ESSA Listening Sessions
Effective School Improvement Summary

In an effort to inform stakeholders and gather pertinent input on the reauthorization of ESEA, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) held a series of listening sessions during the summer of 2016. Approximately 275 attended the sessions including educators, parents, community advocates, and other stakeholders on ESSA and the potential for change upon its anticipated implementation on July 1, 2017.

The structure for each session consisted of a presentation of background knowledge and facts followed by a sequence of five questions stakeholders responded to in table discussions led by a facilitator related to effective school improvement strategies:

1. What are effective school improvement strategies?
2. What should the district do to support improvement efforts?
3. What should a state monitoring system include to best support school improvement efforts?
4. How should families be engaged in school improvement efforts?
5. How should the community be engaged in school improvement efforts?

This document summarizes the insights, reflections and experiences of the stakeholders shared in small group conversations at the listen sessions. From the feedback gathered fourteen themes emerged capturing the origin and essence of elements that impact effective school improvement strategies:

- Data & Assessment,
- Collaboration and Implementation,
- School Day and School Year Structure,
- Parents and Community,
- Student Involvement,
- Teachers and Instruction,
- School Leadership,
- Culturally Responsive Practices,
- Professional Development and Coaching,
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support,
- Material Resources,
- Institutions of Higher Education,
- Early Childhood, and
- Other - unique input uncommon to the aforementioned categories and incorporated within the summary.

1. **What are effective school improvement strategies?**

    Respondent comments pointed to areas which were deemed challenges or gaps to leverage sources for improvement:
    - teacher licensure requirements,
    - student progress accountability,
    - LEA accountability measures,
    - school level leadership,
    - family and community input and participation,
    - professional growth and development opportunities
        - Materials to engage both struggling and advanced learners, and
        - knowledge and skill to differentiate instructional practices.

    Professional development emerged as a significant topic of influence to shift the scope of practice and systems. The descriptors used to define the term were "quality" and "direct application." Participants defined professional learning opportunities as: training and coaching for both teachers and school leaders, district planned and facilitated offerings, school and collegial networking with a content emphasis for immediate classroom use and relevance to practice, and a process to disseminate learning opportunities to all school building faculty and staff to sustain a culture of transparent learning.

    The obstacles perceived to impede effective school improvement were named as:
    - absence of responsive approaches to directly measure improvement;
    - struggles with how to use data management systems;
    - need for transparency in knowledge of promising practices which positively impact classroom instruction and student learning;
    - insufficient support of school building leadership;
    - understanding of the needs ELL students and Title III monitoring compliance;
    - general district and building level focus is too broad to have an effect on priority initiatives;
    - access to comprehensive strategies for family and community engagement; and
    - excessive time spent on compliance: process too rigid and hinders time to concentrate on school primacies.

    As a means to shift the current approaches, respondents offered several solutions: increasing cultural sensitivity through the use of the Hexagon Tool developed by The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN); growth goals with action sets; cohesive teaching and learning to implement change; robust interventions; State Education Agencies (SEA) to structure a collaboration with Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) teacher preparation programs and school districts (i.e. pipeline preparation programs, action research, professional learning offerings); DPI and Department of Children and Families (DCF)

partnership; equity and diversity training; and expand mentoring component across coaching models for new and veteran teachers and principals.

Current practices showing evidence of gaining traction and leveraging well-matched professional development to have a direct and noticeable impact on student learning growth: the Hexagon tool to repurpose systems conducive for planning, assessment, Response to Intervention (RTI), and Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS).

Recommended evidence based practices and models to consider for effective school improvement were: *Learning to Improve* (Anthony Bryk); Growth Models focused on the outputs of education and expected progress from all students published by the U.S. Department of Education (ED)*;* Implementation Science; Jim Knight (Kansas Coaching Project); alternative school schedule models: Colorado, Mexico; Paul Gorski's EdChange work.

2.   What should the district do to support improvement efforts?

In response to the role of school districts to promote school improvement efforts, participants identified a myriad of areas:

- relevant interventions - based on needs of current practice;
- focus on student learning;
- provide specialized professional development and coaching for teachers, paraprofessionals, principals;
- shift the culture and beliefs of district to reflect cultural responsiveness;
- provide training on mental health and the effect of trauma on learning;
- provide knowledge on how to differentiate instruction for low performing and advanced learners;
- coach methods to effectively use data and assessments;
- accountability to cultivate systems and conditions;
- offer access to adequate and flexible funding sources to support long-term program implementation; and
- ability to expand resources.

The dialogue revealed perceived barriers associated with why districts have been unable to implement, maintain and sustain school improvement. These barriers included:
- too many inconsistencies within district and varying school building practices;
- unclear alignment to goals across state, district, school, student, parents and community;
- lack of time;
- Indistar, a tool used to organize and track school improvement initiatives, focuses on compliance not real improvement;

- state compliance requirements detract from work schools are currently implementing;
- undefined Local Educational Agency (LEA) role to satisfy compliance measures;
- lack of appropriate staffing;
- lack of professional development targeting paraprofessionals;
- difficulty attracting and retaining high quality individuals to the teaching field;
- CESAs are not being utilized as a conduit for school improvement;
- inequitable shared leadership; and
- lack of attention on increased capacity building.

One example, placing emphasis on the need for comprehensive data analysis for successful application: a teacher commented about "hating to use data" which points to a concern that educator preparation and licensure does not equate to understanding of how data drives student learning decisions and correlates directly to classroom instruction.

A strength was pointed out as evidence of what is working to impact district's efforts is the implementation of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) process with fidelity.

Respondents further offered suggested solutions of ways districts can improve efforts such as setting standards and expectations for professional trainings; shifting from direct coaching to transformational coaching; providing an awareness of the need to parallel systems: school culture, support for improvements; offering seminars for parents; consider reframing school-home relationships (one respondent inquired, '*Why do families always have to go to the school?');* developing a long-term plan with evaluation measure benchmarks; fostering teacher-to- teacher collegial learning; encouraging high expectations for every child; aligning interventions and universal instruction; accessing statewide supports for Students with Disabilities (SwD).

Recommended evidence based practices and models to consider for effective school improvement mentioned were: Growth Mindset Research and the Marzano High Reliability Schools framework.

3. **State education agencies monitor identified Title I schools to ensure compliance with the law and support school improvement. What should a state monitoring system include to best support school improvement efforts?**

The respondent comments gathered were central to district mandatory reporting of data and practices. The range of remarks underscored the SEA monitoring system lacking consistent follow-up processes. Specifically mentioned were Educator Effectiveness, flexibility considerations to adapt or sync district reporting

tools with SEA requirements, and the compliance systems themselves.

The observed and experienced hindrances named in current practice included:
- lack of dissemination of effective initiative models and strategies statewide;
- lack of alternative options for Indistar reporting to provide schools flexibility to select a reporting source to better capture indicator progress;
- insubstantial feedback and takeaways from Indistar to incite meaningful changes in practice;
- negative encounters of families with schools;
- rigid compliance versus a relevant continuous improvement reporting system;
- insufficient knowledge of educators to understand mandated SEA and federal compliance; and
- the negative connotation attributed to improvement measures.

There were several strengths mentioned. One referenced frequently was home visits as a promising strategy to re-connect and appeal to families, though it was unclear if this strategy was offered for consideration as a state mandate. Another asset offered was the Spotlight Schools model as an exemplary practice DPI has modeled to promote schools and offer mentorship to share like insights and successful strategies and methods. Also pointed out as a plus was the State Superintendent's interest to learn and be well informed from constituents before taking action.

Respondents further offered suggested solutions of ways the SEA can improve the existing monitoring system such as:
- adapting an accreditation model to assess school strengths and areas of improvement;
- alignment of assessment cycles to identify student learning needs;
- replicating the School Improvement Grant (SIG) partners communication structures;
- creating a space for schools to share their stories of trials and victories to identify specific patterns and markers of success;
- a statewide collaboration of Title I schools for educators to share insights of effective strategies and practices;
- retaining expert DPI consultants;
- moving towards a monitoring system which identifies and spotlights effective practices; and
- increasing DPI consultants' awareness of district profiles to match appropriate interventions and expectations.

A recommended evidence based practice for the SEA to consider was the research of Daniel Pink.

4. How should families be engaged in school improvement efforts?

The participant remarks centered on practices lacking strategies to cultivate and sustain viable models of family engagement. The factors noted are highly regarded in the literature as essential elements to implement a family engagement initiative with fidelity:
- communication,
- welcoming environment,
- leveraging parents as experts of their children,
- maintaining a disposition that honors the cultures and values of families,
- knowledge of correlation between student achievement and parent engagement,
- home visits,
- parents engaged as active decision makers on school improvement teams,
- relationship building, and
- valuing parent input.

Communication was a factor mentioned frequently as a critical area of need to increase family participation and engagement in schools. As observed and experienced in current practice, parents are sometimes addressed in condescending tones, home contact is limited to reporting problems with a child, and inconsistent messaging and infrequent contact is used to share other important school information.

Respondents offered a number of suggestions which could improve the home-school relationship:
Awareness of how to serve families;
- districts should seek parents input on best ways to engage - stay away from one size fits all approach;
- schools/districts should have willingness to meet families where they are as a starting point;
- invite parents to attend district and school site professional development;
- building community relationships; invite families to participate as experts to understand conditions which impact student learning in underperforming schools;
- faith based entities expressed willing to help but are uncertain of where to connect;
- family engagement has been based on white, middle class models – redefine to address needs of all racial groups; and
- increase school access for parents to utilize computer labs and other resources.

A few comments were shared, '*parents are trying their best*,' and '*there is difference between parent volunteers and parents being engaged.*'

There were several evidenced-based practices/models regarded to have an encouraging impact on students and families: the Academic Parent Teacher Teams (APTT) model was mentioned as a strategy to build and strengthen relationships, improve communication, provide academic supports, and has been instrumental in helping parents to understand data and learning strategies that will help their children. Additional evidence-based practices/models included: Promoting Excellence for All (PEFA) report on Family & Community Engagement strategies, the Collective Action Framework to align resources, and community listening sessions.

5. **How should the community be engaged in school improvement efforts?**

Community partnerships were defined as businesses, universities, nonprofits, and faith based entities.

Participants emphasized placing a high importance on establishing strong community partnerships. Several elements were noted to be inconsistent or absent from the process to effectively engage community entities in school improvement efforts:

- fluid and transparent communication and action;
- a robust pathway for stakeholders to become knowledgeable of Priority school needs and assets ;
- build capacity to match community resources and supports in meaningful ways for direct impact on student learning;
- valuing community voice and reciprocal input;
- trust;
- an open door policy;
- varied approaches to leverage community partnerships – no two are the same; and
- collaboration should be meaningful –'*it's about us for us.*'

Two districts were cited for how community partnerships are advancing in successful ways:
- Juda School District's commitment to join and actively participate in community-based organizations; and
- Another district built partnership capacity by inviting business into the school to increase familiarity. One business was able to match its resources to provide an ATV to a student with a disability to minimize a mobility concern.

Respondents offered a number of suggestions which could improve the establishment and sustainability of community relationships. The solutions consisted of considering community partners as experts on culture of neighborhood, ethnicity, demographics--especially understanding student capital in underperforming schools; offer tours of schools to expand knowledge of who

they are and the needs; recognizing the difference between volunteering and engagement; investing time to revisit mission/vision statements and determine if community engagement is part of culture and belief; leveraging the voice of school board members as community members; hosting community listening sessions; engaging the African American community; DPI providing awareness of resources; increased visibility of businesses in schools to identify how to help and support; exploring how community partners can offer internships and college-career readiness skills; connecting with community senior citizens; opening schools for community meetings (Women's groups, Quilt Clubs, etc.); and offering the community access to WISEdash.

There were several evidenced-based practices, models and resources named to have positive returns on school and community relationships: Character Counts and the PEFA report. Chippewa Falls Schools was noted as doing well to foster positive community partnerships.