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Examining State Education Agency Perspectives on School Improvement Supports

By: Shayna Levitan, Senior P-12 Policy Analyst, and Anna Skubel, Ph.D., Senior P-12 Research & Data Analyst

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Union Elementary School in Macon, Georgia, enrolls about 430 students, each brimming with big aspirations for the future. Nearly all these students are Black (94%) and from low-income backgrounds (92%).[1]

Since 2018, Union Elementary has been identified for comprehensive school improvement (CSI), yet this designation has not resulted in the transformative change that these students deserve. From 2021 to 2024, the school nearly doubled its percentage of third graders reading at grade level; however, this amounts to only 17% of the grade reaching this fundamental academic milestone. A strong accountability system *should* ensure that Union Elementary receives the additional resources that would allow school leaders and educators to serve every student's needs. Yet, years after the initial CSI identification, significant school improvement has yet to materialize. For the students at Union, and for countless other schools across the country, the implementation of state accountability systems continues to break the promise made to our nation's students.

School improvement has been called many things: complex, daunting, elusive. While this may be true, stories like Union Elementary remind us that, at its core, **school improvement, hard as it may be, is an equity imperative**. The nation's lowest-performing schools disproportionately serve students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, due to deep-seated inequities and centuries of systemic underinvestment.

State education agencies are central to this challenge. They hold both the responsibility and the leverage to drive improvement efforts by investing resources, dismantling barriers, and championing long-term, systemwide change. This is the only way to deliver on the currently unfulfilled promise that accountability designations unlock meaningful support for identified schools, and to shift the perception away from accountability designations signifying punitive labels.

Our Findings

EdTrust conducted semi-structured interviews with state administrators who are leading or supporting school improvement work at their state education agency (SEA). A full methodology can be found in the Appendix. The findings from this qualitative study highlight both the progress made and the current limitations of state supports to schools identified as needing improvement.

- SEA administrators expressed a clear intention — and highlighted some ongoing efforts — to reimagine their role, moving beyond compliance monitoring and grants management toward developing meaningful resources, building local capacity, and offering technical assistance.
- School improvement efforts rely on strong leadership, especially at the state level. Interviewees highlighted the impact of their agency leaders in championing improvement efforts by aligning agency priorities, marshaling resources, and fostering coherence across the system.
- Several state administrators stressed the importance of building trust with schools and districts.
- The use of data to guide changes in school improvement efforts is more nascent, underscoring the need for continuous improvement and data-informed decision-making to refine support moving forward.

Implications and Recommendations

The school improvement terrain remains challenging. There has been relatively little large-scale success in improving schools to date, and high-profile improvement efforts have often been ineffective, controversial, or dismissive of the voices of impacted communities. Additionally, states face significant hurdles as they contend with wholesale attacks on public education by the current federal administration. This includes a coordinated reduction of federally funded technical assistance for states, districts, and schools, as well as the expansion of school voucher schemes that siphon resources from public schools, and a condemnation and dismantling of rigorous data and research. These attacks compound centuries of disinvestment in communities of color and low-income areas, capitalizing on the nation's waning confidence in public education.

But for those committed to educational equity, school improvement efforts are an essential tool for improving educational opportunities for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Advocates can support these efforts at the state-level by urging their leaders to:

1. Dedicate state funding to augment federal improvement dollars
2. Revise school funding formulas and oppose school voucher programs
3. Integrate improvement efforts into broader equity and accountability systems, as well as state initiatives and priorities
4. Promote a culture of continuous learning across the school improvement ecosystem
5. Provide tiered support for all schools to improve

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The Connection Between School Improvement and Equity

The work of school improvement inherently aims to advance educational equity. Federal accountability identifications flag inequitable outcomes within and across schools. Estimates suggest that 2.5 million students attend low-performing schools, which disproportionately serve students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.[2] Improving these schools directly addresses some of the deepest and most persistent inequities faced by underserved students in our education system.

To be clear, these trends do not reflect the abilities of students in these schools but rather the systemic inequities that are rife within our education system. More accurately, these trends reflect centuries of deliberate policy decisions — resulting in chronic disinvestment and a lack of commitment to improving education for **all** students — that have restricted access to resources in the communities these schools serve.

Introduction

Data from state accountability systems plays a vital role in advancing education equity by shining a light on how schools meet the needs of their students, where disparities exist, and where targeted support is most needed.

But accountability data alone cannot improve schools or create more equitable opportunities for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual students, and students with disabilities. Real change happens in what comes next: through the sustained and often difficult work of school improvement.

> **NOTE:** In this report, "school improvement" refers to targeted interventions and supports associated with federal and state accountability systems — specifically those required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA deliberately outlines a vague role for states: rather than prescribing specific school improvement strategies, ESSA positions states primarily as monitors and overseers and then calls upon underperforming districts and schools to develop and tailor their improvement efforts to meet local needs and contexts.

Too often, however, school improvement efforts lack the same urgency and investment as maintaining or refining state accountability measures.[3] This dynamic undermines the potential of accountability systems to function as engines of educational equity, which ultimately aim to produce stronger, more equitable outcomes for all students.

States that simply meet the limited ESSA compliance requirements will not create the necessary conditions for meaningful school improvement at scale. Identified schools often lack resources and serve students with the most acute needs, which requires substantial additional support. This means states have an important responsibility to serve as key enablers and partners in school improvement, and advocates must encourage them to do so.

More specifically, states play an indispensable role in building the infrastructure and capacity that enable schools and districts to better meet the needs of their students. **Doing so is the only way to fulfill the promise of accountability designations to unlock meaningful support and help states shift the perception of these designations from punitive labels to opportunities for significant growth.**

Shifting State Responsibilities, Shifting State Work

This is a relatively new ask of state education agencies. Historically, state agencies have been organized to fulfill two primary responsibilities: effectively funneling state and federal funds to local districts and schools, and ensuring local compliance with federal education policy.[4]

ESSA provided both increased responsibility and flexibility to states, and in response, states aimed to build their capacity to adjust to an expanded role.[5] State leaders also described changes in their approach to school improvement: a greater emphasis on continuous improvement, rather than absolute improvement, by focusing on high-quality needs assessments, root-cause analyses, and ongoing progress monitoring. Administrators also discussed establishing

strategies that provide greater differentiation in the supports provided to schools.[6] To carry out these changes, administrators mentioned experimenting with new structures, reporting routines, funding approaches, and technical assistance offerings, as well as interest in cross-divisional teams, revamped SEA structures, and stronger collaboration with local stakeholders, such as school and district leaders.[7] Importantly, research suggests the success of these reforms depends on whether they are intentionally leveraged to improve teaching and learning.[8]

Years later, however, research shows how difficult these shifts are to make. Many state agencies still struggle with developing dynamic supports,[9] and may rely instead on primarily "passive" approaches, such as providing links to frameworks, suggested practices, or repositories.[11] There is evidence that most states offer professional development opportunities, though they may not be targeted toward identified schools, and technical assistance offerings vary in content and intensity.[10] Additionally, state education agencies have approved a staggering number of CSI school improvement plans that fail to meet quality and legal benchmarks — in a nationally generalizable sample, only 42% of these plans addressed all three required elements.[11] Plans also varied widely in detail, quality, and understanding of resource inequities. For instance, some plans focused on the types of inequities students faced in their own lives (e.g., poverty or homelessness), rather than on conditions within the school.

While many states have aimed to take meaningful steps to redefine their role in school improvement, persistent challenges remain. New structures, differentiated supports, and stronger partnerships remain works in progress. This is compounded by a systemwide reckoning with largely stagnant or declining achievement, and schools and districts are still struggling to make up for unfinished learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For advocates, this underscores the need for renewed engagement. To help states match measurement with meaningful action, equity advocates can push for educational systems that don't just identify gaps — but also actively close them — by ensuring state agencies are directing meaningful, strategic support and resources to the schools and students most in need.

About This Report

Advocates are well-positioned to ensure that states meet more than just their statutory obligations under ESSA and can urge state leaders to leverage school improvement efforts as core mechanisms to advance education equity. The purpose of this report is to share insights from interviews and focus groups with SEA administrators across 11 states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, Texas, and Wisconsin) and Washington, D.C. The full methodology can be found in the Appendix. The report aims to shed light on the barriers and opportunities state agencies face when designing, monitoring, and evaluating their school improvement initiatives and concludes with state-level advocacy considerations.

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Key Takeaways

1 School Improvement Efforts Must Reflect and Align With Systemic Commitments to Educational Equity

Improving underperforming schools is an exceptionally difficult undertaking. This is because sustained school improvement demands an immense amount of change — change powerful enough to overcome centuries of entrenched inequities and underinvestment shaped by systemic racism and classism. Those carrying out school improvement work, from their respective spheres of influence, face an arduous task: designing and delivering supports strong enough to disrupt this long, complicated history of underinvestment in education systems and other public resources.

Findings from interviews underscore this complexity, with participants discussing the difficult dynamics and limited resources associated with state-led improvement efforts. Furthermore, several participants emphasized that every school brings its own strengths, challenges, and context, requiring improvement efforts to be tailored to each school's specific needs and capacity. As one participant noted, this dynamic means that strong school improvement supports are extraordinarily resource-intensive, and there are relatively few efficiencies to be found in delivering them.

The depth of this complexity suggests that effective school improvement efforts cannot happen in isolation. The resources, staffing, and capacity required are simply too great for any one team or initiative to shoulder alone — without broader organizational coherence and alignment with other priorities. School improvement strategies do not best serve students when efforts are viewed as an isolated set of activities, disconnected from other state agency functions. Instead, state school improvement efforts must be seen as part of a broader, agency-wide commitment to continuously improve educational systems for all students.

To achieve this, a number of state administrators highlighted the coordinated steps they are taking to align supports and tie school improvement efforts to existing statewide priorities and goals, such as improving literacy outcomes, reducing chronic absenteeism, and adopting and using high-quality instructional materials (HQIM). Some interviewees also emphasized the importance of developing shared language, aligned goals, and increased coherence throughout the agency as an ongoing effort.

> "The focus on coherence and alignment has helped us evolve … [O]ur data [shows] that there's some schools [that] are in a position where they're continuously being identified, and so as a team, we really want to see those schools move, make some positive movement in [the] first year … [T]o do that, we realized we have to be aligned in the work. And we have to have a strategic plan going in to support the schools this time ... getting to the heart of the priorities that we would like them to focus on."

Additionally, some respondents mentioned that their school improvement team either formally or informally utilizes various specialists across the agency, such as curriculum and learning specialists, data analysts, grant managers, and special education coordinators.

> "What I frequently tell people is [that] everybody at the agency […] technically work[s] in the division of School Improvement, whether they know it or not. Everyone's responsible for school improvement. [Our state] is a big old state. Fifteen people is not enough to sort of support everybody. So, I really see our team as being a little bit more of like a conduit or maybe like air traffic control to help districts access some of the supports that other teams at the agency run. So, for example, we have our teams that run high-quality instructional materials adoption and implementation. They are experts in that work. They know what good looks like. [We] can help connect districts to that work …."

Most state administrators also indicated that they use external entities, such as regional educational centers, nonprofit organizations, education collaboratives, and consultants, to support their school improvement work. This finding is consistent with other research and is discussed in greater detail in Takeaway 5.

2 States Seek to Strengthen Capacity and Relationships to Drive Improvement

Strengthening school improvement is not only about what supports are provided, but also how they are delivered. This means that school improvement is relational — requiring schools, districts, and states to trust that they are working toward the same goals and are willing to engage as genuine partners. However, in many contexts, this is far from the case: it's an open secret that many schools and districts experience state oversight as compliance-oriented, punitive, or disconnected from local realities, with relationships characterized by mistrust and resistance. For many local actors, accountability systems have also come to feel like ways to unfairly label schools — reinforcing stigma and deepening mistrust. This is partly because, too often, accountability identifications are experienced by local leaders and communities as only the label itself, beginning and ending with identification rather than serving as a trigger for meaningful support.

In our interviews, state leaders expressed a clear intention to break from this dynamic — shifting away from compliance-oriented practices toward providing meaningful support and capacity-building opportunities. They recognized the importance of strong relationships with school and district stakeholders to achieve this goal.

> "[I]n the past … the approach had been compliance. It was really grants management … [N]ow where we want to go is to ask the schools what the root cause is ... because we really care and we really want to align supports to help them. That's just a major shift in how we've approached the work, and it takes time to build that trust with the school leaders."

Administrators also spoke about the challenges of operationalizing this shift and making it stick. Breaking from a compliance mindset requires unlearning entrenched habits and embracing new ways of working collaboratively. To achieve this, administrators mentioned rethinking internal structures to repurpose staff priorities and capacity, coordinating across departments, streamlining processes to reduce administrative burden, and strengthening supports and technical assistance delivery.

Several state administrators indicated that these shifts are more likely to succeed if they are grounded in strong, trusting relationships between state and local actors, and emphasized the importance of building trust. As two administrators reflected:

> "It's a big change, and sometimes with change management and growth, there are people who don't necessarily want to come along immediately because that process and the trust haven't been built. And so when you're asking schools to do things a little bit differently or be more reflective, provid[ing] evidence-based strategies when in the past it was more of a checking of the box exercise, sometimes there can be some resistance or some hesitation to really come along with us .... [I]t's something that we have to be mindful of as we're changing our approach as an agency. It will take time for others to come along with us, and so that's something I've been grappling with recently."

> "I basically laid it on the line [with our LEA workgroup] and said, 'We're shifting to support, and I know that there are things that are not working. Give me a list, and we'll work on it together.' And they were really hesitant at first, but they threw out a couple of things. And I said, great, let's work on it. And when we started working on it together right away, and they saw that we really meant that we wanted to be partners, at first, [the LEAs] were really surprised. And then they, for the most part, were really willing to try [working] with us."

Moreover, part of the challenge in making these shifts is recognizing that strong continuous improvement efforts are as much a technical pivot as they are a deeply human process. There may be lessons to draw from recent literacy instruction reforms in this regard. Efforts to shift to evidence-based reading instruction have highlighted the importance of championing best practices without disrespecting deep practitioner expertise or dismissing the complicated human dynamics we navigate when we do not feel trusted to do the right thing. Where many literacy reforms have succeeded, they've done so not only by better aligning instruction to the evidence base, but also because state, district, and school leaders led a thoughtful approach to change management that honors experience, assumes best intent, and cultivates trust at all levels — school improvement efforts demand the same approach. States taking on a supportive role is more than the sum of its parts: it requires a complete mindset shift that positions local leaders as core change agents who need comprehensive investments in their systems' capacity, coordinated expectations, and specific goals to measure their progress against.

Lastly, several interviewees also spoke about how their school improvement team was trying to change the narrative around what school improvement designations indicate. Instead of a "punitive" label, the designation signifies opportunities for extra support and collaboration. While this shift in messaging is important, change requires both purposeful words and actions — states should pair a narrative shift with meaningful resources that demonstrate a real, sustained commitment to support.

3 Strong State Leadership Can Spur Meaningful School Improvement Efforts

Leaders at every level, such as state chiefs, department leads, key district administrators, and school-based turnaround leaders, are the anchors of school improvement. Leaders in their respective roles create the conditions to enable structural change, make important shifts in resource allocation, leverage additional funds strategically, build trust in communities, and communicate their progress.

In our interviews, administrators spoke about the impact of their agency leaders championing improvement efforts and dedicating resources to operationalize this priority. These resources include funding, efforts to build cross-agency alignment, staffing a strong team, and building a culture of data-driven decision-making — conditions that administrators cited within their agency as enabling them to engage in their own continuous improvement practices. Leaders can also convey the importance of building trust with schools, districts, and communities, as discussed in Takeaway 2.

> "Gosh, leadership. I don't always agree with them. [My state] is a tough place. But, you know, I think the willingness to not just serve as a compliance arm, not just do the regulatory functions, but to actually also really lead on defining what is best practice and to take the lead on creating the systems to actually put those practices into schools, I think that's been the biggest pieces that we have ... I think that that's probably one of the biggest internal drivers of all of this work."

Several administrators also cited how a change in leadership often ushered in a new prioritization of school improvement efforts and resources. For example, one respondent indicated that a change in leadership enabled them to create a dedicated school improvement team.

> "I was able to handpick my team so that I could have a comprehensive school improvement team that was dedicated solely to the needs of school improvement. And once I had a dedicated team, I could really make that change from compliance to support because we had the personnel, we had the talent, and we had the time. And so that's how those changes came [about]. So, it really was based on new leadership … and the idea that school improvement was a priority."

4 Leveraging Data to Refine SEAs' Supports and Approaches Is Emerging Work

Equally fundamental to the power of leadership is the culture of improvement that leaders cultivate within their sphere of influence. At the state level, this involves honest, data-driven reflection on what is and isn't working, and refining supports accordingly. Just as schools are expected to continuously improve to better serve students, so too must state agencies. Embedding a culture of reflection and adaptation ensures that supports evolve in step with the needs of districts, schools, and students.

Findings from our study underscore that this is an area for improvement. While states shared a variety of data used to monitor identified schools' progress — most commonly via school/district improvement plans and tracking the supports schools/districts use — additional work is needed to assess whether these supports are having the desired level of impact. As one administrator reflected:

> "We have to continually be reviewing what we're doing and identifying whether or not we're getting desired outcomes. Because if we're not doing that, you know, we can't expect what we're doing to have the desired effect. We clearly have theories of action. But I'm not sure that we've always checked ourselves to the extent that we should."

Moreover, some administrators shared how they have begun to refine the types of support they provide to districts and schools. For example, one state agency used survey and interview input to modify the way they provided feedback to schools during site visits.

> "[Some school leaders] felt like our instructional or implementation site visits didn't focus enough on providing specific direction for instruction. We did all our classroom observations and we shared the data, but not necessarily examples [of what influenced the results]. So now, when we go in, we make sure we collect a ton of data [on this] so that leaders [feel] like they have more information specifically about how to move the instruction in those classrooms and there [is] like a whole section of the report now that's focused on instruction."

Another administrator referenced using data to bolster support for special education services in various regions of their state, kicking off conversations with their education service agency partners to improve Tier I instruction, which ultimately benefits all students. One interview participant spoke about how their state-level budget line item for school improvement funds earmarks funding for third-party evaluations. These evaluations revealed a blind spot in the agency and resulted in the state developing more specific support for district-level leaders. A few SEA officials also spoke about streamlining school improvement goals or plans, either by reducing the number of goals schools and districts should focus on or aligning plans with state-specific initiatives like math curriculum or attendance, to better target limited resources toward measurable outcomes.

However, some administrators also spoke about newer efforts underway, recognizing that there is still room for growth in monitoring progress, adapting their approach, and understanding the mechanisms of long-term change for districts, schools, and the agency itself.

> "I think our teams are sort of at the beginning stages of really leveraging more of our student-level data and then adult practice data to drive the way in which we are organizing our support … so we have a whole initiative underway right now around our statewide system of support … to be able to build a data system around student outcome[s] and adult practice data to better identify what the critical needs are in the field."

In another interview, one administrator described a shift towards building more meaningful capacity-building opportunities for system leaders to understand their own progress.

> "[Monitoring and evaluating school improvement over time] is one of our biggest growth areas. [Historically] what we've done is we get these targeted improvement plans usually like, three to four times a year and then somebody in our division would just kind of like review that. We might give some feedback, like, 'This sounds good' or 'Why aren't things on track?' But there wasn't really any kind of meaningful .... We were like watching it, but we weren't necessarily doing anything about it."

5 School Improvement Efforts Require Sustained and Dedicated Resources

In identified schools where student needs are often most acute and resources are frequently limited, the need for high-quality, strategic school improvement efforts is especially urgent. This means that these schools require investment through dramatically more intensive supports, intentional capacity-building of leaders, evidence-based instructional shifts, and a reorganization of a wide range of resources. These initiatives require properly resourcing the state-level expertise and infrastructure that design and enable these supports.

However, findings from our interviews indicate that school improvement requires more resources than many state agencies have. Most state administrators emphasized their limited financial resources and personnel capacity as barriers to providing the necessary support to sustain meaningful, long-term, and comprehensive school improvement efforts.

> "It's the capacity and funding. We get so little in school improvement funds that like, what we get doesn't even cover what it costs to administer the funds …. [O]ur team is small and so we often feel like we are sort of begging, borrowing, and stealing other people's time to help support the work."

One of the most crucial levers for states to drive improvement in identified schools is the allocation of school improvement funds. Under ESSA, there is a 7% set-aside of Title I funds to be allocated to schools identified for improvement. While states use various approaches to allocate this money, the amounts are often far too small to support the large, transformative changes schools need. Across our sample, the average 2020-21 grant award to an individual school was about $100,000, though grant awards ranged from $1,000 to upwards of $870,000.[12] Analyses of national data from 2019-20 indicate that this amounts to about $300 more in spending per student.[13] Many states also do not have additional state-level funding to supplement these federal funds. The result is that expectations for improvement are high, but resources remain limited.

Additionally, only 3% of federal set-aside dollars support administrative costs at the agency. While this restriction ensures that most funds go directly to schools, it also constrains the state agency's capacity to support the infrastructure necessary to make these school-level investments truly effective.

To help ease this tension, many state administrators indicated that they are using external entities. This finding is consistent with previous studies.[14] State administrators noted that the types of external entities varied, and in several interviews, participants spoke about leveraging regionally based supports such as regional service centers, intermediary organizations, and nonprofit partners.

While this is a strategy used to address limited capacity within the agency, it also allows state agencies to better understand and support local needs. Additionally, those at the intermediary level may not have to overcome the same level of mistrust of the state agency and, therefore, can engage differently with identified schools and districts.

> "We make better decisions, we go further, faster when we do it together with our regional partners …. [They] are so important because they open the door to a better understanding of what's going on in districts and schools, [which informs] the way in which we identify problems, consider solutions, [and] broaden [our understanding] of … unintended consequences of actions that [the SEA] make."

While these regional supports vary widely, one participant spoke about the ways in which the availability and capacity of external support have changed under the current federal administration. His state previously relied on its comprehensive center to facilitate third-party conversations with various stakeholders across state lines and leveraged its Regional Education Lab (REL) to conduct various analyses and rigorous evaluations to improve their accountability measures. However, as funding for these supports has been gutted by the current administration, these longstanding resources are no longer available to the state agency or local actors in the same way.[15]

Addressing Larger Systemic Barriers Through School Funding

School improvement efforts are inherently corrective — a reactive set of supports triggered when educational systems must better equip schools to meet student needs. But if these efforts only happen in isolation, without addressing the larger systemic barriers facing students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, they risk only redressing school performance, rather than fundamentally improving the conditions that shape schools today. What's more, school improvement funds are not only temporary by nature but are also only available to a small subset of schools — precluding many others that need improvement from accessing resources to better support their students.

As such, school improvement must be paired with efforts to more adequately and equitably fund all schools.[16] Stronger school funding directly shapes the conditions that enable or constrain student learning and performance. Too often, instead of fully funding schools or school improvement efforts, some decision-makers have pushed for dramatic, academically harmful interventions, such as school voucher programs.[17] These initiatives drain public resources, erode public trust, and disproportionately harm students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students in rural communities. Additionally, privatization initiatives are often justified by broad conclusions about the value and effectiveness of public education as a whole, conveniently overlooking the fact that the school improvement efforts of these public schools have never been adequately resourced to offset entrenched inequities.

Advocacy Considerations

Based on these findings, and in connection with other research, advocates can consider the following to advance education equity through strong state support for school improvement efforts:

1. **Work With State Legislators to Dedicate State Funding for School Improvement**
   Advocates can work to secure dedicated state investments to supplement federal dollars and ensure that improvement efforts are adequately resourced, so that the lowest-performing schools have the funds they need to make lasting change. Advocates can simultaneously work with their state administrators to assess whether the current strategy in allocating school improvement grants is producing meaningful results and in what ways additional state dollars will be most effectively used — either to support identified schools and/or for agency use. It may likely be a combination of both.

2. **Work With State Leaders to Revise School Funding Formulas and Fight Back Against School Voucher Programs**
   Few state funding systems invest enough to meet the costs of educating all students, fueling the very conditions that cause schools to struggle — especially in low-income communities and communities of color. School improvement efforts rightly unlock additional resources for identified schools, but they remain reactive by design and only benefit a small subset of schools. Advocates must also push for proactive solutions that address the underlying inequities driving the need for intervention in the first place. Advocates can work with state leaders to adequately and fairly fund schools[18] and resist the expansion of vouchers and Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) using EdTrust's toolkit.[19]

Advocacy Spotlight

Southerners for Fair School Funding (SFSF) supports advocates across the South in their efforts to fairly fund every school. SFSF partners with communities across the region, providing tools and training on school funding advocacy, coalition building, and effective messaging, as well as producing a State Ratings Rubric — a framework grounded in research, best practices, and student-centered values to assess the fairness of state funding systems.

3. **Elevate School Improvement as an Equity Issue and an Essential Part of an Effective Accountability System**
   Advocates can help leaders — especially state chiefs, governors, and state policymakers — understand that robust supports for school improvement help stakeholders use data from their accountability measures. A strong accountability system honestly identifies which schools need the most support; but without equal attention to providing that support, states are falling short. Instead, they risk just diagnosing problems without providing options for treatment. Advocates can engage with policymakers and agency leadership to promote a narrative of school improvement as an integral part of accountability systems and call on their leaders to do the same.

4. **Urge State Agencies to Model Data-Driven Decision-Making in Their Own Work**
   Advocates can encourage state agencies to treat continuous improvement not just as an expectation for schools, but as an ethos they adopt themselves. By applying the same cycle of identifying challenges, deploying evidence-based strategies, collecting measurement data, and refining approaches over time, SEAs can better support identified schools. Underlying this consideration is a clear call for state agencies to leverage multiple sources of data (ideally integrated into a streamlined platform) to monitor school progress and, just as fundamentally, refine the agency's own supports and infrastructure.[20]

5. **Encourage State Leaders to Build Strong Tiered Support for All Schools**
   While improvement designations help identify and prioritize schools with the most room to improve, many more schools that are not technically identified have significant, urgent needs.[20] Advocates can encourage state leaders to provide tiered opportunities for all schools to improve, which also supports identified schools after they exit status to sustain their progress. This, of course, presents a tension given the limited resources overall, but advocates and administrators can work together to be honest about limitations and tradeoffs.

The Federal Role

Federal support for school improvement could significantly help augment state efforts. Specifically, Congress can:

- Increase Title I funding, which would automatically increase the amount of set-aside funds for school improvement activities, as outlined in Section 1003(a) of ESSA. There is compelling evidence[21] that the current set-aside is inadequate to support and sustain improvement in all identified schools, let alone support the important roles SEAs and LEAs can play in facilitating the school improvement process.[22]
- Create new funding streams to provide sustainability grants for schools that have exited improvement, as well as and capacity-building grants for SEAs and LEAs.
- Allocate additional funding to ensure that the federal technical assistance centers (the National Comprehensive Center, regional centers, and content centers) are adequately funded, thereby providing integral research efforts, data analysis, evaluation support, technical assistance, and/or centers dedicated specifically to school improvement efforts. The attacks on these resources by the current administration represent a coordinated effort to dismantle a key support system for states, regions, and districts.[23]
- Direct the Department of Education (ED) to expand and provide examples on how SEAs and LEAs can assume a leadership role and more strongly support school improvement activities, even where not statutorily required.[24]

However, since federal support may be unlikely under this current federal Administration, advocates should continue to push for federal solutions while focusing on state-level efforts.

Areas for Future Research

As always, to advance education equity, advocates, administrators, and lawmakers need to understand how education systems are serving students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities. In the school improvement space, this includes growing our understanding of what's working and why in driving transformational shifts in underperforming schools.

To achieve this, it is essential to understand how identified schools, districts, and communities experience improvement initiatives. This can reveal which support structures are most useful, provide insight into how efforts to cultivate trust are perceived, and inform opportunities to shift away from compliance-only mindsets. In the coming years, EdTrust hopes to interview technical assistance providers for deeper insights into how they position themselves to build trust and support real changes in student outcomes.

Additionally, because states have such an important role in deploying improvement resources and support, a closer look at the inner workings of successful state education agency initiatives may be especially informative. These examples can serve as bright spots for other state agencies and help advocates make the case for additional funds to support this work.

Conclusion

School improvement is an extraordinarily complex and resource-intensive undertaking. Still, school improvement efforts remain an important tool aimed at confronting systemic inequities. This report highlights that effective improvement requires a combination of coherent, aligned state systems, investments in capacity, strong leadership, relational trust, and data-informed decision-making. While states have made meaningful strides, persistent challenges remain. Moreover, these findings underscore an urgent and ongoing role for advocates: they must hold states accountable not only for identifying gaps but also for addressing them. Without sustained, equitable investment, school improvement efforts will remain reactive and piecemeal, unable to address the systemic inequities that fuel underperformance.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

The project was guided by two research questions:

RQ #1: How do SEA officials currently use their capacity to support identified schools?
RQ #2: How can SEA officials better leverage their capacity to support identified schools?

EdTrust conducted semi-structured interviews with state administrators who are leading or supporting the school improvement work at their state education agency (SEA). State administrators were recruited through outreach via EdTrust partners to opt in to participate in the study, email introductions made from state-level partners (Rodel, Prichard Committee, and Empower Schools) and EdTrust state teams, or by direct invitation via email. In total, 11 states — Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, Texas, and Wisconsin — and the District of Columbia participated.

In the semi-structured interviews, state administrators were asked to discuss how their state supports identified schools in improvement efforts, including support for schools identified under any state-level improvement designations. Specifically, participants were asked to describe their current role in their SEA as it pertains to school improvement work, how their state approaches school improvement work (e.g., theory of change, identification processes, office structure, personnel, and roles), the supports provided to districts and schools, barriers to providing meaningful school improvement supports, how their state monitors and evaluates progress, data collection efforts related to school improvement, enabling conditions that allow states to engage in school improvement, and how their SEA has changed and refined its school improvement processes over time. While respondents were asked about the types of supports provided, interviews focused primarily on the levers states use to deploy their various strategies.

All interviews were conducted remotely via videoconference and were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative analysis software Dedoose, following an inductive content analysis approach to identify and code themes across the transcripts for discussed topic areas.[25]

In addition to the interview, participants were asked to complete a survey regarding the types and frequency of school improvement supports their SEA (either directly or through contracts with external entities) offers to districts and/or schools. Eleven out of 12 states and jurisdictions completed the survey.

Disclaimer: The advocacy perspectives outlined in this report are those of EdTrust and should not be interpreted as an endorsement by the state agencies of the positions presented.

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EdTrust is committed to advancing policies and practices to dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system. Through our research and advocacy, EdTrust improves equity in education from preschool through college, engages diverse communities dedicated to education equity and justice and increases political and public will to build an education system where students will thrive.

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