Building the Capacity of State Education Agencies to Support Schools

States, faced in the past few years with stringent accountability measures regarding student, school, and district performance, have recently been confronting some hard facts:

★ There are schools—sometimes a great many of them—in all states where students persistently achieve at significantly lower levels than in comparison schools;

★ States have been unable to appreciably narrow achievement gaps among students and schools, particularly in schools serving highly challenged, high-poverty students; and

★ After nearly two decades of standards-based reform, states have yet to broadly and successfully prepare most high school graduates with college- or work-ready skills.

The sheer scale of the ongoing challenges—which now include significant belt-tightening in the face of the down economy—and what is needed to overcome them have raised a host of issues about how states and, in particular, state education agencies (SEAs) can create the capacity needed to dramatically improve public education. States are being asked not only to take on the heavy lifting in terms of developing and administering state assessment and reporting systems, but No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) implementation has also had a pronounced impact on the nature and degree to which states must intervene in low-performing schools and districts by requiring each state to “establish a statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement for local education agencies and schools.”

But seven years after the law was signed, states continue to have difficulty defining a coherent response to the growing number of schools that are chronically failing to meet performance requirements. In part this is due to agencies that have historically been undermanned and that have received little additional federal assistance to take on the school turnaround role. As Massachusetts Secretary of Education and former state board of education chair Paul Reville has written, “little effort is made through NCLB to build state capacity. This leaves understaffed, underfunded education agencies, with a history and culture of compliance monitoring, to suddenly reinvent themselves into leadership agencies.”

In addition, under current accountability measures, the problem continues to grow. It is estimated that by the end of the decade, about five percent of the nation’s public schools, many of them in high-poverty areas, will have moved into the most extreme NCLB designation—one that calls for school restructuring. In some states, the figure approaches fifty percent of public schools. Moreover, despite studies that document what it takes to turn around high-poverty, challenged schools, most states continue to struggle to craft an adequate response that can transform these schools and districts into learning organizations.

While a great deal is known about the elements that are associated with effective schools and districts, much less is...
understood about how the state education agency can differentiate and scale successful improvement strategies in underperforming schools and districts. This brief will examine some of the factors influencing the role of the state in catalyzing school improvements, look at recent research on state resources, and suggest ways states can build their capacity to deploy an effective system of support and intervention for schools identified as in need of improvement.

Survey on State Agency Capacity

In 2008, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) surveyed officials from all fifty states to learn about state education agency capacity and how SEAs support low-performing schools and districts. The researchers computed an overall index for each state based on how officials perceived their state’s capacity to support low-performing schools. Officials were asked about the following SEA components:

- Infrastructure, which includes human and fiscal resources as well as technology;
- Professional resources, which refers to substantive and technical expertise along with the strategic leadership and communication needed to leverage expertise as appropriate; and
- Political resources, which encompasses support from legislators, governors, state boards of education, and unions.2

Nearly all indices for these components were negative, indicating that state education officials perceived more weaknesses than strengths, particularly with respect to “hard resources” such as the number of state agency staff available to provide support to schools and districts, state and federal funding, and the technology infrastructure. Only about one-third of state respondents thought that their state agencies had adequate capacity to effectively support low-performing schools. On the positive side, states reported that their in-house expertise was adequate in terms of a number of issues, particularly special education.

The results also showed that states increasingly perceived their internal capacity to be challenged as the number of schools identified for improvement grew. For example, among states with acute capacity limitations, 19 percent of schools were identified for improvement under NCLB, in comparison to all other states where about 15 percent of schools had been identified for improvement. At the same time, the authors noted that the differences in perceived capacity were not related to state size, enrollment, or demographics of the student population. Furthermore, they remarked that states’ rating of capacity was not solely a function of the number of schools designated as needing improvement in as much as states sharing similar capacity ratings varied widely in the number of schools identified for improvement. For example, among the “acute limitations” states, some had well over 40 percent of schools identified for improvement, whereas others had less than 10 percent of schools identified for improvement. These findings raise a number of questions about how states define “capacity,” how it is related to the model deployed for school improvement, the broader framework of school accountability, how state officials leverage the capacity they have, and the degree to which improvement strategies produce desired results.

State Approaches to Intervening in Schools Identified for Improvement

As part of the AIR survey, the researchers also solicited responses on state approaches to supporting schools in need of improvement. They noted that while many states have adopted a framework for providing support and intervening in schools, few have articulated a theory of action that outlines the critical assumptions about how schools work and what is needed for improvement to take place. Nevertheless, all states have had to make many decisions about the nature and extent of services, what gets provided and by whom, how support is differentiated, and the sequence of steps entailed in school improvement.

In general, states tended to adopt standard approaches to intervening in failing schools by creating planning tools, identifying providers and support activities, providing funding, and describing the content of improvement strategies. Most states assign SEA staff and add external providers, drawing from district and regional offices or contracting with individual consultants or external organizations to provide help with needs assessments, school improvement planning, and resource acquisition. Finally, in response to capacity constraints, about 38 states have adopted tiered systems of support in which states adjust their support strategies in light of the school improvement status, school and district context, and/or characteristics of low-performing student subgroups.

In summary, the researchers noted that state officials design their systems of support in ways that accommodate their internal capacity: “[States] may seek efficiencies or simply ration support in ways that conserve their scarce resources.” The authors noted that states tend to target assistance at the front-end, but few provide sustained support throughout the process of implementation. Little
empirical evidence can be found on the quality of support provided through state systems or on their impact on student achievement.

**Barriers to Improving District and School Performance**

State efforts and capacity for helping turn around schools also run headlong into general concerns about the overall effectiveness of school reforms. These concerns have been well-documented in the school improvement literature. For example, researchers such as Michael Fullan and Richard Elmore have found that reforms frequently fail to address what specifically needs to be improved in instructional practice. Standards-based reform articulates instructional goals in terms of student outcomes or achievement levels rather than in terms of instructional quality, that is, what the schools do to help students achieve.

Porter and Snipes drew a similar conclusion after examining the implementation of improvement strategies targeted at district and school leadership (including such leadership areas as coaching, evidence-based decision-making at all levels, and networks and collaboration) and found that the intensity of the reforms tended to wane the closer they got to the classroom. The “theory of action” behind the reforms addressed the establishment of goals for improving student achievement and reducing achievement gaps, but failed to translate into specific instructional practices aimed at improving classroom teaching and learning.

Another barrier to effective state improvement efforts rests on the difficulties in changing the traditional roles played by SEAs. Organizationally, the typical SEA has been structured as a compliance and monitoring bureaucracy for multiple programs operating under distinct administrative guidelines and purposes. In 2007, the Education Alliance at Brown University began a dialogue among state and district leaders, researchers, and other policy actors about the role of state education agencies in catalyzing effective district improvements. A number of consensus points emerged from the two-day symposium. “What was clear to all involved...is that no single level of the system can adequately develop the solutions needed to bring improvement efforts to scale. In spite of good intentions and good ideas, solutions enacted independently and without systemic purpose may result in an incoherent application of strategies and use of resources.”

The summary report outlines the participants’ points of agreement as to what state agencies should do to increase the access and transfer of expertise across the different levels of the system and initiate feasible improvement strategies. These include creating organizational structures to mobilize coordinated systemic action across departments, increasing coherence and alignment in leveraging expertise and resources, shifting from compliance monitoring to a service orientation, and building responsive, trusting relationships with districts to develop improvement strategies.

Essential to ensuring coherence up and down the layers of the system, the participants agreed that the state must create a common language and shared focus on what constitutes the “right work” of improving teaching and learning. Just as school leadership is central to building a high-performing learning organization based on a singular focus on student learning, so too is it imperative that states play a leadership role to advance the collective thinking about how to improve the quality of classroom instruction. States must organize their operations in accord with a theory of action that explicitly outlines what needs to change in instructional practice and delineates the factors that mediate quality teaching. Accordingly, states will need to redefine challenges and collaborate across networks of districts and other entities to develop flexible, responsive improvement strategies that fit the particular needs and context of districts (along with the schools identified for improvement within those districts).

Along the same lines, the MASS Insight Education and Research Institute’s report on *The Turnaround Challenge* documents similar barriers such as state capacity and resource issues to effectively design and implement intervention strategies. But the report goes on to charge that these efforts have not produced the desired outcomes and that for the most part, state responses can be characterized as timid, largely passive, and inadequate in their design, coherence, and use of robust partnerships and networks. The report cites a number of obstacles that undercut state efforts, including inflexibility in responding to the local context, lack of coherent systems to recruit and prepare quality educators, a lack of coordination among agencies, and insufficient focus to respond to the nature and magnitude of the need.

The authors chronicle the failure of these “light touch” efforts that focus largely on programmatic and curricular changes and propose an alternate framework for producing dramatic, transformative change in the lowest-performing schools. They call for strong political leadership and commitment in order to design scalable and sustainable improvements, to change conditions and incentives, and to strengthen the systems states establish to train and support teachers and school leaders.
Approaches for Bolstering SEA Improvement Efforts

As public pressure for states to effect change in underperforming schools continues to increase, there is broad recognition that states must adopt a more active, strategic role. Approaches must be crafted that move beyond convenience and that focus on addressing the underlying causes of schools’ inability to meet performance requirements. Such approaches should:

- **Focus on student learning and success:** Policy and guidance must provide an explicit picture of what teaching and learning should look like as the primary aim of educational reforms.

- **Clarify roles and responsibilities:** Improvement efforts must ensure reciprocal accountability so that at each level of the system, the roles and responsibilities of key players contribute to enhancing the capacity and performance of others (e.g., states for districts, superintendents for principals, principals for teachers, and teachers for students).

- **De-silo departments within SEAs:** Policymakers must work with state agencies to set priorities for improving student learning as central to all divisional work; mobilize coordinated action and leverage expertise and resources across departments; shift from compliance monitoring to a service orientation; and build responsive, trusting relationships with districts and schools.

- **Ensure sustained political commitment to improvement efforts:** State boards of education should partner with other state leaders in creating new organizational structures and ways of working at the state level to generate coherent, comprehensive improvement efforts and work with other political constituencies to address conditions within communities that impact education, such as healthcare and poverty.

- **Ensure the coherence and strength of state policy structures and systems:** States need to exercise their key authorities in ways that drive instructional improvements at the classroom level. States must consider the essential features of major policy systems—whether it’s in the design of assessments and school accountability or the way in which teachers and building leaders are recruited, trained, and prepared—so that improvements in teaching and learning are leveraged systematically across all classrooms.

- **Focus on the district level:** States need to fashion strategies that consider the local context and specific needs, uncover the root causes for underperformance, and build district capacity. States should consider the use of zones that acknowledge different conditions and leverage incentives that enable local leaders to accelerate change by granting greater autonomy for staffing and allocating resources.

- **Identify exemplars of success:** Prioritize efforts that create collaborative solutions, broker strong partnerships and networks, and create exemplars of what’s working.

State Actions

A number of states have begun to reconceptualize how they work internally and externally to mobilize coherent school improvement strategies. This is an emerging dialogue among state policymakers that can help all states rethink and retool their efforts, not only to intervene in the lowest-performing schools, but to transform education reform writ large.

Alabama’s state education agency created the Accountability Roundtable as a vehicle for coordinating school improvement efforts across the instructional services divisions including: Classroom Improvement; Federal Programs; Alabama Reading Initiative; Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative; Student Assessment; Special Education Services; Professional Education Personnel; Prevention and Support Services; Career Technical Services; and Technology Initiatives.

The mission of the Roundtable is to provide a seamless system of technical assistance and support to schools in response to defined local needs. Roundtable members pool their collective expertise in areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, fiscal management, support programs, and leadership to shape coherent responses to improving districts and schools identified for intervention or restructuring. Roundtable members use the knowledge gained through information sharing and deliberations to guide their day-to-day divisional work and to train regional coaches, peer mentors, and school improvement specialists in working directly with schools and districts.

These cadres of coaches serve as a primary resource for building instructional capacity at the local level. Alabama has a history of recognizing specific coaching as an effective school improvement approach. Coaching has been central to the Alabama Reading Initiative begun in
1996, which proved highly effective in advancing school-wide literacy plans. The regional support coaches, who serve under the direction of the state board and school improvement specialists, are deployed throughout the state as a vehicle for intensive instructional capacity building. In addition, the regional coaches play an important role in providing feedback to the state by reporting back to the Roundtable regarding the particular needs of schools and districts, how reforms are implemented on the ground, and whether a lack of coordination from the state is impeding improvement efforts.

Ohio established the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council to bridge the work across all levels of the system and to create a sharper focus on improving instructional leadership and student performance. The Council created a framework that defines the essential practices of district and building leadership teams to improve instructional leadership and student performance. It outlines the system elements central to holding all adults accountable for implementing evidence-based practices along with the state policies, procedures, and tools needed to build district and school capacity. The framework promotes a student-centered focus, reduces the number of initiatives to ensure alignment and coherence, creates a single plan for improvement, uses data to continuously monitor student progress, and focuses on getting past opinion as to what works by delineating research-based practices.

As one of six states selected by the U.S. Department of Education to pilot an alternate approach to intervening in low-performing schools, Ohio designed its Differentiated Accountability Model based on the state’s leadership framework. The model treats districts and schools as part of a system, rather than as fragmented entities, that moves through the improvement process as a unit and adheres to the following principles:

- Defines leadership as essential practices that should be implemented at all levels of the system;
- Takes into account the role and responsibility of the district in making/sustaining improvements;
- Organizes district/school data to customize interventions/solutions to critical needs as determined through a comprehensive needs assessment; and
- Accelerates support and targets resources and assistance to the districts and schools that need the most support.

North Carolina’s Department of Public Instruction (DPI) created a blueprint for consolidated, comprehensive support to schools in need of improvement in response to a mandate from the North Carolina General Assembly. The goal was to build on lessons learned, leverage best practices, streamline and coordinate the various DPI assistance efforts, and build the department’s capacity to respond effectively to evolving school and district needs. Formed in consultation with more than 700 external stakeholders, DPI created a theory of action to move the agency from a focus on compliance to one focused on providing proactive, coordinated assistance to schools and districts.

As part of the redesign efforts, DPI established a Strategic Roundtable to better coordinate support services and resources internally across divisions and to ensure greater coherence in its delivery to schools and districts. The Roundtable includes the state board of education along with the associate superintendents (directors) for technology and information, curriculum and instruction, policy and strategic planning, finance, district and school support, innovation and transformation, and support coordination. Its responsibilities are to focus resources and talent on strategic initiatives to improve student achievement and development, allocate support resources, evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery, and make modifications as needed.

The state’s comprehensive, tiered support model focuses primarily on school districts, uses a comprehensive needs assessment to determine root causes and assess district capacity, customizes support to improve instruction in accord with priorities and need for resources, and deploys a collaborative partnership approach through regional support teams and/or dedicated coaches. The intent is to create scalable solutions, intervene within areas or at times of highest impact, and rigorously monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions. More information is available online at www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/assistanceproject/briefings/assistanceredesign.pdf.

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Endnotes


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