

Prepared Statement

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**The Challenges of Building State Capacity**

**Introduction**

The context in which state education agencies (SEAs) operate has changed significantly in the last five years. Once focused primarily on compliance monitoring, SEA’s, as a result of No Child Left Behind and a variety of state-level initiatives, have been thrust into a new leading role in the implementation of standards-based reform. SEA’s now set standards, design and implement systems of assessment and accountability, and attempt to provide support and capacity building services for improvement efforts in schools and districts throughout their states. While this unprecedented shift in direction from compliance to service provider might seem sufficiently challenging in itself, state departments of education have to grapple with the realities of meeting the needs of a growing number of schools while being woefully under-resourced, under-staffed and generally unprepared to meet these new challenges.

**The Context**

State education agencies are sailing in uncharted waters. The logic of standards-based accountability systems has changed the environment, calling for schools and districts to be held accountable for getting all students to higher levels of proficiency, necessitating that robust support services be provided to enable “underperforming” schools to reach the mandated standards. Thus, SEAs, having designed these accountability systems, are now responsible for providing resources and support to local schools and districts and for leading school improvement efforts. The problem is that SEAs, generally, have relatively little historical knowledge or skill in school improvement. In addition, little research has been done on state and district supports or interventions in low-performing schools, so these SEAs have virtually no place to turn to build their knowledge and skills.

SEAs and districts are also operating in an environment with diminished resources where funding levels have not kept pace with the increasing demands. States simply have not adequately funded their departments of education to meet these growing needs. This lack of resources also relates to human resources. State department of education staff members, with their history of monitoring compliance, often do not possess the skills necessary to provide support and guidance for improving schools and districts. In

addition, the salaries and working conditions for SEA employees are often far below market value, leading to a dearth of qualified applicants for SEA positions. Finally, the size of the state department of education staff is often significantly lower than the number required to adequately serve all the schools and districts in need of improvement.

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

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

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

### **Reaching Capacity: Massachusetts Case Study**

In 2005, the Rennie Center undertook a modest research project to analyze the status of the state's capacity to meet the growing needs of schools in need of improvement. The key research question was: What components are needed in a state system to support low performing schools & districts? We conducted interviews with superintendents, principals, state DOE & policymakers and talked with leaders in other states and internationally as well as performing a literature & web review. From this research, we proposed recommendations for improvements to the current system and carried out a cost analysis of the impact of the proposed changes.

We found that while 376 schools had been identified for performance deficits in school year 2003-2004, only 16 schools had been reviewed by the state. One hundred thirty-two districts had been identified, but only 17 were reviewed. The state simply does not have the resources to review the number of schools identified for improvement and, to

compound the problem, the number of these schools continues to grow. In 2006, 629 schools were identified as compared with 420 in 2005 and 376 in 2004.

When we asked superintendents what services they would need to add, expand or improve to get all students to proficiency, almost all superintendents interviewed cited professional development and curriculum support as areas of need. Support in data and assessment and increased time on learning were close seconds.

We asked superintendents to report on the degree to which they found the budget crisis to be an obstacle to improvement. Seventy-nine percent of those interviewed cited the budget crisis as a problem.

This case study also analyzed Massachusetts' total education budget versus the DOE budget and found that the DOE's percent of the total budget had decreased from .44% of the total in 1994 to .24% of the total in 2004. Instead of receiving more resources commensurate with an increased role, the DOE has received a diminished proportion of resources from the state and a reduction in its capacity to meet a growing set of demands.

Next, we looked at the size of the staff at the DOE and found that in 1980, the DOE had 990 employees, and in 2005 the DOE employed 510 staff. Although the DOE's responsibilities had arguably doubled over that time period, the staffing had been reduced by nearly half. As a comparison, the Boston Public Schools central office employs 548 administrators to oversee a district of approximately 60,000 students or 6.5% of the state's student enrollment.

Finally, our case study examined the median annual salary of DOE employees as compared with public school teachers and administrators and found that the median salary for DOE specialists, coordinators, and managers was nearly \$10,000/year below the median salary of a teacher and nearly \$25,000/year below the median salary of principals.

Based on our research and interviews with those in the field, we made a set of recommendations for building the state's capacity to support districts and schools in need of improvement. We recommended that the state provide curriculum & professional development by increasing its leadership and guidance in helping districts select curricular programs and professional development providers. We also recommended that the state increase its role in the area of data and assessment, providing districts with data and help in analyzing it. Leadership and strategic planning was another critical area in which we recommended that state increase its role – especially in terms of building administrative capacity and developing a pipeline of new leaders. Lastly, we recommended that the state seriously consider funding additional learning time for both teachers and students as an added resource for schools and districts seeking to improve.

We concluded our report with recommendations for the state department of education's infrastructure. We suggested refining and improving the state's intervention process to make it more of a service for schools and districts. This also implies that the DOE adopt a

“service-mentality” where they listen and respond to the needs of schools and districts. We advised that the SEA focus on improving the quality of staffing by addressing the inequities of the pay scale and reducing bureaucratic hurdles in the hiring process. We also encouraged the DOE to foster more capacity-building efforts at the regional level by exploring partnerships with educational collaboratives and local education funds. Finally, we recommended that the department create a research mechanism to support state-level decision-making.

### **Key Components of an Effective Statewide System of Support**

Through our work in Massachusetts and a more recent national survey of state initiatives, we have developed a list of key components for statewide systems of support. These components provide a model for SEAs as they seek to meet the diverse needs of schools and districts.

It is important to note that before states develop key components of an effective system of support, they must develop a coherent strategy designed to achieve critical and well-defined goals. SEAs must have in place a “theory of action” – a collective belief about causal relationships between action and desired outcomes – to guide their work and ensure that it is focused and directly tied to the needs of schools (Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University).

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

**Leadership support** is another critical component and includes building *instructional* leadership that is focused on results, as well as developing “professional learning communities” among all school/district staff, and addressing the supply of new leaders. Leadership support might take the form of leadership coaches, mentor principals or a program that creates a pipeline of new leaders.

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

**Curriculum and instructional support** are other critical areas of support. This type of support includes providing guidance in curriculum selection and content area professional development. States must also play a role in providing support for improving teachers’

practice and pedagogy so that they receive support in both the content and the skills necessary to teach that content well.

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

SEAs also need to provide assistance to districts by focusing on **building district-level capacity**. The state can assist in building district leadership to support school- and classroom-level improvement through professional development focused on student achievement for superintendents and other central office leaders, assistance in developing district improvement plans based on meeting diverse needs of individual schools, and conducting central office reviews.

### **Conclusion**

It is crucial that state departments of education receive the support needed to assist schools in need of improvement. Without urgent attention to limited capacity issues at the state level, the promise of education reform that is at the heart of No Child Left Behind is in jeopardy. Standards-based accountability asks educators to reach higher than they have ever reached to bring not just some, but ALL students to proficiency. With these increased expectations comes an obligation to provide the resources and support to realize these new goals. As states are being asked to do more with less, the future of our nation's youth hangs in the balance. We know that these laudable goals are within reach, now we must provide the capacity building assistance to make them reality.