LEADERSHIP CAPACITIES FOR A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT:

State and District Responses to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

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We dedicate this work to our friend and colleague, John Correiro, who brought us together as a team, challenged us, and continues to inspire us.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School reform efforts in the Northeast received a renewed push with the congressional passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Introducing a range of new requirements, sanctions, and incentives, the bill changed the education landscape decisively. Most critically, it brought issues of school performance and student learning into sharp relief. In so doing, NCLB has prompted intense self-scrutiny across the education system. In the Northeast, we found it has prompted an historic shift in how state and district education leaders understand and perform their work. How and why that shift came about is the subject of this paper.

For the first time in the country's history, NCLB ties specific consequences to schools that do not address the learning needs of all students and close the achievement gap between subgroups of students. NCLB systematizes the identification of schools "in need of improvement" and makes clear the lines of state and district responsibility for school improvement.

The immediate consequence for education leaders has been skyrocketing numbers of schools "in need of improvement." Even as state and district leaders struggle to institute assessment measures, procure supplemental education providers, and populate classrooms with highly qualified teachers, they have also engaged in the far larger task of improving low-performing schools, especially schools that are, or are at risk of becoming, "in need of improvement."

While clearly necessary to guarantee educational equity to all students and fulfill the law, the work of improving low-performing schools is enormous and largely uncharted. Several factors make it daunting:

- Little research has been done on state and district supports or interventions in low-performing schools that could inform new work.

- State education agencies have not historically engaged in school improvement at the building level and consequently have relatively little knowledge or skill in school improvement, even as they are being asked to lead the effort.

- Resources available to states and districts have not kept pace with the increasing demands placed on them.

- The law has increased and will likely continue to increase the number of low-performing schools and districts, as well as the speed with which improvements must be made.

In response to requests from four state agencies (New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont) and one local school district (New Haven, Connecticut) in dealing with this unprecedented effort, the Northeast Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB) at Brown University, and more specifically, the Leadership in Complex Environments (LCE) team,

set out to document what actions states and districts in the region were taking and what new pressures they placed on education leaders. We posed two research questions:

What policies, structures, and supports are state education agencies (SEAs) and school districts creating and implementing to improve student achievement in low-performing districts and schools?

What are the demands on leaders in the complex, high-expectations environment of NCLB, specifically those arising from new policies, structures, and supports?

Our explanatory framework (below) suggested that the process of improvingschools involved an interlocking set of steps, shaped by local features and, ideally, constantly informed by feedback from the field. Within this conceptual framework, we worked on five separate research studies, building on earlier collaborations between the sites and the LAB.

In **Massachusetts,** the LCE team and the state Department of Education designed descriptive research on implementation of the state's two major support strategies: a comprehensive school improvement planning process known as Performance Improvement Mapping and a network of school support specialists who work directly with low-performing schools and districts.

For the **New Haven, Connecticut,** school district, the LCE team explored the differences in response to district directives and supports, comparing persistently low-performing schools with more successful schools with similar demographics.

The Office of School Improvement (OSI) in **New York's** State Education Department asked the LCE team to assess an aspect of its regional network strategy, which marshals the resources of existing regional support networks in service to low-performing schools. Specifically, the LCE team assessed the alignment of understanding among participants of the strategy's goals and approaches to school improvement.

In **Rhode Island**, the LCE team followed up its facilitation of statewide work on clarifying expectations of schools districts with an assessment of the state's new approach to working with districts in need of improvement.

The LCE team followed up on work in **Vermont** to clarify the responsibilities of districts, the state board of education, and the commissioner of education by documenting the reorganization of the state education agency.

Although the conceptual framework encompassed the whole process of school reform and improvements in student outcomes, our work focused on the initial stages of design and early implementation of state and district supports.

We produced our findings in two forms: a set of five case studies that describe in detail how states and districts designed and implemented new strategies and a set of seven themes that emerged when we compared data across sites.

The case studies highlight the following: key features of the support strategies, their rationale, their history and background, related education policies, the role of leadership, shared beliefs and assumptions, expectations (and measures) of success, resources, implementation actions, take-up and response (where applicable), and feedback mechanisms. The cases describe the actions of leaders at all levels of the educational system and at all stages in the process of supporting low-performing schools.

We found similar emphases on systematic, data-based approaches to school improvement, especially the use of school and student data to identify gaps in service and inform planning. The rationales for strategies were also similar but context (past practice, geography, theories of change, etc.) shaped the strategies' overall design and subsequent implementation.

Beyond these similarities, however, we found wide variations in both the structures and the content of the strategies that states and districts in the Northeast designed: Some state education agencies prescribe school interventions; others stress building leadership capacity. In this region, where independence is highly prized, shifting control was a common issue; however, states and districts varied in the extent to which they centralized control.

The changed environment in which education and leaders work today has created new problems and new possibilities for solutions. We found that leaders face similar crises and constraints: New policies and structures have affected how they prioritize problems, what resources they can bring to bear on them, and how well they can tackle high-priority tasks and develop a common purpose. We found mixed acceptance of the idea that conventional and expedient approaches would, in many instances, be supplanted by more adaptive approaches in order to effect the types of changes low-performing schools need to implement.

The seven themes describe an arc—as state and district leaders began to grasp the enormity of the job before them, they took (and are taking) similar steps. They are:

- Tackling capacity
- Shifting priorities
- Aligning resources and policies
- Centralizing control
- Embracing adaptive change (i.e., tailored to context)
- Seizing opportunities
- Zeroing in on instruction and learning

Tackling capacity. State and district leaders have necessarily evolved from compliance monitors to active supporters of school improvement, but resources have not kept pace. Limitations in their own capacity have hampered state and district efforts to build local capacity for improvement in the growing number of schools not meeting performance expectations.

Shifting Priorities. Leaders are paying more attention and providing more resources to low-performing schools, but it appears that persistently low-performing schools need not only more, but different, support. Leaders are pressed to provide basic supports to all schools, sustain gains made in improving schools, and meet the unique needs of the lowest performing schools.

Aligning resources and policies. Initially, leaders layered new policies, responsibilities, and resources onto existing structures without considering their impact on the education system as a whole. Today, states and districts are rethinking underlying assumptions and aligning their actions and policies throughout the entire system of schools, districts, and state agencies.

Centralizing control. Striving to use resources effectively to improve low-performing schools and enhance student learning, district leaders are centralizing not only policies and support structures, but also making decisions about the structure of the school day, curricula, assessments, and professional development.

Embracing adaptive change. The scope and complexity of the challenges confronting leaders is requiring them to move beyond existing frameworks and approaches. All key players are learning that support must be tailored to the specific needs of the targeted schools and districts and constantly adapted in the light of feedback.

Seizing Opportunities. Survival and success in environments that are characterized by adaptive change require that leaders continually renew and extend their networks of relationships. As new efforts to improve low-performing schools have exacerbated tensions among leaders in places, they have also created opportunities for new ways of working.

Zeroing in on instruction and learning. State and district leaders are finding that formal planning processes are inadequate to make significant instructional improvements in low-performing schools. They are learning that in these schools, improvement requires direct attention to school culture and classroom practice.

Our report concludes with four recommendations for further action, derived both from our evolving understanding of issues in this new policy environment and from discussions with regional state and district leaders about the most significant questions and concerns before them today.

Build feedback systems to create coherence. The adaptations necessary to improve schools require a continuous flow of information. Although systems for disseminating information are strong, those for "hearing" and integrating responses from the field are weak. Leaders need to know the effect of policies quickly and regularly in order to adapt policies to contingent needs.

Focus on instruction and learning. School learning is a complex interaction among students, teachers, materials, and technologies. Improving low-performing schools will require attention to many elements, but chief among them must be a strong grasp of research-based pedagogy and practice; meaningful analyses of student data, such as regular opportunities to examine student work; and the marshalling of resources to focus on instructional priorities.

Address equity issues. The link between poverty and low levels of student achievement suggests that schools alone cannot solve social problems. But the appropriate distribution of resources and experienced teachers to communities of greatest economic need must occur if all students are to meet high academic standards.

Evaluate the reform strategies. Evaluating school improvement strategies will be complex, taking into account the unfolding nature of improvement efforts and the complex inter-relationships among different initiatives and within various parts of the education system. Only formative information and careful analysis will allow us to judge an improvement strategy's impact on student learning.

INTRODUCTION

PRESSURES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN A HIGHER STAKES ENVIRONMENT

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (referred to hereafter as NCLB) is an unprecedented combination of requirements, sanctions, and incentives affecting the nation's schools, school districts, states, and education leaders. NCLB's accountability provisions for states, districts, and schools go far beyond those of its predecessor legislation, the Improving America's Schools Act, in the specificity of rules for determining need, the identification and classification of schools and districts that are not making sufficient progress, the timetable for achieving improvements, and the expectations for supports (Section 1117 of Title I, NCLB).

NCLB's high-stakes environment has created pressures for change, affecting how state education agency (SEA) leaders conceptualize their roles and obligations toward low-performing schools[1] and districts and also how local education agency (LEA) leaders relate to low-performing schools. Many state agencies and school district central offices have begun to advance new policies, structures, and supports to assist low-performing schools, especially schools that have been persistently low performing for years. In some cases, these strategies represent completely new functions for the agencies involved; in others, states and districts are building on existing approaches by intensifying and/or expanding existing activities.

Meeting the challenge of improving low-performing schools matters not only for fulfilling NCLB's requirements, but also for reasons of equity and educational quality. Several factors make the task daunting:

1. There is little research on state and district support or intervention in low-performing schools to inform new work.

2. SEAs in particular have relatively little knowledge of and expertise with low-performing schools because they have only recently undertaken the work, yet they must now act in leadership roles and exercise new responsibilities on an unprecedented scale.

3. SEAs and districts have limited resources and those resources have not kept pace with the increasing demands placed on them.

4. The passage of NCLB has increased and will continue to increase the number of low-performing schools that SEAs and districts need to improve, as well as the rapidity with which these improvements must be made.

The moral and legal obligation to improve low-performing schools as quickly and effectively as possible makes it critical to understand the approaches that state and district leaders use, the lessons learned to date, and the choices and challenges states and districts

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[1] As defined by NCLB.

face in this work. It is further crucial to understand how state and district improvement efforts interact because schools receive reform impulses from both levels of the system and because district actions mediate the implementation of state policy.

This report begins to address the need for research about the structures, policies, and supports that leaders are implementing to address the needs of low-performing schools. It documents findings from a descriptive research study of four states and one large urban district in the Northeast during the formation and early implementation of new supports for low-performing schools. In addition to describing the design of strategies for sup-porting low-performing schools (and, for state agencies, of low-performing districts), the report also describes the leadership demands and the opportunities these policies, strategies, and structures have created.

We begin with background about the NCLB requirements related to low-performing schools and descriptions of how states and districts have responded with new structures and supports. This background serves as context for the choices state agencies and districts made in the Northeast. We also highlight some challenges states and districts face – in building their own capacities to take on new roles, addressing long term needs of schools, and working without adequate resources.

Relevant NCLB requirements*. The law currently requires that states, districts, and schools make measurable progress each year in increasing the number of students proficient in reading and mathematics and in reducing the achievement gaps between average student performance and that of subgroups (economic disadvantage, racial or ethnic background, disability, limited English proficiency). The federal goal is that all students will reach at least proficiency level by 2013-2014.

NCLB's accountability provisions are grounded in this concept of adequate yearly progress (AYP). Based on whether or not schools and districts make AYP (defined in approved state plans as increments of improvements in achievement and reduced differences among subgroups of students), states and districts must use a mix of supports and sanctions according to a timeline specified in the law. Schools classified as in need of improvement (i.e., do not make AYP) for two consecutive years must undergo a series of prescribed reforms, which escalate over time if progress is not made. These reforms include such steps as required planning, offering public school choice, providing supplemental education services, and taking corrective actions (e.g., replacing school staff, bringing in expert review, and so forth). By the fifth year of failing to make AYP, a school must undergo restructuring (reopening as a charter school, state takeover, etc.).

Districts classified as in need of improvement go through similar stages. In a district, corrective action might include replacing district personnel, appointing new administrators, instituting new curricula, allowing students to attend schools in other districts (and transporting them), deferring program funds, and even restructuring or abolishing the district.

States vary considerably in the numbers and proportions of schools and districts that have not made AYP as well as those identified for improvement and corrective action. For example, in 2004-05, the proportion of schools per state in the Northeast that did not make AYP ranged from about 12 to almost 30 percent. Schools that had failed to make AYP for two or more years ranged from seven to 17 percent. In all cases, however, as anticipated, the numbers of schools that require support has

grown, and states now face increasing numbers of districts that will be classified as in need of improvement.

In order to support the requirements for school and district improvement, states must provide technical assistance to districts and make districts aware in turn of their responsibilities to provide technical assistance to schools. NCLB requires that states "create and maintain a statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement designed to increase the opportunity for all students and schools to meet the State's academic content and achievement standards." States are required to base their strategies on scientifically based evidence.

The US Department of Education recommends that SEAs establish support teams to work in identified schools, designate and use distinguished teachers and principals, and develop other approaches that build on the expertise of other agencies (USED, LEA and School Improvement non-regulatory guidance, January 2005). States are also expected to identify rewards and sanctions, including recognition for schools that have made great strides in achievement.

SEA and District Approaches to Improving Low-Performing Schools

Over the past 10 years, SEAs have developed numerous approaches to supporting and improving low-performing schools. They have changed how they provide support and developed new and adapted existing school improvement processes and tools to help schools plan and build capacity for improvement. Although federal education law guides SEAs in developing their approaches, they are granted considerable flexibility in how they actually set up their support systems. Their approaches vary considerably.

Organizing for support. Local political environments have also shaped state and district leaders' responses to NCLB. Variations associated with new structures and policies include the degree of prescriptiveness, extent of monitoring, and nature of feedback opportunities. Approaches to supporting low-performing schools emerge from and fit within a complex mix of existing state reform legislation, state accountability mechanisms, governance structures that prescribe the state-district relationship, and the history of state-federal and state-district relationships.

Some states have highly centralized support, locating control with state officials. Others have kept support relatively decentralized, allowing local distinguished educators, technical assistance organizations, or other intermediaries decide how to work with targeted low-performing schools.

The primary, as well as the most highly centralized, SEA-organized assistance has been through SEA-level support teams that work directly with identified schools.Approximately half of the states with support systems have formed such SEA-level support teams, typically comprising SEA officials and selected stakeholders (e.g., administrators, experienced educators, school board members, and community members) to engage with low-performing schools (Mazzeo & Berman, 2003; Reville, Coggins, Schaefer, & Candon, 2004). Some states have organized SEA-level support teams with limited or no direct participation by SEA officials, resulting in a state-level team that carries the authority of the SEA but is not overtly influenced by SEA officials.

Another approach states have used is designating an individual or a small group of skilled educators (e.g., an external assistance team) to work directly with schools as coaches, change agents, or facilitators of school improvement processes (Holdzkom, 2001; Krueger, Snow-Renner, & Ziebarth, 2002). Whereas SEA-level teams typically engage with schools over a short period of time, focusing on an initial needs assessment or an audit, individual coaches and external assistance teams can provide support, coaching, and staff development for more extended periods, sometimes over years.

Distinct from state-level support teams, school coaches, and distinguished educators is the use of existing organizations, institutions of higher education, networks, and regional service providers to provide support to identified schools (Mazzeo & Berman, 2003). Leveraging and brokering assistance to low-performing schools is common in large states, such as Texas, California, and New York, where the SEA lacks the capacity to provide services directly to the state's many low-performing schools (Krueger et al., 2002; Council of

Chief State School Officers, 2003). By contracting out services to support low-performing schools, SEAs relinquish a certain amount of control over the content and quality of services provided.

Many SEAs have dealt with escalating numbers of identified schools by creating tiered systems in which services become progressively more intense the longer schools are identified as low-performing. For instance, Nevada has three priority levels: In year one, the state provides assistance in developing an improvement plan; in year two, the state provides technical assistance if the school did not make sufficient improvement in year one. In year three, a panel oversees the improvement processes if improvement were not sufficient in the previous years. Vermont takes the opposite approach by initially providing identified schools with highly intensive services and then progressively diminishing the intensity of services, rather than moving from minimal to maximal services (Krueger et al., 2002).

Some states have reorganized state-level offices to increase their capacity to support schools. For instance, Illinois created a new division, the System of Support Unit, specifically to work with identified schools (CCSSO, 2003). Similarly, some SEAs use existing Title I management structures and staff to provide support, while others have integrated Title I and other programs linked to school improvement into new units focused on school improvement.

Improvement actions and activities. While SEAs vary widely in how they have organized and structured their efforts to improve low-performing schools, they share common actions and processes. Regardless of their organizational structure, most states focus on the needs of identified schools, such as promoting staff buy-in, assessing the school's needs, and developing and implementing school improvement plans. School improvement efforts typically fall into three broad categories:

- Needs Assessment and Analysis
- Plans and Planning
- Support for Plan Implementation

Needs assessment and analysis. All SEAs work from the assumption that a high-quality and thorough needs assessment is necessary in any effective school improvement process. However, the types of needs assessments vary. The SEA-level support team may conduct an audit—sometimes referred to as an external review—of low-performing schools. This audit may consist of one or many school visits and use a number of tools, protocols, and rubrics, including classroom observations and teacher interviews, to assess the school's overall status, climate, and academic program (Holdzkom, 2001; Mintrop & Papazian, 2003). The outcome is typically a report, with some level of feedback, to the school to inform its planning. After such audits, however, the work of implementing the suggested remedies transfers to the school, often with support from an external technical assistance provider and the district.

In other states, a SEA-designated service provider (e.g., a school coach, external assistance team, or regional service provider) carries out the needs assessment in collaboration with the school. In these instances, the needs assessment involves an intensive, ongoing analysis

of data to inform planning, rather than serving solely as an audit or performance review. In either case, however, the SEA expects schools to use the results of the needs assessment and subsequent data analysis in their school improvement plans.

Plans and planning. The school improvement plan is closely linked to the needs assessment. SEAs assist low-performing schools in developing plans informed by the needs assessment and data analysis. Most states require that schools use a common template based on NCLB planning requirements and related Title I regulations. Responsibility for assisting schools with planning varies according to how the state has organized its system of support. In some states, a state liaison works with the school to incorporate the results of the state audit; in others, a local service provider or designated external assistance team works with the school. Many states are beginning to involve districts in the planning process and in writing the plan (CCSSO, 2003).

Support for plan implementation. All states with statewide support systems provide schools with some level of support to implement their plans. Depending on a number of factors (e.g., resources, capacity, theories of change), SEAs provide the following at varying levels:

- *School-based Coaching:* facilitation of school improvement teams; leadership development and mentoring of administrators; and job-embedded professional development, including modeling instruction

- *School-based Data Analysis:* ongoing support to school teams in data analysis and planning

- *Professional Development:* professional development targeted to identified needs (e.g., curriculum development and standards alignment, classroom and behavior management, diversity training)

- *Additional Resources:* Some states prioritize the use of federal programs (e.g., Reading First, Comprehensive School Reform) or state-sponsored initiatives to low-performing schools (CCSSO, 2003; Krueger et al., 2002).

From support to sanctions. In addition to providing support to low-performing schools through a variety of structures, states also use a range of mechanisms to sanction or impose corrective action on persistently low-performing schools. Under NCLB, in the early stages of identification as low performing, districts are required to offer students the choice to attend higher performing schools and access to supplemental educational services.

Prior to NCLB, some states were beginning to use corrective action to improve schools most resistant to improvement. Actions included restructuring, state takeovers, contracting, and creating public charter schools. The more severe sanctions frequently require adopting a new educational philosophy, implementing a new curriculum, changing governance structures, and/or changing school leadership (Krueger et al., 2002).

The distinction between support and sanctions, however, is not always clear at either the state or district level. Some level of sanction, such as being labeled as low performing, necessarily precedes state improvement efforts. Massell (2000) noted that some districts that targeted support to low-performing schools coupled that support with a great deal of

oversight and feedback. In Chicago, schools sanctioned by being placed on probation then received extensive support (Finnigan & O'Day, 2003).

NCLB and the district role. NCLB enhances the role of the district as the responsible agent of school reform. The literature on school districts highlights that: 1) the district context and approach affect a school's ability to improve instruction, and 2) districts mediate the implementation of state policy in schools and the consequent impact of those policies. Much of the relatively recent literature on school districts has focused on their role in instructional improvement. This literature generally focuses on instructional improvement across all schools in the districts studied, as opposed to in low-performing schools per se, although some of the studies focus on urban school districts, which often contain concentrations of low-performing schools.

School districts strongly influence schools' teaching and learning choices and are often the major or only source of external assistance schools receive in their improvement efforts (Massell, 2000). A study of 22 districts in eight states identified four major capacity-building strategies, one of which targeted interventions to low-performing students and low-performing schools. Most of the targeted interventions that these districts used in low-performing schools mirrored those used by states, as described above. They included:

- providing assistance in interpreting and using performance data in planning,

- adding resources, such as assistance teams, coaches or consultants, new staff, and professional development for both teachers and administrators,

- networking low-performing schools with more successful schools, and

- offering low-performing schools financial incentives to adopt particular whole school reforms and/or instructional programs (Massell, 2000, esp. p. 5).

Districts also act as important arbiters of state policy, rather than as simply implementers (Marsh, 2000; Massell, 2000). The response to state policies varies both within and among districts. Districts may ignore or rework state policy, either intentionally or through misinterpreting the original state policy (Marsh, 2000, citing Spillane 1997, 1998, 2000, 2000b). Citing Firestone and Fairman (1998), Marsh lists three main district responses to state policy:

- fragmented responses: little leadership for change

- inconsistent responses: some policies are communicated but there is little interest in fully implementing them

- coordinated responses: deliberate efforts to implement changes

Marsh, citing Spillane (1996), concludes, "Districts matter in several ways: 1) their instructional policymaking has the potential to undermine state policymakers' efforts to streamline instructional guidance (e.g., they shape the opportunities practitioners have to learn about instruction and state policy), 2) their policies influence state policymakers' efforts to transmit messages for instructional change to practitioners, and 3) they influence state efforts to increase coherence of messages" (2000, p. 4).

Resources. In raising expectations for SEAs and districts, the federal legislation presumed the existence or development of capacities that, in many cases, do not now exist. From the perspective of SEAs and districts, the federal investment in state and district systems, structures, and personnel to realize NCLB's ambitions have not materialized. Because federal education dollars have primarily been provided directly to districts for local use, with little funding for building state capacity, SEAs are feeling particularly stretched as they attempt to build school capacity.

Finally, NCLB became law at a time when SEAs faced, and continue to face, fiscal cutbacks. District offices were often in similar straits, and even with extra resources, districts with large numbers of low-performing schools are experiencing difficulty in scaling up supports.

Capacity-building Tasks of SEAs, Districts, and Schools

The unprecedented demands state and district leaders face in improving low-performing schools are intensified by the overall lack of state and district capacity. By "capacity" we mean a constellation of ingredients, including knowledge and expertise related to teaching and learning and school improvements; material and human resources; systems for collecting, organizing and using information; and leadership and collaborative mechanisms for problem solving. State agencies have limited staff with the knowledge base and skill-set to improve low-performing schools. This is understandable—the knowledge base in this area is thin and the tasks relatively new. Still, state agencies need to change dramatically if they are to do this work well, as the Council of Chief State School Officers explained:

> Ensuring that all students achieve high standards requires that state education agencies shift from compliance-based work that ensures regulations are followed, to capacity-building efforts that facilitate change. State education agencies must increase their internal capacity by developing an infrastructure to collect and analyze data, create structures for continuous learning by staff, and hire or train people with the appropriate knowledge and skills. To guide and support districts and schools in their improvement efforts, state education agencies must increase their capacity to provide information, training, and other forms of assistance to schools and districts (p. 9).

However, the Council goes on to note, "These changes require resources, both human and financial…. The financial constraints currently facing many state education agencies may seriously impede their ability to build their own internal capacity for reform" (CCSSO, 2003).

Beyond contributing specific expertise, state agencies must craft strategies that work in their context—a context that includes a specific history of past policies, practices, and roles, as well as particular state and local resources. Constructing useful, effective theories of change and building the capacity to act on them quickly to turn low-performing schools around is an enormous undertaking.

To determine the types of expertise and structural changes the Massachusetts SEA needed to meet current challenges, for example, researchers at the Rennie Center assessed the scale of Massachusetts's low performance problem, drew comparisons to capacities in other agencies, and developed resource estimates to address capacity issues. They concluded, "The state does not currently have adequate knowledge or staffing capacity to support schools and districts with their improvement efforts" (Reville et al, 2005, p.19). Implementing NCLB presents parallel challenges for district leaders. These parallels are especially strong in large (often urban) districts with growing numbers of low-performing schools.

Rethinking short-term solutions. State and district capacity issues, coupled with short timelines and ingrained practices, can narrow solutions at the school level. Under pressure, SEAs and district leaders may promote shorter term "quick fix" solutions that may overlook the long-term improvement and capacity development needs of low-performing schools. SEAs and districts have often chosen more expedient solutions that, being compliance-oriented, are easily regulated (e.g., conduct a needs assessment, develop a plan, and implement identified interventions). Such prescriptive solutions may provide greater control over the day-to-day activities in low-performing schools, but they tend not to address long-term capacity issues of the most difficult low-performing schools.

Heifitz (1994) makes a distinction between "technical" and "adaptive" change. Technical change, which has been widely used among educators, is effective when a problem can be solved through technical expertise, such as replacing a broken window with a new one. When the problem requires ongoing learning, however, such as teaching the neighborhood children to play baseball in a different location, for example, technical change is inadequate; the situation calls for adaptive change. Adaptive problems that require adaptive approaches are never well defined. "Adaptive approaches require the engaged involvement of multiple parties across organizations and at multiple levels in the system as a whole" (p. 76). Because adaptive change involves innovation and learning among multiple parties, the results are not as predictable as those associated with technical changes. In an environment that requires adaptive changes, the roles of leaders are much more complex than in situations where the leadership task is a technical one, that is, to implement known solutions. In the adaptive change environment, the leader must identify priority issues, diagnose the situation, and then engage others in producing questions about problem definitions as well as possible solutions to problems. The adaptive change leader lets conflict emerge and encourages challenges to typical ways of operating rather than focusing on establishing control.

Although technical approaches to school improvement are not necessarily incompatible with capacity-building strategies, they are often insufficient and may conflict. The literature draws attention to an inherent tension between the more technical approaches to school improvement favored by NCLB and the school-based capacity-building strategies (e.g., school-based coaching, data analysis, job-embedded training, and external support teams) promoted by those who are directly engaged in school improvement (Holdzkom, 2001). SEAs and districts now face the complex challenge of developing policies and structures that integrate capacity-building strategies into more conventional and expedient, but not always entirely effective, technical school improvement strategies, such as the development of school improvement plans.

Building capacity in low-performing schools (i.e., developing a school-based capacity to identify, implement, and sustain effective improvement strategies) is critically important. Emerging evidence suggests that bureaucratic accountability mechanisms (e.g., pressures, sanctions, and mandates) tend to have the least effect in low-performing schools, precisely because those schools lack the internal capacity to respond effectively to external account-ability sanctions (Elmore, 2001; O'Day, 2004).

Researchers documenting state supports to low-performing schools draw attention to capacity building as pivotal to the schools' long-term success. In his in-depth review of how Kentucky, North Carolina, and South Carolina supported identified schools, Hold-zkom (2001) observed that each state "emphasize[d] local capacity building as a primary ingredient in helping low-performing schools become successful" (p. 9). Michigan, for example, promotes a coaching model of school improvement, because this approach "…does not bring in 'experts' to 'fix' schools, but instead brings in trained educators whose facilitation can help schools fix themselves" (Scott, 2004, p. 7). The National Governors Association recommends, "Governors should work with state education leaders to build capacity in their state's low-performing schools, focusing on the weakest schools" (Mazzeo & Berman, 2003, p. 13).

States face ongoing needs to meet federal guidelines and fulfill their traditional roles as administrators and monitors of federal programs. At the same time, emerging evidence suggests that low-performing school need new approaches to school improvement.

Re-examining the roles of leaders. Theorists are recognizing the need to re-examine lead-ership roles and responsibilities at different levels of the system. As suggested in the afore-mentioned distinctions between technical and adaptive change, Heifitz (1994) differentiates between leadership and authority. Those in formal leadership positions are given specific authority—which may empower or constrain actors—but actual leadership may come from those without formal authority who may have more latitude to effect change. Similarly, Stacey (1996) distinguishes between "legitimate" (formally recognized and controlled) net-works and "shadow" (unofficial, personal) networks in organizations. He argues that change often occurs in the shadow network—that personal, social, and emotional relationships underlie and inform the legitimate network. Fullan (2003) argues that the "deep" change the emerging educational environment demands will require synergies between patterns of centralization and the establishment of learning communities. Fullan also discusses the need for tri-level reform (school, district, and state) and calls for increasingly powerful theories of both education and change. "Those leading the system," he states, "need increasingly sophis-ticated conceptions of each set of theories" (p. 53).

The theme of sensemaking appears often in the literature on leadership. Weick's landmark *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995) asserts that reality is constructed by the interactions and perceptions of each person in a group. Through this enacting process, an organiza-tion's members construct their environment through their social interaction. Building on the work of McGlaughlin, Honig, Elmore, Spillane, and others, Hamann and Lane (2004)

call for sensemaking that "not only takes place within school and at the individual level, but across the multi-tiered educational system and across different stakeholder groups as well" (p. 5). Lane and Hamann (2003) argue for a *sense making* approach, building leaders' capacities to mobilize others around a common purpose and use strategies aligned with that purpose.

Origin of Study: NCLB and Client Requests

At the study's outset in Fall 2003, state and district leaders in the LAB region were scrambling to respond to anticipated increases in the number of schools identified as low performing. At that time, state leaders were just beginning to realize that within a few years, 20% or more schools in their states could be identified as needing improvement; few state leaders had even considered the ramifications of classifying *districts* in need of improvement. Leaders in state agencies and district offices—even those with track records of targeting support to low-performing schools—began to recognize that their existing approaches for providing support were inadequate.

Some state agencies and district leaders in the Northeast turned to the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB) at Brown, and specifically to the Leadership in Complex Environments (LCE) team for assistance. Comprising LAB and RMC Research staff, the LCE team had several years of experience working in the region on school and district reform. In the three years prior to this study, the LCE team had assisted state agencies and districts with low-performing schools, typically through planning, consultation, feedback, and evaluation.

In conjunction with state and district partners, the LCE team undertook a series of new initiatives that, in the course of assisting partners in responding to NCLB, provided the LCE team with data for a descriptive research study. The new projects included planning, consultation, design, and professional development activities for three state agencies (New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont); documentation of the effects of state policies on one state agency (Massachusetts); and exploration of the differences among school responses to district policies in one large urban district (New Haven, Connecticut). To different degrees, all the new projects involved the design of support mechanisms for low-performing schools. This common focus provided the LCE team with the impetus to craft a research study to describe the scale-up of support systems in the Northeast.

The team decided to use its unique "semi-insider" position to document the formation and implementation of state and district policy actions in response to NCLB, building on existing LCE projects, most of which had originated as requests from state and district clients. The team set out to describe systematically how SEAs and school districts in the region responded to NCLB, specifically to requirements associated with schools and districts in need of improvement.

Research Questions

The team framed two overarching research questions that could be informed by data collected via the five LCE projects:

> **What policies, structures, and supports are SEAs and school districts creating and implementing to improve student achievement in low-performing districts and schools?**

> **What are the demands on leaders in the complex, high-expectations environment of NCLB, specifically those arising from new policies, structures, and supports?**

This report responds to these two questions in the form of findings about the nature and adequacy of policies, structures, and supports that have been created and are in the process of implementation, and emerging patterns of leadership demands and opportunities arising from the new strategies and structures. The report also includes a case report for each of the five projects.

The LCE team understands leadership as an organizational rather than an individual quality (Ogawa & Bossert, 2000)—the interaction of agents serving in different roles, the relationships among those agents, and their collective capacities, including the ability to work with common purpose to achieve important and complex goals.

Although four of the five projects focused on state actions, and only one on a district's response to low-performing schools, we include the district findings in the cross-site[2] analysis for several reasons. First, because NCLB assumes complementary and aligned roles for state and district agencies in improving low-performing schools, it is important to learn more about the similarities and differences in how state and district leaders execute their responsibilities. Further, we wanted to understand the influence of the district on state expectations because, as indicated earlier, the district role can have a strong bearing on the ability of low-performing schools to improve (Marsh, 2000; Massell, 2000) by mediating state policy as well as providing assistance. Districts affect instructional practices significantly even when the core school interventions originate with state agencies (O'Day & Bitter, 2003). The LCE team's previous experience tracking district influences on school reforms in Connecticut were also influential in the decision to include a district case example.

Organization of Report

The report includes four sections: Background; Study Overview; Findings about Policies, Structures, Supports, and Leadership Demands and Opportunities; and Conclusions. **Section I, Background** provides context for the study. **Section II, Study Overview** presents the methodology for the study, describes the conceptual framework and related variables that guided data collection and analysis, and summarizes information from existing literature that informed the study's design (i.e., information about the effectiveness of state- and district-created support systems for low-performing schools, and the leadership demands inherent in working with them).

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[2] The terms "site" and "case" are used interchangeably.

Section III, Findings from Cross-Project Analysis: Seven Themes begins with brief descriptions of each site, followed by seven themes that emerged as patterns from the cross-site data analysis. Each finding is accompanied by a sample of related evidence from project sites; full case descriptions are included in the report appendices. A brief **Section IV, Conclusion** presents reflections by the LCE team and state and district leaders on issues that states and districts now face. These reflections emerged in part from a seminar with regional leaders to discuss the team's findings. This section also includes thoughts about gaps in current knowledge of the design and effective roll-out of strategies for supporting low-performing schools and districts.

The **Appendices** contain the five case studies, whose format corresponds to the major features of the conceptual framework, and a bibliography. The **Massachusetts** case describes intense planning work with both schools and districts within a system of district liaisons that connect the state agency's interests with local support. The **New York** case describes the ambitious approach to reorienting the various existing regional service providers to collaborate in providing support for low-performing schools and districts. The **Rhode Island** case documents the SEA's shift in attention from schools to districts, and the **Vermont** case describes how the entire state agency rethought its priorities. The **New Haven, Connecticut,** district-level case compares selected low-performing schools in New Haven in terms of their responses to district expectations, supports, and interactions. Each case includes methodology specific to data collection and analysis for that site.

Note: The LCE team carried out projects for clients while collecting data for this research report. The team prepared separate client reports, which go beyond the information in this report; they are available through the LAB at Brown.

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

As indicated in Section I, two overarching research questions guided the descriptive research study:

> **What policies, structures, and supports are SEAs and school districts creating and implementing to improve student achievement in low-performing districts and schools?**
>
> **What are the demands on leaders in the complex, high-expectations environment of NCLB, specifically those arising from new policies, structures, and supports?**

The LCE team used several sources in designing a conceptual framework to structure the development of site-specific evaluation questions and sub-questions, and guide and focus data collection and analysis in response to the research questions. Examples of sub-questions: *How have past reform efforts influenced the design of structures and strategies for supporting low-performing schools? To what extent do collaborative relationships exist among leaders who are working together to implement new strategies? What types of feedback opportunities did state agencies or districts construct to gather information with which to adjust strategies?*

Sources included the statutory requirements of NCLB, the team's own experiences from previous work with states and districts in the region on the roll-out and evaluation of education reforms, and a review of related literature on state and district supports for low-performing schools and the leadership demands inherent in working with low-performing schools. The framework was designed prior to developing data collection strategies; subsequent experiences led to minor modifications to the framework described below.

The conceptual framework (Exhibit 1, page 22) depicts the flow of influences on a state or district environment from a rational-logical perspective (design-implementation-response/adaptation-outcomes-impact). It depicts generically how state and district actions influence the actions of others in the educational system. The framework can be "read" as applying to strategies designed and implemented by a state agency and/or strategies designed and implemented by a district. Because the study's questions concern the improvement of low-performing schools and districts, the ultimate impact of the policies, structures, and supports is intended to be improvement in student achievement.

Beyond the "designed" path of influences, the LCE team was also interested in the "lived" experience of influences, that is, how the intended design is shaped and reshaped by a variety of factors. Accordingly, the framework includes attention to the influences of state and local contexts, the effects of leadership structures, interactions and demands, and the use of feedback mechanisms to reshape designed intentions.

The conceptual framework suggests that NCLB has affected the approaches (labeled *Design of Strategies*) states and districts use to formulate new strategies (i.e., policies, supports, and/or structures). Examples are the creation of support mechanisms for low-performing schools such as a state agency's assigning expert consultants to schools or requiring that low-performing districts prepare evidence-based strategic plans to guide the allocation of resources and track improvements.

The collective capacities and actions of leaders and the challenges they face (labeled *Leadership Structures, Interactions, Demands*) all influence decisions about how policymakers implement strategies. *Implementation Choices and Actions* describes the choices that leaders make in rolling out strategies, including the intensity with which strategies are pressed and the manner in which expectations about strategies are communicated to leaders in other parts of the education system.

Exhibit 1: Conceptual Framework for Descriptive Study

Leadership Structures, Interactions, and Demands characterizes how leaders from different role groups employ their knowledge, understanding, skills, and abilities in working together to improve the educational system. Examples are the leadership skills involved in building common purpose among people in different parts of the system and in adapting approaches to achieve the same ends in varied contexts. The notion that leadership is the property of a group of interacting individuals, known as "distributed leadership," is associated with the idea that expertise is optimally "stretched over" people in different roles rather than divided among them. Learning grows out of differences in expertise rather than differences in formal authority, according to Elmore (2000).

Leaders' actions at one level of the system influence how leaders at other levels respond to and even change the new strategies (*Implementation Take-up* in the framework). District and school leaders respond to state strategies variously by "taking up," taking advantage of, or even resisting strategies promoted by the state agency. School leaders respond with a similar range to district strategies. The framework acknowledges that in responding to a state or district strategy, district and school leaders may modify the intended strategy to suit local context or circumstances and may actually implement a revised version of the strategy's original design.

Whether they respond to strategies or ignore them, district and school reactions affect the potential to develop district and school capacities for supporting student achievement (labeled *Outcomes*). Those capacities in turn affect student achievement (*Impact*), including overall achievement, the performance of student subgroups, and the rate of improvement progress.

Building capacity requires "…enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contribution to collective results" (Elmore, 2000).

The conceptual framework (Exhibit 1) also recognizes that *State and Local Contexts* influence not only how strategies are formulated and implemented, but also how and to what extent they are taken up and what their potential for realizing outcomes is. For example, local fiscal resources affect a district's ability to respond to and work with state-initiated strategies. Other types of contexts we examined include historical practices that have shaped expectations, the local political climate, leadership structures, and policies that govern relationships and expectations, for example, union contracts.

A final feature of the framework is its attention to the presence or absence of *Feedback Mechanisms and Processes*, information that allows leaders to adjust strategies for greater effect. Feedback processes include the formal and informal ways that state agency and district personnel learn how their initiatives are being taken up by districts and schools, how they organize and interpret that information, and how they reflect on it from a continuous improvement perspective. From the LCE team's history of consultation experience with states and districts, we know that reflection and feedback can yield useful information for modifying policy actions and enhancing their intended impact.

We were interested in how policymakers accessed and used ongoing implementation data to revamp strategies.

Study focus and development of constructs/variables. While the conceptual framework depicts the full realization of the path of influences, this descriptive study focuses primarily on three areas: design of strategies; implementation choices and actions; and leadership structures, interactions, and demands. We focused on those areas because our sites were in relatively early phases of developing and implementing support strategies for low-performing schools. When the LCE team began the descriptive study in late 2003, state agencies in the region had finalized their processes for identifying low-performing schools and districts but were still shaping their support strategies. For the most part, the LCE team followed states and districts during the conceptualization and early implementation of new strategies for supporting low-performing schools and districts. Thus, the framework's most salient features for collecting data in response to the research questions were *Design of Strategies, Implementation Choices and Actions* and *Leadership Structures, Interactions, and Demands.* For each feature, the LCE team defined a set of constructs, summarized below, to guide data collection.

Design of Strategies. We were interested in identifying the types of *policy structures* that SEAs and districts used to support low-performing schools and districts and in documenting the types of actions their improvement efforts encompassed. Structures can include special offices tasked with improvement, individual support by designated experts, and/or networks of technical assistance or professional development providers focused on low-performing schools and districts.

From the state perspective, improvement actions and activities might include needs assessments and information analysis, planning processes, prescribed reform models, and/or targeting resources. From the district perspective, improvement actions include practices designed to build district leadership, curriculum and instructional changes, alignment of assessments with curricula, development of accountability systems, re-allocation of resources to fit needs, and so forth. The policy structures and improvement actions may be focused on capacity-building approaches or on approaches that rely more on monitoring and sanctions.

We were also interested in factors that affected the *rationales* for the choice of strategies. They include the influence of past practice and state legislation, the use of input from stakeholders, the results from research on or evaluation of previous strategies, individual leaders' theories of how change occurs, and the influence of other states. Finally, we were alert to any *standards or criteria for success* that were part of the design discussion— expectations for the kinds of capacities a given strategy would develop at the district or school level.

Implementation Choices and Actions. As noted above, the designers of strategies make many choices about their roll-out and implementation. Here we were alert to particular constructs: the various roles and responsibilities associated with strategies (for example, who is tasked with implementation); assumptions about the intensity and duration of

supports; the inclusion of pressure and/or incentives to accompany supports; the way in which information and expectations about strategies are communicated; the degree of prescription (i.e., extent of options); and the extent to which monitoring is built into implementation (e.g., the inclusion of indicators).

No matter the strategy a state or district agency selected to support low-performing schools, it was accompanied by or embedded in other decisions—whether planned explicitly or made by default—that shaped how it was presented and understood. For example, a state agency might assign expert support specialists to districts in need of improvement. Implementation choices then include such decisions as the range of specialists' responsibilities, the district's expected responsibilities to work with the specialists, the time a specialist devotes to a district, the expected tenure of support, whether the specialists' recommendations are required or optional, the reporting mechanisms the specialists are expected to use in tracking district responsiveness and improvements, and so forth.

Leadership Structures, Interactions, Demands. As described above, leadership factors include how leaders work together to improve the educational system. Leaders are found at different levels and in different roles; leadership actions and interactions are not limited to those in formal positions of authority. We were particularly alert to relational aspects of leadership, seeking to understand the combination of actions multiple leaders must take to make important changes in complex environments.

In order to take *collective actions*, leaders need to be able to form relationships and maintain trust, deal with conflict, attend to the values and beliefs of others, articulate the rationale for change, build consensus, communicate clearly and effectively, motivate common purpose among varied stakeholders, and establish norms of conduct.

To work with others in complex systems, leaders need to *understand the workings of systems*, making connections within and beyond the systems in which they work, recognizing the use of power and authority, understanding others' perspectives, and taking responsibility for making and communicating coherent directions. *Other management skills* associated with interacting with a range of leaders in large systems include planning, the capacity to assess and synthesize complex information, and the ability to weigh competing courses of action and define priorities. The *demands and challenges* on leaders are of particular interest because they help determine the need to modify strategies and help explain adaptations and resistances.

Data Collection

The LCE team grounded its data collection approaches in five projects designed in response to requests from state agencies and school districts.

The **Massachusetts** Department of Education worked with LCE staff to design a descriptive research project focused on implementing two support strategies for low-performing schools and districts: their statewide school improvement planning process and network of school support specialists.

For the **New Haven, Connecticut** school district, the LCE team explored the differences in response to district directives and supports between persistently low-performing schools and more successful schools with similar demographics.

The **New York** state education agency's Office of School Improvement requested that the LCE team assess the alignment of understanding among participants in the state's regional network strategy, its approach to addressing low-performing schools that marshals the resources of existing regional support networks.

In **Rhode Island**, the LCE team followed up the facilitation of statewide task force work on clarifying expectations of school districts with an assessment of the state's new approach to working with districts in need of improvement.

The LCE team followed up work in **Vermont** on clarifying the responsibilities of school districts, the state board of education, and the commissioner of education by documenting the reorganization of the state education agency.

Small teams drawn from the larger LCE team assumed responsibility for each site and customized a research plan for each site, including research questions, methods of data collection, samples, and instruments. (More detail about those plans is included in each of the five case studies in the Appendices.) An internal review process, through which members of small teams provided feedback on each other's work during development, facilitated cross-site coherence.

Each site team crafted research sub-questions specific to the site, focusing on features and variables that were preeminent in the state or district during the study period. In Vermont, for example, where most activity during the study period revolved around state-level reorganization, research questions and data collection focused on the state's design of strategies and the influence of the state context on that design. In Rhode Island, data collection focused first on strategy design and then on implementation choices and actions as the state agency adopted a new approach to working with school districts in need of improvement.

Data sources and instruments. Guided by the conceptual framework and constructs, each site team identified sources and developed instruments and data collection procedures. Exhibit 2 on the following page shows the types of instruments that we developed and used in each site as well as the sources of data. For example, the first row shows that we used separate interview protocols for central office and school staff in New Haven, reviewed relevant documents (e.g., district policy statements, schedules of professional development), and observed classrooms.

Exhibit 2: Data Sources and Instrumentation by Project Site

	Individual Interviews	*Examples of Documents Reviewed*	*Group Interviews*	*Observations*
New Haven	Central office, school staff	District policies and procedures, school improvement plans, principal portfolios	School leadership, grade-level teams	Classroom observations, district team meetings, grade-level meetings
Massachusetts	SEA leaders, district leaders, school principals	State policies and procedures, panel review and fact-finding reports, school improvement plans, state monitoring reports	School leadership teams, school support specialists	Classroom observations, school leadership team meetings
New York	District superintendents	State Board of Regents' policy papers, SED professional development evaluations, district superintendents' white paper, individual network documentation	Network participants, SEA officials	Statewide professional development meetings
Rhode Island		Policies and guidance documents, State Board of Regents' minutes, internal SEA working documents and planning materials		Meeting observations
Vermont	Statewide leaders	State Board policy documents, strategic plan		

Each site included multiple sources of information and, typically, several different data collection approaches. More information about instruments and data sources appears in the case studies in the Appendices. The LCE team collected data over approximately a 15-month period.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved several stages of data preparation, data review, construct coding, and summary and pattern analyses. First, each site team prepared and analyzed data to respond to the research sub-questions associated with its site. Individual and group interviews were transcribed and relevant sections of policy documents highlighted. Given the nature of much of the data, that is, interviews, document reviews, and observations, all teams employed content analysis approaches to define coding frameworks and code text data, supplemented in some cases by quantitative analyses of surveys.

Using the constructs from the conceptual framework and following individual review of all of the raw text data, each site team determined its process for systematically coding the collected text data, using a variety of tools. For example, the Massachusetts team used the scientific software, *ATLAS.ti*, to code its data and the New Haven team used *FileMaker Pro*. Text data from the Vermont interviews were reorganized in Word files according to phases of state activity and in categories linked to the key research questions, for example, perspectives on influence from feedback mechanisms, influences on design decisions, and so forth.

Site teams reviewed the coded text data for patterns of responses to the research sub-questions; typically, team members took responsibility for describing findings, identifying patterns, and interpreting evidence for particular sub-questions, and through small group discussions, they corroborated and/or challenged one another's interpretations, offering alternative explanations or evidence. Through several such opportunities for dialogue, site teams honed their interpretations and prepared both the case studies included in the Appendices and client site reports (available separately from the LAB at Brown). Clients subsequently provided feedback and clarifications.

Cross-site analysis. In addition to the site-specific analyses, the LCE team also conducted several rounds of cross-site analysis, facilitated by using a common outline (essentially, the conceptual framework and constructs) for the case study write-ups. After drafting case studies, teams met to posit patterns or themes emerging from the group of case studies as a whole. The process of analysis was iterative; the team revisited case data on several occasions after summary themes were refined in order to ensure that relevant details were included in the cases.

The entire LCE team discussed possible responses to the two overarching research questions and tested them against each case study for evidence that the speculative finding held true (or not) across multiple sites. To be included in the report, a pattern had to be supported by evidence from at least three of the five sites (although for brevity, the findings in Section III are typically illustrated by examples from two sites). The team emerged from the initial cross-site meeting with draft findings; over the next several weeks, each site

team attempted to summarize evidence from its site relevant to each theme. Not all findings were supported by evidence from all five sites.

After the evidence summaries had been prepared and reviewed, the full team met again to challenge and/or corroborate the statements of findings based on the evidence from each site. The LCE team then refined and expanded the draft findings statements, which in turn led to further clarification of the evidence summaries.

At that point, the draft findings were discussed with state agency and district leaders from the region in a policy seminar and, at the same time, shared with external reviewers. Another cross-team meeting considered the feedback from those discussions and reviews, leading to further refinement of the findings statements and greater selectivity among the evidence summaries to identify the strongest examples.

Review of Literature

In developing constructs and variables to flesh out the conceptual framework and frame the research sub-questions, as well as to aid in interpreting the findings from the five sites, the LCE team drew on recent studies of approaches to supporting low-performing schools. Information about the effectiveness of different approaches helped point to notable features of specific strategies, such as capacity-building approaches, and of implementation options, such as intensity. The literature also guided our conceptualization of leadership and leadership features. In this section, we provide highlights from the literature that influenced the study.

The literature on state and district efforts to improve low-performing schools is emerging and the landscape in which such efforts take place is changing quickly. SEAs and districts vary widely in their approaches to working with districts and/or schools. Terms such as "planning assistance" and "needs assessment" can and do mean different things in different states and localities. In addition, state and local efforts to support and intervene in low-performing schools are very much in process. This means that examples, even from very recent literature, may not be up to date. They should be taken as indications of the approach described, rather than as descriptions of current practice. Further, because the SEA and district efforts are quite new, the evidence of their effectiveness is thin; the effects are necessarily indirect, and the methods to assess findings are correlational rather than definitive.

Effectiveness of State and District Interventions in Low-Performing Schools

The research on the effects of state interventions in low-performing schools and districts is only beginning to appear and to date shows mixed results (Krueger et al., 2002; Mintrop & Papazian, 2003; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2004; O'Day, Bitter, & Perry, 2003). This body of research is emergent for multiple reasons. First, state interventions on any scale are still relatively new, particularly interventions aimed at academic, rather than strictly managerial, performance (Krueger et al., 2002). Second, state interventions are very much works in progress, in flux both before and after the passage of NCLB (CCSSO, 2003; Krueger et al., 2002; Laguarda, 2003). Third, state implementation varies considerably, making systematic

evaluation of intervention practices difficult (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2004). Fourth, interventions are usually implemented in combination with one another, making it difficult to separate the impact of any single approach (Krueger et al., 2002). Finally, methods of measuring the impact of interventions vary from state to state, complicating efforts to compare interventions and locate replicable models (Reville et al., 2004).

Thus far, there is broad agreement that results of most intervention approaches are mixed. These approaches include planning for improvement, providing technical assistance, providing additional funding and/or other resources, placing schools on probation, and taking a variety of corrective actions (e.g., reconstitution, takeovers by states, educational management organizations and/or external partners), and instituting charters, vouchers and intervention teams (Krueger et al., 2002; Mintrop & Papazian, 2003; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2004). There is, however, some emerging agreement on the characteristics of more successful interventions and the conditions that increase their likelihood of success.

State interventions that improve student achievement tend to focus on a smaller number of schools with greater intensity, rather than offer more schools fewer services (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2004; Reville et al., 2004). With their teams of experienced practitioners who spend extended periods of time in low-performing schools, North Carolina and Kentucky are cited as examples of this approach, in contrast to states that have provided assistance to more schools for much shorter periods of time. Effective interventions also integrate planning and implementation in ways that link directly to improving practice. O'Day and Bitter (2003) found, for example, that when this integration did not occur in California, the influence of planning on practice was minimal. Finally, Mintrop and his colleagues argue that successful interventions need to focus on organizational development and teacher commitment in addition to implementing effective instructional programs (Mintrop, 2002; Mintrop & Papazian, 2003). Such multi-pronged approaches are necessary because low-performing schools tend to have high staff turnover, lack organizational structures to maintain stability and support ongoing improvement, and be staffed by teachers who lack a sense of efficacy—who focus on external conditions facing their students that school staff cannot change, rather than on changes that can be made in schools and classrooms to improve student performance.

Some other important lessons are also emerging from this body of research. Paramount is the importance of capacity building, which outstrips the value of pressure and sanctions over time. Approaches to building capacity should reflect local needs. Low-performing schools have varying capacities to improve and generally require substantial assistance (Laguarda, 2003; Mintrop & Papazian, 2003; O'Day et al., 2003). In addition, low-performing schools sit in local contexts, in districts and states with varying capacities to assist them. All of these factors seem to affect the outcomes of interventions (Krueger et al., 2002).

It is crucial, however, that states develop and align strong capacity-building approaches despite these multiple layers of influence. Mintrop and Papazian (2003) found that although pressure and sanctions usefully focus attention on the problem of poor performance, they have limited value in improving performance. In fact, Mintrop and Papazian found that states and districts with more accountability experience, by virtue of developing their systems before NCLB, have de-emphasized the use of more severe sanctions over

time. The authors examined state accountability systems in Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, California and Texas, in addition to district systems in New York City and Chicago. They term these "first-generation accountability systems" because they all introduced NCLB-like elements prior to the passage of the law. Reviewing the results of their own research, as well as that of others, Mintrop and Papazian (2003) attribute the de-emphasis of pressure and sanctions to several possible factors: 1) the results of more severe sanctions have been shown to be inconclusive; 2) the limited number of indicators typically used in high-stakes accountability systems do not capture the complexity of educating children; 3) heightened pressure only increases already existing problems of teacher commitment in low-performing schools; and 4) there are glaring capacity deficits in low-performing schools that motivation alone cannot remedy (pp. 11-12).

Other lessons come most clearly from the research by O'Day and Bitter (2003) and concern the district's role in improving low-performing schools, either alone or in combination with state efforts. The researchers conclude that district context and school instructional coherence strongly influence the ability of a low-performing school to improve through state intervention. When O'Day and Bitter examined why some schools in California's Immediate Intervention/Underperforming School Program (II/USP) improved more than others, they found that school districts exerted significant influence on the instructional practice and achievement trends of low-performing schools, regardless of their II/USP status. This finding led the authors to recommend that states proactively build a role for district leadership into their programs.

O'Day and Bitter (2003) further found, "A school's ability to develop a coordinated and coherent instructional program is a key factor in its ability to meet and surpass academic growth targets" (p. 152). They found that two school factors were particularly important in developing instructional coherence: 1) collaboration and professional community among teachers, and 2) instructional leadership by the principal or other school site leader. While the authors acknowledge that a state's ability to directly influence instructional coherence in schools is limited, they recommend that states establish and maintain stable, consistent, and transparent policies that support, rather than undermine, coherence by aligning standards, assessments, professional development, and other instructional policies. Mintrop and Papazian (2003) go further, recommending that states and districts explicitly focus on building school culture and commitment—both key to instructional coherence—as they intervene in low-performing schools.

Exploring the literature on districts further, most intervention approaches elicit mixed results. Corcoran and Lawrence (2003) conclude, "There is not strong empirical evidence supporting the notion that districts can develop the capacity to make sustained improvement in teaching and learning" (p. 6). Corcoran and Lawrence did find a number of key factors that affect a district's capacity to engage in sustained instructional improvement:

- leadership focused on results and committed to instructional improvement

- a focused strategy for improving instruction, sustained over years

- the alignment of critical policies to guide practice and to support improvement

- the provision of resources to implement the reforms

- clear expectations about classroom practice

- support for teacher learning and adequate investments in professional development

- development in central offices and schools of communities of practice that share a common vision of good practice and beliefs about teaching and learning

- the use of data and evidence to drive decisions and revise strategies

After examining Chicago's attempts to support low-performing schools through a combination of a school-selected support provider and a district-assigned probation manager, Finnigan and O'Day (2003) concluded that the district supports were too weak to improve classroom instruction, despite millions of dollars spent on providing this support. The authors recommend more time- and content-intensive intervention strategies, such as intensive, coordinated, and ongoing professional development for teachers; cross-provider communication and learning; direct targeting of literacy instruction; and clear theories of action for change.

Snipes, Doolittle, and Corrine (2002) note that despite reorganizing and implementing strategies such as those outlined in this paper, many districts still do not succeed in improving student achievement. What may distinguish successful districts is "reform press," their term for the concerted effort it takes to drive coordinated educational reform at all levels, including the classroom level. According to Snipes et al., "reform press" entails a willingness by central office staff to be very specific and practical in their directions for implementing reforms in schools, and to change the behavior of or dismiss staff members who ignore district mandates.

Research that has systematically looked at state support and interventions in low-performing schools and its impact on improving student achievement/ meeting AYP goals is very limited. O'Day and Bitter's (2003) research comes closest, and they found that California's program of support for low-performing schools made a negligible contribution to improving student achievement. Although student achievement initially increased in most schools during the planning year of the program, this upward "bump" usually dissipated in the second year.

SEAs' and districts' lack of capacity and familiarity with school improvement work has compromised the effectiveness of their approaches to working with low-performing schools. For example, school-based accountability systems often ignore performance barriers that schools encounter in larger district or state contexts. States and districts need greater sophistication, both in identifying the root causes of low-performance and in identifying the actors or agencies responsible for creating them (Mintrop, 2002). In order to help low-performing schools reform, states and districts need more sophisticated and effective strategies—strategies that go beyond those outlined in NCLB, as Mintrop and Trujillo (2004) explain: "The enormity of the task at hand requires states, districts, and schools to go far beyond NCLB and proactively search for powerful, high quality and comprehensive ways of reform" (pp. 18-19). This said, research by O'Day and Bitter (2003), as

well as the other research cited above, begins to clarify our understanding of the conditions under which support to low-performing schools is most likely to improve student achievement.

The Choices and Challenges that SEAs and Districts Face

Each of the complex, multi-faceted challenges SEAs and districts face—addressing capacity issues, promoting capacity-building strategies as well as technical solutions, and developing pragmatic approaches—affects the choices they make in developing their overall approach to supporting low-performing schools. The following describes some critical choices that SEAs and districts must make in implementing strategies to best support low-performing schools

Allocating limited resources. Limited resources drive decisions in a number of ways, including the scale and scope of improvement efforts, the depth versus breadth of those efforts, and the length of time services are provided. States and districts had greater control over the scale and scope of their efforts to improve low-performing schools prior to the passage of NCLB. Pre-NCLB, state systems varied in both the cognitive demand (difficulty) of the assessments used and the performance demands and growth expectations for entry into and exit from the "low-performing" designation (Mintrop & Papazian, 2003). Greater cognitive demands and more ambitious performance and growth expectations led to identifying larger numbers of schools, increasing what Mintrop and Papazian refer to as the states' "improvement challenge." Although the cognitive demands of state tests and required proficiency levels still vary, NCLB has left states with many fewer degrees of freedom to determine school entry into and exit from the low-performing category.

States and districts often lack the capacity to intervene in all the schools they identify as low-performing, and under NCLB the problem of developing the capacity to assist more and more schools has become and will continue to be more pronounced in all states (Bowles, Churchill, Effrat, & McDermott, 2004; Krueger et al., 2002). States face an inherent tension and potential trade off between breadth and depth in deciding how many schools to intervene in and how intensively to intervene (Reville et al., 2004). In the Chicago system, although substantial resources went to support low-performing schools, supports were not well coordinated and did not operate under common theories of action for helping schools make desired changes (Finnigan & O'Day, 2003).

Intensity and duration. Some states have chosen depth over breadth in their intervention efforts and have reaped the benefits of intensive work in a few very high-needs schools. North Carolina, Vermont, Arkansas, and Indiana all focused their efforts intensively on a few schools most in need of assistance (Bowles et al., 2004; Krueger et al., 2002; Mazzeo & Berman, 2003; Reville et al., 2004). In contrast, other states, such as Kentucky and Alabama, tried to serve all the schools identified as low-performing (Reville et al.). States must also choose how long services to low-performing schools are provided. Long-term capacity-building goals in low-performing schools have been much more difficult for states to scaffold and support than shorter term goals targeted on improvement plans. States are realizing that assistance may need to extend over a number of years to be effective.

A few states have already developed ways to extend technical assistance for longer periods of time. Arkansas, California, Nevada, and Vermont organize technical assistance in multi-year cycles to prevent schools from reappearing on lists of low-performing schools. These states are also beginning to offer assistance to "bubble" schools that are in danger being identified. Nevada uses leftover funds to assist schools on the verge of being identified, as well as schools that have just been removed from low-performing lists. North Carolina provides weekly monitoring after schools leave the low-performing list. Vermont continues to serve schools that made improvements, but less intensively than when they were on the low-performing list. Arkansas and North Carolina have also developed follow-up programs for schools that have exited the low-performing list (Krueger et al., 2002; Mazzeo & Berman, 2003).

Similarly, district supports must be designed to provide appropriate levels of intensity and duration. As shown in the Chicago study (Finnigan & O'Day, 2003), a support system that uses professional development to improve instructional practices must be sustained, coherent, and informed by knowledge of the kinds of professional development that change classroom practices. Choices about time and intensity of service may well affect the outcome of intervention efforts. A near-term increase in test scores is not the same thing as lasting, sustainable change. Capacity building for this deeper change takes substantial time, yet most intensive state assistance to low-performing schools lasts only one or two years (Holdzkom, 2001; Mazzeo & Berman, 2003).

Degree of centralization. To meet the objective of aligning purposes and actions efficiently, states and districts face pressures to create new organizational structures. Their responses have generally fallen into two patterns: 1) increased centralization and location of detailed decisions at higher levels in the overall hierarchy, or 2) attempts to build learning communities that extend across organizational structures (Senge, 1990) and include district staff and staff from multiple schools. Each aims at a more tightly aligned system, but the nature of the relationships differs substantially. Increasing centralization without creating learning communities has tended to decouple structures from important reform activities (Ogawa & Bossert, 2000). On the other hand, the learning community model is not necessarily congruent with the monitoring functions that have been, and continue to be, a significant function of required reform efforts.

States vary considerably in the level of autonomy they allow districts in implementing state policies. Districts, too, range in the amount of autonomy and flexibility they give schools (even low-performing schools) to meet district goals. As schools and districts experience increased pressure to raise achievement on NCLB-mandated state level accountability measures, however, tension has increased over lines of authority between central offices and schools. Low-performing schools in particular seem to have less autonomy over the critical areas of teaching and learning, as evident in trends toward greater prescriptiveness in curriculum alignment and professional development, although this trend is not universal and not without its detractors.

Curriculum alignment entails alignment to district standards, or state standards, or both. The content of curriculum alignment could be defined "loosely" as standards, outcomes, and educational approaches that a district endorses and leaves up to individual schools and

teachers to implement, or more "tightly" as specific materials, lessons, and instructional practices that a district prescribes for all schools and by all teachers. The former, decentralized approach leads to more school-based autonomy; the latter, centralized approach leads to less.

The research differs on the relative merits of decentralized and centralized curriculum alignment. Corcoran and Christman (2002) stress potential problems with decentralized alignment. In their study of Philadelphia, the district defined standards but left many curriculum decisions up to individual schools, creating a system in which teachers were confused about choosing curricula and lacked knowledge of the instructional practices and materials they needed to help their students meet the district standards. Two other studies echo the authors' observations. Snipes et al. (2002) note that rather than allowing each school to devise their own strategies, successful urban districts adopted or developed district-wide curricular and instructional approaches. Togneri (2003) also notes that the successful districts she observed avoided leaving curricular decisions up to individual schools.

By contrast, McLaughlin and Talbert (2003), Darling-Hammond et al. (2003), and Hightower (2002) describe successful curriculum alignment efforts in California's Bay Area and San Diego, where districts defined instructional approaches but left some implementation decisions to individual schools. It is important to note, however, that these districts also instituted high-quality professional development for teachers and administrators as they implemented the district-wide instructional approaches. Staff development aligned to the district's instructional approaches may have been an important factor in their successful curriculum alignment work—a factor that was missing in Philadelphia. Some curriculum alignment work done in the districts studied by Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) also established partially decentralized systems that allowed schools some flexibility in implementing district goals.

There is no consensus on whether decentralized or centralized curriculum alignment is ultimately better for students and teachers, but a strong tendency seems to favor centralized alignment in most of the studies reviewed. The relative strengths of centralized and decentralized curriculum alignment may ultimately depend on the instructional capacity of the district engaged in alignment; that is, decentralized alignment may work well in districts with greater teacher capacity and more centrally aligned professional development opportunities.

Finnigan and O'Day (2003) suggest that there is value in centralizing decision making about service providers. In their study of Chicago's support system, they found that externally provided assistance was often short-term, fragmented, and widely varying in approach. They recommend continuing to provide schools with a limited choice of service providers, which is explained in further detail below.

Shaping roles and structures. States must make at least two sets of choices about roles and structures for improving low-performing schools. They concern the role of school districts and SEAs and the role of intermediaries or service providers with which the SEA or district might work. The district's role in state assistance to low-performing schools is influenced by how states work with districts to improve low-performing schools and how states work to improve low-performing districts, which often contain the low-performing

schools. Many states have begun to recognize the need to include districts in school assistance efforts, but they have not yet developed the programs and capacity to do so (CCSSO, 2003; Krueger et al., 2002; Reville et al., 2004).

In 2002, the Education Commission of the States found, "The partnerships between states and districts were not particularly active, although there were exceptions" (Krueger et al., 2002). Two years later, the Rennie Center found that fewer than half of the 36 states with intervention programs for low-performing schools had district programs, but the number of states that include districts in state assistance plans is increasing: 16 states currently have district intervention programs or fund districts to work with independent contractors (Reville et al., 2004). Many states still appear to limit the district role in school assistance and reform to that of fiscal agent, but some states are beginning to develop programs that allow states and districts to collaborate as partners to improve low-performing schools.

States must also make choices about the roles of SEAs themselves and the intermediaries with whom they might work. As we have seen, the charge to improve low-performing schools places many new demands on SEAs. These new demands lead to questions about the role(s) SEAs should play in this work and the capacity they have to play them. SEAs must choose which work and responsibilities they will keep "in house" and which they will shift to regional or external providers. These choices and how they are framed have deep implications for the control that SEAs maintain over the kind and quality of the work with low-performing schools. How much control should SEAs maintain over the support provided to schools? Should support providers use a consistent approach to school improvement or explore the potential gains from flexible and locally developed strategies?

Florida, Maryland, New York, and Louisiana have all sought to redefine the district role in state assistance initiatives (CCSSO, 2003; Krueger et al., 2002; Mazzeo & Berman, 2003; Reville et al., 2004). Florida encourages districts to redirect local resources to low-performing schools (Krueger et al., 2002). In its evaluation of Maryland's city-state partnership intervention in low-performing Baltimore public schools, Westat found slow progress; only four schools were removed from the state reconstitution list (CCSSO, 2003; Mazzeo & Berman, 2003; Reville et al., 2004). New York required districts to develop local assistance plans explaining how they will redirect resources and help change instructional practices in low-performing schools (CCSSO, 2003). Louisiana takes chronically low-performing schools out of the geographic districts in which they reside and creates a "recovery district" without geographical boundaries (Mazzeo & Berman, 2003; Reville et al., 2004). New York City uses a comparable policy. Twenty-four states permit school district takeover, which has brought improvement in some cases, but took a lot of time (Mazzeo & Berman, 2003).

Lessons from the study of the Chicago support system (Finnigan & O'Day, 2003) suggest that in relying primarily on external providers to develop school capacity, significant attention must be given to issues of prescriptiveness, consistency, authority, and power. The authors highlight shortfalls in the Chicago policy in each of these areas, and offer several implications for strengthening externally provided support:

1. Limit the external partners to a handful of proven groups and require them to offer or support a coherent, comprehensive instructional program in targeted areas.

2. Clarify the roles of support providers.

3. Develop opportunities for learning and sharing among partners.

4. Discourage schools from developing multiple and fragmented partnerships.

5. Stimulate the development of in-depth, content-based professional development.

6. Connect assistance to the standards, not the test.

Reframing Leadership to Meet the Challenges of Large-Scale Improvement

The focus on teaching and learning, the scale of the problems states and many districts face, and the urgency of problems confronting them in the light of shrinking educational budgets are forcing a reexamination of relationships and interactions within and among state, district, and school. The longstanding vertical decoupling among levels of the educational system (Ogawa and Bossert, 2000) reflects inefficiencies that are unacceptable in this new environment. Instead, leaders need to rethink approaches to change and move toward forms of leadership that are connected to learning (Riley, 2000).

Efforts have just recently been made to understand the effects of state and district leadership on school and student performance. Research on the effects of leadership on student learning has focused almost exclusively on the role of the school principal. Recent reviews of research show that the total effects of principal leadership, for example, on student learning account for about one quarter of the total school effects (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). The 2003 MCREL study (Waters et al., 2003) found 21 leadership responsibilities, such as intellectual stimulation, that correlated significantly with student achievement. Earlier often-cited research found correlations with student achievement in the principal's role in school mission and focus, teacher expectations, school culture, and facets of a school's instructional organization (Hallinger & Heck, 1996).

Today, principal leadership is largely conceived of as focused on and accountable for learning. Rather than narrowing school leaders' purview to instructional or institutional systems (as did older notions of instructional and managerial leadership), leadership that is accountable for student learning assumes that leaders ensure that all actors and actions in the educational system support students' learning needs (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). The large-scale improvements that current accountability reforms require call for looking beyond the exercise of leadership in formal positions of authority to the role of leadership in fostering concerted action among people with different areas of expertise.

Given the research findings on the effects of principal leadership on student learning, research into the state and district leaders' roles in developing principals' leadership capacities in areas that benefit student achievement is needed. A central, emerging role

for district and state leaders in accountability for student achievement is in developing *leadership capacity* for school improvement. Although we know that leadership matters in influencing student achievement, we also know that it matters most where it is needed the most (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Alternative and emerging concepts of leadership. Over the last century, scholars have devoted considerable study to understanding school leadership and school leaders. An extensive review of recent studies in four major educational journals (Leithwood & Duke, 1999) identified six primary conceptions of leadership: managerial, contingency, transformational, instructional, moral, and participative. Recent research into and theory of educational leadership points to limitations in existing conceptions of leadership, however. A major criticism is that each attends to a different piece of the leadership puzzle (Leithwood & Duke, 1999). The MCREL meta-analysis of research cited earlier (Waters et al., 2003) found principal leadership qualities associated with student achievement in each of the above conceptions of leadership, highlighting the inadequacy of framing leadership in any of these commonly used senses.

To account for the complexities of context and actors in which leadership takes place, theorists have begun to understand leadership as "relational" (Bolman, Johnson, Murphy, & Weiss, 1990; Leithwood & Duke, 1999)—one reason the LCE team attended to relationships among leaders in forming its research sub-questions. Complexity theory (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; Stacey, 1996), which understands organizations as co-evolving networks of interacting agents, holds that cause and effect relationships exist among agents, but that both the number of agents and the number of relationships defy categorization or analytic techniques. Leadership becomes a function of identifying and maximizing beneficial patterns (and suppressing harmful ones) as they emerge (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003).

Writers such as Senge (1990) and Wheatley (1999) approach change and leadership from a systems perspective, calling for changes in mind-set as well as systems, which may affect leaders in component organizations, many of whom hold their positions on the basis of technical expertise. Ogawa and Bossert (2000) suggest:

> To capture leadership strategy as an organizational quality will require adopting rather paradoxical research strategies that increase the unit of analysis and reduce the focus of inquiry. If leadership is treated as an organizational quality, then studies of leadership must have as their unit of analysis the organization (p. 53).

In the context of systemic change, the unit of analysis becomes the whole support system for schools, including the state and districts, and their capacity to improve teaching and learning at all levels of the system. The authors support the view that most theories of leadership derive from a technical-rational view of organizations and argue instead for an institutional perspective in which leadership "is embedded not in particular roles but in the relationships that exist among the incumbents of roles" (pp. 48-49).

Summary

The themes and ideas embedded in the literature about the effectiveness of reform efforts and the choices that SEAs and districts face provide the context within which the LCE team sought to understand the actions undertaken in our region to improve low-performing schools. We first used the themes emerging from the literature to refine questions and develop a conceptual framework; later, after collecting data, we used them to help interpret the findings from the five sites.

The following section describes the pattern of findings from the cross-site data analysis, referencing the literature where we have been able to find examples in the region that are similar to or extend beyond what has been written about the influences of SEA and district practices on school improvement. The findings update the pre-NCLB literature about reform influences, and because we were particularly alert to the roles of leaders, they provide a perspective that is oriented toward dilemmas that leaders now face and actions they might take.

Seven Themes

What policies, structures, and supports are SEAs and school districts creating and implementing to improve student achievement in low-performing districts and schools?

What are the demands on leaders in the complex, high expectations environment of NCLB, specifically those arising from new policies, structures, and supports?

Results of the LCE team's investigations are presented here in the form of seven themes, or patterns, derived from the analyses of data we collected across five sites. We found that state and district leaders were taking common approaches as they began to grasp the enormity of the job before them. These approaches are reflected in the following themes which, taken together, describe an arc of leadership actions in turning around low-performing schools.

- Tackling capacity
- Shifting priorities
- Aligning resources and policies
- Centralizing control
- Embracing adaptive change
- Seizing opportunities
- Zeroing in on instruction and learning

The appendices of this report contain descriptive case studies with detailed findings from each of the five sites. The cases describe state and district strategies for supporting low-performing schools—their rationales, their history and background, related education policies, the role of leadership, shared beliefs and assumptions, expectations (and measures) of success, resources, implementation actions, take-up and response (where applicable), and feedback mechanisms. The cases describe the actions of leaders at all levels of the educational system and at all stages in the process of supporting low-performing schools.

Case synopses, intended as background to the discussion of the seven themes, are provided in the Appendixes. A brief summary of what the cases show is provided below.

Across the five sites we generally found similar emphases on systematic, data-based approaches to school improvement, especially the use of school and student data to identify gaps in service and inform planning. The rationales for strategies were also similar, although context (past practice, geography, theories of change, and so forth) shaped the strategies' overall design and subsequent implementation.

Beyond these similarities, however, we found wide variations in both the structure and the content of the strategies that states and districts in the Northeast designed: Some state education agencies prescribe school interventions; others stress building leadership capacity. In this region, where independence is highly prized, shifting control was a common issue, although states and districts varied in the extent to which they centralized control.

The changed environment in which education and leaders work today has created new problems and new opportunities for solutions. We found that leaders face similar crises and constraints: New policies and structures have affected how they prioritize problems, what resources they can bring to bear on them, and how well they can tackle high priority tasks and develop common purpose. We found mixed acceptance of the idea that conventional and expedient approaches would, in many instances, be supplanted by more adaptive approaches in order to effect the types of changes low-performing schools need to implement.

Brief Overviews of Five Sites

Massachusetts

Massachusetts initially created its system for identifying and supporting low-performing schools after enacting the Education Reform Act of 1993. Aimed at dramatically changing public education, this legislation required greater and more equitable funding of schools, accountability for student learning, and the institution of statewide standards for students, educators, schools, and districts. Since then, the Massachusetts Department of Education (MADOE) has furthered its policy and organizational development to meet the accountability demands of NCLB. MADOE's Accountability and Targeted Assistance division identifies schools in need of state intervention and designs and implements supports to low-performing schools and districts.[3] Leaders in the DOE's school performance division recruit and train educators to serve on school panel reviews through which they determine whether schools require state intervention and support. Schools found "underperforming" as the result of these reviews then undergo a longer, and more intense, diagnostic fact-finding review and are required to participate in the state's system of support.

Support strategies. The state has implemented and refined two key strategies to support low-performing schools. Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM), a school improvement planning process, helps schools use data in their analyses and planning. The theory is that in order for low-performing schools to improve, school leaders need to become proficient strategic planners. Early DOE reviews of school plans showed significant gaps in leaders' abilities to use data and create coherent improvement plans. The PIM process requires school teams to look at the factors most closely linked to student performance and identify the root causes of poor performance.

To assist in planning and implementation, the department supports a network of school support specialists. Designed as district positions in order to build local interest and sup-

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[3] In 2004, the state established the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability, a non-DOE entity, to conduct accountability reviews of districts.

port for the work of school improvement, these positions are also embedded in a state-wide structure of accountability and support. DOE staff train teams of school and district leaders in the PIM process, and school support specialists meet regularly with each other and the DOE leadership.

Capacity. The DOE's accountability system reflects a carefully crafted balance of pressure and support; efforts to build capacity for school improvement are explicit: common training and tools and embedded expert assistance. At present, the system is stretched to meet growing needs amid limited and unreliable funding. The complexity and unpredictability of funding require leaders to spend time figuring out how to support the existing system rather than improving and expanding it to meet growing needs.

New Haven, Connecticut

As a district, New Haven has been focusing on improving literacy for all students in all schools. As a state, Connecticut has been identifying low-performing schools since 2001 and has been working directly with districts and identified schools. The district's language arts curriculum framework is a set of expectations for skills, competencies, and applications for students' learning (grades K-4 and grades 5-8) in reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and problem solving. These learning outcomes guide the development of curricular units, lessons, and assessments at each school. Teachers can employ a wide range of teaching strategies and select literacy materials consistent with the learning needs of the students. Many elements of the district's literacy initiative, such as curriculum guides, suggested materials, and professional development, have been in place for a number of years. Implementation has been required throughout all schools.

Now the district is focusing on literacy teaching and learning in the early grades in persistently low-performing schools, intensifying the levels of district monitoring and district support through additional literacy staff and new intervention programs. Top-level district administrators meet monthly with principals to review grade-level test scores and probe instructional strategies with questions such as: What intervention is being used for this student? Why have these students continued to score at this level?

Support strategies. Because of inconsistent implementation of literacy supports at the building level, the district mandated several "non-negotiables" during the 2003-04 school year, which included:

- a 90-minute literacy block;
- ongoing, internal assessments;
- grade-level meetings to review student work; and
- principal accountability.

In New Haven, accountability for literacy improvement has been placed on the shoulders of the principals in the persistently low-performing schools—with supports available from instructional coaches and consultants outside the school.

Capacity. Each school has multiple building-specific initiatives in place, all competing for attention. The district has been working with principals to identify three targeted priorities for the year and then hold them accountable for only those priorities. However, principals find it difficult to abandon other building programs, and the district finds it difficult to force principals to redirect their priorities. Some school leaders are clearly struggling with how to make the leap from the plan to improved student literacy outcomes, that is, to implement the literacy initiative effectively at the classroom level.

New York

In 2001, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiated the Regional Network Strategy to provide services and support improvement efforts in districts and schools identified in need of improvement. Leveraging the resources and expertise of numerous state-funded networks, the Regional Network Strategy serves as New York's statewide system of support required by NCLB.

One premise of the Regional Network Strategy is that in a state as large and diverse as New York, a regional approach to school improvement is more efficient and effective than a statewide approach. To develop this strategy, NYSED called upon several state-funded networks to form new partnerships and jointly design ways to work together in schools identified for improvement. Another premise is that the strategy's complex, adaptive problem-solving approach is best realized through a statewide learning community.

Support strategies. NYSED's actions to implement the Regional Network Strategy include: 1) large-scale professional development activities, offered quarterly, 2) concurrent policy development to support coordination among the regional networks, 3) development of partnership agreements with the "Big Four" cities (Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, and Yonkers), 4) revision of work plans and roles in the Office of School Improvement (OSI), and 5) outreach from OSI to other NYSED offices that fund and direct statewide networks that affect student achievement and school improvement.

The highlight of the Regional Network Strategy is the large-scale professional development initiative, which brings together staff from the state-funded networks (e.g., the regional partners) and state-level departments to create a learning community where participants can develop a common understanding of the responsibilities of the network partners and related NYSED departments. These sessions also provide a forum where networks can coordinate regional strategies for schools identified as low performing.

Capacity. The NYSED Regional Network Strategy has increased interaction among networks within regions and between regions and state offices. The professional development initiative, especially, promotes extended conversations among networks on the best way to work with schools and is increasingly seen as an opportunity to develop mutual understanding and identify strategies for working together. NYSED is also strategically changing the language of network contracts when they are renewed to redirect some resources from networks that have a broad mandate to work with all schools and districts to target schools identified under NCLB. Finally, there is a growing partnership between historically separate departments in NYSED. These partnerships allow for leveraging additional resources

to support schools identified for improvement and increasing coherence among the networks funded by NYSED.

Rhode Island

As in many states, Rhode Island's response to NCLB required a serious review of its existing accountability system and an examination of how the state agency is organized to deliver effective supports to districts and schools in need of improvement. Starting in 2002, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) began a major design activity that refined elements of its Progressive Support and Intervention (PS&I) accountability system and shifted the agency's focus to districts with large numbers of low-performing schools. The focus on districts, articulated as a set of explicit expectations, generated several new team structures within RIDE as it began to design and carry out its revamped account-ability system.

Support strategies. RIDE created explicit expectations for district performance in areas such as using data, staffing with high quality personnel, and engaging parents and communities. The district expectations also provided indicators of relative progress in these areas that both RIDE and the districts could use in planning, implementing, and monitoring improvement actions. To position itself to work with the districts and the reframed expectations, RIDE launched a series of agency PS&I teams charged with (1) identifying programs, expertise, and research related to written district expectations, (2) organizing meaningful data on districts, schools, and students to guide support and intervention, and (3) providing targeted assistance and resources to districts and schools. This major development work was done in preparation for shaping interactions with districts during the 2004-2005 school year.

Capacity. RIDE's focus on districts grew out of both practical and research-based concerns. Practically, RIDE can intervene more effectively in a smaller number of low-performing districts than in a much larger number of individual schools, given the size of its staff. From a research perspective, RIDE believes that the focus on districts is likely to be more systemi-cally effective because districts exert considerable influence on whether improvement takes hold at the school level. As RIDE developed teams to address the district-focused work, its leadership team began to work more systematically. Previously, the state agency relied on individuals' professional judgment to assess the causes of low-performance and actions to address it. At present, however, RIDE is trying to pool information from staff as it makes decisions about district supports and interventions and gauges the capacity needs across the state. Taken as a whole, the revamped PS&I system illustrates a greater emphasis on clear expectations, the use of evidence-based programs, and an agency-wide commitment to improving low performance in identified districts.

Vermont

The most rural of the New England states, Vermont has a large number of small towns and small schools. Small classrooms, small schools, and decentralized administration results in relatively high costs for education and limited local capacities for some types of services envisioned by NCLB, such as professional development, supplemental education services,

and specialized interventions. By 2003, the Vermont Department of Education was facing a number of challenges stemming at least in part from the high-stakes environment created both by state law and NCLB. Despite some successes in the state's work with low-performing schools, the overall context was not favorable to the types of SEA and district roles and supports envisioned over the long term by NCLB.

Between January 2003 and June 2004 and under the leadership of two different education commissioners, Ray McNulty and Richard Cate, Vermont undertook steps to reexamine the role and focus of the state education agency. Several issues prompted this reexamination, aimed at focusing the agency's resources optimally to ensure student achievement outcomes in the high-stakes environment that both Vermont's Act 60 and NCLB created. Chief among these issues was the lack of state and district capacity to meet new requirements for professional development, supplemental services, and specialized interventions.

Support strategies. Vermont's Act 60 formed the backdrop for the recent era of education reform in the state, establishing procedures for identifying and supporting low-performing schools, and Vermont developed a system of state-level support to work with identified schools. A team of state-level school support coordinators (SSCs) works with schools on action planning. Beyond providing technical assistance in the content areas associated with identified needs, however, the SSCs now also take a more comprehensive approach, for example, helping schools access outside providers and assuring the department of education's services, such as special education and support services, are well coordinated. The intent is to maximize the effective use of resources from all sources. Title I improvement funds are provided directly to low-performing Title I schools after the department of education approves an action plan.

Capacity. Vermont undertook to reorganize the state agency and other supports to meet the higher stakes demands placed on local districts and schools. The unusual aspect in Vermont's case is that the strategy unfolded over a series of leadership changes. In June 2004, the state board approved the joint department-board strategic plan. The plan includes focus areas to guide state agency work and measurable indicators of progress. Both directly address issues that originally prompted the reconceptualization of the SEA role and functions, including satisfying the needs of customers—in this case, local schools and districts. Throughout the reorganization processes, cross-role and cross-level interactions were central in surfacing important issues in a way that stimulated new thinking about responsibilities and obligations at various levels.

SEVEN THEMES

1. ***Tackling capacity.*** *To meet the demands of NCLB, states and districts must make a significant shift in function from monitoring compliance to offering districts and schools strategic support with the same or sometimes diminished levels of resources. Limitations in their own capacity have hampered state and district efforts to design and implement policies, structures, and supports that will build local capacity for school improvement in the growing number of schools not meeting performance expectations. (See page 15 for definition of "capacity.")*

Even for the northeastern states whose existing reform efforts were quite congruent with NCLB, the strict timeline and the scale of the problem they now grapple with has created a sense of urgency. We found that states are acknowledging their own deficiencies in meeting the needs for building school and district capacities to fulfill improvement expectations. As raised earlier, studies of state and district systems of support for low-performing schools describe capacity limitations as primary influences on design considerations (CCSO, 2003; Krueger et al., 2002). Capacity limitations narrow the choices states and districts can make. Despite their limitations, states and districts are nevertheless making commitments, for example, to extra staff and resources for identified schools, that while risky in terms of actual resources, signal an intention to change and respond to the crisis at hand.

The examples describe how Vermont and Massachusetts have attempted to address state and local limitations in knowledge, skill, systems, and resources amid ever-growing problems of scale and urgency.

Vermont. *Vermont has responded to the accelerated schedule for student achievement by reorganizing the state agency and clarifying responsibilities at the state and district levels, strengthening the capacity at both levels to meet new demands.*

Prior to NCLB, Vermont acknowledged the importance of allocating resources and developing expertise specifically targeted to improve low-performing schools. Expertise was located at the SEA level, which was feasible given that in the first several years, the greatest number of schools identified in need of support was about 40 and the record of improvements after a year was positive. Specially recruited staff at the state agency (now called school support coordinators) provided individualized support to schools identified as in need of improvement.

Vermont's current and previous commissioners of education recognized that the new high-stakes environment required more than "business as usual." They called for the SEA to reorganize to serve schools and districts more effectively, in the belief that they could not make new demands on school districts until the SEA had clarified its own priori-

ties and aligned responsibilities to those priorities—while making maximum use of the resources available from all sources to improve student achievement.

Until recently, the primary function of Vermont's SEA staff has been to assist in developing data-based action plans and monitoring their implementation. Beyond providing technical assistance in the content areas associated with identified needs, the SEA school support coordinators now take a more comprehensive approach. Recognizing that low-performing schools need help accessing services, the coordinators help schools make connections to outside providers and assure that departmental services, for example, special education, support services, and so forth, are coordinated. The intent is to maximize the effective use of resources for low-performing schools and coordinate multiple, sometimes competing, funding streams.

NCLB's requirements for annual identification of low-performing schools holds districts responsible for supporting schools. Under NCLB, resources for school support that had formerly been retained at the SEA level instead flowed directly to districts. Most Vermont districts are small, with few staff at the district level, and most did not receive enough new federal funding to provide the professional development required for school improvement. Districts immediately felt pressure from the new higher stakes without the necessary capacity to fulfill expectations. Its own resources reduced, the SEA was seriously constrained in the support it could offer districts. District pressures on the SEA for more support have increased rapidly over the past two years.

Massachusetts. *Although a structure to identify and provide supports for low-performing schools was instated nearly seven years ago, Massachusetts is struggling to keep pace with the number of schools in need of improvement. The demands of scale present enormous challenge for a small state entity charged with helping hundreds of schools to improve.*

The standards and assessments provisions of the state's Education Reform Act of 1993 set in motion the creation and subsequent adoption (in 1999) of a School and District Accountability System on Under-performing Schools and Districts. The current system retains its central features: using state measures to assess performance, setting targets for school performance and improvement, identifying schools that fail to meet targets, and determining, through panel review, schools that lack adequate plans to address needs. By law, following the review panel's assessment and "taking into account the availability of resources to support State intervention efforts," the commissioner declares a school underperforming or not. These schools then undergo an intensive fact-finding review.

The difference between 2000 and 2004 lies in scale. When the department identified its first underperforming schools in 2000, prior to NCLB, four of eight middle schools undergoing panel reviews were identified as such. The department's 2004 AYP ratings now show 324 Massachusetts schools in need of improvement, 27 schools in corrective action, and 25 in restructuring. The department struggles to offer intervention and intensive support to an ever-larger and deeper pool of underperforming schools and districts; in 2004, for example, only 16 schools received panel reviews.

The state's primary support strategies, the PIM improvement planning process and the School Support Specialist system, are intended to provide tailored assistance to underperforming schools, develop school and district capacity, and act on opportunities for bringing supports to scale. Both strategies were affected in 2004, when the Massachusetts Title I funds were seriously reduced, reportedly to a greater extent than any other state. Evidence indicates that schools that receive the in-depth PIM and School Specialist support make progress; however, the state and districts continue to be challenged to meet the needs of all schools.

Many districts have adopted the DOE's PIM process for all schools, a move that the department's associate commissioner views as "in general, good, but the process is intense and it is time consuming." School support specialists are stretched to provide the depth of support low-performing schools need and still support all schools in their districts. They struggle to balance breadth and depth of service while also being "pulled" to do other tasks by district leaders. In some cases, the specialists work with schools undergoing the state's panel review and fact-finding processes. Elsewhere, districts leverage other mechanisms to provide ongoing support to identified schools. In Boston, for example, the district's Collaborative Coaching Model services were ramped up in an underperforming school to provide frequent and regular coaching support in literacy and math. In an underperforming middle school in Lowell, an instructional specialist provides ongoing coaching and modeling. When identified schools receive additional resources, however, districts may have difficulty coordinating services and maintaining focus.

External pressure continues to mount for state action in regard to low-performing schools. A major plan aimed at turning around "100 of the worst schools in the state in three years" was unveiled in early February 2005 by a coalition of business and school leaders. Their proposal, estimated to cost between $400 and $600 million per year, calls for fixing failing schools, increasing the number of students who achieve top scores on the state's math and science tests, and steadily raising the passing score on the MCAS high school graduation requirement.

> **2.** **Shifting Priorities.** *State and district leaders have shifted priorities to pay more attention and provide more resources to low-performing schools and districts. However, an emerging consensus suggests that persistently low-performing schools and districts may need not only more, but different, support. With limited resources, leaders are pressed to provide basic supports to all schools, sustain gains made in improving schools, and meet the unique needs of the lowest performing schools.*

Shifting priorities to focus on low-performing schools is both logical and practical, particularly given capacity concerns, but it raises major concerns for state and district leaders. In giving priority to those schools most in need of improvement, state and district leaders are experiencing conflict with their customary goal of addressing the educational health of *all* schools. In a context of limited resources, strengthening commitments to lower performing schools may compromise preventive efforts in other schools.

It is also becoming clear that adding resources that merely intensify conventional school improvement efforts are insufficient to improve student performance in persistently low-performing schools. As literature suggests (CSSO, 2003), differentiating the *level* of supports in a tiered system occurs in several states around the country, but differentiating the *types* of support is less common. Leaders are still identifying the kinds of supports, as well as their levels of intensity and duration, that low-performing schools need, seeking solutions that are strategically focused, coordinated, and customized to address persistently low performance.

The states and district under study reflect the awareness that low-performing schools require priority attention and different solutions. Those faced with large numbers of schools in need of improvement (Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island) are concerned about the specific supports required to make a difference with low-performing schools and the consequences of reduced support to other schools.

As the examples below demonstrate, New Haven's tiered system of support for identified schools has worked for some schools, but chronically low-performing schools are requiring even more intensive efforts. Rhode Island's efforts to address low-performing schools have raised issues of capacity for the SEA as it focuses more resources on schools and districts with the greatest performance gaps. In both instances, leaders struggle to maintain their traditional role of supporting all schools.

New Haven. *A number of New Haven's improvement measures have worked for most schools; greater resources and more customized oversight are the next steps for schools that have not improved.*

New Haven spent four years providing more, but not necessarily different, support for reading, writing, and math in its lowest performing schools. The district recently changed its policy so that these schools receive more resources and are monitored more frequently and in greater depth than other schools. This new attention has worked for some schools.

To accomplish this, the district has developed a tiered system for identified schools. Those on the top tier are given little extra support and are expected to have the capacity to solve their own problems. Those in the middle receive some additional resources. Those on the bottom tier have received more intensive support, such as intervention programs and literacy coaches from the district. This year, more targeted resources and a new oversight director have begun to customize support for New Haven's chronically low-performing schools. The district is providing new resources in persistently low-performing schools, while receiving "push back" from certain schools because of the change in the historical premise of support for all schools in the district.

Rhode Island. *School officials are recognizing the time and effort school improvement initiatives will ask of state staff, raising questions both of capacity and responsibility for leadership of reform efforts.*

Though the RIDE is still the *State* Department of Education, providing a wide variety of services and monitoring to every district in Rhode Island, it is moving toward placing greater priority, as well as more staff, focus, and money, on the state's persistently low-performing districts. This represents a distinct shift for the agency. The shift is manifested in internal staffing pressures. Various initiatives related to PS&I, such as the development and rollout of grade-level expectations, new state tests, high school regulations, and new approaches to teacher re-certification, all require significant attention from RIDE staff. The initiatives directly related to PS&I also require the time and expertise of many of these same staff. RIDE leadership repeatedly states that it is not "restructuring the agency," but it is nonetheless in transition as it tries to concentrate more resources on PS&I and the districts it targets.

In addition to shifting its own staff to reflect the greater priority placed on low-performing districts, RIDE is actively defining how it will allocate resources directly to districts. The "progressive" element in the PS&I system suggests that RIDE will not only place more resources on low-performing districts, but will place even more attention on districts with a greater magnitude of performance gaps. On paper, RIDE is moving toward a differentiated focus on low-performing districts rather than the state as a whole, and on lowest performing districts in particular. It is also trying to match supports to specific district needs, allowing for a more context-sensitive set of remedies, but it has not fully sorted out this approach. As with other changes necessitated by NCLB, these shifts in priority are relatively new and the agency is sorting out their implications.

> **3.** ***Aligning resources and policies.*** *As states clarify their priorities to meet requirements associated with NCLB and related state and district policies, they are recognizing the need to align their entire education systems. Initially, states and districts layered new policies, responsibilities, and resources onto existing structures without considering their impact on the education system as a whole. Recognizing the limitations of past practices has required states to rethink underlying assumptions and align their actions and policies comprehensively—to see the continuum of schools, districts, and the state as a whole.*

In the face of a clearly defined problem—escalating numbers of schools identified as in need of improvement and limited resources to assist them—leaders are seeking to align polices and existing resources to maximize the value of the resources that they have. The requirements associated with federal and state policies and funding streams often work at cross purposes and impede desired reform. Leaders have found that adding NCLB and related state policies to these deeply embedded funding structures and practices can be cumbersome and ineffective.

Fullan (2003) argues that for deep-level change to occur, all parts of the education system need to work together–school, district, and state. In seeking to create alignment, leaders are evaluating current resources and rearranging them to be more effective. Alignment in this new climate is broader than aligning curricula and assessments with state standards; it encompasses practices at all levels and an understanding that the state is no longer a neutral observer but a committed player in the whole education system.

Aligning their systems poses immense challenges for state education departments. Fully recognizing the benefits of aligning resources and policies, leaders nevertheless struggle inside education systems that lack coherence and consistency. Moving toward alignment requires states to redraw traditional boundaries, set new priorities and, in many instances, shift roles and responsibilities.

The examples from New York and New Haven, Connecticut, illustrate state and district efforts to align elements of systems and the difficulties they encounter.

New York. *New York has made ambitious efforts to align resources and policies within an inherently complex regional network system. The state's effort to prioritize services to low-performing schools is requiring networks with distinct mandates to coordinate their efforts.*

In 2002, NYSED began to reorganize and develop new policies to enhance its ability to support low-performing districts. The following year, it created an Office of School Improvement and Community Services (OSI) to design and implement the state's system of support for low-performing schools, including the Regional Network Strategy. NYSED developed this regional strategy as a way to leverage and refocus existing regional

resources (e.g., established technical assistance networks) to give low-performing schools customized, coordinated support.

NYSED institutionalized this shift in priorities and resources by designing the Regional Network Strategy around four critical purposes: 1) align regional resources and related roles and responsibilities, 2) develop a continuum of support for identified schools, 3) align roles and responsibilities among state-funded technical assistance networks and NYSED offices, and 4) identify and disseminate best practices related to school improvement. Further, a separate state policy requires that the regional technical assistance networks collaborate and direct a substantial portion of time and resources to the provision of services to NYSED-identified schools and districts. All of these elements are incorporated into technical assistance center contracts as they are renewed.

Additionally, NYSED prioritizes which schools the regional networks will serve, recognizing that the networks cannot respond to the needs of all identified schools with their current resources. By providing support to schools strategically, based on their level of need, NYSED seeks to avoid spreading services so thin that they become ineffective. Its intentional, strategic approach, the department argues, can best provide schools with supports and services appropriate to their individual needs and local context.

The subsequent shift in roles and responsibilities has increased tension in some networks and in the state agency. This tension stems from the pressure, both internal and external, on networks to continue to provide a basic level of support to their target audiences (e.g., English language learners, special education students) in the face of new state and federal demands to support low-performing schools. Managing the shift to focus on low-performing schools without losing (or devaluing) the skills and expertise the different networks have developed for their particular, historically relevant student populations is an ongoing struggle. It has also created stresses for other systems of school and district support, such as the regional Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). One outcome has been a formal, ongoing dialogue through professional development activities to clarify the roles of BOCES and district superintendents and to explore with them their role in supporting schools at risk of becoming identified of needing improvement.

New Haven. *With influences and funding from many sources, the district is beginning to coordinate resources, with varying success. At the same time, it has begun to move away from the autonomy it historically granted schools, taking greater control over and responsibility for persistently low-performing schools.*

New Haven draws funds from many sources, such as Titles I and III, SPED, and Reading First, as well as the Stupski Foundation (partnering to support improving student achievement). The new resources for early literacy have been an advantage for the district, although not evenly. In some buildings, the additional resources are well deployed and used effectively; in others they are not. Largely through Reading First, curricula are stronger and resources more plentiful in the lower elementary grades.

To date, the district has been unable to coordinate special education and ESL education with regular education initiatives effectively, in part because of the categorical isolation of

the departments and differing goals. Funding streams are beginning to be coordinated, but fragmentation is more common than alignment.

New Haven's central office efforts, though strenuous, are confronting barriers every step of the way. The district is large and complex, with a strong union and a history of independent school leaders. The district's past policies favoring school-level autonomy conflict with recent trends toward greater district control. Newer district policies have been generally layered onto existing practices without integrating or removing old practices. Indeed, earlier models that the district no longer supports continue to influence schools' practices and ideologies; New Haven school staff still frequently refer to theirs as "Comer" schools, for example, and advocate for school-based management councils.

Past practice, multiple messages, and competition between school- and district-based initiatives result in confusing, and sometimes contradictory, behaviors on the part of school and district staff. For example, the central office holds school leaders accountable for student achievement, yet the system for evaluating principals does not support this accountability. Principals report to, and are evaluated by, one of two school directors, not the administrator responsible for school improvement and curriculum and instruction. Additional staff (literacy tutors, ESL instructors) who are under district supervision have been placed in the schools to support instructional improvement, but their work is often compromised by contradictory direction from building principals.

> **4.** ***Centralizing control.*** *The realignment of states' entire education systems has meant, at a practical level, an historic shift in decision making from schools and districts. In response to state pressure, districts are striving to use resources effectively and efficiently to move unprecedented numbers of low-performing schools to higher student achievement and greater learning. Especially in large urban districts, district leaders are centralizing not only policies and support structures, but making decisions about the structure of the school day, curricula, assessments, and professional development. Emerging questions include when centralized control and standardized procedures make sense and whether they really address core problems of student learning.*

Historically, local control over what is taught in the classroom has been the norm in the Northeast. Districts, and sometimes schools, have typically developed their own curricula, assessments, and professional development programs. Today, pressures inconsistent with the region's historic trend stem both from state-level mandates and from district-level efforts to increase student achievement in large urban districts (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2004).

For example, larger urban districts with high student mobility are finding that inconsistencies in programs throughout their schools put struggling students at a disadvantage, and the districts are shifting to a uniform curriculum in the belief that it better supports special education students, English language learners, and students performing below grade level. These same districts also tend to prescribe a range of related practices, including the amount of time students spend learning core subjects, the use of pacing guides and quarterly assessments for all students, and mandated interventions for students whose achievements do not meet standards.

Increased accountability for student achievement on statewide assessments has made locally developed programs a luxury most schools and districts can no longer afford. This has resulted in a shift towards a "one size fits all" approach, generally determined at the top. In the Northeast's traditional context of decentralized school systems, centralized control and prescribed practices can create tensions between the district office and individual schools, particularly when disadvantaged students still lag behind in achievement.

The examples show both district and state uses of centralization to address the needs of students in low-performing schools. In New Haven, the district set new policies on school curriculum, personnel, and district support for persistently low-performing schools. In Vermont, pressured by the districts, the state agency came to realize the enormous task of centralizing support systems.

New Haven. *New Haven has set a precedent by adopting core curriculum materials, requiring all teachers to attend trainings, and mandating grade-level planning to talk about student*

work. In a push for central control, district personnel must be out in the schools and gain new technical skills in order to work effectively with principals and instructional coaches.

New Haven has traditionally allowed its school leaders wide latitude in how they run their buildings. New are increasingly prescriptive district requirements for persistently low-performing schools. Identified schools are required to use the district-approved literacy and math curricula, structure the school day around an uninterrupted 90-minute daily literacy block, and conduct weekly grade-level meetings; staff members must attend monthly district-wide professional development programs. Administrators are also required to attend district professional development trainings. Although these requirements are district-wide, considerable freedom is given to schools where student performance remains acceptable. Principals in higher performing schools receive district permission to substitute alternative professional development offerings or curricular approaches in their schools.

District curriculum and instructional personnel are required to spend a great deal of time in schools, observing grade level planning meetings, conducting "walk-throughs" with principals, and meeting with instructional coaches. Principal evaluations are aligned to their responsibilities as outlined in school improvement plans. The district associate superintendents review quarterly benchmark tests with each principal of a low-performing school. These are new roles and responsibilities for district staff.

Vermont. *In Vermont, the demand for more centralized systems and technical services began at the local level. State leaders are realizing how much more centralization is needed to address gaps in education in the state and how much it will cost.*

Vermont educators take great pride in the decentralization that has characterized Vermont's small schools and districts. However, the increased pressures for accountability from the state's Act 60 and NCLB have raised issues of the viability of such a decentralized system to provide adequate supports to schools and districts for professional development and specialized interventions. Small classrooms, small schools, and decentralized administrative services result in relatively high costs for education and limit local capacities for some types of services envisioned by NCLB.

While the desire for local control of education may be especially strong in Vermont, there is increased recognition—even at the local level—that local capacity for changing educational conditions is small. In fact, in a turnabout, it is district and school educators who have pressed the SEA to provide more centralized and uniform services in some areas, including centralized data management services. Districts have come to recognize that a critical mass of resources is needed to respond to new requirements.

The Vermont Department of Education has leveraged the opportunity created by the gap in capacity to offer incentives for various pilot programs associated with centralization options at different levels. For example, the department created regional educational support agencies with incentives for districts to pool resources for professional development. With external funding, the department has encouraged various local experiments that involve collaboration and centralization.

> **5.** ***Embracing adaptive change.*** *Leaders initially responded to the demands of NCLB with technical solutions rooted in existing knowledge, strategies, and structures. These solutions provided an impetus for change, but the scope and complexity of the challenges confronting leaders are requiring them to move beyond existing frameworks and approaches. Using feedback from their initial and subsequent responses, they are continually adapting policies, structures, and practices to meet the demands for effective assistance to schools and districts identified as low performing.*

The shift in state roles from monitoring for compliance to capacity building, the need to create greater organizational and inter-organizational alignment towards a common purpose, and the shifting definition of organizational roles to increase this alignment have catapulted states into territory in which past practices and procedures and existing knowledge are inadequate. An outcome is that states have been forced to make initial responses, learn from them, and make incremental adaptations that move them towards desired goals. They are functioning in conditions described by Heifitz (1994) as requiring adaptive rather than technical approaches to leadership.

In addition, all key players responsible for designing support systems are learning that support must be tailored to the specific needs of the targeted schools and districts. The understanding of the need for, and implications of, contextually based support tends to spread unevenly throughout the system. The shift often initially manifests itself in providers working independently, followed by inter-group conflict that begins to resolve as understandings of roles, responsibilities, and approaches are revised and reconciled.

Continual adaptation increases the need for informed decision making at various levels of the system, as seen in increased attention to data and the use of data in new ways. Data increasingly inform planning conversations rather than serve largely as the basis for reports or as information to be disseminated.

The New York case that follows shows how the need for adaptive approaches to new demands is being manifested at both the state and local levels. Some of the issues confronting Rhode Island in the subsequent case study illustrate the changing demands for information and data.

New York. *New York is seeking to align both state and regional agencies and to create a support system based on common principles that allows for adaptation to local and regional needs. All members of the system have had to learn from each other and adapt accordingly in order to use limited resources as effectively as possible.*

The regional network strategy uses existing regional networks and resources rather than state-level intervention as the primary method of school improvement. Such an approach reflects an intentional mix of, and appreciation for, externally driven approaches to school

improvement promoted by NCLB (e.g., planning, monitoring, and state intervention) and locally developed approaches; however, balancing these different approaches does present a number of challenges.

The adaptive and context-based strategies used by the regional networks often conflict with the more linear and directive approaches promoted by some state-level officials. State officials are pressured (by NCLB and internal influences) to ensure that the support strategies used in the field are consistent, research-based, and focused on outcomes, namely, improved student performance. While most state officials, and in particular the OSI staff, value and understand the intent of the regional network strategy, the pressure to maintain consistency and meet NCLB requirements often leads OSI officials to focus on technical solutions, such as planning and targeted intervention. In contrast to this rational, linear perspective, the regional networks' approach is strategic, systemic, context based, and pragmatic. It emphasizes the development of relationships with identified schools, and it is flexible enough to allow the networks to engage and work with schools in multiple ways. An outcome is that regional networks sometimes receive guidance and directions from the state that conflict with how they perceive they must work with schools to be effective, and state staff sometimes see the networks as non-compliant.

One regional network, for example, the Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs), directly engages with school leaders to develop data- and context-based improvement plans. Support center staff work directly with teachers to build successful practices that can be spread school-wide. Within this approach, a core RSSC practice is to lead teachers and administrators through an analysis of community, school, and student data (including, but not limited to, state assessments) to inform planning for school improvement. Focusing on data that accurately represent their students' current academic status (and other performance indicators) helps districts and schools move away from decisions based on hunches and anecdotal evidence. It also helps RSSC staff guide administrators and teachers toward tackling issues that they can control and change rather than attributing failure to parents and students.

These leadership and capacity-building activities often complement data- and inquiry-based strategies to help schools develop improvement plans. Because this process is almost never linear, RSSC staff members sometimes find it more effective to begin with job-embedded professional development so that school staff members learn new strategies before the school creates an improvement plan. In all cases, RSSC staff members seek to engage school and district personnel in ongoing data analysis and planning focused on changing individual and organizational behaviors. Some of these efforts will result in written plans; others will modify existing plans. By focusing on relationships, leadership skills, and data-based planning, the RSSCs work to build capacity and empower schools to make sustainable changes.

Past policies and different theories of change also show up in how the different regional networks work with schools and how they now need to be aligned. For instance, the regional networks have different foci (e.g., special education, bilingual education, general education) and are funded by different NYSED offices. Although the networks differ in emphases and program requirements, each does focus on building school capacity and

uses similar strategies (e.g., coaching, mentoring, inquiry-based technical assistance) to attain that goal. Thus, while the NYSED purposely structured its support system to leverage local expertise and build capacity, NCLB continues to challenge its collective ability to reconcile contrasting theories of change about how to best support and improve low-performing schools.

New York is using a learning organization approach to create coherence across these different perspectives and approaches, drawing on both field and state knowledge to "adapt into" an effective and efficient framework. All staff from NYSED's OSI and the major state-funded regional networks convene quarterly for intensive professional development. Addressing common topics, these meetings create opportunities for common regional strategies and generate recommendations to NYSED on policy frameworks to guide network activities. These professional development sessions and follow-up regional work continually change policy and practice throughout the state support system.

Rhode Island. *Rhode Island leaders are mining data to move beyond monitoring and technical purposes to make collective decisions about supports and interventions. Senior state staff are pooling knowledge and expertise to make systematic, data-based judgments that will be targeted and tailored to meet individual district and schools' needs for supports.*

As in New York, RIDE leaders are seeking new ways to work together that combine tailored, flexible solutions for individual districts with more systematic processes for evaluating district needs and interventions. RIDE's new approaches to using data illustrate this kind of adaptive change: Mining data that the SEA has long collected for monitoring and technical purposes, RIDE leaders are creating district profiles that will guide their collective decisions about particular supports and interventions. Rhode Island's shift, then, is driven by two related factors: the need for agency staff to work together differently and the need to balance contextual decisions about individual districts with systematic, data-based judgments.

RIDE is engaged in numerous new roles and functions, many of which require facing complex problems that defy straightforward, readily available solutions. RIDE leaders, for example, are centrally focused on improving student achievement at scale, but they need to know whether the instructional programs in a given district are being implemented and are making an impact. In many cases, individual RIDE staff members have had long relationships with particular districts or staff within central offices and as a result have accumulated insights about these districts. Their individual judgments, born of professional experiences and knowledge, often served as the basis for agency decisions. Increasingly, RIDE is trying to pool this kind of knowledge among senior staff members and reach more systematic judgments. This shift requires more collaboration, more information sharing and discussion, and new processes that balance flexibility with consistency. RIDE is trying to collect and harness the individuals' professional knowledge and relationships into a more shared, agency-wide system.

One strategy for doing so is an internal "work group" charged with compiling district profiles. Like most state departments, RIDE collects considerable information from districts for a variety of reporting and compliance purposes. The work group has tried to make meaningful use of RIDE's various data, which range from special education reports to

financial data to professional development information. It compiled the data in a comprehensive yet manageable form and conducted additional analyses to show district patterns. As the work group progressed, it created and continually revised a "district profile" of one of its low-performing districts.

The profile was designed to provide a foundation of evidence and analysis so that RIDE's possible interventions would be based on more than the singular judgments of particular RIDE staff. The profile allowed RIDE leaders to work from a shared frame of reference to generate evidence-based diagnoses and prescriptions. Yet it also continued to focus on each district's own trends, thus allowing for tailored decisions. RIDE staff continue to forge new ways of sharing knowledge and different ways of crafting solutions.

> **6.** *Seizing Opportunities. Innovative structures, enhanced responsibilities, changes in roles, and new feedback mechanisms—these advances resulting from school improvement initiatives may have exacerbated tensions among leaders, but they have also opened up opportunities for new ways of working. Survival and success in environments that are characterized by adaptive changes require that leaders continually renew and extend their networks of relationships.*

Some responses to NCLB have thrust together leaders from different levels of the system to address urgent problems, whether to diagnose causes of persistently weak performance, coordinate and focus various supports, or determine the value of competing solutions. If managed well, these opportunities for cross-role and cross-level dialogue can be a source of energy for tackling challenging problems—a type of sensemaking that takes place across the "multi-tiered educational system and across different stakeholder groups" (Hamann & Lane, 2004).

When solutions to problems are not clear, leaders must take risks with new strategies to overcome persistent obstacles. The ability to share expertise across boundaries to solve complex problems is an essential aspect of adaptive change. The type of coherence-making that Fullan cites as everyone's job depends on leaders' abilities to tap into networks of expertise and extend relationships of trust (Fullan, 2003).

Revised expectations may complicate existing relationships and require new methods. Service providers who are expected to work on new priorities, for example, are often unable do so without significantly reducing services to their traditional constituencies. Facing large numbers of schools and districts in need, state leaders who in the past have based reform approaches on individual relationships may now be forced to employ more formalized and systematic approaches.

While tensions over role shifts can show the stress points in the education system, they are also indications that emerging structures and policies are having an effect on traditional ways of working.

The Massachusetts and New York examples below describe new opportunities, roles, and structures (i.e., team retreats for planning, district school support specialists, statewide superintendents' networks, statewide and regional provider networks, common professional development for technical assistance providers) that stem from a philosophy about reform that rests on the engagement of multiple stakeholders. At the same time, the new structures stimulate additional connections and facilitate the relationship-building needed for tackling important educational problems.

Massachusetts. *Structures the state has created, from panel reviews and fact-finding visits to the PIM process and various school support networks, appear to have strengthened cross-level communication and cooperation.*

Central to the Massachusetts strategies for supporting low-performing schools and districts is the belief that people need to work together within and across role groups in meaningful ways to improve teaching and learning. The state accountability office calls principals, district, and state office staff together to conduct panel reviews and fact-finding school visits to judge an identified school's plan and capacity for change. These visits foster new relationships and conversations and provide occasions for leaders across the state to learn from each other through the process. In essence, they build statewide capacity for conducting focused inquiry about schools.

Schools determined to be underperforming participate in statewide PIM training. Every three months, the state holds intensive retreats, where school and district teams work through the 10-step PIM process with training and support from the state and district school support specialists. Teams engage in critical "sensemaking" through intense, sustained dialogue. School leaders commonly describe the PIM retreat as where they "turn the corner" in their ability to accept the need for change and commit to working for it in their schools.

Once written, school plans provide an opportunity for school staff to talk at new levels about deep concerns they share. Many districts have expanded PIM planning to all schools and other content areas. The specialist's complex role in the district as data analyst, convener, and monitor has opened up opportunities for district planning not considered when the districts hired their school support specialists. School and district leaders report that their relationships with the state have changed as the result of their work together to improve schools. Relationships once characterized by dread, fear, and resentment are now described as respectful and supportive.

The state's Office of Accountability has also formed two state-wide networks—one for urban superintendents and one for consultants and service providers working in the state's underperforming schools and districts. The Urban Superintendents Network's monthly forum invites collaborative support and exchange and affords district and state communication and dialogue, as well as feedback from superintendents that the DOE uses in shaping decisions and actions. The Partners' Roundtable, still early in development, endeavors to bring together those who provide assistance to schools and districts to talk about their work and ultimately build a more coordinated system of support for schools and districts. State-level leaders have committed to the use of networks as a strategy for supporting low-performing schools.

New York. *Quarterly professional development sessions for regional network staff have led to constructive shifts in interaction, increasing cross-role understanding and collaboration.*

New York's structural and policy changes, such as reorganizing OSI and developing the regional network strategy as the state's official policy for supporting identified schools, have occasioned necessary shifts in roles and responsibilities, both among state officials and within the regional networks. Personnel from different levels of the state's education system must work together in new ways. These changes have highlighted a number of stress points in its education system. For instance, approaches to school improvement and theories of change vary across levels of the system as well as among organizations at the

same level (e.g., bilingual education, special education, general education/school improve-ment). Disparate ways of working with schools are reinforced by federal funding streams, different organizational missions, and established and valued traditions and histories of different programs. As leaders across the system are being asked to work together to improve schools, a tremendous need (and opportunity) for cross-role and cross-level communication and dialogue has emerged.

As part of the regional network strategy, since 2003 the assistant commissioner in charge of OSI has involved staff from relevant networks in quarterly professional development sessions. These sessions were also seen as an opportunity for increased (and in many instances new) communication among individuals and groups from different levels of the system who were renegotiating their roles and responsibilities to support low-performing schools. The initiative was designed to create a statewide learning community where par-ticipants could develop a common understanding of each network's responsibilities and develop regional, collaborative strategies to support schools identified as low performing.

While difficult, this work is also seen as an opportunity to build new relationships and improve the services and support provided to low-performing schools. The expectation is that by participating in statewide professional development sessions, state officials and members of the regional networks will increase the coherence, efficiency, and effectiveness of the entire system to build capacity in low-performing schools and districts. The ses-sions have focused on broad educational issues that affect low-performing schools, most recently leadership, capacity building, coherence, and systems thinking.

The sessions are purposely designed to bring cross-network and cross-regional partici-pants together to promote interaction and productive dialogue, and the various groups engage in content- and process-oriented activities focused on the session's theme. By structuring the professional development sessions this way, New York provides a forum to reduce professional isolation and support the kinds of cross-role and cross-level learning and interaction needed to best support low-performing schools.

Initially, network representatives and OSI managers experienced high levels of discomfort as they reflected on their roles and tried to define themselves in relation to partner networks (or, in the case of the state, in relation to the regional networks in the field). After a full year (four professional development sessions), OSI managers, staff, and network representa-tives have shifted how they relate to and work with each other. State officials have begun to relinquish their role as the "expert" and increasingly engage in peer-based, constructive discussions about their roles and responsibilities. Network representatives report greater understanding of each other's roles and collaboration with partner networks. Although some networks (and some regions) have struggled more than others, networks in all regions held regional meetings between professional development sessions and worked on ways to fulfill the demands of their new roles. Each region has developed its own strategies for sharing information, coordinating work, and identifying which networks are best suited to which schools.

> **7.** *Zeroing in on instruction and learning. State and district leaders are finding that relying on formal planning processes as the primary engine for change often does not result in significant and adequate instructional improvement in low-performing schools. They are learning that in these schools, improvement requires direct attention to instructional practice.*

An overall school improvement strategy requires a sustained focus on instruction (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003). Schools with a history of low student performance lack an understanding of how to make instructional practice significantly more effective. They often lack the culture and organizational structure necessary to implement and sustain improved instructional practice.

Meaning-making that does occur in these systems (Weick, 1995) tends to attribute low student performance on assessments to causes outside the control of professional staff. In this context, writing a formal improvement plan, which may be effective in supporting moderate change in higher performing schools, is inadequate. The challenge of retaining a focus on improving instructional practice in the classroom remains.

In Massachusetts, the state's training process for low-performing schools helps school leaders use data for planning and work collaboratively in school improvement planning, although it falls short of helping schools identify research-based strategies best suited to addressing their needs. In New Haven, the district is working to redirect its school leaders to focus on the quality of classroom instruction, including the full implementation of required curricula. .

Massachusetts. *The PIM process, with guidance from school support specialists, helps develop school leaders' skills in making data-based decisions to engage in school improvement at a deeper level. The PIM process does not necessarily lead to solutions for the most intractable problems; moreover, the process itself may sometimes overwhelm leaders with planning minutiae.*

Users laud the PIM process for its training in the use of data, in helping schools to better understand student performance and related causes, and for engaging district and school leaders in a highly collaborative process. Through the intense and ongoing collaboration required in the PIM process, school leaders are developing trust, collaborative skills, and the understanding necessary to move forward in school improvement endeavors. In turn they develop strategies to enlist buy-in and engagement from their school communities.

The PIM process leaves decisions about strategies up to schools, advising schools to identify research-based strategies to meet identified needs. Without time and support for such research, however, teams proceed ahead with the development of strategies they believe are best suited to the needs. The pressure to complete a plan with strategies, benchmarks, and timelines supersedes well-researched strategies and attention to the types of curricular

and instructional changes needed to address gaps in student performance. Well into plan implementation, school leaders are finding that solving their identified problems is messy and complicated, requiring attention to scale and specificity, feasibility, and attending to a myriad of district mandates and initiatives.

Schools face many challenges in implementing their PIM plans. Plans frequently contain numerous strategies and actions as well as new commitments to collect and monitor data. Some report that the mechanics of attending to all the steps overshadows attention to the essential elements of improving instructional practice. According to state leaders, the greatest weakness in the PIM process is that no one really knows how to develop and measure the effectiveness of the set of solutions or strategies to meet the needs of all students. Some worry that the PIM process can induce over-planning and obscure core problems and systemic solutions in the details of a 50-page plan. Schools also face challenges in reconciling PIM implementation with district-mandated policy and curriculum initiatives. For example, a Boston school that has made notable gains in students' math achievement struggles with a district-mandated mathematics curriculum.

In monthly meetings facilitated by DOE leaders, school support specialists collaborate to improve their knowledge and services in support of school improvement. Much of this work centers on problem solving. At a recent meeting, the statewide group of school support specialists met with district and state leaders of English language learning initiatives to discuss how school and district improvement planning and implementation efforts are meeting the needs of English language learners. At a fall 2004 meeting, specialists shared tools and protocols they had developed to support the work of low-performing schools.

Many districts have adopted the PIM as a planning tool for all schools. In some cases, support specialists have created district-wide systems to provide timely and useful data to schools. In other districts, specialists take on broader leadership responsibilities at the district level, connecting DOE, district, and school leaders.

New Haven. *District leaders are beginning to address instructional issues in the lowest performing schools, but will likely need further skills to help school leaders focus on and improve classroom teaching. In a system characterized by independence, the need to bring all parties together to address low-performing schools has evoked both resistance and enthusiasm.*

While recognizing that significant changes in teaching and learning are key to improving student performance, the district continues to search for concrete ways to reform its lowest performing schools. One approach has been to bring the expertise of the district closer to the classroom by increasing the availability of literacy coaches and requiring district staff to spend more time in schools. The district is trying to help schools prioritize and make meaningful improvements in instruction, but all leaders are finding it challenging. District and school leaders are trying to adapt to new roles and the new skills they require.

At the school level, principals have been asked to create portfolios of student data and improvement strategies; they have responded unevenly and some require much more support to do this adequately. Principals uniformly report student test scores by item to grade-level meetings, yet they are not sure what would be helpful beyond delivering this

information. A foundational district requirement is weekly grade-level meetings, where discussion is supposed to focus on student work and improving instruction. School leaders are clearly struggling to sort out priority needs and reforms and are unable to focus on classroom instruction.

Like many large districts, New Haven has a traditional structure, with content specialists, bilingual specialists, special education specialists, and so on. These professionals have traditionally worked directly with schools, independently of one another. Some veteran district staff who have acted as rule-makers, brokers, and monitors have not turned around persistently low-performing schools. In some cases they may lack the technical skills to address instructional issues, though intensive training and new staff have begun to address this gap. The intense focus on low-performing schools has brought all players into dialogue to focus on low student performance at selected schools. New district staff members have been brought in to address some persistent district issues, a move that has generated mixed reactions at the district level. Some staff feel territorial, while others feel empowered by the chance to share their ideas and expertise.

The LCE team studied states and districts during the early stages of conceptualizing and implementing strategies to support improvements in low-performing schools and districts in the context of NCLB's accountability requirements. These policies, structures, and supports are still developing, and the current demands on leaders are those associated with early stages of a process. Indeed, the support strategies we examined evolved during the period of our study and will continue to do so. There is consequently a continuing need for research and consultation to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of state and district support systems. This section makes recommendations for further action and suggests some questions that merit further research.

The current study culminated with a seminar attended by state and district leaders from across the region. At the seminar, we presented our conceptual framework and findings and asked leaders from the states we studied to identify and discuss the significant questions they currently face. The following recommendations reflect the concerns of educational leaders from the region and our evolving understanding of issues in this new policy environment.

- Align system components and build feedback systems to create coherence.
- Focus on instruction and learning.
- Address equity issues.
- Evaluate the effects of reform strategies.

1. Align system components and build feedback systems to create coherence.

We know that effective schools have a tightly coupled focus on instruction and that school administrators and teachers regularly confer to examine and improve teaching and learning. Something similar is needed across the entire system of schools, districts, and state agencies (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2003). The goal is to create a state education system in which all components are aligned and educators at all levels (school, district, and state) work toward a common purpose to improve student learning.

The overarching questions that states are confronting are: *How do we best align all components of the system? How do we increase efficiency by eliminating overlap, diminishing conflicting strategies, and increasing synergy among system components?* As we have observed, achieving coherence and alignment will require an adaptive approach to change. That is, in the absence of immediate solutions to previously unresolved problems, leaders will need to make constant adjustments in response to the impact of their strategies while holding to a clear collective vision. In fact, creating alignment and coherence in such a fluid environment requires continuous change best based on core anchoring principles, ongoing learning, and collective sensemaking (Elmore, 1980; Honig, 2001; McLaughlin, 1987; Spillane, 1998), both within and across component organizations.

Such an adaptive approach in turn requires significant changes in attitude and practice. Learning and sense making requires a continuous flow of relevant information. Although states and districts have well-developed systems for disseminating information, systems for quickly learning how districts and schools are responding to policy directives appear inadequate, as do systems for collectively making meaning of those policies. Leaders at the state and district levels need to know the influence of their policies, strategies, and practices in chronically low-performing schools. They must also understand the issues that leaders, staff, and students in these schools face as a result of these new policies.

In all the systems we studied, existing feedback mechanisms, such as the regular reports required from staff and agencies who work directly with schools, are not providing policy-makers with the information they need to make decisions based on the effect of their policies on teaching and learning in schools. Further, we found, these feedback mechanisms tend not to communicate information considered most important by those in the field. In fact, over the past two years the LAB played a significant role in collecting information, analyzing it, and providing clients with feedback; even this effort garnered little information directly from schools, however. If states are to deploy limited resources effectively and respond to changing requirements and contexts, feedback methods will have to change. Aligned, coherent systems use regular, interactive feedback (extending well beyond student outcome data from state assessments) as a lever for continuous change. In our experience, involving external facilitators and thoughtfully structuring interactions to facilitate dialogue can help create new means of communication and meaning-making.

2. Focus on instruction and learning.

Existing strategies for school improvement tend to focus on such issues as school organization, selecting curriculum, and aligning curriculum to state standards. Annual student assessments serve as the primary lever for change and the primary means of measuring progress. Integral to most state strategies, and written into federal legislation, is the assumption that formal needs assessment and planning processes can be the primary engines of change. Yet little research explores how persistently low-performing schools do use planning processes, or what these processes must incorporate in order to be effective. Leaving these assumptions unquestioned permits state and district leadership to emphasize broader organizational issues and to identify intermediate outcomes that can be monitored, such as completion of school and district plans. Decisions about instruction and learning devolve to the schools.

Improving instructional capacity in pursuit of increased student learning requires attention to the interaction of students, teachers, materials, and technologies (Cohen & Ball, 1999). How to efficiently and effectively enhance this interaction and build the necessary organizational support is the challenge. We recommend an unblinking focus on this issue by all components of the system. This involves attending to instructional practice, creating widespread and effective instructional coaching strategies and other forms of embedded professional development focused on pedagogy. We assume that it will involve creating regular, structured opportunities for teachers to examine student work in relation to state standards and what they are teaching.

Attending to instruction will require regional and state analyses of patterns of student performance on assessments to identify the research-based curricular and instructional approaches that are most likely to remedy low performance. State and regional analyses should give districts and schools access to expertise and high quality professional development that enables teachers to make informed choices about what their students need and to integrate new approaches and material into their practice. In short, in addition to attending to change processes, leaders must increase their attention to the research and practice in instruction and learning. This must inform policy and strategy at all levels of the system.

Further, information from our work, supported by cognitive science, suggests that in low-performing schools with no history of success, staff attribute their students' lack of success to issues outside their control and do not believe that there are strategies that will succeed with their students. It may be that in some cases school staff need new ideas, information, and experiences that give them a different frame from which to plan and act more effectively.

An allied question is how states, districts, and schools can best marshal limited resources to use timely and relevant data to improve student learning. To date, NCLB has required states to collect and compile data on student outcomes at three grades, disaggregated for race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic and special education status. This brings much needed attention to the academic learning outcomes of neglected sub-populations. Many opportunities for collecting and analyzing other data relevant to practice and policy-making exist, and significant amounts of data are now available to inform decisions. At the same time, however, many leaders are unskilled in using outcome data to inform decisions. In addition, states and districts are often unpracticed in identifying the most useful information, making it available in easily usable forms, or in providing it in a timely fashion.

At the school level, improved access to student outcome data begins to show what groups of students are learning and what others are missing in the instructional process – information vital to improve instruction. Many states require teachers to conduct extensive analyses of their students' scores on state assessments. In Massachusetts, for instance, teachers participating in the state planning process are expected to analyze their students' itemized MCAS results and identify strategies for improving student learning. These analyses are no doubt necessary and teachers need to be familiar both with the state assessments and their students' performance patterns. But they often lead to plans for piecemeal change related to low scores on specific groups of items and we question if this is the best use of limited teacher time. Staff with expertise in the topic at another level in the system might perform these analyses more efficiently, leaving teachers more time to attend to pedagogy. District and state leadership might more optimally analyze data from multiple schools, and then provide tailored, informed advice on a limited number of research-based curricula and instructional strategies that are likely to meet the broad needs of specific groups of students or schools.

Creating an aligned system with a focus on instruction and learning will necessarily redefine the roles and require new capacities of everyone in that system. At the school level, it will require teachers to commit to the school as a whole and not just to their classrooms. It will also require them collectively to conceive of and implement strategies that address their students' learning needs. Longer term interventions and professional development

that gives teachers a "deep" experiential understanding of the content they are teaching and how it relates to prior skills and knowledge might better help schools make the necessary large-scale changes in practice that persistently low-performing schools require.

3. ADDRESS EQUITY ISSUES.

Schools identified as persistently low performing generally serve high percentages of students from families with low incomes. The intersection of poverty and low-performing schools has implications for society that extend beyond the school (Rothstein, 2004). Students in a community need a range of economic and social supports to exhibit patterns of success. Within the school system, funding imbalances occur not only across, but also within, districts. In some instances schools welcome NCLB classification because it brings additional resources, and they fear moving off "the list" because they fear that funding necessary materials and professional development will dry up. Equity issues extend beyond funding. Many schools identified as low performing, for example, experience high teacher turnover rates and often have staffs with a high percentage of inexperienced teachers. The issue is highly politicized, and for that reason it is seldom directly addressed. Yet research into how resources are allocated within and across districts, and how well they are being used, will be necessary to effect extensive change and redress systemic inequities.

Another area where equity is an issue is education for students who are English language learners or who have special needs, including disabilities. Programs for students with language or other special needs generally remain separate at the state, district, and school levels. As educators break down traditional barriers and roles and begin to look more deeply at teaching and learning, the need to pay greater attention to the differentiated instructional needs of special populations is immediately evident. NCLB's continuing spotlight on the achievement levels of special populations creates further urgency to increase communication and collaboration across these traditionally separate entities.

State and district support staff are often not versed in equity and diversity issues. They are often not from the social classes or racial and ethnic groups that tend to predominate in schools identified as low performing, and they have not learned the necessary skills to relate across these differences. They are consequently unaware of the perspectives and concerns of the target populations and often are not as effective as they might be in low-performing schools. For this reason, too, state and district staff are often ineffective in reaching out to and engaging parents of students in low-performing schools. Despite the relationship between parents' expectations and student motivation, the state and district strategies we studied put little emphasis on meaningful parent involvement. They bypassed opportunities to drawn on strengths and meet the educational needs of families in poverty or from other cultures, who so often make up the majority of parents of students in identified schools and districts.

4. EVALUATE THE EFFECTS OF REFORM STRATEGIES.

This report describes the considerable effort being put into support strategies for schools in the Northeast. We have only documented the early stages of implementation, but policy makers are already asking, "Does it make a difference?" and, "What are these reform strategies buying us?" States and districts have little direct evidence of the relative efficacy of different approaches to building capacity in schools and districts that have been identified as low performing. Nor do they have evidence of the value of different elements of support systems. Independent evaluations of support systems and support strategies are needed.

As we have already noted, evaluations that provide policy makers with the information they need will require considerable expertise because interventions are very much works in progress and are often implemented in combination with one another. Effective evaluation will require significant resources and careful planning and will be designed to answer policy makers' questions about effectiveness. Ideally, smaller efforts by parts of the system could be linked to provide a cumulative analysis that addresses questions most relevant at each stage of implementation.

Initially, evaluation activities should address the extent to which alignment of elements of the system occurs and what activities tend to be most effective in creating such alignment. Evaluation activities that assess the extent to which end users are experiencing a coherent system and whether alignment results in increased efficiency of service delivery should follow. Activities should culminate with assessments of the reform strategy's effect on student outcomes. Examples of the questions to be addressed at this stage include: Is learning increased for the student population as a whole and for all sub-populations? What is the effect on student behavior and student academic completion rates?

Puma, Raphael, Olson, & Hannaway (2000) lay out a framework for a national evaluation of systemic reform that states could adapt and that would serve as the basis for answering the questions posed by state policy makers. Reviewing existing research and evaluation studies, they suggest several implications for evaluating emerging systems: (1) understand the baseline and prior policy; (2) provide a "moving picture" of ongoing adaptations; (3) assess different and evolving responses, because theory and research on reaching desired outcomes are inadequate to endorse; and (4) focus on the relationship between and among the parts of the system. Acting on these implications would both enhance theory and research on the design of support systems and provide data, in addition to student assessments, with which to monitor major components of the support system.

The five case studies describe efforts to improve low-performing schools from three critical perspectives. Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont present cases of state-level initiatives; New York demonstrates a regional approach; and our study of New Haven examines school improvement from the district perspective. Each case offers readers the opportunity to learn about the strategies and how they have been implemented. The cases, presented alphabetically here, also illuminate how variables such as context, history, and leadership theories of change influence the decisions that leaders make about how to support low-performing schools. Finally, the dilemmas and challenges that leaders face in each case demonstrate how complex this work is, particularly at a time when demands are increasing and resources are not.

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MASSACHUSETTS MOVES TO SCALE: CREATING NEW LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS

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Carol Keirstead and Cynthia Harvell

I. Strategies Overview

Summary of Key Strategies

The Massachusetts system for identifying and supporting low-performing schools was initially formed following the enactment of the state's *Education Reform Act of 1993*. Since then, the Massachusetts Department of Education (MADOE) has furthered its policy and organizational development to meet the accountability demands of NCLB. Currently, the state's Accountability and Targeted Assistance office is responsible for the identification of schools in need of improvement and for the design and implementation of supports to low-performing schools and districts.

Two key strategies have been implemented and refined over the past several years to support the state's low-performing schools. Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) is a school improvement planning process the department developed to help schools conduct data-driven analysis and planning. The department's PIM Manual, refined and augmented over the past three years, sets forth guidance and tools for school and district teams to implement the 10-step planning model. To support teams through the planning and implementation process, the department has trained a network of school support specialists. The state's 10 largest districts with underperforming schools apply to the department for funds to hire a specialist who works to build capacity for school improvement planning and implementation at the district and school level.

Role of the LAB. The LAB at Brown and partner organization RMC Research Corporation conducted descriptive research about the PIM and School Support Specialist systems of support as part of the LAB's regional study of state and district strategies for supporting low-performing schools. Methods of data collection included document reviews and interviews with state, district, and school leaders. We conducted site visits in three schools that are in various phases of the state planning and implementation process.

Methodology

The Massachusetts case study was based on the analysis of data from a variety of sources: 55 state, district, and school documents; 37 individual interviews with state, district, and school leaders; and 12 focus groups with school leadership teams and other teachers. The documents we reviewed included those related to the state context and policy for supporting low-performing schools, tools and correspondences used by the state and districts for intervention in low-performing schools, school plans, and other documents pertaining to implementation of school improvement initiatives.

We conducted research over 14 months, from April 2004 through June 2005, in five consecutive phases: planning with SEA leaders and site preparation (three districts/four

schools), document review, protocol development, 2-day school site visits, and data analysis. Based on the LAB's research questions and framework, we tailored interview protocols at the end of this case study for each stakeholder interviewed: state leaders, district leaders, school principals; school leadership teams; teachers and other school personnel, and school support specialists.

Using the research constructs and variables, two lead researchers for the Massachusetts study coded all text data using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data management and analysis software program. We coded our data and then analyzed them for patterns of common and diverging responses. Team deliberations focused on developing key findings. A case description and key findings were developed to inform the LAB's regional research; a more detailed client report included specific findings about the state's key support strategies, school case descriptions, and considerations for future policy and action.

Key Features of Strategies

The state's two strategies for supporting low-performing schools are linked by design to provide schools and districts with resources for engaging in rigorous, data-driven planning. Recent research on district and school leadership states that virtually all district leaders need to be proficient in strategic planning processes. Furthermore, when schools are required to have school improvement plans, school leaders need to master skills associated with productive planning and the implementation of such plans (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Performance Improvement Mapping. PIM is an intensive, data-driven, results-oriented school planning model. MADOE developed the PIM process to assist low-performing schools in raising student performance in English language arts (ELA) and math. The first year that underperforming schools were identified, MADOE recognized that their plans shared common weaknesses. Their existing plans were too general, were not based on thorough data analysis, did not target key teaching and learning issues, lacked a clear rationale linking the identified problems with the improvement strategies cited, and did not include measures for tracking implementation or outcomes of proposed improvement strategies.

The PIM process was developed to help schools address these shortcomings in the creation of new plans. The 10-step PIM process addresses a gap in capacity that the DOE identified in its early work with underperforming schools, that is, that school leaders needed considerable support in learning how to diagnose needs based on performance data and to create focused goals and strategies to address them. PIM is designed to help school leaders:

- set goals aligned with state and federal expectations for AYP and improved student performance;

- analyze assessment data to determine student strengths and weaknesses;

- analyze the root causes of low student performance;

- identify specific skills that students lack;

- appraise current practices to determine what is working and what is not;

- select research-based strategies to address gaps; and

- evaluate plan implementation and outcomes.

The PIM support system includes comprehensive, sustained training for teams of school and district leaders using the DOE's *Performance Improvement Mapping: A Handbook for School Planning Teams.* The handbook provides guided instruction in the 10-step process, tools for use throughout the process, and notes for facilitators to assist them in leading school teams through the process.

The state requires schools identified as underperforming to assemble teams, including the principal, ELA and math teachers, district administration, and other support personnel as needed, for training in and implementation of the PIM process and plans in their schools. Team training occurs through four to five statewide retreats over the summer and early fall. Teams are expected to lead and involve their school colleagues in the process as they proceed through the steps.

School Support Specialist Network. MADOE established the School Support Specialist Network in October 2002 as a primary component of the state's infrastructure of support to schools identified for improvement, corrective action and restructuring under NCLB. In FY2003 and FY2004, the department of education awarded grants to the state's 10 largest school districts, in which over 70% of the schools identified for improvement were located, to hire school support specialists to work directly in the district. In FY2004, the department hired three additional school support specialists who have been assigned to districts with fewer low-performing schools to support their district leadership's school improvement activities.

The school support specialist system offers schools and districts support in building capacity in improvement planning and implementation. Through a school support grant program, the DOE funds districts to hire school support specialists to fulfill local and state expectations for improvement. In addition to supporting district-based specialists, the department employs its own specialists to support schools throughout smaller districts. Working with the district and state leadership, the school support specialists:

- set criteria and guide the district's school improvement plans in alignment with state and federal guidelines;

- coordinate the review of school improvement plans;

- monitor the implementation of school improvement plans through regularly scheduled visits with low-performing schools;

- design and implement district support for schools identified for improvement and other schools that score below state targets;

- assess the needs of those schools and match them with district and outside school supports;

- coordinate with other district leadership to direct district resources to meet the identified needs of those schools;

- offer resources and training in scientifically based strategies; and

- participate in regular team meetings with their counterparts in other urban districts for training and to share expertise.

Rationale for Strategies and Underlying Principles

The DOE strategies for turning around low-performing schools have been shaped by a set of beliefs and theories about change. The first of these theories contends that the most effective accountability system must be a well-crafted blend of pressure and support. The school review and identification process, coupled with mandates for action, creates pressure for schools to act. The school improvement and planning training, as well as the assistance provided to schools, is a substantial investment in supporting schools and districts in their efforts to improve. Lastly, the department believes, and acts on the belief, that the most effective and lasting changes will happen through collaboration at all levels of school leadership.

The theory behind the PIM and school support specialists program is that in order for low-performing schools to improve, school leaders need to become proficient strategic planners. Early DOE reviews of school plans showed significant gaps in leaders' abilities to use data and to create coherent plans to address student and school performance gaps. The PIM process forces school teams to look at factors most closely linked to student performance in identifying root causes of poor performance. The PIM retreat strategy for training and engaging teams of school/district leaders in intensive, ongoing data-driven planning work reflects what organizational scholars refer to as sense-making, a social and cognitive process that forces individuals to confront values, past practices, cognitive limitations, organizational culture, and organizational inertia.

The theory behind the school support specialist strategy is that districts and schools are most likely to change with a balance of internal/external pressure and support. The school support specialist position was designed to be a district position in order to create vested interest and support for the work of school improvement. At the same time, the positions are also embedded in a statewide structure of accountability and support in which school support specialists meet regularly with each other and the DOE leadership.

II. History and Context of Accountability System in Massachusetts

Massachusetts has made considerable progress in developing an overall accountability system since the enactment of the state's *Education Reform Act of 1993*. The Massachusetts *Education Reform Act* called for dramatic changes in public education over a 7-year period by requiring greater and more equitable funding to schools, accountability for student learning, and statewide standards for students, educators, schools, and districts. Some of

the major changes included in this reform bill were a school council in every school, continuing education for educators, more authority for every principal, better defined roles for school committees, and clear, concise, and measurable, statewide standards for students and schools. The capstone was a "high-stakes" test based on the new curriculum standards, which every student must pass in order to receive a diploma. The act allowed the board and commissioner to formulate criteria to determine school and district performance, and if a district were found to be underperforming, enabled the option of state receivership.

Key Factors and Related Policies

State Intervention System. State intervention in low-performing schools began in 1999, shortly after the first results of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) results were released. Since then, the process for rating, reviewing, and identifying schools for improvement has evolved. The Massachusetts School Accountability System has three stages: school performance ratings, school panel reviews, and diagnostic fact-finding reviews.

School performance ratings are issued to all public schools every two years. These ratings flag schools with low performance or little improvement and identify potential compass schools—exemplars of effective teaching and/or school administration practices—for more extensive evaluation. Based on their AYP ratings, schools can be identified as potential compass schools, in need of improvement (2-3 years of not meeting AYP in aggregate), in corrective action (4-5 years), or in restructuring (6 years). In 2004, schools were also rated for student subgroup performance.

School panel reviews are conducted annually at schools with low performance or little improvement and finalist candidates among schools identified as exemplars of effective teaching and administration practices. Based on these ratings, DOE officials select a number of schools to participate in panel reviews. For schools identified as low performing, trained teams of DOE and education professionals conduct 2-day site visits, during which they collect and analyze data to answer the following questions: 1) Does the school have a sound plan for improving student performance? and 2) Does the school have the capacity to successfully implement the plan? Based on a panel review, the commissioner may declare a school underperforming.

Diagnostic fact-finding reviews are conducted only at those schools the commissioner declares to be underperforming following completion of the panel review process. The DOE leads a fact-finding team in an in-depth review of the school to diagnose the reasons for performance problems and recommend strategies for improvement. Schools found to be underperforming are required to participate in the state's PIM and school support specialist support systems.

Leadership

The board of education appointed David Driscoll as the state's 22nd commissioner in 1999, six years into the state's education reform initiative and two years before the passage of NCLB. Under the leadership of Commissioner Driscoll, Massachusetts' NCLB accountability system was one of the first five in the nation to be approved. During his tenure he has overseen the creation and implementation of the state's MCAS exam and graduation requirement, as well as the development of the state's school and district accountability system.

The MADOE entity responsible for designing and implementing the state's accountability system is the Accountability and Targeted Assistance division. Led by Associate Commissioner Juliane Dow, a school performance group carries out the school rating, review, and identification process, and a school improvement planning and support group oversees implementation of the state's targeted assistance to low-performing schools. Three other division groups provide guidance and technical assistance in language acquisition and academic achievement, reading and literacy, and Title I services.

In 2004, the responsibility for district review and identification shifted to a non-DOE entity established by the Commonwealth to conduct accountability reviews of every district in the Commonwealth. The DOE is now primarily responsible for school review, identification, and assistance and the independent Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (OEQA) is responsible for district reviews. The MADOE, however, continues to be responsible for providing support to districts identified as low performing.

III. State Expectations for Strategies

The expectation is that the PIM intervention and the school support specialist network will empower schools to make educational decisions based on an analysis of and reflection on student and school data. As schools come to understand the link between what they do and the outcomes for students, they will tailor solutions to the actual needs of their students, thereby enhancing student learning and achievement.

The state has an explicit expectation that schools identified in need of improvement will first make the necessary, real commitment to change that is required to move forward after being identified as underperforming. Second, identified schools will make necessary changes, improve their practices, raise student scores, and remove themselves from the list of schools in need of improvement. The Massachusetts expectations are transparent, both in terms of expectations for improvements in student performance and for how schools are to be engaged to that end.

Evaluating Success

The MADOE has mechanisms in place for monitoring the success of schools in meeting their expectations on an ongoing basis. First, the role of the school support specialist is to provide key feedback on school progress. School support specialists meet regularly with their respective school teams and with their statewide network. They have ongoing communication with the school improvement and planning leadership about the prog-

ress of their schools and about how to meet the needs of their schools more effectively. The department's school performance unit conducts regular monitoring visits to schools to assess the status of schools' success in implementation of school plans. Finally, annual MCAS test results provide important information about the progress of schools.

DOE leaders feel that a key weakness is the lack of a formal evaluation of their efforts. They would like to see a formal evaluation process in place for the school support specialist system. The associate commissioner commented, "How do we really know if what we are providing is working? We are not yet systematic in terms of an expression of expectations" (Fieldnotes, 01/30/04).

IV. Implementation Features

MADOE leaders take a hands-on, capacity-building role in carrying out their respective accountability functions. Department staff model and promote professional and collegial relationships with and among schools and districts. The two "arms" of the Massachusetts accountability system include the process of school review and monitoring and the systems of support provided to identified schools.

School Performance Review. Leaders in the school performance division recruit and train educators throughout the state to serve on school panel reviews. Team members are trained in the state's review protocol, which is reviewed and revised on a regular basis. The protocol enlists teams in data collection and analysis to respond to two key questions:

- Does the school have a sound plan in place for improving student performance?
- Does the school have the capacity to implement the plan?

The DOE school review process has been strategically designed to identify needs based on an objective review of the school. In doing so, the review process provides targeted feedback to schools about their strengths and weaknesses. The department enlists educators throughout the state to serve as team members on school review panels, thereby developing statewide awareness and capacity in meeting expectations for school planning and improvement. After a school is declared to be underperforming, follow-up reviews and monitoring visits are conducted regularly to assess its progress toward developing sound plans and increasing its capacity to implement them successfully.

PIM. The PIM process is implemented through intensive training and support provided by the improvement planning and support group and the network of school support specialists as described above. Each school that is declared to be underperforming attends five 1- to 2-day retreats beginning in the summer and concluding in the fall. State leaders train schools/district teams in each of the 10 steps in the process, and school support specialists then work with their respective teams in retreat work sessions and at their respective schools between retreats. DOE staff and support specialists meet during lunch to discuss team progress and important issues. It is also an opportunity for sharing ideas and strategies. After school teams complete the PIM training and process, school support specialists provide follow-up implementation support. When plans are completed and approved by the DOE, each school then presents its plans to the commissioner and the board of education.

The PIM process is periodically revised to address needs as they arise. Revisions have included the addition of guidance and tools to help schools with setting implementation and outcome benchmarks. At the writing of this report, school support specialists were working to review and recommend changes based on their extensive use of the document and process.

School Support Specialists. The school support specialist system reflects an intentional cross-level leadership function in building capacity for school improvement. Districts recruit and hire school support specialists with approval from the DOE. Districts that have the most schools identified as in need of improvement are able to apply for funds to hire a school support specialist through the state's school support grant. The specialists feel allegiance to their districts; however, the state writes the specialists' job descriptions and has veto power over direct specialist hires. Only in few cases, however, has the state exercised its veto power. In each case, the expectations of the state, as well as the districts in which the specialist works, shape the specialist role.

The statewide school support specialists network meets at least monthly for 1-day sessions to provide training and to allow the specialists to develop and share resources. The network serves as a communication link between high-need districts and the DOE. The network meetings and frequent communication among the school district and DOE specialists ensure that districts have direct access to information that is pertinent to their schools' status, state assessment data, and improvement strategies and resources.

Early on, the DOE provided extensive training to the school support specialists in the PIM process. The network members continue to consult on and participate in the refinement of the PIM guidance and training materials. The school support specialists share tools they have developed to assist in school planning and in monitoring schools' implementation of their plans. For example, during one monthly meeting, specialists working in Springfield, a large urban district, demonstrated how they use personal digital assistants with their schools in using data and monitoring implementation of school plans. A specialist from Lowell, a mid-sized urban district, presented work in training district teams to conduct internal school review processes fashioned from the state school review model.

With leadership from the DOE, specialists conducted a standard-setting process to identify examples of rigorous and comprehensive school improvement plans. The school support specialist network has worked on identifying and sharing resources on effective practices in core content-area instruction to help schools implement the improvement strategies identified in their school plans. This year, the group has been working with the Office of Language Acquisition to ensure that school improvement planning efforts are adequately addressing issues related to English language learners and with the Office of Special Education Policy and Planning concerning services to students with disabilities.

The roles of school support specialists take shape based on the expectations of district administration. In some cases, the specialists work hand in hand with senior district leaders, and in other cases they work more closely with schools than with district leaders.

One specialist described his role as "trying to facilitate leaders being leaders. It is mostly about building relationships and skills" (Fieldnotes, 12/07/04). Specialists are often asked to work with a large number of schools, more than just those identified by the state. As one specialist stated, "My superintendent charged me with working with all 22 schools" (Fieldnotes, 06/04/04). Although the intent of the strategy was, in fact, to enable districts to build capacity through the work of the school support specialist, state leaders worry that stretching personnel too thin or implementing modified versions of PIM may not be effective in helping schools most in need. One state leader stated:

> Schools that we reviewed this year—we found the plans not sound. They had been given a watered-down form of PIM training. When a specialist is directed by the district to take on all the schools—and the specialists are not in a position to challenge it—they do not provide the depth of training to underperforming schools. It is not a dual supervision arrangement. They report to the district (Fieldnotes, 06/25/04).

Feedback Mechanisms

The school support specialists serve as an important source of ongoing feedback between the state, districts, and schools. Their work in the schools informs district decisions. Specialists provide state leaders with valuable perspectives on the successes and challenges that districts and schools face. From the state's perspective, the network serves to give specialists peer interaction and to maintain state control over the school improvement process. Another important communication resource supported by the department is the urban superintendents network, which also takes up the issues related to underperforming schools. In addition to its formal feedback mechanisms, state leaders are in frequent, formal and informal contact with district and school leaders.

V. CONCLUSION

Five years into implementation of its school identification and support system, the MADOE continues to develop and refine its process for reviewing and identifying schools for possible state intervention and for supporting them in the improvement process. School- and district-level data are being collected and analyzed to describe the impact of the DOE support services on four underperforming schools and their respective districts for a subsequent report.

Our research to date suggests that the Massachusetts system of support for low-performing schools embodies notable features in its design and implementation. The DOE's organizational structure and implementation of services reflect a carefully crafted balance of pressure and support to spur school change. The system includes a combination of technical support, provided through the PIM training and tools, and adaptive support, provided by the school support specialists, to help school leaders implement state improvement policy in their local contexts. Finally, DOE leaders model and support interactions and problem solving among and between leaders as the primary lever for school improvement.

At the same time, the system is stretched to meet growing needs amid limited and unreliable funding. The greatest challenge of the school-level accountability system in Massachusetts continues to be the level of resources available to meet the needs of a growing number of schools identified as needing improvement. One of the goals the DOE had in mind in the design of its support strategies was to create systems of support that would develop capacity throughout levels of the system, given limited resources. The associate commissioner stated:

> My biggest leadership challenge is that we still have a tiny little system that is expected to get all these kids proficient. The other problem is the instability of the funding. We spend a lot of time wondering where money will come from (Fieldnotes, 06/25/04).

The inconsistency of funding requires leaders to spend time figuring out how to support the existing system rather than on improving it and expanding it to meet growing needs.

Massachusetts Department of Education Data Collection Protocols

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I. SEA Leader Interviews

A. Juliane Dow, Associate Commissioner Accountability and Technical Assistance

1. How is the School Accountability and Targeted Assistance division enacted to support underperforming schools and districts?
   (refer to DEO org/staff list)
   • policies
   • roles and responsibilities
   • SEA coordination
   • resources

2. Can you describe for us what the rationale was for the creation of the PIM as a means to help underperforming schools?

3. What expectations did/does the state have for schools and districts regarding the PIM process and training?

4. What are the key features of implementation of the PIM support system?

5. What successes has the state seen as the result of the PIM process and training?

6. What do you think enabled these successes?

7. In instances where it has not met expectations, what were the factors that impeded progress?

8. Can you describe for us what the rationale was for the creation of the SSS as a means to help underperforming schools?

9. What are the expectations for SSS and for districts and schools receiving their support?

10. What are the key features of implementation of the SSS system?

11. What successes has the state seen as the result of the SSS system?

12. What do you think enabled these successes?

13. In instances where it has not met expectations, what were the factors that impeded progress?

B. Lynda Foisy, School Performance Evaluations

1. What is your role in designing and implementing systems of SEA support for under-performing schools?

2. Can you please describe:
    a. what the PIM process/intervention is?
    b. why it was developed? (rationale for PIM as a primary strategy)
    c. what the expectations are for what it will accomplish? (How do you know when it is working?)

3. How has PIM been implemented and supported?
    a. Who is involved and how?
    b. What resources are required to implement it?
    c. What level of involvement is expected of districts/schools?
    d. How is it monitored and refined?

4. How have schools and districts responded to PIM? (Elicit examples.)
    a. How would you characterize school and district buy-in to PIM?
    b. Who has been involved at each level and how?
    c. To what extent have schools and districts used PIM?

5. Can you give us an example of a school/district where PIM has led to the kinds of changes it was intended to effect?
    a. What were the changes? (Elicit specific examples.)
        ♦ Changes in practice
        ♦ Changes in policy
        ♦ New programs (e.g., data systems)
        ♦ New roles and responsibilities
        ♦ New skills and knowledge
    b. What were the factors that enabled progress?

6. What about where it has not worked well?
    a. What were the barriers that limited progress?
    b. What has happened to address those barriers?

7. How do you get feedback about the PIM process and its use?
    a. What kinds of changes have you made in your approach or expectations based on feedback? (Elicit specific examples.)

8. What have been the most challenging dilemmas you have faced as an SEA leader in carrying out this support initiative?
    a. How have you gone about working through those challenges and to what effect?
    b. What particular skills, knowledge, or attributes have been required of you (SEA leadership) in solving the problem(s)?

9. Given the expectations that you had for what the PIM system would accomplish for underperforming schools, what do you see as the most significant effect to date?

10. What do you see as the most pressing concern as you move forward?

C. Lise Zeig and Rebecca Talbot, School Improvement Planning

1. What is your role in designing and implementing systems of SEA support for underperforming schools?

2. Can you please describe:
    a. what the School Support Specialist (SSS) role and system is?
    b. why it was developed? (rationale for SSS as a primary strategy?)
    c. Are there standards or expectations for what the SSS will accomplish? (How do you know when it is working?)

3. How is the system implemented?
    a. What are their roles and responsibilities and how are those determined?
    b. With whom do the SSS work and to whom are they accountable?
    c. How is the system supported? (resources)

4. How have schools and districts responded to the SSS as a support strategy?

5. Can you give us an example of a district where the SSS has had the kind of changes it was intended to effect?
    a. What were the changes? (Elicit specific examples.)
        •   Changes in practice
        •   Changes in policy
        •   New programs (e.g., data systems)
        •   New roles and responsibilities
        •   New skills and knowledge

6. What about where it has not worked well?
    a. What have been the barriers that limited progress?
    b. What has happened to address those barriers?

7. How do you get feedback about the effectiveness of the SSS?
    a. What changes have you made in your approach or expectations based on feedback? (Elicit specific examples.)

8. What have been the most challenging dilemmas you have faced as an SEA leader in carrying out this support initiative?
    a. How have you gone about working through those challenges and to what effect?
    b. What particular skills, knowledge, or attributes have been required of you (SEA leadership) in solving the problem(s)?

9. Given the expectations that you had for what the SSS system would accomplish for underperforming schools, what do you see as the most significant effect to date?

10. What do you see as the most pressing concern as you move forward?

II. New Bedford Public Schools District Leader Interview

A. About SEA strategies

1. What is your role in the district?
    a. Have you been in that role since the state's first involvement in 2000?
    b. If not, what was your role?

2. What has been your involvement in implementation of the state strategies for underperforming schools?
    a. PIM
    b. School Support Specialist

3. What were the primary issues concerning student achievement at Roosevelt and Mt. Pleasant at the time they were declared underperforming?
    a. Probe for subgroups
    b. What were identified as the primary causes for underperformance?

4. What were/are the SEA expectations for the district and schools?
    a. To what extent were/are they aligned with the district's expectations?

5. How have the district and schools responded to the state expectations and supports?

6. How did the district work to implement these expectations/strategies?
    a. Depth and breadth of implementation
    b. Adaptation

7. What was the feedback mechanism for communication with the state?
    a. Were changes made based on feedback? If so, what changes?

8. What changes have happened in the district as the result of DOE support (PIM and School Support Specialist)?
    a. What about the support contributed to the changes?

9. What were the factors that most enabled the state involvement to have a positive impact?

10. What were the factors that most impeded progress in relation to the state's strategies for school improvement?

11. What have been the major leadership dilemmas in implementing state strategies/expectations?
    a. How were these resolved?

B. About district strategies

12. What specific strategies (one or two) have the district developed and implemented to address the needs of underperforming schools?

13. How were these strategies implemented?

14. What has changed as a result?

Interview with School Principals

1. How long have you been in your current position? What was your role in the school during and since the panel review in March 2002 (Mt Pleasant) and May 2000 (Roosevelt)?

2. What were the primary issues concerning student achievement at Roosevelt and Mt. Pleasant at the time they were declared underperforming?

3. What were identified as the primary causes for underperformance?

4. How was/has MADOE and district been involved in support of your school since the panel review? Who came to the school? How often? What did they do? What was rationale for the involvement?

5. What were the expectations for MADOE/district involvement? What did they hope to accomplish?

6. How did the school respond to MADOE/district involvement? To what extent were these actions aligned with those of the school?

7. What were the two or three major actions/interventions that have taken place over the two to three years that have made a difference? What was the planning and prioritizing process? How were they implemented? How involved was the DOE/district?

8. What changes have happened in the school? Are these changes the result of district/ DOE support? If so, how?

9. What were the factors that most enabled these changes?

10. What were the factors that most impeded progress?

Interview with School Leadership Team

1. How long have you been on the leadership team at your school? What is your current role in the school? What was your role in the school during and since the panel review in March 2002 (Mt Pleasant) and May 2000 (Roosevelt)?

2. What were the primary issues concerning student achievement at Roosevelt and Mt. Pleasant at the time they were declared underperforming?

3. What were identified as the primary causes for underperformance?

4. How was/has MADOE and district been involved in support of your school since the panel review? Who came to the school? How often? What did they do? What was rationale for the involvement?

5. What were the expectations for MADOE/district involvement? What did they hope to accomplish? What have been the major leadership dilemmas in implementing district/DOE expectations?

6. How did the school respond to the MADOE/district involvement? To what extent were these actions aligned with those of the school?

7. What were the two or three major actions/interventions that have taken place over the two to three years that have made a difference? What was the planning and prioritizing process? How were they implemented? How involved was the DOE/district?

8. What changes have happened in the school? Are these changes the result of district/DOE support? If so, how?

9. What were the factors that most enabled these changes?

10. What were the factors that most impeded progress?

Laureen Cervone and Cynthia Harvell

I. STRATEGIES OVERVIEW

Summary of Key Strategies

The New Haven School District has a well-defined literacy plan, including learning outcomes for all students. The district's language arts curriculum framework is a set of expectations with skills, competencies, and applications for students' learning (grades K-4 and grades 5-8) in reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and problem solving. These learning outcomes guide the development of curricular units, lessons, and assessments at each school. Teachers can employ a wide range of teaching strategies and select literacy materials consistent with the learning needs of the students. Many elements of the district's literacy initiative have been in place for a number of years, such as curriculum guides, suggested materials, and professional development. Implementation has been required in all schools.

Currently, the district is focusing on literacy teaching and learning in the early grades in persistently low-performing schools. New Haven is intensifying the level of district monitoring and amount of district support through additional literacy staff and new intervention programs. All district supervisors are expected to work in targeted schools to support teachers and principals to improve instruction in reading and English language arts (ELA). District-assigned staff developers and test coordinators target specific students and teachers in targeted schools. Top-level district administrators meet monthly with principals to review grade-level test scores and probe instructional strategies with questions such as: "What intervention is being used for this student?" and, "Why have these students continued to score at this level?"

Stage of Development. The New Haven School District is fine tuning the implementation of its literacy initiative through a partnership with the Stupski Foundation. New Haven is moving from separate elementary and middle schools to K-8 schools throughout the district, which often results in reassigning students and building new schools with a view to changing some schools' reputations as "dumping grounds." Low-performing schools are now labeled as Superintendents' Lead Schools. Part of the Stupski Foundation's investment is support for a new district director-level position to oversee persistently low-performing schools.

Role of the LAB. The LAB's role has been documenting the implementation of the literacy initiative from the perspectives of district personnel and the staff of six schools (three persistently low-performing schools and three schools that have similar student characteristics) in order to understand the extent of implementation of the literacy initiative and the differences in response and adaptation at each school. In late 2004, the LAB wrote a report for the district to guide the new director overseeing the improvements in the persistently low-performing schools.

Methodology

The three schools chosen as the focus of our work (Clemente, Hill Central, and Robinson) were entering their fourth year of "failing to progress" and the district of New Haven had identified them for restructuring as a result. We asked district staff to identify three contrasting schools we could look at to give us a deeper understanding of the district. The criteria for selection were that the schools would have similar demographics and structures but would be viewed as substantially more successful by the district. The three schools chosen for contrast were Troupe Magnet, Wexler Grant Community School, and Bishop Woods.

District interviews

Our first step was to schedule and conduct interviews with Superintendent Mayo and Assistant Superintendent Osborne using the interview protocol at the end of this case study. The interviews, which occurred in March of 2004, helped to define the district priorities, examine strategies the district was promulgating, and explore how schools were to implement these strategies. Elementary literacy clearly emerged as the highest priority. All subsequent work followed the literacy initiative throughout the system.

In April 2004, we scheduled and conducted interviews with all central office staff to understand their perceptions of how strategies are formulated, how actions are implemented, how they fared, and the factors affecting implementation and uptake at the selected schools.

In talking with central office staff, we also asked for and received copies of written materials and guidance documents related to district policies. Our document analysis, combined with central office interviews, allowed us to understand and describe the district literacy initiative.

Site visits to schools

In April and May of 2004, LAB staff conducted site visits at the six chosen New Haven schools to examine how they were responding to the district's literacy initiative. Three schools, Clemente, Hill, and Robinson, had been identified as persistently low performing. Three other schools, Troupe Magnet, Wexler, and Bishop Woods, were selected to provide contrasting examples of the literacy initiative's implementation.

Teams of two visited each school over a 2-day period, following a protocol that included meeting with focus groups, conducting interviews, and observing classrooms and grade-level meetings. Drawn from school-based staff, participants did not include parents or community members. Site visitors specifically sought to understand how the literacy initiatives were implemented at the school and gather evidence to support their conclusions. The protocol used for school visits can also be found at the end of this case study.

Method of analysis

All original notes from interviews, focus groups, and observations were gathered and entered into a database, which allowed us to categorize our descriptive findings in a

number of different ways. Working as a team, we read each another's notes multiple times and discussed emerging findings and themes, frequently returning to our original data to validate evidence and check our own understanding.

We initially characterized each school by looking at the literacy initiative to see which areas were functioning well and which areas appeared weak. We did this by looking at the "high payoff practices" the LAB has identified as crucial to improvement of low-performing schools. The "high-payoff" practices include focusing on academics, consistent curricula, onsite professional development, and targeted support for students, among others.

Next, again as a team, we looked for patterns across schools to see if there were similarities or striking differences between the schools. Mining our data, we gathered evidence and devised explanations to account for the patterns we uncovered. Our final step was to examine the data to uncover variables related to implementation of district policy, feedback, and uptake at each school. As part of this process, we also have collected and identified findings related to leadership qualities in identified schools.

Key Features of Strategies

Because of inconsistent implementation of literacy supports at the building level, the district mandated several "non-negotiables" during the 2003-04 school year, which included the following.

- A 90-minute literacy block

The literacy block is required in K-4 grades and suggested for grades 5-8. The requirement is based on research on sustained time with balanced literacy activities producing improvements in reading. Extensive district professional development provides information about how to teach ELA and reading at various levels.

- Assessments

In addition to ongoing, grade-level assessments designed by teachers, such as running records and student portfolios, the district has periodic required assessments. For example, Development Reading Assessment (DRA) is administered in grades K-3, the Beginning Reading Inventory (BRI) is administered in grades 4-5, Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) is administered in February in grades 3-8, and a district Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) is administered in spring in grades 3-8. The district provides student results by item to the principals and literacy coaches who serve in schools with Reading Excellence Act (REA) or Reading First grants.

- Grade-level meetings

The district requires grade-level meetings at least once every other week to address the learning needs of individual students by reviewing data/student work and discussing how to adjust classroom instruction. In most buildings, the literacy coach or principal convenes the grade-level meetings. In some buildings, the special education teachers attend grade-level meetings. Test data are used at these meetings to make decisions about extra instructional time, interventions, summer school, and how to reconfigure students into smaller classes.

- Principal accountability

Principals are required to identify specific goals related to student achievement and to monitor their progress towards achieving the goals. Progress is documented in leadership portfolios, which form the basis for evaluation.

The district required the "non-negotiables" listed above because it became clear that in the low-performing schools, 90-minute literacy blocks were being interrupted, grade-level meetings were not focused on instruction, and assessment data were not used effectively.

Using district and federal funding such as Title I, Special Education, Title III, and Reading First, the district has set up a variety of supports for literacy at targeted buildings. One of the district's primary support strategies is to provide literacy coaches, mentors, or staff developers (the title varies with funding stream) who work with teachers to interpret data, adapt instruction, and demonstrate new teaching methods.

Initially, literacy coaches reported to the principals. When the district found that some principals were reassigning coaches, the district made them responsible directly to Associate Superintendent Dr. Eleanor Osborne and Supervisor of Reading Imma Cannelli. The district has developed "literacy walk-throughs" that district staff and principals conduct together as one way to assess implementation of the literacy initiative.

Another strategy for supporting persistently low-performing schools is strong principal accountability. In 2003, principals were trained in a new principal evaluation system that includes a portfolio with student work. Speaking about the effects of this new system, Associate Superintendent Osborne, commented that the stronger monitoring and support system in place requires greater accountability from those schools most in need. When principals attend district meetings, they bring evidence of student performance in their portfolios. The principals of low-performing schools are "under the microscope" at the district meetings.

The two district directors of instruction responsible for overseeing curriculum and instruction and evaluating principals are expected to use the portfolios to evaluate principals. Each director, however, is responsible for more than 25 schools. While ostensibly their roles are focused on curriculum and instruction, both reported they are brokers of services, responding to building needs and enforcing district policy. Both directors of instruction said much of their communication with schools is by telephone, with visits to schools occurring in response to problems. They stated that they rely on principals to carry out district policies.

Rationale for Literacy Strategies

The district's learning objectives for literacy instruction are aligned with state standards and assessments. District supports include grade-level curriculum guides, frequent assessments, professional development, intervention programs, and additional literacy staff when funding is available. District leaders believe that literacy test scores will improve and be sustained if building-level staff have the capacity to make good choices about literacy materials, instructional time, and instructional practices, and if they are willing to learn new approaches and change behaviors.

II. History of Literacy Initiative

Background

New Haven had been responding to Connecticut state mandates prior to NCLB. In 2000, the state passed legislation that mandated the identification of low-performing schools and established timetables for improvement. In the first year, Connecticut identified 28 low-performing schools, 11 of which were located in New Haven. Three of these, which were part of this study, remained classified as low performing in 2003-04. Accountability measures have been aligned with the NCLB timetable, and the three schools are now in their fourth year of needing improvement and are subject to planning for reconstitution.

Key Factors and Related Policies

New Haven's focus on literacy reflects state and federal policies and priorities. New Haven was a recipient of federal REA and Reading First funds and has responded to state mandates such as the Connecticut Blueprint for Reading Achievement, PL 98-243, and the Early Reading Success law. These policies require goal setting, student evaluations, professional development, extra time for remediation, and specified instructional methods, among other features. Several of New Haven's policy documents and circulars show that the district has attended to these elements and developed a local approach that reflects the broad thrust of state policy. New Haven's approach also reflects the state and federal funding streams that have allocated more resources at grades K-3 than in the upper grades.

New Haven's literacy initiative is multidimensional, but most simply, places reading and writing achievement as the highest priority for all schools and students. In 2001, New Haven began formulating its literacy approach with a well-defined vision for learning outcomes for its students and a district ELA curriculum framework that encompasses a set of expectations by skills, competencies, and applications for students' learning (grades K-4 and grades 5-8) in reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and problem solving.

The district provides quarterly grade-level pacing charts, required grade-level assessments, and additional staff to help teachers interpret and use data. Administrators and teachers then select literacy materials consistent with the learning needs of the students and employ a wide range of teaching strategies. District administrators indicated that building administrators and teachers have the materials and professional development they need for good literacy instruction. Results, however, have been mixed.

Leadership

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Reginald Mayo leads the district's efforts to increase student achievement; however, translating that message into policy and practice largely rests with Associate Superintendent Dr. Eleanor Osborne. Mayo, who has been in the New Haven schools for many years, began his career as a teacher and then assumed various administrative positions of increasing responsibility before becoming superintendent. He was the principal of one of the persistently low-performing schools and remains keenly committed to improving that school. Mayo is highly regarded as a superintendent in New Haven and nationally. The long-term stability of the top leader is clearly an exception in the current, urban educational landscape.

At the district level, the core leadership for literacy consists of Associate Superintendent Osborne and Supervisor for Reading Imma Canelli; both are highly respected by many district and school personnel. With direct oversight of curriculum, assessment, and instruction throughout the district, Osborne is the decision maker and driving force behind the literacy initiatives. The district reading supervisor works with literacy instructional coaches/staff developers to improve literacy instruction by planning for trainings, writing pacing charts, scheduling student assessments, and analyzing data.

Recently funded by the Stupski Foundation in late 2004, the district director who is responsible for improvement of seven of the lowest performing schools is a new leader in the district. The district directorship is a consultant position with no supervisory authority. The director reports directly to the superintendent. Two other directors of instruction interface with and evaluate all the principals. The district has had curriculum supervisors in all content areas for many years. District personnel reported that for many years, supervisors worked independently based on the mandate of the funding stream or loosely defined collaboration district goals and met monthly at large district meetings to report on their work. However, when Osborne became associate superintendent three years ago, she started weekly meetings with all the supervisors to discuss student test scores and improvement strategies. As a result, district planning and communication improved. All interviewees stated that these meetings now focus more on content than previous meetings, which merely reported on what had been happening. The superintendent has an advisory council, a subset of the district supervisors, that also meets weekly to discuss district activities and plan for new policy directions.

Two other critical members of the curriculum team involved in implementing the district's literacy initiative are the supervisors for special education and the bilingual/ELL program, both of whom provide support to, but do not supervise, teaching staff. Principals hire and assign specialist teachers. District leaders agreed that the needs of special education students and English language learners (ELLs) in low-performing schools are not being uniformly met. In fact, some district staff suspected ESL teaching slots have been allocated to mainstream teachers to reduce class size. ELL students in the three persistently low-performing schools have little support beyond the optional 30 months of bilingual education.

The associate superintendent supervises teachers and administrators in implementing curriculum. At each school, the principal is in charge of administrative issues that influence literacy instruction, such as assigning teachers and students, scheduling time for teacher planning, and professional development. The principal's other main function includes supervising and evaluating teachers. The instructional coaches/staff developers assigned to buildings supervise implementation of literacy district practices and policies and support teachers. One district administrator commented that literacy progress is less of an issue in buildings where the principal has an understanding of reading and literacy and grade-level teams meet to discuss student performance and instruction.

Shared Beliefs and Assumptions

New Haven is a large, unionized, complex district, with a history of allowing school principals a great deal of latitude. Consistent with its long-standing philosophy of school

autonomy developed through the influence of Yale University's Comer Model advocating school-based management, the district has not adopted one core literacy program. Instead, the district recommends curricular materials, leveled reading books based on the DRA levels, and decodable texts. The district seeks funding for intervention and supplemental reading programs and bases its approach to teaching literacy on the CT Blueprint for Reading Achievement, which was based on the National Reading Panel report. District trainings focus on how to teach reading according to the five "pillars" of literacy (decoding/phonics, comprehension, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and fluency) and how to implement grade-level guided reading strategies. In theory, the district holds school leaders accountable for student achievement, but the district's principal evaluation system does not yet support this accountability in practice, which has led to mixed messages and inconsistent standards.

III. District Expectations for Strategies

Expectations for Literacy Implementation

The district has clear expectations that implementing its literacy initiative will improve student literacy test scores. In 2003-04, each school set a grade-level target to reduce the number of students at the intervention level and increase the number of students at the proficient level to meet AYP goals. Principals talked about working with teachers to target interventions for groups of students who were very close to moving up an assessment level.

In spring 2004, the Stupski Foundation selected New Haven as a district alliance partner. Stupski has invested considerable resources in the district and works with a district leadership team as an advisor to build district capacity to address root causes of failure and low performance. At the foundation's suggestion, a number of district-wide committees have been formed in relation to five "bold goals":

- By 2008, 95% of students will be ready to succeed by the end of Kindergarten.

- By 2008, 95% of students will achieve math and literacy standards.

- By 2008, the achievement gap will be no more than 5% for defined student subgroups.

- By 2008, 95% of students will master the necessary social skills for success in school and life.

- By 2008, 95% of students entering ninth grade will graduate ready for college, post-secondary education, military, or the workforce.

This timeline accelerates the district's pace of raising literacy test scores in the persistently low-performing schools. The district has in place numerous grade-level assessments that administrators and teachers use to track progress and differentiate instruction. District and state assessments take frequent and specific measurements of the first three goals, and targets for each student are understood in all the classrooms. The associate superintendent and superintendent receive monthly progress reports, by student, which are discussed at the monthly principals' meeting.

Specific, measurable objectives for the fourth and fifth goals have not been established, but there is a shared belief that a consistent social skills curriculum will help provide the foundation needed for academic achievement. The data collected by the Yale Child Study Center show a strong connection between student behavior, attention to task, and Connecticut Mastery Test scores.

Policy Enactments

New district policies as a result of focused work on improving literacy in its lowest performing schools are the five outcome goals listed above for 2008. The district is looking at other issues that might result in policy changes: the way they serve ELLs, indicators of accountability, and best practices in addressing behavioral issues.

Resources

The district is committed to small classrooms in low-performing schools. Due to reduced funds, district supervisors reported using funds to support classroom teachers wherever possible. Instructional coaches and test coordinators assigned to each building support teachers. Some are shared among buildings, but persistently low-performing schools may have two instructional coaches (literacy and mathematics). Staff developers and test coordinators from low-performing schools stated they frequently receive assignments from the principal to cover regular classrooms. Consequently, they are taken away from district-assigned duties. In 2005, the role of instructional coaches was redefined. An instructional coach coordinator now manages the instructional coaches.

The district is also committed to fund a literacy intervention program for each low-performing school so that students who perform under grade level have an additional class period for small group literacy instruction. Some principals have been more creative than others in securing and retaining additional time and resources.

The Stupski Foundation has been an additional resource to leverage more support for l ow-performing schools. Currently, there is a new director to monitor the progress of seven low-performing schools. Also as a direct result of its new strategic plan under Stupski's guidance, the district is hiring a full-time director of data, assessment, evaluation and research and a consultant for grade-level meetings to help teachers use data and collaborate effectively.

IV. Implementation Features

Implementation Actions

New Haven has spent four years providing more—but not necessarily different—support to low-performing schools. These schools receive more resources and are monitored more frequently and in greater depth. Some schools have moved out of the low-performing status. A tiered system has been developed for identified schools—those on the top tier are given a little extra support and are expected to have the capacity to solve their own problems. Those in the middle receive additional resources, such as more district classroom supervision and greater help in analyzing data, and are coached to improve. Those on the bottom tier receive

the most targeted, one-to-one resources. In 2004-05, the district added a new oversight structure; a new director was hired specifically to support bottom-tier schools.

New Haven is in the process of realigning resources to better support the implementation of its literacy initiative through the following actions:

- Creating structured, integrated, reading/writing curriculum that extends from Pre-K through grade 8.

- Aligning an evaluation system for principals with targeted instructional objectives, which will include accountability for required grade-level meetings and the supports and materials needed to meet the identified needs of struggling students.

- Reconceptualizing the literacy coaches and instructional coaches and providing the personnel and training to each school to make them effective. Instructional coaches have a different and more clearly defined role in working with classroom teachers, which has resulted in the reassignment of some personnel at the school level.

- Hiring a new school director who will be solely responsible for identified low-performing schools. The seven schools targeted for special support are referred to as the Superintendents' Lead Schools; this year they are Roberto Clemente, Hill Central, Fair Haven, Lincoln Bassett, Jackie Robinson, Katherine Brennan, and Clinton Avenue. The LAB visited three of these schools in 2004 for this study.

The district reading supervisor, Imma Canelli, works closely with Assistant Superintendent Osborne to provide support for principals to monitor and evaluate the literacy program in their individual buildings. District personnel accompany principals on classroom walk-throughs.

Canelli also coordinates extensive professional development opportunities for all professional staff. She meets frequently with her literacy instructional coaches to target improvements in instruction more effectively. Finally, she processes and monitors the assessment results of all students and works with principals to ensure they receive the data in a timely manner and that they understand the results. Principals have the ultimate authority to ensure that teachers attend district trainings, classrooms are covered when teachers are absent, staff members discuss student work during grade-level meetings, intervention programs are properly implemented, and that the principals know what to look for when visiting classrooms. Canelli acknowledges that some principals "get it and some do not" (Fieldnotes, 04/07/2004); that is, the district recognizes that some principals are able to identify and support good instruction and discuss student work, while others may need training. Both Osborne and Canelli state there is not enough additional literacy support for the middle grades.

One of three persistently low-performing schools is now in a new building. It opened in fall 2004 as a K-8 International Baccalaureate school. In addition, there have been administrative changes in two of the three persistently low-performing schools: The former principal of one school is now a co-principal in the newly opened magnet school and the former principal at another has been replaced.

Professional Development. The district has an annual professional development plan that outlines all the district trainings for the year. The supervisor for staff development commented that new teachers receive the same, but more intense, training as all teachers. District trainings for veteran teachers were reported to not have been well attended in 2003-04. Beginning with the 2004-05 school year, district professional development trainings are now mandated, whereas previously, teachers were expected to attend.

District administrators are expected to attend the trainings. In 2004, district administrators commented that those principals who do not attend trainings do not know what to look for in the classroom. Because the district policy for special education is inclusion, special education teachers are also required to attend district trainings; however, many special education teachers we interviewed said their principals did not allow them to go to mainstream teacher trainings.

District personnel said that the annual training schedule often changes and they reported that principals complain that there are too many workshops without enough time or support to fully implement programs. Many principals said that teachers do not have enough time to see if trainings are effective.

Data Systems. The district has two data systems, one for general student data (attendance, demographics, etc.) and another for test data. Test data are frequently provided to schools and the district and more often to low-performing schools in multiple formats for analysis. Currently, the general student data system cannot be linked to the test data system. There are district plans to interface the data systems and to hire a director of data and evaluation. It frequently takes months for student records to be transferred as students move or get reassigned, which results in delayed services for ELLs and special education students. Receiving schools test incoming students for proper literacy placement and supports.

Building Autonomy. In New Haven, differences in implementation of the literacy initiative exist at the school level. Each building controls factors critical to improving instruction, such as decisions about staff assignments, structure of the school day, and selection of literacy materials, models, and interventions. Principals' lack of vision in relation to literacy reform can be a barrier to motivating and retraining teaching staff. Principals who delegate supervision of instruction to others and do not know what questions to ask when looking at assessment data do not understand what teachers would require to initiate literacy reforms. The same principals do not understand what to look for during literacy walk-throughs.

New Haven's literacy initiative relies on building leaders who "get it," can participate in a meaningful way in discussions about student work, and respond accordingly, providing added resources for targeted actions. When this is not the case, district's expectations do not mesh with lines of authority, and schools are unlikely to achieve accountability benchmarks.

V. Take-Up and Response

The LAB found considerable variation in the depth, breadth, and quality in implementing the elements of the literacy initiative among the three persistently low-performing schools and three higher performing schools with similar demographics. Two of the "comparison" schools employed an aligned approach for literacy and made consistent use of a variety of

supports for implementation and improvement of reading and writing. At the other end of the spectrum, two low-performing schools exhibited sporadic and fragmented efforts to implement the district's literacy initiatives. In addition, LAB site visits surfaced evidence of other kinds of climate and structural problems at these two schools.

Although our inquiries were focused on the literacy initiative, a number of other factors emerged, notably, the challenge of converting schools to K-8 structures and to magnet schools. School staff could not articulate a rationale for the conversions to K-8 or the magnet concept and, perhaps as a result, implementation of programs was weakened. The range of responses by the six schools to the district's literacy initiative is described below.

Strong Implementers

The two schools that were more fully implementing the district literacy initiative (neither of which is a low-performing school) exhibited curricular coherence. The two schools were able to find resources to support instruction, including coaches who remained with teachers for extended periods of time, professional development that fit identified needs, and time for planning and grade-level meetings. They also used differentiated staffing so that staff members could complement each other's work. Grade-level meetings, true to the district's intention, were used to examine student work, plan instruction, and monitor student progress. The schools used assessment data rather than simply administering assessments.

The principals provided active leadership for the coherent implementation of the literacy initiative. Only one principal seemed directly involved in instruction, but both focused on creating and maintaining supportive conditions for instructional improvement: an inviting climate, effective student discipline, a stable staff assigned appropriately, and opportunities for sharing and developing staff expertise.

Weak Implementers

Two schools (both of which are persistently low-performing) showed limited implementation of literacy improvement strategies. LAB staff observed select elements of the district's literacy initiative, such as grade-level meetings and literacy coaches, yet these elements did not appear to add up to instructional improvements. For example, teachers participated in literacy-related professional development, but there was little follow up by instructional coaches or principals to help them practice and integrate new learning into their instruction. Similarly, the schools administered many assessments, as required by the district, but there was little evidence that assessment data were used to plan instruction. However, the data were used for monitoring student progress and grouping students. There appeared to be functioning literacy teams in K-3 grades, and principals were beginning to convene grade-level meetings for the upper grades.

At neither school did staff view the principal as an instructional leader. Staff reported numerous behavior issues. High staff turnover and absenteeism were barriers to implementing literacy initiatives. In both schools, there was a lack of respect for instructional time, with students and staff frequently arriving late and leaving early. Both schools faced additional challenges, having just converted to a K-8 program. Many interviewees felt

that the K-8 conversion happened too quickly and with no planning. Both schools struggled with their programs for ELLs and special education students. There was certainly evidence of strengths at both schools—one school has an abundance of curricular materials, the other has a Family Resource Center, and both schools have potential support from literacy coaches. Nonetheless, there was little evidence that the district's literacy initiative was taking hold as intended.

Uneven Implementation

Two schools (one low performing and one "comparison") exhibited uneven implementation of improvement strategies. At the lower grades, these schools demonstrated a cohesive curricular framework, meaningful use of assessments, effective use of differentiated staffing, and focused grade-level meetings. Both received additional district support and had principals who understood elementary literacy strategies. The upper grades curriculum was not as well aligned, especially in writing, and instruction was significantly more uneven. In spite of these conditions, there were fewer staff vacancies and a more friendly school climate than in recent years. Additionally, there was consistent implementation of grade-level meetings, though faculty had not taken ownership of the agendas. There was also less staff turnover at these schools than in the past year.

VI. Feedback

The associate superintendent and some central office staff receive frequent feedback in the form of student assessments from the district data office; however, this information is only about student outcomes, not implementation information (e.g., evidence of changes in teacher capacity or school organization). Findings from the LAB's school visits were shared in a forum with the principals, where specific discussions about the extent of implementation occurred. A formal process for examining the extent of implementation of the literacy initiative in the district does not exist.

VII. Conclusion

In New Haven, accountability for literacy improvement has been placed on the shoulders of the principals in the persistently low-performing schools—with supports available from outside the school. Each school has multiple building-specific initiatives in place, all competing for attention. The district has been working with principals to identify three targeted priorities for the year and to hold them accountable for only those priorities. However, principals find it difficult to abandon other building programs, and the district finds it difficult to force principals to redirect priorities.

Some school leaders are clearly struggling with how to make the leap from the plan to improved student literacy outcomes, that is, to implement the literacy initiative effectively at the classroom level. There are still hurdles in communications between central office staff and school leaders: School leaders have difficulty identifying and voicing building needs and central office staff often do not seek information about specific needs. These gaps lead to faulty or incomplete implementation of well-intentioned policies and inappropriate use of resources in some cases. Tensions persist between school autonomy and district-mandated reforms.

NEW HAVEN INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – SUPERINTENDENT AND ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT

1. As [superintendent or associate superintendent], what are your main areas of responsibility? What parts of your job have a direct impact on Hill, Clemente, and Jackie Robinson? Which other central office staff members have a direct impact on any of the three schools?

2. What have been the main actions that New Haven has taken to improve student achievement? Has the district done anything differently at Hill, Clemente, or Jackie Robinson than at other middle or K-8 schools? Has the district taken any special approaches regarding special populations? What and why?

3. If you had to choose *the three most important district actions* to improve achievement, what would they be and why? If you had to choose *the three most important actions* to improve achievement for the three schools, what would they be and why?

4. Why were these actions chosen for the three schools? What were the rationales? Who was part of the decision-making process?

5. What kind of monitoring is the district using to gauge what's happening with its initiatives at those schools? (Probe for assigned staff, reporting, liaising, meetings, etc.) How are you specifically involved in monitoring?

6. What do you think about the school improvement plans and priorities at Hill? At Clemente? At Jackie Robinson?

7. What kinds of progress have you seen at Hill? At Clemente? At Jackie Robinson? In what ways have they been able to implement district actions or efforts? [For this question, we should substitute the names of the actions described in response to question 3 for the generic term "action."] How do you know this? What evidence can you cite?

8. In your view, what factors have seemed to influence progress at Hill? At Clemente? At Jackie Robinson?

9. In your view, what factors have influenced the progress at other low-performing schools that have made AYP? How do you know this? Please give examples.

10. In what ways have the initiatives been communicated to schools? (Probe for meetings, memos, liaisons, etc.) How often does this occur? Over what time span?

11. Thank you for all of the perspectives you've provided. So we can better follow up on what you've described, what kinds of documents and materials should we look at? Are there district grant proposals, binders, professional development materials, and written policies that will help us get a deeper sense of how central office has been working with these schools? Could you suggest a staff member we could work with to get these documents?

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – SCHOOL-BASED STAFF

1. What are your main areas of responsibility?
    a. Can you describe for me what your role here is at the school?

2. Can you describe for me the school's approach to teaching reading and writing?
    a. How has this approach fared at the school?
        Note: Literacy programs will look different at different grade levels. Be sure that the responses clearly indicate grade level.

3. Tell me how [you/the school] approach reading assessment?
    a. How's it going?
        Note: If talking to a member of a specific role group, such as a teacher, substitute the word "you" for "the school."

4. Tell me how [you/the school] approach writing assessment?
    a. How's it going?
        Note: If talking to a member of a specific role group, such as a teacher, substitute the word "you" for "the school."

5. What are the central topics at grade-level meetings?
    a. What happens there?
    b. How does what happens at grade-level meetings affect instruction in reading and writing?

6. How do you use student work or student data in your work? If interviewing the principal, ask, "How does the school use student work or student data to support reading and writing?"

7. What's the approach to teaching reading and writing for:
    a. English language learners?
    b. Special education students?
    c. Students who are struggling?
        i. Note: For each group ask, "What are the challenges and weaknesses of this approach?"

        ii. Note: For each group ask, "What support services are available?"

8. How do district activities affect reading and writing at the school?

9. If I, as an outsider, want to better understand this school, what do I need to know?

NEW YORK'S NETWORK STRATEGY: ALIGNING LAYERS OF LEADERS

Brett Lane, Andrew Seager, and Susan Frankel

I. STRATEGY OVERVIEW

Summary of Key Strategy

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) is using the *Regional Network Strategy for School Improvement* (referred to as the regional network strategy in this document) to support improvement in schools and districts. The regional network strategy is specifically intended to meet requirements of Title I in the NCLB Act of 2001—that states must design and implement a system of support for schools and districts identified for improvement under the state's accountability system. While focused primarily on providing assistance to schools and districts identified for improvement through the state's accountability system, the regional network strategy is a component of New York State's overall Statewide School Improvement System designed to implement NCLB and reduce achievement gaps among students based on income level, race/ethnicity, and special education or limited English proficiency status (Brief to Board of Regents, 8/25/04). The objectives of the regional network strategy are to (1) assist schools and districts identified by state accountability systems to improve student achievement in identified areas and (2) build the capacity of identified districts and schools to sustain organizational performance through ongoing professional development, data-driven planning, and action.

Stage of Development. In September 2004, NYSED entered its second full year of implementing the regional network strategy. This report focuses on implementation actions and strategies, as well as responses by the regional networks to the implementation of the regional network strategy between September 2003 and January 2005.

Role of the LAB. The LAB provides technical assistance to the state education department, specifically working with the Office of School Improvement (OSI). This work involves documenting OSI-led professional development sessions and reporting feedback that shapes subsequent sessions, consulting on the design of these sessions and collecting information from the state-funded networks involved with the regional network strategy. Most of the attention has been directed toward the OSI and four networks, which will be explained in further detail in the following section: Regional School Support Centers (RSSC), Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRC), Student Support Services Network (SSSN), and Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Centers (BETAC). We also collected information from a set of district superintendents with organizational links to the RSSCs. The primary purposes for collecting information are to (1) document the extent to which there is alignment and shared understanding (coherence) of school improvement processes and approaches within and among the tiers of New York's educational system and (2) use this information to assist and promote the development of New York's regional network strategy as an effective support system. Finally, the LAB, in collaboration with the New York Comprehensive Center, is assisting OSI to conceptualize a longitudinal evaluation of the regional network strategy.

Methodology

The New York case study was based on information gathered from: 1) structured group and individual interviews, 2) participation in and documentation of the quarterly professional development sessions and related committee planning meetings, and 3) a review of regional network strategy policy documents, including regents briefs, strategic plans, and OSI presentations. We gathered information to address the overall research question as well as questions pertinent to New York's regional network strategy (e.g., extent of coherence within and among levels of the education system).

Project staff held structured group and individual interviews with key regional network partners and members of the OSI between March and November 2004. Approximately 115 participants represented all regions of the state and key partners.[1] The interview protocol addressed a number of dimensions of the LAB's conceptual framework:

- Strategies and approaches to school improvement

- Purposes, rationales, and assumptions behind strategies and approaches

- Roles and responsibilities, including how groups work together

- Leadership interactions

We summarized each of the key partner network interviews, which representatives reviewed for accuracy and clarity. We then used the revised summaries to describe the status of the key partners and their understanding and implementation of the regional network strategy; further analysis identified seven common themes among the network partners. The summaries and cross-group analysis formed the basis for a report to NYSED.

The description of how New York is implementing the regional network strategy is based on documentation of the quarterly professional developments sessions and reviews of policy documents. We designed all data collection methods to gather information from key network partners and persons involved with the regional network strategy, confirm the accuracy of the information, and communicate the findings to NYSED to inform ongoing professional development activities.

Key Features of the Regional Network Strategy

The regional network strategy uses existing regional networks and resources rather than state-level intervention as the primary method of school improvement. In order to provide and coordinate regional services, the state competitively funds seven RSSCs across the state, with one in New York City and the remaining six responsible for different geographic regions outside NYC. The RSSCs have primary responsibility for providing technical assistance and support to districts and schools identified for improvement. Within their regions, RSSCs assist with required school and district planning, provide job-embedded professional development to build instructional and organizational capacity, and serve as

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[1] The regional network partners are: Regional School Support Centers (RSSC), Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Centers (BETAC), Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRC), Student Support Services (SSSN), and district superintendents that housed the RSSCs.

buffers and translators of state and federal policy. Additionally, RSSCs are responsible for coordinating the services and supports of other organizations and networks that provide assistance in identified districts and schools.

In their role as a coordinating organization, RSSCs work with a number of well-established partners and networks funded by NYSED and located regionally across the state. These networks address bilingual education, school climate and environment, special education, and other services and supports to meet the needs of students and school districts. The four primary networks involved include:

- Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs)
- Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRC)
- Student Support Services Network (SSSN)
- Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Centers (BETAC)

The regional network strategy draws upon the resources of many additional networks and organizations, but the official responsibility of the four networks listed above is to coordinate their work to improve the academic performance of students in identified schools and districts.

Each network has slightly different regional boundaries and different staffing arrangements. For instance, there are over 40 SETRC offices located across the state, with each office housing from one to four (typically three) staff. On the other hand, there are seven SSSN offices located in regions that mirror the RSSC regions. SSSN offices typically include a coordinator and three to four staff. There are a total of 13 BETAC offices, with eight regional offices located outside of NYC.

Additional key partners include the Board Of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) district superintendents, local school superintendents (especially in the major urban centers), and state education department staff and liaisons who work with state-identified schools.

Although the regional network strategy stresses a regional and coordinated approach to district and school improvement, it is important to note that there are a number of related initiatives and strategies that are part of the overall system of support but are not integral to the functioning of the regional network strategy or linked directly to NCLB accountability requirements. Examples of related strategies include the prioritization of work into different tiers; the Urban Forums and the partnership agreements with the Big Four cities (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers); and the implementation of other initiatives such as Reading First, the Math Initiative, the Middle Level Initiative, and Comprehensive School Reform.

Three policies influenced the development of the regional network strategy. First, NYSED created the RSSCs in 2000 to work with districts and schools identified for improvement. Approximately $6.5 million was allocated for nine RSSCs throughout the state, not including NYC. After three years, this number decreased to six RSSCs because NYSED did not have the resources to fund nine adequately. A second policy established a set of design principles for technical assistance providers that include, but are not limited to, the RSSCs. This policy required that education providers collaborate with each other and, to

the extent possible, focus resources on districts and schools identified for improvement. Third, in spring 2003 the Office of Elementary, Middle, Secondary and Continuing Education (EMSC) reviewed its organizational structure related to its capacity to implement NCLB and subsequently created an Office of School Improvement and Community Services responsible for designing and implementing the state's system of support for school improvement, including the regional network strategy.

II. History of Strategy

Background of Strategy

With the passage of the NCLB, NYSED was faced with a number of constraints and challenges that influenced the decision to develop a regional approach to school improvement. Like other states with considerable urban and high-need schools, New York was faced with the likely sharp increase in the number of schools to be identified for improvement, especially among those already identified through the pre-existing Title I accountability system. Also influencing NYSED's decision-making process was the history (and related infrastructure) of providing regional assistance to schools through mechanisms such as the Effective Schools Consortium and the BOCES located across the state. New York has traditionally used a regional approach to school assistance, though it has not always been tied to a state educational accountability system. Lastly, NYSED experienced a significant decrease in staff between 1994 and 2004, rendering it increasingly unable to provide the level of field services that it did historically, and there is little chance of this decline reversing in the near future.

Within this context, New York developed the regional network strategy as a means of leveraging and refocusing existing resources (e.g., existing networks) so that identified low-performing schools receive customized and coordinated support. Additionally, New York prioritizes which schools are to be served and specifically recognizes that the networks cannot meet the needs of these schools with available resources. By prioritizing schools and then strategically providing support based on their level of need, New York recognized that identified schools required specialized assistance. Further, the goal is to avoid the inevitable resource drain that stems from trying to provide the same level of services to all low-performing schools. A strategic approach, state staff argue, is better able to provide schools with differentiated supports and services appropriate to their individual needs and the local context.

The official rationale for the regional network strategy is provided in the Report on School Improvement Initiatives submitted to the Board of Regents in fall 2003. The report states:

> Partnering with regional networks is an important component of the department's statewide school improvement strategy. Regional networks bring services closer to schools and draw upon local experts who are familiar with the political and school context. Regional networks may provide general assistance (i.e., improving English language arts and mathematics) or more specialized assistance (i.e., to address needs of bilingual students and students whose first language is not English, and address school discipline and attendance issues) to schools and districts in need of improvement. (Kadamus, 2003)

Related Policies

There are a number of state-related policy issues that are critical to the implementation and success of the regional network strategy.

- Although New York has an approved, single educational accountability system as described in the state's accountability workbook, there are traces of a dual accountability system that continue to hinder school improvement efforts. For example, there are different processes and funding for Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) and Schools in Need of Improvement (SINI) or Corrective Action (CA) schools under NCLB. For instance, the corrective action plan completed by NCLB corrective action schools is different than the corrective action plan required of SURR schools. Depending on how a school is identified (e.g., through NCLB, IDEA, Title I or non-Title I), the school may be asked to submit multiple – and often redundant—school improvement plans. The inconsistency in planning and documentation requirements also influences the ability of different technical assistance providers to coordinate support.

- A number of state networks included in the regional network strategy are funded through functionally separate programs and initiatives, and there is little history of collaboration between these programs within NYSED. These networks have been asked to shift their roles and responsibilities, leading to increased tension within some of the networks, as well as in their counterparts at the state education department. Conflicting mandates, coupled with apprehension that their network's mission may in some way be devalued if the focus of their work is low-performing schools rather than a particular and historically relevant student population, has made some of the networks reluctant to coordinate their efforts with the RSSCs.

- The geographic boundaries of the different networks are not fully aligned. As a result, it is often difficult to coordinate activities across networks working in multiple regions.

- RSSCs also support the implementation of various federal and state initiatives that are not always aligned with their work in districts and schools identified for improvement. For example, RSSCs are required to provide support to schools receiving Reading First funds. However, Reading First schools do not necessarily overlap with the list of schools identified for improvement.

Shared Beliefs

In addition to historical and contextual rationales for using a regional approach to school improvement is the shared belief among a number of state education department leaders that district and school improvement requires a systems approach to produce change. In a presentation in June 2003, Assistant Commissioner James Butterworth, responsible for the OSI and the regional network system, emphasized four features critical to the design of an effective statewide school improvement strategy: (1) the alignment of regional resources and related roles and responsibilities; (2) the development of a continuum of support for districts and schools with varied needs (e.g., urban schools) and at different levels of NCLB

identification; (3) the development of aligned roles and expectations among state-funded networks and NYSED offices and coherence within levels of the system (related to purposes, assumptions, strategies, and activities); and (4) identification, creation, and dissemination of knowledge and best practices related to school improvement.

Although NYSED vocally demonstrates that it supports the rationale behind the regional network strategy and believes that a systems approach to change is needed to appropriately address the issues faced by identified schools, there exist longstanding differences between how NYSED understands these concepts and what actually occurs in the field. For instance, the regional networks intentionally utilize a variety of strategies and approaches when working with schools and districts. This adaptive and context-based approach to school improvement is often in conflict with the approach promoted by state-level officials. State officials are pressured (by NCLB and by internal influences) to ensure that the support strategies used in the field are consistent, research-based, and focused on outcomes, namely, improved student performance. Although most state officials, and in particular the staff in New York's OSI, value and understand the intent of the regional network strategy, the pressure to maintain consistency and meet NCLB requirements often leads OSI officials to focus on *technical solutions* to problems in the schools that are identified through state assessments (e.g., a school's performance in a particular grade and subject level) and subsequently addressed through planning and targeted intervention. Instead of approaching school improvement from a rational, linear perspective, the regional networks tend to utilize a *strategic, systemic, and pragmatic approach* (Evans) that is context-based, emphasizes the development of relationships with identified schools, and is flexible enough to allow the networks to engage and work with schools in multiple ways.

III. State Expectations for Strategy

Connections to School Achievement

The state argues that the success of the regional network strategy depends on the effective alignment of regional resources, appropriate prioritization of districts eligible for assistance, aligned and coherent roles and expectations within and throughout levels of the system, and coordinated and timely dissemination of best practices to identified districts and schools. The leaders responsible for implementation believe that a regional and coordinated approach that leverages the resources and expertise of well-established networks will provide the support needed to improve student achievement in identified districts and schools. By identifying districts based on need and focusing federal and state funding and programs (e.g., Math Initiative, Comprehensive School Reform, and Reading First), the state education department expects identified schools to make AYP and increase their capacity to improve over time.

Timeline for Results

New York's timeline for results corresponds with that set forth by the NCLB; that is, 100% of students will reach academic proficiency by the 2013-2014 school year.

Process for Judging Success

NYSED is in the process of designing an evaluation of the regional network strategy. The evaluation will include a process evaluation intended to assess implementation, including the extent to which alignment and coherence exists within and across levels of the statewide system of support. NYSED is also designing an outcome evaluation, though its funding constraints have delayed the schedule for issuing an RFP through which to carry it out.

IV. Implementation of Strategy

Implementation Actions, including Capacity Building for Leadership

NYSED has taken several concurrent actions to implement its regional network strategy. These include: (a) large-scale professional development activities offered on a quarterly basis, (b) concurrent development of policy to support coordination among the regional networks, (c) the development of partnership agreements with the Big Four cities, (d) revision of work plans and roles within the OSI, and (e) outreach from the OSI to other offices within NYSED that fund and direct statewide networks that have an effect on school improvement.

Large-scale Professional Development. The assistant commissioner in charge of OSI decided that the best way to implement the regional network strategy would be to involve staff of relevant state-funded networks in ongoing professional development. The central goal of the OSI professional development initiative was to create a statewide learning community in which the participants would develop a common understanding of the responsibilities of each network and develop regional strategies for collaboration as they support schools identified as low-performing. The objectives of the professional development are:

- Develop a statewide learning community that focuses on effective ways of supporting low-performing schools.

- Develop a shared understanding and appreciation of the roles and responsibilities that each network brings to the schools and of the supporting role the networks play in low-performing schools.

- Identify existing relationships among networks at the state and regional levels and activities that can increase the coherence, efficiency, and effectiveness of networks throughout the entire system to build capacity in low-performing schools and districts.

A set of principles and basic assumptions guided the development of the content and structure for the professional development session. Central to the development of the professional development sessions was the idea that questions related to school improvement and the design of an effective support system had yet to be adequately framed. This especially held true in a complex setting such as New York. Thus, the structure of the professional development had to afford participants the opportunity to identify those questions and explore and identify the appropriately complex and adaptive solutions to problems (as yet to be defined) (Heifitz, 1994). To this end, the professional development sessions needed to be mission-driven, strive to develop coherence at every level of the system (see Exhibit 3: New York

Regional Network Strategy Conceptual Framework), and be supported by a learning community that would access the expertise of all involved. The implication of this approach was that the collective wisdom of the learning community would inform detailed policy development and strategy implementation.

The sessions have focused on broad educational issues that are critical to the improvement of low-performing schools. In 2004-2005, the four quarterly professional development sessions focused on leadership, capacity building, systems thinking, and diversity issues, and they included presentations by other leaders in the field, such as the district superintendents. During the professional development sessions, the various groups engaged in a series of content and process-oriented activities focused on the theme for the session and were purposely grouped cross-network and cross-region to promote interaction and productive dialogue. A core element of the professional development activity was to organize sub-group meetings in which representatives from the six regions meet and plan how to work together within those regions. It is expected that these regional groups will continue this work between quarterly sessions. By structuring the professional development sessions in this way, New York is providing a forum that reduces professional isolation and supports cross-role and cross-level learning and interaction needed to best support low-performing schools.

The professional development sessions have been well attended by representatives from most of the networks involved in the regional network strategy (with the exception of BETAC, which has not been fully represented during the OSI professional development sessions). The first professional development session was in January 2004. Attendees included approximately 120 staff from two of the four regional networks (e.g., RSSC and SSSN), all OSI professional staff, representatives from the New York City state education department and RSSC staff, and representatives from Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, the office in SED responsible for addressing special education regulations and services.

Since the initial session, four additional sessions have been organized. Participation in these professional development activities has expanded to include additional networks. The September 2004 professional development session included approximately 150 representatives from other state-funded networks included in the regional network strategy (e.g., SETRC, BETAC) and other partners, including the regional adult education network and representatives from (state-funded) teacher centers.

Planning for these professional development activities is the responsibility of two committees supported by external consultants, with representation from all the core constituencies. Consultants provide assistance with data analysis and with delivery and facilitation of many of the professional development sessions.

Policy Development. An excellent example of how New York is implementing and institutionalizing the shift in priorities and resources needed to support schools is illustrated in the development of design principles for EMSC technical assistance centers, which extend to all networks involved in the strategy as funding cycles expire and are renewed. The design principles address the RFP process itself, confirm that a priority for all the technical assistance

centers will be supporting the regional network strategy, and also cover common principles about the clients to be served, staffing, funding, and operations. The design principles state, "The greatest portion possible of technical assistance centers' time and resources must be directed to provision of direct services to SED-identified school and districts" (NYSED, n.d.). These elements are incorporated into contracts with successful bidders for networks as the contracts are renewed.
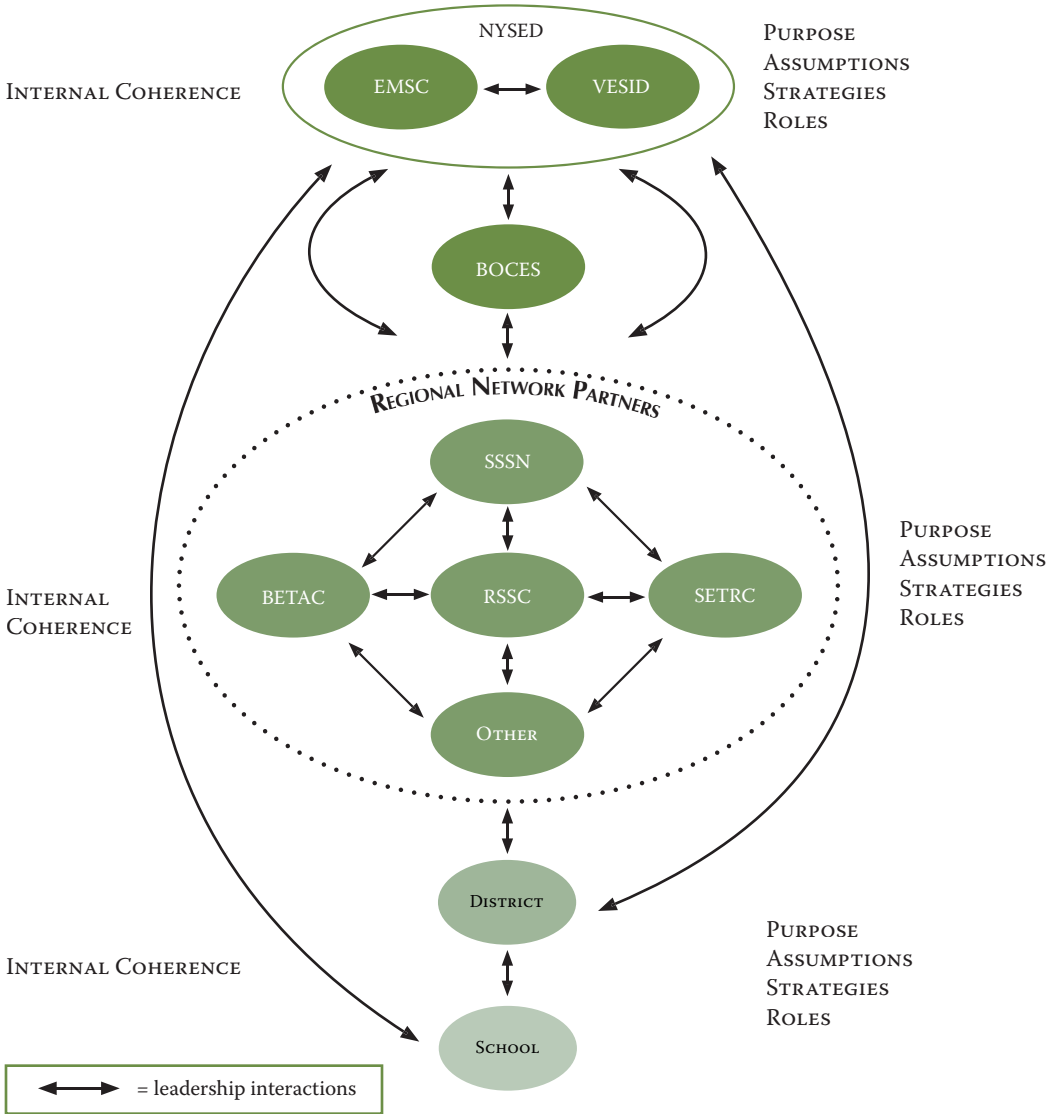
Additional policies have emerged in response to the professional development activities. For example, in summer 2004, two memoranda to the New York Board of Regents described strategies for closing the achievement gap in urban areas and for improving student performance, accountability, and the fiscal integrity of school districts. The memoranda confirmed the policy that the RSSCs are the state-funded network responsible for coordinating regional collaboration. This statement made it clear which network was responsible for coordinating the regional network strategy.

The regional network strategy has also spurred other policy proposals from the field. The 37 district superintendents proposed a policy to integrate their role into the strategy (District Superintendents of New York State, 2004). District superintendents have been formally charged by the commissioner of education as state representatives in the field to eliminate the gap between low- and high-performing schools. The district superintendents see their role as coordinating the deployment of the state-funded field networks, other government agencies, and other resources at their disposal in a cost-effective and comprehensive manner. They are particularly concerned about coordination of provider services and network resources and delivery of services to schools in danger of falling under the NCLB-defined list of schools in need of improvement. These policy proposals have resulted in ongoing discussion between the district superintendents and the commissioner. Changes in the law establishing BOCES, enabling them to deliver services to large cities, is one probable consequence of these discussions.

Regional Partnership Agreements. OSI has developed "partnership agreements" with the Big Four cities—Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers. The purpose of these strategic plans is to influence and focus the major district and school reform efforts of each of these cities and to define services that will support these efforts from both NYSED and the state-funded networks. The specifics of this approach have evolved since the first partnership agreement was signed with Buffalo in 2001. Subsequent partnership agreements have become increasingly specific and the roles of both NYSED and state-funded networks more clearly defined. This has had the impact of providing state-funded networks with information on what each is charged with accomplishing in these cities.

Office of School Improvement Roles. OSI staff has embarked on a process to define more clearly their roles and work scope related to the regional network strategy. This has included professional development on planning processes, complex systems, and strategies for managing work. During the OSI-targeted technical assistance, OSI staff members engage in ongoing discussions of the unique role that NYSED must play in order to make the regional network strategy a success.

**EXHIBIT 3: NEW YORK REGIONAL NETWORK STRATEGY
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

INTERNAL COHERENCE

NYSED

EMSC ↔ VESID

PURPOSE
ASSUMPTIONS
STRATEGIES
ROLES

BOCES

REGIONAL NETWORK PARTNERS

SSSN

BETAC ↔ RSSC ↔ SETRC

Other

INTERNAL
COHERENCE

PURPOSE
ASSUMPTIONS
STRATEGIES
ROLES

DISTRICT

PURPOSE
ASSUMPTIONS
STRATEGIES
ROLES

INTERNAL COHERENCE

SCHOOL

↔ = leadership interactions

OSI Outreach to Other NYSED Office. Only two of the networks in the regional network strategy are the under the responsibility of OSI. OSI has worked to coordinate policy with the offices responsible for the other networks. For example, OSI has done extensive outreach to Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities that houses the SETRC network. NYSED offices tend to be oriented toward the (largely federal) funding sources for their networks. As a result, state-funded networks have different approaches and philosophies in the field.

In some regions, there is a history of RSSC and SETRC staff working together in schools and districts. In other regions, there is less understanding of each other's roles and less coordination. The same tends to be true for other state-funded networks. The physical location of networks within a region and the role of the district superintendents are significant factors in the degree of coordination between these networks.

V. Take-Up and Response

Responses to the regional network strategy have been extensive, complex, and varied. This section addresses state education department and regional responses to the initiative, discusses NYSED-regional roles and relationships, and closes with a description of the differences and similarities in the ways in which four state-funded networks work with schools and districts (SETRC, RSSC, SSSN, BETAC).

SED and Regional Network Responses to the Network Strategy

Following the initial OSI professional development session in January 2004, network representatives and OSI officials experienced a high level of discomfort, or cognitive dissonance, as they were asked to reflect on their roles and try to define themselves in relation to partner networks or, in the case of the state, in relation to the regional networks in the field. After participating in a total of five professional development sessions, OSI managers, staff and network representatives have changed how they relate to and work with each other. Representatives from each network report increased understanding of each other's roles as well as increased collaboration with partner networks. Their leadership overwhelmingly supports collaboration in principle and can articulate the negative impact of multiple networks working independently in a single low-performing school. Drawing on data collected during focus groups with the four networks in spring 2004, it is clear that the OSI professional development sessions have had an impact on how the networks work with and relate to each other.

EXHIBIT 4: PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO REPORT

OSI TRAINING LED TO A CHANGE IN SERVICES

Participation in the OSI Training has resulted in:	RSSC	SETRC	BETAC	SSSN
More collaboration with other networks	58%	78%	80%	30%
More thought going into planning and who should be involved	26%	22%	40%	30%

State officials have begun to relinquish their role as the "expert" and increasingly engage in peer-based and constructive discussions about their roles and responsibilities related to how to support low-performing schools most effectively. Similarly, network representatives report an increased understanding of each other's roles as well as increased collaboration with partner networks. Although some networks (and some regions of the state) have struggled more than others, there is evidence that networks in all of the regions responded to the professional development initiative by holding regional meetings between sessions and working on ways to fulfill the demands of their new roles. Each region has developed different strategies for sharing information across networks, coordinating work, and identifying which networks should best work in which schools. These strategies include piloting a collaborative approach to working together in a single school or district, creating a regional leadership group of all networks involved in the professional development, and creating a Web-accessed database on the activities of each network in schools. These regional strategies are in the beginning stages, so it is too early to inform practice. In some instances, the collaboration work between networks was interrupted because both networks were told by different state education department offices to take the lead in coordinating services.

From focus group discussions, networks reported that physical proximity is a significant factor in promoting coordination of services. Several district superintendents have taken advantage of this factor and added structural supports for integrating multiple networks within a single BOCES division. This is most effective where all the networks are within the same BOCES, they have a history of working together, and the physical distance between locations is reasonable. Another factor that influences the networks is whether there is a long-standing, established working relationship. For example, a number of RSSC staff members previously worked together for SETRCs in one capacity or another.

NYSED-Regional Roles and Relationships

The professional development has increased interaction between OSI staff and those of the participating networks. This has resulted in increased communication and also awareness of different perspectives on leadership. From the perspective of a district superintendent, the state education department tends to over-regulate. The result is a system designed to maximize control at the state level and diminish the efficiency in delivery of services at the local level. District superintendents and leaders within most networks tend to utilize a facilitative style of leadership, both because they consider this style most conducive to capacity building among their clients and because they work in schools and districts over which they have no formal positional authority.

Regional Approaches to School Improvement

The regional network strategy calls upon regional networks to engage with and provide support to identified districts and schools. The implementation of the strategy has called attention to the overall lack of coherence among the types of strategies used by the regional networks and the fact that the varied strategies for school improvement are often based on different rationales and assumptions as to how to best support low-performing schools. Although there tends to be commonality of approach within networks, there are also regional variations.

Despite the apparent regional and network differences, our work with the NYSED has explored and documented an emerging set of principles and shared strategies that characterize how the regional networks interact with and support schools. The four primary networks (RSSCs, SETRC, SSSN, and BETAC) report that a central element of their work with schools involves using capacity-building strategies. Further, each of the networks sees their role as primarily providing support or assistance in one form or another and they seek to minimize the amount of monitoring they perform. Monitoring is perceived as antithetical to providing technical assistance support. All networks stress the importance of relationship building to their effectiveness in working with districts and schools. Common principles and themes, which are drawn directly from focus groups and structured interviews with representatives from the four networks, are listed below.

Cross-network themes are:

1. Each school is different, and building ownership within diverse schools requires dialogue with school staff. Networks have to be adaptive in how they engage and work with schools.

2. Networks value building trusting relationships.

3. Even though their entry points and foci are different, all networks see themselves as building the capacity of the whole school.

4. All networks see planning as essential to their work. However, how they engage in planning, what processes they use, whom they seek to involve, and how they relate the planning process to writing formal plans differs from one network to another.

5. Every network perceives that they understand other groups (e.g., what other networks do, what their focus is, and how they work with schools); however, each network also feels that others (those not from their network) often do not fully understand their own network.

6. The state education department and those in the field view the work differently and often value different kinds of information. Many in the field want more consultation and dialogue. The state education department would like networks to follow its directives more closely.

The regional networks and the state education department utilize a number of approaches to change that sometimes result in conflict and confusion. One way to portray these differences in approach is the continuum below.

Exhibit 5: Varying Approaches to Change

Seek to create stable, logical ororganization	← Organization →	See change as continuous and inevitable, organization as fluid
Well-defined and sequenced steps	← Entry →	Build relationship, which will Influence steps that will follow
Always begin work with full needs assessment	← Assessment →	Build on what exists, deepen over time.
Focus on writing plan as blueprint	← Planning →	Focus on planning as ongoing activity
Bring in product with fixed outcome	← Innovation →	Engage in process with emerging outcome
Structure, function, tasks, roles, rules	← Overall Focus →	People, culture, meaning, motivation
Most purely top-down, disseminating, pressuring	← Implementation →	Top-down and bottom-up, commitment building

The **RSSCs** are working to design a common approach to school improvement that is flexible, context-based, and focused on building credible relationships that contribute to building leadership and capacity among district- and school-level administrators and school staff. A central school improvement strategy that the RSSCs use involves the analysis of different types of school, student, and community data with teams of teachers and/or
administrators to inform planning for school improvement. Through this support, RSSCs facilitate and lead teachers and administrators through an analysis of different types of data (including, but not limited to, state assessments) that are intended to help a school focus its discussion and planning efforts.

Complementing the assistance with planning and related job-embedded technical assistance (e.g., classroom-based training and modeling of instructional practices), the RSSCs have also learned that it is critical to work with teachers and administrators to develop leadership skills and build capacity. To accomplish this, RSSC staff are often required to play the role of a change agent. They have to be willing to work intensely and deeply enough to utilize strategies intended to "change the culture" of the schools. They work by "facilitating learning and understanding instead of 'telling' schools what to do." The RSSCs leadership and capacity-building activities are often carried out in conjunction with the causal analysis and use of inquiry-based strategies to help schools analyze data and develop an improvement plan.

At a minimum, all RSSCs help schools and districts focus on relevant data and analyze how to help schools identify where they might most effectively address low performance in their school. On the one hand, the RSSCs stress the need for flexibility in their approaches. This allows them to take into consideration the local context. On the other hand, they also stress the need to have consistent protocols and ways of working with schools that ground their work in data, research, and evidence that what they are learning is effective.

In general, the **SETRC** approach is similar throughout regions and offices. SETRC has a well-developed model for targeting intervention. SETRC staff members are trained in a child-centered, problem-solving model that looks at data to identify "root causes" for specific issues such as low student performance or over-identification of specific populations for special education services. SETRC seeks to create internal capacity and its planning process is designed to be flexible enough to promote internal organizational ownership of the process. SETRC works with general education as well as special education staff and creates whole-school solutions. SETRC staff view whole-school solutions as being more effective for special education students than solutions that address special education alone. The other networks, however, often perceive SETRC as special education specialists.

The **SSSN** works from the assumption that a healthy school environment provides support systems that help all students learn. The SSSN emphasizes flexibility and relationships and works with schools from an assets base rather than a deficit model. SSSN directors report a lack of clarity about their roles, both at the state and local levels. This is particularly true as the SSSN seeks to increase their attention to focus on schools identified as low performing

while meeting the requirements of their multiple funding streams. SSSN staff members often have long-established relationships with schools that are not identified as in need of improvement. These may be jeopardized as the network changes focus.

BETACs do not have a specific process for engaging with schools and districts. They are primarily involved in the delivery of targeted technical assistance and professional development, often with a focus on the immediate needs of teachers working with bilingual students, rather than helping schools go through a change process. BETAC staff members report a lack of quality data with which to conduct a needs assessment process. Therefore, services are primarily delivered in response to the needs of schools. Many of the schools that seek assistance from BETAC and schools with the most bilingual students are, in fact, not designated as schools in need of improvement.

VI. Feedback

NYSED is obtaining formal feedback on the regional network strategy from three sources. One is the analysis of data from each professional development meeting. Benchmarks against which to assess the impact of the professional development were developed and are currently being revised. Second, feedback from each of the networks is also obtained through their representation at the planning committees for the professional development. Finally, feedback from the LAB study was provided during the January and March 2005 professional development sessions. All these sources will inform the adaptive approach of the regional network strategy to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of statewide services to schools and districts identified as in need of improvement under NCLB.

VII. Conclusion

New York is an example of a state, which because of the number of schools that have been identified and the limited resources within the state education department, is utilizing regional or intermediary organizations as the primary mechanism for providing coordinated and intensive support to low-performing schools. To enhance the quality of services provided by intermediary organizations, New York is competitively funding the intermediate organizations. By using a strategy of contracting support efforts to state-funded networks, New York is purposely redirecting some of the resources from networks that have had a broad mandate to work with all schools and districts to those that have been identified under NCLB. The objective is to make optimum use of limited resources for the demanding task of improving student outcomes in the lowest performing schools. Finally, there has been a growing partnership between historically separate units in the state department of education, in particular the OSI and Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities. Reauthorization of IDEA has added impetus to increased cooperation between special education and general education services at the state level, which provides an opportunity for leveraging additional resources to support schools identified for improvement under NCLB and increasing coherence among the networks funded by NYSED.

The NYSED regional network strategy has increased interaction among different networks within regions and between the regions and state offices. Regional inter-network interaction that at the outset of the strategy two years ago was based primarily on personal relationships and common location has now become an expectation and increasingly a common practice. The use of regular large-scale professional development sessions to bring about this change initially increased role confusion and conflict between groups. The sessions are now attended by a wider range of networks and are increasingly seen as an opportunity to develop mutual understanding and identify strategies for working together. Because NYSED staff members are full participants, the sessions are also opportunities for interactive feedback of the type essential in crafting policy in situations that call for complex adaptive responses.

The network professional development opportunity has extended conversations on the best ways to work with schools that have been identified as low performing across all the networks that work with them and with NYSED staff. All have accepted the fact that capacity building is central to the strategy and the exchange has required some networks to revise their strategies. Discussions of how to evaluate the impact of the strategies are still in the early stages, so data on effectiveness will not be available for some time to come.

[1] The regional network partners are: Regional School Support Centers (RSSC), Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Centers (BETAC), Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRC), Student Support Services (SSSN), and district superintendents that housed the RSSCs.

New York State Office of School Improvement Focus Groups Protocol Questions

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Part I. (15 minutes)

A) *Roles and Responsibilities*

(1) Using activity sheet #1, ask the participants to check the roles that their department/unit performs in working with schools or districts identified for improvement. Participants also are asked to indicate the level of impact of their work; that is, do they work directly with schools, district, or networks?

(2) Participants introduce themselves and indicate their primary role and responsibility in working with identified districts and schools.

Part II. (40 minutes)

B) *Strategies and approaches to school improvement*

(1) Whether or not you work directly with schools or districts, describe your department's overall approach for working with schools/districts that have been identified for improvement.

C) *Purpose, Rationale, and Assumptions*

(1) In thinking about this approach, what does it assume about change? For example, what does your approach assume schools need in order to change? What are the underlying assumptions about how districts, parents, and students change?

Part III. (40 minutes)

D) *Leadership interactions (across regional networks and levels of the system)* (40 minutes)

(1) If working with regional network organizations in the support system (RSSC, SSSN, BETAC, SETRC), describe how you work together.

    a. Provide an example of a time when OSI and the network organization worked effectively to support schools and districts identified for improvement.

    b. Talk about a time when you and OSI and the network did not work effectively together.

(2) Describe how you work with other departments/units within OSI to support schools and districts identified in need of improvement.

a. Provide an example of a time when you worked effectively with another OSI unit to support schools and districts identified for improvement.

b. Talk about a time when you and an OSI unit did not work effectively together.

(3) Describe how you work across offices in SED to support schools and districts identified in need of improvement.

a. Provide an example of a time when you worked effectively with another SED office to support schools and districts identified for improvement.

b. Talk about a time when you and another SED office did not work effectively together.

(4) Overall, what are successful approaches for working with networks, across OSI departments, and across SED offices to support schools and district identified for improvement?

Part IV. (20 minutes)

(E) Evaluation of Impact

(1) If your department/unit were to be as effective as it could possibly be, what would your department/unit be doing and how would it be interacting with others, that is, network organizations, within OSI, across SED?

(2) To what extent do your current roles and responsibilities support working effectively?

Part V. (10 minutes)

(F) Change Process

(1) Have you integrated any of the concepts you have learned at the statewide training (capacity building, learning community, organizational coherence) into your work? If so, which ones?

(2) Briefly describe any ways in which the state training has changed the way you work.

Protocol for District Superintendents

A. *Role & Responsibilities*

(1) You have dual responsibilities—you are superintendent of a BOCES and also the field representative of the commissioner of education. Please describe your responsibilities in each role as they relate to working with schools and districts identified as in need of improvement.

(2) In what ways do these responsibilities complement or conflict with each other?

B. *Strategies and Approaches to School Improvement*

The OSI is seeking to create a coherent approach to improvement among schools and districts that have been identified as in need of improvement.

(1) What do you see as the district superintendent's role in improving student achievement in schools or districts that have been identified as in need of improvement?

(2) To what extent do you perceive in your (RSSC) region a coherent approach to supporting improvement in schools and districts identified involving the state-funded networks and the BOCES?

   a. Specifically, how does this play out in your BOCES?

   b. Specifically, how does this play out in the state-funded networks?

C. *Leadership Interactions*

(1) In what ways do you work with the state-funded networks?

   a. Provide examples in which you provide leadership.

   b. Provide examples when your leadership worked and when it did not work.

(2) What do you propose as the ideal relationship between these networks and the BOCES system?

(3) An essential partner in the system of support for identified schools is the New York State Education Department represented by the OSI and Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities.

   a.   In what ways do you see NYSED working particularly effectively with the networks to improve school and district performance on state measures?

   b.   It what ways do you see a need for improvement?

   c.   What would you recommend as the optimum NYSED role in your region?

D. *Impact*

(1) Given the resources that are allocated to these networks, what do you realistically think their impact could be?

(2) To what extent do you think the state-funded networks in your region have been actually successful in supporting schools or districts identified as in need of improvement? Provide some examples.

RHODE ISLAND'S PROGRESSIVE SUPPORT AND INTERVENTION:

FORGING NEW RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STATE AND DISTRICT LEADERS

Jennifer Borman and Mary-Beth Fafard

I. STRATEGIES OVERVIEW

Summary of Key Strategies

As in many states, Rhode Island's response to NCLB required a serious review of the state's existing accountability system and an examination of how the state agency is organized to deliver effective supports to change schools and districts identified for improvement. Starting in 2002, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) began a major design activity that refined elements of its existing Progressive Support and Intervention (PS&I) accountability system and shifted the agency's focus to districts with large numbers of low-performing schools. This shift in focus engaged all RIDE senior managers and program staff in identifying evidence-based programs and practices that support improvements in low-performing districts and the schools within them.

RIDE's refined PS&I system focuses on districts rather than individual schools. RIDE has created a set of explicit expectations for district performance in areas such as using data, staffing with high quality personnel, and engaging parents and community. This central feature of the refined PS&I system led RIDE to assign its own staff to specific PS&I teams responsible for various components of the system. Examples of PS&I team responsibilities include (1) identifying programs, expertise, and research related to written district expectations, (2) organizing meaningful data on districts, schools, and students to guide support and intervention, and (3) providing targeted assistance and resources to districts and schools. RIDE's leadership team is revamping itself to work more systematically. The team tries to pool information from staff as they make decisions about supports and interventions for districts and gauge the capacity needs across the state. Taken as a whole, the revamped PS&I system illustrates a greater emphasis on clear expectations, use of evidence-based programs, and an agency-wide commitment to improving low performance. RIDE's new strategies require it to focus more intensely on low-performing districts rather than the state as a whole and to do so in a more systematic and rationalized way.

Stage of Development. During the period of this research study, RIDE was in the midst of major development work by its own staff to support the refined PS&I system. Internal PS&I teams worked to identify possible recommendations of programs, practices, and strategies that could be tailored to meet the needs identified in district data. RIDE planned "corrective action teams" to provide technical assistance, monitoring, and targeted resources to low-performing districts and schools. This major development work was carried out in preparation for shaping interactions with districts in the 2004-2005 school year. Implementation strategies, responses and adaptations, and feedback mechanisms will evolve as development efforts are put into action with districts. The press for implementation accelerated RIDE's design decisions, but RIDE has yet to apply fully the new processes of its refined PS&I system with all identified low-performing districts and schools.

Role of the LAB. LAB staff worked closely with RIDE to develop the district expectations in 2002-2003. LAB and RIDE staff tackled the challenge of reconceptualizing district-focused work by engaging a design team. The design team created specific expectations and indicators that would be used by RIDE and district staff in addressing low performance. As the RIDE leadership team refined the PS&I system, the LAB has been tracking RIDE's design by observing leadership meetings and analyzing policy documents. The LAB continues to provide consultation to RIDE, using the information collected through its descriptive research to pose questions and provide reflective feedback.

Methodology

The Rhode Island case study addressed the larger study's major research question:

> *What policies, structures, and supports are SEAs creating and implementing to improve student achievement in low-performing districts and schools?*

In particular, the Rhode Island case study focused on describing the state's design of structures to support its new district expectations. Because the LAB had assisted with the design of district expectations in 2002-2003, it launched the descriptive research phase of its work by building on established relationships and contextual information, while shifting to a formal research methodology. Because the district expectations were relatively new, our study focused on the *design of new strategies, policies, and structures*—elements of the conceptual model rather than the implementation or impact phases.

For the descriptive study, we used two primary data sources: structured observations of RIDE meetings and systematic reviews of documents. For the observations, we developed and used a 3-part observation protocol, which can be found at the end of this case study. It tracked meeting attendance and foci and contained a narrative of the meeting's purpose, discussion items, and decisions. The observation protocol also included explicit attention to key constructs drawn from the larger research study, such as the degrees of monitoring, prescription, or proposed support. Between September 2003 and October 2004, we observed 19 RIDE meetings, encompassing larger internal working meetings, smaller group planning sessions, and PS&I Advisory Council meetings.

We supplemented our observations with document reviews, collecting and analyzing formal policy documents and guidance RIDE issued to schools and districts. We analyzed minutes of the State Board of Regents over a 2-year period and also collected and analyzed internal working documents that outlined possible strategies and proposed structures and processes.

During and after data collection, our analysis consisted of iterative phases of coding using the constructs laid out in the observation protocol and the larger research study. We looked for relative attention to these constructs and generated provisional interpretations. We also compared RIDE internal working documents and meeting narratives to formal policy documents to track key decision points and the influences that shaped them. As we generated descriptions and interpretations of RIDE's actions with respect to its district expectations, we looked for confirmatory evidence and alternative explanations. Coding and analysis continued through November 2004, at which point we compiled the analyses into a draft case narrative that described the design of RIDE's strategies and its various emphases.

Two RIDE leaders reviewed the case study for accuracy and clarity. Other LAB team members also reviewed it for clarity and quality.

Key Features of Strategies

Shifting to a focus on districts and refining the PS&I system progressed over a 2-year period. In 2002-2003, RIDE staff recognized that the number of identified low-performing schools exceeded the state's capacity to intervene in each school in an intensive and sustained way. Although RIDE had invested much effort into school-based improvement activities, RIDE staff acknowledged a need for more explicit focus on districts' capacity to improve low-performing schools.

To this end, the assistant commissioner of education engaged in a series of discussions with RIDE staff. RIDE staff indicated that both RIDE and districts had to rethink the way they work together to improve student learning. They stated that the improvement of student learning in low-performing schools had to be a mutual responsibility shared by RIDE and districts (The Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2004). RIDE engaged the LAB to help tackle the challenge of reconceptualizing district-focused work.

From October 2002 through June 2003, RIDE, working with the LAB, engaged a design team of Rhode Island educators and constituents to develop a district framework that articulates expectations, supports, and indicators to improve low-performing schools. The design team reviewed the research on district and school improvement, examined both federal and state legal requirements, and shared knowledge and expertise of critical areas needed to improve student learning. This resulted in the identification of seven areas:

1. Leading the focus on instruction and achievement

2. Guiding the selection and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment

3. Recruiting, supporting, and retaining high quality personnel

4. Engaging parents and community

5. Providing safe and supportive environments for students

6. Ensuring equity and adequacy of fiscal and human resources

7. Using data for planning and accountability

For each area, there is an explicit set of expectations and a corresponding set of performance indicators (The Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2004). The performance indicators were arranged along a continuum of visible behaviors that provided evidence that a district was moving from policy enactment to changes in student performance. For example, "Using Information for Planning and Accountability" outlines three expectations:
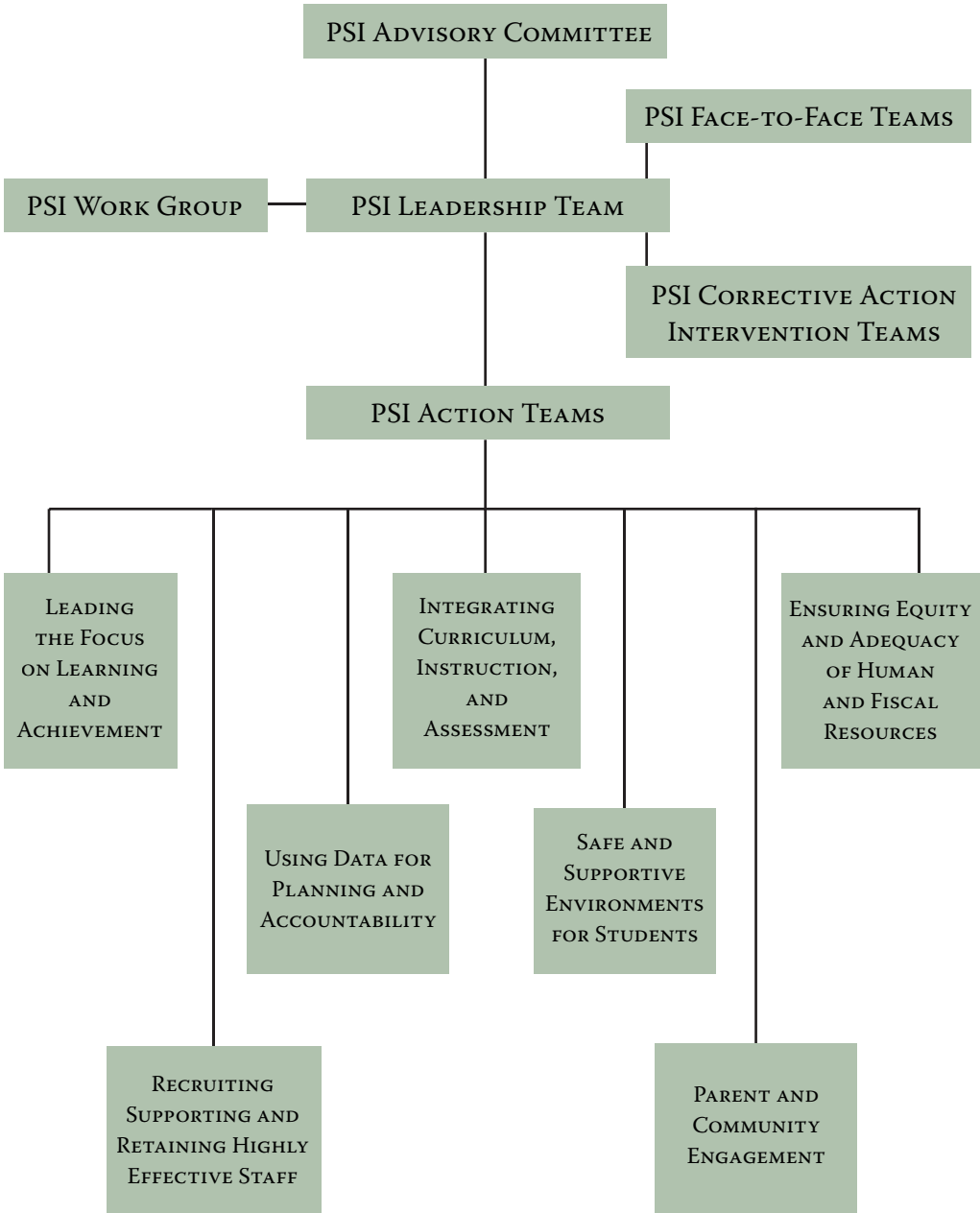
1. The superintendent and school committee evaluate school progress and student performance to ensure that the district's vision, strategic mission, and supporting goals and objectives have been implemented effectively.

2. The central office collects, analyzes and uses data to plan instruction to set instructional priorities, allocate resources, and be accountable for student performance.

3. The superintendent provides professional development and ongoing support for interpreting and using data to school staff, members of school improvement teams, and other individuals or groups responsible for school planning.

For each content area, the design team developed seven performance indicators that illustrate a range of implementation stages. For example, the lowest indicator reads: "The district has information infrastructure and technology supports that facilitate accurate collection, entry, and storage, and flexible retrieval of a wide range of information." An indicator that describes a mid-level state of performance reads: "Central office staff, principals, and teachers reference specific data in explaining instructional decisions." A description of higher levels of performance in this area states: "The data system is used to answer a wide range of district and school inquiries, increasingly including questions about the effectiveness of interventions for different types of students."

The development of district expectations and indicators and the revision of the PS&I guidance document led to an in-depth examination within RIDE of how the SEA would make the PS&I system operational. The revised guidance document placed capacity building as PS&I's ultimate goal and described the vision for the way RIDE would work with districts to meet this goal "…to work collaboratively with districts in the process of capacity building in ways that capitalize on the respective skills of each institution."

To meet this goal, RIDE senior managers raised issues about how the SEA was structured for conducting PS&I work, how agency-wide ownership of the PS&I system could be developed, and what levels of supports were needed within RIDE to create a more responsive and evidence-based system. RIDE senior managers also acknowledged that building a system of support for districts meant that the development of content knowledge in current effective practices for the seven district content areas needed to occur at the state level. By creating a system of interrelated teams with explicit roles and responsibilities, the senior managers signaled to the entire agency that PS&I was everyone's concern. Each of the teams undertook specific PS&I functions: compiling data for analysis of district progress; organizing state resources and proven programs to address district expectations; increasing information exchange about districts among members of RIDE leadership staff; and creating "intervention teams" that would have a role in carrying out intervention decisions. Again, each of these teams addressed a central element in RIDE's design and eventual implementation of its accountability system. Exhibit 6 on the following page describes the teams that were established to implement the refined PS&I system.

EXHIBIT 6: ORGANIZING RIDE TO SUPPORT SYSTEMIC REFORM

PSI ADVISORY COMMITTEE

PSI FACE-TO-FACE TEAMS

PSI WORK GROUP

PSI LEADERSHIP TEAM

PSI CORRECTIVE ACTION INTERVENTION TEAMS

PSI ACTION TEAMS

LEADING THE FOCUS ON LEARNING AND ACHIEVEMENT

INTEGRATING CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ASSESSMENT

ENSURING EQUITY AND ADEQUACY OF HUMAN AND FISCAL RESOURCES

USING DATA FOR PLANNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR STUDENTS

RECRUITING SUPPORTING AND RETAINING HIGHLY EFFECTIVE STAFF

PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Rationale for Strategies

Shifting the focus to districts and building agency-wide ownership for the PS&I system was based on RIDE's understanding of how much capacity building is needed to intervene directly with a growing number of schools in a systemic way. The focus on districts was viewed as more efficient and pragmatic than directly intervening in a growing number of schools. Most importantly, however, the district focus was linked to a systemic reform rationale: Districts were increasingly viewed as having a central influence on whether reform took hold at the school level. In reviewing districts' strategic plans, school improvement plans, and consolidated resource plans, RIDE noted the wide variability in district approaches to working with low-performing schools and the significant variation in RIDE's own methods of supporting districts. As a result of face-to-face meetings in spring 2002 with districts that had a significant number of low-performing schools, SEA staff became aware that "no one has good handle on evaluating implementation of action plans" or shared a systematic way of capturing the effectiveness of supports and interventions that had been conducted (D. Abbott, personal communication, April 9, 2002). Building on its firm belief in standards-based instruction, RIDE set out to extend its standards development work to districts.

In the past, the low-performing districts and meetings with them were divided among the commissioner, deputy commissioners, and senior staff. Each brought his or her individual style and priorities to these meetings. The official agreements with the districts bore the imprimatur of the agency, yet the ability to track supports and strategies used based upon assessed needs over time was not as systematic as hoped. Although staff recognized the value of personal relationships and knowledge of district decision makers, they also expressed the need for a more consistent set of decisions and rationales behind them for supporting and intervening with districts. Therefore, the leadership team started revamping what it expected of itself in a more systematic approach to PS&I.

II. History of Strategies

Background

Rhode Island is a small state with a population of approximately one million people. Of these, 159,000 are school children who attend 321 public schools in 38 districts (http://www.infoworks.ride.uri.edu/2004/default.asp). Rhode Island's districts span urban, suburban, and rural settings. The number of low-performing schools and districts fluctuates from year to year. In the 2002-2003 school year, the state classified 99 schools as "in need of improvement, making insufficient progress." In the 2003-2004 categorization, the number dropped to 56 schools.

The 56 schools classified as "in need of improvement, making insufficient progress" are located in 14 districts. Eleven of those districts contain one or two schools in that lowest category. The three districts with several categorized schools are located in the state's high poverty cities. Providence, the capital city and the state's largest district, enrolls 27,000 students. Of its 44 schools, 29 are "in need of improvement, making insufficient progress,"

while another 9 are "in need of improvement," but "making progress." RIDE's PS&I system will have the greatest bearing on these districts, even while the state as a whole reveals varying magnitudes of need.

Key Factors and Related Policies

Rhode Island's most recent refinement of PS&I builds on its past system. Rhode Island's long-time commissioner of education, Peter McWalters, often refers to the "ALL KIDS" agenda as the core of the state's reform plan. In the 1990's, the Board of Regents formally adopted the emphatic promise that all kids can achieve at high levels. This pledge took legislative shape as the Rhode Island Student Investment Initiative (Article 31). Article 31, passed in 1997, encompasses many different priorities, from technology funding streams to mandatory school breakfasts. In terms of the state accountability, however, its most prominent features included formalized standards setting; statewide testing at grades 4, 8, and 10; annual public reporting of student performance; and categorization of schools based on their performance.

In addition to mandating measurement and identification processes, 1997's Article 31 spelled out two related strategies for school improvement: School Accountability for Teaching and Learning (SALT) and Progressive Support and Intervention (PS&I). SALT is a multi-faceted initiative that requires schools to engage in self-study using data collected through an annual statewide survey of parents, educators, and students, as well as student performance data. Among its more notable features, adapted from a British practice, is an "inspection" visit whereby a trained team of educators assesses school strengths and weaknesses related to student learning, and then issues a public report. SALT specifies a continuous improvement cycle where schools engage in an ongoing process of problem identification, planning, implementation, evaluation, public reporting, and feedback.

In addition to school improvement processes, RIDE's previous accountability system included annual approval processes of consolidated resource plans for district funding allocations and annual face-to-face meetings between RIDE leadership staff and a district's educators and officials. In these face-to-face meetings, districts were brought to the table to speak about progress with their schools in need of improvement. RIDE's role consisted of requiring 1-year school improvement plans, asking districts and schools for reasoned justification about their improvement plans, and negotiating collaboratively with districts about their consolidated resource plans. The current version of PS&I retains several features of past practices, such as face-to-face meetings, review of plans, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Leadership

The key leader for refining the PS&I system is Deputy Commissioner David Abbott, who has responsibility for articulating how the agency would address the requirements in NCLB. Abbott initiated the design team for district expectations, engaged the LAB, and works with the RIDE staff on identifying the programs and practices that RIDE had used as it interacted with districts. Relatively new to the department, he approached the refinement of the existing PS&I system as a series of design and planning activities. While

Abbott led the design phases of the PS&I refinements, Commissioner Walters, Deputy Commissioner Flaherty, and General Counsel Jennifer Wood have been key to engaging the entire agency in owning the PS&I system. They advocated moving forward so that the entire leadership team has responsibility for each of the district expectations. RIDE's key leadership has moved the agency toward a much greater emphasis on PS&I.

Shared Beliefs and Assumptions

The refinement of the PS&I system and the focus on districts are based on the state agency's commitment to a process of continuous improvement that is owned and directed by educators at the local level. State leaders believe that they need to model the inquiry-based and evidence-based approach desired to promote continuous improvement in districts and schools. Although RIDE has developed a *statewide* accountability system, it acknowledges that the magnitude of performance gaps varies greatly across the state and its support and interventions need to vary accordingly. RIDE believes that that it should tailor interventions and interactions to the particular needs of the district rather than imposing one-size-fits-all remedies.

Although this belief has shaped the refinement of the PS&I system, RIDE acknowledged that its decisions were based on individuals' professional judgments rather than systematized and consistent analyses. While PS&I still values tailored solutions and human interactions, it is shifting toward a greater emphasis on building a consistent system of support and intervention. In its past work with identified districts, RIDE offered supports such as professional development opportunities, technical assistance from RIDE fellows, some additional funding, and general oversight. RIDE has retained several of these capacity-building efforts, but the recent revision of PS&I has several new features that are intended to make oversight more systematic, intervention definite, and evaluating effort possible.

III. State Expectations for Strategies

Connection to Student Performance

Agency-wide ownership of the refined PS&I system continues RIDE's belief that tailored supports and interventions will lead to continued improvements in student performance. The new PS&I Blueprint specifies the timeline triggers for intervention, describes a range of possible intervention actions, and indicates that intervention will be linked to the magnitude of student performance gaps. However, RIDE has not stated exactly how and on what basis it will intervene. The blueprint states, "Rhode Island's accountability structure is designed to engage local schools and districts in ongoing partnerships, but RIDE will act assertively on behalf of children where collaboration alone has not produced results." As another RIDE staff member said in regard to district intervention, "There's a big, bright line where you may say, 'Now we're going to substitute our judgment for yours.' There's a pretty bright line when we say, 'No, you're not going to do that'" (Fieldnotes, 6/16/04). As RIDE refines and implements the system, the connection of interventions and supports to changes in student achievement in districts can be tested.

Timeline for Results

The most recent version of PS&I sets forth clear timelines for improved performance and attaches consequences to not meeting the timelines. The timelines and sanctions mirror NCLB provisions. As in NCLB, the timelines are more accelerated for Title I schools and the consequences are more specific. The implementation of the refined PS&I system started in the 2004-2005 school year. However, certain components of the system are yet to be solidified with respect to corrective action teams, identified programs and evidence-based practices, and organized data for each district. As roles and responsibilities have been articulated in policy guidance and operational documents, RIDE has raised new questions on how the work of all the PS&I teams will get accomplished. The development steps that have occurred thus far are all foundational to actually engaging in progressive intervention. The timelines for improved student performance require RIDE, too, to meet pressing timelines in its implementation. The next benchmark for success will be implementing the new system with districts and evaluating its results.

Judging Success

The seven expectations areas encapsulate RIDE's view of the central ingredients of district and school reform. Their explicitness provides new clarity; however, they also raise several questions. Which expectations will have the most direct bearing on raising student performance? Should districts try to make simultaneous progress on all seven or prioritize? What are the dynamic relationships between the seven areas? What should RIDE's role be in assessing district progress in any of the areas and asserting the need to focus on other areas? As with many areas of PS&I, RIDE's demonstrable progress on criteria for judging success nonetheless surfaces new complexities as design shifts toward implementation.

Policy Enactments

District expectations, indicators, and the process for implementing supports and interventions were incorporated as an essential component in the Board of Regents' newest guidance document on accountability for improving student performance. The state's blueprint document emphasizes three main thrusts for PS&I, many of which show continuity with the past: setting high standards and expectations; measuring school and student progress; and ensuring accountability for results. Within these thrusts, however, are new elements such as a statewide information system, a stronger emphasis on evidence-based program evaluation, a set of expectations for districts, and the provision of timelines and consequences for student performance. Formal policy is set, but implementation is just emerging.

Resources

RIDE has mobilized an enormous amount of agency resources to the refinement of the PS&I system. Every senior manager and significant numbers of program staff have been engaged in the design activities specified for each newly created PS&I team. The time and resources required for development work at this scale comes on top of pre-existing responsibilities that the agency must carry out. The state's own capacity has been shrinking due

to budget cuts over the past 15 years. RIDE staff worry that they lack the human resources to meet their new roles in the accountability system. The expansion of state policymaking has brought some new resources, but not at levels commensurate with stated needs. In addition to its own staff, RIDE is reaching out to outside groups within the state, such as the Rhode Island Parent Information Network, The Education Alliance and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (both at Brown University), among others, as key partners in providing resources to low-performing districts and to RIDE itself.

IV. PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation Actions

As the entire agency began to focus on owning the PS&I system, RIDE launched the initial stages of its implementation actions. These involved the organization of several RIDE teams during 2004-2005. The teams—such as the PS&I work group, leadership team, action teams, corrective intervention teams, and advisory committee—constituted preliminary implementation as RIDE rolls out the revised PS&I.

The Work Group. RIDE, like most state departments, collects considerable amounts of information from districts for a variety of reporting and compliance purposes. Although districts often decry the burdensome paperwork, RIDE, too, has begun to wonder how to make more meaningful use of its various data, ranging from special education reports to financial data to professional development programming information. RIDE launched a team called the "work group" that was charged with compiling and analyzing data on low-performing districts. This group inventoried disparate data sources, compiled the data in a comprehensive yet manageable form, and conducted additional analyses to show district patterns. As the work group progressed in its effort, they created and continually revised a "district profile" of one of its low-performing districts.

The profile was intended to allow RIDE to check districts' own diagnoses of problems and possible remedies. The profile was also meant to help RIDE see district patterns of problems or progress. In both cases, the profile was designed to provide a basis of evidence and analysis so that RIDE's possible interventions would be based on more than the singular judgments of particular RIDE staff. As the profile work progressed, RIDE PS&I leadership staff confronted a number of complicated questions: Was RIDE in a position to know anything about a district's or a school's instructional programs? How could RIDE assemble a profile that was comprehensive, but not so voluminous that key information was buried? RIDE's PS&I leadership wrestled with these questions and others as the profile underwent multiple revisions, shrinking from approximately 200 to 70 pages. RIDE confronted the same challenges faced by districts advised to "use data." Data use requires careful analysis, inference, and targeted exploration linked to focused questions.

At the time of this research study, the work group had completed one district profile and had begun to tackle other districts. The profile development has turned out to be time consuming and labor intensive. After the profiles are completed, the work group will be tasked with other development projects to help RIDE manage PS&I.

PS&I Leadership Team. At the center of the refined PS&I system is RIDE's leadership team. It is the body that interfaces with all other PS&I teams to ensure that districts will receive tailored support and intervention based on their needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. It is the decision-making body charged with determining the supports and intervention priorities for targeted districts.

Starting in 2004, RIDE's leadership team identified the following functions for itself: review the district data prepared by the work group; identify patterns of needs; direct the action teams to examine research, programs, and strategies for addressing particular district needs; make decisions about what types of intervention and supports may be provided to a district; and oversee the work of the corrective action intervention teams. The PS&I leadership team began its first analysis with one district that requires support and intervention and examined the work group's profile of data to determine needs. They are engaging in the cycle of needs assessment, priority setting, identifying actions, and eventually evaluating the results of their decisions with districts.

Action Teams. Concurrent with the work group, RIDE organized and charged seven action teams with addressing the district content area expectations. These action teams are comprised of a larger group of RIDE staff drawn from throughout the agency and experts from outside organizations and consultants. The action teams were to become fully familiar with their assigned content-area expectations and indicators. Next, the action team identified programs, research, organizations, and tools that exist to address the expectation, drawn from within and beyond Rhode Island. As helpful programs and tools are assembled, the action team would then clarify its criteria for judging the effectiveness of the program. Eventually, the action team would be able to help match solutions to identified district needs, making recommendations to the PS&I leadership team.

The action teams' work proved complex, but several teams made progress. Some teams grappled with the fact that RIDE lacks a depth of specific expertise matched to a particular expectation area. Several teams wondered how to capitalize on overlap between their work and the work of a related action team. Yet despite these challenges, many RIDE staff reported that their teams are energized. The action teams have concrete work to accomplish, but a byproduct of their effort appears to be increased commitment to PS&I from a wider swath of RIDE staff.

PS&I Corrective Action Intervention Teams. Along with the work group, action teams, and leadership team, RIDE has outlined PS&I corrective action intervention teams. With an increased allocation from the state targeted specifically for PS&I intervention, RIDE identified the need to create coordinated teams of distinguished educators who would provide meaningful assistance and oversight to districts. The intervention teams' membership, as well as its functions, were being developed and discussed during the period in which this research was undertaken. The preliminary responsibilities for this team were to work directly with schools and districts to facilitate corrective action, provide technical assistance to school-based leaders, oversee program evaluation efforts, engage in long-term district capacity building, and implement the negotiated agreements developed from the face-to-face meetings.

PS&I Advisory Committee. In addition to reconfiguring its own staff to support PS&I, RIDE convened a panel of district and school leaders and other education reform groups in an advisory committee. Meeting quarterly, the advisory committee is meant to increase understanding of and commitment to PS&I from a variety of stakeholders. The advisory group was also designed to offer ongoing feedback to RIDE on its PS&I process. As the commissioner stated during the panel's first meeting, "You can provide reflective feedback for RIDE, be a critical friend, offer more reality testing" (Fieldnotes, 5/24/04). RIDE expects the advisory group to be an essential feedback loop in shaping a long-range direction for PS&I initiatives as implementation proceeds.

Key Players. At the time of this research, RIDE was actively designing elements of its PS&I system while timelines pressed for swift implementation. Each RIDE team reflected a key accountability function: clear expectations for districts, research-based programs matched to expectations, use of information for diagnosis and decision making, collective decision making by RIDE leadership, and engagement from education stakeholders. Each team's work and attendant dilemmas reveal the complexity of expanded roles for the state department of education. The entire leadership and program staff of the state agency began implementing the refined PS&I system with districts in spring 2005.

V. Conclusion

Shifting the focus to districts and refining the PS&I system have been foundational steps for RIDE's design of supports and interventions for improving low-performing schools. Undertaking major development work has engaged the entire agency in reexamining its roles, responsibilities, processes, and actions used with districts. As RIDE moves toward more information sharing, decision making, and collaborative perspectives on district needs, it is experiencing a rapid expansion of roles and responsibilities. Staff members are in the midst of adding new roles to pre-existing ones, shifting some attention from statewide service to low-performing districts. As they do so, the department tries to maintain past commitments to continuous improvement, inquiry, and tailored solutions while adding NCLB elements such as defined sanctions and new interventions.

For RIDE, the next step in its design efforts is putting the results of PS&I team work into action. As RIDE interacts with districts, using expectations and indicators, organized data, and evidence-based supports and interventions, it hopes to gather evaluative information to understand how its system can be refined and improved. More importantly, the take-up by districts and their feedback will help shape the next phase of providing both progressive support and intervention.

Ride Observation Protocol

• •

Event/Meeting observed: _____

Date and location: _____

Meeting start and end time: _____

Please list all present, indicating role and title if known. List those expected but not

present and those arriving late or leaving early: _____

_____

_____

Education Alliance staff present, including note taker/documenter: ____

_____

PART ONE: Narrative

Please provide a 2-3 page descriptive record of the meeting or event. To the extent possible, describe what happened, what was discussed, and who participated—staying as close to verbatim interactions as possible. Please include the following information, as available.

- The stated purpose of the meeting

- A running record of the time, demarcating major topics or agenda items during the meeting

- The formal agenda in comparison to the actual items that were covered

- Materials that were distributed at the meeting

PART TWO: Key Dimensions

Scan the list of framework elements below. For each that is relevant to the meeting/event observed, please provide a synthesized description, cutting and pasting from Part I as appropriate. If a participant stated a rationale or justification, please describe that, too.

A. Please describe any **decisions** that were reached or **next steps** that were agreed upon.

B. Did the meeting connect to any **organizations/structures to lead relationships with districts or schools?** If yes, please describe.

C. Did the meeting connect to any **policies?** If yes, please describe.

D. Did the meeting connect to any **planning and prioritizing?** If yes, please describe.

E. Did the meeting connect to any **information systems?** If yes, please describe.

F. Did the meeting connect to any **fiscal resources?** If yes, please describe.

G. Did the meeting connect to any **professional development for district or school leaders?** If yes, please describe.

H. Did the meeting connect to any **person-to-person support?** If yes, please describe.

I. Did the meeting connect to any **monitoring?** If yes, please describe.

J. Did any part of the meeting reference or discuss **roles and responsibilities?** If yes, please describe.

K. Did any part of the meeting reference or discuss **the nature and extent of support?** If yes, please describe.

L. Did any part of the meeting reference or discuss **monitoring, assessment, and refinement of RIDE's actions to support identified districts or schools?** If yes, please describe.

M. Did any part of the meeting reference or discuss **communication actions, issues, or strategies?** If yes, please describe.

N. Did any part of the meeting reference or discuss **issues relating to prescriptiveness?** If yes, please describe.

O. Did any **conflicts or conflicting perspectives** arise during the meeting or event? Please describe the conflicts along with the person(s) or parties engaged. How did the conflict appear to arise? What did it center on? How was the issue resolved or tabled?

P. Did anyone explicitly reference **knowledge of content (of standards, curriculum, assessment, data use, pedagogy, current research, and/or laws and regulations)?** Please describe what was stated along with its context and consequence.

PART THREE: Immediate perspectives and provisional interpretations

Please describe your own perspective on what transpired, providing evidence to explain your thinking. Feel free to record your immediate impressions, questions, emotional reactions, and provisional interpretations. Try to explain how your perspectives arose from the concrete events that transpired.

VERMONT'S REORGANIZATION OF STATE FUNCTIONS: NEW LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES

M. Christine Dwyer

I. Strategies Overview

Summary of Key Strategies

Between January 2003 and June 2004, under the leadership of two different education commissioners, Ray McNulty and Richard Cate, Vermont undertook a series of steps to reexamine the role and focus of the state education agency. Several issues prompted the reexamination aimed at focusing the agency's resources in optimal ways to ensure student achievement outcomes in the high-stakes environment created by Vermont's Act 60 legislation and NCLB. Those issues included lack of capacity at state and district levels to meet new requirements for professional development, supplemental services, and specialized interventions, among others.

The following activities took place over an 18-month period (the tenure of two commissioners and an interim commissioner), involving education leaders in Vermont in examination of the responsibilities of various levels of the education system:

January-April 2003: Commissioner McNulty launched the process of examining roles and needs of school districts and the supports desired from state education agency and other partners.

May-June 2003: Local administrators and school board members provided feedback on the results, reacting with widespread concern about the capacity of the SEA.

July-September 2003: In response to field concerns, state board of education members decided to examine the board's role and set priorities for the work of a new commissioner (McNulty had resigned in February 2003).

November 2003-May 2004: Under new Commissioner Cate, reexamination shifted internally toward the development of a strategic plan to guide the work of the department of education.

June 2004: The strategic plan (a joint product of the department and the state board of education) was formally adopted.

July 2004-present: The SEA is developing implementation and staffing plans for the priorities in the strategic plan.

Taken as a whole, the activities add up to a strategy of reorganization of the state agency and other supports to meet higher stakes demands placed on local districts and schools. The unusual aspect in Vermont's case is that the strategy unfolded over a series of leadership changes.

Different from some other cases in this series, Vermont's self-examination and planning activities encompass the Vermont Department of Education's relationship to all school districts in Vermont, including those that have low-performing schools. Vermont has also made some specific changes related to low-performing schools as part of its overall reconsideration of SEA functions.

Stage of Development. Following an extended period of data gathering and planning, the Vermont Department of Education is now at the stage of developing implementation plans associated with the strategic plan adopted in June 2004. Reported in this description is information about the design process for the state agency reorganization and strategic plan.

Role of the LAB. The LAB helped Vermont leaders carry out planning activities and also documented results. To initiate reorganization of the SEA, Commissioner McNulty asked the LAB to help the state department look at its role with a view to rethinking the supports the state could offer districts, particularly districts with low-performing schools. LAB staff worked closely with senior staff from the state agency through all phases of the initiatives. During the initial phases, the LAB was instrumental in planning activities, facilitating district expectations work, and creating documents for field review. A LAB staff member led the field review and developed summary documents. Next, LAB staff facilitated the state board's work on expectations and criteria for selecting the new commissioner and also the department's strategic planning. A team from the LAB conducted interviews as part of documenting a range of perspectives on the various planning efforts.

Methodology

Twenty-six individual interviews with key stakeholders, including SEA staff, state board of education members, educational association representatives, superintendents, and principals informed the Vermont case study. Interviewees included those who had been directly and closely involved in the major change activities that were the object of study. We also interviewed individuals who were not directly involved in these activities but who would have experienced the changes secondhand.

The first step in developing an interview protocol was to design a timeline of activities encompassing the period of study; the timeline was based on a set of three interviews with individuals involved in the design of major activities. We used the timeline as a starting place to generate interview questions, and then also with interviewees to base the discussion on a set of events.

We developed the semi-structured interview protocol, which can be found at the end of this case study, to capture responses to the overall research questions (i.e., questions about the design of strategies, leadership interactions, and feedback mechanisms) and to answer specific questions related to the unique Vermont experience (i.e., factors influencing progress during the transition period).

Four different interviewers scheduled and conducted individual interviews over a 3-week period. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Three of the four interviewers and a team member who had been involved in all of the Vermont activities read all the transcripts and then met to identify broad themes emerging from the interviews to structure further analysis. Nine themes on these topics emerged: considerations of feasibility associated with policy; consequences of isolated role groups; managing tensions among cross-role groups; alignment of responsibilities and expectations of commitment; bases for trust in expectations; turning points for forward motion; continuity of planning processes; partnerships of DOE and DOE credibility; and responsibility of the state agency and state board.

Using these nine themes, three members of the team reorganized all the interview notes according to the themes. Then, one member of the team used the reorganized interview notes to summarize information relevant to the theme, attending to both consistent patterns and outlier perspectives. The summaries, which several Vermont stakeholders reviewed for accuracy and clarity, became the basis for the case report.

Key Features of Strategies

As indicated above, the reexamination of agency roles proceeded in phases. The first phase focused on district-level expectations. A key feature of the initial work was to create a forum where different education stakeholders could take a careful, rational look at expectations of districts from Vermont's Act 60 school reform legislation, NCLB, and other sources, for example, regulations and practice. Stakeholders could then rethink priorities for state expectations of districts and sort out what the SEA could and should be able to offer districts. The SEA and LAB personnel brought together representatives from the various subdivisions of the department of education, superintendents, principals, teachers, education partner organizations (superintendents, school boards, principals, teachers, colleges and universities), among others. Every region of the state was represented.

Beginning with some materials developed through a similar effort in Rhode Island, the LAB and SEA personnel "jump-started" the forum discussion by tailoring the Rhode Island work to Vermont, producing an initial draft with which the task force could work. (A broad-based group of Rhode Island education leaders had developed categories of school district functions under NCLB along with indicators of progress.) The Vermont representatives met for a series of open discussions about the requirements and priorities for districts and the state's role in education. For each discussion, participants engaged in structured dialogue about expectations at both the state and district levels. This structured dialogue within cross-role groups both facilitated substantive discussion and surfaced the frustrations of those in the education field.

A team of senior department of education staff and LAB staff mediated the conversations and over time, the team was able to help participants transform their frustration into a feeling that the system was capable of change. Following the conversations about roles and needs conducted with the broad-based group, smaller groups convened to refine the statements emerging from the larger meetings and produced documents about existing priority expectations of districts and desired supports, including suggestions for types of supports desired from the SEA.

The second phase involved gathering feedback from the field, the entire department of education, and state board members on the expectations and supports documents. LAB staff took documents to the field and to DOE staff, while state board members were interviewed individually. About 100 administrators participated in eight regional meetings to provide reactions. At least one state board member attended each session as an observer. Although generally the field agreed with the expectations document, they had much to say about the lack of supports. Many participants, including the state board members, had never heard the field express such profound disappointment with the state department of education, namely, the obligations imposed and the services not delivered.

The feedback from the field helped motivate a third phase of activity as state board members undertook a similar process, facilitated by LAB staff, to produce a document that clarified its role and that of the commissioner. The timing of this document proved critically important because it coincided with the board's selection of a new commissioner. The board's development of criteria for the selection of a new commissioner provided the foundation for the subsequent strategic planning effort led by the new commissioner. The board's roles and responsibilities document covered the following areas: advocacy, licensing, budget, planning and research-based decision making, communications, policy, evaluation and supervision, professional development, fiscal planning, school construction, legislation, and standards, assessment, accountability, and technical assistance.

At about the same time, the state agency funded five regional education support agencies as a partial response to the demands from districts for more support for professional development. The regional education support agencies received some funding from the state and also pooled funds from districts to provide professional development to local schools and districts. The idea of using regional collaboratives to provide professional development to districts was an idea that had already been "hovering" for some time when McNulty became commissioner.

Commissioner Cate, who assumed office in November 2003, worked with a small task force during winter and spring 2004 (board chair, commissioner, and eight DOE staff) to design a strategic plan (described below) that would be a unifying framework for goals and priorities of the state board and DOE. The process began with a review of the expectations work and the feedback from the field.

Rationale for Strategies

This extensive set of reorganization activities was stimulated by the concerns of a newly appointed commissioner who had served most recently as a superintendent in Vermont and was keenly aware of district pressures and state agency responses. Among high concerns of then-Commissioner of Education Ray McNulty at the beginning of 2003 was a widespread perception, both internally and externally, that the state department of education had lost its focus and was trying to do and be too many things. At the same time, under NCLB, federal funds that had previously been used by the state agency to provide some support services to schools were sent directly to local districts. Finally, local administrators and school board members were expressing frustration with the burdens of compliance with federal and state laws and the lack of state support for professional development

and other technical assistance. The reexamination was designed to set the stage for operating differently in a new federal and state environment.

II. History of Strategies

Background

Some history is necessary to describe how Vermont came to the point where forces converged to press for major changes in the state agency. By the time McNulty became commissioner in 2003, the Vermont Department of Education was facing a number of challenges stemming at least in part from the high-stakes environment created both by state law and NCLB. Certainly, there had been notable efforts by the SEA to address features of those laws. Vermont had taken steps toward improving the services its SEA could offer to low-performing schools prior to the requirements of NCLB. For example, the SEA had cultivated school improvement specialists within the department with strong skills in turning around low-performing schools.

Despite some successes in the state's work with low-performing schools when McNulty became commissioner, the overall context was not favorable to the types of SEA and district roles and supports envisioned over the long term by NCLB. Vermont, the most rural of the New England states, has a large number of small towns and small schools. Each town has its own school board, even if students go to schools in other districts. Small classrooms, small schools, and decentralized administration results in relatively high costs for education and limited local capacities for some types of services envisioned by NCLB, for example, professional development, supplemental education services, and specialized interventions. Although local control may be strong, in many areas local capacity is low. The solution to concentrating capacity in many states—consolidation of school districts – has been an object of vigorous debate in Vermont for a long time. Indeed, those who resist any attempts at centralization prize local control.

Further, with changes under NCLB that resulted in federal dollars going directly to school districts, the department of education faced limits on resources used in the past to provide professional development and technical assistance to local schools. A decade of "grant chasing" had left the department with an organizational structure and personnel not oriented to customer service (customers are schools and districts, in this case). Moreover, as described above, many in the field had lost the sense that the SEA could provide the support they needed. Although the department contained many extraordinary, talented, competent individuals, as an institution it lacked rational coherence and purpose from the perspective of the field. It had come to be perceived as ineffective and unstable.

Key Factors and Related Policies

Vermont's Act 60 provided the backdrop for the recent era of education reform in the state, including establishing procedures for identifying and supporting low-performing schools. Vermont first identified low-performing schools in 1999 and had planned to do so every other year, using an accountability index based on state test data. At that time, two state-level school improvement coordinators worked with the four schools identified in the first round to develop action plans and monitor progress. In the next round, 39 schools

were identified; when NCLB passed and schools were reassessed, about half made enough progress to no longer be considered in need of improvement. The number of state-level improvement specialists was increased and assistance was provided even to schools that had not made AYP for a single year.

In 2004-05, 28 schools were identified for improvement, that is, they had not made AYP in a content area for two consecutive years. A team of state-level school support coordinators (SSCs) works with the schools on action planning. Beyond providing technical assistance in the content areas associated with identified needs, the SSCs now take a more comprehensive approach than earlier practices. The SSCs help schools access outside providers and assure coordination of the department of education's services, for example, special education, support services, and so forth. The intent is to maximize effective use of resources from all sources. Title I improvement funds are provided directly to low-performing Title I schools after the department of education approves an action plan.

Under the previous system, expectations were not formalized at the state level until schools reached the stage of needing "corrective action." Now under NCLB and with the reorganized department, the commissioner formally documents the actions a district must take at the time a school is identified. The commissioner's recommendations are based on the school's action plan created in conjunction with an SSC.

Over time, state legislation and regulation had codified so many "good ideas" that local administrators and school board members were overwhelmed with expectations of compliance. The field perceived the SEA as giving prescriptive directions and requesting a great deal of information, but not offering resources necessary to comply with requests. In a time when requirements on districts were increasing as a result of NCLB, the DOE seemed increasingly unable to cope with field requests. The gap between the department and the field was increasing.

The scope of demands on the SEA resulted in confusion of its role. It was unclear whether its core mission was to be a service provider or a monitoring and compliance agency, an uncertainty that only increased local districts' sense of wariness toward the SEA. Was it there primarily to help with the tasks of improving education or simply assuring the compliance by local districts to do so?

Another historic factor was the instability of the Vermont commissioner's position. Including interims, McNulty was the sixth commissioner in five years. In a climate survey held early in his tenure, McNulty found that morale within the department was extremely low. No commissioner had stayed in the position long enough to build up widespread trust in the department's capacity to follow through on obligations. As a result, despite admiration for certain individuals in the system, many in the department had become dispirited and the field had become cynical about the prospects for leadership and support coming from the state agency. As a result, initial resistance to engaging in the dialogue about expectations for the state and districts was strong. Many people feared it would be a fruitless exercise.

In concert with the weakened position of the SEA, the state board of education—again, containing several outstanding contributors—was also in a weak position, largely taking direction from the SEA.

While potentially a solution to provide support for local school districts, the creation of five regional education support agencies during the period also complicated the field's understanding of reorganization of SEA purposes and functions. By all accounts, the process of establishing the regional education support agencies was somewhat thorny in that it lacked a clear and strong message about rationale. The department appeared to want the agencies, but the field did not necessarily require them—at least in the form they took.

Leadership

Two Vermont commissioners of education who served during this period developed and led the strategic actions described in this case. Ray McNulty began the process of rethinking the functions and organization of the state agency, and Richard Cate took on the challenge of reframing the work of the SEA through the strategic planning process. While McNulty's departure was a blow to Vermont educators, his ultimate replacement, Richard Cate, chose to move forward with his predecessor's initiative, rather than start a new project or point the SEA in a different direction. Commissioner Cate was able to focus on the state's internal capacity, clarifying the state's primary functions and building its capacity to perform those functions. Further, he expressed a commitment to define benchmarks and measure success. Between McNulty's departure and Cate's arrival, an acting commissioner provided support and continuity for the work McNulty had begun.

McNulty's departure also prompted the state board to consider its expectations for the commissioner's role and, in so doing, into examining their expectations for themselves as a board. At around the same time, the new chair of the state board seized the opportunity to continue the work of defining the role of the state board, with the result that the state board and SEA ultimately developed a common vision and plan.

During the initial phases, the deputy commissioner of the SEA was a key link to people inside the SEA, while a LAB staff member who is a senior, well-trusted educator, was a key link to the external community. Another LAB staff member took on the major facilitation tasks for the first phase of activity and also worked with feedback from the group to create draft documents for further consideration. That team gave the initial processes some stature and gave participants confidence in their skill and commitment. They were instrumental in focusing the conversations on shared purpose and away from smaller, political issues that divided people. Within the larger group of statewide task force participants, key figures were the leaders of the superintendents' association, the Vermont-National Education Association, and the school boards' association. All three were strong personalities, and their eventual commitment to the process was critical to its success.

Shared Beliefs and Assumptions

Key players held various sets of assumptions and beliefs that were central to the actions taken during different phases of activity. Major topics included the trade-offs between capacities achievable through centralization and local control; the appropriate functions of an SEA; and the complementary roles of a state board of education and state department of education.

The set of background beliefs and assumptions that emerged during the initial conversations with the commissioner and senior staff formed the basis for later discussions. Some beliefs, such as the desire for the end product of the reorganization effort to be better outcomes for students, could be anticipated in any context. But other convictions related to valuing smallness and decentralization, for example, are at least in part unique to Vermont. The tension in relation to the issue of smallness was marked. Among some Vermonters, the fear of centralization runs very deeply. Some participants were unwilling to relinquish the idea that they could deliver high-quality education with limited resources; others wanted more resources without compromising their belief that small is good.

The other set of strong beliefs concerned the state agency's core business. From the beginning, Commissioner McNulty felt that the agency's role might become only regulatory, with other partners providing support and technical assistance. Commissioner Cate, on the other hand, was clear from the outset that the state agency cannot give away any of its functions to partners. State board members were not of one mind. The debate is about the extent to which the agency, once it has set the vision and written regulations, should also directly help local schools and districts fulfill that vision. Beyond a regulatory role, how much technical assistance to local districts is appropriate or possible?

Through all activities, at least at a superficial level, Vermont educators trusted that their fellow Vermonters would do the right thing—and that Vermont educators were special in that way. They trusted that everyone participating in planning activities was committed to the common good as a goal. Although they might not agree with a senior staff member, if he's a Vermonter, they would give him benefit of the doubt.

III. State Expectations for Strategies

McNulty's (and later, Cate's) explicit anticipated outcome was that the state agency would be reorganized and that the functions of the state agency would be clear and clearly related to meeting district needs. Further, it was expected that the state would form partnerships with other groups (such as universities and other institutions) to fulfill roles the SEA could not undertake (such as professional development) in order to realize the optimal use of the state's resources for education.

Connections to Student Achievement

McNulty's original expectation was that reorganization would streamline the department of education, focus it on its core mission and align its activities to district needs, use resources optimally, and improve relationships between the department and the field. The expectations of the strategic plan were similar, with the added emphasis that the roles of the department and state board would be coherent and clear, expectations would be measurable, and the state agency would reorient itself toward customer service. The field would think of the department as an educational leader and resource, as well as regulator. The underlying belief was that by improving schools and helping teachers teach more effectively by providing organizational support, student learning and achievement would improve.

Timeline for Results

The reconceptualization effort began in January 2003. Commissioner McNulty felt a sense of urgency and hoped for a rapid turnaround; he wanted to have a plan for the state board of education by summer, reasoning that educators couldn't start the school year without the SEA's having done something to improve. Conceivably, this time frame could have been realized, but when McNulty resigned, the process threatened to stall. Valuable work occurred during the eight interim months—extensive field feedback and state board internal planning about is own role and the desired role of a new commissioner—but the pace slowed until Commissioner Cate accelerated the work through the strategic planning effort. The state board adopted the new strategic plan about a year later than McNulty's original timetable.

Judging Success

A key marker of success was achieved when the state board approved the joint depart-ment-board strategic plan in June 2004. The plan includes focus areas to guide state agency work, as well as measurable indicators of progress. These indicators directly address issues that originally prompted work on the reconceptualization of the SEA role and functions, including attention to customer satisfaction—in this case, local schools and districts being the customers of the SEA. Annual assessment of the progress on indicators will be the pro-cess for evaluating success of the strategic plan.

Policy Enactments

Eighteen months of data gathering and planning became policy in the strategic plan. The internal strategic planning task force worked intensely over a 5-month period to produce a plan designed to guide organizational structures, operational priorities, and resource allo-cation decisions at the state level. The resulting 5-year plan for the department of educa-tion is expressed in five goal areas:

- Support high-quality, innovative instruction to improve student achievement.

- Provide and promote high-quality educational leadership.

- Promote safe and positive learning environments.

- Build department capacity to best support external needs.

- Practice and promote effective use of all resources.

The plan, adopted in June 2004, includes objectives and strategies within each goal area along with indicators that reflect measurable success. Another policy outcome was the development of a common vision for the SEA and the state board of education. Before this process, the two had not shared a common plan. However, with both the SEA and the state board working out their own sets of expectations and priorities and creating operational policies, the two were able to craft a truly common vision.

The initial phases of work (expectations and supports and field feedback) were foundational to subsequent state policy development. That broad-based, intensive discussion formed the background for explicit state policy in the strategic plan that will guide the actions of

all SEA activities. The strategic plan sets priorities for the functions of the SEA and establishes criteria for actions and benchmarks for progress, therefore freeing it from more arbitrary and tangential pursuits. For the first year of implementation (2004-05), the state board has identified six focus strategies:

1. Support High Schools on the Move principles as the statewide vision for secondary education.

2. Develop a public school choice proposal for the Legislature.

3. Adopt measurable school quality standards.

4. Provide professional development for state board members.

5. Allocate resources and prioritize budget initiatives.

6. Analyze the cost and quality of education in Vermont in comparison to national data and make recommendations for cost containment.

Resources

During the 18-month process, most of the reorganization was driven by a considerably high level of "person power," with very little funding. All phases of the work were supported by in-kind time from many educators throughout the state, as well as the time of state agency staff and state board personnel. The LAB contributed external support time for planning, facilitation, synthesis, and documentation. In the creation of regional education support agencies, the state did provide new resources to leverage pooling of district resources.

IV. Conclusion

The strategic plan sets forth the priorities and processes for moving forward. At this point, energy has turned to developing and staffing specific implementation plans for the goal areas and the priority strategies.

The success of sustaining a reorganization process through major leadership transitions is an achievement that cannot be underestimated. An important, completely unanticipated barrier faced early on was McNulty's decision to step down from the commissioner's position after six months. As the initial force behind the change process described in this document, his premature decision to leave initially threatened to derail the entire planning process. Yet, the stakeholders selected to participate in the district expectations work committed themselves to continue when urged by department leadership and the interim state board chair to persevere. When state board members heard the discouragement of the field with the effectiveness of the state agency during the feedback stage, they committed to looking at their own role in focusing the work of the state agency. The new commissioner chose to build on the earlier work and continue the process of agency reorganization. At any of these turning points, the reorganization process could have stalled. Throughout the processes of reorganization, cross-role and cross-level interactions were central in surfacing important issues in a way that stimulated new thinking about responsibilities and obligations at various levels.

Vermont Interview Protocol

1. We're interested in all the actions and events that are represented in the timeline and want to hear from you about your involvement and perceptions of the work. [**Design of Strategies**]

   a. First, what are your overall impressions of the work?

   b. What do you see as the big ideas in this work?

   c. If you were going to use some adjectives (or metaphors) to describe this work, what comes to mind?

2. What parts were you involved in directly? [**Leadership Interactions/Qualities**]

   a. What was your role(s) [asked for each part in which involved]?

   b. How did you become involved?

   c. What kept you involved? Was that the same for others?

   d. What were you trying to accomplish through involvement?

   e. Were there times you and others were discouraged? Or faced challenges? How would you characterize those challenges? How were hurdles overcome?

3. What was responsible for forward motion of the work? How did things progress from one stage to the next? (Give specific example.) [**Leadership Interactions/ Qualities**]

   a. What or who were the key influences that shaped ideas?

   b. In what ways did you influence the ideas?

   c. How did relationships among individuals and groups help or hinder progress?

   d. Were there particularly important relationships that affected the process?

4. How would you characterize opportunities to give feedback at key stages? [**Feedback Processes**]

   a. Probes: adequacy of feedback opportunities, from whom feedback was solicited, how feedback was obtained

5. What do you see as the end result of this work? [**Design of Strategies; Outcomes**]

    a. Probes if not asked: How will it affect education in Vermont? What will be replaced or different as a result of the work?

    b. What are the most significant results likely to be?

    c. Does Vermont have any new capacities as a result of engaging in this work? If so, what capacities and who has them?

6. Has Vermont lost anything through this process?

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