Exploration Supports: Overview

Introduction

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The Exploration route of the Empowering Action for School Improvement (EASI) application is focused on identifying needs and exploring options through external diagnostic reviews, stakeholder engagement, and effective improvement planning. The components of the Exploration route assist LEAs in identifying areas of strength and need (External Diagnostic Review), engaging a variety of stakeholders in improvement conversations (Stakeholder Engagement), and building a plan centered around those prioritized needs (Improvement Planning). The EASI application also offers the opportunity for LEAs/schools to focus their Exploration work on a particular population of students, content areas, or school models (i.e., English Learners or AECs/Online schools).

The Exploration route differs from the other routes within EASI. Reviewers of applications for the EASI Exploration Route assess readiness and fit for this set of supports, rather than awarding points through a competitive grants process. If the collective amount of approvable requests exceeds availability of funds, then a prioritization process is used. The duration of the awards is shorter than most other EASI routes and spans 18 months (e.g. January of the award year through June of the following year). Early Implementation funds may be available for initial implementation of activities and strategies arising from the review and planning process.

The diagram below outlines the four components of the Exploration route. LEAs must select an approved external provider or CDE for the external diagnostic review. LEAs *may* decide to contract with an external provider for remaining Exploration activities. *Because the different elements of the Exploration route work so closely together, LEAs contracting with external partners for stakeholder engagement and/or improvement planning work are encouraged to select the same provider used for the external diagnostic review, or to consider how the different providers will align their work.* These four components are explained in greater detail on the following pages.



External Diagnostic Reviews Options

Based upon years of best practice, the department has identified external diagnostic reviews as an important component in helping a school prepare for rapid, effective school improvement work. The types of reviews have expanded within the last few years to include the traditional holistic diagnostic review that looks at the comprehensive school system, as well as specialized reviews for schools that want a more detailed look at programming for English Language (EL) students or Alternative Education Campuses and Online Schools. The Exploration Route also offers district-level services for Specialized Reviews or Strategic Planning.

Holistic Diagnostic Review. The Holistic Diagnostic Review is ideal for schools that would benefit from an external eye taking a comprehensive look at the school system to identify areas for improvement. LEAs are awarded funds on behalf of their schools to work with a CDE-approved and -trained partner to conduct a school-based diagnostic review. External partners will provide the following services:

1. Conduct a comprehensive, evidence-based review and corresponding report organized by the Colorado Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement detailing how the school's infrastructure supports culture and climate shift, instructional transformation, talent management and leadership for rapid improvement.
2. Facilitate a staff debrief, including key findings from the review, high-level observations, opportunities for improvement, and a timeline for next steps for turnaround work.

Currently, the holistic review is only available at the school level. CDE is working to update district level standards for district level reviews in the future. Note that the external partner must be selected prior to submission and a scope of work must be uploaded to the application. In January, CDE will provide training to selected partners to ensure they understand the intent of the grant and reporting expectations.

For a list of preferred service providers approved by the CDE, visit CDE's Advisory List of Providers.

Alternative Education Campus (AEC) and Online Review. Participating AECs and online schools work with CDE staff to conduct a school-based diagnostic review, discuss recommendations and major areas to build on, engage stakeholders in planning efforts, and visit other participating schools. The Diagnostic reviews result in a formal report, recommended improvement actions, and other partner sites for visits. The facilitated improvement planning process is designed to assist the school in designing implementation plans and refining the Unified Improvement Plan (UIP) to incorporate priorities from the review. See the Diagnostic Review and Planning for AECs and Online Schools fact sheet for more information.

Language Learner Partnership *(formerly English Language Development Program Review).* The Language Learner Partnership offers targeted services for districts and schools seeking to improve their English language development instruction. It includes a CDE-led diagnostic review focused on identifying strengths and areas for improvement in systems, supports, and opportunities for English Learners (ELs)/Multilingual Learners (MLs). The review is followed by collaborative action planning and supports and by quarterly progress monitoring and short-cycle planning support. See the Language Learner Partnership fact sheet **(**PDF) for more information.

District Strategic Planning. This opportunity provides funding to districts who are seeking to strengthen district systems that are necessary to support sustainable school improvement in one or more identified schools. These district systems may include Talent Management, Instructional Infrastructure, Turnaround Leadership development, and/or Culture and Climate. Grantees will partner with an approved external

provider to conduct a systems review, stakeholder engagement activities, and prioritization and improvement planning. See the District Strategic Planning fact sheet (PDF) for more information.

Stakeholder Engagement

State and federal expectations highlight the importance of engaging stakeholders (e.g., building leadership, teachers, families, community members, local board members) throughout the school improvement process. Funding for this opportunity may be used for (1) contracting with a CDE-approved provider that has knowledge of working with the selected stakeholders and background knowledge of the content area, and (2) costs associated with the stakeholder engagement proposed activities (e.g., substitutes, stipends, copying, translation services, childcare, food for community events, travel). The Family-School-Community Partnerships (FSCP) office at CDE is available to provide technical support related to evidence-based stakeholder engagement strategies. It is recommended that a team of diverse stakeholders implement high-impact strategies that are aligned to the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships and Colorado's FSCP Framework. Additional resources are available through CDE's Office of Family, School and Community Partnerships page.

Improvement Planning

All schools and districts are expected to have a coherent plan for improvement (e.g., the Unified Improvement Plan or UIP) that meaningfully involves stakeholders, builds upon a thorough data analysis and needs assessment, and proposes evidence-based strategies that address the school's most pressing issues. The improvement planning component is intended to build upon the external diagnostic review and stakeholder engagement work. Schools may choose to contract with an external provider for the improvement planning activities, or they may choose to complete these on their own. CDE representatives are also available to provide support to schools, including

- Assistance with data gathering and organizing (pre-planning for data analysis)
- Review of student performance data
- Identification of trends and performance priorities
- Prioritization of performance priorities
- Root cause analysis (including integration of the external diagnostic review)
- Target setting
- Action planning
- Progress monitoring

Typically, three to five days of onsite work is needed, as well as time to share feedback on the written plan. The facilitator will not write the plan for the school but will provide guidance and feedback, ultimately assisting the school in completing it and advising on how to keep it updated as the school progresses in its improvement efforts.

Early Implementation

For schools that complete the Exploration route and develop a strong improvement plan, funds may be available for the early stages of implementation for this plan. Before accessing these funds, if they are awarded, schools must:

1. Submit a copy of the final Diagnostic Review report to CDE using this submission form; ***and***

2. submit a revised budget detailing the proposed use of implementation funds for evidence-based strategies incorporated into the updated UIP.

Eligibility & Prioritization

Eligibility. Schools that meet the following criteria are eligible to apply:

- Schools identified for improvement under ESSA as Comprehensive Support (CS), Targeted Support (TS), or Additional Targeted Support (ATS); and/or
- Schools with a state identification School Performance Framework plan type of Priority Improvement, Turnaround, or On Watch

District eligibility is based on the eligibility of schools in the district. A district must have at least one school meeting the criteria above to apply.

Prioritization. If not all EASI proposals can be funded, proposals that meet grant expectations will be funded in the order of the EASI school-level prioritization list. Schools with the highest number of prioritization points will be funded first. District level support requests will use the average prioritization of all EASI eligible schools. District level supports that serve specific EASI-eligible schools will use the average prioritization of the included EASI eligible schools. Details on how prioritization points are calculated and the points for each EASI eligible school are available on the EASI Resources and Technical Assistance webpage.

Limitations. Alternative Education Campus (AEC) and Online Review and Language Learner Partnership are both direct CDE supports. The number of new schools awarded each grant cycle may be limited due to CDE staff capacity to conduct the reviews. If not all EASI proposals for CDE provided review requests can be supported, prioritization points and service capacity in a single district or region may be considered.

Program Considerations & Fit

Program Considerations. The Exploration route has been designed to be a good entry point for EASI support, providing a diagnostic review or needs assessment to inform and guide improvement plans and possible subsequent EASI grant applications.

Program Fit. The Exploration route is a good fit for systems that are newly or recently identified for improvement (e.g., in years 1-2 on the state accountability clock or recently ESSA-identified) and/or that are new to EASI. Systems that have not had a diagnostic review in the last two years or that have experienced significant recent context changes (e.g., large-scale leadership turnover, rapid demographic shifts, or other significant community events) will benefit from the external perspective supplied by CDE-approved providers. Sites that anticipate upcoming leadership transitions are strongly encouraged to include new leadership in the diagnostic review and planning activities, if possible, or to apply for the Exploration route after new leadership is in place and can participate in the process.

Sequence of Program Support

The components of the Exploration route work together to support the creation of a thorough improvement plan. A Diagnostic Review (either holistic or specialized) informs a rigorous process of Improvement Planning. The Improvement Plan also draws on initial Stakeholder Engagement work and incorporates future stakeholder input as a part of the planning process. The Exploration Route has been designed as a cohesive bundle (Diagnostic Review, Stakeholder Engagement ***and*** Improvement Planning) to ensure a thorough exploration process. The timing of the diagnostic review, stakeholder engagement, and improvement planning activities is determined in partnership between grantees and providers. The release of Early

Implementation funds, if awarded, is contingent upon the completion of the other phases of work, the submission of the diagnostic review report, and the approval of updated budget items in alignment with the results of the diagnostic review.

Available Funds & Duration

Available Funds. Award amounts depend on the services that the LEA selects for eligible schools. Grantees will receive funds according to the schedule of awards and recommended allocations in the tables below. Note that an LEA/school may use the information obtained through the review and improvement planning process to develop an application for additional funds in the District Design and Led route in a subsequent EASI application.

Review Type	Total Award Amount	Review	Stakeholder Engagement	Improvement Planning	Early Implementation
School-level award with Holistic Review and Improvement Planning *(External Provider)*	$80,000	$25,000	$10,000	$25,000	$20,000
School-level award with Specialized Review and Improvement Planning *(CDE provides services)*	$42,000	$10,000	$10,000	$2,000	$20,000
District Strategic Planning *(External Provider)*	$80,000 - $150,000	*Award amounts will vary based on district size, identification status, and number of schools identified for improvement. Contact Sam Schneider, (Schneider_S@cde.state.co.us) with any questions.*			
District-level award with Specialized Review *(CDE provides services)*	$55,000	$10,000	$10,000	$15,000	$20,000

Duration. Exploration program support is designed to support schools or LEAs for a period of 18 months (spring 2026-27 through 2027-28).

Allowable Use of Funds

Funds are intended to support the four components of Exploration Supports. Expenses related to stakeholder engagement, improvement planning, and early implementation must align to the recommendations from the diagnostic review. Allowable use of funds includes costs associated with:

- Hiring an approved external provider to facilitate reviews and/or planning activities outlined above.
- Stakeholder engagement (stipends, translation, childcare, etc.)
- Development of an improvement plan (or strategic plan, at the district level)
- Early implementation of the plan activities (e.g., leadership or teacher development, stipends to support job-embedded training or teacher collaboration, etc.).
- Other expenses to support process (e.g., stipends, substitutes, etc.)

Note: Full-time equivalency (FTE) positions are generally not an allowable use of Exploration funds. Exceptions may be made for term-limited positions whose primary function is establishing new and sustainable systems at the school to support activities aligned with recommendations from the External Diagnostic Review. Exploration funds may not be used to support ongoing positions (e.g., paraprofessionals).

Budget Recommendations. For the application submission, the budget should include each of the components of Exploration Supports: diagnostic review, stakeholder engagement, improvement planning, and early implementation. General placeholders in the budget are acceptable for stakeholder engagement, improvement planning, and early implementation as specific activities will be determined by the outcome of the diagnostic review.

For example, the draft budget for Holistic Review may include the following budget lines:

- Year 1 (2026-27)- Cost of approved external provider (insert provider name) to complete diagnostic review for $25,000
- Year 1 (2026-27)- Placeholder for stakeholder engagement activities as part of diagnostic review and improvement planning for $10,000.
- Year 1 (2026-27)- Placeholder for improvement planning activities as determined by the outcome of the diagnostic review for $25,000.
- Year 1 (2026-27)- Placeholder for early implementation activities as determined by the outcome of the diagnostic review for $20,000.

Applicants should request the maximum award amount in the Year 1 (2026-27) budget. If awarded Exploration Supports, funds are issued in Year 1 (2026-27) and may carry over into Year 2 (2027-28).

Any expenses related to an external provider must be supported by a scope of work (draft version acceptable) that clearly outlines timelines, deliverables, and a breakdown of associated costs for the eligible school. The scope of work (SOW) must be specific to the applicant; generic or boilerplate SOWs describing typical offerings by the provider are not sufficient. If the external provider is facilitating multiple components of the support including the diagnostic review, stakeholder engagement, and improvement planning, schools are strongly encouraged to limit provider costs to no more than $60,000 and to reserve at least $20,0000 for early implementation activities. Early implementation activities should not be included in the provider's scope of work. The budget lines and amounts must be separated by each of the components of Exploration Supports (diagnostic review, stakeholder engagement, improvement planning, and early implementation).

Note: If entering indirect costs, the total request amount may not exceed the maximum allowable award.

Indirect Costs. Applicants may elect to include indirect costs in the application budget. Indirect cost rates based on the district's restricted indirect cost rate. The total request amount (indirect costs plus other budget lines) may not exceed the maximum allowable amount. There are some exclusions for distorting items that apply, such as the limitation of indirects on the first $50,000 on provider contracted services. Grantees should note that indirect costs are only allowed on federal awards. *If the grantee receives a state award, indirect costs must be removed during the post-award revision process.* More information regarding indirect cost rates is available on CDE's School Finance webpage at https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdefinance/icrc.

Fund Considerations.

- Funds from this opportunity must be used to **supplement and not supplant** any federal, state, and local funds currently being used to provide activities.
- Post-award revisions must be submitted and approved in the online system prior to incurring expenses. Any expenses incurred prior to approval are the responsibility of the LEA. All post-award revisions must be approved by 06/30.
- For federal awards, funds must be obligated by 09/30 and requested by 11/1 of each respective fiscal year.
- For state awards, funds must be obligated by 06/30 of the final year of the grant cycle.

- A school or district may carry funds forward in alignment with funding source restrictions and with CDE approval. At the end of the grant performance period, any non-requested federal funds are reverted, and any unspent state funds must be returned to the state.
- CDE may terminate a grant award upon thirty days' notice if it is deemed by CDE that the applicant is not fulfilling the requirements of the funded program as specified in the approved project application, or if the program is generating less than satisfactory results.
- Multi-year or future award year amounts are contingent on allocations of state and federal funds to CDE in each respective fiscal year.

For additional information, please consult the EASI Budget Guidance and EASI Fiscal Guidance documents, linked on the EASI Resources and Technical Assistance page.

Important Program Dates

Program Dates	Activity
September-December	Meet with the appropriate school and district teams to discuss interest in applying for EASI support and develop an application. If needed, meet with supporting CDE staff.
December	Application due
January	Award notifications
February-April	Complete external Diagnostic Review *Note: Timeline is suggested; please contact the program lead if the school needs to adjust to an early fall diagnostic review.*
February- August	Conduct Stakeholder Engagement work (in both review and planning phases)
May-August	Conduct Improvement Planning and goal setting
September- June (following year)	Upon completion of external diagnostic review, stakeholder engagement, and improvement planning work, the school may begin some early implementation of strategies and activities identified during the diagnostic and improvement planning work. Consider using information gathered during the Diagnostic Review and Planning to apply for additional EASI funds in the next grant cycle. Note that there is no guarantee of additional funds and eligibility may vary by grant cycle.

Evaluation and Reporting

Each grantee of the program must, at a minimum, agree to the following evaluation, reporting, and/or progress monitoring components:

- Incorporate the findings of the review in the school's UIP during the school year to reflect the exploration work (i.e., external review, parent and community engagement, improvement planning).
- *[Schools identified for support and improvement through ESSA (i.e., CS, TS, and ATS schools)]* Use the Exploration results to inform their improvement plan that may be included in their UIP.

- Any school or district contact working with an approved external provider funded through the EASI grant may be asked to provide feedback about their experience with that provider to inform the CDE School & District Support RFI process in the following year.
- Submit Final Expenditure Report (FER) in GAINS each fiscal year by 09/30.

Note: All data collected will protect personally identifiable information (PII) protected and is only reported on an aggregate level for purposes of evaluating the EASI support and/or supporting future program improvements.

Program Assurances

See individual information sheets (linked on the EASI Application Routes & Services page) for specific program assurances. Otherwise, there are no additional assurances for this route beyond the general assurances in the EASI application.

LEA Commitments:

- Ensure the LEA and staff will not discriminate against anyone regarding race, gender, national origin, color, disability, or age.
- LEA will be required to submit Final Expenditure Reports (FER) the end of each fiscal year.
- LEA understands that unobligated funds state funds will be returned to CDE and unobligated federal funds will be rescinded at the conclusion of the grant cycle.
- Funds will be used to supplement and not supplant any federal, state, and local moneys currently being used to provide services and grant dollars will be administered by the appropriate fiscal agent.
- Funded projects will maintain appropriate fiscal and program records and fiscal audits of this program will be conducted by the grantees as a part of their regular audits.
- If any findings of misuse of these funds are discovered, project funds will be returned to CDE.

Related Resources & Information

Colorado Department of Education's EASI Website

www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/easiapplication