

How Can State Education Agencies Support District Improvement?

**A Conversation
Amongst
Educational
Leaders,
Researchers, and
Policy Actors**

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The Education Alliance at Brown University

The Education Alliance, a department at Brown University, promotes educational change to provide all students equitable opportunities to succeed. We advocate for populations whose access to excellent education has been limited or denied. Since 1975, The Education Alliance has partnered with schools, districts, and state departments of education to apply research findings in developing solutions to educational challenges. We focus on district and school improvement with special attention to underperformance and issues of equity and diversity. The Education Alliance designs and delivers expert services around planning, professional learning, and research and evaluation.

The Education Alliance's Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Support and Capacity Building Program provides support and technical assistance to states and districts towards the development of aligned and cohesive systems of support for districts and schools. Through the CSR Support and Capacity Building Program, The Education Alliance offers a number of opportunities and resources for states, districts, and schools working toward inclusive and sustainable school improvement. For additional information, please visit The Education Alliance's web site (www.alliance.brown.edu/improvement) or the CSR Support and Capacity Building Web site (www.alliance.brown.edu/projects/csrqi).

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Introduction

Why this conversation?

Over the past forty years, the federal government, state and local education agencies, districts, and schools have directed a significant amount of time, effort, and resources towards identifying and implementing practices and strategies that will improve students' academic achievement. The most recent iteration of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, is the latest effort by the federal government to provide the accountability mechanisms and tools needed to improve student performance in districts and in schools. The NCLB Act of 2001 is based on the assumption that the use of annual and strict state-specific accountability measures, public disclosure of district and school performance, and the enforcement of tiered sanctions for not meeting achievement expectations will mobilize states, districts, and schools to employ strategies, structures, and systems that will in turn serve students better.

These accountability expectations have identified schools and districts whose students are not performing as well as expected, based on state assessments and other current measures of student performance. It was expected that the public identification and disclosure of low-performance, coupled with sanctions and supports, would provide the incentive for districts and schools to seek out and employ research-based and innovative practices that have been developed and marketed by vendors, NGOs, and governmental agencies as means to improve the performance of underperforming students, schools and districts. However, the reality is that in many cases these well-intended and often well-researched interventions have not led to dramatic improvements in school performance and in students' academic achievement. Instances of significant improvement are few and the number of schools and districts requiring dramatic improvement continues to grow.

Why, despite over 40 years of effort from educational leaders and organizations from across the multi-level system of public education, as well as the emergence and implementation of standards-based education, do so many of our districts and schools continue to have difficulty in meeting the needs of all students?

Over time, many provocative conversations, articles, books and meetings have provided numerous "answers" to this and other questions, yet the quest continues for sustained, systemic school and district improvement to meet the learning needs of all students. This report and the conversations that spurred this report, while unlikely to be the last word in addressing these issues, is our contribution to the dialogue.

The Need for Cross-stakeholder and Cross-sector Conversation

There is a growing body of research, confirmed by our own practical experience working with states and districts across the eastern seaboard, that the system of public education is fragmented and lacks cohesiveness. There is no entity to “blame” for this fragmentation. The fact that the fragmentation exists suggests that there is an opportunity to dramatically improve the system of public education by fostering coherence and aligning structures and processes within and across levels of the system.

What do we mean by and see as evidence of the lack of cohesiveness? With the government’s new expectation that states develop an effective “state system of support” for improved teaching and learning, we see state education agencies striving to provide support to schools, yet struggling to balance and negotiate these support efforts with federal requirements to monitor districts and schools for compliance; we see state officials struggling to find time to meet and constructively discuss how they can provide support to districts; we see districts and schools writing and submitting multiple plans for improvement to different state-level offices; we see schools and districts responding to what they perceive as contradictory policies and regulations; we see schools in which teachers continue to teach in isolation, and in which special education students or the growing numbers of English Language Learners are still spoken of as “others”; and we see communities whose confidence in their local schools and districts has greatly diminished. At the same time, we recognize that there are many state, district, and local school leaders, principals and teachers who are, in the midst of this new era of accountability, doing their best to find ways to more effectively support the opportunities and achievement of the students under their wing. And many of these passionate and expert educational leaders are providing excellent examples of how to build leadership capacity and increase coherence across the education system.

We are also finding that educational leaders and other members within and across each level of the system – federal, state, district, and school – each bring their own perspective on what ails the system. These differences in perspectives are unfortunately exacerbated due to the lack of opportunities for cross-role groups to collectively: (1) identify the central challenges facing them, and (2) consider and pursue the strategies and resources that will truly effect change for the better. If our system of public education is to flourish and move towards its goal of providing a high quality education for all students, then the knowledge and perspectives of leaders from each level of the system must be heard, valued, and collectively considered. In order to develop a meaningful assessment of schools’ and districts’ needs and provide the types and intensity of support required to address those needs, professionals and stakeholders at all levels of the system need to learn from each other. When forums and “dedicated space” for targeted conversations among individuals within and across the system is provided, there is an opportunity to share assumptions and issues, problem solve around a core issue or outcome, respond to changing circumstances, and reconcile policies and strategies. From such conversations could come efforts to work together more synergistically and harmoniously – in a word, coherently – in a way that leads to dramatic inroads into the common and specific challenges that are faced by schools and districts.

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The Shared Responsibility of States and Districts to Catalyze District Improvement

States and districts have important and pivotal roles to play in supporting school improvement. The NCLB Act of 2001 requires that state educational agencies assess district and school performance and subsequently identify and monitor those districts and schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress. When schools fail to improve student academic achievement, districts are responsible for developing an improvement plan and subsequently scaffolding support of increasing intensity and scope to schools at different stages of identification and need (e.g., schools identified for improvement, corrective action, planning for restructuring and engaging in restructuring). Furthermore, NCLB holds state education agencies responsible for developing a statewide system of support to assist and monitor identified districts and schools. As a result, state education agencies are now being asked to take on responsibilities and engage in work that differs considerably from their traditional responsibilities and patterns of interaction with districts and schools. In many instances, state education agencies are better suited to fulfill traditional roles such as monitoring, setting policy and regulations, and distributing funds (Lusi, 1997; Redding, 2007; Sunderman & Orfield, 2007). Some state education agencies lack the fiscal resources and technical know-how to provide such support to districts and schools (Dwyer, 2006; Lane & Gracia, 2005). Within this policy context, it is clear that states must make the transition from an emphasis on monitoring to an emphasis on actively catalyzing and supporting school and district improvement.

However, while much is known about the characteristics of effective districts and schools, there is a relative lack of information and research about how state education agencies can effectively design, support, and effect district improvement efforts, and how these agencies can differentiate and scale up improvement efforts in the growing number of districts that are failing to meet AYP expectations. States are grappling with the challenge of developing the leadership capacity needed to fulfill their new role as a provider of support to underperforming districts and schools, and it is this challenge that provided the focus for conversations during our symposium.

Engaging in the Conversation: Bringing Together Educational Stakeholders

In the summer of 2007, The Education Alliance and The Urban Education Policy program, both at Brown University, convened and co-hosted a two-day symposium entitled *Designing and Catalyzing Effective District Improvement: The Role of State Education Agencies*. We invited state education leaders, superintendents and district leaders, researchers, directors of non-profit organizations, and other educational actors deeply involved in district and school improvement efforts. Our goal was to create the space for these various educational leaders to share their experience and expertise regarding the challenges of engaging in significant improvement efforts across the system. Our intent was to create conditions for building and renewing relationships with colleagues, and to engage in collective problem solving with respect to these challenges.

If our system of public education is to flourish and move towards its goal of providing a high quality education for all students, then the knowledge and perspectives of leaders from each level of the system must be valued, heard, and collectively considered.

The development of leadership capacity in state education agencies is best understood as the transition from a rational and technical perspective, often characterized by a focus on compliance monitoring, reporting and making sure schools are doing what they are 'supposed' to do, to a systems perspective that presents leadership as an organizational quality and focuses support activities on providing contextualized assistance to districts and schools (Ogawa & Bossert, 2000). Building leadership capacity involves altering organizational structures and traditional ways of doing business so that state education agency leaders are able to learn from and with districts and schools engaged in improvement efforts. Ultimately, leadership capacity in state education agencies requires productive relationships with districts and schools. Leadership capacity is relational and can be measured by the extent to which the state agency and its leaders are able to engage in a learning process with districts and schools. (Lane & Gracia, 2005)

The intentional inclusion of multiple stakeholders was based on the premise that collectively defining the problem and considering potential practical and innovative solutions requires: (1) input from individuals with different perspectives and from multiple levels of the educational system, and (2) the time and opportunity to think deeply and critically about the challenges to scaling up district and school improvement efforts.

The two central questions guiding our conversations were:

How can states and state education agencies effectively design, support, and catalyze district improvement efforts?

Given that an increasing number of districts are being identified for improvement and corrective action, how can state education agencies strategically differentiate and scale up intervention and support strategies?

In addition, we focused the panel presentations and small and large group conversations around the following four themes:

Organizational Coherence

- How can state education agencies best be organized (e.g., through a certain configuration of state offices and different ways of working together) to leverage state and federal resources, catalyze district improvement, and provide effective support to targeted districts?

Effective Intervention and Support Strategies

- What types of state-level intervention and strategies do states utilize, and how are states making decisions about the effectiveness and use of these strategies?

Catalyzing Conditions

- What are the conditions and incentives needed to catalyze and support district improvement efforts?

Resource Allocation

- What is the level of resources needed to meaningfully support, assist, and catalyze change in underperforming districts?

To frame the various conversations we intentionally used the term “catalyze” to invoke the felt need to engage in something more dramatic than piecemeal improvement and to emphasize that intensive and continuous effort by educational leaders from across the system is needed to make dramatic improvements. By bringing various stakeholders together we were hoping that the term “catalyze” might spark the notion that new (or existing, yet untapped) state- and/or district-specific strategies and policies could act as a catalyst for significant and dramatic change in districts and schools. Such innovative strategies and policies might involve the leveraging of resources and the coordination of actions to improve the

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entire system, rather than the use of isolated and often uncoordinated improvement efforts that attend to one portion of the system to the detriment of the whole. We also encouraged participants to think beyond existing strategies, and to consider policies and ways of working together that would produce the conditions needed to catalyze dramatic improvement efforts, and to do so at scale. We focused on the term “coherence” to suggest that an education system in which the various levels of the system are working in harmony and synergistically rather than at odds with one another will be better suited and able to address the collective challenges facing states, districts, and schools.

From Innovative Ideas to Catalyzing Strategies, Policies, and Actions: Organization of Our Symposium and of this Report

As a starting point, we convened four separate panels representing four different stakeholder groups to address the central questions of district improvement, giving everyone the opportunity to hear each perspective. The questions asked of each panel were:

What do we mean by “district improvement”?

What are the central challenges to district improvement?

What role (can, do, should) state education agencies play with regard to district improvement?

As one would expect, each stakeholder group – state leaders, district leaders, researchers, and other educational actors – saw the central challenges differently, responding with differing views of the role that state education agencies could play to more effectively supporting district improvement. A summary of their major points and opinions in this regard are presented in the section titled *Perspectives of Educational Leaders*.

Using these panels as a springboard, we then convened several *cross-role* and *role-alike* small groups to discuss how they viewed the central challenges facing states and districts in catalyzing district improvement efforts and the potential of strategies to impact these efforts. The purpose of the *cross-role* conversation was for different stakeholder groups to share their perspectives regarding the essential questions and themes of the symposium and to consider the challenges to, and potential ideas for, catalyzing significant improvement efforts across the system. The purpose of the *role-alike* small groups was to give each stakeholder group the opportunity to reconsider what they perceived as the central challenges facing states and districts in their improvement efforts, and to collectively consider potentially new and innovative strategies, policies, and resources to significantly impact district improvement efforts.

We present the key ideas and insights from these multiple conversations in two sections of this document, *Insights and Themes from the Cross-Role Conversations* and *Insights and Themes from the Role-Alike Conversations*. In each of these sections, we draw attention to a number of cross-cutting themes, such as the need for more

alignment between state supports and district needs, the overall lack of fiscal and human capacity, especially within state education agencies, and a need for improved communication among state leaders, district leaders, researchers, and other educational actors. While a number of cross-cutting themes arose, participants' understanding of how to address these issues differed. Drawing from the panel discussions and the breakout group discussion, we provide a set of *Points of Agreement, Disagreement, and Distinction* that illustrates the various points of agreement and points of distinction among the various groups with respect to the state role in district improvement.

The conversations held over our two-plus days together were rich and thought-provoking, and demonstrated the power of cross-role discussions. This report begins with *A Summary of the Conversation* that forefronts the key ideas and themes of the conversation and offers a snapshot of the conversations and thinking that emerged from different parties. The summary presents broad areas of agreement and considerations of promise and suggests starting points for the even deeper conversations that are needed to inform state actions and broader policy decisions that can make a real difference for children's experience of school.

While the broad areas of agreement and considerations of promise illustrate participants' shared understanding of the issues and challenges facing states and districts in this work, it is important to acknowledge that different and distinct narratives, or ways of defining problems and potential solutions, continue to exist among the various constituencies. The existence of these different narratives provides an opportunity to build more effective practice, as they each contain valued perspectives and expertise. However, differing narratives are also a challenge, if we continue to allow different perspectives and experiences within the system to exist in isolation and not inform each other. What was clear to all involved in the symposium 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. Instead, we need to develop and utilize systems-based processes that involve accessing and transferring expertise and experience across the different levels of the system, and subsequently mobilize this collective expertise into specific and feasible strategies and policy alternatives that indeed *can* "catalyze" significant improvement.

We invite readers to engage with these areas of agreement and considerations of promise towards the goal of developing a cohesive and aligned system of public education — a system that serves all students, that engages adults as learners, and will lead to improved outcomes for all.

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A Summary of the Conversation

How can states and state education agencies effectively design, support, and catalyze district improvement efforts?

Given that an increasing number of districts are being identified for improvement and corrective action, how can state education agencies strategically differentiate and scale up intervention and support strategies?

During our two-plus days together, participants engaged in many lively discussions – in small groups, large groups, in pairs, trios, and tables during breakfast, lunch and dinner – about how states and districts might best work together to truly support district and school improvement. State and district leaders shared ideas and perspectives, often times grounded by their experience in the public school system and the issues and constraints they face on a daily basis. The invited researchers and educational actors, as individuals somewhat removed from the day-to-day workings of state education agencies and districts and schools, shared perspectives and ideas not bounded by particular state or district contexts, although there was keen awareness that state and local policies have great influence over actions that might be taken. Overall, a number of issues and overarching areas of agreement across constituent groups rose to the surface. These areas of agreement, outlined on the following pages, provide an overview of the how participants understood the plethora of issue and challenges facing district and states. In addition to the areas of agreement, participants outlined a number of innovative ideas and strategies to leverage resources and catalyze improvement across districts and schools. These considerations of promise are a mix of strategies and innovations that states and districts have developed and are in the midst of implementing and other innovations and ways of thinking that are in the early stages of conceptualization. Like the areas of agreement, these considerations of promise are areas deserving of additional conversation and problem solving.

Areas of Agreement

A set of of cross-cutting Areas of Agreement emerged from the panel presentations and small and large group discussions. These areas of agreement suggest that there is a strong foundation from which to develop innovative and potentially catalytic solutions. They are as follows:

SEAs need a new organizational structure, a reorientation in their approach towards working with schools and districts, and greater expertise to effectively support districts and schools.

It was clear that state administrators felt that they needed to reconsider the ways that SEAs were organized and “do business” with districts, as it was clear that SEAs have traditionally been organized as monitoring and compliance bureaucracies, compartmentalized into various “silos” by department. In the words of one SEA official, “To the idea of lacking systemic focus or optimizing the subparts, we were clearly broken into silos and bunkers that were absolutely, hermetically sealed.” Many mentioned the need to break down the silo structures and create opportunities for SEA personnel to begin to collaborate on shared improvement efforts. Some SEA leaders, researchers, and external educational actors rallied behind the idea of creating a sub-unit (or multiple units) within the SEA that could operate independently and with greater autonomy. Such semi-autonomous units would be better able to respond to districts’ and schools’ needs effectively and quickly through targeted and coordinated support and technical assistance.

In addition to confronting the challenge of operating in silos, many participants asserted that the traditional organizational structure of SEAs did not enable SEAs to function as “service” entities that can effectively construct long-term and trusting relationships with districts to collaboratively tackle challenges at both the district and school levels.

There is a need for a shared focus, common language, and greater coherence.

Many participants across the different role groups voiced the need for greater coherence up and down the layers of the system, such as the federal government and SEAs, SEAs and districts, and districts and schools and individual classrooms. This includes having a shared focus on desired outcomes and a common language regarding the targeted goals of improvement efforts across states, federal and state legislatures, SEA offices, and district efforts.

In addition, district administrators were displeased with the overabundance of various mandates and compliance monitoring processes that, in many cases, were redundant and therefore stifled improvement efforts. They also asserted that these bureaucratic mandates and processes often required a great deal of their time, energy, and resources. One superintendent, speaking about SEAs, asked the following question: “If you’re not coherent, how can my district be coherent?”

There is a need to “right-size” the work.

The idea of “right sizing” the work emerged early in the discussions as a key issue to resolving core challenges at both the district and school levels. Participants framed the issue of “right sizing” the work in the following way: first, agreement on goals and objectives (e.g., about state supports and interactions with districts and schools); second, agreement on the core challenges to district and school improvement; and third, the appropriate allocation of resources within and across agencies (SEA, district, and others) to address these challenges directly. Another use of the term “right-size” was a reference to providing appropriate resources for smaller or mid-size districts that do not have access to the same fiscal, personnel, and other resources as larger

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districts. In this case, many participants across all roles commented on the value of SEAs helping to pool resources for use across several smaller and/or mid-size districts.

In addition, several participants mentioned that NCLB and Title I accountability regulations have resulted in the exponential growth in the number of schools and districts in need of improvement, corrective action, and restructuring, but without concomitant growth in SEA capacity. In many cases, the actual amount of funds available to SEAs to provide district and school improvement services has decreased. One view of this situation is that the work of SEAs is dramatically increasing while their resources (in terms of time, people, expertise, and finances) have remained the same. The other view of these circumstances is to reframe the challenge as finding ways to leverage the resources of SEAs to have a better impact on the system, such as working with districts that include schools in need of improvement (or corrective action or in restructuring) rather than working directly with the increasing number of individual schools throughout the state. This would be an example of “right-sizing” the work – using available resources to realistically engage in the work of improvement throughout the state.

There is a need to utilize timely and meaningful assessments of student achievement and performance.

Several of the superintendents asserted that timely and meaningful assessments must be utilized, and stated that many of the current state assessments are neither timely nor meaningful enough to influence and directly affect instruction. Other superintendents, researchers, and other educational actors also recommended that states or other parties could construct an array of assessment instruments that could be used by districts and schools to provide immediate and meaningful information and feedback directly to teachers.

Considerations of Promise

Several ideas resonated strongly with different stakeholders during the panel presentations, the small group discussions, and the large group conversations. These ideas – presented here as considerations of promise – are not necessarily points of agreement or consensus; rather, they are ideas that came up time and again as part of the problem but also as potentially innovative ideas that could lead to solutions.

Using the shared expertise of SEA officials and district leaders to jointly define what “district capacity” means, how to appropriately “diagnose” district capacity, and what might be the focus of efforts to build district capacity

In keeping with the theme of the symposium, a number of state officials discussed how they are in the process of developing potential frameworks for working with districts and examining issues related to the differentiation and provision of services to districts with varying levels of need. However, district participants and researchers voiced concern that states were developing tools for building capacity without full knowledge of the needs and context of districts. For example, one superintendent questioned the logic of states trying to develop differentiated

district (or school) improvement strategies without first having an accurate means of diagnosing the “health” of districts (beyond that currently measured by state assessments). If state and district officials had a shared understanding of what district capacity (and/or district improvement) truly meant, then perhaps district officials would be more willing to fully accept state support (and related planning requirements), and SEAs would be better situated to provide appropriate and differentiated support. While the concept of district capacity meant different things to symposium participants who work at different levels of this system, there was consensus about the need to define the idea of district capacity more clearly and identify how states could build such capacity.

Developing appropriate and differentiated services and supports for districts

Many of the superintendents, as well as researchers and educational actors, discussed the need to differentiate the services that are provided to districts dependent on factors such as size, capacity, and context (such as urban vs. non-urban districts). The difference in need between larger and smaller (or mid-size) districts was clear. Many superintendents pointed out that in many cases, larger districts have greater capacity in certain areas than the SEA; therefore, these districts can more directly, efficiently, and expediently attend to their specific needs than the state. For example, the creation of systems of formative and summative assessment was considered to be a manageable and meaningful task for larger districts because they can develop and implement assessments and return results to teachers more efficiently than SEAs. On the other hand, a number of SEA and district administrators and researchers suggested that this was also an example of how an SEA could support a group of smaller or mid-size districts if they did not have the necessary levels of capacity.

Another point of distinction that was frequently raised was the difference between challenges and issues that urban and non-urban districts face. While concerns related to poverty, race and ethnicity, and low expectations on the part of administrators and teachers for particular subgroups are not unique to urban versus non-urban school systems, how these issues are articulated and understood in their respective settings, and the impact of these issues on the ability of districts to engage in ongoing improvement efforts, may be different. All participants emphasized that issues related to race, class, and language were critical and that differences in context and local culture must be acknowledged when considering how to develop and implement appropriate supports. However, participants also recognized that existing state (and federal) policies may not allow for the differentiation of services based on local context.

Creating “safe zones for improvement”

Several SEA administrators mentioned the viability of creating “safe zones for improvement” by removing many of the barriers that have typically hindered various improvement efforts. In Massachusetts, for example, the state has constructed a set of agreements that will enable superintendents and principals in selected districts to make changes to certain factors that have previously stalled their efforts. One of those agreements, for example, is that school principals will be given full authority

over hiring and firing staff, unimpeded by union or school board politics. Many superintendents, as well as other educational actors, had voiced this particular concern – the power of unions to block various activities at the school or district level – as a central challenge to effective and expedient change in structures and practices needed to enable positive change.

In such cases, district administrators described their reliance on SEAs as a possible agent of support in their improvement and reform efforts. Many superintendents, researchers, and educational actors openly discussed how SEAs could possibly act as buffers against or mediators with regard to politically or legislatively driven expectations or mandates that may overwhelm districts rather than support targeted efforts.

Networking educational agents for improved capacity

SEA administrators indicated that they have limited expertise about exactly how to address some of the central challenges that impede district and school improvement efforts, and several district administrators (particularly those working in districts with limited resources and personnel) also indicated that they do not have the expertise or know-how to address their challenges. Given the limited levels of expertise and resources, as well as the continuing struggles of many districts to address their specific challenges, many state administrators are considering the idea that their role may be to facilitate networks of districts and external agents that can collectively and collaboratively address the shared challenges across districts and throughout the state.

State administrators from Massachusetts and Maryland described their efforts regarding the development and construction of networks of various district, SEA, and external technical assistance providers and experts to collectively and collaboratively address shared challenges across the state with particular focus on those districts and schools deemed to have the greatest need of assistance and support.

In Massachusetts, for example, the Department of School and District Improvement is constructing these networks and convening meetings of network participants from across the state to address common and shared challenges. In Maryland, the SEA has developed a framework for what they call their “Breakthrough Center,” which will be a network of SEA leaders, districts, and other educational actors and organizations that can readily support and collaborate with districts and schools in their improvement efforts, and therefore greatly expand the capacity of the SEA, districts, and schools.

These types of activities may greatly expand levels of SEA capacity. By utilizing the expertise of districts and other educational actors across the state, the support offered to districts and schools may no longer be limited to the actual personnel or organization of SEAs.

Broaden and deepen the political constituency

Finally, there was much discussion about the need to broaden and deepen the political constituency working towards educational improvement and reform. While many parents and some legislators are concerned with the current dilemmas and challenges facing our educational system, these concerns are not as widely

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embraced by the public and business or political constituents. Many of the issues and challenges that our educational community confronts cannot be realistically and effectively addressed by the work of educational actors, structures, and organizations alone. For example, significant concerns related to high rates of poverty and poor health were mentioned repeatedly as fundamental issues that have a negative impact on our children and our communities.

Therefore, many participants advocated for collective concern about the challenges that have significant impact on children, families, and communities nationwide and also deeper investment in the outcomes of our educational systems.

Perspectives of Education Leaders

**What do we mean by
“district improvement”?**

**What are the central challenges
to district improvement?**

**What role (can, do, should) state
education agencies play with
regard to district improvement?**

To help frame the small cross-role and role-alike conversations we had over the two days of the symposium, and to add to the diverse viewpoints of multiple constituents in our discussions, we convened four different stakeholder panels to provide us with their experience, thoughts, and reflections regarding the topic of “district improvement” and the role of State Education Agencies in catalyzing and supporting district improvement efforts.

The four panels convened were:

District Superintendents

State Education Leaders

Researchers

Other Educational Actors

Each panel was provided with a set of central questions from which to respond, but each panel member was also given the freedom to present and elaborate on the central issue of “district improvement” and the potential (if not, desired) role of SEAs to catalyze and support these efforts as they perceived it from their particular perspective.

The questions for each panel are presented below, followed by a synthesis of each panel’s responses and an overview of each panel’s main points, identification of central challenges, and specific recommendations to move forward.

Perspectives of Superintendents

The Symposium's first panel discussion included four superintendents of large, urban school districts who addressed central challenges of district wide school improvement in addition to the role that SEAs could, should, or currently play with respect to district improvement.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS

From your perspective, what are the central challenges impeding your district improvement efforts?

What should be the role of SEAs with regard to supporting improvement efforts in your district and districts throughout your state?

How can SEAs best support your work and enhance district capacity to improve student learning in schools that have been identified for improvement or corrective action?

- Which support strategies have contributed to your district improvement efforts?
- What are your suggestions for alternative state-level supports and intervention strategies that would better support your work?

PANELISTS

Dr. Basan Nembirkow, Brockton Public Schools

Dr. Jerry Weast, Montgomery Public Schools

Dr. James Williams, Buffalo Public Schools

RESPONDENT

Dr. Donnie Evans, Providence Public Schools

Synthesis of Superintendents Panel

A Need for System-wide Capacity

All district superintendents acknowledged that there is limited capacity at the state and local levels that leads to unpredictable levels of resources and challenges such as turnover among staff, limited funding, and a lack of political stability. Dr. Nembirkow commented, "While the DOE is ramping up expectations and ramping up particular needs of schools, they are downsizing the State Department of Education, leaving issues of capacity everywhere. When you change state superintendents and the staff is constant, they have to start all over again with their work and different policies." This is one example of how tensions between local schools and states can occur, making the need for more organizational capacity a priority.

Panelists alluded to the importance of understanding how rural and urban schools experience capacity differences and a need to “right size” the work to match school and district contexts and capacity. Panelists proposed that SEAs build strategic partnerships to extend the reach of resources available to schools. For instance, in Massachusetts, the state department and some local businesses formed a partnership to organize an accountability system in conjunction with the DOE to create a curriculum framework that helped address structural difficulties and incompatibilities in large and small school districts as a whole.

One superintendent in particular pointed out that districts and SEAs alike face many of the same capacity challenges and that they are not limited to one specific entity or another. It was suggested that both states and districts take maximum advantage of one another and utilize opportunities to get the job done.

The Need for a Deep Level of Coherence

Several panelists suggested the need for sequential communication and follow through both at the state and district levels to address clarity and coherence issues. Dr. Weast asked, “If SEAs aren’t coherent, how can a district be coherent?” In many states, superintendents agreed that there are instances where a school’s or district’s improvement efforts are out of focus or unaligned, and that this often results from a lack of strategic planning or involvement at the administrative level. To achieve coherence, participants argued, at least one entity has to be working with a school at all times and actors must develop and agree on a theory of action. “Theories of action don’t necessarily cause change but they start to create strategies at different levels that can be effective,” said Weast.

When contemplating coherence issues from a teacher’s perspective, the demands of NCLB have landed heavily on the shoulders of local schools and school boards rather than with district administration. Teachers and schools need to have a common understanding of what good instructional practice means. Emphasis was placed on developing a coherent curriculum and meaningful assessments that can help drive instruction as well as help principals understand the role of teachers. Strategic and collaborative thinking and planning were presented as key elements to achieving a well aligned school system.

“It’s kind of like an AWACS plane, the State, and we’re kind of like the little planes that fly at the next level down, and the troops on the ground are the teachers. If we don’t all get lined up, they [the teachers] will be hurt by friendly fire. It’s that simple, but it’s also that difficult,” added Weast.

Superintendents discussed various means in which coherence among states would begin to improve reform efforts in critical areas such as improved graduation rates, an established common language, clear certification standards, as well as a plan for handling an increasing population of immigrant students.

Political and Structural Constraints

Regarding governance and political infrastructure, superintendents voiced serious concerns and commented on the challenges of achieving the goals of NCLB. In New York for example, The Taylor Law, which ensures that expired or outdated contracts

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stay in place until new contracts are negotiated, and the 3020A law, which protects state employees from termination, have made it very difficult to make any substantive change in districts. Dr. Williams pointed out, “There is little incentive to renegotiate a new contract when you are operating under the same political structure.”

In response to panelists’ comments, symposium participants asked questions about SEAs potential to act as buffers to certain legislatively-driven policies or local politics that can sometime hinder district activities for the better. “They’re blockers, because when you talk about systemic change in our organizations, they block it.” Weast claimed that many times SEAs may not agree with the policies being delivered, yet they are mandated to follow through with regulations. “When we have private conversations with the state people, and they do talk to us, they complain to us, and then they apologize. I don’t really want to do this, but I’m mandated to do this.”

Each superintendent referred to various levels of power and specificity in which unions operate and the limitations they have experienced in working within their parameters. Dr. Evans described some of his union interactions in the following way: “Sometimes I feel as if I have to ask permission from the unions to go to the bathroom. It’s that extreme. And having to negotiate and work in that environment creates different challenges.”

Dr. Weast raised a point about the type of political coverage and context that is needed from union contracts. He would opt to “change the calendar and change the periods, and change the conditions of work.” He asserted that the school day and school year are too short and currently provide an insufficient amount of time to cover everything under NCLB and that more flexibility is necessary to create change.

Lastly, participants addressed union issues as well as laws and regulations at large. Political structure, similar to capacity issues, plays a considerable role in how urban versus non-urban schools operate. Dr. Evans concluded the discussion on an encouraging note: “There is a need to refocus laws and regulations particularly at the state level and to question the laws, why they are in existence and if they are still needed.”

Perspectives of District Superintendents

Overview of Main Points

CENTRAL THEMES

There is a need for system-wide capacity that:

- Meets the challenges posed by different types of districts (e.g. rural, suburban, urban)
- Provides SEAs with access to more predictable streams of resources (financial, human, and material)

There is a need for greater top-down and bottom-up coherence that exemplifies shared priorities such as:

- A common understanding of what good instructional practice means for teachers
- Consistent and accurate use of assessments related to curriculum and providing timely and meaningful feedback to teachers

There is a need for broader political support and will to make substantive changes such as:

- Eliminating outdated or expired contracts
- Identifying laws and regulations that positively or negatively affect the current status of the school system.

Challenges to District Improvement

Having and using assessments to provide timely and meaningful feedback to teachers;

Developing greater clarity about teacher preparation and quality;

Developing top-down and bottom-up coherence within states, from parents to teachers, schools to districts, and districts to state agencies;

Managing existing structures and developing new frameworks that strike a balance between capacity and the equitable allocation of resources;

The impact of political structures, such as teachers' unions or certain regulations that have too broad an influence.

Recommendations

Develop assessment instruments and tools for teachers that are aligned with the curriculum and that can help them to differentiate their instruction in a timely and meaningful manner;

Bring multiple stakeholders together to share and discuss problems related to capacity and resources, and create partnerships to collaboratively and strategically develop plans, anticipate problems, and identify potential solutions. States and districts need to listen to each other to become more coherent and collaborative.

Develop procedures and processes to maintain leadership stability within the SEA and at the district level but also allow for flexibility when needed. Assure competencies at the SEA and district levels that reflect stability while also remaining flexible.

Review laws and regulations for accuracy and applicability and lessen the authority of union contracts by including professional associations in discussions about school-wide reform.

Perspectives of State Education Agency Leaders

The three individuals on this panel presented leadership perspectives about central challenges impeding district improvement at State Education Agencies. The panelists spoke from personal experience in their roles as Deputy Chancellor (Iris Wilson), State Administrator (Lise Zeig) and former Assistant State Commissioner (Dr. James Butterworth), respectively.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS

From your perspective, what are the central challenges impeding district improvement?

Based on your experience, how can (or how could) SEAs most effectively support and build district capacity to assist schools that have been identified for improvement or corrective action?

- Which types of state-level support and intervention strategies have positively contributed to district improvement efforts?
- What are your ideas for alternative state-level strategies that could truly catalyze district improvement efforts across multiple districts and schools?

What are the primary challenges that are impeding the design and implementation of effective strategies to support district improvement efforts? How is your organization addressing these challenges?

PANELISTS

Dr. James Butterworth, State University at Albany

Iris Wilson, Florida State Department of Education

Lisa Zeig, Massachusetts Department of Education

Synthesis of State Education Leaders Panel

Building Capacity Through Collaboration in the SEA and beyond the SEA

All panelists addressed implications for capacity shifts at the state and district levels. There was a consensus on the need to create open and dedicated space for communication within departments and collaborating with districts and outside professional organizations to strengthen levels of leadership capacity in any given state.

Dr. Butterworth referred to Edward Deming's Total Quality Management principal and the "optimization of subparts" as a premise to understanding how models are necessary to follow in any organization. Yet many current school administration models are still "outmoded." Participants addressed the notion that SEAs should be working together synergistically and systemically to produce radical change in the school improvement process, and that all too frequently, the models do not match the size of the school system. Another consideration was that "districts are often looking for a

‘magic bullet’” and that “they are stuck on incremental rather than deep change,” said Butterworth. There was a focus on learning new ways of problem solving as well as understanding the context in which problems arise. Also, paying attention to the number of initiatives that are in place and evaluation of fragmentation within a system were notable concerns when considering the overall infrastructure of schools.

An example of a change made to the physical, organizational space at the State Department in Florida led to more internal collaboration in a relatively short period of time, according to Ms. Wilson. Attributing the change to forward-thinking leadership within the building, the idea of moving people in similar roles to sit on the same floor, near their peers and colleagues has made the SEA “more collaborative.” Feedback from superintendents to the state has been, “We’re glad you’re talking amongst each other so that when we get information, it makes sense to us because you’ve talked,” said Wilson.

In addition to communicating internally at the SEA level, the idea of fostering “communities of practice” and “professional learning communities” between SEAs and high- and low-performing districts was suggested as a way to stimulate conversations as well as identify benchmarks for strong systems and share them with one another.

In Massachusetts for example, partnerships such as these have already been discussed as part of a large scale planning process at the state department according to Ms. Zieg. As she put it, “What we’re contemplating is having a set of geographically based educational service centers that bring folks together who are able to provide some central resources. Taking people who are knowledgeable in the math arena for example, and putting them together in these educational services cooperatives would support a range of districts, who could then pull from these partnerships to get the kinds of training and resources they need.”

Zieg continued to say that SEAs are “in a position to be able to see across districts. We are clearly in a better position for bringing districts together, to try to problem solve around certain cross cutting issues. I see this as an activity that SEAs can engage in. Part of what we want is to be in a collaborative relationship with the districts, to be able to think about what it takes to do this job that nobody’s done before. We know there are lots of things that each district needs to address, and doing it alone is inefficient, and probably won’t get the best results.”

Existing partnerships within Massachusetts have already been assisting SEAs by conducting classroom observations and working with school and teacher teams to gauge professional development practice and trends as a means of providing summative assessment data that goes beyond MCAS testing.

One participant cautioned that expectations for collaborative partnerships should be realistic and that an essential, initial goal of the group should be focused on design and identification of best practices in each geographic part of the state. The design, in turn, has a profound impact on the level of coherence a state can expect and the process itself is a lengthy one in which Massachusetts is proposing a three- or four-year strategic plan.

“I’m a firm believer you can’t say what a need is unless you’ve been to a school and seen it. So that means you have to be in the schools, you have to meet with district staff that will be supporting the school, but you also have to meet with the principal and the teachers.”

Creating Coherence between SEAs and LEAs

At various points throughout the panel discussion, participants consistently commented on the limited number of staff available to serve the needs of schools, and said that this shortage was linked to driving coherence levels at the state and district levels. Many participants agreed that the more time state department personnel spend outside the

state department and inside of schools and districts, the more coherent and symbiotic a system becomes.

Ms. Wilson reflected on the situation by saying, "I'm a firm believer you can't say what a need is unless you've been to a school and seen it. So that means you have to be in the schools, you have to meet with district staff that will be supporting the school, but you also have to meet with the principal and the teachers." One way to ensure coherence is for staff members to be aligned with schools based on the school's curriculum need. In Florida, for example, an additional state employee is paired with schools to handle State Board requirements and ensure compliance via monthly written reports to the State Board. This individual develops a unique working relationship with the school because he or she voices valuable information back to the state that ultimately results in gaining access to professional development and critical resources.

Another challenge discussed in this session was the issue of poverty and the standards in which states have to abide. States need to be proactive when enlisting the support of local community-based organizations as well as thinking proactively about technology supports that can be added to classrooms for students who may not be thinking about a college education, but rather finding employment after graduation. Each of these factors in their own right can help lead to stronger levels of coherence between states and districts.

Perspectives of State Education Agency Leaders

Overview of Main Points

CENTRAL THEMES

There is a need to create professional relationships and collaborative partnerships within and across SEAs and districts to build capacity in the following ways:

- Foster a forward-thinking school improvement approach within and across SEA departments to breakdown silos and change outdated mental mindsets;
- Confer, advise, and develop strategic designs and strategies for improvement;
- Establish professional learning communities that enable SEAs and districts to share common practices, experiences, and resources with one another.

There is a need for improved coherence between SEAs and districts that leads to:

- Stronger alignment of school staff and curriculum needs
- Targeted professional development that directly responds to schools' and teachers' needs, including the targeting of resources that schools receive

Challenges

SEA departments operate as silos; there is little collaboration or communication across departments and districts;

It is difficult for SEAs to provide technical assistance to districts when their role has primarily and typically been to monitor compliance;

SEAs have difficulty hiring the right people to do the work of supporting district improvement.

Recommendations

Engage in collaborative discussion with districts to establish common expectations in areas of need that will assist in strategic planning, design of strategies, and the allocation of resources;

Develop partnerships and professional learning communities with external organizations and consultants to broaden the reach of SEAs and provide greater depth of services to support district improvement;

Staff local area facilitators who live in a specific district and can visit schools within the area on a daily basis to work with teachers, look at data, and support the school in whatever ways possible regarding professional development and access to resources.

Perspectives of Researchers

This panel consisted of three highly experienced researchers in the field who addressed issues within the following themes: Political and Structural Constraints, Capacity and Resources, and Context and Differentiation. Panelists offered possible solutions or initial steps to approaching the problems related to these themes within SEAs across the nation.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS

Based on your research and work with various stakeholders, what are the central challenges impeding district improvement efforts?

Given your research and experience, which state-level strategies have the most promise and potential to build district capacity and bring district improvement efforts to scale?

What are the central challenges limiting the ability of SEAs to design and implement district improvement strategies? How are SEAs addressing these challenges?

PANELISTS

Dr. Angela Minnici, Center on Education Policy

Dr. Jennifer O’Day, American Institute for Research

Dr. Gail Sunderman, The Civil Rights Project

Synthesis of Researchers Panel

Incoherence and Instability of the System

The main issue discussed was the increased demands placed on SEAs that created tensions between roles and responsibilities. On the one hand, SEAs have a political and bureaucratic function in attending to, and fulfilling, state and federal policies and on the other hand, they provide technical and professional services to districts and schools to support teaching and learning. The impediments that districts face are a direct result of the inability of SEAs to find a balance between these two functions. On top of balancing these functions, it is necessary for states to align realistic and meaningful goals with those that the NCLB accountability system requires. As Dr. Sunderman put it: “There are a couple of things that I think states need to do. The first is to balance the accountability goals with worthwhile performance goals.” She added, “A clear result of this imbalance is evidenced by SEAs designing and implementing policies that are not aligned with the needs of their districts and that also pay no attention to what has been proven useful in practice. Dr. O’Day added her perspective by saying, “So we talk about being results oriented, but in fact when it comes right down to it, because the policies come out of a political environment and political negotiation, they, in fact are not results oriented the way that we would like our schools and our systems to be.”

The fact that SEAs change unpredictably often does not help the situation either. She added, “The changes in policies, the changes in superintendents, and the difficulty in that kind of unstable environment [does not allow us] to really see progress over time.”

According to Dr. Sunderman, the way that SEAs are currently organized contributes to the imbalance as well. “If you look at what state agencies have developed, it’s a structure and expertise that allows them to interpret and implement rules and regulations, and monitor districts for compliance.” Participants proposed that in order for SEAs to begin to properly address the needs of their districts they must be re-structured in a way that is not fueled by the accountability required under No Child Left Behind, but rather driven by a much more practical approach to solving the problems of districts.

In order to begin implementing some degree of change, as recommended by an individual on another panel, all entities must be united under a common understanding of the condition of the state system. “When you think about needing stability of leadership, I completely agree, I think what was trying to be communicated was we all need to share a sense of urgency.”

Limited Capacity and Limited Resources

The first issue that most SEAs struggle with is having a limited amount of intellectual and human resources at hand. Panelists added that some SEAs rely heavily upon outside help to tackle their needs, but in most cases, these groups cannot address all of the needs that states may have. “In terms of central capacity issues, states are telling us ... we don’t have sufficient numbers of staffing and we don’t have the right staff to do the job that we need to do,” said Dr. Minnici. States not only lack the proper staff to assist at-risk schools, but they also lack the resources to properly assess the effectiveness of the policies when they are in practice, as well as the effectiveness of strategies and programs that are aimed at improving performance.

Without the resources to properly assess these policies and strategies, the ability of states to develop effective models is compromised. Many districts are, more or less, left to assess these programs themselves, and from that, draft an improvement plan. This leads to the challenge, as described by one SEA official, that, “We think that this is really having an effect on improving schools, but we’re not sure. We don’t have the capacity to evaluate the strategies that we’re [implementing].” This insecurity leaves them questioning which direction to take and whether or not that will lead them down a path of improvement.

SEAs must be restructured in a manner that addresses these organizational and capacity issues.

Contemplating this thought, Dr. O’Day added, “If there aren’t enough people and there aren’t enough resources, [and] people are spread too thin, can they really do the things that we’re asking them to do? So I guess one of the things I asked is can they be re-organized in a way to be effective, given the constraints of the SEAs as well?” The ability of a state to properly assess its policies and programs becomes questionable because of the limited amount of individuals working for the state.

States not only lack the proper staff to assist at-risk schools, but they also lack the resources to properly assess the effectiveness of the policies when they are in practice, as well as the effectiveness of strategies and programs that are aimed at improving performance.

Considering these constraints, will it be possible to restructure the current system to effectively work with what they have?

In finding a balance between accountability goals and performance goals, schools must have greater capacity to reach these heightened goals and standards that are set by their SEAs. States that were functioning under accountability systems prior to the implementation of NCLB demonstrated that they were initially able to meet the needs of two to four percent of their schools that were earmarked for improvement. “Over time, they [the SEAs] scaled back their programs to meet this sort of state capacity level,” said Dr. Sunderman. Now, however, the increase in state standards under NCLB legislation correlates with the number of schools falling in the category of “in need of improvement.” Their states do not have the capacity nor the resources to assist the schools to perform at the level they should be.

Lack of Effective Models of Support and Differentiated Services

Few models of state support of districts exist. This leads to the replication of previously ineffective strategies, as well as the legislation of previously effective local strategies (which may or may not be effective in different contexts) into state policy. “The fact of the district as a manager of a whole lot of different schools doesn’t really come into play,” which becomes highly problematic for those seeking change, but unable to realize it through the execution of unilateral policies.

An element of this ineffective policy design is the evaluation of programs currently in place. When programs are evaluated, it is the end results that are given the most attention, rather than focusing more on the implementation and varying stages of the program. In order for states to understand what works and under what contexts, a much deeper and thorough measure of these programs is required. “Doing more of that could be helpful both in terms of the implementation of policies that originate at the state, and in terms of helping districts out,” said Dr. O’Day. This can be considered an issue of capacity, but is most importantly recognized as an issue of differentiation because of the importance of learning how to implement these policies and strategies in an effective, but varying manner, in multiple districts.

A problem with NCLB requirements was that states were collecting massive amounts of data which were not necessarily useful for districts. Federal law required this, but they were not the kind of data that could help drive improvement. “You’ve got all of these federal requirements and you have to keep focused on what kind of data are going to be really useful for schools and districts,” said Dr. Sunderman. In understanding the importance of differentiation and the accumulation of significant data, effective policies can be put in place.

Ultimately, this issue of differentiation is important for the federal level as well. Dr. Sunderman commented that federal legislators “...want to legislate a model that can be used in every state for all districts.” She added, “To think that every State Department of Education should have the same role with every single school district in the state, I think, is a fallacy, and I think the research shows that that’s not the most effective model.” A “one size fits all” approach ignores the importance of understanding that not all states, as well as their entities, function in the same manner and under the same contexts.

When programs are evaluated, it is the end results that are given the most attention, rather than focusing more on the implementation and varying stages of the program. In order for states to understand what works and under what contexts, a much deeper and thorough measure of these programs is required.

Additional Issues

It was noted that many schools that are in need of improvement clearly are dealing with challenges of poverty, race and health, but that these issues still have not been addressed.

Dr. O'Day elaborated on this point by saying, "Issues of poverty and health and so forth...it's not proper to talk about somehow. And yet, if we don't start figuring out how to deal with those things, we can't really solve the problems in many of our high-poverty, low-performing schools. Issues of race and class were not invented by schools, but schools do mirror those issues."

Perspectives of Researchers

Overview of Main Points

CENTRAL THEMES

The nature of the system is characterized by ongoing instability, which leads to:

- Varying roles and an inability to attain a middle-ground within them and
- A system that needs reorganizing;

There is limited capacity and resources, primarily but not exclusively within state education agencies, including:

- Limited numbers in staffing and limited “intellectual capital” about how to improve districts and schools and an inability to leverage existing expertise within the system
- The inability (on the part of the SEA and some districts) to assess the effectiveness of current programs and policies as they relate directly to district and school improvement and student performance
- A lack in the capacity of schools to respond to and meet accountability requirements;

There is a misunderstanding about differentiation, characterized by:

- The absence of effective models and strategies
- Insufficient evaluation of programs leading to an inability to differentiate strategies among districts and schools
- Collection of meaningless/inapplicable data

There are concerns about the continued inability of the education system as a whole to fully acknowledge and address issues related to race/ethnicity, poverty, and health.

Challenges

The dual role of SEAs as monitoring agents and providers of assistance is causing a great deal of chaos for these organizations, particularly given rapidly increasing numbers of schools and districts in need of improvement;

The instability of SEA leadership as well as policies that are not aligned with needs of districts or with “proven practice” adds to the difficulty of progressively providing districts with what they need;

The lack of capacity (both human and intellectual) makes it difficult for SEAs to provide districts with sufficient and differentiated supports;

Issues related to race/ethnicity, poverty, and health

Recommendations

Create a model that brings individuals together to collectively solve problems, and perhaps limit the presence of SEA personnel during these sessions;

Restructure the role of SEAs to:

- “Develop within the state agency a unit that provides intervention services”
- “... leverage regional and other services within the state. The development of networks and relationships and partnerships...there’s a lot of service providers within a state that can be leveraged and managed”;

Decentralize SEA services and the delegate functions to smaller offices, which would improve the levels of communication with local offices.

Improve data collection and reporting systems, including dissemination strategies; this can lead to enhanced program evaluation and provide districts with timely and meaningful information about the strengths and weaknesses of their educational programs;

Create more inter-state communication to discuss and share strategies for improvement;

Help schools and districts figure out how they can work with other agencies and community-based organizations to address issues that are related to race/ethnicity, poverty, and health.

Perspectives of Educational Actors

This panel of educational actors was comprised of individuals who were neither SEA leaders nor district administrators, but individuals who, in their past and current work, have been involved in various large-scale reform and educational improvement efforts either at the state, district, and/or national level. Given their past and current experience, they were asked to present “bold and innovative ideas” to catalyze state and district improvement efforts as they saw the challenges, tensions, and possibilities from their perspectives. Due to the makeup of the panelists and their task, the dialogue focused less on barriers to district improvement and centered on how states and districts can organize to mobilize change. The panel discussed their work experience and respective organizations as a starting point for change.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS

How can SEAs best catalyze and support district improvement efforts, especially with respect to those districts targeted for support?

How should the challenges to SEAs’ efforts (e.g., issues related to organizational coherence, capacity issues, and resources) be addressed, and by whom?

PANELISTS

Andrew Calkins, Mass Insight Education and Research Institute

Jacquelyn Davis, New Leaders for New Schools

Sandi Jacobs, National Council on Teacher Quality

Synthesis of Educational Actors Panel

Innovative Ideas

In response to generating ideas that have potential to catalyze district improvement, each panelist spoke of a different avenue where change could be enacted. The ideas presented were offered to combat several barriers to district improvement, including lack of capacity and resources, political and structural constraints, and lack of coherence and alignment among state and district efforts. The bold and innovative ideas presented can be categorized into three distinct approaches: (1) conceptual shift in thinking about school reform, (2) outsourcing services to build human capital, and (3) redefining the state’s role in school improvement processes.

Conceptual Shift in Thinking

To shift thinking around school reform, participants proposed a model to show how people can begin to shift their thinking about school reform, suggesting that the field has made progress in this area. However, the job is not complete according to Mr. Calkins who claims, “They’re basically moving from a model where it’s all about what’s being taught, to a model where it’s all about what’s being learned.”

The model, termed the “Readiness Triangle,” has three components: readiness to teach, readiness to learn, and readiness to act. The framework is expected to be child centered and orient all work around students’ readiness to learn. Contrary to a “conveyor belt” model where students are locked into a track, the Readiness Triangle ensures a more equitable and accommodating approach to student learning.

The Readiness Triangle states a set of operating conditions which details how states, districts, and partners should function, though all conditions were not specified within the panel presentation. It was suggested that states create subunits or a new public private partnership that is designed to have flexibility at the school level. It was suggested that districts develop a subunit as well, however, designed to work in the turnaround zone. Lastly, partners need to connect and support states’ and districts’ improvement efforts. “So we need a whole new setup of lead partner organizations that are charged by the school district with aligning and integrating the work of other partners. So: new structures and then new conditions that are established by state policy,” said Calkins.

Contrary to a “conveyor belt” model where students are locked into a track, the Readiness Triangle ensures a more equitable and accommodating approach to student learning.

Outsourcing Services

Outsourcing services or contracting external agencies to provide services where states, districts, and schools do not have capacity to do so was suggested as an innovative approach. Ms. Davis noted that much of district improvement is about human capital and therefore outsourcing may be more necessary than innovative, yet a feasible solution to ineffective reform efforts. “The systems don’t work. If you’re looking at the district perspective where I come from, I always say every single vector that touches a school building is broken,” said Davis. Participants asked questions about how external partners can be engaged to help make the work move quickly and effectively. Outsourcing components of district improvement efforts to partners was discussed as a viable, albeit short-term, solution to lack of capacity at the state level to provide the services needed. This option is expected to provide consistency and accountability, rather than common and standardized approaches.

Redefining the State’s Role

Ms. Jacobs took another approach that focused on changes in the states’ role to catalyze district improvements. “But what we did find is that state policy, at the most basic level, really creates a lot of barriers and obstacles,” said Jacobs. Through examination of national policies that effect teachers and teacher quality, several recommendations were provided. Among these include: annual evaluation of teachers, a classroom component to teacher evaluation, evidence of student learning as part of teacher evaluation, a state policy that sets a minimum standard, a longer probationary period, performance pay, flexibility around pay rate that meets the local needs, alternative routes to certification, and opportunities for career switchers. In closing, Jacobs remarked, “We have a lot of states spending a lot of time reinventing a lot of wheels in the name of local control and local context.”

Panelists suggested removing barriers to certification and developing assessment and curriculum were state-level recommendations. Ms. Davis responded, “But if states effectively took that work on and got a full alignment of curriculum standards, interim and diagnostic assessments, I think a lot of low-capacity districts would benefit.” Steps to alignment at the state level indicate the need to refine the state’s role.

Perspective of Educational Actors

Overview of Main Points

CENTRAL THEMES

There is a need for a reform model that shifts from considering “what is taught” to “what is learned” that includes:

- Moving to a framework that is student-centered, and includes consideration of students’ “readiness to learn”
- Creating operating conditions where states, districts, and partners collaborate on this model;

Create partnerships among SEAs, districts, and with external partners that can better serve the needs of schools and districts, by:

- Outsourcing to external agents those services that districts and/or states are unable to perform, provided that external agents are more capable of providing the services
- Creating partnerships with agencies that have greater capacity (e.g., intellectual and otherwise) to attend to state and district challenges;

Redefine the role of the state to catalyze district improvement, reduce common barriers or obstacles to improvement, and create statewide supports by:

- Removing barriers to certification
- Developing interim and diagnostic assessments that can be readily used by teachers, schools, and districts.

Challenges

Current reform models continue to focus on a “conveyor belt” model of schooling (moving all kids along) rather than a more student-centered model of schooling (identifying the individual needs of each child and differentiating the resources required to support him or her in their learning);

Many districts lack the capacity to effectively engage in various organizational practices that effectively serve these districts and their schools;

Building top-down and bottom-up coherence within states, from parents to teachers, schools to districts, and districts to state agencies.

Many state policies (e.g. those with regard to teacher quality and teacher evaluation) actually serve as barriers and obstacles to educational improvement.

Recommendations

Create subunits within or apart from the SEA comprised of several public-private partnerships that are designed to be flexible in serving the true needs of schools and districts based on the capacity and intellectual know-how of these partnerships;

Contract with external agencies to outsource services that schools and districts as well as the state do not have the capacity to provide, particularly to support smaller districts or districts that have higher levels of need;

Revise antiquated or inappropriate state policies that hinder improvement, and remove structural constraints to improved services;

Review laws and regulations for accuracy and current applicability and lessen the authority of union contracts by including professional associations to help make school-wide reform decisions.

Insights and Themes from the Cross-Role Conversations

**What are the central challenges
impeding district improvement
efforts?**

**How can SEAs best catalyze and
support district improvement efforts?**

On the afternoon of the first day of the symposium, small cross-role groups convened to reflect on what they heard during the panel discussions, discuss the central challenges impeding district improvement efforts, and discuss how SEAs can best catalyze and support district improvement efforts. While the discussions were far-reaching, there was significant consensus across the different groups regarding several common themes.

Organizational Coherence

Symposium participants, regardless of their role within the educational system (i.e., district superintendents, SEA leaders, educational researchers, and policy actors), agreed that their states do not have coherent, coordinated, and comprehensive systems of technical assistance. Participants pointed to a number of factors contributing to the lack of coherence and alignment in the support offered by states to districts, including:

- The lack of communication and collaboration within SEAs and between SEAs and districts;
- The difficulty of adjusting the role of SEAs from compliance monitor to provider, or at least broker, of technical assistance;
- The challenges SEAs face with regard to balancing local autonomy with more directive intervention as they work with struggling districts;
- Insufficient models and knowledge about SEA support for school/district improvement; and
- A lack of shared goals, expectations and clearly defined roles and responsibilities at all levels.

Achieving organizational coherence within SEAs entails both structural and cultural shifts. Symposium participants addressed both dimensions when discussing what could be done to achieve greater coherence and alignment. SEA leaders identified the need to be proactive in changing their internal organizational culture to: 1) focus explicitly on district improvement and 2) break down silos and increase collaboration within the SEA to streamline services and requirements and model the type of collaboration they seek with districts. In order to promote coherence between SEAs and districts, SEA leaders in particular highlighted the need for SEAs to provide clear goals, expectations, and a shared theory of action to guide school and district improvement efforts. Superintendents and district leaders called

on SEAs to provide an unrelenting focus on student achievement. District leaders pointed out that too often there is a disconnect between what is professed to be important and what is rewarded (e.g. school and district improvement may be the goal, but pay raises are based on something else entirely). Although most participants acknowledged that there was no single model for district improvement, superintendents and district leaders in particular wanted SEAs to be more proactive about disseminating information regarding context-specific strategies for addressing district needs and providing supports (e.g., data, formative assessments, curricula) to align district improvement efforts and improve student achievement.

Effective Intervention and Support Strategies

All symposium participants agreed that SEAs cannot be successful in implementing effective intervention and support strategies without building trust and collaborative relationships with district administrators. SEA staff described how SEAs have historically fulfilled the role of compliance monitor and enforcer of rules and regulations and typically have not had experience with supporting district improvement. Consequently, district administrators have little trust in the intentions of SEAs and in the ability of SEA leaders to effectively intervene in and support struggling districts. Superintendents in particular pointed out that SEAs are too far removed from schools and districts to have knowledge about and effectively address the idiosyncratic needs of schools and districts. In addition, they asserted that there have not been concerted efforts on the part of most SEAs to identify the needs of districts and then meet those needs. Instead, SEAs have tended to approach the work of district support with a compliance orientation as opposed to a service orientation.

Both district leaders and SEA staff highlighted the need for SEAs to do a better job of establishing collaborative working relationships with districts and ensuring that SEA support services meet the authentic needs of districts. More specifically, participants discussed the need for better diagnostic tools that could accurately assess how students, schools and districts are faring and what they need to do to improve. Superintendents and district leaders discussed the need for diagnostic assessments that would help drive instruction and provide useful information about student progress. Researchers and SEA leaders also discussed the need for system-level diagnostic tools that could be used to assess the health of schools and districts and identify the neediest schools. All participants agreed that SEAs need to more accurately diagnose the problems facing schools and districts and then provide services that address these identified problems. They acknowledged, though, that accurate diagnosis of the problem(s) is just the first step and that there is a lack of information about effective intervention and improvement strategies. All participants agreed that more research is needed to clarify what high-performing districts could or should look like and also what it takes to transform struggling districts into high-performing districts.

Catalyzing Conditions

Participants discussed at length the structural and political conditions that constrain district improvement. According to all participants, both districts and

In order to create conditions that are more conducive to district improvement efforts, both district and SEA leaders suggested that SEAs should take a more proactive role in mediating state politics, advocate for flexible resources, streamline rules and regulations; and consolidate reports and requests.

SEAs operate within a political context that is not conducive to results-based reform. Politics, they argued, not research and experience, tended to drive educational agendas. Moreover, they asserted that turnover in leadership at all levels (e.g., superintendents, commissioners, governors) can lead to new educational agendas. Even if SEAs were buffered from politics and had a stable agendas that were focused on district improvement, SEA leaders pointed out that their ability to implement such agendas would be stymied by the fact that much of their funding comes from the federal government and the targeted nature of this funding inhibits their ability to be responsive to district needs. SEA leaders reported that they cannot allocate resources and personnel as they wish because positions are tied to specific federal funds and cannot be moved around as needed. SEA leaders also pointed out that their own bureaucratic structures (e.g., the persistence of silos within SEAs) inhibited their ability to effectively support districts. Superintendents reported facing not only political pressure from “above” (i.e., from state and federal agencies), but also obstruction from “below” (i.e., from teacher unions). Similarly, superintendents and district leaders reported feeling constrained with regard to what they were able to do to improve student achievement because of the difficulties they faced when negotiating any changes in teacher contracts. In order to create conditions that are more conducive to district improvement efforts, both district and SEA leaders suggested that SEAs should take a more proactive role in mediating state politics, advocate for flexible resources, streamline rules and regulations; and consolidate reports and requests.

Capacity and Resource Allocation

Based on the discussions in the first day’s breakout groups, it is clear that the lack of capacity within SEAs and in underperforming districts is the greatest challenge facing district improvement efforts. Lack of capacity at the state level is related to lack of capacity at the district level, and they are both related to the overarching question around how to build capacity across the educational system to promote sustainable improvement. Participants discussed the challenge of limited capacity not only in terms of technical resources (e.g., people, money), but also in terms of knowledge, skills and will (e.g., a commitment to school and district improvement and a shared understanding of the nuts and bolts of improving schools and districts). There was agreement among participants that SEAs do not have enough people to do the job of supporting district improvement efforts, nor do they necessarily have the right people with the right skills. Some district leaders concluded that because SEA staff do not always have the requisite expertise, the most they can do is monitor for compliance. Participants agreed that some districts (typically larger urban districts) have greater capacity than SEAs in some areas such as developing and implementing formative assessments, but even in the instances where districts have greater capacity than SEAs, participants agreed that those districts still need to improve their efforts to promote overall school improvement.

Participants approached the problem of limited capacity in two ways, one which centered on increasing SEA and district capacity by increasing the capacity of SEA leaders to support district improvement through professional development and training and second, finding ways to maximize the capacity of those who could

support the educational system, such as external technical assistance providers. Researchers and SEA leaders questioned whether SEAs should be the entity to provide on-the-ground technical assistance and instead suggested that SEAs partner with (and closely monitor) external organizations that have more expertise with regard to providing technical assistance. SEA leaders grappled with how they could “right-size” their work (for example, establish priorities and make strategic choices about where to focus energy and resources) and discussed partnering with external providers as one example of “right-sizing.” SEA staff also discussed how to leverage their position in the system and agreed that SEAs were best positioned to create forums for building district capacity by brokering relationships, convening stakeholders, and disseminating information.

Insights and Themes from the Role-Alike Conversations

What conditions would best support district improvement efforts?

What are the constraints that a state faces in trying to make the policy changes needed to alter conditions and/or provide the incentives needed to catalyze change?

What policies, strategies, innovative ideas have the potential to catalyze district improvement efforts?

On the morning of the second day of the symposium, participants in role-alike groups were asked to reflect on what they, or those in similar roles, could do to catalyze district improvement efforts and how they could address the constraints currently impeding improvement.

Overall, there was variation among the different role groups in terms of:

- The degree of change they proposed (i.e., “tweaking” vs. total overhaul);
- What level of the system they would target for change (e.g., SEA, teachers, legislators);
- Whether they suggested procedural/structural changes or changes in culture/relationships (e.g., increasing teacher licensing reciprocity across states versus developing collaborative relationships among district staff and SEA staff); and
- Whether they focused primarily on changes within their own organizations or on external agencies and individuals.

Districts (Superintendents and District Leaders)

In their small group discussion, district leaders focused on the importance of teachers and their struggle as leaders to find and keep “the very best people.” They discussed ways to increase flexibility in hiring teachers (e.g., increase flexibility with regard to teacher licensure and increase licensing reciprocity across states), better retain high-quality teachers (e.g., provide mentors and improve working conditions), and develop greater flexibility with regard to negotiating teacher contracts. District improvement was seen more as the aggregate of improvement in their schools, and less about improving how district offices themselves operate or the ways in which district offices support school improvement.

There was a keen awareness about the political environment in which they operate, and they stressed the importance of building a political constituency that supports the goals of district improvement and the action steps necessary for change. They discussed how districts needed more allies to influence policymakers at all levels of the system (including school boards, state commissioners, and governors). District leaders asserted that if they had more people advocating on their behalf for the kinds of support that schools and districts need to improve, it would result in the creation of a policy context that was more conducive to change. From the district perspective, the work of school and district improvement requires greater political will than what currently exists. For example, a common issue that participants identified was the need for extended time (i.e., an extended school day or school year) as means to increase instructional time so that students have sufficient time to meet expectations; however, the reality is that in many communities, there currently is not enough political will to address that issue. The participants recognized that district leaders could be more proactive about communicating with the general public and with stakeholders (e.g., parents), and also recognized that they needed to elicit input from different constituencies at different levels to develop a unified message about shared priorities. A cross-cutting theme among district leaders was that these shared priorities should be focused on equity and that there should be clear, direct messages

about the moral imperative to assist the neediest students. Superintendents recognized that while district contexts vary across states, most districts face similar problems, and they should leverage these commonalities by establishing common agendas and advocating for similar needs.

State Education Agencies

While district leaders focused their attention outside of the district office, SEA leaders examined the inner workings of their own organizations and suggested changes that need to be made within SEAs. The SEA participants recognized that culture shifts were needed in their organizations related to how they as organizations viewed their role, how they worked together, and the centrality of district and school improvement to their work. A number of participants proposed working towards breaking down the silos and departmental divisions that are endemic within SEAs and deliberately building collaborative relationships both among departments within their organization and between SEA and district leaders. SEA leaders asserted that they needed to develop more of a “customer service” mentality in their approach to working with districts. Some specific suggestions for cultivating buy-in and collaboration with district staff included bringing together SEA and district staff to examine data, having SEA and district staff conduct classroom observations together, establishing SEA district coordinators who would be in close communication with district leadership, provide positive feedback to districts, call district leaders when they are struggling with a problem, and take steps to ensure that SEA staff are quick to respond to district needs. Although there was general consensus that SEAs lack the agility they need to respond to district needs effectively (in the words of one participant, “the whole organization gets in the way”), most of the suggestions proposed were about tweaking current operations rather than making significant cultural changes to SEAs.

SEA leaders also discussed the ways in which their organizations were currently well positioned to catalyze district improvement, including coordinating and brokering technical assistance from external partners, providing networking opportunities for districts, collecting and disseminating information about methodologies/ models of district improvement (including guidance on district improvement and frameworks), ensuring the equitable allocation of resources and prioritizing the concerns of higher need districts, and mediating state politics (for example, providing “political cover” to districts when appropriate, influencing state policymakers, and helping to build political will through better communication). Participants also discussed the need for increased research capacity within SEAs to help assess program effectiveness and identify how this information might enable them to move beyond compliance. For the most part, these participants discussed how they might catalyze district improvement within the context of their current (and limited) capacity, but did not explore what SEAs as organizations could do to catalyze district improvement.

The SEA participants recognized that culture shifts were needed in their organizations related to how they as organizations viewed their role, how they worked together, and the centrality of district and school improvement to their work.

Researchers and Educational Actors

This group focused primarily on policy and partnerships to catalyze district improvement. There was agreement that states over-regulated schools and districts and that states tended to layer on policies without removing older, more outdated policies. Participants noted that the state had a role to play with regard to regulation and compliance, but also recognized that steps needed to be taken to ensure that state oversight did not result in counterproductive state intrusion. However, this was not clarified in their discussion, and there was a suggestion that negotiating between oversight and intrusion might be a moving target depending on whether school and district staff were perceived as being sufficiently competent.

This group also discussed using external partners to catalyze district improvement, but participants recognized that there are not enough external partners to meet the growing needs of districts, nor do existing service providers necessarily have the right expertise and/or capacity to meet all the needs of districts. In other words, tapping external partners to provide technical assistance to districts is not a silver bullet. Therefore, this group discussed the need to manage and monitor the work of external partners to ensure that their work is closely aligned to state and district priorities and that their services are effective and having the necessary impact. The group of researchers and educational actors expressed divergent views regarding the locus of change. Some believed that change must come from within the system, while others asserted that external pressure is necessary to prompt change. The researchers and policy advocates also discussed larger societal issues including higher rates of poverty and poorer health that affect schools and pointed out that there are other factors that affect students that are beyond the reach of educational systems. They highlighted the fact that states are in the best position to address issues of educational quality, inequality, and equity, but also asserted that the educational system in and of itself cannot resolve all these problems.

Although participants identified the need for more research about strategies, practices, and models for district improvement, they did not come to a consensus about what specific kinds of research would be most helpful in catalyzing district improvement. There was some disagreement within the group about whether specific models of improvement or sequencing of action steps should be researched and promoted due to the idiosyncratic needs of individual districts. Some participants suggested that schools/districts who were performing at the same level should not, necessarily, be treated the same, while other participants suggested that there were factors common to most, if not all, low-performing districts which could be identified and addressed.

Points of Agreement, Disagreement, and Distinction

Coherence and Alignment

Points of Agreement

SEA services and support are not aligned with district needs.

SEAs do not have theories of action that explicitly outline how these agencies expect to transform struggling districts into high-performing districts.

There is a lack of communication and collaboration within SEAs and between SEAs and LEAs. Leadership turnover (at state and district levels) leads to different and sometimes conflicting agendas.

SEAs, with their atomized departments, are structurally ill-equipped to respond quickly and effectively to district needs.

There is a need for clearly defined roles and responsibilities within SEAs.

Points of Disagreement/Distinction

SEA perspective

SEAs do not always trust that districts know what they need. (“They know what they don’t know.”)
“We gave specific steps. We found that we had to hold their hand and be very specific... they needed the help. They didn’t know how to do it themselves.”

SEAs recognized that alignment within SEAs was needed, but that collaboration across silos was difficult and is not being promoted throughout the organization. *“The organization [SEA] doesn’t demand change. We could each keep doing what we’re doing. For each of us to make a change, it requires that you take initiative, take risks.”*

Some SEAs attributed their lack of partnerships with districts to the limited capacity to work as closely with districts as they would like. *“There is a willingness to partner with districts at the state level, but due to the small size of the agency, resources to assist districts are limited. States want to help, but often cannot spare the resources.”*

Points of Disagreement/Distinction (continued)

District perspective

SEAs do not pay sufficient attention to district strategic plans. State mandates create fragmentation and district needs are not attended to. *“When superintendents are new, they create a district strategic plan, but people inside the SEA would lose focus, forget promises, and this would create a lack of coherence.”*

LEAs face an unwieldy amount of demands and requirements. *“I’ve only got 720 days to get a kid out of high school. That’s it, 180 x 4. And now you want me to teach you about this, and this, and this, and this, and this... Special Ed reporting comes here, and then over here comes the No Child Left Behind, and here’s the testing window... is that real strategic?”*

SEA requests of LEAs are not neither streamlined nor efficient. LEAs are required to develop multiple plans in response to overlapping or repetitive SEA requests. *“How many plans do you guys have?” – “At least 30 or 40.”*

State assessments do not provide the types of information that could drive instruction, nor do the results arrive in time to drive instruction. There is a lack of coherence between the testing instruments that districts are required to use and the testing instruments they need to support instruction. *“If you really have one thing that you can do, give us a testing instrument that matches the curriculum, appropriate that I can differentiate, and that will help me drive instruction. And then I need it, just like a mirror, it’s got to be that clear, and it’s got to be that quick. And so if I get it a year late, that’s not going to help me. If I get it six weeks late, that’s not going to help me if the testing window’s in May. We’ve got to figure that out. Because the tests we have right now don’t really drive instruction.”*

Researchers and Educational Actors perspective

Policymakers tend to keep layering on initiatives without making strategic choices about priorities. *“Some states proliferate programs, restrictions, over-regulation.”*

SEAs over-regulate. There is not an appropriate balance between oversight and intrusion. *“This state of policy intrusiveness is inappropriate...states are way too regulatory.”; “I think some of the things that states can do, and here I’m speaking of states at large, but also in Departments of Education, is to get out of the way, get things moving and then get out of the way. Get out of the way in terms of the kinds of regulations that are imposed on people.”*

Effective Intervention and Support Strategies

Points of Agreement

In order for SEA support to be effective, collaborative relationships and trust need to be developed between SEAs and LEAs.

Most SEAs do not have a depth of experience and/or expertise in supporting district improvement.

SEAs need more of a customer service orientation in their approach towards districts.

There is a lack of research/knowledge at all levels about what it takes to transform struggling districts into high-performing districts, as well as a lack of models of high-performing districts.

The most important relationship is that between teacher and student. Individuals at every level of the system need to be focused on improving the teaching and learning that happens between teacher and student.

Points of Disagreement/Distinction

SEA perspective

SEAs are well-positioned to convene districts or broker relationships, but may not be in the best position to implement the on-the-ground, time-intensive technical assistance that districts need. *“SEAs are in a good position to see who’s doing what and help with coordinating cross-district learning.”; “The implementation piece is a whole other piece – highly time intensive. We need to find partners to take it deeper.”*

SEAs are being asked to do work (e.g., supporting district improvement) that they were never asked to do before nor are organized to do. *“We [the SEA] were not results-based. For us, compliance matters, you know. It is about, in the end, compliance, it’s not about results. To the idea of lacking systemic focus or optimizing the subparts, we were clearly broken into silos and bunkers that were absolutely, hermitically sealed. We spent 75 percent of our energy trying to build bridges across different departments that historically had grown up protecting their turf and their fiefdoms.”*

District perspective

LEAs do not always trust SEAs to provide support. Their interactions with SEAs thus far have not only been compliance-driven, but in some instances, adversarial. *“In a press release, they [SEA] blast the urban districts without a chance to analyze the data...it’s a ‘gotcha mentality.’”*

Researchers and Educational Actors perspective

Incremental change is insufficient. When a district is chronically low-performing, all possible options should be considered to turn around the district. *“What can we do with the most chronically underperforming schools, the ones that are most ill-serving the students with the greatest degree of need? And...is there an opportunity in this cohort of schools to do some more fundamental kinds of change that then could actually lead the way to more broad forms of change across a broader cohort of schools?”*

Catalyzing Conditions

Points of Agreement

School and district improvement is highly politicized. Politics, not research and practice, may be driving decisions/initiatives/agendas.

Political will and a political constituency needs to be built to support the conditions necessary for district improvement.

More flexibility is needed at all levels (e.g. flexibility in recruiting teachers; flexibility in negotiating with unions; flexibility in the use of resources).

Points of Disagreement/Distinction

SEA perspective

Although they agree that collaboration with legislators/policymakers is necessary, not all SEA staff view themselves as being able to influence decision-makers. *"It's a bureaucratic challenge – how far up the system we can have influence varies greatly."*

LEAs need to recognize that there is a need for reform and they need to be committed to making the necessary changes. *"They [districts] have to believe that that [improvement] is their role. They need to see that as a legitimate role for them to play."*

District perspective

LEAs are constrained by so many factors over which they have little control—laws, regulations, unions, little autonomy over resources and staff, etc. *"We come from the northeast, very strong unions and so on. It took me six months to negotiate nine extra minutes for my middle schools for math. And they [unions] can wear you out."*

"The structure of the school day/school year needs to be re-examined. There is not enough time in the current school schedule for students to learn all that they are expected to learn. It's the structure that's at fault, and we're blaming people. So the first thing we have to look at from the state level is 180 days is not sacred."

Researchers and Educational Actors perspective

Researchers/advocates point out that we cannot ignore the larger societal issues (e.g., poverty, health, etc.) that fundamentally effect schooling and students' lives. *"In theory, there is no more powerful instrument that the state to address issues of quality and inequality. The state has been a co-conspirator in denying these populations equity, so we need to deconstruct this stuff and then name and discuss these issues: Why are the students in under-performing schools and districts black, latino, and poor?"*

Capacity and Resource Allocation

Points of Agreement

The lack of capacity (i.e., skills, knowledge and resources needed to improve schools and districts) is the biggest obstacle facing LEAs and SEAs.

LEAs and SEAs are facing increasing pressure and increasing demands on their capacity as more and more schools and districts face sanctions under NCLB.

SEAs and LEAs have difficulty implementing long-term initiatives/strategies because funding is unstable and prone to change year to year.

Some districts (e.g., large urban districts) have more capacity than SEAs.

Points of Disagreement/Distinction

SEA perspective

SEAs don't have enough people with the right experience to do the job of supporting district improvement. *"It's not just numbers (of staff), it's about [having the right] skills."*

SEAs stress that it's hard to hire the right people with the right expertise. *"It's complicated to hire into our department, people who've got a set of skills who can really bring value to work. We have searched and pleaded and begged to try to get higher level positions so we can recruit people that were former super-intendents, former principals... They have to be at a certain place in their career where they're willing to come in and are interested in the work we're doing, but we can't find enough people who have those sets of skills that we can be really confident are going to be well received and provide really good advice to the districts."*

District perspective

LEAs are concerned about their ability to find and keep high-quality teachers. *"If I had the power to do only one thing: give me the very best people and the flexibility to find and keep them."*

Researchers and Educational Actors perspective

There is also a lack of capacity among partner organizations. External partners have the potential to infuse the system with additional capacity, but partners should be closely managed by SEAs and should be accountable for their effectiveness. *"Fire us if we aren't doing it better. [Currently there are] lots of low-quality providers at the local level and no vetting."*

Critical Themes and Closing Reflections

Dr. Kenneth Wong, Chair of the Department of Education at Brown University, Director of the Urban Education Policy Program, and co-sponsor of the symposium, and Dr. Susan Lusi, Superintendent of the Portsmouth School Department in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, were asked to serve as critical reflectors for the event. In particular, they were asked to identify and reflect upon the critical themes and issues that emerged from the discussions, and they presented their thoughts to the participants during the final session of the event.

Reflections from Dr. Susan Lusi

“I think cross-role, honest engagement, and learning around genuine problems and potential solutions is absolutely crucial for all of us.”

—DR. SUSAN LUSI

Dr. Lusi began her comments by asserting that educational stakeholders must continually engage in collaborative discussions about district and school improvement in order to achieve significant change. In many cases, “the implementation of improvement efforts is mirrored from level to level” and results in situations in which state-level policy and organizational fragmentation is reproduced, or “mirrored” within component districts and schools. Separate timelines and differing expectations for the work that is undertaken by stakeholders at different levels of the educational system both contribute to this fragmentation. Lastly, stakeholders often do not have information about which strategies are being utilized both across and within different states and districts.

Given this reality, Dr. Lusi recommended that stakeholders engage in cross-role dialogue and model successful practices for effective communication and collaboration as a means of reducing policy fragmentation. Cross-role dialogue and modeling collaborative conversations and practice provides opportunities for collective learning and increases stakeholder knowledge about which strategies are being utilized by administrators and practitioners both across and within states. While stakeholders should recognize variation among states and districts, greater knowledge about existing strategies could result in the development of solutions to common problems.

Dr. Lusi also discussed the importance of developing greater coherence around a shared theory of action.

“Given what we’re trying to do...what do we think we need to do to accomplish what we want...what are the steps we have to take in order to bring that about?”

In particular, she urged the participants to “think carefully about how we frame and reframe the questions that we’re asking” in order to better determine both the *what* and the *who* of improvement and reform efforts. For example, with regard to the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders, she asked the participants to consider “Who’s already doing it well, and who’s best positioned, potentially, to do it?” in order to best determine how support services should be provided. In some cases, state education agencies may need to work with both districts and schools; however, in other cases where districts are providing effective support to schools, it may be better for the state to take a more hands-off approach. While the central theory of action may not change from one context to the next, the strategies and “answers” employed by states and districts may be quite different.

Lastly, Dr. Lusi reemphasized a central theme of the two days of conversation: the importance of “right-sizing” the work. If different stakeholders must develop and maintain an “unrelenting” and “laser-like” focus on student achievement, she asserted that people must be allowed “to make good and strategic choices.” Within the current political and educational context, state, district, and local administrators and practitioners are required to respond to multiple and simultaneous initiatives; she questioned the validity of this approach, and asked whether there is evidence, “in research or in practice, that a district can do everything at once, successfully?” She stated that administrators and practitioners often respond to the multiplicity of initiatives by making “good, bad, or indifferent” choices, but do not necessarily make *strategic* choices about how to best serve students.

Dr. Lusi also stated that time is a precious commodity, and asserted that individuals at multiple levels of the education system must think strategically about how to spend their time and how their actions influence how the time of others is spent. She emphasized the need to maximize opportunities for individuals to make strategic choices regarding their work, and urged the participants to think critically about what will have the most impact on classrooms and students.

Dr. Lusi concluded her remarks by discussing the value of assessing whether current expenditures of state resources reflect articulated priorities and goals, and stated that additional information about how resources are being allocated could inform discussions about how to best leverage existing resources to support the work.

Reflections from Dr. Kenneth Wong

“What do you think actually may lead to some potential changes in the way you behave when you go back to your unit, when you go back to your agency, when you go back to your district or your think tank?”

—DR. KENNETH WONG

Dr. Wong began his remarks by asking the participants to focus on identifying “concrete, tangible, actionable”, and manageable action steps that could alter the manner in which they do their work. In addition, he asked the participants to consider ideas and concepts that they had not considered, including the “redefinition of terms or rephrasing the kind of questions that you thought that you’ve already gotten the solutions”.

Dr. Wong also asked the participants to adjust their perspectives regarding school reform and improvement.

“We are looking at school reform and improvement from a very rational perspective; that means that we often think a lot of the ideas that we have come across over the last day and a half are very sequential. As we have to have the theory of action, we have to then follow through with a design, and with the implementation blocks, with the structural changes and then communication plans and feedback plans, and then come back to redesign. It is very, very sequential – but at the same time, I think we need to be thinking about opportunities.”

He asked the participants to think about how to identify opportunities to “redirect the implementation process” and again, potentially alter the ways in which multiple stakeholders do their work. For example, he asserted the participants could “expand the pie” to include new and different partners, especially those with whom the participants may not have existing relationships. Given that rational approaches to school reform are oftentimes biased by “our own experience and our own practice,” the development of new partnerships could build different types of trust, increase communication, and “rebalance the sequence”. In essence, these partnerships could provide opportunities to examine the implementation process from different perspectives; therefore, he emphasized the importance of developing partnerships with parents, community-based organizations, businesses, unions, and congressional staff members. Dr. Wong pointed out that a participant in another session had asserted that not having a common language across stakeholder groups was a barrier to resolving issues and concerns. However, Dr. Wong suggested that the existing level of disagreement was “a good sign” and potentially “the beginning of a productive process”, and again emphasized the need for multiple stakeholders to be involved in the work.

While it may be challenging to develop consensus among multiple stakeholders with regard to theories of action, implementation processes, and strategies for

improvement and reform, Dr. Wong argued that it is essential to “galvanize and mobilize broader support for public education” and education reform. To that end, he urged the participants to think constructively about how they can work proactively to mobilize public support and increase communication across states and districts.

Lastly, Dr. Wong asserted that stakeholders must think critically about how to “build and rebuild institutions” so that they will include infrastructures that will promote sustainability over time and will also withstand shifts in leadership at multiple levels. In particular, he asked the participants to examine both the constraints to and opportunities for rebuilding institutions, and also asked them to identify which types of support would best reinforce this work.

In summary, Dr. Lusi and Dr. Wong emphasized the following themes and recommendations:

Educational stakeholders must continually engage in collaborative discussions about district and school improvement to develop a shared theory of action, reduce policy fragmentation, build organizational coherence, develop opportunities for learning, and increase knowledge about the types of strategies that are being utilized across and within states;

Partnerships should be developed with new and different stakeholders so that the work of education improvement and reform can be examined from different perspectives, to develop a common language with which to discuss and resolve issues and concerns, and to mobilize support for public education and reform;

Stakeholders should “right-size” the work by maintaining an unrelenting focus on goals and priorities and also by providing educators with opportunities to make strategic choices about their work;

Stakeholders should examine their perspectives regarding school reform and improvement in order to identify opportunities for change; and

Stakeholders must think critically about how to build and rebuild institutions, and must therefore develop effective institutional structures, systems, and processes that can best support the work.

References

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Agenda

Designing and Catalyzing Effective District Improvement: The Role of State Education Agencies

Monday, July 30 – Wednesday, August 1, 2007

The Viking Hotel, Newport, Rhode Island

Symposium Schedule

MONDAY, JULY 30

5:30 p.m. Registration

7:00 p.m. Welcoming Dinner

TUESDAY, JULY 31

Day 1: Articulating the Problem Space

What do we mean by “district improvement”?

What are the central challenges to district improvement?

What role (can, do, should) state education agencies (SEAs) play with regard to district improvement?

7:30 a.m. Breakfast

8:30 a.m. Opening Remarks

8:45 a.m. Panel Presentation: Perspectives of District Administrators

9:45 a.m. Panel Presentation: Perspectives of State Education Agency Leaders

10:45 a.m. Break

11:00 a.m. Panel Presentation: Perspectives of Researchers

11:45 a.m. Group Discussion Session

12:00 p.m. Lunch

1:30 p.m. Small Group Problem-Solving Conversations

The symposium participants will engage in cross-role problem-solving discussions to collectively identify additional factors that impede district development, generate innovative ideas, and develop recommendations for how SEAs could better support district improvement efforts.

3:15 p.m. Break

3:30 p.m. Gallery Walk and Group Discussion Session

4:30 p.m. Break

5:30 p.m. Cocktail Reception

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 1**Day 2: Catalyzing Conditions for District Improvement**

What are the political and structural conditions (e.g. policy levers, incentives, and alternative governance structures) needed to help SEAs catalyze and meaningfully support district improvement efforts?

How can states, SEAs, and other stakeholders develop and sustain these conditions?

What are bold and innovative ideas to better support and enact district improvement throughout a state?

7:30 a.m. Breakfast

8:30 a.m. Panel Presentation: Perspectives of Policy Actors

9:45 a.m. Small Group Discussion Sessions

Participants having similar roles will consider and reflect upon the previous day's discussions in light of the broader observations and ideas presented in the morning's panel presentation. In particular, participants will identify which conditions would best support district-wide improvements throughout a state and what roles they could play to mobilize these conditions, and will also discuss which policies they feel would have the greatest potential for high impact.

10:45 a.m. Break

11:00 a.m. Large Group Discussion: Sharing of Ideas and Perspectives

Each group will briefly share ideas about policies that they feel would have the highest potential impact on district-wide improvement and SEA support for such improvement throughout a state.

12:00 p.m. Lunch

1:30 p.m. Final Session:

Identification and Articulation of Central Themes and Open Discussion

3:00 p.m. Closing Remarks



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