

New Efforts and Energy for Struggling Schools:

State perspectives on how school
improvement is evolving under ESSA



Adopted with bipartisan fanfare in late 2015, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (“ESSA”) gives states new flexibility for how to support struggling schools—but also more responsibility

At Education First, we see both potentially big rewards and possible risks in ESSA’s new approach to school improvement



Ways ESSA could strengthen states’ efforts to help struggling schools improve ...

- **Reset a statewide commitment** to school quality and gap-closing
- **Encourage more innovative—and potentially successful—approaches** to monitoring progress and intervening
- **Engage stakeholders** during planning *and* implementation—to increase participation and community understanding of reforms

Ways states’ efforts could be less effective than before ...

- **Settle for minor tinkering** to current systems and approaches
- **Implement new strategies and supports unevenly**
- **Fail to prioritize equity** or act with urgency
- **Provide little transparency** about how decisions are being made

One key area where states now have more control is school improvement: ESSA requires states to identify struggling schools but delegates key decisions about how best to help

Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools (CSI)

These schools are the **lowest-performing** in the state and must be identified at least **every three years**:

- ☒ Schools in the bottom 5% of all schools
- ☒ Any high school with a graduation rate of 67% or less
- ☒ Schools identified for Targeted Support and Improvement (*see other column*) that have not improved over time

And these schools must adopt a new school improvement plan:

- Based on a “comprehensive needs assessment”
- Uses “evidence-based interventions”
- Approved by the LEA **and the state**

Targeted Support and Improvement Schools (TSI)

These schools are the **lowest-performing in the state for one or more subgroups** of students and must be **identified annually**:

- ☒ Any school with a subgroup of students consistently underperforming on the state’s indicators

The school improvement plan for these schools must:

- Use evidence-based interventions
- Be approved by the LEA, but **not the state**

To create a resource for the field about states' early progress, Education First invited 51 SEAs to share plans and perspectives on how their strategies are changing with ESSA's new flexibility

The goal of our research project was to help SEAs—and those working closely with them and with struggling schools—learn more about how states have started implementing their school improvement plans, early successes and promising practices so far, and where extra support may be needed

- 1 How are states using new flexibilities and authorities under the Every Student Succeeds Act to evolve how they work with struggling schools and LEAs?
- 2 What progress have states made on implementing the school improvement plans they outlined generally in their overall ESSA plans?
- 3 What are common trends as well as challenges across all states—including where states and LEAs may need additional help, resources or technical assistance to accomplish their goals?
- 4 Which state-developed tools, activities and approaches are viewed as most promising?

KEY TAKE-AWAY #1: States told us they are making two big shifts: (1) *Focus on continuous improvement* and (2) *Provide differentiated support based on individual school needs*

States started implementing their ESSA plans this summer and early in school year 2017-18. Across most states, leaders are betting on two new approaches to school improvement, building on what they say they have learned from the past decade of uneven school support, intervention and turnaround.

1

Help schools aim for **continuous improvement** rather than absolute improvement, by emphasizing the use of tools that can spur improvement: needs assessments, diagnoses of root causes, identification of priorities and targeted strategies, measures of progress, and making data-informed revisions



2

Provide **greater differentiation** in approaches to helping struggling schools, including providing a greater range of supports to meet schools where they are and help them move forward—plus helping schools attend to “the whole child” or non-academic outcomes

KEY TAKE-AWAY #2: We learned states are trying all sorts of new structures, reporting routines, funding approaches and technical assistance to accelerate school improvement

Seeking to build **more collaborative relationships** with schools and LEAs



Creating **new SEA teams composed of program leads** (Title I, school improvement, ESL/Title III, federal funding, etc.) that meet regularly, coordinate and review school progress together



Investing in **higher-touch support activities**, such as contracted coaches, TA providers and regional education service centers



Developing **more specific tools, resources and guidance** to support schools throughout the improvement process



Streamlining federal funding streams and program requirements to **reduce compliance burdens and align funding** to a single approach



Providing LEAs and schools access to evidence-based TA and professional learning (such as by curating TA providers, creating resource-hubs and agency-sponsored training)

KEY TAKE-AWAY #3: SEAs reported to us that—as they try new, hopefully more effective approaches—resource constraints are challenging their goals and plans

1

Funding adequacy given the number of schools likely to be identified under ESSA's requirements



2

Bandwidth to fully support both CSI (most students struggling) and TSI (some sub-groups struggling) schools—with most states prioritizing plans, funding and supports for CSI schools initially



3

Capacity (time and talent) to fully and knowledgeably support local school improvement efforts

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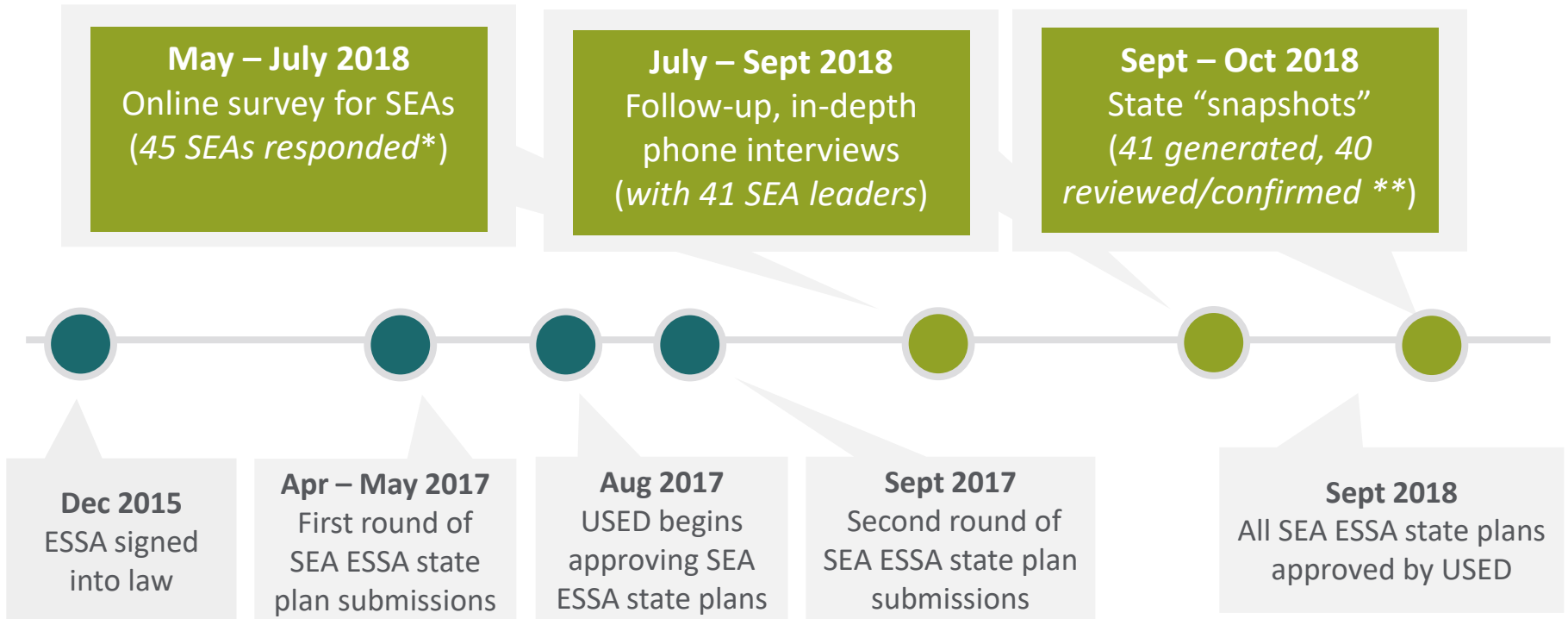
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1 | Research Design

This spring, Ed First conducted an online survey of SEA school improvement leaders and then conducted follow-up interviews with each participating state in summer/fall

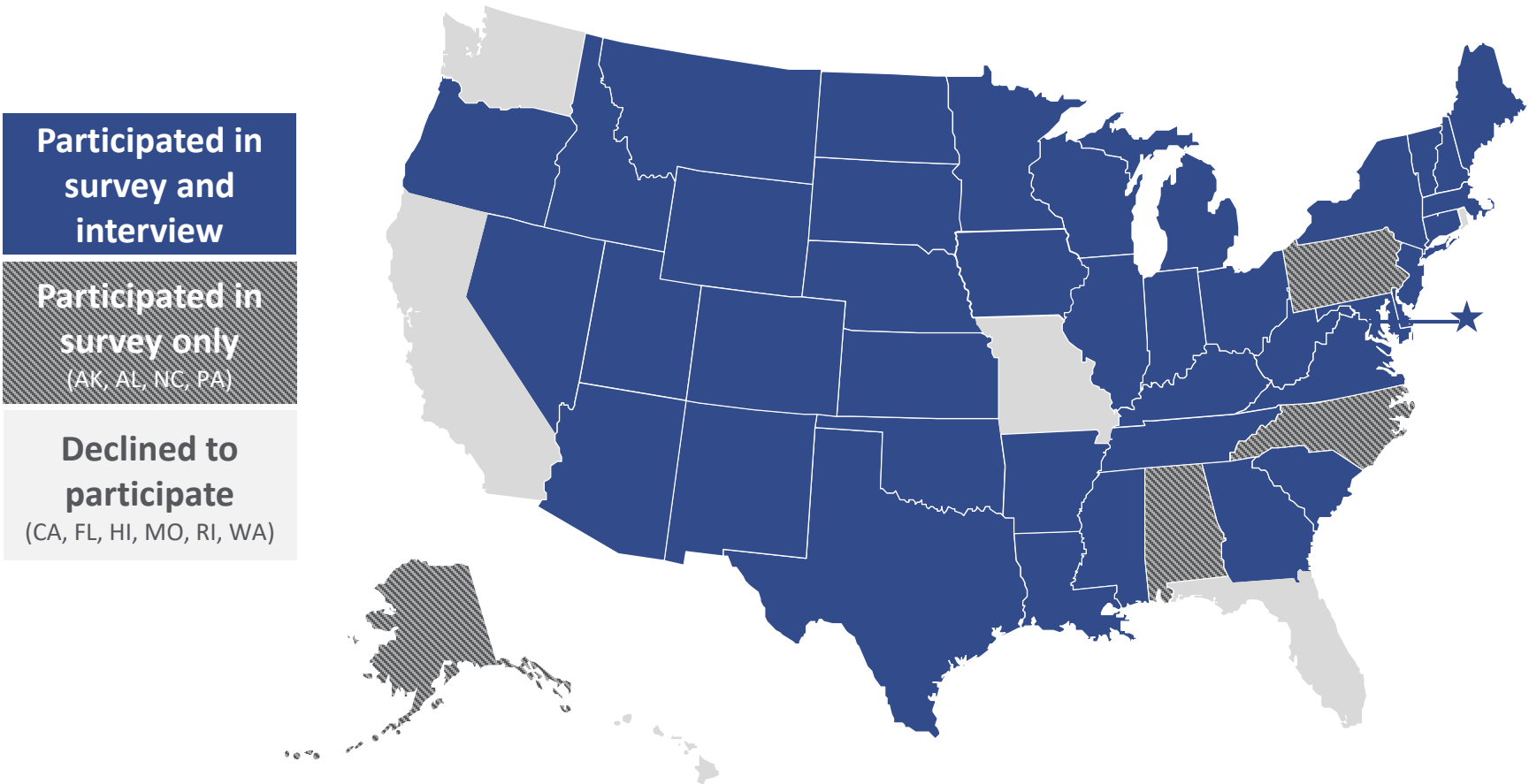
Research Process



State ESSA Plan Submission and Approval Process

- Ed First invited SEAs in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia to participate in this research project
- ** Based on survey and interview data, Ed First created snapshots describing each state’s school improvement strategy; all states reviewed and confirmed these snapshots, except for Texas which did not respond to this final step in our research project

Forty-four states and D.C. participated in our research; 41 states and D.C. completed both an online survey and a phone interview to answer more qualitative questions about strategy



Our online survey (early summer 2018) asked state leaders to describe technical aspects of their approach, as articulated in each state's approved ESSA plan



Online Survey: Key Topics

Changes to the LEA application for federal school improvement funds

Timeline for CSI/TSI identification

Technical assistance (TA) activities

Anticipated changes to monitoring of school improvement activities

Stakeholder engagement activities

Resource allocation audit (*timing and process*)

Funding approach/model (*for distributing federal funds*)

Survey Response

45 of 51 states/DC responded (88% response rate)

Follow-up interviews (late summer 2018) explored big-picture questions about the state's vision, strategy and progress



Follow-up Phone Interview: Key Topics

Overall vision for school improvement (*struggling schools specifically*)

Key technical assistance (TA) and support strategies

Progress and challenges to date

Strategy for distributing school improvement funds

Major changes in SEA practice

Major changes in state policy related to school improvement

Reflections on priority SEA-level and school-level needs

Interview Response

41 of 45 states/DC participated in interviews
(91% response rate; 80% overall response)

From these data, Ed First created two resources to help state leaders, advocates, researchers and TA providers better understand state approaches, promising tools and challenges

Tool #1: Collection of 41 state “snapshots” highlighting each state’s approach to school improvement under ESSA (as of Fall 2018)



Tool #2: Cross-state analysis of common tools and challenges

THIS DOCUMENT

Wyoming
Approach to School Support and Improvement | Fall 2018

Vision for School Improvement
WDE is dedicated to providing support for all schools across the state to promote student achievement, regardless of designation status.

Key Strategies
PROGRESS UPDATES: WDE developed a guidebook supporting TA and compliance monitoring.
CHALLENGES: WDE is addressing both state and federal requirements for plans without placing an undue administrative burden on schools.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE & COMPLIANCE

- **Templates and rubrics for improvement plans:** Developed (a) a rubric to evaluate LEA applications, (b) needs assessment rubrics and (c) an exemplary CSI template plan
- **Professional development:** Held convenings to cover changes to the SI application and provided TA on how to implement SI plans
- **Guidance:** Developed materials to explain the process to educators, families and community members and provided guidance to LEAs on (a) ESSA regulations to which schools and LEAs must conform, (b) the actions WDE will take to identify, support and intervene in CSI and TSI schools, (c) implementation strategies for TSI schools and (d) evidence-based SI strategies aligned to ESSA requirements
- **Structures and processes:** Developed or updated processes to (a) recruit, screen, select and evaluate external partners/providers, (b) provide feedback to LEAs on SI efforts, (c) work with ESAs to provide TA to LEAs and schools and (d) monitor progress

Key Updates
NEW POLICY/REGULATIONS: WY updated state laws to conform with its ESSA plan for SI.
NEW SEA PRACTICE: WDE is hosting two-day data retreats and developing a tiered support structure for schools.

Funding: Formula
Minimum grant awards are \$50,000. The state formula designates a greater percentage of funds for LEAs with higher percentages of low performing schools.

State and School Needs
SEA
An increase in the administrative cap for Title I SEA allocation to dedicate to additional FTE or fund other supports

SCHOOLS
A continuous improvement approach to the grant application

Implementation Timeline

Winter '18	LEA SI grant application opens; CSI and TSI schools identified; full implementation of SI system; state report card released
2019-20 SY	LEA resource allocation audit

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Both resources are available at <http://www.education-first.com/essa>

Finally, in reviewing this research, keep some caveats in mind—most importantly that state efforts are just getting underway, so Ed First’s research provides an early (but not definitive) peek



- Ed First surveyed states in May-June 2018 and conducted follow-up interviews in July-September 2018
- While many states used the 2017-18 school year to develop new tools and communicate new expectations, many (not all) states were on the cusp of actually identifying their first round of CSI schools and putting their new approach in place when we contacted them
- It will be important to revisit state progress in a year (and more), to see which new approaches actually lead to better results
- On slides 32-33, we suggest important issues to probe and pay attention to in the future



2 | States' School Improvement Strategies: Common Themes and Example Approaches

HOW DO STATES SAY THEIR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES HAVE CHANGED? WHAT CHANGES WILL MAKE THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE?

We asked states to describe their school improvement goals, strategies and progress to date in *six categories*; we learned most states are immediately prioritizing CSI schools



Note: Ed First’s analysis emphasizes states’ greater clarity and focus on working with CSI schools (as defined by ESSA—see slide 3), as states reported to us that they were furthest along in their planning and implementation for activities that could help these schools, which are generally struggling in multiple areas. While many states shared information on their plans for TSI schools as well, the level of detail (and depth) to include in this analysis was inconsistent. Still, we have tabulated what we learned about state plans for TSI schools in the Appendix.

To better support schools identified for more intensive state support, most SEAs report creating new cross-program teams and/or reorganizing how the agency relates to schools/LEAs

1 *Orientation: More Collaboration, Less Command*

Many states report a **shift in their approach** to working with struggling schools—aiming to be **more “collaborative” and hands-off**, and less oriented toward compliance.

“We are working collaboratively with schools—side by side—to do a needs assessment, understand the local context and landscape, and provide resources they need or connect them to the partners they need. It’s a little different tact than we took before when it was much more prescriptive.” – SEA Leader

2 *Support: Giving Struggling Schools More*

States report **revamping existing SEA structures**, such as creating new offices or investing in regional education centers to lead TA and support

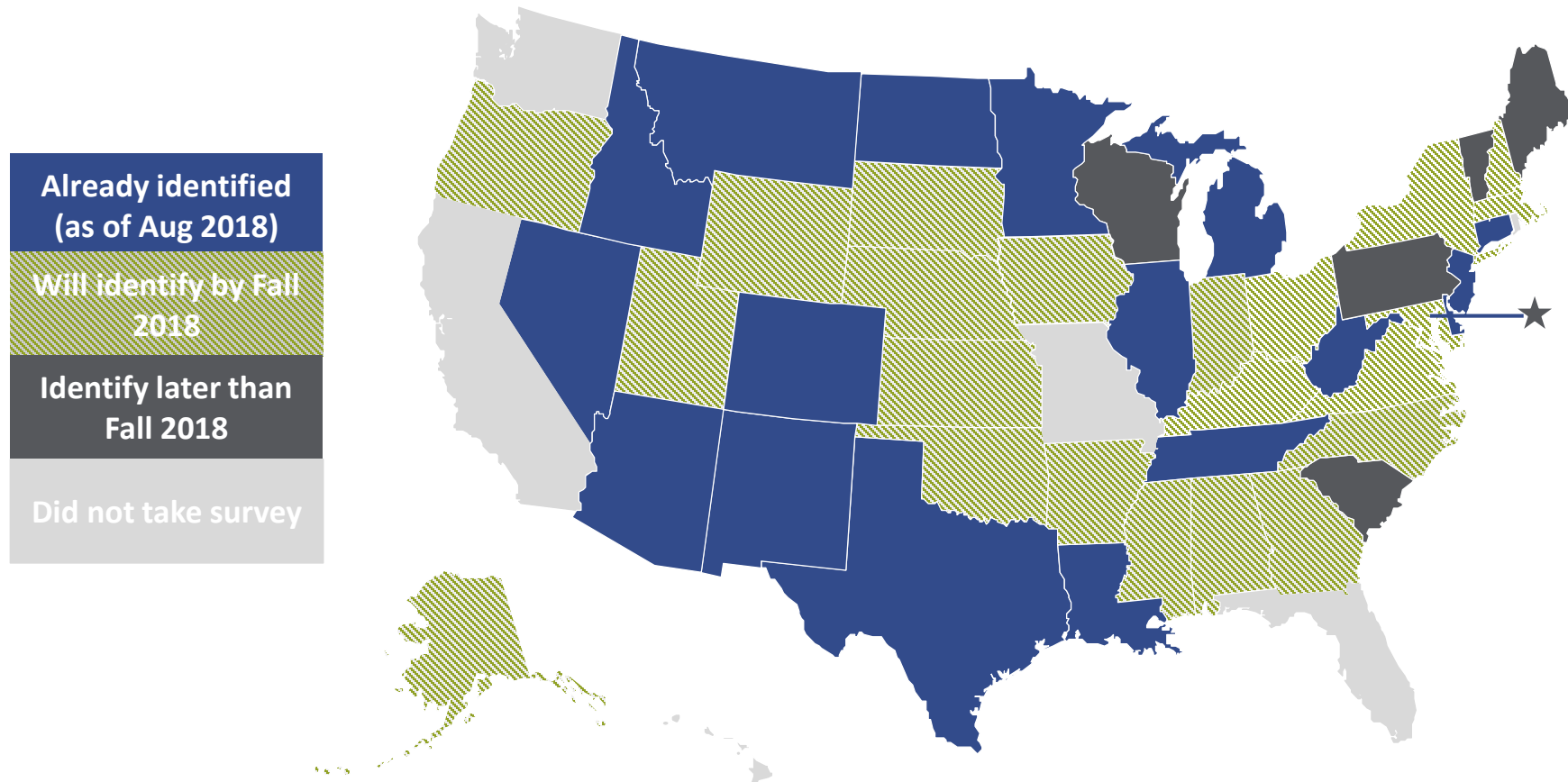
*“We’ve amplified the infrastructure by formalizing our agreements with the Area Education Agencies to support all schools. These relationships are critical to maintaining continuous improvement over time.”
– SEA Leader*

3 *Structure: New SEA Cross-Teams*

States report **assembling new support teams for schools**, such as cross-divisional teams with differentiated expertise, assigning agency liaisons to steward schools, and/or hiring coaches to provide on-the-ground support

“We have a new cross-agency team, the Continuous Improvement Team, that pulls in key divisions at the agency. The great thing is we all sit around the table and we train our own people in-house. We are making sure the specialized expertise is there to support school needs.” – SEA Leader

By the end of Fall 2018, 39 states say they will have identified their CSI schools for more intensive support



22 states will provide schools with an allowed “Planning Year” to plan for their improvement strategies following their identification: *AR, DE, IA, IL, IN, KY, MA, MD, ME, MN, NC, NH, NJ, NY, OR, PA, SC, SD, UT, WI, and WV*

SEAs report investing significantly in making schools' newly required needs assessment processes more robust and helpful



Tools

At least 24 SEAs report that they revised or modified their needs assessment tool to reflect the state's new approach under ESSA, while 15 states are in the process of modifying their needs assessment tool (*total of at least 39 states making changes*)



Training

The majority of SEAs have provided training (in-person and/or virtual) about their new needs assessment process. And four states—AZ, MD, MS and NV—reported they are training school leaders specifically on key skills for conducting needs assessments, including analyzing root causes

State Spotlights



Maine

To roll out its new needs assessment tool and process, the Maine SEA conducted regional in-person trainings with all LEAs; it reports that, for the first time, all LEAs will complete a needs assessment identifying areas of focus



Arizona

The Arizona SEA revised its needs assessment approach to be aligned with its Six Principles of Effective Schools, and it has done extensive training for CSI/TSI schools on the new tool and root cause analysis



Oregon

Oregon's SEA adapted the University of Kansas' Swift Center needs assessment tool, adding a greater emphasis on evidence-based approaches. It also developed a new protocol for listening to and engaging diverse community perspectives on school needs



Michigan & Ohio

SEAs in both Michigan and Ohio developed new needs assessment tools that are designed to integrate seamlessly into the state's overall planning and grant application systems for struggling schools

SEAs say they are implementing a wide range of new or refined structures, practices and training to help schools create the highest-quality improvement plans



Planning

19 states report they have created or will create a new model improvement plan to share with their schools and LEAs



Training

A majority of states report they provided training (in-person and/or virtual) about new planning processes and expectations this summer



Streamlining

At least 21 states (50%) say they reduced paperwork and accelerated planning processes by allowing schools and LEAs to create one plan to access multiple funding streams



Feedback

At least 21 states (50%) have new routines for feedback between SEA staff and the school or LEA as their improvement plans are developed

State Spotlights



Georgia

This past spring and summer, the Georgia SEA designed and offered statewide training institutes for all educators to help improve standards-aligned teaching



Louisiana

The Louisiana SEA requires that all school improvement plans include a plan for using high-quality curriculum from state-approved providers



Mississippi

Mississippi's SEA uses regional TA centers to train school and LEA staff on choosing and using appropriate evidence-based intervention



Illinois

The Illinois SEA's IL-EMPOWER system offers a suite of online resources to support school planning aligned with the Illinois Quality Framework, including an equity analysis tool

SEAs report they are providing greater support to struggling schools via a range of strategies, such as vetting TA providers, identifying evidence-based strategies and aiding school leaders



Tools & Resources

At least six states are creating a clearinghouse of evidence-based school improvement practices, and 18 states say they are in process of creating (about 60% total); at least 13 states are using a new framework to guide choices



Curation of Providers

At least eight states have created processes to review, select or monitor TA providers that can support identified schools, while 10 states are creating new ones (44% total); multiple states say they are especially considering evidence in vetting TA providers



Leadership Capacity

At least eight states (15%) will be working to strengthen the leadership capacity at identified schools, such as by establishing principal training programs and turnaround credentials or by sponsoring new professional learning communities

State Spotlights



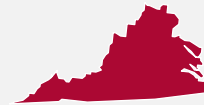
Texas

The Texas SEA grounds its approach in an “Effective Schools Framework,” which schools, LEAs and regional service centers use to guide improvement efforts



Nevada & Indiana

SEAs in Nevada and Indiana have begun new efforts to evaluate potential TA providers against ESSA’s evidence-based practice requirements, and to connect schools to different providers with different tiers of evidence



Virginia

Virginia’s SEA shifted to a “case management” support model for CSI/TSI schools where SEA staff build relationships and support a portfolio of schools through the school improvement process



Maryland

For principals at all CSI schools, the Maryland SEA established a new leadership development program, with regular school visits and coaching

Looking forward, some SEAs already have revised their monitoring protocols too, with a handful incorporating new practices as part of their continuous improvement approach



Tools and Protocols

At least 10 states report revising their monitoring protocol and tools going forward, and 27 states say they are in the process of revising these tools (90%)



Monitoring Practices

Nonetheless, most SEAs explained they are still considering how best to approach monitoring in a way that fulfills the SEA's accountability role but also is aligned with a continuous improvement approach; for example, five states described putting in place more frequent feedback cycles, where SEA support teams engage in site visits and support provision multiple times per year

State Spotlights



North Dakota

North Dakota launched a consolidated monitoring process, which combines planning and monitoring into a web-based tool for all major federal grants except IDEA



New Mexico

New Mexico has made its Data, Accountability, Sustainability, High Achievement (DASH) tool the key way all schools (but especially struggling schools) can develop plans and monitor progress; DASH provides a framework for 30/60/90-day goal-setting, and—for struggling schools--a SEA support team visit just prior to the 90-day mark to check on progress



Kentucky

Kentucky works with CSI schools to determine three big focus areas for their plans, and then monitors on a 30/60/90-day schedule with on-site visits



3 | State Funding and Policy Priorities to Accelerate School Improvement

HOW ARE STATES USING FEDERAL FUNDS AND STATE POLICY
CHANGES TO REINFORCE THEIR GOALS FOR SCHOOL
IMPROVEMENT?

ESSA allows states designated school improvement funds to use with struggling schools (separate from Title I allocations to schools); states have wide latitude on how to distribute these targeted funds, and SEAs are valuing different priorities

Formula Funding



Advantages

- Ensures all LEAs receive funding
- Allows for weighting based on enrollment, need of student population and concentration of CSI/TSI schools in the LEA in funding calculations
- Allows LEAs with less capacity to dedicate to completing a plan/application to still receive support

Disadvantages

- Makes it difficult to encourage use of state-vetted programs or approaches or strategies well-aligned to states' visions and goals
- May spread funding more thinly across schools, rather than directing funds toward the hardest problems or the best-articulated strategies

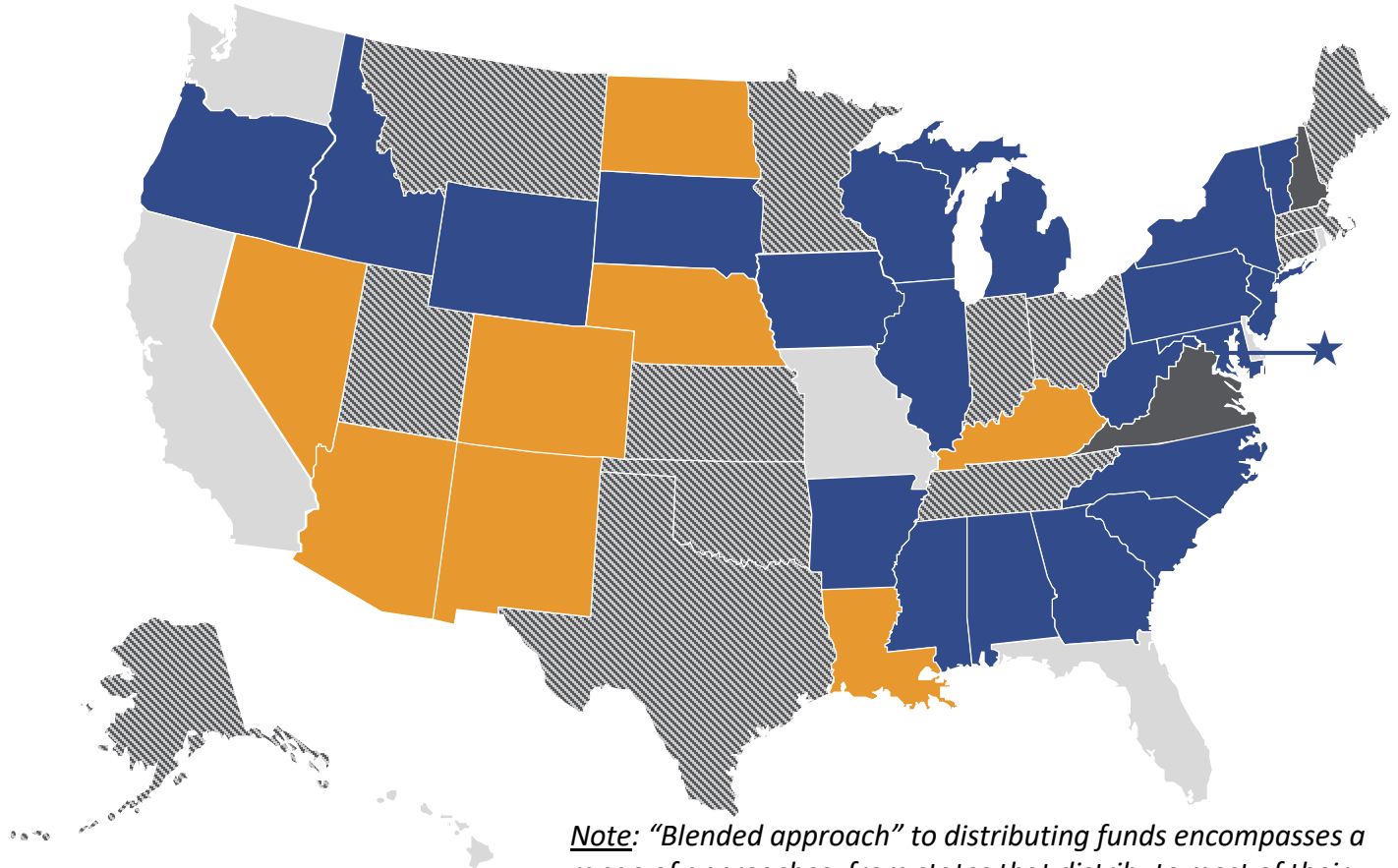
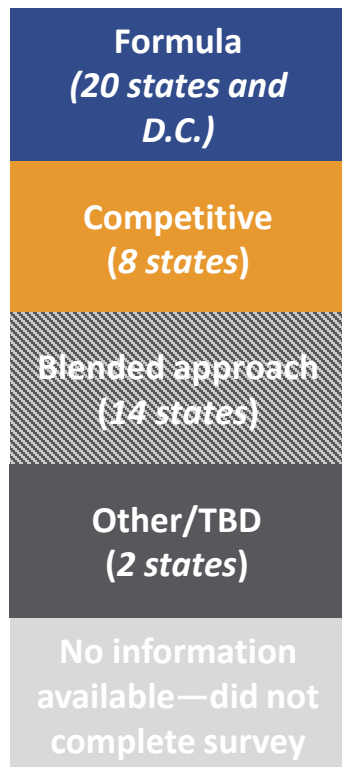
Competitive Funding



- Encourages LEAs to engage in planning processes and rewards well-articulated, well-conceived plans
- Allows for SEA to target resources to address unique challenges and targeted population needs
- Allows for SEAs to incentivize particular approaches to school improvement

- Draws on SEAs to help all eligible LEAs/schools put together the most competitive applications (which NM is doing, for example)
- Requires SEA capacity to develop and manage a robust competitive grant selection process
- Could lead to resentment or excuses if some LEAs/schools receive no funding

Twenty states and D.C. report they are using formulas to distribute federal school improvement funds; fewer states are using blended and competitive models for distributing funds



Note: “Blended approach” to distributing funds encompasses a range of approaches, from states that distribute most of their funding via formula but hold back some to advance key state priorities or goals, to states that more evenly split available funding between formula and competitive grants

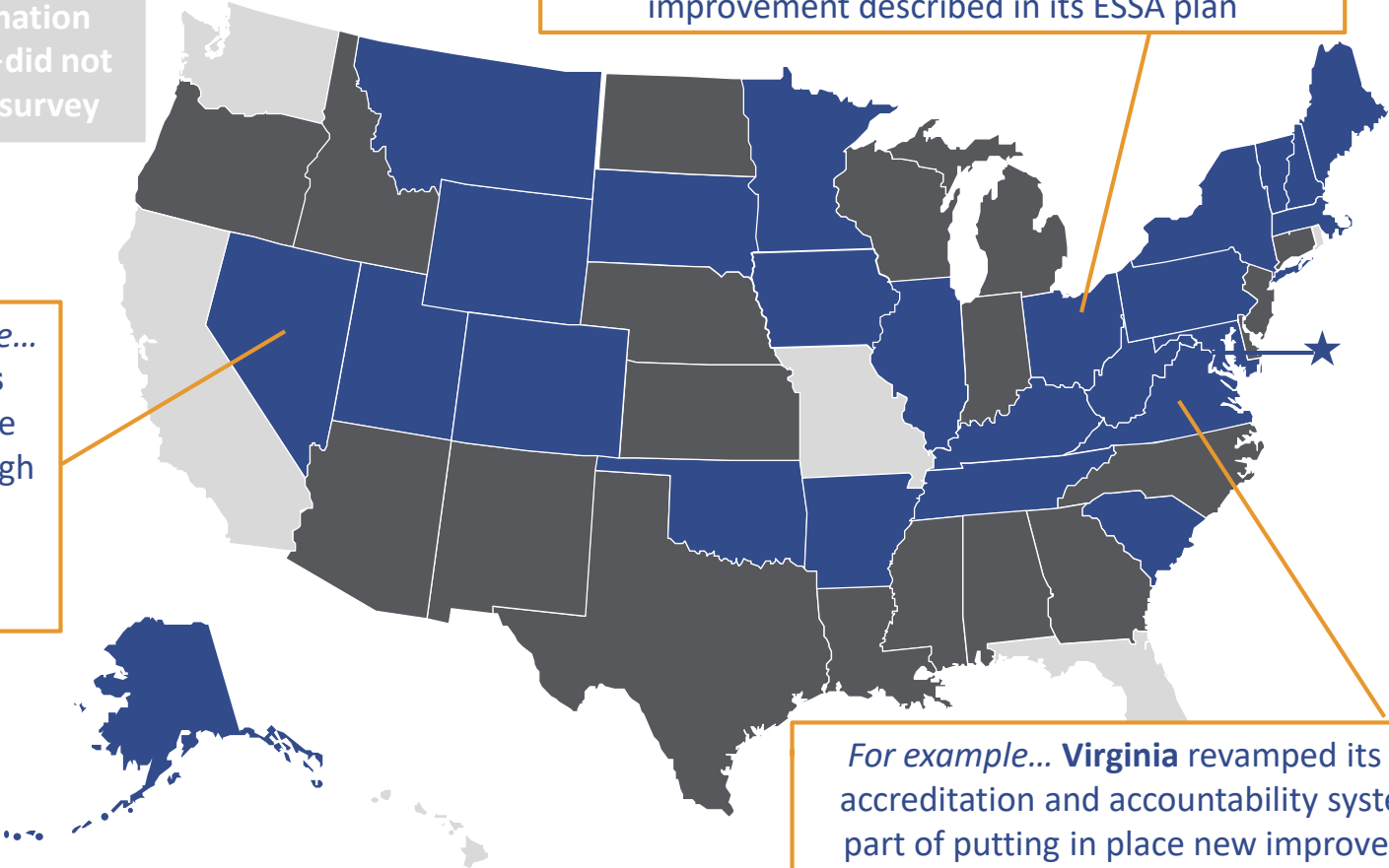
The opportunity to rethink school improvement strategies has had wide-ranging policy impacts: 25 states and D.C. reported they changed state policies to align with their ESSA plans

Reported changes made to state policy

No information available—did not complete survey

For example... **Ohio's** State Board of Education approved its new Strategic Plan for Education, which includes the state's new approach for school improvement described in its ESSA plan

For example... **Nevada's** Legislature changed high school diploma options



For example... **Virginia** revamped its state accreditation and accountability system as part of putting in place new improvement requirements for schools under ESSA



4 | Opportunities to Approach School Improvement Differently

WHAT CHALLENGES ARE STATE LEADERS FACING AS THEY SEEK TO
SUPPORT MORE SCHOOLS MORE SUCCESSFULLY?

Looking across states, Ed First heard common challenges facing SEA leaders in planning for and implementing new approaches to school improvement under ESSA—*many related to capacity*

Challenge

What we heard from state leaders

Scale / Need

Can we support LEAs adequately, given the large number of expected schools to be identified as CSI and TSI?

"We need to make sure we have staff to address the concerns of schools and districts. We have concerns about our capacity because we identified more schools than we anticipated."

- SEA Leader

"What happens when TSI schools become CSI schools? There is a potential for resource, capacity and knowledge challenges. What do we do with this?"

- SEA Leader

Knowledge / Talent

Do we have the ability and people—at the SEA and/or with partners—to meet the wide range of local needs (especially while trying to offer tools and resources that support more robust school improvement)?

"We are constantly trying to learn about the best interventions: curriculum, talent, subgroups, high school students. We spend a lot of time finding partners/experts who can help with these interventions."

- SEA Leader

"We are good at compliance but when we get to the next level of instruction and supporting that, we haven't had capacity and resources to do this."

- SEA Leader

Funding

Do we have enough funding to fully support struggling schools? Are funds at the SEA, LEA and school levels adequate to launch and sustain improvement efforts over time?

"The funding is part of it; we also need capacity. We are not a state that gets a lot of state funds for improvement. We rely heavily on federal funds."

- SEA Leader

"A big challenge is funding. There are federal dollars, but [our state legislature] used to have money for school improvement, but no longer."

- SEA Leader

Across states, Ed First heard common challenges from state leaders about supporting schools—including whether their new strategies could overcome a history of uneven progress

Challenge

New State Roles

Can we successfully build trust with LEAs and schools—and successfully move away from more prescriptive (and punitive, as perceived by some) approaches required under the previous No Child Left Behind act—to successfully establish new ways of engaging and supporting change?

Professional Learning

How do we ensure professional learning is both widely available and high-quality—meeting a wide range of student and school needs, beginning with helping educators wisely chose evidence-based strategies best aligned to their needs?

What we heard from state leaders

“You have to be compliance-driven but at the same time you want to be a partner and be able to provide technical assistance and have districts trust the assistance you are providing”
- SEA Leader

“We’ve tried to reflect on previous school improvement efforts: what worked and what didn’t work. For Race to the Top and NCLB, we were very prescriptive and it didn’t go so well. We, as a state, created barriers and difficulties for LEAs and schools. Now we have postured ourselves as a supportive agency.”
- SEA Leader

“You need to help [schools] know how to use guides for evidence-based strategies. When our teams are doing program monitoring and evaluation, they know their role is to provide training, access and assistance and where schools can access more resources.”
- SEA Leader

“Understanding the importance of evidence-based practices and their impact on the quality of instruction in classrooms is significant ... It helps schools understand the 'why' behind the 'what' of evidence. It gave them a deeper sense of how they should be thinking about this work.”
- SEA Leader



5 | Concluding Thoughts and Outstanding Questions

As SEAs begin to put their new school improvement strategies in place this school year, Ed First sees 10 key questions worth posing a year from now—all related to *SEA capacity and choices*

Outstanding Questions

- 1 New strategies for TSI schools** Which strategies are states using to help schools improve the performance of specific populations of students? And which activities are proving to be most successful?
- 2 State monitoring role** How are states balancing new practices that value local continuous improvement and local partnerships with the responsibility to expect progress and maintain a focus on accountability for results?
- 3 Evaluation of results** How are states beginning to evaluate progress of their new efforts, including whether their overall approach is working and whether school-specific approaches are effective? What are they tweaking?
- 4 Funding choices** What tough choices are states making about limited resources, with local needs likely greater than federal funding allocated for school improvement? In particular, are states able to successfully support both CSI and TSI schools in making consequential improvements?
- 5 Ensuring evidence-based strategies** How successfully are states validating locally implemented practices to ensure they are both the best choices and truly evidence-based practices? What can we learn from this new focus on evidence?

As SEAs begin to put their new school improvement strategies in place this school year, Ed First sees 10 key questions worth posing a year from now—all related to *SEA capacity and choices*

Outstanding Questions

6	Making adjustments after year 1	How did states use results from the first year of implementation (2018-19) as to gauge how well their new approaches to school improvement are working? What adjustments were made?
7	Increasing SEA's own capacity, talent and knowledge	What steps did SEAs take to explicitly increase their own capacity and talent for supporting and implementing robust school improvement interventions, strategies and activities?
8	Policy & funding	Are policy-makers making any further changes to state policies or providing any additional funding to further state-led efforts at guiding school improvement?
9	Sustaining school improvement, after intensive support	Have states put in place any explicit monitoring processes to ensure previously-identified CSI and TSI schools maintain progress after exiting identified status?
10	Figuring out ESSA's "more rigorous interventions"	What exactly are states considering doing to intervene more forcefully in schools (and their LEAs) that fail to meet exit criteria for CSI? How different is that approach from the initial supports?



5 | Appendix

While states seem more focused on how to support CSI schools, 40 states (of 45) reported they will have identified TSI schools by this year

Identify before Fall 2018 (15)	Identify in Fall 2018 (20)	Identify by Winter 2018 (5)	Identify after Winter 2018 (5)
Arizona Colorado Connecticut Idaho Illinois Louisiana Michigan Minnesota Montana Nebraska New Jersey New Mexico North Dakota Pennsylvania Tennessee	Alabama Alaska Arkansas Georgia Indiana Iowa Kansas Kentucky Maryland Massachusetts Mississippi Nevada New York North Carolina Ohio Oregon South Dakota Utah Virginia Wyoming	Delaware District of Columbia Maine South Carolina Vermont	Oklahoma New Hampshire Texas West Virginia Wisconsin

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Thank you!
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