ACCELERATE DC
A VISION FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Sept. 30, 2024

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

The DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education's (OSSE) vision is to close opportunity gaps and ensure learners of all ages and backgrounds are prepared to succeed in school and in life. The agency's strategic plan serves as the blueprint for achieving that vision. One of the five pillars of OSSE's current strategic plan is to "achieve equitable outcomes for all students." The school improvement initiative is a cornerstone of this pillar. Centered in how we provide structures of both accountability and support to drive improvement in the District's lowest-performing schools, OSSE's Accelerate DC roadmap for school improvement has the potential to improve academic outcomes and close opportunity gaps for some of our highest-need students who are educated in these schools.

Under the leadership of Mayor Muriel Bowser, we are committed to strengthening our state level approach to school improvement. OSSE has the opportunity to reimagine school improvement in the District and identifying a vision for enhanced supports, oversight, and accountability to help accelerate student learning and close gaps across student groups in the District's lowest performance schools.

This report describes OSSE's historical and existing school improvement work and articulates a research-backed path forward to maximize the impact of this initiative:

Part I: Federal Mandate

Part one of this report lays out the federal requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to which OSSE must adhere for implementing both a statewide accountability system and the agency's school improvement initiative. It describes the mechanics of how school accountability scores are calculated, how these scores translate into federal school improvement designations, and the exit criteria a school must meet in order to exit these designations. Furthermore, this section offers important historical context for understanding how OSSE has implemented the school improvement initiative and met federal requirements since the passage of ESSA in 2015. Key takeaways include:

- OSSE has maintained a consistent focus on meeting federal requirements.
  - Following the passage of ESSA, OSSE's school improvement work has been guided by meeting the expectations laid out in this federal law.
  - This has included a process of designating schools based upon the results of OSSE's accountability system and requiring them to conduct a needs assessment, resource equity analysis, and improvement planning, supported by targeted funding and oversight.
- OSSE has utilized appropriate federal resources available to meet these federal requirements and has prioritized Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools.
  - Federal resources allow OSSE to meet minimum federal requirements but do not provide for additional supports.
  - The federal funds support grants to designated schools for the implementation of school improvement plans and 50% capacity for one full time employee.
  - OSSE has focused its technical assistance and monitoring capacity as well as the federal grant funds on the highest-need schools, those designated as CSI schools.
- The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the District's federal designation cycles.

- o The first cohort of schools was designated under OSSE's ESSA-aligned accountability and school improvement systems in December of 2018.
- o The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures disrupted the school improvement process. Interrupted and limited statewide assessment administration and accountability score calculations contributed to limited plan implementation and delayed the next cycle of designations.
- o As a result, OSSE has yet to complete a full, uninterrupted three-year cycle of support and accountability for designated schools under ESSA.

Part II: Key Findings

Part two of this report provides a concise summary of key findings from the extensive stakeholder engagement and research on national models and best practices. OSSE conducted this work with support from the Region 4 Comprehensive Center, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and WestEd. OSSE and its partners reviewed state education agency (SEA) websites and school improvement literature as well as conducted interviews with SEA staff across 28 states to assess and compile best practices from other jurisdictions. In addition, OSSE engaged more than 60 District stakeholders through listening sessions and interviews to inform our proposal for the path forward. Key takeaways include:

- Clear expectations from the state with aligned models of support must come first.
    - o A strong school improvement program should start with clear expectations from the SEA, communicated through a framework that establishes a vision and identifies the key drivers for improvement.
    - o Following the development of such a framework, the SEA should establish a system of support that is aligned to the framework to drive rapid improvement across designated schools, prior to pursuing more rigorous interventions.
- The field's approach to more rigorous interventions has evolved.
    - o While states are required under ESSA to implement more rigorous interventions for persistently low-performing schools, the leading practices in this space have evolved significantly over the last several decades.
    - o The approach for doing so has shifted from state-directed takeovers to models that allow for more local flexibility and autonomy and prioritize enhanced support prior to pursuing governance changes.
- DC stakeholders expressed a strong interest in more robust supports and streamlined requirements.
    - o Stakeholders expressed a strong desire and need for more robust supports from OSSE, including around the use of data to evaluate needs and set goals; professional learning opportunities for instructional excellence; resources to assist with the implementation of evidence-based strategies; and continued access to direct supports currently offered by OSSE, such as the high-impact tutoring initiative.
    - o School leaders also highlighted the multiple planning and reporting requirements across OSSE, DC Public Schools (DCPS), and the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) that would benefit from continued cross-agency efforts to streamline and align these requirements.

Part III: Vision for Acceleration

The final section of the report lays out a new vision for school improvement that is grounded in clear expectations for how to drive rapid improvement, a portfolio of coordinated supports to help schools identify and implement evidence-based strategies for improvement, and increasing levels of support and accountability for persistently low-performing schools. This section also outlines plans for coordination with DCPS and PCSB, as well as the resources and capacity that other state education agencies have leveraged to implement more comprehensive strategies for school improvement. Lastly, this section provides a timeline for the path forward under different scenarios and underscores the importance of conducting further engagement to codify OSSE's approach to the final step in the school improvement process of more rigorous interventions for persistently low-performing schools, which would be rolled out for the first time following designations in 2027. Highlights include:

- A new vision and theory of action for school improvement
  - The new vision and theory of action are grounded in setting clear expectations for schools around the key drivers for improvement and expanding access for all designated schools to more robust supports to both develop and implement strong plans for improvement.
  - More rigorous interventions must follow increasing levels of support and requirements for persistently low-performing schools.
- A new, research-backed framework for setting clear expectations, "Accelerate DC"
  - OSSE has established a new approach to school improvement that is informed by a research-backed framework established by WestEd, implemented by multiple states, and modified for DC's unique context.
  - The new framework establishes five domains that schools should focus on to drive improvement and improve student learning outcomes: 1) transformational leadership; 2) talent development; 3) academic excellence; 4) strong school climate; and 5) operational health.
- A plan to strengthen coordination with PCSB and DCPS
  - OSSE has identified multiple opportunities to strengthen coordination with PCSB and DCPS in order to align our respective accountability and school improvement structures while also streamlining requirements for schools, including developing consistent goals and aligned templates, coordinating oversight where appropriate, as well as identifying more clearly defined roles for PCSB and DCPS engagement in OSSE's school improvement process.
- A suite of new potential supports to accelerate school improvement
  - OSSE has identified a robust portfolio of new potential supports that could benefit all designated schools and be accompanied by increasing levels of accountability.
  - These supports could include a new competitive local grant fund for implementing evidence-based improvement strategies; planning supports to assess school needs, identify root cases, establish clear goals, and identify evidence-based strategies for improvement; peer learning opportunities for school leadership; and/or leadership coaching throughout the three-year cycle for redesignated schools.
  - Under the full implementation of Accelerate DC, schools would receive scaffolded supports and requirements based on their designation category. This would range from light-touch

and optional supports for schools designated as Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools to heavier-touch supports with more oversight from OSSE for CSI schools, and the greatest level of both supports and oversight for redesignated CSI schools, who then become Intensive Support and Improvement (ISI) schools.

- Stronger alignment with OSSE supports and funding streams beyond school improvement
  - In addition to building out this portfolio of new supports, OSSE would work to more tightly align the agency's existing resources as well as potential future opportunities to support the effective implementation of school improvement plans for our lowest-performing schools.
  - This approach would allow us to more strategically channel existing and future agency resources and expertise, such as our high-impact tutoring supports, career and technical education (CTE) grant opportunities, science of reading trainings, and school climate supports toward the schools with the greatest needs where their school improvement plans also demonstrate gaps in the aligned area.
- A plan to develop a more rigorous intervention model tailored to the DC context
  - The report identifies a menu of options for what is possible based upon OSSE's school improvement capacity, the evolving approaches to more rigorous intervention models in other states, and the critical importance of grounding the path forward in the context of a specific locality.
  - OSSE strongly recommends conducting further engagement with local stakeholders to finalize the right approach for DC prior to its first cycle of implementation in 2027.
- An outline for the capacity and resources leveraged by other states to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies.
  - Multiple states have dedicated local resources to support a coordinated system of support, requirements, and monitoring for a state's designated schools.
  - For example, Rhode Island, with a public school population of approximately 136,000 students, has a core team of seven team members to manage their robust school improvement process and grant program, and Massachusetts, with a public school population of approximately 900,000, has a core team of nine state employees and nearly 20 consultants to manage their robust school improvement process, including multiple supporting grant programs.
- Next steps
  - Implementation of the new framework, Accelerate DC, and corresponding required planning resources will launch in December 2024 with the next designation cycle.
  - Outlined additional supports and accountability could launch as early as 2026.
  - Implementation of more rigorous interventions would begin following the 2027 designation cycle.

Part I: Background

The History of OSSE's Accountability System

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed in 2015 and requires that each state develop a plan to identify schools for support designations.[1] ESSA requires states to measure student academic achievement, student growth, progress in achieving English language proficiency, graduation rates, and one or more indicators of school quality and student success that is valid, reliable, and comparable.[2] Under the District's ESSA State Plan (State Plan) that was approved by the U.S. Department of Education (USED), OSSE established a federally required state accountability system that assesses the performance of public schools across a number of metrics and indicators aligned to these requirements and tailored to the specific context of the District. In 2022, the accountability system was amended by OSSE and re-approved by USED. Table 1 below provides a full timeline of the system's development and implementation.

Table 1: Timeline for Development and Implementation of OSSE's Accountability System

December 2015	ESSA is signed into law.
August 2017	The District's State Plan was first approved by the DC State Board of Education (SBOE) and U.S. Department of Education (USED) and was used to designate schools and publish the DC School Report Card in December 2018 and December 2019, using data from the 2017–18 and 2018–19 school years, respectively.
March 2020	USED granted the District and all 50 states accountability and assessment waivers due to the COVID-19 pandemic; there is no statewide testing or reporting of results.
March 2021	USED granted the District an accountability and assessment waiver due to the COVID-19 pandemic; there is no statewide testing or reporting of results.
March 2022	The District submitted and received approval for an Addendum to its State Plan, which OSSE used in the 2022–23 school year to make school designations using data from the 2021–22 school year.
June 2023	The District submitted an Amendment to its State Plan; it was first approved by the SBOE in July 2022 and by USED in June 2023.

Changes to state accountability systems take years and multiple levels of engagement, review, and approval before submission to USED. The 2022 amended plan incorporated the thoughtful feedback OSSE received during years of public engagement from parents, educators, advocates, and the State Board of Education (SBOE) that produced hundreds of pieces of written feedback and public comments for OSSE to consider in advance of finalization and submission to USED.

The amended plan increased the focus on student growth and on students who are economically disadvantaged, as well as added metrics for high school growth, dual enrollment participation, and the five-

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[1] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(D) (2024).

[2] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(B) (2024).

year graduation rate. These changes to the state accountability system were designed to center students furthest from opportunity and to reward schools with high growth in order to disrupt the relationship between the socioeconomic status of students served and the accountability score.[3]

The approved accountability system is used to determine the lowest scoring 5% of schools required to receive support and intervention from the state.

The Current Accountability System

Under the state accountability system established in the most recent version of the State Plan, OSSE will designate its third cohort of CSI schools in December 2024 using the school accountability scores. A school's accountability score is calculated based on the number of metric points earned across all available metrics in the state accountability system. Metrics are arranged in grade span frameworks (i.e., Elementary School without Pre-K, Elementary School with Pre-K, Middle School, High School, and Alternative School) and metric points are weighted by student group.[4] These accountability scores are ultimately used to identify the lowest performing 5% of schools eligible for support and federal funds (the Investment in Schools (IIS) grant).

Metrics & Student Group Weights

The below table illustrates the metrics in the District's state accountability system, as well as the frameworks under which they are included. Each framework assigns a different number of possible points for each metric. More detailed information on how each of the metrics are calculated and defined can be found in the 2024 DC School Report Card Technical Guide.

Table 2: District of Columbia Accountability System Metrics

Category	Metric	Elementary School without Pre-K	Elementary School with Pre-K	Middle School	High School
Academic Achievement	Meeting or Exceeding Expectations	20	20	20	15
	Approaching, Meeting or Exceeding Expectations	10	10	10	10
Academic Growth	Median Growth Percentile	25	25	25	N/A
	Growth to Proficiency	25	25	25	12.5
Student Attendance	Chronic Absenteeism	5	4	5	7.5
	Chronic Absenteeism in Pre-K	N/A	1	N/A	N/A
	Attendance Growth	5	4	5	7.5

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[3] This effort reduced the correlation coefficient between accountability score and the percent of students who are economically disadvantaged served at school changed from -0.69 in 2019 to -.51 in 2023.

[4] The accountability system by which scores are calculated for Alternative Schools has not been employed since 2019. OSSE engaged stakeholders in a process to update its Alternative School Framework in 2024; these updates will be employed with SY24–25 data in December 2025.

Re-Enrollment	Re-Enrollment	5	3	5	5
Early Childhood Environment	CLASS	N/A	3	N/A	N/A
College and Career Readiness	AP/IB/Dual Enrollment (DE) Participation	N/A	N/A	N/A	7.5
	AP/IB Performance	N/A	N/A	N/A	5
	SAT College Ready Benchmark	N/A	N/A	N/A	5
English Language Proficiency	ACCESS Growth	5	5	5	5
Graduation	Four-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate	N/A	N/A	N/A	11
	Five-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate	N/A	N/A	N/A	9
TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS		**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

The below table illustrates the student group weights that are used when calculating metric scores in the accountability system.

Table 3: District of Columbia Accountability Student Group Weights

Student Group	Percentage of Overall Score
All Students	30%
Economically Disadvantaged	40%
Race/Ethnicity	15%[5]
Students with Disabilities	10%
English Learners	5%

Calculation of School Accountability Scores

OSSE takes the following steps when calculating a school's accountability score to make designations for school support:

1. Calculate metric scores for each student group (e.g., students with disabilities) based on floors and targets for the metric.[6]

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[5] This 15% is divided evenly between all race/ethnicity student groups present; therefore, in a school with more student groups present, each racial/ethnic student group will have a lower weight than schools with fewer racial/ethnic student groups present.

[6] Most floors and targets are set relative to the 10th and 90th percentile of performance for the District for each metric, respectively. Schools that fall between the floor and the target receive a proportion of the available points for the metric; the closer to the target, the more points the school will earn. OSSE calculates floors and targets for all student groups by the grade band of the framework. OSSE reset floors and targets in 2023 using the data from the 2022–23 school year.

2. Combine the student group scores into single metric scores for each category (e.g., student growth scores, graduation rates, attendance growth scores). Student group scores are weighted before being aggregated (see Table 3 above for student group weights).
3. Calculate school accountability scores by multiplying each metric score by the weight for each metric (e.g., Median Growth Percentile (MGP) accounts for 25% for the accountability score), adding values together, and dividing the total metric score by the total available points for the school. [7]
4. Apply framework weights (if applicable). [8]
5. Makes designations for school support.

School Improvement Designations

Consistent with federal requirements under ESSA, OSSE makes the following school improvement designations (based on accountability score calculations). [9] Each designation status is defined as follows:

- **Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI):** Title I schools that score in the bottom 5% of total number of points on the accountability framework within the same grade span/accountability system level.
- **Comprehensive Support and Improvement – Graduation (CSI-Grad):** High schools where both their 4-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate and 5-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate fall below 67%.
- **Target Support and Improvement (TSI):** Schools with a student group accountability score that is at or below the threshold identified for the lowest performing 5% of schools within the same grade span/accountability system for two consecutive years.
- **Intensive Support and Improvement (ISI):** Any school that was designated as CSI in the previous designation cycle, and remains in the lowest performing 5% of schools, as determined by accountability score. This designation is officially a subset of CSI.
- **Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI):** Schools with a student group accountability score that is at or below the threshold identified for the lowest performing 5% of schools within the same grade span/accountability system—and the school was identified as TSI in the previous accountability cycle.
- **Comprehensive Support – Student Group (CSI-SG):** Any school identified for Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) that does not improve sufficiently to meet exit criteria after three years.

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[7] Schools must be eligible for more than 50 points in order to receive an accountability score (so a pre-K only school will not receive an accountability score).

[8] For schools that serve multiple grade bands (most commonly schools serving both elementary and middle grades), OSSE calculates an overall rating based on the percentage of students in each grade band.

[9] *See* Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d) (2024).

- **Monitored Improvement Status (MIS):** School was designated as CSI in the previous designation cycle and is not in the lowest performing 5% of schools but has not met exit criteria.

Exit Criteria

In addition to outlining the identifying criteria for school improvement designations, OSSE must also outline exit criteria, which schools must meet at the end of a cycle in order to exit their designation status. Once a school has been designated for support, they enter a three-year designation cycle and, if they are designated a CSI school, they are eligible for federal funding through the IIS grant.[10]

For schools designated in 2024 and beyond, schools will exit CSI status if they meet all of the of the following conditions:

1. The school receives an accountability score higher than the initial cut-point that was used to make designations for CSI in the cycle of their designation;
2. The school receives an accountability score which is higher than the new lowest performing 5% cut-score; and
3. The school increases its rate of students meeting or exceeding expectations on the statewide English language arts (ELA) and math assessments above the respective rates from the year in which the school received its original CSI designation.

In order to exit CSI-Grad-designation status, the school must: (1) increase its 4- and 5-year graduation rates so that at least one is higher than 67% and (2) both rates must not be below the rate when the school was designated for support.

In order to exit CSI-SG-designation status, the school must: (1) receive a student group score that is higher than the initial cut-point score that was used to make designations for CSI in the cycle of their designation for the student group for which they were designated and (2) the school must receive a student group score for the student group for which they were designated that is higher than the new lowest 5% cut-score.

In order to exit TSI- or ATSI-designation status, the school must show student group progress for two of the three years in which it has been designated.

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[10] Schools were first designated by OSSE in 2018. CSI schools designated in 2018–19 entered the third year of their three-year school improvement cycle in the 2022–23 school year and received IIS grant funding that year. Due to the impact of the pandemic, USED granted OSSE a waiver for accountability requirements in the 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years. While CSI-designated schools continued to receive funding during the pandemic, those two years were considered "null years." CSI schools designated in 2022 will be in the first year of a two-year school improvement cycle that will end in 2024 and are eligible for IIS grant funding each of the two years. The next full three-year school improvement cycle will begin in 2024 (based on data from the 2023–24 school year).

Timeline for Accountability Score Development

Each year, OSSE administers a process to ensure that the agency is capturing the highest quality data from LEAs. This process is known as Metric Calculation Confirmation (MCC), and allows LEAs to review the calculations and metrics used on the DC School Report Card and OSSE to calculate accountability scores for each school.

OSSE starts the MCC process over the summer with a series of phases that last through early fall. Each phase of the MCC process contains a different set of data and metrics to be validated by heads of school. Following the MCC process, OSSE transmits a summative file to LEAs with the data and metrics for all their schools along with final accountability scores for schools. OSSE then informs designated schools and their LEAs of their respective statuses based on the final accountability scores. This information is released to LEAs at the end of November just before OSSE publicly releases and publishes it on the DC School Report Card in early December. The final data files related to the DC School Report Card are also published on the OSSE website.

Current and Future Designations

OSSE designated schools for support in 2018 and 2022. The below table represents CSI-designated schools.

Table 4: Comprehensive School Improvement (CSI)-Designation Cycles

CSI Cohort	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
2018[11]	Y1	Y*	Y*	Y2	Y3	Optional Y4			
2022[12]					Y1	Y2			
2024							Y1	Y2	Y3

Due to the impact of the pandemic, USED granted OSSE a waiver for accountability requirements in the 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years. While CSI-designated schools continued to receive funding during the pandemic, those two years were considered "null years."

OSSE will make school improvement designations in December 2024 based on data from the 2023–24 school year. These schools will represent the lowest-performing 5% of schools (10 schools total (2 high schools, 8 middle/elementary schools)) and will receive the federal grant funds designated for the lowest-performing schools.

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[11] 2018 CSI-designated schools include: Anacostia High School, Ballou High School, Cardozo Education Campus, Democracy Prep PCS – Congress Heights (now closed), Eliot-Hine Middle School, Ideal Academy PCS (now closed), Kramer Middle School, Langley Elementary School, Moten Elementary School, and Sousa Middle School.

[12] 2022 CSI-designated schools include: Anacostia High School, Ballou High School, Johnson Middle School, Kelly Miller Middle School, King Elementary School, Kramer Middle School, Moten Elementary School, Sousa Middle School, Eagle Academy PCS - Capitol Riverfront (now closed), and KIPP DC - Inspire Academy.

ESSA Requirements for School Improvement and Support

In addition to accountability system requirements and designation of schools for improvement, ESSA also requires state education agencies (SEAs), local education agencies (LEAs), and schools to participate in activities designed to offer support and accountability for designated schools.[13]

Planning Requirements and Oversight

SEAs are required by ESSA to play a stronger oversight function with CSI schools than with TSI schools.[14] For CSI schools, the SEA must approve each school's school improvement plan (SIP) while also monitoring and periodically reviewing each of the plans.[15] The SEA should complete this work in collaboration with the LEA, but for the CSI schools, it is the SEA's responsibility to approve and monitor the plans.[16] The SEA responsibility differs for TSI and ATSI schools, where it must ensure that the plan is completed but does not formally approve the plan or monitor its implementation.[17] The law allows SEA discretion around the support and oversight provided to CSI-Grad schools but does not direct any specific measures to be taken separately for these schools.[18]

ESSA requires the LEA to partner with stakeholders (including principals and other school leaders, teachers, and parents) to develop and implement a SIP to improve student outcomes for all CSI schools.[19] This plan must be informed by student performance and a school-level needs assessment.[20] The plan must include evidence-based interventions and identify resource inequities.[21] In the case of the CSI schools, the LEA is charged with developing the school improvement plans, but the LEA's oversight function is more focused on the TSI and ATSI schools.[22] For these schools, the LEA must approve and monitor the schools' plans, identify resource inequities, and provide ongoing support.[23] The overall responsibility for TSI and ATSI schools remain with the LEA. See Table 5 below for a summary of plan development, approval, and monitoring responsibilities across each designation type for both the SEA and LEA.

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[13] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d) (2024).

[14] *Id*.

[15] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(1)(B)(v–vi)(2024).

[16] *Id*.

[17] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(2) (2024).

[18] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(1)(C)(i) (2024).

[19] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(1)(B) (2024).

[20] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. §§ 6311(d)(1)(B)(i), (iii) (2024).

[21] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. §§ 6311(d)(1)(B)(ii), (iv) (2024).

[22] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d) (2024).

[23] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(2)(B) (2024).

Table 5: School Designations and Responsible Parties for School Improvement Plans

School Designation	Plan Development	Plan Approval	Plan Monitoring
CSI and ISI Schools	Schools & LEA	SEA	SEA
CSI Grad Schools	Schools & LEA	LEA	LEA
TSI and ATSI Schools	School	LEA	LEA

School Improvement Federal Funding

The SEA is also responsible for ensuring funding for LEAs that service high numbers or a high percentage of elementary and secondary schools implementing plans. The SEA must demonstrate a strong commitment to using funds to enable the lowest-performing schools to improve student achievement and student outcomes. This can be executed through formula or competitive grants. However, those grants may not exceed four years, including the planning year. The grants must be used to support the implementation of SIPs in CSI and/or TSI schools. Once these funds have been granted, the SEA must not decrease the amount of funds each LEA receives below the amount received by the LEA for the preceding fiscal year. SEAs are also required to ensure allocations represent the geographic diversity of the state, the allotments are of sufficient size to enable an LEA to effectively implement selected evidence-based strategies, monitor and evaluate the use of funds by LEAs, and reduce barriers to provide operational flexibility for schools in the implementation of improvement activities.

Additional Supports and Intervention

Further, the law states that an SEA is responsible for establishing statewide exit criteria and determining "more rigorous State-determined action, such as the implementation of interventions (which may include addressing school-level operations)."[24] Additionally, when a school does not improve within a state-determined number of years, the state "must provide technical assistance to each [LEA] in the State serving a significant number of schools implementing [CSI] plans … or schools implementing targeted support and improvement plans,"[25] and "may take action to initiate additional improvement in any [LEA] with a significant number of schools that are consistently identified by the State for comprehensive support and improvement … and not meeting exit criteria established by the State … and consistent with State law, establish alternative, evidence-based State-determined strategies that can be used by local educational agencies to assist a school identified for comprehensive support and improvement…"[26] This element of the law gives OSSE the authority and directive to increase the rigor of support and interventions for LEAs with multiple schools not exiting CSI status.

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[24] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(3)(A)(i) (2024).

[25] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(3)(A)(iii) (2024).

[26] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(3)(B) (2024).

Looking Back: Historical School Improvement Structures

Historically, OSSE's school improvement work has been guided by federal ESSA requirements and included a rigorous process of needs assessment, resource analysis, and improvement planning, supported by targeted funding and continuous oversight. OSSE has relied on federal IIS funds amounting to approximately $2 million annually; OSSE chose to limit the IIS grant funding to a formula grant for schools designated for CSI for an annual grant allocation averaging around $200,000 per school per year. LEAs were required to use OSSE-developed templates for CSI and CSI-Grad schools to complete these requirements, while TSI and ATSI schools were encouraged, but not mandated to do so. To provide guidance and flexibility, OSSE named three categories (people, instruction, and structures) for school improvement plans (SIPs) to address. SIPs must also explain how newly implemented evidence-based strategies and interventions in each of these areas drive the changes needed for each school's individual context. This approach has maximized the impact of limited federal resources, seeking to drive improvements in the schools most in need. Throughout its existence, OSSE has strategically funded schools designated for improvement under ESSA, and the below activities reflect OSSE's work aligned with the current ESSA requirements:

First Cohort of Schools Designated Under ESSA	
2018-2019	• OSSE designates the first cohort of CSI, CSI-Grad, and TSI schools under the current ESSA requirements in December 2018. • All designated schools develop school improvement plans (SIPs). • CSI schools receive federal school improvement grant funds and must submit their SIPs to OSSE for approval, inclusive of a needs assessment and resource equity analysis.
2019-2020 & 2020-2021	• All designated schools implement their improvement plans while also navigating the immense effects of COVID and school closure on their school community. • Statewide assessments are suspended in both years due to COVID. • OSSE conducts progress monitoring for CSI schools.
2021-2022	• Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education (USED) grants OSSE a waiver from accountability requirements for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. • Existing activities for CSI, CSI-Grad, and TSI schools are extended for a fourth year. • OSSE continues to fund CSI schools for a fourth year.
Second Cohort of Schools Designated Under ESSA	
2022-2023	• OSSE designates the second cohort of CSI, CSI-Grad, TSI, and ATSI schools a year later than planned due to COVID, in December 2022, without academic growth data. • All designated schools develop SIPs. • CSI and CSI-Grad schools submit SIPs to OSSE for approval. CSI school SIPs must also include a needs assessment and resource equity analysis. • CSI schools receive federal school improvement grant funds.
2023-2024	• All designated schools implement SIPs on a condensed, two-year cycle. • OSSE conducts progress monitoring for CSI and CSI-Grad schools.

As this timeline illustrates, OSSE has yet to complete a full, uninterrupted three-year cycle of support and accountability for designated schools since implementing the ESSA-directed accountability and school improvement systems in 2018. This is due to the disruptions caused by COVID, including two years of waivers from the federal accountability requirements, which then resulted in a condensed two-year timeline for the subsequent designation cycle, occurring a year late in 2022 and not informed by growth data. Nonetheless, throughout these periods, OSSE has continued to be guided by federal requirements and ensured compliance with federal law by mandating that all designated schools develop and implement SIPs. For CSI schools, OSSE has also enforced the following:

- **Needs Assessment**: Each designated school conducted a comprehensive needs assessment, gathering input from stakeholders, reviewing data, and identifying root causes of underperformance. OSSE provided mandatory templates for the needs assessment, Resource Equity Analysis, and SIPs, ensuring consistency and adherence to federal guidelines.
- **Resource Equity Analysis**: For LEAs with more than one school, OSSE required a Resource Equity Analysis to document expenditures and identify disparities in resource allocation. This analysis documented expenditures and identified disparities in resource allocation across schools.
- **School Improvement Plan (SIP)**: Schools were required to develop an SIP based on their needs assessment and Resource Equity Analysis. These plans must outline specific, evidence-based strategies for improvement, and were subject to approval by OSSE.
- **Investment in Schools (IIS) Grant**: Schools submitted an IIS grant application, aligning their budgets with the SIPs and focusing federal funds on the most critical areas of need. Over three years, OSSE invested approximately $200,000 per school annually in the lowest-performing schools.
- **Monitoring**: OSSE conducted periodic monitoring of SIP implementation, ensuring that schools adhered to their plans and made progress towards their improvement goals. OSSE offered ongoing technical assistance to LEAs and schools, helping them navigate the requirements, complete their assessments and plans, and effectively utilize the IIS grant funds.

Part II: Strategic Planning, Research, and Engagement

Introduction

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) aims to improve guidance and support for schools designated for improvement under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), particularly Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools. To enhance school improvement strategies, OSSE, in partnership with the Region 4 Comprehensive Center, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and WestEd, has researched best practices from other jurisdictions. OSSE reviewed state education agency (SEA) websites and school improvement literature and conducted interviews with SEA staff across 28 states, including Massachusetts, Tennessee, and Rhode Island. In addition, OSSE engaged more than 60 District stakeholders through listening sessions and interviews, including with: teachers and principals serving on OSSE's Superintendent Advisory Councils; principals or executive leaders of both charter and DCPS schools currently designated for improvement by OSSE, designated as Bold Performance schools by EmpowerK12, and implementing an XQ school redesign model; District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) Instructional Superintendents; and LEA leaders, students, and individuals from external organizations with deep histories, commitment, and knowledge of DC's schools, teachers, and students. Highlights from this research are outlined below and the complete reports can be found in the appendix.

Research & Landscape Analysis Findings

- **Clear SEA Expectations**: Refining state-level school improvement support starts with assessing the expectations and priorities set by the SEA. The Center for School Turnaround and Improvement identified four domains of rapid school improvement as a framework for rapid improvement to enhance SEA support. This framework helps establish a clear vision and structure for technical assistance to LEAs and schools. Examples include the Texas Education Agency's Effective Schools Framework and the Rhode Island Department of Education's School Improvement Framework, which outline key practices to aid district and school improvement efforts.
- **Models of State Support**: Selecting or developing a framework for school improvement should guide the model for state support, typically involving collaboration between SEAs, LEAs, and external partners due to limited SEA resources. States often expand their capacity by partnering with external providers. For example, Rhode Island leverages its Rhode Island Practitioner's Guide to School Improvement 2019-2020 for technical assistance, Louisiana employs School Improvement Best Practices and specialists for curriculum-focused support, and Illinois uses IL-EMPOWER, which aids CSI and TSI schools with planning and professional learning, supported by a list of approved vendors for various services.
- **Leverage Funding**: There are several potential strategies an SEA can use to support implementation of its school improvement framework, including leveraging funding. Beyond the strategic design of the federal school improvement grant, SEAs can offer financial planning tools to help facilitate strategic budgeting and equitable resource allocation as well as guidance and support to LEAs for utilizing existing fund sources, such as Title I funds, to support implementation of their SIPs. New Jersey has done this with their Maximizing Federal Funds Guidance. States can also establish

competitive grant programs to supplement the federal funds available for school improvement. Massachusetts has established competitive grant programs with clearly defined parameters using only state funds, while Colorado has established a single, consolidated grant program that is available to federally and state designated schools using both federal and state funds.

- **Monitoring School Improvement**: SEAs are required to monitor LEA compliance with ESSA. At a minimum, they must approve and then monitor the implementation of school improvement plans. SEA monitoring capacity can also be broadened to work with LEAs in real time to support data collection, analysis, reflection, and course correction to strengthen implementation efforts, encourage continuous improvement, and enhance collaboration to achieve results. Massachusetts and Tennessee are among a handful of states that have been funded to build a robust progress-monitoring system that includes regular feedback loops and external evaluation support. Components of monitoring systems can include the development of progress indicators and the design and implementation of research studies on local practices, successes, and challenges.

- **Alternative Governance and More Rigorous Intervention Options**: ESSA mandates that SEAs set exit criteria for CSI schools to be met within a state-determined number of years, with more rigorous interventions if criteria are not met. If schools remain in CSI status, SEAs may impose sanctions, offer alternative structures, or provide intensive support. For example, some states like Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Tennessee have tried state takeovers, which have shown limited positive effects and often target predominantly Black districts.[27] Alternatively, many states such as Rhode Island are shifting towards increasing local flexibility and autonomy while focusing on targeted, high-leverage interventions and enhanced support. (See the "More Rigorous Intervention" section in Part III for additional detail and examples.)

- **High-Leverage Strategies**: Research highlights several high-leverage strategies for SEAs to support LEAs in implementing effective, evidence-based practices, including diagnosing student learning needs, providing rigorous instruction, and supporting school leader development. ESSA mandates that schools conduct local needs assessments to guide improvement plans, with SEAs offering support through best practices and state resources, such as Colorado's Unified Improvement Plan and Oregon's Student Success Plans. SEAs also help CSI schools implement evidence-based interventions linked to needs assessments, exemplified by California's organizational tools and Massachusetts' Turnaround Practices Field Guide. States like Delaware and Wisconsin have implemented school leadership development programs through the Governor's Institute for School Leadership and the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute.

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[27] Beth E. Schueler & Joshua F. Bleiberg, *Evaluating Education Governance: Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement?*, Journal of Policy Analysis & Management, 162-192 (Feb. 10, 2022), https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/schueler/files/schuelerbleiberg_jpam_takeovers.pdf.

Stakeholder Listening Sessions and Interview Findings

- **Learn from Successes**: Participants named bright spots in designated schools such as staff/school culture, student engagement, differentiating instruction, and student academic growth that serve as a reminder of the strengths on which to build further success. Furthermore, a sense of belonging was described as key to school communities for students, teachers, and families.

- **Leverage Data to Understand and Improve**: Diagnostic data allows schools to differentiate instruction and target support to meet students' needs. Participants noted the importance of using data to identify student needs and tailor support accordingly.

- **Build Capacity in Instructional Excellence**: Professional learning around content area knowledge and effective instruction is seen as an important tool for school improvement and an opportunity for OSSE to supplement LEA offerings. Participants also noted the importance of helping teachers develop deep content knowledge and the high value to new teachers of observing veteran teachers in the classroom.

- **Prioritize Support for Implementation Fidelity**: Schools implementing evidence-based strategies would benefit from additional implementation support to ensure fidelity of implementation. Participants identified challenges (such as changes to school schedules or staffing needs) they encountered in implementing complex improvement strategies to ensure the success of evidence-based interventions; furthermore, participants explicitly requested SEA support in addressing these implementation challenges.

- **Provide Individual Expert Consultation**: While school leaders noted that they benefit from multiple sources of support, including LEA supports, they expressed a desire for opportunities to meet directly with experts at OSSE for in-depth consultations, particularly on instructional topics.

- **Streamline Requirements**: Schools face multiple planning and reporting requirements that would benefit from continued cross-agency efforts to streamline and align. DCPS, PCSB, OSSE, and each LEA have planning and reporting requirements rooted in law and best practice. Schools can at times perceive these as burdensome and overlapping. Schools can benefit from the SEA being able to engage schools and LEAs more fully both to clarify the intention and use of required school plans and reports and to identify areas for greater efficiency in planning and reporting, such as having a single planning template.

- **SEA Resources for High-Leverage Strategies Can Make an Impact**: Participants praised the value of the High Impact Tutoring initiative and the tutoring managers funded by OSSE. Additionally, participants identified potential roles that OSSE can play in facilitating the sharing of effective strategies across schools and LEAs.

Part III: Accelerate DC: A New Approach to School Improvement

A New Vision for School Improvement

OSSE is committed to strengthening the supports and accountability mechanisms in place for our lowest performing schools. Over the last six months, OSSE has conducted a listening tour with stakeholders across the District to understand their priorities and expectations for school improvement, investigated best practices and models in other states, and developed a new framework that draws upon this research to set clear expectations for the key drivers of strengthening the quality of instruction and, ultimately, student learning outcomes in DC schools. This new framework, called DC Accelerate, is ready for implementation in the next school improvement designation cycle, which will launch in December 2024.

In addition, OSSE has developed a new, long-term vision for school improvement that is grounded in providing rigorous interventions combined with increasing levels of accountability to drive rapid improvement. OSSE envisions laying the groundwork for the full execution of this vision beginning in fiscal year 2025. During this time, OSSE will also continue refining the approach to the final stage of rigorous intervention for persistently low-performing schools that will need to be implemented in 2027 and building buy-in for this new accountability model. The agency also anticipates robust external engagement will be needed to complete an ambitious design process, build support across key stakeholders, and ultimately implement this new approach.

The Challenge Today

The school improvement structures that OSSE has in place today meet the minimum federal requirements could be enriched through additional investments to drive meaningful and rapid improvements in our lowest-performing schools. This work would allow OSSE to target discreet school improvement priorities, align a coordinated suite of supports to wrap around our lowest-performing schools, or systematically increase the supports and accountability for the subset of schools who fail to improve.

Under the current school improvement structure, some designated schools have experienced significant progress and exited school improvement status, many designated schools have seen small, incremental improvements, and other schools are failing to exit their designation status altogether. Out of the ten CSI schools designated in 2018, five schools were redesignated in 2022, two closed, and three exited. ELA and math proficiency rates at our CSI schools ranged from <1% to 19.48% in SY22-23, and a number of the schools designated in 2022 may be on track for redesignation in 2024.
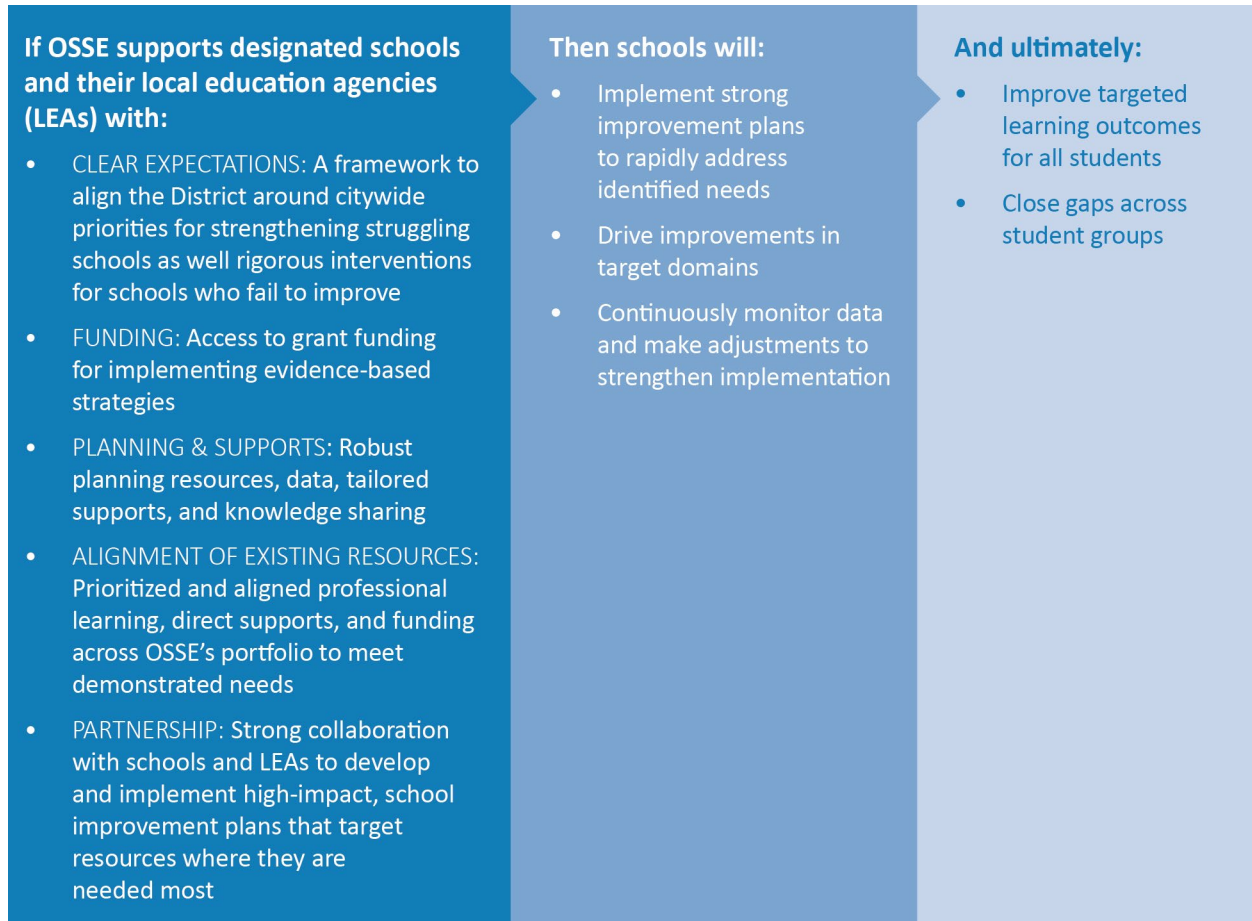
A stronger system of supports and accountability would help drive rapid improvement for designated schools.

A New Vision for School Improvement

OSSE has developed a new vision for school improvement centered on five key pillars. Further, to drive rapid improvement across the District's lowest-performing schools, the District could direct significant and strategic funding alongside robust supports and increasing levels of accountability to target the five key domains of school improvement: 1) transformational leadership; 2) talent development; 3) instructional excellence; 4) strong school culture and climate; and 5) organizational health. This vision, further detailed below, aims to accelerate student learning outcomes while closing gaps.

A New Theory of Action to Drive School Improvement

To realize this vision, OSSE strives to implement the following student-centered theory of action to drive rapid improvement across our lowest-performing schools.

If OSSE supports designated schools and their local education agencies (LEAs) with:	Then schools will:	And ultimately:
• CLEAR EXPECTATIONS: A framework to align the District around citywide priorities for strengthening struggling schools as well rigorous interventions for schools who fail to improve • FUNDING: Access to grant funding for implementing evidence-based strategies • PLANNING & SUPPORTS: Robust planning resources, data, tailored supports, and knowledge sharing • ALIGNMENT OF EXISTING RESOURCES: Prioritized and aligned professional learning, direct supports, and funding across OSSE's portfolio to meet demonstrated needs • PARTNERSHIP: Strong collaboration with schools and LEAs to develop and implement high-impact, school improvement plans that target resources where they are needed most	• Implement strong improvement plans to rapidly address identified needs • Drive improvements in target domains • Continuously monitor data and make adjustments to strengthen implementation	• Improve targeted learning outcomes for all students • Close gaps across student groups

Rapid Acceleration Framework

Introduction

Beginning with the upcoming designation cycle in December 2024, OSSE will implement a new framework for school improvement that seeks to establish shared, citywide priorities for the key levers aimed at accelerating progress for designated schools and enhancing the overall quality of education. Whereas OSSE's prior framework established very broad categories that gave schools and LEAs significant leeway in identifying strategies for change, the new framework is grounded in the latest research (see the section above) on evidence-based approaches to drive rapid improvement.

Importantly, the framework helps establish a shared language and common vocabulary across the education system, facilitating better communication and collaboration among all stakeholders. A specific and cohesive framework also communicates shared expectations for how OSSE and other stakeholders can support

designated schools through their improvement journey and will serve as the foundation for intentional planning, innovative strategy-setting, and excellence in implementation.

Many states, including Colorado, Michigan, New York, and Tennessee, have successfully adopted such frameworks. WestEd is a national leader in research, development and practice and has supported many states in reimagining their school improvement strategy. Their Four Domains of Rapid School Improvement represents a national best practice, integrating core areas of focus, known as domains, with critical practices for achieving rapid and significant improvement. The framework is grounded in school improvement and turnaround research, as well as practice, and is currently implemented in multiple states across the country with strong school improvement systems.[28]

OSSE's new framework, Accelerate DC, adapts these domains for the unique context of the District and centers student outcomes at its core, with the guiding principles of equity and continuous improvement. Also found in the vision statement, the domains for DC's rapid acceleration framework include: 1) Transformational Leadership; 2) Talent Development; 3) Academic Excellence; 4) Strong School Climate; and 5) Operational Health. Accompanied with sample evidence-based strategies aligned to each domain to drive improvement (see Table 6 below), this system will support students in designated schools and have a cascading effect that improves the ecosystem of all schools.

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[28] The Center on School Turnaround at WestEd undertook a year-long process to develop this framework. The Center conducted a comprehensive review of the school improvement and turnaround literature to examine what works in both education and non-education sectors. The draft framework was further refined based upon feedback from school improvement experts across 13 states. The methodology is summarized in the appendix of the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework. Center on School Turnaround at WestEd (2017)

OSSE's Framework for Rapid School Improvement: Accelerate DC

Table 6: Accelerate DC Domains, Key Practices, Aligned Strategies for Improvement

Domain	Key Practices	Aligned Strategies for Improvement*
Transformational Leadership	• Prioritize improvement and communicate its urgency • Develop and monitor short- and long-term goals and strategies based on customized needs • Customize and target support to meet needs • Develop strong and aligned instructional leadership	• Leadership coaching for principals and school leadership teams • Creation of diverse career pathways for teacher leadership • School leader pipeline development and succession planning • Distributive leadership model implementation
Talent Development	• Recruit, develop, retain, and sustain excellent talent • Target professional learning opportunities to identified needs • Set clear performance expectations and support continuous improvement	• Instructional coaching for educators • Increased compensation for school leaders and educators in exchange for clear accountability metrics and/or increased time commitments • Educator trainings on the science of reading (e.g., LETRS), as well as other research-backed trainings (e.g., math bootcamps) • Classroom management training
Instructional Excellence	• Provide rigorous, evidence-based, high-quality Tier 1 instruction • Diagnose and respond to student learning needs • Target supports for students with the greatest needs	• High-quality instructional materials and implementation supports • Integration of academic and social and emotional learning content and competencies • High-impact tutoring targeting highest-need students • Use of validated interim assessments to target supports based on data • Implementation of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) • Expanded planning and collaboration time for educators • Use of research-backed technology to help provide individualized supports based on student needs
Strong School Culture & Climate	• Build a strong community intensely focused on student academic acceleration and wellbeing • Solicit and act upon ongoing stakeholder input from the school community	• Conducting home visits to re-engage chronically absent students • Implementation of a positive behavior management system • Coaching for school leaders on developing and maintaining effective

	• Engage students and families in pursuing the student's education goals • Provide wraparound supports based on student, family, and community needs	partnerships with community-based organizations • School behavioral health training and curricula • Access to evidence-based behavioral health interventions (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy)
Organizational Health	• Implement a cycle of data-driven, continuous improvement • Optimize the allocation and use of financial, human, and material resources aligned to goals • Develop efficient scheduling systems that maximize instructional time and support student learning • Ensure plans are in place to address ongoing and emergent barriers to student learning (attendance, safety, crises)	• Extended instructional time through an extended school day and/or school year • Conducting a school-day audit to evaluate the use of time and maximize instructional class time • Assessment of resource allocation in school budget and relative impact of each item on student outcomes • Consultation on relevant school policies to support effective implementation (e.g., school immunization policy, mental health guidelines)

*This list of evidence-based strategies represents a sample of strategies that can drive improvement within each domain. The list is not intended to be exhaustive.

The domains and practices overlap and there are consistent threads which tie them together. The practices are not provided in a suggested order of implementation. Each school, supported by their LEA and OSSE, must determine which domains and corresponding practices to focus on in implementation based on their needs assessment and planning process. Similarly, the evidence-based strategies identified for each domain represent a sample of potential strategies with a strong base of supporting evidence for driving improvement in the given focus area. The list is not intended to be comprehensive or prescriptive but rather to serve as a guide for LEAs and schools in building their school improvement plans as well as for OSSE in identifying future professional learning and support opportunities. OSSE intends to further develop this list in a guidance document as part of a more robust set of planning resources for all designated schools.

Coordination with PCSB and DCPS

Close coordination with the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) and DC Public Schools (DCPS) is critical to ensuring alignment across our respective systems of accountability and improvement, as well as to reduce the burden of distinct reporting requirements on schools. While OSSE regularly engages with both the DCPS School Improvement Team as well as PCSB on school improvement, we see the following opportunities to strengthen these partnerships as we move forward with implementing Accelerate DC. We will refine these further in the coming months.

PCSB Coordination:

- Consistent Goals: Ensure that School Improvement Plan goals are consistent with charter goals set by PCSB.
- Coordinated Oversight for Initial Designations: Establish that an initial CSI designation prompts consideration of additional oversight and monitoring of low-performing schools by PCSB, if not already initiated.
- Coordinated Oversight for Re-Designations: Establish that a CSI re-designation (i.e., ISI designation) prompts consideration of a series of escalating interventions such as academic conditions, an off-cycle review, and resultant consequences, if not already initiated.
- Streamlined Templates and Reporting: Streamline and align the school improvement plan templates and reporting used by OSSE and PCSB to reduce redundancies for schools.
- Clear Roles: Establish a formal role for PCSB to play in the review of school improvement plans for all designated charter schools to ensure consistent goals across both systems of accountability.

DCPS Coordination:

- Consistent Goals: Ensure that School Improvement Plan goals and supporting strategies are reflected in DCPS's annual school improvement planning and used to offer guidance on principal evaluation goals for designated schools.
- Aligned Expectations for Principals: Crosswalk the Accelerate DC Framework and expectations under IMPACT's leadership framework for principals to demonstrate alignment.
- Coordinated Process to Access Funding: Update timelines and processes to accelerate access to funding for designated schools in light of unique District budgeting practices for DCPS that require multiple additional steps in OSSE's grant management system and the District's financial system in order to access and reimburse for grant funds.
- Streamlined Templates and Reporting: Streamline and align the school improvement and needs assessment templates and reporting used by OSSE and DCPS central office to reduce redundancies for schools.
- Clear Roles: Engage directly with school leaders while maintaining a strong partnership with the Instructional Superintendents and Central Services team, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all parties.

New Investments to Drive Improvement and Strengthen Implementation

Introduction

With additional resources and capacity, OSSE could build a portfolio of supports designed to serve our lowest performing schools and provide the tools, supports, and accountability structures needed for acceleration. Informed by findings from OSSE's listening tour, as well as national best practices in school improvement, these new investments would be aligned with our school improvement framework ("Accelerate DC") and would leverage internal expertise, expand access to grant funding, and offer individualized coaching and guidance from trusted, third-party organizations. Additional resources would also be designed to

complement a suite of new templates and guidance provided by OSSE to empower schools and their LEAs to develop and implement strong improvement plans.

New Support Strategies to Accelerate Improvement

Competitive Local Grants to Implement Evidence-Based Improvement Strategies

Even with OSSE choosing to concentrate the federal funding stream on supporting CSI and ISI schools, the current federal school-improvement grant program provides an average of $200,000 annually per school, depending on available funding. This is only enough to cover 1-2 staff positions within each school. To supplement this, OSSE could establish a new, multi-year competitive grant program for school improvement using local funds that would be made available to all designated schools. OSSE could set competitive grant priorities for each three-year cycle that are aligned with Accelerate DC and based on targeted areas of need, such as high-quality math curriculum and educator training, high-impact tutoring, or chronic absenteeism interventions. Schools could be required to engage their family communities, staff, and LEA (and with PCSB to align with charter goals if a charter school) to develop a proposal that leverages funds to support evidence-based strategies in their SIP. The scale and number of available grants could depend upon fund availability but be substantial enough to drive meaningful, rapid improvements at the school level. Competitive funding could maximize the value of limited local resources, driving every dollar toward the implementation of a high-quality plan, while the formula distribution of federal IIS funds could continue providing a reliable, baseline level of resources for our highest-need schools that are designated as CSI and ISI.

Support for Assessing School Needs and Root Causes

To support the development of data-driven and informative needs assessments, OSSE could make a partner available to designated CSI schools along with their LEA to provide third-party facilitation of the needs assessment process. Such a partner would provide expert facilitation, offering a neutral, external perspective for schools while bringing deep expertise in the school improvement and needs assessment space. First-time designated schools could apply and opt into this service. Re-designated schools who are receiving full-scale partnership (see below) would not be eligible. Schools and LEA could still own the process and outcomes, but the partner could help identify data sets to analyze, organize available data into accessible formats, gather additional qualitative data through interviews and focus groups, and then support school leaders in synthesizing findings and translating them into concrete goals and strategies that address the identified needs.

Intensive Support for Goal Setting, Identifying Evidence-Based Strategies, and Continuous Improvement

OSSE could secure a third-party partnership to run strategy design sprints and continuous improvement cycles with leadership teams of designated CSI schools. Over an intensive, multi-day series of sessions, the third-party partner could support the leadership teams of designated schools in leveraging the findings from their needs assessments to establish clear goals, evidence-based strategies for reaching those goals, metrics for tracking progress, and continuous improvement cycles for revisiting and adjusting implementation as needed. This design sprint would occur on the front end of the designation cycle shortly after the needs assessments are completed. The partner could then facilitate an annual review process to help school teams review their data and adjust their strategy and/or implementation as needed.

Leadership Coaching and Full-Service School Improvement Partnership for Re-Designated Schools

Schools who have not demonstrated adequate progress, and are therefore redesignated as ISI schools, could be required to work intensely with a third-party coaching partner from re-designation through their full school improvement cycle. Partnership with a neutral third party who brings deep leadership and school improvement experience to the table could include regular on-site coaching for the school leader, needs assessment facilitation, strategy development, and rapid evaluation cycles to support continuous improvement. Pending fund availability, this resource could also be made available to first-time CSI schools on an opt-in, application basis.

Peer Learning for Principals and School Improvement Teams

OSSE could host a monthly community of practice for principals and school improvement teams that could be required for re-designated ISI schools, recommended for CSI schools, and open to all TSI schools. The community of practice would provide a space for discussing shared challenges, soliciting peer feedback, identifying support needs, and sharing lessons learned from implementation. Facilitated initially by a third-party partner, this could shift to an OSSE-hosted convening as OSSE builds its internal school improvement capacity.

Redesigned Templates and Bolstered Resources

OSSE will redesign its needs assessment, resource equity analysis guide, school improvement plan, school improvement plan rubric, and progress monitoring to align with the Accelerate DC framework. These updates will be made in advance of the upcoming December 2024 implementation cycle with OSSE's existing school improvement capacity. With expanded capacity in the future, OSSE could develop additional guidance, provide direct technical assistance and support aligned to the guidance, and build a suite of resources that empower all designated schools and LEAs to develop actionable school improvement plans with clear goals and aligned strategies for improvement. Such resources could include a funding strategy guide for designated schools to help them fully leverage all federal fund sources for implementing their SIPs, guide for identifying root causes, best practices guide, a menu for selecting evidence-based strategies, and a continuous improvement guide.

Alignment of Existing and Future OSSE Supports and Funding Streams

In addition to building out this portfolio of new supports, OSSE could also work to more tightly align the agency's existing resources as well as potential future opportunities to support the effective implementation of school improvement plans for our lowest-performing schools. We could seek to do this through a variety of ways, such as the following:

- Develop a curated list of OSSE supports for each CSI and ISI school, aligned to their needs assessments and school improvement plans
- Create an OSSE professional learning guide that is aligned to the school improvement framework ("Accelerate DC"), and share this guide with all designated schools
- Prioritize all designated schools for participation in OSSE professional learning, technical assistance, and other direct supports (e.g., access to high-quality instructional materials or high-impact tutoring) based upon their distinct needs
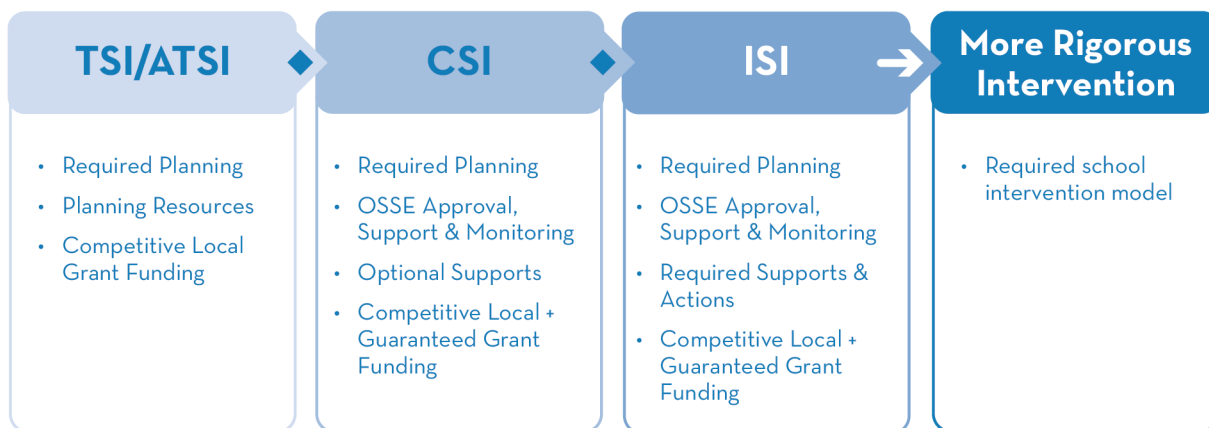
- <u>Give priority points in competitive grant programs</u> to designated schools for tying their application to their SIP
- <u>Encourage/incentivize the strategic use of federal formula funds</u>, such as Title I, by designated schools to bolster implementation of their school improvement plans

This approach could allow us to more strategically channel existing agency resources and expertise, such as career and technical education (CTE) grant opportunities, science of reading trainings, and school climate supports toward the schools with the greatest needs where their school improvement plans also demonstrate gaps in the aligned areas. In addition, as future grants, direct supports, and professional learning opportunities become available, OSSE could undertake a systematic process of prioritizing this subset of schools for receiving those supports.

Scaffolded Systems of Support and Accountability

Under the full implementation of Accelerate DC, schools could receive scaffolded supports and requirements based on their designation category. For TSI designated schools, the support could be light-touch and optional, with no guaranteed funding and limited OSSE oversight. However, this balance could begin to shift for CSI-designated schools, where OSSE could play a more substantial role in both the review and monitoring of school improvement plans and in providing access to guaranteed funding and a more robust menu of supports. For schools redesignated as ISI, the intensity of both supports and oversight could increase further, with OSSE playing a more active role in plan development, a number of supports becoming mandatory, and continued access to both the guaranteed and competitive grant funds. The final stage of the school improvement process is reserved for persistently low-performing schools who are re-designated as ISI and then fail to show improvement in this second cycle. This small subset of schools could undergo the most rigorous intervention, which would begin in 2027. See the flow chart below for a summary of this model.

Table 7: Summary of Potential Progression of Supports, Requirements, and Monitoring

TSI/ATSI ◆	CSI ◆	ISI →	More Rigorous Intervention
• Required Planning • Planning Resources • Competitive Local Grant Funding	• Required Planning • OSSE Approval, Support & Monitoring • Optional Supports • Competitive Local + Guaranteed Grant Funding	• Required Planning • OSSE Approval, Support & Monitoring • Required Supports & Actions • Competitive Local + Guaranteed Grant Funding	• Required school intervention model

School Improvement Resource	TSI/ATSI	CSI	ISI	More Rigorous Intervention
Planning	• Required needs assessment and resource equity analysis • Required school improvement plan, submitted to OSSE • School and LEA approve and implement plan	• Required needs assessment and resource equity analysis • Required school improvement plan submitted to OSSE for review and approval	• Required needs assessment and resource equity analysis • Required school improvement plan submitted to OSSE for review and approval	Planning, supports, and funding will be developed prior to 2027 implementation. Required school intervention models may include (see more detail in next section): • LEA Proposed Redesign • Restart • Empowerment • Small Schools of Choice • Receivership • Closure
Monitoring	• LEAs monitoring plan implementation	• Required OSSE progress monitoring that increases over time if progress toward goals is not made*	• Required and more rigorous OSSE progress monitoring that increases over time if progress toward goals is not made	
Support	• Suite of planning resources and technical assistance provided • Priority access for OSSE professional learning, direct supports, and other grant opportunities	• All TSI/ATSI Supports • Optional leadership community of practice • Option to work with a third-party expert partner to conduct a needs assessment and resource equity analysis • Option for design sprint partnership	• All TSI/ATSI Supports • Required leadership community of practice • Required full-service partnership and coaching with a third-party expert to support through the full three-year cycle	
Funding	• No federal funding • Option for local competitive grant aligned to District priorities	• Federal IIS grant funding provided* • Option for local competitive grant, districtwide priorities	• Federal IIS grant funding provided • Option for local competitive grant, districtwide priorities	

*The IIS funding and increased monitoring would not include CSI-Grad schools.

The table below provides a summary of the supports that are possible currently versus with additional resources by designation type.

Table 8: Supports Possible With Existing Versus Expanded Resources

Designation	Current Capacity & Funding	Expansion of Capacity & Funding
TSI/ATSI	• None	• New planning templates and technical assistance • Access to competitive, local grant fund • Prioritized access to OSSE supports, professional learning, and grants aligned to the needs in each school's SIP
CSI-Grad	• None	• All TSI/ATSI supports • Optional leadership community of practice • Option to work with third party expert for needs assessment and resource equity analysis • Option for design sprint partnership
CSI	• Federal IIS grant funding • Prioritized access to targeted OSSE supports and professional learning, such as high-impact tutoring and math bootcamps	• All TSI/ATSI/CSI-Grad supports • Federal IIS grant funding
ISI	• Same as CSI supports	• All TSI/ATSI supports • Required leadership community of practice • Required full-service partnership and coaching throughout the cycle • Federal IIS grant funding

More Rigorous Intervention

Introduction

OSSE researched more rigorous intervention models and alternative governance models across many states and districts, including Louisiana, Tennessee, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Arizona. A summary of these findings is included in the landscape analysis section of this report, with a more detailed review included in Appendix A. Based on this research, the Region Four Comprehensive Center, DC's federally funded support partner, made the following recommendations to OSSE:

- Design and implement a strong system of support before considering alternative governance structures
- Ensure OSSE, the LEA, and the school have a clear understanding of the root causes of school underperformance prior to initiating a more rigorous intervention that directly addresses those root causes

- Assess the extent of public support for implementation of selected alternative governance strategies

ESSA requires SEAs to develop and implement more rigorous interventions for persistently low-performing schools who fail to exit CSI status. SEAs can determine specific sanctions, pursue alternative governance structures, and/or offer more intensive support. However, in light of OSSE's history of limited supports and resources for school improvement, and in alignment with this guidance, the agency is committed to first designing and implementing a strong system of increasingly rigorous requirements and supports. The development of the Accelerate DC framework has been OSSE's priority over the last six months and is the focus of this report. OSSE has identified potential approaches to more rigorous intervention through alternative governance changes and will partner with PCSB, DCPS, designated schools, and other education stakeholders in the District in FY25 and FY26 to design and establish an approach that is appropriate to DC's unique context in preparation for implementation beginning in FY27 and following a three-year cycle of improvement that captures the new model of more robust supports. Moving forward beyond 2027, the implementation of more rigorous interventions could occur as soon as two years following an ISI designation for schools that consistently fail to show improvement toward their school improvement goals.

More Rigorous Intervention Models

For the last several decades, SEAs have pursued a variety of alternative governance structures, including district or school takeover, restructuring as a charter, replacing leadership and staff, and school closure. Recent research suggests that the outcome of these alternative structures has been positive in cases of organizational and human resource changes where LEAs and schools maintained some degree of autonomy but largely neutral or negative in most cases of state takeover, with a few exceptions. Specifically, research has found little to no evidence that state takeover improves academic achievement in the long run.[29] Below are summary descriptions of alternate governance models found in OSSE's landscape analysis:

- **LEA Proposed Redesign:** LEA applies to the SEA for a redesigned school model, which directly addresses insufficiencies in the framework and identifies one or more of the following: (1) high-quality school leader; (2) new school model; and/or (3) significant school autonomy.
- **Expanded School Autonomy:** Similar to LEA proposed redesign, expanded autonomy includes a full redesign led by the school leader with elements covering alternative governance, an empowered leader, and comprehensive list of autonomies, such as staff hiring and compensation, along with clear performance targets agreed upon by the school leader, LEA, and SEA.
- **Small Schools of Choice:** A whole school reform in which a school is reorganized into one or more "small schools" (roughly 100 students per grade), which emphasize student-centered personalized

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[29] Schueler, B. E., & Bleiberg, J. F. (2021). Evaluating education governance: Does state takeover of school districts affect student achievement? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 00,0, 1-35. https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/schueler/files/schuelerbleiberg_jpam_takeovers.pdf

learning, relationship-building, intentional instructional program, longer blocks, and a focus on postsecondary preparation.

- **Restart:** School is reopened under the management of a charter management organization, educational management organization, or other state-approved expert managing entity and could include the implementation of a new school model, staffing changes, and/or governance changes.
- **Receivership:** Model that appoints an external receiver to take control of a failing school with broad authority to make changes aimed at improving performance outside of an LEA model.
- **State Takeover**: A form of receivership in which the state takes control of a failing school to drive improvement for a limited period of time, either directly or through a state-established school district.
- **Closure:** School ceases all operations and students participate in the school lottery process to match with another school of their choice or are re-assigned to schools not identified as CSI or ISI.

Tennessee offers an interesting case study of two competing models: state takeover and expanded school autonomy. Tennessee established the Achievement School District (ASD) in 2010 accompanied by an influx of $22 million in Race to the Top federal funds to take over and run the state's lowest performing schools. At its peak in 2015, 29 schools were part of the ASD, and initial results were impressive but, over time, regressed. Today, only three schools remain in the ASD, and chronic low performance persists. Tennessee has, instead, turned in recent years to relying more on its Innovation Zone (iZone) model, in which schools remain under the authority of their local district but gain autonomy over financial, programmatic, and staffing decisions. Research has since documented a positive impact on student outcomes driven by Tennessee's iZones, particularly in math.[30]

Rhode Island has established a model that offers CSI schools who fail to exit and their districts one of five school redesign options that each represents different governance changes. The LEA determines which model is appropriate based upon their needs assessment and root cause analysis data. Other states are also pivoting away from interventions that greatly restrict LEA and school autonomy and instead moving toward models that offer school-level flexibilities but direct LEAs and schools to implement research-based interventions from a menu of state-developed options while also receiving more intensive support with implementation and monitoring.[31]

The research makes clear that finding the right balance of autonomy, prescriptiveness, and support is essential to successful governance changes that support school improvement. However, there is not a one-

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[30] Pham, Lam et. al. (2019). *School Turnaround in Tennessee: Insights After Six Years of Reform. Tennessee Education Research Alliance at Vanderbilt University*. https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/tera/school-turnaround/turnaround-after-six-years.

[31] Backstrom, Brian (2019). School Turnaround Efforts: What's Been Tried, Why Those Efforts Failed, and What to Do Now. *Rockefeller Institute of Government at SUNY: https://rockinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/7-23-19-School-Turnaround-Efforts.pdf*.

size-fits-all model for change. Rigorous interventions must account for the unique challenges of the specific schools as well as the broader community and district context. Moving forward, extensive community and stakeholder engagement as well as broad community support will be essential to designing the models most likely to succeed in DC's unique environment and across both the DCPS and charter sectors.

OSSE's School Improvement Capacity

Current Capacity for School Improvement at OSSE

In order to realize this new vision for school improvement, OSSE will need to expand both its dedicated staff capacity and the resources available to support the District's designated schools. Due to DC's small size relative to other states, the four percent administrative set-aside on the federal school improvement grant is enough to cover only a portion of one staff member's time. As a result, OSSE presently has one staff member who dedicates approximately half of their time to school improvement. To meet the federal requirements for school improvement, OSSE must rely on a variety of staff members with relevant expertise from across the agency to add capacity to the one part-time staff member funded by the federal grant. The agency also relies exclusively on the federal IIS grant to support designated schools. The ISS grant fluctuates year-to-year but provides an average of $200,000 per year to each of the District's 10 CSI school.

Current Capacity for School Improvement in Peer and Model SEAs

in their Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) states that state education agencies should dedicate sufficient time, staff, and funding to school improvement programs to produce strong results. A review of the capacity and funding committed to school improvement in peer states and those with strong systems in place for driving improvements in their lowest performing schools, including Virginia, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Colorado, reveals that these state education agencies have dedicated school improvement teams, led by individuals who report directly to a member of the agency's senior leadership team, and several also have supplemental funding allocated at the state level to augment the federal grant resources. Furthermore, with a fixed 0.5% federal administrative set-aside, larger states can fund more staff members with their larger grant allocations, benefiting from economies of scale unavailable to OSSE due to DC's size.

For example, Massachusetts has a core team of nine people supported by nearly twenty consultants who manage the school improvement planning process, grant programs, rigorous monitoring, and offer tailored supports to the bottom 10 percent of lowest-performing schools in the state. Massachusetts offers a series of competitive and formula grants to support these schools and their LEAs, including a Targeted Assistance Grant, focused on funding the implementation of a district instructional priority in a designated school and leveraging approximately $4 million of state and federal school improvement dollars annually, as well as an Evidence-Based Practice Grant, a one-time, multi-year grant program focused on funding state-identified priorities for school improvement.

Rhode Island's Department of Education (RIDE) offers another model for expanded school improvement capacity. Led by a Director who reports directly to one of two Deputy Commissioners, RIDE has a core team of seven individuals to oversee the school improvement planning process, federal grant program, rigorous monitoring, and tailored supports for the bottom five percent of lowest-performing schools (approximately

22 CSI and ISI schools). Rhode Island's dedicated grant resources for school improvement are limited to the federal IIS program totaling approximately $4 million annually. They also actively support schools in leveraging their Title funds to support implementation of their school improvement plan and have a consolidated application process for both. All of their positions are split funded with both federal and state funds, and dedicated state funds are used to strengthen the plan review process for their persistently low-performing schools who must initiate redesigns. Adjusted for DC's size, this team would equate to approximately five dedicated staff for school improvement.

Scope of Work for Existing School Improvement Capacity

With the agency's current school improvement capacity, OSSE is committed to updating and strengthening our core school improvement processes to reflect the new framework of Accelerate DC. This will include redesigning and effectively implementing the needs assessment, school improvement planning process, resource equity analysis guide, the federal school improvement grant program, and progress monitoring. We will also continue to partner closely with PCSB and DCPS to ensure that the new framework and processes are incorporated appropriately into their own accountability systems. Additionally, we will leverage expertise from across the agency to develop new planning resources where possible to support all designated schools with building and implementing strong plans. Lastly, we are committed to partnering with education stakeholders across the District to create a contextually-relevant approach to more rigorous interventions for persistently low-performing schools, with implementation beginning in 2027. We further note that more rigorous interventions will be most effective when combined with a strong system of supports that precede the rigorous interventions, which may also involve their own set of resource requirements to be successful.

Scope of Work for Expanded School Improvement Capacity

OSSE could potentially initiate the following expanded supports as early as FY26:

- A multi-year, competitive grant fund to support designated schools in implementing evidence-based strategies aligned to the school improvement framework and District priorities;
- Consultative supports and design sprints to assist schools in developing strong SIPs;
- Intensive coaching and full-service partnership for re-designated schools;
- A community of practice for principals and their teams to support knowledge sharing and capacity building to drive the effective implementation of evidence-based strategies; and/or
- Aligning existing OSSE resources and funding streams, including a curated list of OSSE-provided professional learning and technical assistance for each designated school, based upon the unique needs identified in their needs assessment.

This approach, organized around a framework that clearly articulates the District's priorities for school improvement, would enable OSSE to drive resources toward targeted priorities for the city's lowest performing schools. If implemented in FY26 and FY27, this foundation of robust supports would position OSSE and the District to successfully implement more rigorous and directive interventions for persistently low-performing schools beginning in the subsequent designation cycle, December 2027

Planning & Implementation Timeline

OSSE has the opportunity to expand its role in school improvement by establishing a strong system of school supports, requirements and monitoring for designated schools before implementing more rigorous interventions. See Table 9 below for an implementation summary by school year that outlines what is possible with existing versus expanded resourcing.

Table 9: Implementation Timeline With Existing and New Capacity

Year	With Existing Capacity & Resources	With Additional Capacity & Resources
SY24-25	- Implement new school improvement framework, Accelerate DC - Update all core planning resources to align to new framework - Finalize and initiate stronger coordination with PCSB and DCPS accountability structures - Designate third cohort of schools under ESSA in December 2024 - Administer federal school improvement grant funds to CSI and ISI schools - Initiate citywide planning for more rigorous intervention	*All actions taken with existing capacity plus the following:* - Initiate full design and procurement planning for new portfolio of supports - Design new and more rigorous monitoring framework for CSI and ISI schools that fail to make progress toward school improvement goals
SY25-26	- Monitor implementation of plans for CSI and ISI schools - Finalize approach to more rigorous interventions and determine resourcing implications	- Launch a multi-year, competitive grant fund with targeted priorities for all designated schools - Create a robust portfolio of supports, including design sprints, consultative supports, intensive coaching, and a community of practice - Initiate implementation of more rigorous monitoring framework - Build a suite of new planning and implementation support tools for use by all designated schools - Strengthen the alignment of existing OSSE resources and funding streams to support implementation of SIPs - Combine monitoring of plans for CSI and ISI schools with a new portfolio of supports - Finalize our approach to more rigorous interventions and determine resourcing implications

SY26-27	• Monitor implementation of plans for CSI and ISI schools • Initiate planning for implementation of more rigorous interventions using existing capacity and resources	• Continue monitoring implementation of plans for CSI and ISI schools with heightened supports and requirements • Initiate planning for implementation of more rigorous interventions with expanded capacity and resources
SY27-28	• Designate fourth cohort of schools under ESSA in December 2027 • Initiate resource-constrained plans for more rigorous interventions for re-designated schools	• Designate the fourth cohort of schools under ESSA in December 2027 • Initiate comprehensive plan for more rigorous interventions for re-designated schools

Conclusion

OSSE is committed to strengthening the supports and accountability mechanisms in place for our lowest performing schools. We believe that the new framework we have established, Accelerate DC, will provide clear expectations for how to improve student outcomes, and an aligned system of supports and requirements that increase with the level of school need has the potential to drive rapid improvement for our lowest-performing schools. With the resources and capacity to implement this vision, OSSE and the District will be positioned to close opportunity gaps and accelerate student achievement for this cohort of schools. We look forward to working with partners across the District to realize this new vision.

Appendix A: Landscape Analysis of State Education Agency Best Practices for School Improvement

Evidence-based School Improvement:
Landscape Analysis of State Systems of Support
Developed by the Region 4 Comprehensive Center for OSSE
July 2024

At the request of the DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), the Region 4 Comprehensive Center (R4CC) has conducted a landscape scan of state education agency (SEA) best practices in developing and implementing state systems of school improvement support. Identifying what works at the state level to support school improvement is an area of ongoing study. However, there is a growing body of literature that sheds light on SEA practices that can help or hinder the school improvement process for low-performing schools to ensure that schools and districts have the knowledge and capacity to effectively implement evidence-based strategies that achieve results. In this review, R4CC has identified and summarized promising SEA strategies from a scan of SEA websites, school improvement literature, and interviews with select SEA staff.

SEA Organizational Structures
The first step to refining the state-level school improvement support process begins with assessing and refining the organizational structures driving state-level work. The Center for School Turnaround and Improvement at WestEd identifies using a framework for rapid improvement as the basis for optimizing how the SEA functions to support school improvement. This framework communicates an agency-wide vision and foundation for building the policies and structures for providing technical assistance and support to LEAs and schools.

Establishing a school improvement framework to drive change. The Center for School Turnaround and Improvement has identified four domains of rapid school improvement that form the basis of a systems framework[1] that can be adopted or adapted by SEAs. A systems framework outlines a coherent system of support that defines the state-, local-, and school-level roles that are necessary to create and sustain change. The framework articulates a unifying vision centered on the four domains of **leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and a culture shift toward high academic expectations for all**. Several states across the country including Colorado, Indiana, Massachusetts, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Texas have developed a school improvement framework that focuses on a set of the same or similar domains. The framework is used to design a comprehensive continuous school improvement process, align technical assistance and support, and articulate a clear delineation of SEA, local education agency (LEA), and school roles. The following examples from Texas and Rhode Island illustrate how SEAs can use a school improvement framework to drive change.

The Texas Education Agency Effective Schools Framework

In collaboration with LEA and school leaders, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) created the TEA Effective Schools Framework (ESF) to serve three purposes: 1) to articulate a statewide vision for the best practices of effective LEAs and schools; 2) to support continuous school improvement using a research-based diagnostic process; and 3) to align statewide resources and supports to the needs of LEAs and schools. The ESF identifies five levers as essential for school outcomes based on a national scan of evidence-based practice research. For each lever, TEA articulates the role of the LEA in supporting schools and the prioritized essential actions effective schools do to support teaching and learning. TEA also provides examples of key practices that define each essential action.

THE TEA EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS FRAMEWORK FIVE LEVERS

- Strong school leadership and planning
- Strategic staffing
- Positive school culture
- High-quality instructional materials and assessments
- Effective instruction

Source: TEA Effective Schools Framework

The five levers also form the foundation for a Theory of Action that drives TEA technical assistance and support. The Theory of Action states that if LEAs build a common vision of highest leverage school practices; assess current practices; identify and prioritizegaps in systems; connect to effective capacity builders; and receive ongoing, targeted support during plan implementation and change management; then schools and student outcomes will improve. Highlights of the Texas system of support can be found in the Models of State Support section on page nine.

The Rhode Island School Improvement Framework

The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) created a School Improvement Framework designed to articulate a coherent school improvement strategy, philosophy, and structure for LEAs and school communities. One central component in the framework is the notion of moving away from prescription and toward equity, and shared responsibility with districts and schools.

The School Improvement Framework also includes the following key ideas as central to the SEA vision:
- o School improvement is an agency-wide priority
- o Emphasize support and accountability
- o Acknowledge LEAs as the unit of change
- o Focus on teaching and learning

According to the Rhode Island Practitioners' Guide to School Improvement 2019-22, Rhode Island's framework outlines a process for LEAs and districts to ensure that all students achieve at high levels. The guide states that equity and shared responsibility are the framework's overarching values, and, as with the TEA framework, teaching and learning is the highest priority (p.6).

The framework, illustrated below, draws on the Center for School Turnaround and Improvement framework as well as frameworks developed by other technical assistance organization, and Massachusetts (p.7).
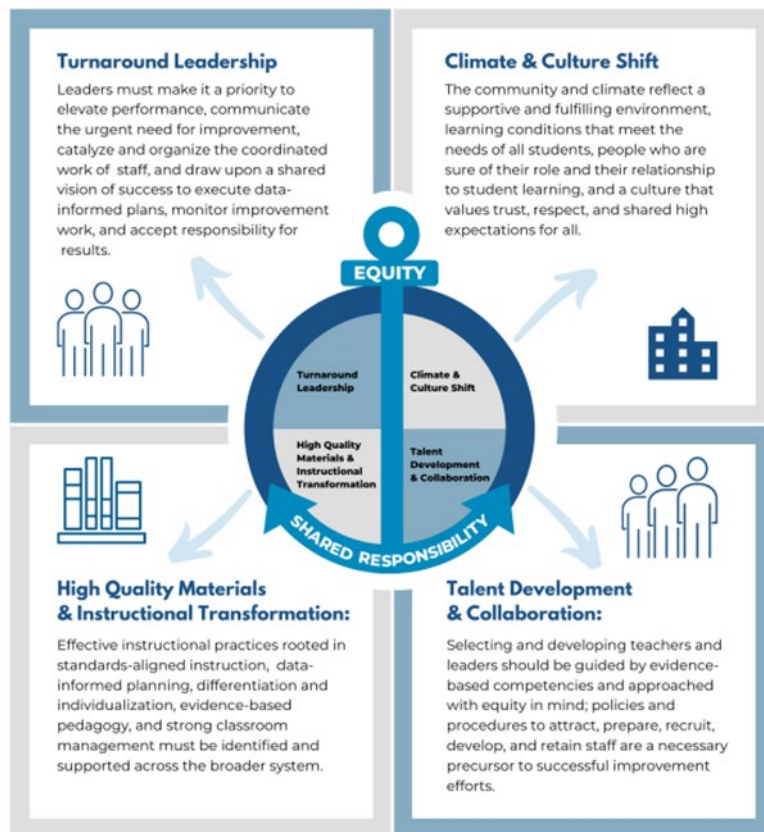
Source: Rhode Island Practitioner's Guide to School Improvement 2019-2020, p.8

The Rhode Island Practitioner's Guide to School Improvement 2019-2020 articulates RIDE's comprehensive school improvement process derived from the School Improvement Framework. Highlights of the Rhode Island system of support can be found in the Models of State Support section on page five.

Using the framework to assess and redesign current SEA policies and practices. SEA system-wide prioritization of school improvement and a focus on continuous improvement across all LEAs and schools emerges as a common theme in the research literature. To address the needs of LEAs and schools, SEAs must first assess their own capacity, expertise, and gaps and create a system that leverages strengths and builds capacity, communication, and efficiency systemwide. SEAs can assess their policies and practices across the agency and reorganize structures and personnel, as needed, to maximize the delivery of technical assistance. REL West at WestEd provides a tool for SEAs to conduct an inventory of current structures and support practices to identify gaps and redundancies. SEAs can use the tool as a guide to assist with streamlining current SEA supports and activities to align with a framework and reorganize and restructure as needed to maximize the effectiveness and delivery of technical assistance.

Considerations for OSSE

As OSSE considers redesigning a system of school improvement support, R4CC recommends the following research-based strategies:

- Adopt or adapt a framework that sets the vision for school improvement and articulates the role of the SEA, LEA, and school.
- Conduct an inventory of current structures and support practices to identify strengths, gaps, and redundancies across OSSE divisions.
- Streamline SEA supports and activities to align with a framework and restructure as needed to maximize the effectiveness and delivery of technical assistance.
- Identify external partners or resources needed to build technical assistance capacity.

Tools and resources
- Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework, The Center for School Turnaround and Improvement
- Evidence-Based Improvement: A guide for States to Strengthen their Frameworks and Supports Aligned to the Evidence Requirements of ESSA, REL West at West Ed
- State Support Network: Evaluating State Accountability Systems, U.S. Department of Education

Models of State Support

The most common models and promising practices of state support include a collaborative partnership between SEAs, LEAs, and third-partner organizations. SEAs have limited resources to provide direct support to districts and schools to meet technical assistance requirements outlined in The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). As such, a majority of states expand their capacity by partnering or contracting with external providers. In a 2019 survey of 41 SEAs, all SEAs reported that they work directly with LEAs to provide technical assistance. Seventy-three percent of SEAs reported that they contracted with or planned to contract with individuals to provide coaching or other services to CSI schools (49 percent for TSI schools), 56 percent planned to work with regional education service agencies, and 51 percent planned to work with

non-profit or for-profit provider organizations to provide technical assistance to CSI schools. Fewer than half of SEAs planned to have LEAs work together in a network to provide technical assistance to each other (44 percent), planned to work with professional associations (39 percent), or planned to work with higher education institutions (20 percent) to provide supports to CSI schools. Fewer SEAs planned to provide any of these technical assistance supports to TSI schools compared with the level of support for CSI schools. Patterns were similar between smaller northeastern states and larger states.[2]

States may use their own Title I set-aside funding to contract directly with technical assistance partners. They can also allow LEAs, CSI, and TSI schools to use their Title I funds to contract with providers. In many cases, SEAs vet technical assistance providers to develop a state-approved list of technical assistance providers. In some cases, CSI schools are required to work with a state-approved partner.

In addition to providing targeted technical assistance and expertise to LEAs and schools, partnerships with external providers can provide a neutral perspective in the school improvement process; help enhance lines of communication across schools, LEAs and the SEA; and provide frequent and ongoing face-to-face assistance and support that can bolster implementation and accountability. Ways in which SEAs utilize their own internal capacity and leverage partner to provide technical assistance varies widely from state to state. The examples below showcase a few of the ways in which states may organize themselves and leverage their capacity with the assistance of external partners.

Rhode Island

RIDE targets technical assistance and support primarily to LEAs, but also directly to CSI schools following the state's School Improvement Framework and the process articulated in the Rhode Island Practitioner's Guide to School Improvement 2019-2020. RIDE's role consists of the following activities:

- RIDE developed and supports a Statewide Strategic Planning System that standardizes and integrates LEA and school strategic planning across the state. The secure online system promotes collaboration between LEAs and schools by setting up a common system where LEAs and schools can share and collaborate on their plans in real time. The online planning template and tools are based on the state's School Improvement Framework and ties local planning to SEA goals.
- RIDE provides tiered supports to LEAs developing new strategic plans and/or entering strategic plans into the state planning system.
- RIDE requires CSI schools to develop Community Advisory Boards (CAB) as part of the needs assessment and planning process. RIDE provides foundational support to CSI schools to help them establish a CAB and build capacity for the CAB to oversee and guide school improvement efforts. Capacity building technical assistance may include training on understanding educational data, state funding, policy, evidence-based practices, and research. RIDE also organizes networking opportunities among and between CABs.
- RIDE works with LEAs to approve CAB members and provide planning support. LEAs with large numbers of CSI schools must also assemble their own CABs.
- RIDE has developed tools and resources to support the development and implementation of school improvement plans including a root cause analysis protocol that is the third step in a three-step process for identifying 3-5 high-priority needs and their likely root causes.

- RIDE grants LEAs and CSI schools a planning year to establish their CAB, conduct a comprehensive community needs assessment and root cause analysis, and develop a strategic plan. LEAs and CSI schools then have an additional three years of implementation to complete the turnaround cycle.

RI District Support Program

In addition to its system of support for CSI schools, RIDE launched a District Support Program (DSP) for all LEAs in response to COVID-19. RIDE targeted this program to districts most impacted by the pandemic. Participating districts received matching grants ranging from $1.4 million to $4 million for targeted district improvement efforts. RIDE also provided support from one of three DSP Fellows hired to support districts. DSP districts participated in professional learning on systems change from the Proving Ground program at Harvard University. The DSP Fellows provided support related to improvement planning, professional learning, and communications and resources.

RIDE launched the DSP in late 2021 as a two-year program of support. RIDE focused DSP on districts disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in terms of health effects, districts with declining academic performance from 2018-19 to 2020-21, measures of school climate, and the proportion of students from historically underserved groups.

To launch the work, RIDE, LEAs, and a support contractor worked with districts to identify priority areas for district improvement. Most districts prioritized instructional improvement; others chose equity or student engagement as their priority. Though these were initial selections, DSP focused on nine areas overall: equity, expanded learning, instruction, student well-being, student engagement, talent, and school improvement.

The Proving Ground program offered an overview of their services to superintendents and a series of nine virtual professional learning sessions for district teams. Seven of the Proving Ground workshops focused on elements of a continuous improvement process (e.g., needs assessment, root cause analysis, selecting evidence-based interventions, etc.). By summer 2022, with planning complete, districts prepared to launch their selected interventions in school year 2022-23.

At the end of the 2022-23 school year, districts reported satisfaction with the program. Districts also reported improved capacity to continue the work. Consequently, RIDE is looking to expand the DSP to additional districts. Even though DSP was a two-year program, the DSP Fellows have continued to work with their districts during the 2023-24 school year.

Louisiana

The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) has developed a system of School Improvement Best Practices (SI BPs) to support the LDOE school improvement process. LDOE School Improvement Support Specialists (SISS) work with CSI school leaders to provide differentiated "curriculum-focused" support. The model is driven by a Theory of Action carried out by the Division of School Improvement within the Office of Teaching and Learning.

> **LDOE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT BEST PRACTICES SUPPORT**
>
> **THEORY OF ACTION**
>
> *If* the Division of School Improvement Support Specialists (SISS) engage in timely high-quality professional learning experiences and use high-quality, researched-based tools to provide differentiated and curriculum-focused support in partnering with school system leaders in the implementation of LDOE School Improvement Best Practices by
> - consulting with system leaders to discuss current initiatives and stakeholder needs;
> - collaborating with system leaders to identify specific Best Practices and schools that will receive support, developing support plans reflective of current needs, setting observable and measurable goals to meet needs, and engaging in concrete, aligned support actions; and,
> - coaching system leaders to monitor progress of goal attainment, conducting paired observations to gauge quality of learning experiences enhanced by curriculum implementation, and collecting and using data to provide timely, high-quality instructional feedback,
>
> *then* system leaders will be equipped with the appropriate knowledge and tools to support school leaders in strengthening their instructional capacity to result in a transformation of learning and teaching practices.
>
> (Source: LDOE School Improvement Support Overview)

LDOE support specialists provide high-quality, differentiated support to school system leaders, which includes:
- Conducting paired observations with school systems
- Collecting data during paired observations to inform feedback around SI BPs
- Using data collected from paired observations to provide feedback to school system leaders
- Supporting school system leaders to provide high-quality instructional feedback to school leaders/teachers to improve their quality of practice.

Additional technical assistance from SISSs and partner vendors focuses on one or more of the following five SI BPs identified by LDOE as essential to teaching and learning:
- Instructional leadership team support
- Teacher collaboration support
- Teaching standards support
- Principal standards support
- Career pipeline support

Lastly, the state supports the development, review, and approval of LEA plans in accordance with statutory and regulatory requirements. States also support LEAs and their schools by providing:
- Competitive grant funding and resource allocation review;
- Regional turnaround support managers to conduct site visits and monitor progress;

- Technical assistance with needs assessment and planning, for LEAs with a significant number or percentage of CSI schools;
- A professional learning network that includes instructional coaching; and
- Technical assistance convenings such as School Support Institutes and System Leader Regional Collaborations.

Each LEA is responsible for engaging in timely and meaningful consultation with stakeholders to develop a Consolidated State Plan. Each LEAs can submit their school redesign plans as part of a competitive grant process. LEAs with the strongest evidence-based plans will be awarded funds. LDOE convenes school redesign summit for local superintendents and senior staff to meet and discuss needs and opportunities with proven providers. With over 40 providers and representatives from 10 charter management organizations and 45/69 school districts, leaders are able to identify providers with whom they may partner to improve performance through comprehensive and targeted school improvement programs. LDOE provides LEAs with a comprehensive list of vetted providers.

Oregon

Oregon's Integrated Systems Framework begins with a Continuous Improvement Process that provides a roadmap for districts and schools that is designed for all 197 Oregon school districts in mind. Guidance, toolkits, and technical assistance is provided to LEAs. The SEA support aligns with the pillars of the continuous improvement process. The process and its aligned supports are designed to help schools and districts determine what is working and what needs to change, how to engage stakeholders to effect change, how to leverage effective practices to implement a plan, and how to use data to monitor and make timely adjustments to improve outcomes.

ODE support focuses primarily on district-level needs assessment and improvement planning. District liaisons are assigned to LEAs with large numbers of CSI and TSI schools. For the district-level needs assessment, ODE provides comprehensive detailed toolkits and templates on how to conduct a needs assessment, develop a school improvement plan, match strategies to evidence, and develop routines for self-monitoring. A District and School Effectiveness team partners with regional professional development organizations to provide regional workshops aligned with the ODE District Continuous Improvement process. ODEoffers aligned workshops and webinars for LEAs and schools. Resources developed in the field are shared and made available to all districts and schools. These resources include PowerPoint presentations, handouts, graphic organizers, sample needs assessments, and activities administrators can complete to develop skills for creating and measuring goals. (Source: Unlocking Potential: A Tool to Support Ongoing, Meaningful Engagement with Stakeholders.)

Illinois

Illinois has created a system of support known as IL-EMPOWER. IL-EMPOWER supports CSI and TSI schools statewide with the following components:

1. Federal Title I funding and state funding distributed using an equity-based formula.

2. Support with school improvement planning using the Illinois Quality Framework Supporting Rubric. (Chicago Public Schools use their own School Excellence Framework).

3. Every CSI and TSI school works with a state approved "Learning Partner" (LPs). LPs can provide a range of targeted services including professional development, coaching, data analysis, and school improvement planning. Schools have the flexibility to use their Title I funds to contract with one of 56 state-approved LPs. CSI schools must work with an LP. Working with an LP is optional for TSI schools.

4. The SEA also provides professional learning (PP) support to CSI schools at no cost. PP supports can include support with school culture, data driven instruction and decision making, evidence-based practices, leadership, and standards-based learning and assessment.

5. CSI schools outside of Chicago Public Schools are assigned to one of six IL-EMPOWER Coordinators who provide guidance to CSI schools on the school improvement process through quarterly meetings with schools and their selected LP. TSI schools are not assigned a coordinator but have access to a Help Hotline.

IL-EMPOWER is designed for schools and does not mandate a specific role for districts, though districts are expected to maintain a typical LEA support and monitoring role. Schools and districts maintain authority and autonomy about staffing, scheduling, and the allocation of resources. Finally, additional support is available through a peer-to-peer network supported by the SEA.

Other states with notable strategies for supporting CSI schools using vetted partners:

- **Kansas** has formed the Kansas Learning Network (KLN) under its Technical Assistance System Network (TASN), which is intended to provide LEAs with coordinated evidence-based technical assistance from multiple providers in the network. The KLN supports CSI school needs assessment focused on root cause analysis and improvement planning. Its website provides a suite of coaching resources, as well as access to KansaSTAR, the state's performance management system for CSI schools based on Indiana's Indistar system.
- **Nevada** has vetted a pool of qualified technical assistance providers that CSI schools can contract with to provide a range of supports. The SEA hosts a networking event where schools can meet with providers to try and find a good fit. The SEA also supports an LEA partnership network.
- **Idaho** has partnered with a state higher education institution to hire a pool of "capacity builders" in the state to provide partnership and technical assistance teams to CSI schools. The capacity builders are typically former principals and superintendents who provide coaching and mentorship.
- **Maryland** has opted to contract with consultants to provide root cause analysis technical assistance directly to LEAs with CSI schools.

Texas

TEA has designed a [diagnostic process](#) to help schools identify areas of strength and growth. The diagnostic process is designed to ensure that schools and districts focus on the most critical and high-leverage actions. The process is a collaborative effort between the district, school, and a trained facilitator. Indeed, the district must participate in data collection and planning to ensure full LEA commitment and support. The trained facilitator guides the LEA and school through the process and helps refine goals and action steps.

TEA maintains a comprehensive list of vetted technical assistance providers that districts and schools can contract with for support using their Title I funds. The list of providers identifies the expertise of each provider that aligns with the ESF essential practices.

Additionally, a network of 20 regional Education Service Centers (ESC) provides district and school support through the [Texas Instructional Leadership Program](#) (TIL). The TIL aims to support districts and schools through professional development and coaching for administrators in six key areas:

- observation and feedback,
- data-driven instruction,
- schoolwide culture routines,
- lesson alignment,
- formative assessment, and
- materials internalization and alignment.

The TIL is open to all schools and districts but is aligned to the ESF to meet the needs of comprehensive school improvement (CSI) and targeted school improvement (TSI) schools.

Considerations for OSSE

As OSSE considers redesigning a system of school improvement support, R4CC recommends the following research-based strategies:

- Expand technical assistance capacity by creating a system that leverages local expertise, capacity, and resources.
- Consider how OSSE could partner with DC Public Schools (DCPS) and the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) to leverage existing strengths and resources in DC and across LEAs. For example, could LEAs work together to form a network of support?
- Assess the extent to which existing higher education institutions or community-based partners could be leveraged to provide targeted, systemic expertise and support.
- Assess where there are gaps in OSSE services that could be contracted externally.
- Consider how OSSE can position itself to bridge the divide between providers and schools (e.g., over time, shift to the creation of an OSSE-approved list of vendors).

Tools and Resources

State Responsibilities and Opportunities for School Improvement under ESSA, Policy Studies Associates

Leveraging Funding

SEAs must distribute Title I Part A funds to LEAs with CSI and TSI schools. SEAs are required to create a consolidated application process for LEAs and award the funds either on a formula basis and/or competitive basis. SEAs can determine the criteria for both formula and competitive grants and may do so based on equity or need. SEAs also have the option of using grant competitions as a strategy to promote what works. While state funding competitions are generally limited to the allocation of federal funds, many SEAs provide technical assistance to LEAs to help them strategize ways to braid and maximize funding from government, nonprofit, and private entities. Examples of ways states leverage funds through competitive grant applications and technical assistance support are highlighted below.

SEAs can leverage funds through strategic competition. Several states administer school improvement grants through a competitive application process or a combination of formula and competitive grants. A Results for America analysis found that 14 states award funds at least in part on the basis of the evidence-based practices LEAs select to implement or on the strength of the evidence supporting their plans. Examples of ways in which states can design competitions to award funding to LEAs are highlighted below.

- **Arizona's** competitive process gives preference to evidence-based plans that target root causes identified in a comprehensive needs assessment.

- **Connecticut, Delaware, Indiana, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, and Tennessee** all take a similar hybrid formula/competition approach in which competitive funds are awarded at least in part on the strength of the LEA's commitment to evidence-based practices.

- **Louisiana's** competition prioritizes school redesign supported by strong evidence, evidence of a strong monitoring process, and LEAs that choose to work with an external provider with an impactful track record. LEAs and schools may revise their plans until funds are spent.

- **Minnesota** renews LEA funds on a yearly basis partly based on program evaluation data that demonstrates that funds are being spent effectively.

- **Nevada** has a scoring process and decision tree that prioritizes awards first by the ESSA evidence tier of selected interventions, with award decisions cascading until all available funds are spent. Priority is given to LEAs that choose to implement state-approved interventions and those that emphasize data-driven decision making.

- **Washington** uses a formula approach for a base amount of funds then issues supplemental grants based on student and school counts (e.g., additional funding is provided to LEAs with larger portions of CSI schools so that they may increase systemic support at the LEA level).

SEAs can provide direct or vendor-supported guidance and technical assistance to LEAs on how to coordinate federal and state funds for school improvement. LEAs, particularly smaller LEAs, may have limited capacity to ascertain appropriate and allowable use of and braiding of federal and state funds. They may also have limited capacity to search for and apply for grants. The SEA can support LEAs with clear guidance and direct assistance. For example, Nevada provides technical assistance and support to LEAs on how to strategically coordinate funds and develop grant applications as part of its menu of topics of support and New Jersey has developed a hub on its website which LEAs can use as a guide to help them search for and use funds effectively. These examples are highlighted below.

As part of its system of support for districts with CSI schools, **Nevada** began to strategize ways to help LEAs leverage funds. Part of their plan included providing direct technical assistance support related to funding. In an effort to help LEAs develop stronger plans using evidence-based intervention approaches, SEA staff provided individualized technical assistance and worked with LEAs to strategically coordinate funds and develop grant applications aligned to their improvement plans. The emphasis was on funding a plan rather than developing a plan based on the availability of funds. The SEA provided technical assistance to district leaders and held office hours in which principals discussed promising strategies for improving their schools, as well as possible funding sources that could be used to support their ideas. LEAs funded their plans by braiding funds from federal and state sources, including Title I-A, Section 1003a, state turnaround funds, remaining SIG funds, Title II, and Title IV-A and -B. The SEA found that LEA contexts varied and that this was a new approach for many of them. Providing direct technical assistance to LEAs to support their

development of funding strategies that align with the local context of a district required staff time, expertise, and creative thinking.

New Jersey has created a web-based hub called [Maximizing Federal Funds](). The website is a resource designed to help LEA administrators approach spending with the consideration of student needs at the forefront. The website is a searchable database organized by topic (e.g., tiered systems of support, school climate). The site provides guidance on what funding sources can be used to support different interventions that target specific needs, with a description of how each source can be used (e.g., costs related to curriculum, professional development, etc.) and example breakdowns of various scenarios. The cross-agency, collaborative effort was initially designed to help LEA administrators determine how best to use their Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds; however, the website continues to be a resource for LEAs strategizing ways to build and sustain ESSER-funded programs and budget and allocate funds based on student need. The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) supported the use of the website with the development of a toolkit, dissemination to superintendents through repeated communications, and through technical assistance offered through various NJDOE program offices. NJDOE is in the process of developing an updated version that will live beyond ESSER.

Considerations for OSSE

As OSSE considers redesigning a system of school improvement support, R4CC recommends the following research-based strategies:

- **Consider incentivizing OSSE priorities through the use of a competitive grant process.** Could OSSE incentivize innovation with a competitive and/or hybrid grant process?
- **Provide direct or indirect targeted technical assistance**. OSSE can provide tools and resources to districts to help them maximize their use of funds. Other potential strategies could include direct technical assistance on the use of funds or providing an approve a list of vendors or partners with which LEAs can work to scan for financial resources and braid existing funding more effectively.

Tools and Resources
- [What is Resource Equity?,]() Education Resource Strategies (ERS)
- [Deep Dive into Principle #7 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems](), CCSSO
- Budget Hold'Em for [Districts]() and [Schools](), ERS
- [School Improvement Grant Fund Distribution](), U.S. Department of Education

Monitoring School Improvement

SEAs are required to monitor LEA compliance with ESSA. At a minimum, they must approve and then monitor the implementation of school improvement plans. However, SEAs can leverage the monitoring function by working with LEAs in real time to support data collection, analysis, reflection, and course correction to strengthen implementation efforts, encourage continuous improvement, and enhance collaboration to achieve results. Massachusetts and Tennessee are among a handful of states that have built a robust progress monitoring system that includes regular feedback loops and external evaluation support. Their systems are summarized below.

Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) garners intense national interest for its long history of successful innovation. For over 15 years, DESE has developed and refined a set of turnaround practices and indicators used as part of annual school monitoring. DESE has devised a set of 26 indicators it uses to assess school improvement performance. The 26 indicators are grouped into four categories:

- Leadership, Shared Responsibility, and Professional Collaboration
- Intentional Practices for Improving Instruction
- Student-Specific Supports and Instruction for all Students
- School Climate and Culture

External monitors are trained to assess and score school performance using a rubric aligned with the indicators. Ratings are based on classroom observation, staff surveys, and interviews and focus groups with key school leaders and teachers, students, and external stakeholders. Schools receive a report at the completion of a rigorous scoring and analysis process that includes at least three individuals.

The 26 indicators used by DESE have become the language of school improvement and school performance in Massachusetts. An independent evaluation of the monitoring system found that 13 of the indicators have been shown to be associated with better student outcomes.[3] The effect sizes for these outcomes equal or exceed 0.25 standard deviations. The practices and indicators have served as the foundation for DESE's assistance to low-performing schools. In the process, schools have internalized the indicators as how they think about the work of school improvement. In this way, DESE and schools are better able to identify, plan, implement, and review strategies for improvement and to do so with greater clarity and efficiency.

Tennessee

Similar to Massachusetts, Tennessee has also built its internal evaluation capacity. The current Office of Research and Strategy began in 2012 as a small in-house research team focused on evaluating statewide initiatives with the goal of determining which programs were achieving desired results. Over the years, the Office of Research and Strategy has expanded its role to include designing implementation studies for new

pilots, leading efforts to take pilots to scale, and collecting and sharing actionable data with leaders at the district and state levels.

In 2016, Tennessee expanded its evaluation capacity further by establishing a formal research partnership with Vanderbilt University known as the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA). TERA conducts independent research on a wide range of education initiatives in Tennessee, including extensive research on the state's school turnaround work that has been used to inform decision making about the state's role in school improvement.

Finally, Tennessee has developed a three-tiered monitoring framework used to monitor implementation of federal grants across all LEAs. A Risk Analysis Guide is used to assess the risk that an LEA may not meet certain requirements. Fifty indicators are used to assess each district's level of risk and determine which tier of monitoring it will receive. The three monitoring levels are: 1. Low (LEAs must only submit an online instrument); 2. Elevated (LEAs participate in virtual monitoring); and 3. Significant (LEAs receive a site visit).

Considerations for OSSE

As OSSE considers redesigning a system of school improvement support, R4CC recommends the following research-based strategies:

- Determine the extent to which OSSE can enhance existing monitoring support by establishing a robust system of indicators, rubrics for assessing implementation aligned to indicators, and providing responsive technical assistance and feedback.
- Consider funding evaluation and pilot testing assistance to identify what works and eliminate ineffective strategies.

Tools and Resources
Evidence-Building Opportunities under ESSA: How States Can and Should Generate Evidence to Drive Better Outcomes for Students, Results for America
Measuring School Turnaround Success, The Center for School Turnaround and Improvement
State Systems of Identification and Support under ESSA: Evaluating Identification Methods and Results in an Accountability System, CCSSO

Alternative Governance and More Rigorous Intervention Options

ESSA requires SEAs to establish exit criteria for CSI schools that must be met within a specified timeframe not to exceed four years. Should CSI schools fail to meet the criteria in the specified timeframe, SEAs must determine more rigorous intervention. For schools that fail to exit CSI status, SEAs can determine specific sanctions, offer a menu of alternative structures, and/or offer more intensive support.

Over decades going back to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) era and beyond, SEAs have experimented with a variety of alternative governance structures such as district or school takeover, restructuring as a charter, replacing leadership and staff, and school closure. Recent research suggests that the outcome of these alternative structures has been positive in cases of organizational and human resource changes where LEAs/schools maintained some degree of autonomy, but largely neutral or negative in most cases of state takeover and school closures, with a few exceptions.

State Takeover

A study published in the Journal of Policy Analysis and Management[4] found that:
- There is little to no evidence that state takeover improves academic achievement.
- Majority Black districts are often identified for state takeover regardless of academic performance, which correlates with a decrease in African American representation in local government.
- There is considerable heterogeneity of effects across takeover districts. Local context is identified as an important indicator of why some takeovers are more effective than others.

Education Week recently published an article highlighting additional studies that show the same outcomes and cautions states that continue to consider state takeover as an option.[5] In fact, as cited in the article, some states that have engaged in state takeover since the NCLB era or earlier have begun to consider rescinding their state takeover policies (MI, TN). Moreover, since 2018, Jersey City, Newark, Philadelphia, and New Orleans, among others, have been given back local control over their traditional public schools; Virgina's attempt at enacting a state takeover law was ruled unconstitutional; and Alaska and Colorado have repealed their state takeover authority[6] Currently, ten states (AL, CA, IN, MA, NJ, RI, OH, SC, TX, WV) operate at least one district.

Highlights from models of state takeover in Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Tennessee that have yielded some positive effects are included below.

Louisiana Recovery School District Model

The Recovery School District (RSD) in Louisiana was created in 2003 by the state Legislature, but didn't take off until after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 when the state placed all of Orleans Parish schools into the RSD and converted the schools to charter schools. As such, geographic school boundaries all but disappeared in New Orleans and staff were effectively fired and lost their union contract by virtue of becoming a charter. The changes did bring about improvement in student achievement and the Orleans Parish School Board has regained authority of its schools. Other notable features of the RSD include:
- A portfolio governance strategy. There is no single governance structure in the district. Rather schools have a menu of governance options including operation as a charter school, for-profit operator, or a traditional public school.
- Each school operates as its own LEA, meaning federal money is allocated directly to the schools to use however they choose, allowing schools more fiscal autonomy.
- The state has some system-level of oversight, for example, appointing the Superintendent, but no direct role in operations.
- RSD schools may enter a supervisory memorandum of understanding with their LEA.

- Schools must remain RSD schools for a minimum of five years. They may be returned to their former LEA upon recommendation from the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- There are currently five schools in the RSD.

Receivership in Massachusetts

In November 2011, Massachusetts took control of the Lawrence Public Schools District following 10+ years of low academic performance, a 52 percent graduation rate, ineffective leadership, and years as a district in the state's lowest performance category (Level 5). Massachusetts' takeover led to the creation of the receivership, or state takeover, of Lawrence Public Schools, which maintained much of the previous district structure and zoning, but under state supervision. Jeff Riley, the chief innovation officer for Boston Public Schools, was appointed as the Lawrence's receiver. Empowered by strong support from state policymakers and political leaders, Riley was given wide-ranging powers to reform the district.

Riley implemented a range of educational and structural changes, utilizing a mix of school models, including traditional public-school models and charters. Charter school operators had to agree to work within the district structure, meaning teachers and other school employees would remain part of their local union and attendance was limited to its existing neighborhood attendance zone. For students, he increased the potential learning opportunities through mandatory extended school days, English language arts (ELA) workshops during school holidays, and a new performance data system for individualized student data tracking. In his first two years, Riley replaced 56 percent of the principals in the district and recruited teachers with records of high performance to fill vacancies. Riley also worked with the teachers' unions to bring them in as partners of the reforms through initiatives and support for previously neglected advancement opportunities, such as pathways for high-performing teachers to move into administration.

From 2011 to 2015, math proficiency increased from 28 percent to 44 percent and ELA proficiency increased from 41 percent to 44 percent. Academic achievement continued to steadily improve but seems to have leveled off in recent years.[7] The district also raised their graduation rate to 72 percent in 2018, a rate that remained steady in 2023[8]. Lawrence also saw a rise in Level 1 schools, those meeting state performance targets, from 2 to 6 in the first four years, but most of the district's schools were still at Level 3 or 4, maintaining an overall Level 5 classification for the district (the state's lowest designation). In 2018, when the "level" rating system was abandoned, the district was recategorized as "in need of broad/comprehensive support," a label for chronically underperforming districts.[9]

Tennessee Achievement School District Model

Tennessee established the Achievement School District (ASD) in 2010 and soon received an influx of $22 million from the state's first Race to the Top grant. The first six schools under ASD authority opened in 2012. By 2015, 29 schools were part of the ASD, most of which were from Shelby County Schools in Memphis, Tennessee. Although impressive results were seen in the first three years of the ASD, results have fallen as leadership changes weakened authority and political will, and tensions grew between the ASD and Shelby County Schools. Today, only three schools remain part of the ASD and chronic low performance persists.

In recent years, Tennessee has turned to its Innovation Zone (I-Zone) model, in which schools remain under the authority of their local district, but gain autonomy over financial, programmatic, and staffing decisions. Only districts with multiple CSI schools can apply for I-Zone grants as a school turnaround strategy. "As of 2017, Metro Nashville Public Schools, Shelby County Public Schools, Hamilton County Schools, and Knox County Schools have established I-Zones."[10]

Lessons Learned

In 2018, looking back at the evidence from ASD and the I-Zone initiative, TERA released a policy brief outlining five guiding principles for state improvement efforts. TERA identified the five following guiding principles:

1. Establish a dedicated organizational infrastructure to support CSI schools, including dedicated staff to oversee implementation and monitoring.
2. Identify and address barriers to improvement using a comprehensive needs assessment that includes an analysis of school staffing trends, instructional time, and school policies and procedures (e.g., the daily schedule).
3. Increase instructional capacity through, for example, hiring and training effective classroom instructors, implementing curriculum aligned to standards, and developing teachers' capacity to effectively teach the curriculum.
4. Increase leadership capacity through hiring and training effective CSI school leaders.
5. Implement school processes and practices to support continuity and maintain stability (e.g., establish a positive climate and culture, make time for effective teacher collaborative planning, schedule time during the day for additional instruction for students furthest behind).[11]

Other Turnaround Models

As for other alternative governance structures, a meta-analysis assessing the relationship between school turnaround models under NCLB found no relationship between school closure and student achievement but did find positive results from other models. However, the meta-analysis showed no conclusive evidence that any one model was more effective than the other. Study authors concluded that the combination of improvement in organizational operations and human capital likely explains the positive findings in any particular model. Their analysis showed improvement in schools whether or not the improvement effort included a change in management or governance, though governance changes did show stronger improvement, at least initially. The study also found that improvement tended to increase over time and was not always evident in the first year of implementation.[12]

Increasing local flexibility, autonomy, and support alongside requiring more rigorous interventions may increase the likelihood of success. Research indicates that many states have pivoted away from interventions that restrict LEA and school autonomy and are instead moving toward a model that retains LEA and school autonomy while restricting the menu of options available to a shorter list of targeted, high-leverage, best practice, research-based interventions coupled with more intensive support and monitoring.

For example, Arizona offers intensified support specifically with needs assessment, root cause analysis, and assistance identifying evidence-based interventions. Delaware, California, and Minnesota take a similar

approach of conducting their own externally facilitated needs assessment and develop a new district and school plan that includes an evaluation component and monitoring support. Illinois requires CSI schools that fail to meet exit criteria to work with a state-approved partner and establish a stronger monitoring system. Several states including Texas and Utah require schools that fail to exit CSI status to select from a more limited set of evidence-based interventions approved by the state. States like South Carolina and Wyoming require schools to select evidence-based interventions that meet the federal criteria for strong or moderate evidence-based interventions (Tier 1 and Tier 2).

Rhode Island School Redesign

Rhode Island has created a model that offers CSI schools that fail to exit CSI status after four years one of five School Redesign options:

1. **Empowerment:** Local community members and two-thirds of teachers must vote to approve enabling school leaders to have a comprehensive set of autonomies and regulatory flexibilities that are obtained legally through, for example, agreements (e.g., curriculum policy, certification policy, collective-bargaining, etc.)
2. **Small Schools of Choice:** A school reorganizes into two or more new, smaller schools (roughly 100 students per grade) that emphasize student-centered, personalized learning. Students have flexibility to choose which small school they attend (modeled after New York City's small school initiative).
3. **Restart:** A school goes under the management of a charter or educational management organization or other state-approved managing entity (NCLB School Turnaround Model).
4. **Closure:** A school closes and students relocate to higher-performing schools (NCLB School Turnaround Model).
5. **LEA Proposed Redesign Model:** A school initiates an LEA-developed school redesign model that includes at least a high-quality school leader, a new school model, and significant school autonomy.
   Source: Rhode Island Department of Education website and SEA staff interview

LEAs select which Redesign model to engage in based on their needs assessment and root cause analysis data. The Redesign plans are then approved by the Rhode Island Council for Elementary and Secondary Education. The first schools to begin the redesign process did so with a planning year beginning in the 2022-23 school year.

Providence Schools began a Small Schools of Choice redesign process in 2022-23 with a planning year that included undergoing an in-depth application process, conducting a community member informed needs assessment for each of five schools, root cause analysis, and strategic planning sessions with RIDE. The process included redesign teams comprised of family and community members, teachers, administrators and district staff. Schools conducted working sessions and writing retreats with the support of a strategic education organization of choice. Each redesign team met over 20 times during the planning year. Redesign teams developed their own vision for a new school model that includes one Early College High School, one STEAM-focused school, a Life Sciences Institute, a visual and performing arts campus, and a school focused on healthcare and finance career pathways.

Considerations for OSSE

As OSSE considers redesigning a system of school improvement support, R4CC recommends the following research-based strategies:

- **Design and implement a strong system of support before considering alternative governance structures.** As OSSE envisions and develops a redesigned system of support for school improvement, LEAs and schools should be given time to improve under the new system before turning to alternative governance structures.
- **Determine the extent of public support for implementation of selected alternative governance strategies.** Establishing, implementing, and monitoring alternative governance structures is a complex process that can negatively impact SEA relationships with LEAs, schools, and communities if not done in collaboration with communities. Gather public input on the opportunities and challenges of alternative governance structures and more rigorous innovations. Incorporate this feedback into decisions on the selection and implementation of these models.
- **Assess the extent to which OSSE has a clear understanding of the root causes of school underperformance.** A clear clear, evidence-based understanding of school underperformance is critical for ensuring that staff not only implement the new model of governance but also support school/LEA leaders and teachers.

Tools and resources

Lessons from Five Years of Research on Turnaround Effects, TERA

School Turnaround Efforts: What's Been Tried, Why Those Efforts Failed, and What to Do Now, Rockefeller Institute of Government

High-Leverage Strategies

Irrespective of how SEAs organize themselves to support LEAs, the research literature identifies "high-leverage strategies" states can employ to support district and school implementation of effective research-based practices, including the following:

1. Support for diagnosing and responding to student learning needs
2. Support for providing rigorous, evidence-based instruction
3. Support for school leader development

As SEAs assess their system of support to identify areas for strengthening practices aligned with a school improvement framework, organizational leaders should consider the following questions:

- What guidance does the SEA provide on data collection and conducting root cause analysis?

- How is the SEA supporting efficient and effective data collection and analysis?
- How is the SEA facilitating training on data analysis and data-informed instruction for LEA instructional staff?
- How is the SEA working with LEAs to encourage implementation of innovative practices and the discontinuation of ineffective approaches?
- How is the SEA working with LEAs to co-create or strategize plans and timelines for school improvement?
- How is the SEA working with LEAs to select or develop curricula aligned with the state learning standards? [13]

High-leverage strategy #1: Support for diagnosing and responding to student learning needs.

ESSA requires that schools conduct a local needs assessment to drive the school improvement planning process. Schools and LEAs can benefit from state guidance and support that leverages best practices and state resources while minimizing burden. This section summarizes best practices from the research literature on how SEAs can support local efforts to diagnose and respond to student learning needs by supporting the school improvement planning process and the needs assessment process.

The research literature identifies school improvement planning and the needs assessment process as a key feature in an effective turnaround process. SEA policies and practices can foster strong planning and needs assessment with effective tools and support or hinder these processes with redundancies, unclear guidance, or lack of guidance. A strong needs assessment and aligned planning process with SEA support can reduce administrative burden on LEAs and schools and maximize the effectiveness of school improvement efforts.

State examples:

- The **Colorado** Department of Education (CDE) Unified Improvement Plan (UIP) provides districts and schools with a unified, consistent, and streamlined planning template to meet local, state, and federal reporting guidelines. Schools and districts must identify performance challenges, root causes, major improvement strategies, an action plan, and elements for effective progress monitoring. The UIP system is supported with draft feedback, clear guidance and examples, webinar and video support, a user guide, and thirty-minute consultation sessions. CDE has also developed a School-level UIP Quality Criteria Rubric that establishes consistent criteria for local and state plan review. Schools can also use the rubric as a self-assessment guide.

- The **Oregon** Department of Education (ODE) funds the development of Student Success Plans that are intended to meet the needs of underserved groups of students throughout the state that reflect that student community's culture, traditions, and needs. Student Success Plans differ from standard school improvement plans in that they are co-developed with community advisory boards, they target the unique needs of specific historically underserved groups of students, identify success stories, note barriers to implementation, and provide additional supports as needed. ODE has partnered with the Regional Educational Laboratory Program, REL Northwest, to

develop a data collection and evaluation system. ODE also partners with the Region 16 Comprehensive Center to support plan implementation with, for example, professional development, action planning, and facilitating collaboration. This funding is supported by the Student Success Act, an initiative of the state legislature.

- **Rhode Island** requires identified schools to connect the school improvement plan to a comprehensive needs assessment and utilize a community advisory board (CAB) comprised of family, students, and community members. LEAs with CSI schools are required to assemble at least one CAB. RIDE provides technical assistance to LEAs and CABs to help them build capacity over time so that they may guide school improvement efforts. Additionally, RIDE will collaborate with LEAs in the creation of the advisory board and will provide networking opportunities for the advisory board. The department will also provide requested support as needed throughout the improvement process. LEAs select CAB members and oversee CAB activities. LEAs may request a waiver from CAB requirement in lieu of an alternate plan to engage the community in a way that will better benefit their students.[14]

- **Wyoming** organizes data retreats for struggling schools and invites local higher education faculty to work with school leaders to analyze state and local data to identify needs.

Tools and resources

Plans That Work: Tools for Supporting School Improvement Planning, U.S. Department of Education
Utilizing Integrated Resources to Implement the School and District Improvement Cycle and Supports: Guidance for Schools, Districts, and State Education Agencies, CCSSO (Includes research-based planning templates and reflection tools that can be adopted by SEAs.)
A Rubric for Assessing Schools' Plans for Rapid Improvement, The Center for School Turnaround and Improvement
School Improvement: Needs Assessment, U.S. Department of Education
Equitable Access Toolkit: Root-Cause Analysis Workbook, Center on Great Teachers and Leaders
Equitable Access Toolkit: Stakeholder Engagement Guide, Center on Great Teachers and Leaders

High-leverage strategy #2: Support for providing rigorous, evidence-based instruction

CSI schools and their LEAs must implement evidence-based interventions as defined in federal guidance. SEAs can provide assistance to LEAs and schools that encourages them to explicitly link the selection of intervention strategies to the gaps identified in their needs assessment and encourages the selection of high-leverage strategies. SEA guidance and technical assistance around the development of improvement plans can require LEAs and CSI schools to provide data that justifies the selection of particular interventions. Results for America found that 14 states planned to offer "sophisticated supports" to connect needs assessment directly with the identification of interventions.

State examples:

- **California** offers an organizational tool and vetting rubric for identifying evidence-based interventions as part of its continuous improvement process.

- **Oregon** built a continuous improvement system in partnership with LEAs that determines "readiness" for continuous improvement work based on a screening protocol. The state supports LEAs to work with local stakeholders on root cause analysis.

- **Massachusetts** developed the 2016 Massachusetts Turnaround Practices Field Guide: A Research-Based Guide Designed to Support District and School Leaders Engaged in School Turnaround Efforts. The guide provides detailed and comprehensive guidance on evidence-based approaches to school improvement aligned to the DESE framework. The guide includes school profiles of strategies in action and a list of DESE's suite of resources and tools.

  Additionally, as one of its roles, DESE's Office of Planning and Research (OPR), conducts extensive statewide research and performance management for school turnaround efforts. OPR works collaboratively with the state's District Support team to inform, refine, and strengthen school improvement efforts. DESE partners with institutions of higher education and other research organizations to support LEA and school data analysis to improve implementation efforts and outcomes tied to the indicators.

- **Wisconsin** partnered with a network of regional education service agencies to develop a common data inquiry process for schools, called WISExplore. WISExplore includes resources to take account of available data, assess leader capacities for data use, and lead data inquiry PLCs. WISE coaches are available to help build data-related capacities and design school improvement strategies based on data. WISExplore is a component of a larger WISE (Wisconsin Information System for Education) system that includes portals for dashboards and data output, the uploading of unique local data, and resources for learning about data.

Tools and Resources
Selecting Evidence-Based Practices for Low-Performing Schools, American Institutes for Research

High-leverage strategy #3: Support for leadership development and supervision for instructional transformation.
School leadership is consistently linked to the effectiveness of school improvement efforts reinforcing its inclusion as a critical component of a school improvement framework. Targeted and strategic SEA support for leadership development can be one of the most effective SEA strategies to boost sustainable and replicable school improvement. School districts are increasingly dedicating federal funds to support professional learning of their principals in the areas of school improvement planning and instructional improvement. SEAs across the country are using their capacity and partnerships to develop state-led initiatives large and small to support the hiring, retention, and training of LEA and school leaders. For example, within the last five years, the Region 4 Comprehensive Center has partnered with Delaware,

Maryland, and Pennsylvania on projects to support their efforts to recruit and retain leaders in low-performing districts, train aspiring leaders for the superintendency, and diversify the leadership pipeline.

State examples:

- Through a partnership between the state government, the state department of education, and institutions of higher education, **Delaware** established the Governor's Institute for School Leadership (GISL). GISL is jointly led by the Delaware Department of Education and the Delaware Academy for School Leadership (DASL) at the University of Delaware. School leaders have access to expert leadership training and coaching resources from across the nation. Initiatives within GISL include a Superintendent Study Council, a peer learning network of LEA leaders; the Assistant Principal Academy, a 12-month aspiring leader program for assistant principals; and the Executive Leadership Academy, designed to train and support principal supervisors informed by research, practice, and national standards for education leadership.

- With support from the Wallace Foundation, the **Wisconsin** Urban Leadership Institute emerged from a partnership between the state department of education and five of the state's largest urban districts (Green Bay, Kenosha, Madison, Milwaukee, and Racine). Each year, 25 leaders receive training to become culturally competent leaders. The training is based in the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's Equity Framework and is facilitated by experts from within the state. Participants engage in 10 leadership training sessions over the course of a year.

Considerations for OSSE

As OSSE considers redesigning a system of school improvement support, R4CC recommends the following research-based strategies:

- **Coordinate and streamline SEA and LEA planning and need assessment requirements.** How can OSSE coordinate planning with DCPS and the DC PCSB? Look for opportunities to streamline multiple planning and needs assessment processes (e.g., eliminate duplicate content or coordinate submission timelines). Provide tailored guidance to schools on how they can coordinate the LEA and SEA planning processes (e.g., written crosswalks and examples, webinars, short video demonstrations).

- **Strengthen policies and support aligned with high-leverage evidence-based practices.** Provide incentives or competitive grants that encourage LEAs and schools to implement high-quality evidence-based practices. Look for other opportunities to provide more guidance to help LEAs and schools select appropriate interventions aligned with needs assessment and comprehensive root cause analysis.

- **Assess the extent to which OSSE's leadership development and support are meeting the needs of CSI schools.** Inventory existing resources and initiatives to maximize the effectiveness of leadership support that addresses the needs of CSI schools, complements LEA initiatives, and builds local capacity to recruit, retain, and train effective leaders.

- **Use data to determine what works.** Assess the extent to which OSSE can use data to determine what initiatives and interventions are working and in what local context? Use these data to determine if there are policies, programs, or practices that can be eliminated thus allowing for more resources to be distributed to initiatives demonstrating success.

Tools and Resources

How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research, Commissioned by the Wallace Foundation

Developing Effective Principals: What Kind of Learning Matters?, Learning Policy Institute

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Appendix B: School Supports Listening Session Key Findings

School Supports Listening Session Key Findings
Developed by the Region 4 Comprehensive Center for OSSE
July 2024

Purpose

As part of an ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and system-wide learning, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) conducted robust stakeholder engagement to inform the redesign of its model of school support. OSSE reached out to educators, principals, system leaders, students, and external organizations to listen to and learn from their insights into challenges, successes, and opportunities within our school improvement system. The goals of these conversations were to better understand the challenges our schools face in accelerating learning, identify high-impact strategies that have been implemented and resulted in bold improvement, and learn more about ways OSSE can best support DC schools on an improvement journey. Insights from these stakeholder engagement sessions directly informed the development of the school improvement model proposal included in this report.

Who Provided Input

As part of the stakeholder engagement process, OSSE and the Region 4 Comprehensive Center (R4CC) interviewed individuals across the DC education landscape. In total, the listening sessions and empathy interviews included over 60 individuals. The individuals included teachers serving on OSSE's Teacher Advisory Councils (7 DCPS, 7 PCS), principals serving on OSSE's Superintendent Advisory Councils (9 DCPS, 3 PCS), principals or executive leaders of schools currently designated for improvement (6 DCPS, 2 PCS), District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) Instructional Superintendents (8), local education agency (LEA) leaders (9 DCPS, 3 PCS), students (2 DCPS, 8 PCS), and individuals from external organizations (6) with deep histories, commitment, and knowledge of DC's schools, teachers, and students.

Key Insights and Takeaways

The listening sessions and interviews explored multiple aspects of school success and improvement. The Appendix provides a sample set of questions used. These questions were tailored to fit the context and expertise of particular sessions.

Below, we have included a set of key insights from the listening sessions conducted. We then provide selected quotes from the perspectives of the participants to illustrate the topic.

Learn from Successes: Participants named bright spots that serve as a reminder of the strengths on which to build further success.

Listening session participants eagerly shared many aspects of their schools of which they were most proud. Chief among them were: staff/school culture, student engagement, differentiating instruction, and student academic growth. OSSE—and the District generally—can learn from the successes schools have had in these key areas.

Participants described the importance to their school communities of having schools where students, teachers, and families felt a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging created spillover effects in terms of student and teacher attendance, student engagement in class, and student-teacher trust, all of which have been demonstrated as foundational to school improvement and turnaround (see, for example, Osterman, 2000, Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012, Bryk & Schneider, 2002, Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001, Louis, Murphy, & Smylie, 2016).

> *I am most proud of the loving and caring relationships that we have with our students and our families. I've worked really hard to not make the principal's office this place of doom and gloom where you go for your torture and punishment. If you need a pat on the back, if you need a hug, if you need some words of encouragement, and if you need me to give you some corrective feedback, that's what I'm here for.*

> *I'm most proud of the culture of love and safety that we've been able to provide here as a school community for our students, their sense of belonging, their sense of joy, their sense of connection, all those are indicators that we have increased tremendously.*

> *[My school] allows me to be my best self because I feel like I can be myself and be open to who I am.*

> *What's driving our ability to improve academic outcomes is a focus on … the individual needs of all of our learners. …it's individualized, personalized schedules. It's a non-traditional approach to helping people advance from where they are, from where they come in at.*

Leverage Data to Understand & Improve: Diagnostic data allows schools to differentiate instruction and target support to meet students' needs.

Participants noted the importance of using data to identify student needs and tailor support accordingly. OSSE's support to schools should focus on improving access to such data, including ensuring the data follow students as they move across schools during a school year, and that principals and teachers continue to have access to appropriate professional learning on the use of data.

> *Students are receiving instruction that makes sense for them at their starting point; we collect so much data about what they need and how they learn best. We're now able to use that data and we can see it in the classroom.*

The personalized and individualized support [for students] has been the game changer.

Making sure that the data is coming to life in a way that's meaningful, I think is one thing that's also contributing to success. It's easy to say you have a data-driven culture, but it's hard to see it.

I think we've also been successful in the math area in that we're constantly reviewing data and we're spending time with teachers looking at the topic tickets quizzes as well as their exit tickets and seeing where there are misconceptions that students have and what are the next steps for teachers in helping to fill the gaps or reteach the concepts.

We have 110 kids [who are] chronically absent. One by one we have to reach out to find out why are [they] are not coming to school and addressing barriers individually.

Build Capacity in Instructional Excellence: Professional learning around content area knowledge and effective instruction is seen as an important tool for school improvement and an opportunity for OSSE to supplement LEA offerings.

Participants also noted the importance of helping teachers develop deep content knowledge and the high value to new teachers of observing veteran teachers in the classroom.

[We have devoted considerable time] supporting our teachers to have a greater depth of understanding around mathematical concepts and then so that they can push the levels of rigor and engagement with their students.

There is not a lot of time built into the day for [observing veteran teachers] but being able to really go into the classroom and see great teachers teach is eye-opening for a new teacher and even for veteran teachers.

Time and the ability to develop a strong, positive school culture with differentiated opportunities for professional learning. There needs to more incentives for principals to operate differently to support teachers.

Prioritize Support in Implementation Fidelity: Schools implementing evidence-based strategies would benefit from additional implementation support to ensure fidelity of implementation.

Listening sessions participants identified challenges they encountered implementing complex improvement strategies, such as changes to school schedules, to ensure the success of evidence-based interventions. In several interviews, participants explicitly requested OSSE support addressing these implementation challenges.

It would be helpful for OSSE to help principals pick effective improvement strategies, for example, serving multi-language learners. What are the right interventions for their student populations in need? The What Works Clearinghouse is not useful. Principals need more intentional support [paraphrased by R4CC based on notes.]

[The flexible schedule] was a lot to manage because we did the whole school at one time. That was not a good idea. And because of that we had behavior challenges we didn't expect. And when people were absent, we couldn't do it and had gaps because of it.

Is the reason a strategy failed because of the strategy or because of the implementation? Transience of staff causes a lot of challenges in the work.

When we're seeing lots of schools scoring low in the same area, we need to look at the systems of support. There are likely issues with implementation (e.g., the math or reading curriculum). We need to be sure that they are implementing at a level that will affect student achievement [paraphrased by R4CC based on notes].

Provide Individual Expert Consult: While schools benefit from multiple sources of support, school leaders expressed a desire for opportunities to meet with experts at OSSE for in depth consultations.

School leaders noted that they benefit from one-on-one consultation with their LEAs, and often through their LEAs, external consultants as well. They expressed a desire, however, for more direct support from OSSE. While school leaders understand OSSE's role in school accountability, leaders may feel safer raising questions with OSSE staff given that personnel matters are handled at the LEA level.

We only talk to OSSE when it's time for reporting. Most of the people [at OSSE] have experience as either principals or things like that but we don't get to pick their brain; we don't get support from them; everything is DCPS. I think it would be great if we got to have some time with the people who managed, like the specialists, who are actually looking over the reports.

I get emails around special education and specialized trainings. Sending me an email is great and I pass it along, but those are passive asks of people to engage in vs. I want to partner with you about where there are gaps and target support areas [identified] around gaps and then provide [professional development] around that.

I had another technical meeting [with OSS]) where we talked about my school. It might be helpful for someone to come [to my school and] walk with me with consulting eyes and then given the wealth of expertise [they have, give] targeted recommendations and support.

[We need help training teachers] to teach literacy and how to meet student needs. [Not everyone knows] what to do for kids who are at different levels of literacy.

Streamline Requirements: Schools face multiple planning and reporting requirements that would benefit from continued cross-agency efforts to streamline and align.

DCPS, the Public Charter School Board (PCSB), OSSE, and each LEA have planning and reporting requirements rooted in law and best practice. Schools can at times perceive these as burdensome and overlapping. While efforts are ongoing to improve planning and reporting requirements, a priority for OSSE (and other agencies) will be to engage schools and LEAs more fully both to clarify the intention and use of required school plans and reports and to identify areas for greater efficiency in planning and reporting. Some leaders worry about the impact of required reporting on staff retention.

> *The support I would really ask for is time. Simplify things. Respect the time and energy of the staff. Make things simpler. Don't ask for a dissertation. I need the process to be simpler. I feel like OSSE is trying to do that.*

> *I love the new reporting system because now you write the report and it's a 30-minute call. I'm like this is genius. I can't complain about them anymore.*

> *I'm literally pouring so much time and energy into a school improvement plan that includes a needs assessment, that includes having to look at all this evidence-based research, pick one, take one, align it with the strategy. It's so time-consuming. It's so much busy work. I worry about losing good leaders in this field who are so [very] talented and smart because the reason they went into it is they're hitting their heads up against walls, against systems and policies that aren't allowing them to really do their job.*

SEA Resources for High-Leverage Strategies Can Make an Impact: Participants, in particular, praised the value of the High Impact Tutoring Initiative and the tutoring managers funded by OSSE. Additionally, participants identified potential roles that OSSE can play in facilitating the sharing of effective strategies across schools and LEAs.

School leaders credited the High Impact Tutoring Initiative as one of the most important interventions available, particularly when staffed by classroom teachers. There may be other opportunities for OSSE to fund similar evidence-based interventions—such as targeting teacher stress, burnout, and retention—especially school level managers to run them.

> *Several other groups highlighted the positive impact of tutors working directly with students, noting that their involvement allowed academic coaches to focus on supporting teachers to improve their practice more directly and consistently [paraphrased by R4CC based on notes].*

> *Participants in another focus group also highlighted the importance to the tutoring grants provided by OSSE, noting that additional bodies to support instruction has been very helpful to schools as they continue to recover from the impact of Covid [paraphrased by R4CC based on notes].*

Highlighting the role that OSSE can play in sharing effective strategies, participants in one group suggested that OSSE play an active role in breaking down barriers across sectors and encourage the use of successful tools across LEAs [paraphrased by R4CC based on notes].

Participants in another group expressed a similar sentiment suggesting that OSSE connect to other schools that are doing things well and help them see some of the other best practices that schools are using to advance student learning [paraphrased by R4CC based on notes].

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Appendix C: Sample Listening Session Interview Protocol

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW

Time: [30-45min]

Scripted Intro: *Good morning/good afternoon everyone. My name is _____ , and I want to start off by saying thank you for sharing part of your [morning or afternoon] with us today. OSSE and the Region 4 Comprehensive Center (R4CC) are embarking on a series of listening sessions and empathy interviews to gain a better understanding of what the State Education Agency can do to best support our schools in accelerating learning. In OSSE's Strategic Plan, the agency has committed to prioritizing school improvement and is taking a step back to listen and learn before beginning the design process. We are reaching out directly to principals, teachers, LEA leaders, student groups, advocacy groups, and community members to ensure we get a clear picture of the current landscape and needs.*

We will be capturing key takeaways as you share to help inform our planning process. We hope that you will be candid with us in this discussion, and we commit to you that while we will be capturing the specific recommendations you share, your feedback is confidential to our planning team and nothing will be reported out at the individual level.

Our conversation will be supported by the guiding questions that we shared with you. Your input today will prove most valuable as it will help inform our work on developing improvements to new guidance and resources offered for schools in need of support.

Before we get started, let's take a moment to introduce ourselves to one another.

[Hands off the intros to Principal & other participants after colleagues have introduced themselves]

Now that everyone has introduced themselves, let's begin.

Principal Questions:

1. **Warm-up:** What are you most proud of about your school?
2. **Impactful Strategies:** Where have you been most successful in improving academic outcomes for your students?
    a. How was that success accomplished? What strategies did you implement and what steps did you take as a leader?
    b. How did you know you were successful?
    c. [Follow-up]: Who in your school/school community was instrumental to this success? What financial, human capital resources did you leverage?
3. **Surprising Outcomes:** Tell us about a time when you implemented or tried to implement a school improvement strategy that had a strong evidence base that you thought was going to improve outcomes but didn't.
    a. Why do you think it didn't result in the outcomes you were hoping to see?

        b.   Looking back, what would you have changed?

4. **Challenges:** What are some of the greatest challenges to improving outcomes and accelerating learning in your school?

5. **Supports Needed:** What supports or resources have been most impactful to improving outcomes at your school? What additional resources might be most impactful from OSSE or from your LEA? Are there specific programs, interventions, professional learning opportunities that you know of that OSSE should consider offering?

6. **[Follow-up] Opportunities:** If you could wave a magic wand, what structures, flexibilities, and/or supports would you want to make happen to best support your school's improvement?

7. **[Designated Schools]:** What feedback would you like to give to OSSE on its current school improvement processes?