



PRIORITY IMPROVEMENT & TURNAROUND STATUS

ROLE OF LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS

What do these terms mean?

The terms “Priority Improvement status” and “Turnaround status” refer to accreditation ratings assigned to school districts by the Colorado State Board of Education (State Board). Pursuant to the Education Accountability Act of 2009, C.R.S. 22-11-101 *et seq.* (the Act), the State Board annually reviews school district performance and assigns each district to one of five accreditation categories.¹ Priority Improvement and Turnaround are the two lowest categories.

What are the consequences tied to Priority Improvement or Turnaround status?

Districts assigned to Priority Improvement or Turnaround status must conduct a needs assessment to identify and prioritize the district’s issues and needs that must be addressed to attain a higher accreditation category.

If the district includes a school that is operating under a Priority Improvement or Turnaround plan and the school enrolls students in kindergarten or any of the grades first through third, the district must conduct an early childhood learning needs assessment as part of its assessment. State law contains specific factors that must be considered in conducting an early childhood needs assessment, including, but not limited to, the extent to which there are quality early childhood programs existing within the district and whether the district and its schools collaborate with early childhood providers and programs regarding students’ transition from preschool to kindergarten. *See*, C.R.S. 22-11-305(4), 22-11-306(4).

After the needs assessment is completed, districts assigned to Priority Improvement must then develop and implement a district-wide plan addressing the identified areas of need and appropriate improvement strategies.

Districts assigned to Turnaround must develop plans that incorporate at least one of the following improvement strategies:

- employing a lead turnaround partner;
- reorganizing oversight and management structure of the district;
- pursuing innovation status for one or more district schools;
- shifting management of one or more district schools to an outside entity;
- converting one or more schools to a charter;
- closing one or more schools; or
- other actions of “comparable or greater significance or effect.”²

¹ The State Board must assign each district to one of the following accreditation categories: Accredited with Distinction; Accredited; Accredited with Improvement Plan; Accredited with Priority Improvement Plan; or Accredited with Turnaround Plan.

² C.R.S. 22-11-306(3)(d).

The district’s proposed Turnaround plan must then be submitted to the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) for its review and approval.

Both Priority Improvement and Turnaround districts are subject to what is referred to as the “five-year accountability clock,” which means they have five years to achieve a rating higher than Priority Improvement or Turnaround before the State Board removes their accreditation. For districts that receive a rating of either Priority Improvement or Turnaround for five consecutive years, CDE assigns a committee of practitioners (“State Review Panel”) to evaluate the district’s performance and capacity and recommend restructuring strategies for the district.³ The State Board then has the authority to direct the school district as to which restructuring strategy the district must implement before accreditation is reinstated.

Pursuant to the Act, the Commissioner of Education may also recommend that the State Board take early steps to remove a Turnaround district’s accreditation *before* the five-year clock expires, if the district is failing to make “substantial progress” under its Turnaround plan.

CDE may provide technical assistance and support to districts accredited with Priority Improvement or Turnaround, dependent on the district’s need and desire for assistance. Such assistance may include consultative services on best practices for improvement and implementation of intervention strategies, including research-based strategies addressing the quality and availability of early childhood education opportunities and student engagement and re-engagement.

What role does the local school board have in the accountability processes for a Priority Improvement or Turnaround district?

Accreditation contracts

Annual accreditation for each district occurs through the local school board’s accreditation contract with the State Board. Districts assigned to Priority Improvement or Turnaround must have their contracts annually reviewed and approved by July 1 of each year. CDE sends districts individualized accreditation contract templates, which must be signed by the local school board president and superintendent. Through these contracts, school boards provide assurances that they are in substantial good-faith compliance with budgeting, accounting and reporting requirements; school safety requirements; and other statutory and regulatory requirements.

Requests to reconsider

After CDE assigns accreditation ratings, a local school board that disagrees with CDE’s assigned accreditation rating may submit additional data for CDE to consider (i.e., “Request to Reconsider”). This option may be especially important for smaller school districts for which the

³ State law prescribes the available restructuring options for districts that have their accreditation removed: reorganization (possibly including consolidation); shifting management of the district or district school(s) to another public or private entity; converting schools to charters; seeking innovation status for one or more schools; or closing one or more schools. C.R.S. 22-11-209(2)(a).

state has limited data. Following CDE's protocols and using CDE's template, district staff may submit local performance data. The board president then signs the district's request to reconsider.

Approval of district plan

The local school board is responsible for approving the district's Priority Improvement or Turnaround plan. District accountability committees, comprised of parents, teachers, administrators and other community members, provide recommendations to local school boards regarding the content of these plans.

CDE has developed a pre-populated data report and plan template for districts to use in developing their plans. The state's recommended steps for plan development include:

- gathering and organizing the district's student performance data;
- reviewing that data;
- describing notable trends in student performance;
- prioritizing performance challenges;
- identifying root causes of low performance;
- setting performance targets; and
- identifying improvement strategies and action steps.

The plan template also includes elements of progress monitoring (i.e., implementation benchmarks and interim measures of progress) to assist the local school board in monitoring the district's progress under the plan.

Five-year clock actions

For districts nearing the end of the five-year clock, CDE coordinates with the local school board president and superintendent regarding timelines, visits and evaluations by the State Review Panel, as well as the process for developing recommendations for restructuring actions. CDE staff work with the local school board and district staff in selecting a pathway that is best suited to increase district performance and recommend that pathway to the State Board.

Simultaneously, the State Review Panel works with the local school board and district staff to critically evaluate the district's capacity and recommend to the State Board which pathway it believes is most likely to improve district performance. Importantly, local school boards may also submit locally developed proposals for restructuring actions that are most appropriate for the district.

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Revised November 2017