



School Board Leadership in Unified Improvement Planning

Effective board governance results from a clear understanding of the role of the Board of Education relative to the work of the district and school administrative teams. The most effective boards focus on connecting with stakeholders, implementing policy, establishing district ends and monitoring progress in achieving those outcomes. In addition, the board is responsible for the evaluation of its sole employee, the district superintendent. It has been shown that the more adept Boards of Education are in engaging in these activities the better the resultant academic achievement¹.



Colorado statute often directs school boards to weigh in on what are typically considered operational processes that may seem counter to best practice. These legislative mandates often fail to define the scope of required board activities beyond the assurance that a particular action has occurred. This resource attempts to address the role of the school board relative to one such educational requirement, the development and approval of the Unified Improvement Plan.

Purpose of the Unified Improvement Plan

In 2009, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) introduced the Unified Improvement Plan (UIP) to streamline school and district efforts to meet a variety of state and federal improvement planning requirements. The UIP reduces the total number of separate plans schools and districts are required to complete, with the intent of creating a single plan that has true meaning for local stakeholders. Adopting a common improvement planning approach has also enabled the state to shift from planning as an “event” to planning as a critical component of “continuous improvement,” as evidenced by the goals and purposes of the UIP in Table 1.

Table 1: Goals and Purposes of the UIP

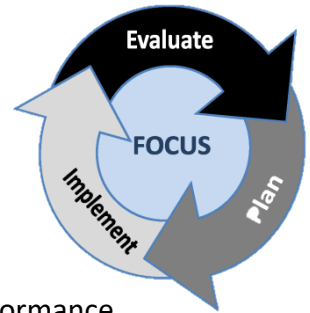
Alignment	Aligns improvement planning requirements for state and federal accountability into a single plan focused on improving results for students.
Best Practice	Promotes best practices in improvement planning, including using state and local data, engaging in a continuous improvement cycle, and prioritizing a limited number of strategies.
Documentation	Provides a common format for all schools and districts to document improvement efforts, and for those on the state accountability clock (i.e., Priority Improvement and Turnaround) to demonstrate a coherent plan for dramatic change over time that CDE and the State Review Panel can review.
Transparency	Offers multiple stakeholders (e.g., staff, families, community members) access to information about school/district improvement efforts through public posting of plans on SchoolView.
Supports	Triggers additional support through CDE, especially for schools/districts on the accountability clock.

¹ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED608840.pdf>

The *Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids* (S.B. 08-212) established the primary purpose of improvement planning as aligning efforts to *ensure all students exit the K-12 education system ready for postsecondary education, and/or to be successful in the workforce, earning a living wage immediately upon graduation*. Over time, several other state and federal programs and grants (e.g., EASI grants, Gifted Education, READ Act) have been woven into UIP processes, allowing schools and districts to simultaneously fulfill compliance requirements and align improvement efforts.

UIP Theory of Action

The “Focus-Evaluate-Plan-Implement” diagram (see figure to the right) illustrates the theory of action behind Colorado’s approach to improvement planning – that by engaging in a *continuous improvement cycle* to manage performance, districts and schools will become more effective and student outcomes will improve. This cycle describes four activities of continuous improvement:



- *Focus* attention on the right things (performance indicators),
- *Evaluate* performance by gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data about performance,
- *Plan* improvement strategies based on performance data and Root Cause analysis, and
- *Implement* planned improvement strategies.

Then, repeat the cycle again throughout the school year to:

- *Evaluate* (or monitor) performance and implementation of major improvement strategies at least quarterly.
- *Adjust* planned improvement strategies, and
- *Implement* revised strategies, as needed.

The Role of School Boards Related to the Review & Adoption of UIPs

The review and adoption of UIPs by specific stakeholder groups is required by statute and State Board of Education rules. Overall, districts are expected to review all school plans before submitting them to CDE for review and/or public posting. Per statute, the local Board of Education must adopt the UIP of the district and schools on Priority Improvement and Turnaround Plans. The principal and superintendent must adopt the plans for schools identified as receiving a Performance or Improvement plan.

Given the requirement that local Boards of Education formally adopt some UIPs it is important to recognize the appropriate role of the board regarding this practice to ensure its actions are aligned to best practice. A good rule of thumb for all statutorily required activities is to approach them from the governance perspective. Specifically, while UIPs are concerned with district and school level activities, the focus of the board review should be the UIPs relationship to effective governance practices. Similarly, the implementation of the UIP should be driven by the superintendent as its focus is operational decisions. In contrast, monitoring the relationship between the improvement plan and district policy should be the focus of the Board of Education. Similarly, the board should be looking for alignment between district policies, performance challenges, action plans and targets while also ensuring compliance with state and federal statute.

In line with this approach, we might expect the questions that are asked by Board of Education members will help them to better understand and confidently vote to approve an improvement plan. The sample questions presented in table two would be aligned with this approach and identify the area of relationship to board practice.

Table 2: Potential Questions to be asked by Board Members Related to UIP Review & Approval	
For District & School Plan Reviews:	
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the plan narrative include Board of Education identified goals, district strategic information, or other related information that would help inform key stakeholders of district work. How does the does leadership include stakeholders, including the District/School Accountability Committee (where applicable) in plan development?
Due Diligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the plan utilize best practices and exhibit due diligence regarding budgeting, implementation, measurement, etc. Does the presented plan meet the requirements of federal/state statute and district policies?
Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How will/when plan progress be communicated to the board during the academic year? Does the plan incorporate any outcomes defined in policy, strategic plans, or other areas that require board monitoring? If not, would it make sense to incorporate such outcomes?
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For the included action plan, should consideration be given to the adoption or revision of any policies that will help support implementation?
For Priority Improvement/Turnaround Plan Reviews:	
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the action plan include a family community partnership plan as required by statute for priority improvement & turnaround schools? What role (if any) does the board play in this regard?
Due Diligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are the presented improvement strategies likely to lead to an increased improvement rating? What evidence does administration present that this is the case (i.e., if not presented in the plan).
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does any identified future action require preliminary board approval, policy change or review? Should any of the possible turnaround options be considered for early action by the board?

The most important questions by the Board of Education during plan adoption should be those related to effective governance, best practice, and district defined outcomes. Plan implementation should rest solely with the superintendent based on their educational and operational expertise. Should the local board assume operational responsibilities, then the superintendent can no longer be fairly evaluated for the implementation of the improvement plan. The board’s greatest contribution to plan adoption remains maintaining a clear focus on governance responsibilities to ensure positive outcomes for every student.

Background to CDE Board of Education Supports: CDE support, grounded in C.R.S. 22-11-208, is non-directive and non-partisan, focusing on best practices and resources. CDE does not prescribe governance approaches; these decisions remain with local boards. Boards should consult legal counsel for specific guidance. Related resources are available at: <https://ed.cde.state.co.us/cdeedserv/board-of-education-supports>