6. Will existing **state and local data systems, policies, and practices** support high-quality monitoring? Are there opportunities to link educational data systems with other state or local government data systems to support more robust data collection and analysis? Can vetted partners (e.g., researchers) access the data needed to support monitoring efforts? Are there sufficient privacy safeguards in place?
7. Have you audited whether the SEA has sufficient **internal capacity to effectively monitor implementation beyond compliance**? Are there external partners you can tap to bolster your efforts? To help build more internal capacity?
8. What **continuous improvement methodology**⁴ will you integrate into your progress monitoring? What adjustments, if any, do you need to make to the **SEA’s organizational design** to effectively implement your chosen approach?
9. How are you requiring, encouraging, and/or supporting **LEAs and schools** to embrace a learning posture and commit to a systematic, continuous improvement of their Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI)/Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) plans? For example, what are your expectations for LEAs to describe in school improvement plans and/or applications for funds their improvement processes, staff positions focused on continuous improvement, feedback loops, and stakeholder engagement plans?
10. Besides informing improvement at the LEA and school levels, what will the SEA do in **response to information collected during monitoring**? For example, how will monitoring reports impact ongoing state support efforts and resource allocation, decisions to renew school improvement grants, etc.?

4 The Carnegie Foundation recently produced [short summaries](#) of seven commonly used improvement approaches commonly used in education: Networked Improvement Communities; Design-Based Implementation Research; Deliverology; Implementation Science; Lean for Education; Six Sigma; and Positive Deviance. For more detailed discussions of each, see LeMahieu, P. G., Bryk, A. S., Grunow, A., & Gomez, L. M. (2017). Working to improve: Seven approaches to improvement science in education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 25(1), 2-4. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1108/OAE-12-2016-0086>.

11. What internal and external capacity exists to **conduct rigorous evaluations and disseminate the findings** to inform continuous improvement and future decisions about how to invest public funds? What partners are available for collaboration in order to expand capacity?
12. Have you established a **research or learning agenda** to guide your (and any partners') evaluations of school improvement across the state to build more evidence for what works, for whom, and under what circumstances? What types of studies (e.g., measuring implementation or impact) will you conduct and when? Are you preparing to meet any data collection needs and to respond to any study design considerations *before* implementation begins? What guidance, resources, and support are you offering LEAs and schools to help them build more evidence of what works, for whom, and under what circumstances?
13. How will **future cohorts of CSI/TSI schools** take advantage of what is learned from your monitoring and evaluation efforts?
14. How are you preparing to **continuously improve the state school improvement system itself**? Given the many design decisions you have made to manifest all ten principles, how will you review and revise those decisions over time? How will you engage stakeholders within and outside the system in these reflections and revisions?



State Spotlights



Like some other SEAs, **Minnesota's** approach to the implementation stage incorporates the [active implementation frameworks](#) developed by the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN). One of three "core elements" of the SEA's statewide system of support framework is "effective implementation capacity," defined as "[u]sing data and consistent, frequent feedback loops to drive decision-making and promote continuous improvement." The SEA works to ensure that this continuous improvement process

includes data on following through on SEA, LEA, and school commitments in the plan; fidelity of implementation of specific interventions; and impact of improvement efforts on student outcomes. The SEA leverages additional capacity at its [Regional Centers](#) to provide significant, ongoing, and collaborative support to LEAs and schools with a stated emphasis on "coaching" rather than "compliance." Finally, in addition to new needs assessments and more rigorous interventions, non-exiting schools in Minnesota must "establish other measures of progress...and monitor these indicators...with more focus and in shorter feedback cycles for extended support." (pp. 3, 9, 19 of Title I, Part A: School Support section of [ESSA plan](#)).⁵



Like All CSI schools in **Iowa** will consistently analyze both implementation and outcome data with school, LEA, and SEA staff members as part of a monthly action plan data review. The SEA also requires that every CSI school participate in a summer progress monitoring institute to review data and determine areas for growth in the coming

school year based on areas of success and challenge (p. 64 of [ESSA plan](#)).⁶ Iowa also supports data-driven

5 Minnesota Department of Education. 2018. *Minnesota's consolidated state plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. Roseville, MN: Author.

6 Iowa Department of Education. 2017. *Every Student Succeeds Act in Iowa*. Des Moines, IA: Author.

inquiry and [improvement cycles](#), including by using their [Collaborative Inquiry Questions](#) to “help [school] teams focus on what to think about, not what to think” as they approach continuous improvement.



Ohio’s continuous improvement strategy, the [Ohio Improvement Process](#) (OIP), is grounded in improvement and implementation sciences. The SEA is investing in building the capacity needed to execute this approach effectively, first in their regional centers and then—through those centers—to LEAs and schools. Embedded in the improvement science work is a system of robust data analysis and progress monitoring.

Implementation science focuses attention on ensuring the LEA and school have the required drivers in place to support the implementation of any particular evidence-based strategy. These drivers also help the SEA’s teams look at competency, organizational, and leadership structures in an LEA or school, as part of their effort to support continuous and sustainable improvement. Additionally, the SEA is partnering with the Center for Education Policy Research’s [Proving Ground](#) initiative to pilot school improvement interventions (focused at first on chronic absenteeism) and conduct rapid-cycle evaluations to iterate, improve, and ultimately scale those approaches that prove effective (p. 49 of [ESSA plan](#)).⁷



Rhode Island is manifesting Principle #9 in part by driving continuous improvement through ongoing, authentic stakeholder engagement (see [Principle #3](#)). All LEAs with CSI schools will establish Community Advisory Boards (CAB), which, at minimum, will provide feedback to their LEA on the development and implementation of school improvement plans, as well as present an annual report to the SEA and local school board on the status of each CSI school’s progress. SEA staff will also monitor the status and quality of LEA school improvement efforts, including meeting with each LEA three times each year to review progress toward improvement goals (pp. 52-55 [ESSA plan](#)).⁸

review progress toward improvement goals (pp. 52-55 [ESSA plan](#)).⁸



Tennessee has formed a state-level research practice partnership with Vanderbilt University. The [Tennessee Education Research Alliance](#) (TERA) has “developed a coherent research agenda aimed at building a body of knowledge that helps the state to better meet its school improvement objectives. With this goal of building the state’s capacity for continual improvement, [TERA] conducts its own independent studies and directs external research to provide timely information to state policymakers.”

Tennessee’s progress monitoring system fosters collaboration and coordination across federal programs (e.g., ESEA and IDEA) as part of a continuous and data-informed cycle of improvement. A risk analysis tool helps the SEA analyze data across 60 indicators to inform decisions about matching supports to schools and LEAs. Additionally, the SEA is empowering more localized decision-making through [ImpactTN](#), an online data platform that provides LEAs and schools nearly real-time disaggregated student data (pp. 140, 190-192 of [ESSA plan](#)).⁹

7 Ohio Department of Education. 2018. *Revised state template for the consolidated state plan: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, Ohio submission*. Columbus, OH: Author.

8 Rhode Island Department of Education. 2108. *Rhode Island’s Every Student Succeeds Act state plan*. Providence, RI: Author.

9 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.



In **Massachusetts**, the SEA’s [Statewide System of Support](#) (SSoS) leads the implementation, monitoring, continuous improvement, and rigorous evaluation of school improvement efforts. SSoS partners with the [Office of Planning and Research](#) (OPR) to provide direct assistance to districts and schools on a suite of tools and resources to support LEA and school improvement, including: an LEA/school [data reporting system](#) used to develop school/LEA profiles, [District Action and Research Tools](#) that can create user-friendly performance reports to track progress over time, an [Early Warning Indicator System](#) that provides data to help LEAs identify students who may need more support, and [Resource Allocation and District Action Reports](#) that support analysis of LEAs’ resource allocation, including comparisons across LEAs.¹⁰



Oklahoma is one example of how some SEAs have made explicit plans to continuously improve their state-level school improvement systems. Oklahoma plans to evaluate its school identification process before identifying its second cohort of CSI schools. This reevaluation will focus on both the accuracy of the identification process and whether the timing of the identification and improvement cycle is supporting and not hindering effective improvement planning and implementation (p. 87 [ESSA Plan](#)).¹¹

Supporting Targeted Support and Improvement Schools

- Although SEAs are not obligated under federal law to progress monitor or evaluate the implementation of TSI plans (except those funded in part with federal school improvement grants), there is nothing in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that prevents an SEA from doing so. **Like any school undertaking an improvement effort, TSI schools face implementation challenges and would benefit from strategic progress monitoring and timely implementation supports.** SEAs should consider how to maximize available resources to monitor, support, and evaluate the improvement efforts at TSI schools (and their LEAs)—and to differentiate the SEA approaches where necessary to account for the specific TSI context.
- Where resources and capacity are too limited to provide sufficient monitoring and support for TSI schools, **SEAs should consider how to leverage networks of TSI schools and their LEAs**, along with schools that have had greater success supporting similar student groups. With relatively light investments in guidance and technical assistance, network approaches—such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching’s [NICs model](#)—can test, refine, and spread effective approaches to improve outcomes for similarly situated students.

10 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. 2017. *Massachusetts consolidated state plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Malden, MA: Author.

11 Oklahoma Department of Education. 2017. *Oklahoma edge: Oklahoma ESSA consolidated state plan*. Oklahoma City, OK: Author.



Common Mistakes

Don't expect new answers if you keep asking the same questions. Although “building a learning culture” can seem overly abstract, there are concrete strategies SEAs can pursue. One critical strategy is to rethink the questions that SEA monitors ask LEA and school staff. Questions are powerful tools for signaling a learning mindset and helping build the learning and improving muscles for all those involved. Traditional, compliance-oriented monitoring might include questions like *“How many of the professional development trainings in your plan have you conducted?”* Learning-oriented monitoring, by contrast, might include questions such as *“What did you actually do in the trainings? Why? Where did it work? For whom? Why? Where did it not work as well? Why not there? What will you do next? Why? What do you need to be more successful in the future? What are you still wondering about?”*

Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Correcting the over-emphasis on compliance does not mean doing away with compliance altogether. Complying with financial rules, civil rights laws, and other legal and regulatory requirements are critically important and must continue even within a more learning-oriented system. The key is to find the right balance, so the compliance work focuses on the right things and is carried out in ways that do not obstruct the learning and improving process.



Recommended Resources

[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 thirteen [leverage points](#) in ESSA identified by Results for America to drive strong evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement practices. Leverage Points #2, #3, #6, and #7 are particularly relevant to Principle #9.

[Utilizing Integrated Resources to Implement the School and District Improvement Cycle and Supports: Guidance for Schools, Districts, and State Education Agencies](#), written by Alison Layland and Julie Corbett and published by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2017), describes how to implement a Strategic Performance Network, a “performance management approach that interconnects the SEA, LEA, and schools to address necessary improvements.” This report provides suggestions, tools, and templates for SEAs, LEAs, and schools to use to apply the Strategic Performance Network model and drive their continuous improvement cycle.

[Advancing School Improvement in SEAs through Research Practice Partnerships](#), published by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2017), highlights ways research practice partnerships (RPPs) can be leveraged by SEAs to support continuous improvement through the evaluation of their statewide systems of support and the impact of chosen school improvement interventions.

This report also includes examples of how Massachusetts, Tennessee, and Oregon have developed and used RPPs to support their school improvement efforts and shares lessons learned by each SEA in the process.

The [Roadmap for Effective Data Use and Research Partnerships between State Education Agencies and Education Researchers](#), published by the Data Quality Campaign (2017), emphasizes the importance of education research-practice partnerships (RPPs) to data-driven improvement and outlines eight key considerations for SEAs as they develop these partnerships. Building off this report, the Data Quality Campaign partnered with the American Educational Research Association and Knowledge Alliance to produce an [infographic](#) showing how effective RPPs support improved student outcomes.

[A Guide to State Educational Agency Oversight Responsibilities under ESSA: The Role of the State in the Local Implementation of ESSA Programs](#), written by Melissa Junge and Sheara Krvaric and published by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2017), discusses the relationship between SEA oversight responsibilities under ESSA and the implementation of ESSA at the LEA and school levels. After providing an overview of what SEA oversight must include under ESSA, the paper then goes on to detail thirteen specific areas of SEA responsibility (e.g., providing technical assistance; monitoring LEA grant programs) with examples of how SEAs may choose to carry them out.

[Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments](#), non-regulatory guidance published by the U.S. Department of Education (2016), not only explicates ESSA's definition of "evidence-based" but also details a five-step framework for selecting, implementing, improving, and evaluating evidence-based interventions, a key part of school support and improvement plans. Step 1 (Identify Local Needs) is directly relevant to [Principle #4](#); Step 2 (Select Relevant, Evidence-Based Interventions) to [Principle #5](#); and Steps 3-5 (Plan for Implementation; Implement; Examine and Reflect) to Principle #9.



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