



**LEADERSHIP FOR A NEW ERA: STATE EDUCATION AGENCY  
AND DISTRICT COLLABORATION**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The context in which state education agencies (SEAs) operate has changed significantly over the last five years. Once focused primarily on compliance monitoring, SEAs, as a result of No Child Left Behind and a variety of state-level initiatives, have been thrust into a new leading role in the implementation of standards-based reform. SEAs now set standards, design and implement systems of assessment and accountability, and attempt to provide support and capacity building services for improvement efforts in schools and districts throughout their states. In addition to this shift in direction from compliance to service provider, state departments of education are also grappling with the realities of meeting the needs of a growing number of schools in an environment of scarce resources and with a staff that was not hired to do this type of work.

In 2001, when the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was voted into law, it fundamentally changed the relationship between the federal government and states and between states and districts. Researchers Sunderman & Orfield (2006) sum up the effects of the NCLB by calling it “the most extraordinary expansion of federal power over public schools in American history” and pointing out that in spite of this expanded federal role, the legislation “relies not on the small federal bureaucracy but on state education agencies (SEAs) to play the crucial role in implementing federal mandates” (p. 526).

This paper will focus on recent changes in the ways in which SEAs and districts collaborate with one another. We will specifically target examples of collaboration in which SEA officials and district and school leaders engage in practices to directly or indirectly improve instruction. We will not focus on the regulatory and guidance functions of state departments of education and instead will concentrate on examples where staff members of the SEA engage directly with staff members of local districts and schools. The paper begins by outlining the new environment in which SEAs and districts now work. Then, we categorize the ways in which SEAs have changed both the structure and substance of their work with districts and schools and provide examples of emerging initiatives in several states. In the final section, we outline some of the major challenges and failures of current SEA and district collaboration.

**The changing relationship of districts and states**

The logic of standards-based accountability systems has changed the environment in which SEAs operate, calling for schools and districts to be held accountable for getting all students to higher levels of proficiency and requiring that robust support services be

provided to enable “underperforming” schools to reach the mandated standards. Thus, SEAs, having designed these accountability systems, are now responsible for providing resources and support to local schools and districts and for leading school improvement efforts. The problem is that SEAs, generally, have relatively little historical knowledge or skill in school improvement. In addition, little research has been done on state and district supports or interventions in low-performing schools, so these SEAs have virtually no place to turn to build their knowledge and skills (The Education Alliance, 2005). Several state level staff members with which we spoke used the analogy “we’re building an airplane while flying it”.

SEAs and districts are also operating in an environment with diminished resources where funding levels have not kept pace with increasing demands. States simply have not adequately funded their departments of education to meet the growing needs of this new era. This lack of resources also relates to human resources. SEA staff members, with a history of monitoring compliance, often were not hired to and do not possess the skills necessary to provide support and guidance for improving schools and districts. In addition, the salaries and working conditions for SEA employees are often far below market value, leading to a dearth of qualified applicants for SEA positions. Finally, the size of the state department of education staff is often significantly lower than the number required to adequately serve all the schools and districts in need of improvement.

Compounding the challenge, NCLB accountability measures are identifying an increased number of low-performing schools and districts and these numbers will likely continue to grow, along with the speed with which improvements must be made. According to the Center on Education Policy, in school year 2005-2006, twenty-six percent of schools in the nation were not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) with fourteen percent of schools deemed in need of improvement and three percent in corrective action. As the AYP targets continue to increase toward the goal of 100% proficiency for all students in reading and math by 2014, the number of schools deemed in need of improvement and thus in need of support and resources is certain to steadily rise.

At the same time, school districts are struggling with their own capacity issues. At the district level, leaders are working to create a culture focused on results and committed to instructional improvement that can be sustained over time. District leaders are striving to align critical policies to guide practice, support improvement and provide the appropriate resources to implement the needed reforms. Districts are increasingly focused on using data and evidence to drive decisions and revise strategies. Fostering clear expectations about classroom practice is another area of focus along with complementary supports for teacher learning and adequate investments in professional development. Finally, districts are struggling to develop communities of practice in the central office and in schools so that the entire staff shares a common vision of good practice and beliefs about teaching and learning (The Education Alliance, 2005).

In this new context, both SEAs and districts are faced with challenges and choices when it comes to allocating resources in ways that are appropriate to the level of need. Both also struggle to determine the intensity and duration of support required by each school under their supervision.

### **The role of the state under NCLB**

“Ensuring that all students achieve high standards requires that state education agencies shift from compliance-based work that ensures regulations are followed, to capacity-building efforts that facilitate change. To guide and support districts and schools in their improvement efforts, state education agencies must increase their capacity to provide information, training and other forms of assistance to schools” (CCSSO, 2003, p. 9)

The new state role carries with it tension between NCLB’s pressure to provide consistent, targeted, outcomes-based support and the need for context-based, customized work with schools and districts that is flexible and has relationships at its center (The Education Alliance, p. 58).

Under NCLB, the state has been mandated to identify schools that have fallen short of the state’s accountability targets in English language arts and math (and soon in science) for two consecutive years. These schools are deemed by the No Child Left Behind Act as in need of improvement and the state must provide assistance to them. The state education agency plays two critical roles: 1) each state must create and sustain a statewide network of support that provides assistance in the form of resources and expertise to schools that have been identified for improvement, and 2) states are responsible for dispersing the federal money that has been designated for school improvement (McClure, 2005, p. 6).

The federal department of education provided guidance to states about what statewide systems of support should consist of and recommended the use of the following components:

1. school support teams;
2. distinguished principals and teachers; and
3. collaboration with federally-funded regional technical assistance centers, institutions of higher education, private providers of scientifically-based technical assistance, and other sources of expertise (McClure, 2005, p. 12).

According to NCLB, school support teams can consist of some or all of the following: highly qualified or distinguished principals and teachers, pupil services personnel; parents; higher education representatives; representatives of federal regional assistance centers; outside consultants; and other who are similarly knowledgeable and experienced. The designated role of school support teams is to:

- review and analyze all aspects of a school’s operation and make recommendations for improvement;
- collaborate with school staff and parents to design and implement a school improvement plan;
- monitor the implementation of the plan and request extra assistance from the district or state as needed; and
- provide feedback at least twice a year to the district and state regarding the effectiveness of personnel and the presence of outstanding teachers and principals (McClure, 2005, p. 13).

### **The role of the district under NCLB**

NCLB clearly focuses its accountability on the school level and led to an initial lack of attention to the role of districts. As states attempt to implement reforms at the school level, it has become clear the district plays a vital role. Districts are responsible for mediating the implementation of state policy that is directed specifically at schools. Because districts create the conditions in which schools exist, school districts strongly influence schools' teaching and learning choices. In fact, in many cases districts are the main or only source of external support schools receive in their improvement efforts (Massell, 2000).

Districts may also ignore or rework state policy, either deliberately or through misinterpreting the original policy (Marsh, 2000). According to Marsh (2000) districts display three main responses to state policy: 1) fragmented responses, with little leadership for change, 2) inconsistent responses where some policies are communicated but others are communicated partially or not at all, and 2) coordinated responses in which the district initiates deliberate efforts to implement changes in accordance with policy.

In a study of high performing districts, Murphy and Hallinger (1988) identified several district characteristics that led to effective practice at the school level. Some of these included: strong instructionally-focused leadership from the superintendent and his/her administrative team, an emphasis on student achievement and improvement in teaching and learning, the establishment and enforcement of district goals for improvement, district advocacy and support for use of specific instructional strategies, systematic monitoring of the consistency between district goals and expectations and school goals and implementation through principal accountability processes, direct personal involvement of superintendents in monitoring performance through school visits and meetings with principals, alignment of district resources for professional development with district goals for curriculum and instruction, and systematic use of student testing and other data for district planning. In all of these ways, districts support improvement at the school level and play a critical role in any NCLB mandated efforts to make improvements at the school level.

### **Developing Structures for Improvement**

District and state collaboration can take many forms. Drawing on the work of the Education Alliance (2005), this section will highlight five ways in which states have structured their efforts to work with schools and districts to improve instruction. Current state examples for each of the five structures are also provided.

#### *State support teams*

The most common structure that states have developed to work with schools and districts in need of improvement is SEA-level support teams that work directly with identified schools. This method is also the most highly centralized of all the structures for providing support as it allows the state to have direct control and oversight of its work with schools and districts. In most states, support teams consist of SEA staff members and other stakeholders such as experienced educators and administrators (The Education Alliance, 2005, p. 11).

Originally developed in 1997 as part of Rhode Island's Comprehensive Education Strategy, Rhode Island's Progressive Support and Intervention (PSI) initiative provides an example of an SEA support team working closely with districts to improve teaching and learning. PSI is designed to focus on: technical assistance in improvement planning; curriculum alignment; student assessment; instruction; family and community involvement; policy support; and creating supportive partnerships with education institutions, business, and other institutions with appropriate expertise (PSI web site). The state legislature created the initiative and mandated that if after three years of support there was no improvement in a school/district, then the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) could assume progressive levels of control over the school and/or district budget, program, and/or personnel. After NCLB, Rhode Island began using PSI as a means to provide support to districts that were deemed "in need of improvement" based on AYP data. See Case Example I for a more complete description of PSI.

Kansas has created Integrated Support Teams in which four consultants provide technical assistance to districts in need of improvement. The teams are named for the integrated expertise of their staff, including knowledge of school improvement, special education, and state and federal programs and are focused on district-level interventions. The district is then held responsible for providing school-level assistance. Integrated Support Teams help district staff members complete an Integrated Self-Assessment Review, a tool that allows staff to reflect on leadership, planning, and staff development to identify focal points for intervention. The SEA scaffolds the work of the Integrated Support Teams through a 12-person state-level Innovation Team, which serves all state districts by assigning state staff to regions. Through the Innovative Team, Integrated Support Teams are supplied with research and background information as well as regional training opportunities (CCSSO E-newsletter, January 2007).

#### *Individual experts*

Other states have opted to authorize an individual or small group of "highly skilled educators" to work directly with schools as coaches, turnaround specialists, or facilitators, of school improvement processes (The Education Alliance, 2005, p. 11). Coaches and external assistance teams can be designated to provide support, coaching and staff development for longer periods of time than the typical state-level support teams.

In Virginia, the Department of Education sought out a partnership with a university to provide successful principals with training in business strategies to turnaround schools, with a particular focus on the needs of under-performing schools. The department entered into a partnership with the University of Virginia, which wrote and designed the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP). Launched in the summer of 2004, the program offers an "executive education program" targeting current school-level administrators with at least a master's degree and preparing them to become leaders of schools in need of improvement, corrective action or restructuring. The VSTSP has several topics of focus, including leadership challenges, strategic change, data-based decision-making, communications, conflict management, sustaining transformations, and leveraging resources. For a more detailed description, see Case Example II.

### *Partnering with existing organizations*

States have also used existing organizations like institutions of higher education and regional service providers to provide support to schools and districts (The Education Alliance, 2005, p. 11). The use of regional providers is common in geographically large states like California, Colorado and Missouri. Contracting out to other providers carries the benefit of increasing the capacity and/or expertise of the SEA, but has the disadvantage of requiring SEAs to relinquish some oversight and control over the content and quality of services provided (The Education Alliance, 2005, p. 12).

California created a Statewide System of School Support to fulfill NCLB's mandates. Because of the state's large size, the system operates on a regional basis, and includes county offices, local school districts, federal Comprehensive Assistance Centers, and the California Department of Education. The state's 58 county offices of education are organized into 11 regions, which are funded to operate school support teams. Within each of the 11 regions, one county office of education is designated as the fiscal agent and applies to the Department of Education for a grant, which it then distributes to support the work of the other county offices in the region. California's strategy is to provide assistance directly to districts, not to individual schools, because it deems it impossible to adequately serve the nearly 9,000 schools in the state, not to mention the growing number of schools in need of improvement (McClure, 2005, p. 15).

In 2004, Connecticut's School Improvement Office began reaching out to superintendents to discuss the possibility of pooling district funds together to offer a statewide program focused on increased accountability and improved student learning. An original collaboration between two districts, the CPA, and the Stupski Foundation, the initiative has become the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI), which now includes several external partners and serves eighteen school districts. For a more detailed description of CALI, please see Case Example III.

The Voluntary Partnership Assistance Team (VPAT) is a unique partnership developed in Kentucky with the goal of assisting "Tier 3" districts, or those districts which have failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress for four or more years. VPAT is a partnership between the Kentucky School Boards Association (KSBA), the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents (KASS) to provide service to districts in need of improvement (KSBA web site). This partnership provides a two-year intensive voluntary assistance model designed to build capacity at the district and school level for improved student achievement. It leverages the expertise of all the key partners to help local district leaders make necessary cultural and structural changes in schools and at the central office level. See Case Example IV for more information regarding VPAT.

### *Tiered systems*

SEAs have developed tiered systems for schools and districts identified for improvement so that more intense services can be provided to those whose need is the greatest (The Education Alliance, 2005, p. 12). Tiered systems can help ensure that state accountability systems distinguish between schools that are improving and those that are not. In a tiered

system, schools and districts can receive support that is appropriate to their various levels of need.

One example of a tiered system exists in Nevada, where the state has created three priority levels. For schools in year one, the state provides assistance with developing improvement plan. Year two schools, those which have not made adequate progress after year one, are provided with technical assistance with the implementation of their improvement plan. Schools in year three must have a panel oversee the improvement process. In Vermont, the state has taken the opposite approach, providing intense support in the early stages and gradually reducing its level of support over time (The Education Alliance, 2005, p. 12).

The NJ Department of Education has worked to both align multiple accountability systems into a single comprehensive system and to create a performance continuum for all schools in the state. The resulting initiative, titled the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC) encompasses five key components for governing school district effectiveness: 1) instruction and program; 2) personnel; 3) fiscal management; 4) operations; and 5) governance. Under this new system, the type and level of oversight and technical assistance and support is organized in a performance continuum. At one end of the continuum are those school districts that have demonstrated effective practices and meet all state standards – these districts require no intervention from the state. At the opposite end of the continuum are school districts that have consistently fallen short of state standards and have not shown improvement after administrative and/or instructional remedies have been offered and implemented. In these districts the state provides maximum intervention (with partial or full state control) and the placement of a Highly Skilled Professional (HSP) to oversee one or more of those intervention strategies. Nineteen pilot districts participated in school year 2005-2006 and the department has implemented the program statewide for all districts in the 06-07 school year (NJ Department of Education web site: <http://www.state.nj.us/njded/genfo/qsac>).

### *State-level offices*

Some states have restructured divisions within the department of education to better align and focus the SEA's capacity to support schools and districts. Illinois created a new division, the System of Support Unit, and Rhode Island created the Office of Progressive Support and Intervention to work specifically with identified schools. Many states are also using existing Title I management structures and staff to provide support. Others are integrating Title I and other programs linked to school improvement into new comprehensive units (The Education Alliance, 2005, p. 12). In the past, SEAs were viewed as the sum of individual parts, but the era of standards-based accountability has prompted the integration of all of school support initiatives into one system where policies and actions are aligned (The Education Alliance, 2005, p. 52).

Historically, states have layered new policies and requirements upon the existing structure, without considering the impact on the statewide system as a whole. For example, in Ohio, the state had established several divisions over time, including regional professional development centers, special education resource centers and education

service centers. Each of these represented different, and sometimes overlapping, regions of the state. The disparate array of state divisions created redundancy in the SEA's efforts and a lack of cohesiveness from the perspective of districts. Ohio has now created the Office of Field Relations, which oversees Regional School Improvement Teams (RSIT). RSITs now coordinate and oversee all of the state's regional work with schools and districts, integrating the work of the professional development centers, special education resource centers and education service centers into one unified system of support. See Case Example V for additional information on the Office of Field Relations' work.

Like Ohio, Alabama recognized the need to develop a more integrated state support system. Alabama's approach was to create an internal structure to oversee and coordinate the state's improvement initiatives called the Alabama Accountability Roundtable. The Roundtable's mission is to provide a seamless system of technical assistance and support to schools in the areas of curriculum, instruction, fiscal responsibility, management and leadership. Membership of the Roundtable consists of the SEA's instruction, support and technology divisions, which work to coordinate the efforts of the SEA with the efforts of the State Support Teams that are engaged in providing assistance at the district and school levels. For more detailed information, please see Case Example VI.

### **Key Components of Statewide Support for Improvement**

While it is important to look at the structures that SEAs have developed to work with districts and schools, it is equally important to analyze the substance of the work between SEAs and districts. Through a recent national survey of SEA initiatives and more specific work in Massachusetts, the Rennie Center has developed a list of critical areas upon which SEAs must focus their work with districts and schools: 1) planning and implementation of improvement plans; 2) leadership support; 3) access to and use of data; 4) support for curriculum and instruction; 5) professional development; 6) building district-level capacity; 7) other types of support.

#### *1. Planning and Implementation*

As mandated in the NCLB legislation, the first key component of state support is planning and implementation. In this phase, the SEA works with schools and districts to help them identify root causes and develop and implement action steps to effectively address challenges. A critical aspect of this phase is differentiating the level of support provided to each school/district based on their individual needs rather than creating a "one-size-fits-all" approach to school improvement.

#### **Prerequisite: A Theory of Action**

It is important to note that before states develop components of an effective system of support, they should develop a coherent strategy designed to achieve critical and well-defined goals. SEAs should have in place a "theory of action" – a collective belief about causal relationships between action and desired outcomes – to guide their work and ensure that it is focused and directly tied to the needs of schools (Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University). Ideally, this process of developing a coherent strategy would occur in collaboration with districts to ensure that the type of support the state provides and the ways in which that support is provided are aligned with district needs.



As part of New Hampshire's needs assessment process, the SEA developed a six-session online training course through which district teams are trained by SEA staff members to analyze school and district data and identify root causes of issues in their schools. The teams work with both online and on-site external facilitators to examine existing data and gather pertinent additional data in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in their districts that most directly impact school improvement and student achievement. Through the course, teams are paired with other district teams to exchange and analyze one another's data. The final product is a list of priority areas, informed by the root cause analysis, that are included in districts' improvement plans (NHDOE web site:

<http://www.ed.state.nh.us/education/doe/organization/Curriculum/School%20Improvement/DINI/2004-2005%20DINI/Root%20Cause%20Analysis%20announcement%20and%20overview.doc>

New York requires districts to work collaboratively with schools to develop local assistance plans in addition to the school-level improvement plans required by NCLB. These local assistance plans must include findings from a needs assessment, the action steps that will be taken to improve student achievement, the resources that will be provided to support the plan, the professional development that will be provided and a timeline for implementation (CCSSO, 2003, p. 3.)

Nevada, South Dakota, West Virginia and Wyoming have worked with the Comprehensive Assessment System State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards in partnership with Edvantia to develop the *District Audit Tool: A Method for Determining Level of Need for Support to Improvement*. The initiative is designed to help states prioritize the degree and intensity of their support and technical assistance to districts and schools in need of improvement. The tool is a five-stage team process that results in a technical assistance plan developed collaboratively by the state and district. States can use the tool to triage their support to schools and districts by prioritizing which districts are most in need of intense and immediate assistance; using qualitative and quantitative data to judge these districts against elements of successful schools and districts; identifying short, medium and long term needs; and conferring with districts on a plan for who will deliver technical assistance, and when and how it will be done (CCSSO, 2005).

## *2. Leadership support*

Leadership support is another critical component. In fact, recent research has shown that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 3). Leadership support includes building *instructional* leadership that is focused on results, as well as developing professional learning communities among all school/district staff, and addressing the supply of new leaders. Leadership support might take the form of leadership coaches, mentor principals or a program that creates a pipeline of well-prepared new leaders.

In 2001, the Wallace Foundation developed a multi-state leadership development initiative that brings states and districts together with the goal of ensuring that state

policies affecting leadership are well-coordinated with, and supportive of, local district practices. This initiative, the State Action for Education Leadership Project (SAELP), is currently working in fifteen states with the long-term goal of developing and sharing policies and practices that influence many other states and districts beyond those supported by Wallace.

In 2002, the Wallace Foundation launched the Leadership for Educational Achievement in Districts (LEAD) within its SAELP states. LEAD districts are focused on identifying and implementing ways to attract and place a broader, more able pool of candidates into the principalship and superintendency; strengthening the ability of leaders to improve learning; and creating more supportive conditions for leaders to succeed. LEAD districts work with SAELP teams to form a learning network in which to examine the effects of leadership on learning, analyze existing obstacles and explore strategic interventions that can, over time, produce new policies and practices that support better student achievement.

Massachusetts, an SAELP state, launched an initiative in 2005 to provide educators from some of the state's neediest districts with an intensive two-year training program aimed at strengthening their organizational and instructional leadership skills to lead their schools to higher student achievement. The state selected the National Institute for School Leaders (NISL), a program of the National Center on Education and the Economy to train 84 participants, 52 of which are taking part in a "train-the-trainer" model to become certified NISL trainers and provide training for other educators throughout their districts and the state. The program is in place in 15 urban districts, and is paid for through state funds. In total, nearly 400 principals and mentor trainers are expected to participate in the program over the next five years (Massachusetts Department of Education web site).

### *3. Access to and use of data*

Schools and districts are also in need of better access to and use of data – especially at the school level – so that data can be used to inform instruction. SEAs are responsible for providing systems that produce timely and useable data and must support schools in the use of that data to drive decisions and inform instruction. This might include developing formative and benchmark assessments tied to state standards, providing professional development in classroom-based analysis of student data for instructional improvement or developing state assessments based on growth.

New Mexico has developed the New Mexico Consumer Guide to Formative Assessments, which reviews the strengths and weaknesses of seven formative assessments according to such things as: alignment to New Mexico's content standards, ease of use of data, immediate feedback, amount of teacher training required, and costs.

Virginia, through its SAELP initiative, va-Lead, has developed the Data Coaches Certification Training Program, which builds the capacity in schools or districts to increase student achievement by developing highly skilled coaches (principals or other leaders) who are subject matter experts in the effective use of data, are able to construct highly effective and research-based interventions, and are capable of leading teams through the school improvement process throughout the school year. The program is a

partnership between va-Lead and e-Lead, a partnership of the Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University and the Institute for Educational Leadership (Retrieved from <http://www.e-lead.org/states/va/successline2.htm>).

#### *4. Curriculum and instructional support*

Curriculum and instructional support are other critical areas of any state-led improvement initiatives. This type of support includes providing guidance in curriculum selection and content area professional development. States must also play a role in providing support for improving teachers' practice and pedagogy so that they receive support to deepen their content knowledge and build the skills necessary to teach that content well.

South Carolina has established the Committee of Practitioners to work with the Title I office on implementing a new curriculum in the state's three districts in corrective action. The Committee of Practitioners includes parents; parent resource center personnel; teachers; public and private school administrators; and school board officials. Committee members meet on a quarterly basis to monitor and plan state school improvement strategies and options. The Committee recommended and each of the three districts agreed to the implementation of Anderson School District Five's comprehensive K-8 curriculum, a curriculum that has proven effective for the Anderson, SC district. Teachers and district personnel have been trained in the teaching the curriculum and leadership and train-the-trainer sessions were conducted as well. District administrators were also trained in the use of the curriculum's walkthrough instrument for use as an evaluative tool. A supplemental external monitoring process has been developed to review district and school implementation efforts in the three districts.

The Committee of Practitioners, in coordination with the South Carolina Title I office, decided on the course of curriculum implementation for the three districts in corrective action. The state has also coordinated additional leadership training with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) and monitors progress of the new curriculum implementation through on-site visitations (CCSSO E-newsletter, October 2006).

Funded by the Michigan Department of Education, the Alliance for Building Capacity in Schools (ABCS) is a collaboration between 13 organizations focused on schools, higher education, and business. ABCS has trained 93 content-area coaches for schools in need of improvement. ABCS coaches are trained over 12 days with a focus on deep and sustained coaching that is customized to each school's strengths and weaknesses. A panel of three experienced educators that are not involved in the training, including representation from the Michigan Department of Education, assesses the candidates and certifies them. The ABCS website maintains a database of certified coaches by district and specialty, and the SEA advises districts on using Title I technical assistance funds to pay for coaches (CCSSO E-newsletter, October 2006).

The Indiana Department of Education has partnered with the Great Lakes East Comprehensive Assistance Center at Learning Point Associates to lead administrators from nine districts through corrective action. The initiative is focused on the NCLB-based option to institute a new curriculum with research-based professional development

for schools in corrective action. Leaders of the initiative began by meeting with teams from the nine districts and focusing on current school improvement goals, district data, and setting district goals aligned to professional development. Next, districts chose between auditing, mapping, or surveying their curricula to guide changes that will lead to a completely redesigned curriculum. The state and comprehensive center will provide technical assistance throughout the school year to these districts to help school meet AYP targets. Learn more from “Indiana: Taking the Lead with Districts in Corrective Action” at <http://www.doe.state.in.us/TitleI/pdf/great-lakes-east-report.pdf>. (CCSSO E-newsletter, September 2006)

### *5. Professional development*

Another component is professional development, which includes supporting the development of communities of practice and ongoing, embedded professional development focused on improving instruction and increasing student achievement. The state can provide guidance on professional development providers as well as providing direct professional development opportunities to districts and incentives for schools to make time for regular professional development for teachers.

The Kentucky Department of Education has developed a statewide network of Achievement Gap Coordinators (AGCs) to support and assist districts and schools in five regions. These coordinators act as liaisons between the department and local sites, by gathering information from the field to share with other SEA staff, as well as bringing state resources to districts and schools. They serve as the department's "eyes and ears" throughout the state, providing staff with information about what schools and districts need to make improvements. The AGCs work closely with other department staff, especially District Support Facilitators, Highly Skilled Educators and Targeted Assistance Coaches, to design assistance programs for schools. The AGCs organize and deliver direct support services to schools and districts in response to their needs, work with highly skilled educators and the office of leadership and school improvement to identify school and district needs, and network to provide professional development providers (CCSSO E-newsletter, March 2006).

South Carolina initiated the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) developed by the Milken Foundation in 1999, as a pilot project in 2002 with six schools. The South Carolina TAP (SCTAP) initiative offers an opportunity for the SEA to work with principals, teachers and superintendents within districts and schools to provide professional development and leadership development. Currently, eighteen South Carolina schools participate in TAP. TAP consist of five key elements: multiple career paths for teachers; market-driven, performance-based compensation; performance-based accountability; ongoing professional growth; and expanding the supply of high quality educators. The goal of SCTAP is to develop strategies and policies regarding teacher quality in all South Carolina schools and districts. For more information on the SCTAP initiative, please see Case Example VII.

### *6. Building district-level capacity*

SEAs also need to provide assistance to districts by focusing on building district-level capacity. The state can assist in building district leadership to support school- and

classroom-level improvement through professional development focused on student achievement for superintendents and other central office leaders, assistance in developing district improvement plans based on meeting diverse needs of individual schools, and conducting central office reviews.

Pennsylvania's Distinguished Educators Program was written into state law in June 2006. The program trains and deploys experienced educator teams with "knowledge and skills ... in school leadership, management, curriculum, and instruction... to help eligible schools and districts improve the quality of education." Eligible districts have schools in corrective action or have not met AYP targets for all students enrolled or among identifiable subgroups over time. Application procedures and criteria are written into the law to assure that candidates hold appropriate certificates, have required experience as well as proven success, and have appropriate knowledge and skills. Rigorous training and internship programs accompany the selection of highly qualified individuals to build capacity in challenged school districts and focus on student achievement. Teams are assigned based on district needs and the relevant experience and skills of individual Distinguished Educator team members. For more information on Pennsylvania's Distinguished Educator program, please visit <http://www.pde.state.pa.us/pas/cwp/view.asp?a=3&Q=110659>. (CCSSO E-newsletter, September 2006)

#### *7. Other types of district-state collaboration*

In Massachusetts, the Department of Education's Office of District Intervention has partnered with the Massachusetts 2020 (Mass2020), an independent nonprofit organization, to develop a program that funds expanded learning time for schools throughout the commonwealth. Mass2020 launched the expanded learning time initiative and lobbied the state legislature for funding to provide planning grants of up to \$15,000 to districts exploring expanding learning time to at least two hours longer than the previous year. The legislature, due to the efforts of Mass2020, also provided funding for ten schools to open in 2006 with an expanded school day.

The Massachusetts DOE and Mass2020 partnership represents a unique collaboration between an SEA and an external organization. The partnership pushes the boundaries of the traditional structure of public education through its work to expand the school day. The partnership is a rare example of innovation that was initiated by an external organization and integrated into the work of the SEA. The Mass2020-MA DOE relationship is symbiotic, as Mass2020, an external organization, has the capacity and expertise to lobby the legislature for additional resources and to bring its own resources from private donors, and provide expertise and technical assistance beyond that which the SEA would be able to provide on its own. Mass2020 is able to institutionalize the expanded learning time through the SEA and to build the foundation for a statewide policy innovation that breaks away from the traditional confines of a school day and year.

### **Challenges for SEA-District Collaboration**

#### *Funding*

Under NCLB, SEA systems of support are to be funded through the reservation of 5% of federal Title I funds. The other 95% of Title I funds goes directly to schools and districts

(CEP, 2004). However, federal budget rules mandate that states cannot hold back money from districts if doing so would mean that the district receives less Title I aid than the previous year (Education Week, 9/13/07, p. S11). So, many states are forced to deplete their meager 5% of reserved Title I funds in order to comply with this rule. In an era when the number of schools in need of improvement is steadily climbing, the amount of state funding should be concurrently rising to meet the increased levels of need. As yet, however, there is no sign that federal or state funding for schools in need of improvement will be increased in the near future.

Another funding challenge for SEAs is that they often find it difficult to lobby for their own funding. State education commissioners are charged with serving districts and have difficulty explaining to local superintendents why that state should receive more money that could otherwise be allocated to districts, which are seen as having a more direct impact on students. SEAs, in a constrained fiscal environment and without the means to lobby the legislature for additional funding, are often forced to make the best of whatever funding they receive.

### *Capacity*

As previously noted, states are dealing with capacity issues in terms of funding, but also in terms of human capital. Most state departments of education cannot compete with district salary scales. When attempting to fill positions, SEAs often lose the most qualified candidates to local districts, which can offer higher salaries. A case study of Massachusetts conducted by the Rennie Center found that district personnel were paid as much as \$25,000 per year more than their counterparts at the department of education (Rennie Center, 2005).

SEAs also struggle to develop the expertise of existing employees, many of whom were hired to monitor compliance, not to provide direct assistance to schools in need of improvement. In addition, SEA employees are often inexperienced in and not knowledgeable about the challenges of schools and districts in need of improvement, so that a cultural disconnection exists between SEA staff and school and district staff. A March 2007 poll conducted by the Center on Education Policy reported that officials from 26 state education agencies perceived a lack of “sufficient in-house expertise” to assist schools and districts identified as in need of improvement (CEP, March 2007).

### *Historical Baggage*

In the course of fulfilling their traditional role of monitoring compliance, SEAs have often been perceived by districts and schools as bureaucrats and enforcers – in general, people not to be trusted by school and district staff. As SEAs set out to assume their new responsibilities as supporters and colleagues, they are often confronted with residual hostility that delays their initial attempts at providing support to local schools and districts.

### *Accountability*

The lines of authority created by the accountability provisions in NCLB as well as state policies, make it unclear who bears the ultimate responsibility for schools that are

chronically underperforming. NCLB mandates that states intervene in schools that have not made AYP and lays out a set of provisions from which states can choose:

1. reopen the school as a public charter school;
2. replace “all or most of the school staff (which may include the principal) who are relevant to the failure to make adequate yearly progress”;
3. contract with “an outside entity, such as a private management company, with a demonstrated record of effectiveness, to operate the school”;
4. turn the “operation of the school over to the state educational agency, if permitted under State law and agreed to by the State”; or
5. engage in another form of major restructuring that makes fundamental reforms, “such as significant changes in the school’s staffing and governance, to improve student academic achievement in the school and that has substantial promise of enabling the school to make adequate yearly progress.”<sup>1</sup>

However, when a school languishes in “needs improvement” status for five or more years, who has the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the school improves or ceases to exist? Does the buck stop with the state or with the district? Who has ultimate authority in these relationships?

Another question for states is how, without committing to continuous direct involvement, they can ensure long-lasting improvements in schools and districts. The premise upon which statewide systems of support are based is that after targeted and short-term efforts to assist and support improvement, schools and districts will improve and no longer require assistance. However, it is possible that some schools will never improve enough to be removed from corrective action or that some will improve, but quickly fall back when the state’s support is withdrawn. It remains to be seen what will happen to these schools and who will take ultimate responsibility for them.

#### *The challenge of equality vs. equity*

Related to the challenge of limited resources, is the dilemma of equality versus equity. Increasingly, SEA’s have shifted priorities and resources to address the growing needs of schools in need of improvement. This is a shift away from the traditional focus of addressing the needs of *all* districts and schools in the state – on an equal basis – and presents a concerning dilemma for many state leaders. Schools in need of improvement need not only more, but different kinds of support from the SEA (Ed Alliance, p. 50). In an environment of fixed resources, for SEAs to expend disproportionate amounts of money on one small sub-set of schools depletes funds for prevention in other schools. It also creates a situation where the state has no choice but to wait to become involved in school improvement only after the school has been labeled for improvement and the situation is dire and much more difficult to fix.

It is clear that some districts have a greater need for funding than others, whether because of discrepancies in local funding levels or due to the needs of the students served. Yet, funding for education is currently a zero sum game. Funds are allocated from the state legislature and federal government in fixed amounts. Providing every district with an equal amount of state and federal funding would be unfair to those districts with the greater need, yet it can also be seen as unfair to decrease the levels of state funding for

less needy districts. Thus, SEAs are presented with the challenge of ensuring that they are adequately serving all schools and districts though some have much greater needs than others.

### **Conclusion**

It is crucial that state departments of education receive the support needed to assist schools in need of improvement. Without urgent attention to limited capacity issues at the state level, the promise of education reform that is at the heart of No Child Left Behind is in jeopardy. Standards-based accountability asks educators to reach higher than they have ever reached to bring not just some, but ALL students to proficiency. With these increased expectations comes an obligation to provide the resources and support to realize these new goals. Sunderman and Orfield (2007) note that, “should the effort fail because the states cannot implement the changes due to lack of capacity, conflict over goals, or the intrinsic unworkability of the changes demanded, there would be important consequences for the future of educational federalism, for the future of state agencies, and for the public debate about education reform” (p. 527).

Should SEAs not be able to provide the support necessary to help schools improve, the policy of placing schools on lists for improvement will be rendered useless. We have identified some promising practices throughout this paper, but all of them require consistent funding and are likely to require increased resources as demand grows. The promising SEA programs that exist will simply not be effective without an increase in resources to match increases in need.

As states are being asked to do more with less, the future of our nation’s youth hangs in the balance. The goal of educating all students is within reach, now the focus must be on providing the capacity building resources and assistance to make this goal a reality.



## **CASE EXAMPLE I:**

### **Rhode Island Progressive Support and Intervention Initiative**

Rhode Island's Progressive Support and Intervention (PSI) initiative provides an example of how the state education agency (SEA) and districts can work together to improve teaching and learning. PSI was originally developed in 1997 as part of Rhode Island's Comprehensive Education Strategy, which was designed to focus on: technical assistance in improvement planning, curriculum alignment, student assessment, instruction, and family and community involvement; policy support; and creating supportive partnerships with education institutions, business, and other institutions with appropriate expertise. It mandated that if after three years of support there was no improvement, then the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) could assume progressive levels of control over the school and/or district budget, program, and/or personnel. After NCLB, Rhode Island began using PSI as a means to provide support to the districts that were deemed "in need of improvement" based on AYP.

Unlike other SEAs, RIDE has taken a hands-on approach to supporting the improvement of the four districts in Rhode Island that have been identified for "corrective action". In part, this is not surprising, given the small size of the state. Rhode Island has just 36 regular public school districts. This, combined with the small geographic size of the state, facilitates a close working relationship between RIDE and the districts it serves. PSI provides several related tools to these districts. The relationship begins with a two-year District Negotiated Agreement (see attachments). This agreement describes the roles of the SEA and district, the timeline and costs for the work, and the specific work to be done, including: integrating the corrective action plan and school improvement plan, building the capacity of the administrative team and faculty through professional development, and clarifying the roles of partnerships and support agencies, and ultimately, increasing student achievement.

Next, PSI provides the following types of technical assistance that focuses on both intervention and prevention: Turnaround Facilitators (which were contracted from Education Development Center); Principal Mentors; on-site assistance in developing school Corrective Action Plans; District Leadership Team training and networking; PSI Action Teams; and a Superintendents' Leadership Network. The specific type of support provided varies by district. As Director Mary Canole notes, "This is not a one-size fits all program." Each district has unique needs and the PSI staff serves as a broker or clearinghouse, locating resources within RIDE and through outside resources such as the Education Development Center and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

The PSI staff works specifically with the four districts identified for corrective action in several ways. Each district creates an Action Team, of which half are from the state's PSI department and half are district, union and school committee leadership. This team meets in quarterly face-to-face meetings to discuss the progress of the technical assistance work in the districts. Initially, PSI works with the district team to identify the underlying needs that must be addressed in order for the school to make progress. They assist in the hiring

and training of new school leaders and work to build the capacity of district leadership to support school improvement efforts.

In the beginning, PSI leaders admit, they were a bit too hands-on. The PSI members of the Action Team were leading school improvement efforts to such an extent that district leadership was becoming frustrated. District leaders viewed the facilitators that PSI had put in place at the school-level as “free-agents” whose work was not connected to districtwide reform efforts. PSI has redesigned the way in which it uses facilitators, making them part of a district-based team and having them work as a liaisons between school and district leaders.

RIDE has worked with the state legislature to negotiate how funds can be spent. The legislature earmarks state allocations to be spent by PSI. PSI combines federal and state funds and determines the amount that is necessary to address each of the four districts’ challenges. Currently, they are spending between \$200,000-250,000 in three districts and approximately \$800,000 in Providence, Rhode Island’s largest district. PSI pools the state’s Title I money along with funds that the state legislature earmarks for PSI as well as IDEA and Title II funds.

Measuring the success of PSI is difficult because PSI, in its current form, is relatively new. It was redesigned for the 2005-2006 school year, so it has less than two years of implementation to assess. PSI leaders are, however, working with the Education Alliance in RI to conduct focus groups in the four PSI districts to solicit feedback from stakeholders on how effective the support from RIDE has been and on what is and isn’t working. RIDE also uses indicators tied to its School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) system. SALT evaluations include a visiting team observing the school and classrooms, an examination of student work and student test scores. These evaluations inform PSI’s work with districts on an ongoing basis.

The biggest challenge facing the Progressive Support and Intervention initiative is that of scale. PSI leaders pride themselves on the strength of the relationships that they have created with the district and school teams. As Director Mary Canole described, “We are very intentional about the amount of time we spend with each district.” With the expected increase in the number of districts in need of assistance, PSI leaders worry that they will have to compromise on the amount of time they can spend with each district. They are also concerned that they will not be able to be as responsive to “just-in-time” district needs.

In conclusion, the Progressive Support and Intervention program is an example of an SEA working closely with a small number of school districts in a small state with relatively ample funding. PSI members function as part of district teams on a regular basis and engage in the day-to-day work of the district and provide an example of close state-district collaboration. Yet questions remain: Is this type of initiative scalable? And, most importantly, is this intense program having the desired impact – are the significant resources going into each district resulting in expected outcomes for students?

## **CASE EXAMPLE II:**

### **Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program**

The Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP) began as a part of Governor Warner's Education for Life Initiative. The Turnaround Specialist Program's original goal was to bring together successful principals and train them in business strategies to turnaround schools, and focused on improvement of under-performing schools. The initiative was created as a way for the Virginia Department of Education to work closely with districts on school improvement strategies. The state and the districts have a written memo of understanding that clearly outlines the state's commitment to the school turnaround specialist as well as the expected responsibilities of the schools.

The Virginia Department of Education sent out a request for proposals to outline this initiative. The state knew that it specifically wanted to partner with a university, and ultimately contracted with the University of Virginia (UVA). UVA wrote and designed the program, including the training and curriculum for the turnaround specialists. The program offers an "executive education program" targeting school-level administrators who have earned at least a master's degree. It provides these administrators with the tools and knowledge needed to successfully turnaround their low-performing schools. The VSTSP has several topics of focus, including leadership challenges, strategic change, data-based decision-making, communications, conflict management, sustaining transformations, and leveraging resources. The VSTSP runs on a cohort system of participants. Each cohort takes three years to complete the VSTSP. The first year of the program (SY04-05) saw a cohort of ten administrators. This first cohort is now in its third and final year of the program. The second year brought with it another cohort of ten administrators, and a cohort of five was created during the third year. The program has seen a change in enrollment over the past three years. Several administrators left the program for a variety of reasons, including moves to different districts or states. Currently the VSTSP supports fifteen administrators between the three cohorts.

The university also collaborates with other colleges and professors across the state to provide training and curriculum for program participants. UVA staff members are the principle decision makers for the program, although the districts are held accountable for the success of their schools. The Virginia DOE monitors and oversees the initiative, and provides money and incentives for the training. The first two years of the program were funded by state money as well as a grant from the Wallace Foundation. The third year is completely funded with state money. While UVA holds the contract for this program and makes the major decisions regarding its curriculum and training services, the DOE follows the trends in district data to monitor program success. For obvious reasons, the state must ensure success and progress within the VSTSP. The state examines student achievement data as well as annual yearly progress at the district level to measure success. The DOE does not monitor data trends at the school-level.

Connie is not certain if Virginia will seek to create a new cohort in the upcoming year. The next several years may be dedicated to seeing the current three cohorts through the program. With the loss of ten participants over the three cohorts, Virginia is focusing on the fifteen administrators that remain. UVA, however, has scaled the program nationally.

### **CASE EXAMPLE III:**

#### **Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative**

The Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative began in 2004 and stemmed from a partnership between two districts, New Haven and Bristol, and the Center for Performance Assessment (CPA). The CPA introduced the two districts to the Stupski Foundation, which focuses on capacity building and improved teaching and learning in urban school districts. During this time Connecticut's School Improvement Office began reaching out to superintendents to discuss the possibility of pooling district funds together to offer a statewide program to all districts. This collaboration between two districts, the CPA, the Stupski Foundation and the state combined with the research of Dr. Douglas Reeves, Dr. Michael Schmoker, Dr. Robert Marzano, Dr. Richard Elmore, Dr. John Simpson, and other professionals in the field to create the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Model, which was later renamed the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI). CALI has helped shape a common language across the state, with a focus on accountability and improved student learning. It provides a wide range of services and supports to districts, including: training for teachers at the school and district levels; the hiring and training of retired urban principals to provide technical assistance to leaders in the lowest-performing school districts; regular partnerships between the state and district leadership teams to identify improvement/accountability plans; state-hired coaches and trained consultants working with leaders from low-performing schools and assess districts in key areas; and district implementation plan cohorts identifying key topics for reform.

Currently, CALI is a statewide initiative and serves eighteen school districts. At its inception, the program served sixteen Title I districts, labeled "priority school districts" by the state, and focused on schools that were in need of improvement. These services are now able to reach many more schools, not just those identified as in need of improvement. This is possible due to the unique funding structure set up by the partnership between the state and the participating districts. Funding for CALI is a pooled financial collaboration with Title I money from the eighteen districts involved with the initiative. CALI does not receive state funding at this time, although a funding request was submitted during this legislative session.

CALI focuses on four key areas in the services and supports provided to schools and districts. The first is data-driven decision making where teachers, leaders and administrators review student data to determine specific areas for reform. Another aspect to this focus area is teacher teams that assess student data in order to determine specific weaknesses and success in learning in order to improve instruction for all. The second focus area is making standards work, which assists in aligning school and district assessments and instruction and creating classroom-based assessments in order to monitor success. The third focus area is effective teaching strategies which are based on research done by Dr. Robert Marzano and others. The final focus area is accountability in district and school improvement planning, with a goal of creating a new accountability system framework.

CALI continues to maintain a strong partnership with the Stupski Foundation and the Center for Performance Assessment. Both organizations are aligned with Connecticut's vision of student achievement, and allow CALI to provide support at both the district and school levels. The Stupski Foundation has also trained state consultants and leaders to conduct district assessments so that the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) can offer support and services statewide. Additional partners include the CT Association of Schools, the CT Association of Boards of Education, the Center for School Change, the CT Association of Supervision, Curriculum Development, RESCs, and CT Association of Public School Superintendents. CALI is currently working to create an ongoing relationship with higher education partners throughout the state. Higher education professionals are included in discussions concerning CALI due to their important connection with the work of the initiative. Along with higher education representatives, new partners include Connecticut teacher unions and parent groups.

Due to CALI's lack of state funding, there is no comprehensive evaluation piece in place to measure the success of the initiative. Staff members note that student achievement levels are not used as a sole indicator of program success because an increase in achievement cannot be attributed to CALI alone. One plan for the potential state funding to be determined this legislative season is the creation of an evaluation project to meaningfully measure the impact CALI has on student learning throughout the state. Meghan Martins, a school improvement consultant working with CALI, says that the initiative "can use future evaluation pieces and analysis to develop greater impact tools."

CALI is a successful collaboration between the Connecticut State Education Department and eighteen districts throughout the state. While the state is ultimately responsible for making the final decisions regarding the initiative, the districts are the initiative "trendsetters," according to Martins. Decisions are made based on the needs and successes of the participating districts. CALI is an example of an SEA and district representatives working in collaboration to leverage partnerships and innovative funding sources to create an initiative that is greater than the sum of its parts.

## **CASE EXAMPLE IV:**

### **Voluntary Partnership Assistance Team (Kentucky)**

The Voluntary Partnership Assistance Team (VPAT) began in 2006 when three friends began discussing what could be done to address the needs of Tier 3 schools in need of improvement. One was the newly hired Executive Director of the Kentucky Superintendents' Association; one was the Associate Executive Director of the Kentucky School Boards Association and one held a position in instructional leadership at the Department of Education. The three thought that together they could provide support to the state's first 45 Tier 3 districts. They knew that there was no way the Department of Education could adequately meet the districts' needs, and that the formation of partnerships would be essential.

VPAT is a unique partnership developed with the goal of assisting "Tier 3" districts, or those districts which have failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress for four or more years. It is a partnership between the Kentucky School Boards Association, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents (KASS) to provide the Voluntary Partnership Assistance Team (VPAT) service to districts. VPAT is one of three options for planning and implementing improvement plans in Tier 3 districts.

This partnership provides a two-year intensive voluntary assistance model designed to build capacity at the district and school level for improved student achievement. VPAT includes a rigorous scholastic review, team planning, monthly progress reports at board meetings and regular meetings with district leadership to support and monitor improvement.

VPAT teams consist of:

- the local superintendent (who leads the team);
- a retired, superintendent from a high performing district to support the local superintendent;
- a retired or sitting school board member from Kentucky School Boards Association to facilitate the local board's professional growth and meetings;
- a Highly Skilled Educator from the Kentucky Department of Education to support implementation of the improvement plan, and
- a Kentucky Department of Education staff member whose expertise matches the needs assessment of the district.

The team develops a district improvement plan focused on five core areas: school culture, leadership, curriculum, effective instruction and data-driven decision making.

VPAT members receive specialized training in order to effectively work with other board members in the districts to which they are assigned. Cadre representatives attend regular school board meetings, visit schools, review data and work with district personnel with the other VPAT partners.

VPAT was piloted in seven districts in school year 2005-2006. As the name implies, the program was voluntary. VPAT designers hoped that the voluntary nature would foster more “buy-in” from team members. However, even though the state did not require it, Tier 3 districts knew that if they didn’t engage in this initiative, they would most likely face mandates from the department of education. In school year 2006-2007 KDE required districts to choose from one of three options for school improvement: 1) VPAT, 2) State Assistance Teams, or 3) Network Assistance Teams.

The goal of the VPAT initiative is to create internal capacity for the district leadership. In the words of one VPAT leader, “It is very difficult when you have an intervention . . . and don’t build in general internal capacity to sustain it when you leave.”<sup>1</sup> The aim is for the district to own the work and the VPAT team to provide information, expertise and support. VPAT leaders are clear that the *district* is the target of this initiative and that any impact at the school-level will come through VPAT’s work with districts. The initiative works to create a sense of urgency for district leaders. As one VPAT leader said, “Nobody is off the hook.”

VPAT measures success in terms of student achievement. According to one VPAT leader, “everything that you do has to relate to student achievement. That changes the culture of the district and that’s what’s key.” The 2006 Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) test results showed that all seven of the school systems involved in the VPAT program recorded gains in their district accountability indexes, from one up less than one point to three rising more than six points. The initiative is also working with participating districts to focus on college-preparedness. VPAT will also measure its success by gauging its impact on changing the attitudes of the adults and the culture in the district to one of helping all students reach proficiency.

Seven pilot districts completed the VPAT program in 2005 and another 17 districts were added at Commissioner Wilhoit’s request in 2006. As the program has grown, a cadre of active or former school board members has been recruited and trained to meet needs. However, VPAT is currently struggling with the staffing required to meet the needs of the 17 new districts.

For the 2005-2006 year, the state gave each participating district \$20,000 to pay the consulting fees and expenses of the retired superintendent and school board member. In this school year, the state is providing about \$10,000 per district and requiring the district to match that amount with incurs additional costs, the district must use local funds to cover them. There is also concern that the Kentucky legislature will reduce or eliminate funding for state interventions in schools in need of improvement.

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<sup>1</sup> Hoff, David F., Education Week supplement, September 13, 2007, p. S15.

## CASE EXAMPLE V:

### Ohio's Office of Field Relations

Ohio's Office of Field Relations has been working to integrate and coordinate the Ohio Department of Education's (ODE) initiatives to ensure that it is adding value to the districts and schools it serves. The Office oversees Ohio's 12 Regional School Improvement Teams (RSIT), which provide a coordinated system of statewide support using a differentiated service delivery model where resources, information, tools, professional development and technical assistance are aligned to all districts' needs, with greater intensity for the lowest-performing districts.

Prior to No Child Left Behind, Ohio had a fragmented system of service delivery, including regional professional development centers, school improvement systems, Special Education Resource Centers and Education Service Centers. With so many different agents of the state working with districts on so many different initiatives, there was concern about the duplication of efforts and the alignment of each agency's goals to districts' needs. Through the Field Services Office, ODE is seeking to provide a coherent approach to state-provided technical assistance and support. Field Services director Keith Speers says that his mantra is, "We have **one** statewide system of support" and he uses it often as reinforcement for those in the state department who are accustomed to the various divisions that have historically existed. The Field Services Office created 12 Regional School Improvement Teams (which will grow to 16 teams in July 2007) to coordinate the efforts of all the regional agencies and oversee efforts in districts in their regions. These 12 teams are led by six ODE regional managers. Regional managers monitor, provide technical support and ultimately, evaluate each team's progress. Through the regional managers, the ODE retains the oversight and control over how assistance is provided at the local levels.

The goal of the Regional School Improvement Teams is to build the capacity of district and instructional leaders to realize and maintain higher student achievement. Each district decides who will serve on its RSIT and how many will serve – so RSITs often look different from district to district. Districts are encouraged to select members that best fit the challenges at hand; this might include teacher representation as well as school and district leaders. Education Service Center staff members also serve on RSITs and depending on the size and resources of the district, may be fully funded by the Department of Education or may be supported by local funds.

RSITs utilize a Tri-Tier Model of service delivery, which focuses on assisting district and instructional leaders in developing the capacity to plan and implement effective school improvement systems. Using the Tri-Tier Model, ODE provides aligned resources, information, tools, professional development and technical assistance within 6 focus areas to all districts with the greatest intensity to the lowest-performing districts:

- Data analysis;
- Research-based best practices;
- Focused planning;
- Implementation and monitoring;



- Resource management; and
- High-quality professional development.

Tier 1, which currently serves approximately 5% of districts, is the most intensive of the Tri-Tier Model. Tier 1 provides data-determined High Quality Technical Assistance to district and instructional leaders of districts with buildings in “School Improvement” status and districts in “District Improvement” status through an effective coaching model so districts have the capacity to plan and implement school improvement processes that close achievement gaps in reading, math and sub-group performance. Tier 2, which serves about 15% of districts, provides technical assistance to district and instructional leaders of districts with buildings in “At Risk” status through periodic assistance so districts have the capacity to plan and implement school improvement processes that close the achievement gaps in reading, math and sub-group performance. Tier 3, serving close to 80% of districts, provides universal access to select data-determined products and programs for district and instructional leaders to build regional capacity so districts can close the achievement gaps in reading, math and sub-group performance. In this way, the state is able to prioritize its resources to meet the various needs of each district.

ODE works with the state legislature and lobbies for how funds can be spent. The state earmarks funding (approximately \$13 million) for “low-performing” schools and districts. ODE also uses Title I funding (approximately \$20 million) for the Office of Field Services.

The Office of Field Services measures success using a number of indicators. First, they look at evidence of student scores increasing as well as graduation rates in the districts in which they are working. To date, 90% of the RSIT districts have improved performance assessment scores. Ohio also utilizes school-based report cards and these serve as another way to gauge progress. Lastly, the ODE requires each district to complete a rubric that evaluates the state’s service delivery. Through this rubric, the Office of Field Services can solicit direct feedback from districts and make changes on an ongoing basis.

While the efforts in Ohio have begun to show results, significant challenges remain. The Office of Field Services still struggles to work effectively with partners. They are working with Education Service Centers to provide training to center staff in exchange for the ESC providing services to RSIT districts for a lower fee. ODE is also working to develop a universal formula for funding, or a statewide “cost of doing business” scale, recognizing that they will need to make adjustments for disparities in different regions of the state to ensure that services are provided at market value. The Field Services Office is also working to develop a career ladder for the SEA whereby members of the Regional School Improvement Teams would have differentiated roles. For example, they may create Facilitator levels I, II, III to indicate differing levels of mastery.

The Regional School Improvement Teams are an example of a state-run system of support that is making measurable improvement in the districts with which it works.

## **CASE EXAMPLE VI:**

### **Alabama Accountability Roundtable & State Support Team**

The Alabama Accountability Roundtable was created as a way to have the different offices within the state department of education work more collaboratively in their support of district and school improvement efforts. Ruth Ash, deputy state superintendent, began the initiative when she came to Alabama in 2004. She began with focus groups to determine a more coordinated effort focused on school improvement – the result was the Alabama Accountability Roundtable (AR). The AR is comprised of members from each section of the Instructional Services Division at the state department of education, as well as representatives from the Technology Initiatives and the Career Technical Education Services divisions, for a total of 16 – 20 people. The AR receives guidance from the deputy state superintendents and each director from divisions of the Instructional Services Division. Its mission is to provide a seamless system of technical assistance and support to schools in the areas of curriculum, instruction, fiscal responsibility, management and leadership. Seven members of the AR make up a small guidance team that acts as a bridge between the broad discussions and decisions of the AR and the State Support Team (SST), which is engaged in technical assistance at the district level. The guidance team convenes after the AR meeting to discuss the outcomes and determine how the outcomes and information will be shared with the SST.

The State Support Team (SST) is comprised of school improvement leaders, regional school improvement coaches, peer mentors, and state department staff. The SST operates under the guidance and leadership of AR's guidance team, and acts as the field staff working within the districts. The larger AR group meets four times a month to address issues affecting the SST such as resources, work plans and goals. The group then determines who within the AR will provide the best support to the SST on the specific issues. The AR also looks at current SST practices and finds redundancies and duplicated efforts within the system. This helps to consolidate initiatives and streamline processes.

While the AR, its guidance team, and the SST work collaboratively to determine and meet outlined goals and levels of success, policy decisions ultimately rest with the AR's oversight committee, which is comprised of state directors and superintendents. This process begins with an AR meeting at which long-term plans and goals are determined. These plans and goals are then sent to the oversight committee for final approval. The AR then shares an approved long-term plan with the SST for review and input. While the SST rarely has additions for the plan, the AR will accommodate their suggestions if possible.

The initiative began by reaching out to low-performing schools and “improving schools” through a system of professional development and focused support. The AR is now including all schools in their support system and is moving toward a language change to account for this inclusive change. The term “continuous improvement” has been coined to define the AR's belief that all schools and districts should be continuously improving at all levels – from those labeled low-performing to those with higher test scores and

student achievement rates. This is just one change that the AR has seen since its inception in 2005.

The initiative does have a plan to grow the supports and services available to schools and districts. Starting this year, they will offer a Continuing Improvement Residence Program in which superintendents can identify master teachers within their districts. These master teachers, who are not full-time educators in schools, will be trained to work with teachers within the district. Training for the master teachers will be provided by the AR, but these professionals will work directly for the district, not the AR or the state.

Although the AR is a relatively young initiative, administrators have seen an increase in interest and support since 2005. They also have several tools in place to measure impact and success of the AR and the SST. They hold interviews with district leaders and superintendents to determine how they perceive the impact of the initiative, and also host listening post-visits with superintendents to hear feedback on the regional coaches. State assessment data is also analyzed to determine the success of supports and services with the achievement levels of students. The AR also looks at practices within districts such as how the districts are analyzing data. The regional coaches bring district leaders and school principals together to look at data.

The relationship between the Alabama Accountability Roundtable and the State Support Team is an example of state and district leadership working effectively with school-level leaders and educators toward the goal of school improvement. Developed as a system of support for low-performing schools, it has become a source of support for all schools, regardless of their performance label. Although still relatively new, the AR has seen success and with a clear plan for growth, is poised for deeper impact in the future.

## **CASE EXAMPLE VII:**

### **South Carolina Teacher Advancement Program**

The Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) began with the Milken Foundation in 1999, and began as a pilot project in South Carolina in 2002 with six schools. South Carolina is focused on the concept of value-added and, according to their website; TAP is a data-driven pilot for the value-added concept for determining student gains and promoting teacher quality through leadership and applied professional development. The South Carolina TAP (SCTAP) initiative offers an opportunity for the state department of education to work with principals, teachers and superintendents within districts and schools to provide professional development and leadership development.

Currently, eighteen South Carolina schools participate in TAP. By the next school year ('07 – '08), there will be between 40 to 45 participating schools. There are five key elements of TAP: multiple career paths for teachers; market-driven, performance-based compensation; performance-based accountability; ongoing professional growth; and expanding the supply of high quality educators. The goal of SCTAP is to develop strategies and policies regarding teacher quality in all South Carolina schools and districts. The pilot programs allow the state and districts to determine best practices and information needed to scale the project and its initiatives statewide. South Carolina is committed to using the TAP model to provide their teachers with new possibilities for professional entry, high quality professional development, and different compensation and career advancement opportunities.

Decision making for SCTAP is a combined effort between Jason Culbertson, the South Carolina Department of Education's SCTAP coordinator, principals and superintendents. Specific relationships with the state vary district by district. In some instances, the principal is leading the project while in others, it is the superintendent. Other districts use a combination of the two leaders. Funding for SCTAP also varies by district and school. Twenty schools participating in SCTAP are now funded by the South Carolina Teacher Initiative Fund (TIF). In these schools, the state and the schools work hand in hand. For the schools participating in SCTAP and not receiving TIF money, the relationships again vary. Federal money also comes from Title I and Title II, and low-performing schools receive federal Teacher Assistance money. Others schools receive funding from local foundations or the state Teacher Incentive Fund grants. More and more, schools and districts are being informed that they will have to find financial autonomy in the costs associated with the SCTAP. Several schools are matching SCTIF funding already.

For SCTAP, student achievement is the number one indicator of success. The initiative's mission to positively restructuring the teaching profession to strengthen South Carolina educators has one goal – to strengthen student achievement and success. Another evaluative tool used by SCTAP is the analysis of teacher turnover rates. The state has seen a decrease in the turnover rates at schools participating in SCTAP. In some cases, the rate has dropped by as much as 20 – 30%.

South Carolina is the second state, along with Louisiana, to participate in TAP. Due to its success with the program, South Carolina is looked to by other states as a model for sustainability.

## **CASE EXAMPLE VIII:**

### **Massachusetts: Expanding Learning Time to Support Student Success**

The Massachusetts Department of Education's Office of School and District Intervention, has partnered with Massachusetts 2020, an independent, not-for-profit organization focused on expanding educational and economic opportunities for children and families across Massachusetts. In 2004, Massachusetts 2020 launched the Expanded Learning Time Initiative with the goal of reforming the entrenched calendar of 180 6-hour days that was originally developed to serve the needs of a nineteenth century agrarian economy. The rationale behind the initiative is that the educational achievement gap will never be closed within the confines of the current school day and year because children, especially those at risk, need more time to achieve proficiency in the standards-based curriculum that now defines public education. The initiative also sought to add more time for enrichment programs that are often squeezed out of the school day in favor of core academic subjects and for professional development for teachers.

Massachusetts 2020 began funding planning grants to schools throughout Massachusetts who wanted to expand school time. In 2006, the Massachusetts State Legislature appropriated \$6.5 million to fund a grant program for schools interested in pursuing and expanded day or year. This enabled ten schools across five districts to open in September 2006 with a day at least two hours longer than the previous school year. These schools were provided with an additional \$1,300 per student to cover the additional resources required for a longer school day.

The appropriation also funded an additional 29 districts to partake in the planning process of exploring whether and how they will expand schedules for schools in their communities. In all, 75 percent of the grants will go to districts where 25 percent or more of their students are eligible for free or reduced price meals.

Districts that are awarded grants use the money to work with principals and school teams, collective bargaining units, and external partners of their choosing to develop an implementation plan for how to extend time and restructure the school day. The grant program allows each district to determine the staffing, schedule, budget, and program options that best fit its local context and goals. All districts that develop approvable implementation plans are eligible for state funding to establish Expanded Learning Time schools, pending state appropriation.

The Office of School District Intervention manages the Expanded Learning Time to Support Student Success Initiative (ELT). This office provides guidance for the planning and implementation of ten ELT schools. The Office works in partnership with Massachusetts 2020 to oversee and assist the conversion of a number of schools to a school schedule that is 30% longer. Massachusetts 2020 provides technical assistance to the current schools as well as to some districts and schools interested in adding time to their school day in the future. ELT is supported by an Advisory Board of leaders in the education, philanthropic, and public policy arenas.

## Resources

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