



# Recommendations for Differentiating Services to Support Schools Designated for Targeted Support and Improvement

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The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), as the latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, includes major revisions to the law in terms of how states design their accountability systems and provide supports aimed at improving academic outcomes in their lowest-performing schools. ESSA defines a category of schools, called *Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI)* schools, which must develop and implement a support-and-improvement plan that targets improvement for a particular subgroup (or subgroups) of students. This paper delves into the TSI designation, draws out some lessons learned from prior education reform work (particularly efforts to improve schools with an earlier, similar designation of being *focus schools*), and makes the case for providing support to TSI schools that is differentiated according to the particular needs of different schools and districts.

School reform is by no means a new concept in education. Over the past four to five decades, numerous well-intentioned efforts have focused on improving low-performing schools, with the laudable goals of increasing overall academic achievement and other education outcomes so that all students can look to a successful future. While many such efforts have yielded lackluster results, there are lessons to be learned from past experience.

In recent years, rapid school improvement — known most commonly as school turnaround — has emerged as the chief focus of dramatic and systemic efforts aimed at improving students' access to better schools and opportunities for success in education. Prior reform efforts have focused on providing rigorous instruction, increasing graduation rates, improving student

outcomes for all children, and increasing the overall academic achievement of students so that the nation would be competitive in world markets. However, in many cases these areas of focus have not included a system approach and have not been particularly successful.

Despite mixed results historically, much has been learned. Over time, the education community has learned the importance of focusing on all levels of the education system, understanding that rapid improvement can be bolstered or stalled by the system within which a school operates — a system that, in addition to the school agency itself, encompasses a state education agency (SEA) and the local district (Center on School Turnaround, 2017). Much has also been learned about addressing inequities. For example, the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) required the reporting

of data by subgroups (e.g., English language learners, students with disabilities, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and students from historically underserved racial or ethnic groups) which brought major attention to inequities in educational quality. One lasting impact of the federal legislation is a focus on academic-performance discrepancies between student subgroups — a focus that continues under ESSA, which was signed into law in 2015, replacing NCLB.

This latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act includes major revisions to the formulas and metrics that states must use to determine which schools are identified for support, along with changes to how the states then provide supports aimed at improving academic outcomes in their lowest-performing schools. ESSA requires states to use accountability indicators, disaggregated by subgroup, to annually differentiate public schools by several categories. TSI schools constitute one of these categories and are defined as Title I schools that have at least one consistently under-performing student subgroup. These schools must develop and implement a support-and-improvement plan focused on the particular subgroup(s) that triggered TSI identification. Under ESSA, improvement efforts for TSI schools must be district-led — that is, improvement plans must be submitted to and approved by the school's local education agency (LEA).

Because a school's TSI designation is based on the performance of a particular subgroup (or subgroups), it is possible — even common — for a TSI school to have many high-performing students. In this respect, TSI schools can be quite different from other schools designated as low-performing and can be similar to NCLB's *focus schools*, as designated under its flexibility waivers. As with TSI schools, focus schools were identified for achievement-gap issues based on the performance of student subgroups. The metrics for TSI identification, determined by each SEA, are different from those used for focus schools. However, because there are similarities between TSI and focus-school designation, this paper makes recommendations for working with TSI schools based in part on lessons gleaned from the authors' experiences and observations of efforts to support focus schools in past years.

## ESSA Shifts Focus to the Local Level

ESSA engages LEAs in different ways than previous federal improvement efforts, shifting the emphasis from federal initiatives to local efforts, thus prompting a greater need for local capacity-building. Under ESSA, LEAs are charged with approving and monitoring improvement efforts in their TSI schools, with each school's specific improvement plan coming from the school itself. This is an important shift because the leading of improvement efforts has historically been a challenging role for LEAs.

Nonetheless, LEAs can play an important role in accelerating system change. First, they are uniquely positioned to identify promising practices across schools and to share those practices to create learning opportunities. Moreover, they can collect data across schools to identify important ideas or concepts that could support improvement efforts.

Under ESSA, turnaround schools and the LEAs (and SEAs) charged with supporting them must enact their strategies to improve instructional practices in a policy environment that focuses on increasing performance expectations. These expectations have enormous implications for students in TSI schools, their educators, and their families. TSI schools are likely to require supports that are differentiated based on each school's needs. The process of identifying and then assisting TSI schools provides an opportunity for SEAs to intentionally create a system of support that allows for and encourages differentiation, based on the needs of individual schools and their districts.

LEAs may need to develop a systemic approach that targets the particular student populations and needs of each school and integrates supports for all students. TSI schools are likely to have more of a homogenous student body with a smaller subgroup of students from a more diverse background, which is often in contrast to schools identified for more widespread low performance, many of which have a more heterogeneous student population. Despite the lack of diversity in the student body overall, TSI schools may often include students from several subgroups. English language learner (ELL) students constitute a

sizable subpopulation of many low-performing and turnaround schools (Taylor, Stecher, O’Day, Naftel, & Le Floch, 2010). Accordingly, LEAs may need to support a focused and data-driven effort to ensure that ELL students in particular are provided with a high-quality education program.

The role of LEAs will be vital for achieving sustained success in improving TSI schools because LEAs set many of the parameters within which a school operates, such as selecting curriculum and assessments, establishing data systems, directing resources, creating incentives, providing professional learning and mentoring for principals and other school leaders, planning for school leader succession, and developing systems for accountability, such as performance evaluation. LEA leaders play a key role in helping schools implement changes that will have a positive impact on student outcomes. For example, in order for a school principal to successfully lead change, the principal needs champions within the LEA who buy into his or her vision for improvement and provide the resources and system supports necessary to execute that vision. By contrast, weak LEA leadership can thwart transformation efforts if it is unresponsive to the needs of the school or if the district bureaucracy impedes progress at the school level (Baroody, 2011; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004; Huberman, Parrish, Hannan, Arellanes, & Shambaugh, 2011).

## First Steps Toward Addressing the Needs of TSI Schools

Many states predict identification of large numbers of TSI schools — in some cases hundreds of schools in a state. At the same time, many SEA staff and budgets have been cut, leaving fewer state-level staff to support these schools. As a result, some states are exploring ways to prioritize those schools with the greatest need and/or those most willing to act swiftly. New Jersey, for example, has proposed a three-tiered support system for all of its identified schools. Additional tiers could be created to prioritize within the TSI-school identification list (e.g., readiness levels, specific subgroups).

Another common trend in how SEAs are responding to changes in accountability and

support for low-performing schools is by attempting to break down traditional silos within the SEA, expanding the responsibility for and work of school improvement beyond a state’s office of school improvement. This collaborative approach often draws in staff from the divisions of special education, ELL education, migrant education, and federal grant programs. Creation of a support infrastructure that spans agency divisions allows for a broader and more appropriate team to support the identified schools. If, for example, a TSI school is identified based on the performance of its ELL subgroup, it might make sense for someone from the ELL support division of the SEA to be the primary point of contact for the school’s improvement efforts. That person would communicate regularly with the LEA and the school, act as a conduit between the SEA and the school/LEA, and could connect other SEA staff to the school’s needs as they arise.

Oklahoma is an example of a state that has intentionally created a statewide system of support that works across SEA divisions to support identified schools. In addition, Tennessee recognized that a high number of schools will be identified for low ELL achievement, and the state has intentionally hired two additional SEA staff, who are experts in strategies to support ELL students, to focus on those schools and to build the capacity of other SEA staff to better support the needs of ELL students.

## Taking TSI Schools Through an Improvement Cycle

The improvement cycle for identified schools begins with a needs assessment to determine the root causes of achievement gaps (Corbett & Redding, 2017). The improvement cycle includes five steps: (1) an initial root-cause assessment that includes assessing the school’s strengths and weaknesses; (2) creation of an improvement plan, including consideration of effective practices most likely to produce results; (3) implementation of the plan; (4) implementation monitoring by the school, LEA, and SEA; and (5) course adjustment (Corbett & Redding, 2017).

Identified schools all go through the same improvement cycle, but TSI schools are unique in that they must maintain a focus on the identified subgroup in each step. While ESSA does not require a needs assessment for TSI schools, some states plan to require one to encourage that school and LEA staff perform root-cause analysis and create an improvement plan that addresses a school's needs.

The needs assessments could include similar questions for all identified schools but should focus on the systems, structures, policies, and practices that address systemic equity issues and that impact the identified student subgroup in TSI schools. For example, a general needs assessment might include questions related to the effectiveness of teachers. For TSI schools that have been identified for ELL student performance, the questions could include:

- ◆ Do the distribution and placement of ELL students throughout the school impact performance?
- ◆ Do some classrooms with ELL students tend to perform better? What are those teachers doing differently?
- ◆ Are the most effective teachers working with ELL students who have the strongest needs?
- ◆ Have teachers received appropriate training on cultural norms and expectations for ELL students and their families?

A goal of the needs assessment can be to push the discussion beyond blaming the identified subgroup of students for the designation, and instead shift the conversation toward how the educational systems, structures, policies, and practices impact that subgroup.

Once the needs assessment is complete, the school improvement team (which should include LEA representatives) can create an improvement plan based on the needs of the students. The strategies for improvement may include some programmatic interventions (e.g., reading intervention programs) but should also include changes to the systems, structures, policies, and practices which impact the identified students (e.g., wraparound support services, student and

teacher placement policies, professional learning on families' cultural expectations).

## Engaging Stakeholders and Building a Sense of Urgency

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As NCLB's focus schools demonstrated, schools that are identified due to achievement gaps may serve many of their students with a sound educational experience. Some graduates may be high-achieving, attend prestigious colleges or universities, and go on to lead successful careers, but analysis of subgroup data shows that students from at least one subset of the overall population do not fare well.

When a school is first identified for low performance, the community may rally behind the school, claiming that the data analysis is incorrect or that the school would be "successful" if not for that specific group of students (Corbett, 2017). In response, the LEA and school may need to engage stakeholders and educate school and district staff, as well as the broader community, about how subgroups of students are impacted by the school's systems, structures, policies, and practices. This type of communicating and capacity-building can be time-intensive and politically controversial and can potentially surface issues of discrimination, cultural insensitivity, and inequity. Having the support of the SEA as school and district leaders address some of these issues allows for school and district staff to focus on implementing the improvement plan as quickly as possible.

## Decision Points for Providing Support to TSI Schools

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Some major decision points that may be useful to think about while designing the system of support for TSI schools include addressing the following questions:

## For the SEA

- ◆ Once schools are identified, is it possible for the SEA to tier the lists, so that SEA staff can prioritize their limited resources (including people, time, and money) on a manageable number of TSI schools and their affiliated LEAs?
- ◆ Does a cross-agency team exist to support all identified schools?
- ◆ Is there a sufficient number of staff from the subgroup-focused divisions (e.g., focused on students with disabilities, or ELL students)?
- ◆ Are the members of the cross-agency team trained in the school and district improvement cycle?
- ◆ How often is the SEA's point of contact expected to communicate with each LEA?
- ◆ How often does the cross-agency team communicate to discuss monitoring progress and the provision of additional supports that may be needed?
- ◆ Which additional SEA staff divisions may be brought in on an "as-needed" basis (e.g., federal programs, Title II)?
- ◆ What level of support (both funds and professional assistance) can the SEA provide? (Many strategies, policies, and practices that can support TSI schools and their identified subgroups may not require a significant influx of dollars; often existing funds can be repurposed to implement the improvement plans.)
- ◆ Is a needs assessment required for TSI schools and their affiliated districts? How does the needs assessment discover the root causes of subgroup achievement gaps?
- ◆ Does the SEA have a framework that it requires or encourages schools and LEAs to use for their improvement work? Examples of frameworks that some SEAs use include the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement (Center on School Turnaround), the Nine Essential Elements (Marzano Research Laboratory), and the Five Essential Elements of School Success (University of Chicago).

- ◆ Is the SEA collecting data now, so that promising practices can be codified, shared with others, and scaled up across the state?

## For the LEA and School

- ◆ Is there broad stakeholder understanding and acceptance of the TSI designation?
- ◆ Has a needs assessment been completed to identify root causes of subgroup achievement gaps?
- ◆ What are the systems, structures, policies, and practices that need to be implemented at the school level? At the LEA level?
- ◆ How will implementation of adult behaviors and actions be monitored?
- ◆ Do LEA-level coaches have the skill sets required to support the school's implementation of an improvement plan?
- ◆ Does the LEA have the willingness and the capacity to change how it functions?
- ◆ How will the changes be embedded into the school/LEA to increase the likelihood of sustainability?
- ◆ Are there community groups that could collaborate with the school/LEA to implement the improvement plan?
- ◆ How often does the school/LEA monitor the performance of each subgroup to ensure that another subgroup or the performance of all students does not decline?

## Conclusion

With the identification of so many schools as low-performing, SEAs may consider prioritizing and differentiating how they support schools and their respective LEAs. ESSA's flexibility allows and encourages SEAs to develop a system of support that meets each state's needs and context. The system of support for TSI schools could fit within the broader system of support for all identified schools, while recognizing the unique needs of schools identified for subgroup achievement gaps. Furthermore, for true systemic and sustained

change to occur, the approach to improvement may focus on aligning district and school vision, mission, and goals. SEAs may consider how to ensure that all supports are organized to be consistent with this alignment. Another consideration for LEAs may be how to align the LEA's beliefs and attitudes and the school's vision, mission, and goals in order for change to be sustained. ESSA provides SEAs the opportunity to intentionally create a system that supports schools and LEAs. SEAs can further support their identified schools by focusing on building LEA-level capacity through consistent advocacy for a sound educational systems framework and the effective implementation of the steps of the improvement cycle.

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