

## Deep Dive into Principle #8 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems



### Principle #8

Establish clear expectations and report progress on a sequence of ambitious yet achievable short- and long-term school improvement benchmarks that focus on both equity and excellence.

*What gets measured gets done.*

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

## Introduction

*Measurement is fabulous. Unless you're busy measuring what's easy to measure as opposed to what's important.*

—Seth Godin

In their Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state plans, state education agencies (SEAs) were required to establish the exit criteria they would use to determine if a school identified for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) had made enough progress to “exit” improvement status or, if it had not, be the subject of “more rigorous State-determined action” to spur more improvement.<sup>1</sup> These exit criteria are important elements of any state’s school improvement system, and they are critical to manifesting [Principle #10](#)’s emphasis on sustainability. **However, given the admittedly low success rate of major improvement efforts—in education but also in other public and private sectors—SEAs cannot wait several years after identifying schools to measure their progress against exit criteria.**

In fact, ESSA *requires* SEAs to monitor and periodically review CSI plans, even though the federal template for consolidated ESSA plans did not ask SEAs to describe their monitoring approach. This deep dive into Principle #8 focuses specifically on how SEAs can best approach the selection of measures (or metrics) for their progress monitoring. The deep dive into [Principle #9](#) focuses in turn on how SEAs might design high-quality monitoring systems and routines. In other words, **Principle #8 examines what should be monitored to set up for maximum success, while Principle #9 focuses on how, who, and when monitoring takes place.**

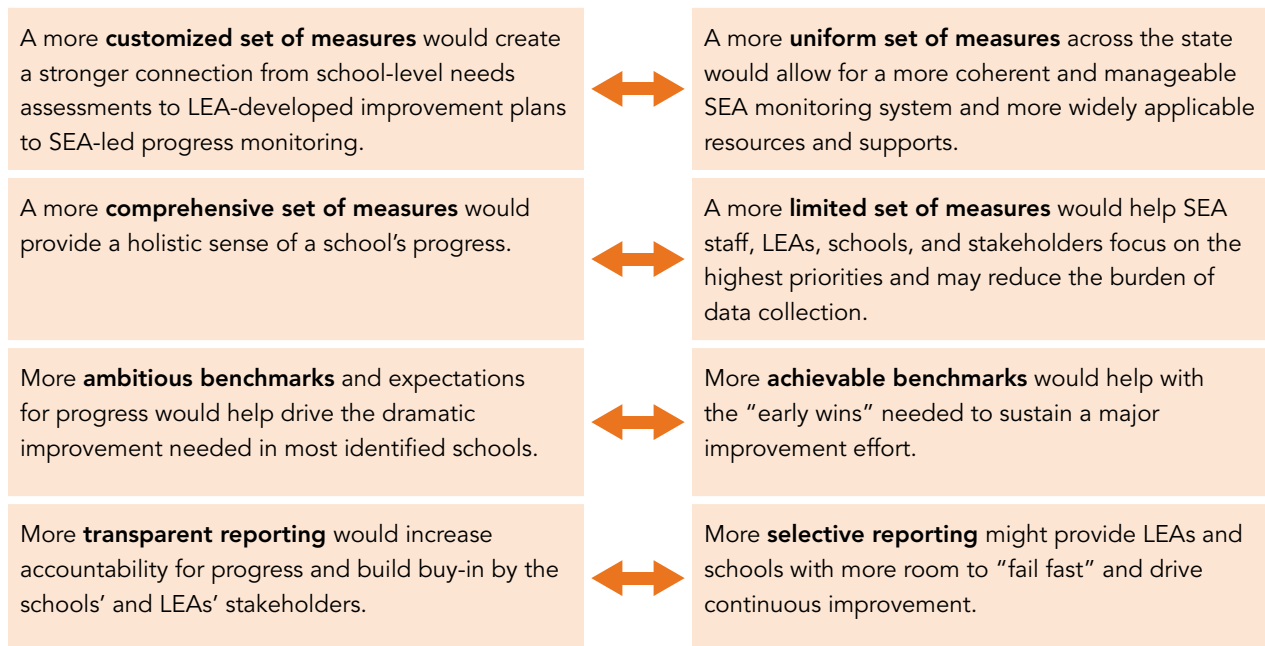
Of course, progress monitoring is not a new concept in education. It is deeply embedded in the way most educators and schools approach support for individual students, from using formative assessments to adjust instruction throughout the year to tracking early warning indicators that can flag whether a student is “off-track” to graduate high school on time to the use of rapid cycle improvement strategies to test and refine new interventions. As with these examples, school improvement progress monitoring must identify and carefully track progress on key **leading indicators** that can provide timely feedback on the improvement effort to inform decisions about what is needed next, such as adjusting strategies, providing new supports or resources, increasing the SEA’s involvement, or even initiating major changes of direction.

SEAs must consider a wide range of measures across three different types of metrics: **inputs** that measure actions taken in alignment with the improvement plan; **outputs** that measure the positive changes in behaviors and practices in the school that occur as a result of those improvement actions; and **outcomes** that measure the actual improvements in student learning, behavior, and mindsets both along the way and when determining if a school has improved enough to exit

<sup>1</sup> Under ESSA, local education agencies (LEAs) are responsible for determining whether a targeted support and improvement (TSI) school has successfully implemented its improvement plan. The exception to this division of responsibility is if an LEA receives an award of federal school improvement funds to support a TSI school. In that instance, ESSA also requires the SEA to “monitor[] and evaluat[e] the use of funds.” ESSA §1003(b)(2)(B).

improvement status.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, SEAs have already identified some of their key outcome metrics through the exit criteria and long-term goals identified in their ESSA plans. Those outcomes should serve as key drivers for “back-mapping” the rest of the SEA-designed and implemented progress monitoring system.

But selecting the right mix of measures also requires balancing a number of sometimes competing interests. For example, SEAs will need to decide where they fall along the following spectrums, taking into account their state and local contexts, internal capacity, and the relative robustness of their data systems:



There is no single “right” answer to resolving these tensions. In most cases, an SEA’s approach will fall somewhere between each spectrum of competing interests. But even the most thoughtful SEA will almost certainly not strike the best balance for their context at first. Thus, to truly manifest Principle #8, SEAs must also study their chosen measures in action, gather feedback from a range of stakeholders, and continuously improve the progress monitoring system over time (see [Principle #9](#)).

## ? Questions To Ask Yourself

1. What is your **process for selecting the measures** that your SEA will use to progress monitor CSI school improvement efforts? Which SEA staff beyond your school improvement office will help you answer the following questions? Which external partners and/or stakeholders will you include in the decision making process?

<sup>2</sup> Reform Support Network. 2015. *Leading indicators for school improvement: A review of state education agency practices*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/leadingindforschoolimprov.pdf>

- o What research can you review and/or conduct to help identify the **most predictive leading indicators** (or measures)? How will you **sequence those measures** over the course of a multi-year improvement cycle? In other words, what is the right mix and sequence of input, output, and outcome measures?
  - o Which measures will be common across all CSI schools and which measures (if any) will be **customized for particular types of schools** (e.g., schools identified via the bottom 5% versus the graduation rate criteria)?
  - o Which measures (if any) will be **customized for individual schools** per the results of their needs assessment and the priorities of their improvement plan?
  - o What **LEA-level measures** will you include? Will those be common or customized across LEAs?
  - o What are the relationships among your progress monitoring measures and your state ESSA plan's **accountability indicators, long-term goals, measures of interim progress, and/or CSI exit criteria**?
  - o Have you explicitly considered whether selecting each measure under consideration could have **unintended consequences** in terms of encouraging ineffective or inappropriate practices at the school or classroom level? Whether the measures are particularly susceptible to any "gaming" of the data? If so, have you identified ways to mitigate these risks (e.g., addressing misunderstandings about the "stakes" accompanying these progress monitoring measures)?
  - o Are there **metrics you considered for your accountability system or exit criteria** that you ultimately decided were not ready or appropriate for those uses but that nevertheless may be important benchmarks of the improvement you want to see in identified schools (e.g., measures related to students' social and emotional learning)? If so, are they ready and appropriate for inclusion in school improvement progress monitoring?
2. Is the SEA doing all it can to **minimize the data collection and reporting burden** on LEAs and schools? If there are measures you want to use but are not currently available (perhaps due to limitations on your data systems), what steps are you taking to remove those barriers?
  3. Are data entry policies and the relevant business rules clearly established and designed to allow comparable analyses across LEAs and schools (e.g., shared definitions of "chronic absenteeism")?
  4. How will you establish **ambitious but achievable benchmarks of progress and performance** on each of the measures? Can you use statistical models to determine whether particular benchmarks are reasonable? How will you differentiate for different types of schools and for different phases of the improvement cycle?
  5. How are you **engaging LEAs, schools, and other stakeholders** in the selection, development, and continuous improvement of these measures and benchmarks? In decisions about the content, form, and frequency of **public reporting** on progress over the course of the improvement effort?

6. Will your decisions about measures and transparency **help all these stakeholders view progress monitoring as a process that contributes to the improvement effort** rather than distracts from it for the sake of state or federal compliance?
7. How will you **continuously improve the metrics over time** by identifying and focusing on the ones most predictive of success and by fine-tuning the sequencing of metrics to best match the experience of successful (and unsuccessful) improvement efforts? Do you have sufficient internal capacity to collect and analyze the data needed to evaluate the effectiveness of your metrics, or are there external partnerships (e.g., research institutions) you should pursue?
8. Will you require LEAs to use a particular set of measures and benchmarks while **progress monitoring TSI schools**? If not, what guidance, technical assistance, and/or incentives will you provide LEAs in this area?



## State Spotlights



**Massachusetts** has partnered with American Institutes for Research (AIR) for several years to develop a robust, data-driven progress monitoring system that builds on and draws from the evidence of what has and has not worked in prior improvement efforts across the state. AIR and SEA team members gather data through a variety of methods, most significantly an annual [Monitoring Site Visit \(MSV\)](#) to each identified school. The MSV's measures and "look fors" are aligned to the SEA's four turnaround practices (see [Principle #5](#)) and reflect a sequenced, developmental approach to progress monitoring that focuses on whether a school is on track and growing in ways that successful school turnarounds have previously unfolded in the state (see Appendix A of [Massachusetts Level 4 and Level 5 School Monitoring Site Visit Procedural Protocol](#)).

Massachusetts also monitors school improvement progress on a series of measurable, state-mandated goals focusing on areas including attendance, school discipline, and progress in student achievement. These goals take into consideration where a school is starting and where they need to be to best serve students.



**New York's** progress monitoring system builds on the goals identified in each [School Comprehensive Educational Plan \(SCEP\)](#), New York's school improvement plan template. Using [Quarterly Leading Indicator Reports](#), school leaders work with their School Leadership Team on a quarterly basis to assess their progress on each of the SCEP Tenets. Furthermore, the SEA repeats a version of its diagnostic needs assessment each year of implementation to build a comprehensive picture of each school's progress. The SEA increases the support and monitoring it provides to LEAs and schools that struggle to make gains while allowing LEAs and schools that make progress more flexibility to proceed with their efforts as they move toward exiting improvement status (pp. 97-98 of [ESSA plan](#)).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> New York State Education Department. 2018. *New York consolidated state plan: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Albany, NY: Author.



Like New York, **Kentucky** also requires CSI schools to complete [quarterly reports](#) that analyze data on a variety of indicators. The SEA allows schools to work with their Education Recovery Teams (see [Principle #7](#)) to choose the indicators that best fit their context, but it encourages schools to consider student performance data, student/teacher/parent perception surveys, non-academic indicators (e.g., student/teacher attendance data, special education data, behavior data, mobility data, etc.), and indicators of equitable access (e.g., teacher and leader effectiveness, teacher turnover, percentage of new teachers, etc.).



Recognizing that LEAs and schools have at times struggled with identifying goals that are both reasonable and ambitious, **Connecticut's** SEA Performance Office will provide LEAs with technical assistance to help them analyze current data and develop numeric interim goals that set them on a trajectory to successfully exit improvement status and that are aligned with the state's ESSA plan goals.

## Supporting Targeted Support and Improvement Schools

- **If the SEA awards federal school improvement funds to LEAs to support TSI schools, then the SEA must also conduct progress monitoring of the use of those funds.**<sup>4</sup> Thus, SEAs should consider the implications of their methodology for allocating the seven percent set-aside on the design of their progress monitoring systems. Adding TSI schools to the SEA's monitoring "case load" can further stretch often limited SEA capacity. On the other hand, a TSI progress monitoring system might also help LEAs focus on TSI schools in ways they may otherwise not. Regardless of its scope, a TSI progress monitoring system may warrant a differentiated set of measures that account for the differences between the CSI and TSI contexts.
- The deep dive for [Principle #4](#) recommends "schools should examine whether school- or LEA-wide systemic issues are actually driving the underperformance" of subgroups identified for support in TSI schools. Similarly, **LEAs' progress monitoring measures must not solely focus on the particular subgroup(s)** if the TSI improvement plans address, even in part, issues related to school or LEA operations and instruction.
- Some subgroups—particularly students with disabilities and English learners—already are assessed significantly more than other students, including but not limited to additional assessments required by federal laws. As SEAs consider what requirements or guidance to provide LEAs about TSI progress monitoring, they should **consider whether the measures chosen will exacerbate this dynamic by layering additional assessments or other data collection on top of the status quo.** Alternatively, an SEA may take advantage of the moment to audit its assessment portfolio and streamline it where appropriate.

4 ESSA §1003(b)(2)(B)





## Common Mistakes

**Don't jump to conclusions.** Well-selected leading indicators can quickly surface whether a particular improvement effort is off-track. That said, most research on successful school improvement efforts "indicate[s] that it can take three to five years for turnaround efforts to impact overall student achievement."<sup>5</sup> SEAs can resolve this tension between acting with urgency and exhibiting patience by adopting a sequenced approach to progress monitoring that emphasizes different measures for each phase of the improvement cycle (e.g., progress on school climate measures earlier and academic measures later). Further, SEAs must work to ensure that stakeholders at all levels of the system understand and buy into this sequencing.

**Don't let the rule swallow the exception.** As described in the introduction to this Deep Dive, there are a variety of competing interests for SEAs to balance in selecting measures for a state-led progress monitoring system. Even if the right balance for a particular state leans more toward a single, common set of measures, there may be compelling reasons to carve out exceptions for measures that can take better stock of a particular set of circumstances.



## Recommended Resources

[Leading Indicators of School Turnarounds: How to Know When Dramatic Change is On Track](#), written by Julie Kowal and Joe Ableidinger and published by the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education and Public Impact (2011), draws on research from other industries on the use of leading indicators to increase the likelihood of success to inform best practices for the use of leading indicators in education, specifically in school turnaround. This report includes a list of key leading indicators and proposed SEA, LEA, and school monitoring timelines.

[Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: Indicators of Effective Practice](#), developed by the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd (2017), provides a research-based school improvement framework to guide SEAs, LEAs, and schools as they engage in this challenging work. The framework lays out four "domains" or areas of focus that have been found to be crucial to successful turnaround, and includes recommended indicators and metrics for progress monitoring specific to each domain.

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

<sup>5</sup> Reform Support Network. 2015. *Leading indicators for school improvement: A review of state education agency practices*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/leadingindforschoolimprov.pdf>

[Measuring School Turnaround Success](#), written by Cassie Lutterloh, Jeanette P. Cornier, and Bryan C. Hassel from Public Impact and published by the Center of School Turnaround (2016), lays out a model (to be customized and contextualized by SEAs, LEAs, and schools) to measure school improvement success. This report discusses a school improvement theory of action as well as indicators and metrics to analyze throughout each phase of the theory of action to inform the extent to which the improvement efforts are successful.

[Identifying a School Quality/Student Success Indicator for ESSA: Requirements and Considerations](#), written by Erika Hall and published by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2017), discusses important considerations for SEAs' selection of school quality/student success (SQSS) accountability indicators. This resource also includes a series of potential SQSS indicators (see Table 3 on p. 8) that may be helpful to SEAs, LEAs, and schools as they determine which measures of school improvement progress they plan to monitor.

[State Systems of Identification and Support under ESSA: Evaluating Identification Methods and Results in an Accountability System](#), written by Juan D'Brot, Susan Lyons, and Erika Landl and published by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2017), focuses on ways an SEA can evaluate its school identification and accountability systems to ensure it is reliable and impactful, and results in accountability-driven changes leading to improvement. In particular, this paper includes sections that focus on considerations related to exit criteria and the role of exit criteria in relation to improvement efforts and monitoring.



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