Unified Improvement Planning
Guidance for Small Systems

Introduction

This document was created for small school systems to provide guidelines and recommendations for creating and updating Unified Improvement Plans (UIPs). Staff members in small systems often have questions about how to effectively plan with limited access to state required data metrics or, in some cases, how to write a plan when numbers are too small to be reported publicly. This document provides background information on the flexibility offered to small districts and offers considerations and recommendations for commonly asked questions regarding improvement planning in small systems. Small systems are defined as districts with less than 1,000 students. Many of the strategies proposed in the second half of this resource may be used in small schools within larger districts.

In addition, many of the resources and guidance documents created for all schools are still valid for small systems including the UIP quality criteria. These are available at http://www.cde.state.co.us/uip.

Flexibility for Small Districts

Every other Year Submission

HB 14-1204 enabled small, rural schools and districts (less than 1,000 students) that maintain a plan type of Performance the ability to complete a UIP biennially (every other year). Schools and districts with a plan type of Improvement, Priority Improvement, or Turnaround must still submit a UIP annually. If a district would like to use a combined plan approach, then the lowest plan type of the involved schools will determine the timeline. For example, a district with a Performance plan that has one school with an Improvement plan type will need to submit annually.

SCHOOL PLAN TYPES

PERFORMANCE PLAN

IMPROVEMENT PLAN

PRIORITY IMPROVEMENT PLAN

TURNAROUND PLAN

INSUFFICIENT STATE DATA: SMALL TESTED POPULATION*

INSUFFICIENT STATE DATA: LOW PARTICIPATION**

School Plan Type	Annual Submission	Submission Dates
Performance Plan	Biennial (every other year)	April 15 (public posting) every other year
Improvement	Annual	April 15 (public posting) every year
Priority Improvement or Turnaround	Biannual (twice per year)	January 15 (CDE review) and April 15 (public posting) every year

Combined District plans

Districts with less than 1,000 students are eligible for flexibility to write a combined improvement plan for the district and its schools. These districts do not need to get prior approval from CDE to do this, but should notify CDE to gain access to the template in the online system.

Districts with between 1,000 to 1,200 students may make a request to CDE to create a combined plan. Districts must submit a memo that includes basic district information (including the most current estimate of student numbers), as well as a rationale for the flexibility. Contact Lisa Steffen (steffen_l@cde.state.co.us) or your field services representative for details. This request must be made annually.

Combined District Plans with schools on the accountability clock

A district with schools on the accountability clock (i.e., turnaround, priority improvement) can create a combined UIP. However, there are additional requirements that the district should consider. Sometimes, it may be more effective to create a separate UIP for the school on the accountability clock and a combined UIP for the district and the remaining schools. The district will need to decide what solution best fits the local context. Additional requirements for turnaround and priority improvement plans include:

- The UIP must reflect the magnitude of the issues the school on the accountability clock is facing and provide a plan for dramatic change.
- The district should be providing additional supports to that particular school – beyond what other schools are receiving – and documenting this in the UIP.
- The UIP is the primary written documentation that CDE and the State Review Panel consider in determining whether the district and/or school has a strong enough plan to exit the accountability clock.

Combined plan guidelines and recommendations

All district and school level requirements must still be met in a combined district plan, including any special expectations associated with a grant, program or plan type. This means that the combined UIP must reflect analysis of data for all of the indicators on which the district, as well as each school, did not meet state expectations (i.e., approaching, does not meet) on the District Performance Framework (DPF) and School Performance Frameworks (SPFs).

Considerations/Recommendations:

- Provide an analysis of data for each school (and/or grade level, if possible). At a minimum, provide an analysis for each indicator (achievement, growth, growth gaps, PWR) where the district and/or the school(s) did not meet state expectations (i.e., approaching, does not meet).

- Identify trends, priority performance challenges (PPCs), root causes and major improvement strategies for each of these indicators for both the district and the school(s). See examples below:

    - **Priority Performance Challenge:** As a district, we continue to not meet state performance expectations in math. None of the three school levels met state expectations in math: elementary had a mean scale score of 717 on CMAS in 2017, middle had a mean scale score of 714.3, and high had a mean scale score of 421 on the PSAT, all falling in the "Does Not Meet" category.

    - **Root Cause:** Current curriculum and scope/sequence across all schools are tied to textbooks and other resources as opposed to state standards. This causes gaps in student performance as students' progress through our school system, especially as they transition from one school to another (e.g., elementary to middle school).

Combined School Accountability Committees (SAC) and District Accountability Committee (DAC)

School districts with less than 1,000 students may have their DAC serve as their SAC.

Frequently Asked Questions: Resource Considerations

In our district, staff have multiple responsibilities (e.g. our superintendent is also the principal) and limited time to get together to do the improvement planning work. How important is it to create the UIP with multiple stakeholders?

Involving multiple stakeholders in the planning process is a required component consistent with state and federal law (Title I, ESSA). SB 09-163 (State Accountability) requires that a District (DAC) and School Accountability Committee (SAC) include a representative body of parents, staff and community members and have a role to play in the development of the plan. Furthermore, the rules for SB 09-191 (Educator Effectiveness) hold principals accountable for creating opportunities for staff and other stakeholders to have meaningful input into the planning process. Smaller districts have unique opportunities to use the improvement planning process to build widespread ownership of the school/district vision for improving results for their students.

Considerations/recommendations:

- Leaders develop draft versions of each plan component (e.g., the summary of trends in the data narrative), then, use 30-60 minutes of an already scheduled meeting (e.g., principal meetings, staff meetings, team meetings, SAC meetings) to give staff and community stakeholders an opportunity to conduct data analysis, review plans, provide input and ultimately validate the plan component.

- To ensure ownership, many schools have found the need to directly involve all staff in at least (1) confirming the priority performance challenges, (2) conducting a root cause analysis, and (3) identifying major improvement strategies. These three elements are crucial to building widespread understanding for the chosen priority areas and resulting actions. While still important, the remaining elements (e.g., documenting trends, setting targets, detailing action steps) may be more efficiently addressed by a smaller, dedicated group.

- Including a standing agenda item (e.g., 30 minutes every week over a month) on regularly scheduled staff meetings to review, provide input and validate sections of the UIP, may be enough time to involve the full staff in updating the UIP. Follow-up sessions (30 minutes) could be added to existing meetings every other month to allow staff and community stakeholders to check-in on the progress made toward implementing the improvement plan (e.g., interim measures, implementation benchmarks).

- Combine external stakeholder groups to meet multiple expectations, such as SACs, DACs and Title I parent advisory groups.

- Create a one-page summary of the plan that uses language that is more accessible to non-educators. Suggested sections may include *How are our students performing?* (description of current performance), *What is our priority for this year?* (priority performance challenges), *Why are we getting these results?* (root causes), and *What are we going to do about it?* (major improvement strategies). The UIP's executive summary may be a helpful resource, as well.

- Consider working with external vendors or partners (e.g., BOCES staff) to extend the capacity of the school/district staff.

Frequently Asked Questions: Data Analysis with small student numbers (N-counts)

We are concerned about sharing personally identifiable information in a public document. What can we do?

While CDE has focused on training schools and districts to refer to numbers and percentages in the UIP data narrative to strengthen the data story, protecting student identity must take priority. If the numbers being reported are too small, then the public may be able to determine information about individual students (e.g., of the five students with an IEP, one of them is Native American). The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits the improper disclosure of personally identifiable information derived from education records.

In Colorado, numbers of students can be shared when the n-size is 16 students or more for achievement results or 20 students or more for results from the Colorado Growth Model. Schools and districts should use this same set of rules for reporting student performance data in the UIP and may need to report overall trends by referencing percentages of students or describing the trend without data. CDE tries to monitor UIPs for these kinds of reporting concerns, and will contact districts if it looks like sensitive data is shared. Ultimately, however, the responsibility lies with the district.

Do we still have to include a review of current performance in our UIP?

Yes, all UIPs must include the data narrative and its essential components (i.e., description of the school/district, trend statements, priority performance challenges, root causes and validation of root causes). It is especially important for small districts to provide some context in the narrative about the size of the student population and if there are any challenges in reporting performance data in a way that protects students' identities. Note that there is a difference between conducting an analysis of data and the public reporting of that data. While the analysis should be conducted, it may be that the UIP is simply used to document the context (e.g., student enrollment) and then explain the process used to analyze the data without actually reporting it.

How do we analyze trends and patterns in our data when our student numbers are small?

The first recommendation is to aggregate or combine data among grades, school levels or years to create larger n-sizes that provide meaningful patterns and can be publicly reported. In some cases, schools/districts may need to conduct an analysis of individual student needs and build a plan from there without reporting numbers. Considerations for both approaches are detailed below.

Considerations/Recommendations:

- Use the DPF/SPF performance indicator areas (i.e., achievement, growth, growth gaps, PWR) to focus the analysis of local data. If there are gaps because of small n-counts, acknowledge that in the UIP and include analysis of local data to supplement.

    > For example: How are students achieving on the quarterly administrations of NWEA? How quickly are students moving from intensive to strategic to benchmark on DIBELS?

Analyzing trends in patterns with small numbers of student continued

- If performance is similar, data may be reported across more than one school year, grade level, clustered levels (e.g., primary, intermediate), school levels (elementary, middle, high), and/or by cohorts depending on the size of the group.

    > Consider this example: *"For the past three years, the 21 students needing to catch-up in grades 4-5 have had lower student growth percentiles than other students within the school, and below the typical level of 35."*

- In many ways, individual student level metrics (e.g., student growth percentiles) provide more accurate and actionable data about school and district performance than summary metrics. If aggregation does not adequately provide large enough numbers or meaningful results, the school/district may describe the analysis and findings in the UIP without sharing the numbers and percentages to avoid identifying students.

    > Consider this example*: "We analyzed math data for individual students across our K-12 school and noted that in the majority of cases, students who were proficient in math in 3rd grade were no longer proficient by the time they got to 8th grade."*

- Consider listing the trends, the associated priority performance challenge, and the identified root cause together so that the alignment among the three is evident, and so that an improvement strategy can be identified that directly addresses the root cause. This can also be viewed in the UIP Narrative tab.

    Alignment Example:

    > **Trend:** *The mean scale score in grades 3-5 was consistent and significantly below minimum state expectations on CMAS math (739.5) over the last three years (725, 727, 723).*

    > **Priority Performance Challenge:** *Achievement of students in grades 3-5 on math CMAS over the last three years has been flat and slightly below state expectations.*

    > **Root Cause:** *Teachers do not consistently use data collected within the classroom formatively to adjust instruction for students who perform below grade level expectations in math.*

Additional Resources

There are additional resources available for Small Systems in working through a Unified Improvement Plan.

Click on the links below for more information:

- Unified Improvement Planning Annotated Plans. The plans are past UIPs from districts/schools that have been annotated by UIP staff to provide guidance for planning teams.

- Unified Improvement Planning Team Contact Information. Members of the Improvement Planning Unit are available to answer specific planning questions as they relate to small systems and the UIP process.

- Field Services Managers Contact Information. This includes information about the rural council and who to contact in Field Services for further assistance.