



**EDUCATION
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GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR STATE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

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"How do we improve lower-performing schools?"

Education Commission of the States has received this question frequently since its founding over 50 years ago. While research and experience point to many strategies that may be effective — including high standards, quality curriculum, assessments, well-prepared teachers and students who are physically and mentally present — the ultimate responsibility for supporting improvement falls on state, district and community leaders.

Because state leaders who are informed and knowledgeable make better policy decisions, Education Commission of the States designed this brief to equip leaders with the knowledge they need to meet the great responsibility of ensuring a high-quality education for all students.

While the hard work of school improvement is often accomplished at the local level, state leaders play a crucial supporting role. Generally, state leaders can leverage policy to create an optimal environment for improvement in their state. In particular, state leaders may be best equipped to ensure equity statewide by focusing support and drawing resources to those schools or districts that need them most.

A recent Education Commission of the States' Thinkers Meeting brought together national experts and top education policy leaders (see the full list at the end of this brief) for a discussion of strategies to address lower-performing schools. This two-day meeting resulted in the key questions outlined in this brief.

Education Commission of the States' Thinkers Meetings convene some of the best and brightest minds on education policy issues and facilitate discussions around what is working and what state leaders can consider.

See examples of previous Thinkers Meeting papers [here](#) and [here](#).

What you will find in this brief:

Questions in four key areas that provide a road map for digging into your school improvement systems and orienting yourself to the process and context within your state. This brief also includes links to key related resources to further assist your efforts.

What you will not find in this brief:

All the answers. The following questions will guide you to a better understanding of the key aspects of your state's school improvement system so that you can collaborate with other leaders to develop unique solutions to unique problems.

To successfully address school improvement in your state, couple the core ideas (see box below) with knowledge of your state's systems. The following questions guide you to a better understanding of your state's accountability and school improvement systems, your roles and responsibilities in those systems, and how your state measures and builds on success.

CORE IDEAS

During this School Improvement Thinkers Meeting, attendees identified several key lessons about education policymaking for state leaders. These core ideas are reinforced by the **work** of Education Commission of the States and **others**, recently and **throughout history**. In short, the must-haves for every state are:

- A **vision** for education for all students: An ambitious north star that aligns with your state's values and helps leaders prioritize competing interests and set goals.
- **Goals**: Short-term, long-term and interim goals that get your state, its districts and schools, and its students closer to achieving the vision.
- **Trust** and **political will**: Leaders in different branches and levels of government trust one another's intentions and use their political capital to commit to long-term success over temporary political gain.
- **Coherence**: All stakeholders in your state, from those setting policy (state and local leaders) to those implementing policy (teachers, students and parents), are on the same page about where you're going and why.
- **Alignment**: All the pieces of education — teacher preparation and professional development, textbooks and curriculum, and standards and assessments — align for the most efficient, effective and fair education system.
- Clearly defined **roles** and **support systems**: All involved parties in your state understand the scope of their responsibilities, as well as who they can go to for help.



KEY QUESTIONS: Understanding the Basics

First, understand the systems and structures within which lower-performing schools can improve in your state.

Vision

- Does your state have a comprehensible [vision](#) for public education? How does your state make the vision easily accessible and publicly available?
- How does the vision address your state's commitment to [equity](#) in educational opportunities and outcomes?
- How do your state accountability system and longitudinal data system measure student and school progress toward that vision?

Performance and progress

- What are your [state accountability system's](#) performance and progress measures? How are they weighted?
- How are lower-performing schools categorized, and how do interventions and supports differ for each category?
- What triggers the identification of a school as in need of support and improvement?

Improvement strategies

- How does your state provide assistance to schools or districts in crafting a feasible improvement plan with a clear scope and defined action steps?
- What kind of support and resources does your state provide to lower-performing schools to help them improve? Who provides support?
- When schools or districts submit an improvement plan, who reviews it? What are the criteria for approval or rejection of that plan?
- When schools and districts struggle to improve after identification, what are the next, more rigorous steps to help them improve?
- How does your state use improvement plans to learn how to better support schools and districts?
- Do your state's policies permit [state-led interventions](#), such as innovation zones or takeovers, in lower-performing schools or districts?

If you are unsure of the answers to the questions above, who can you ask for more information? What support do they say they need from you?

KEY TERMS

Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools; 1) the lowest-performing 5 percent of all Title I schools, 2) all public high schools that graduate less than two-thirds of their students and 3) all public schools with a subgroup(s) performing at a level equal to the lowest 5 percent of schools and that do not show progress under a targeted support and improvement plan.

Targeted Support and Improvement schools; at least one subgroup of students consistently underperforms.

ESSA encourages states to use [evidence-based strategies](#) to address the needs of their lower-performing schools.

ESSA requires state accountability plans to include **five indicators**, or **measures of school performance**; 1) proficiency on assessments, 2) growth in proficiency in grades below high school or another academic indicator, 3) high school graduation rates, 4) progress of English learners toward proficiency and 5) at least one measure of school quality or student success.

Each of the academic indicators is given a **weight**, or how much the measure contributes to an overall rating of school performance.

KEY QUESTIONS: Roles, Relationships and Communication

Next, understand how to promote a more effective school improvement process in your state by ensuring that leaders operate with clearly defined roles, strong relationships and clear channels of communication.

Communication

- As a state policymaker, how do you effectively message your state's education vision and aligned strategies? When speaking about school improvement, how do you convey urgency while acknowledging that improvement is a long-term and continuous process?
- Do you or your staff members have a point of contact at your state education agency that you can consistently reach out to for more detailed information?
- How can you better support a positive political climate by building coalitions, addressing external pressures (such as budget shortfalls) and using your platform to spread key messages?

Roles, relationships and engagement

- What are the responsibilities of your state education agency, districts and schools in the improvement process? Who is authorized to do what? Are those roles clearly defined?
- Do you have strong, trusting relationships with other key education leaders in your state? Are you all aligned to the same vision and goals for public education?
- Is there a team or task force working on school improvement that you could join?
- What other government sectors (for example, public safety, public health or labor) could be involved in the school improvement process and better serve students and their families?
- Does your state have a framework to support or encourage public-private partnerships that could provide additional capacity, expertise and innovative ideas to schools and districts?

If you are unsure of the answers to the questions above, who can you ask for more information? What support do they say they need from you?

STATE EXAMPLES

ACROSS SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS: Texas' System of Great Schools Network

is an optional, technical support program that helps districts gain a clear picture of school performance while expanding access to great schools. Districts in the network “design and implement a continuous improvement process that annually evaluates school quality, parent demand, and neighborhood needs to take strategic action to both improve schools and provide parents with the schools and programs they desire.” Schools, districts and the state have clearly defined roles, activities and expectations.

ACROSS SCHOOLS AND PARTNERS: Nevada's Partnership Network

will connect high-need schools with nonprofit partners that will provide evidence-based approaches to improvement — with an external evaluator to determine how well these approaches are working, and with each other to



KEY QUESTIONS: Measuring and Understanding Your State’s Success

Now, consider what happens after your state identifies lower-performing schools and districts, and the work toward improvement begins. Consider how to assess the unique needs of the school community, how schools and districts use data to continuously evaluate and improve, and how your state supports schools and districts throughout the process.

Context

- What common characteristics or unique challenges do your state’s lower-performing schools share?
- What supports do school and district leaders and community [stakeholders](#) say they need to improve their school?

Continuous evaluation structures

- How do lower-performing schools and districts continuously evaluate their progress toward improvement? Are measures of progress aligned with your state’s accountability system?
- Who is involved in providing and receiving feedback throughout the process? How is feedback used to make improvements?

Data usage and connections

- Do leaders at all levels use data to evaluate progress and adjust course as needed?
- Does your state leverage public universities or other external research organizations to use state-collected data to inform school improvement?
- How does your state use its [P-20 data system](#) to determine effective and appropriate improvement strategies?
- Is there a system in place for identifying strong examples of school improvement?

If you are unsure of the answers to the questions above, who can you ask for more information? What support do they say they need from you?

STATE EXAMPLES

USING DATA:

[Mississippi’s LifeTracks](#) website connects data across the P-20 spectrum in one dashboard, reporting information on student demographics, educational progress and education and workforce outcomes. Policymakers can use LifeTracks to evaluate the efficacy of schools and colleges by examining the employability and earnings of Mississippians.

CONTINUOUS EVALUATION:

[Vermont’s Education Quality and Continuous Improvement Framework](#) provides “a collection of actions, guiding questions, resources, research summaries, and supports for Vermont districts and school systems” to continuously improve and ensure a high-quality education. The [theory of action](#) behind the framework provides a vision for education in Vermont and steps to achieve it.

KEY TERMS

GROWTH AND PROFICIENCY: Measuring proficiency provides you with information on how well students perform at a given point in time. Measuring growth provides you with information on students’ progress over time, typically by measuring how well they perform from one year to the next.

STATEWIDE LONGITUDINAL DATA SYSTEMS: Otherwise known as P-20 data systems, these connect data between core state agencies and between early learning, K-12, postsecondary and the workforce.

KEY QUESTIONS: Scaling and Sustaining Successful Efforts

Finally, understand how your state builds on experience, replicates successful school improvement efforts and ensures that progress is sustainable. Once you identify what's working, mechanisms are available to elevate successful examples and strategies and take them to other schools and districts.

Examples of success

- When schools or districts improve, how does your state reclassify them?
- For schools that improved and exited the process, what does your state do to ensure they still receive the resources and support they need to succeed?
- Who identifies school improvement success stories, and how are they elevated and disseminated across your state? What networks exist to spread best practices?
- How do you determine which successful strategies will work in which contexts and match appropriate strategies to appropriate locations?

Strong leadership

- As a state leader, how are you passing on institutional knowledge and opportunities to upcoming leaders in your state?
- Does your state have a model for developing and retaining **strong leaders** at the state, district and school levels? How does your state incentivize these leaders to locate where they are needed most?
- Do peer-to-peer learning opportunities exist for school and district leaders? Do opportunities exist for leaders to step out of their day-to-day context to gain perspective?

Long-term commitment

- Is everyone in your state fully committed to continuing this work long term? Whose commitment do you still need?
- Who else in your state is deeply invested in this issue, and are they prepared to lead efforts to improve schools?

If you are unsure of the answers to the questions above, who can you ask for more information? What support do they say they need from you?

STATE EXAMPLE

ELEVATING SUCCESS: [Kentucky's Best Practices Spotlight](#) recognizes schools and districts that are successfully using strategies to prepare students for college and career. Highlighted schools and districts receive public recognition and a monetary award, and their strategies are added to a [searchable database](#).



School Improvement Thinkers Meeting Participants

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