

REIMAGINING 'SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT' FOR NEW YORK

The Opportunities and Risks for Educational Equity in New York State Under ESSA

The new federal education law known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to shine a light on schools that are consistently underperforming overall or for any subgroup of students. While this transparency is essential, it alone is not sufficient. What matters even more is the next step: how New York takes advantage of the opportunities and levers in ESSA to provide the urgency, structure, resources, and support to change the trajectory of the schools that are not succeeding for all students.

New York — like all states — has long had requirements for “turning around” schools that are not satisfactorily meeting the needs of students. ESSA represents a chance to step back and evaluate what has worked and what has not. We know that sustained, intensive strategies focused on high-quality instruction, equitable access to strong educators, and support for teachers and leaders can have positive results for students. But we also know that when “school improvement” is just a synonym for blaming and shaming, or for adding misaligned positions or programs without addressing the real underlying school-based challenges, it is unlikely to result in meaningful change for students.

Our coalition of civil rights, education, parent, and business organizations believes that New York should create an improvement process that sets schools on a path to success and that focuses on supportive means to help schools meet rigorous expectations for all groups of students. To achieve this goal, when a school has been identified for targeted or comprehensive support and improvement, the state should:

1. MAKE SURE THE IMPROVEMENT PROCESS BEGINS WITH A HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF STRENGTHS AND NEEDS FOR EACH SCHOOL

The strengths and needs assessment should address factors including: ensuring an aligned curriculum, effective instruction, access to strong educators and leadership, supports for students and teachers, strategic use of time, a safe and positive climate, aligned family and community engagement, authentic community partnerships, and the availability of resources at the school level. In schools where one or more groups of students are underperforming, these questions must be addressed from an equity perspective — i.e., focused on learning opportunities

The bottom line: The state should create a positive approach to school improvement driven by the needs of students. School improvement should be an opportunity for schools to pursue intensive evidence-based strategies focused on high-quality instruction, equitable access to strong educators, and support for teachers and leaders.



for specific groups of students — not just generally. The state should create or make available evidence-based survey tools for a strengths and needs assessment template to help districts and schools accomplish this important step.

2. ENSURE THAT IMPROVEMENT PLANS LAY OUT EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES AND ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED IN THE SCHOOL'S ASSESSMENT OF STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

ESSA requires that improvement plans include “evidence-based interventions,” which is particularly important given that past improvement efforts have failed in part because districts and schools have chosen strategies and programs without first diagnosing the needs and examining the evidence and linking interventions to the specific needs of the school. To help ensure that improvement efforts are aligned and evidence-based, the state should establish clear criteria for the design and ultimate approval of plans, and should provide a list of evidence-based strategies for schools and districts to consider. The state should also ensure a learning phase for schools and districts to be exposed to the evidence-based strategies that are the best fit for their needs, and it should provide increased levels of guidance and assistance for schools with less capacity. Other specific steps the state should take to promote development of strong improvement plans include:

- *Helping address school climate and other preconditions for improvement.* School leaders should be given the time and tools to create a vision for what a positive school climate should be, taking into account the specific characteristics of their school, and the resources to implement that vision. To support these efforts, the state should ensure that there are high-quality tools to measure key climate issues.
- *Improve equitable access to the strongest educators.* Teachers who are inexperienced, teaching out-

of-field, or less effective are too often assigned to the schools with the greatest challenges — which can contribute to high teacher turnover and perpetuate low performance. School improvement planning should be required to ensure that the students in low-performing schools have access to the most effective educators at every stage, which will require changes in staffing assignments, recruitment, and retention strategies.

- *Require that improvement plans address high-quality instructional leadership for teachers and support school leaders to be true change agents in their schools.* School leaders and teachers should be the key drivers of school improvement efforts and need to be supported and encouraged to be successful. Plans should incorporate job-embedded professional development tailored for the academic needs faced by individual schools and teachers, including culturally relevant curricula and teaching practices. It should also help teachers identify the links between in-school practices and the context of students’ communities, to link learning within and outside the school walls.
- *Require that improvement plans align, where appropriate, to New York’s Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP).* Improvement plans should align to and leverage the SSIP as a way to support students with disabilities in a cohesive manner.

3. ENSURE THAT PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY ARE INVOLVED EVERY STEP OF THE WAY

The state can accomplish this by:

- Requiring that all school improvement plans provide and document meaningful opportunities for families and community organizations to participate in all stages of the school improvement planning process — beginning with

understanding the community's expectations for its school;

- In the case of plans from schools identified for targeted support and improvement, requiring that parents of students from the affected group(s) be included in the planning process, including parents with limited English proficiency;
- Providing a rubric showing what good, acceptable, and insufficient forms of involvement look like, and committing to reject any plans with insufficient community involvement; and
- Supporting school leaders and teachers in effectively building community and parent partnerships in the school improvement process that complement and strengthen the capacity of school professionals to support students academically and socio-emotionally.

4. USE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FUNDING AS A STRATEGIC LEVER

ESSA requires that states set aside 7% of Title I funds for local school improvement activities, and the state can decide how to allocate these resources and how they can be used. Simply relying on a formula distribution for all funds will not result in the best use of these resources. The state should:

- Reserve a portion of the funds for districts that agree to participate in certain state-approved activities. This should include:
 1. providing a set amount for schools to engage a state-approved provider to conduct an on-site strengths and needs assessment and help write the school's improvement plan (engaging parents, educators, and other stakeholders);
 2. providing schools that have a demonstrated need in supporting English Language Learners with grants to implement relevant

components of the state's evidence-based strategy; and

3. similar reserve pots for evidence-based strategies that address other state priority improvement activities, such as rigorous standards-aligned coursework, equitable access to the most effective teachers and school leaders, school diversity/integration, restorative justice programs, and support for students with disabilities.

- Provide school improvement funds as multi-year grants, but require that schools initially demonstrate progress on meaningful leading indicators and, by the second year, begin to show initial progress on academic indicators in order to continue to receive these funds. Investments that are not working should be redirected to better serve the school's students.
- Provide sustained funding and support for schools to maintain programs and services that led to successful improvements — so that once a school improves it does not lose ground or experience a sudden funding cut-off.

5. REQUIRE A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF ALL ESSA FUNDS

The state should create a template for school districts to use, and make public, describing how they are leveraging all federal funds available under ESSA to address critical issues like teacher equity, closing achievement and opportunity gaps, and improving access to high-quality instruction. Not every school will require additional resources to carry out improvement activities; the first step should be a holistic look at how resources are currently being invested and whether these decisions are maximizing equity. This review should address how federal funds have been used in the past, whether the investments were successful at improving outcomes for students, and, if not, why they did not work.

6. ESCALATE INTERVENTIONS IF A SCHOOL DOES NOT GET BACK ON TRACK

As the coalition described in its **policy brief**, exit criteria from comprehensive or targeted support and improvement should be based on whether schools are making significant, sustainable progress toward their long-term goals and measurements of interim progress. If a school is not meeting these targets as a result of implementing its improvement plan, it should ultimately be the state's responsibility to work with the district and school to escalate interventions and make sure that the strategies and supports are appropriate to the school's needs.

At the same time, it is important that school improvement be seen as a positive force that can

bring the community together. To that end, New York should rebrand the current "Receivership" law in order to preserve its improvement strategies while changing the label and fostering a mindset that improvement can be a beneficial process.

7. CREATE A COHERENT TIMELINE FOR ALL OF THESE IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITIES

The state should ensure that the strength and needs assessment, planning, and plan approval — including ongoing parent and community engagement — occur early enough in the school year that the plan can inform key decisions that need to be made for the next fall. There must be appropriate time (and support) for planning in order to set schools up for success and lay the groundwork for improvement. ■