

# Building a Better System of Support

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The role of state education agencies (SEAs) in leading change to improve student learning has been evolving over several decades. The 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2013) introduced the “statewide system of support” as a framework for guiding the state’s role in district and school oversight and assistance. This definition evolved into the more strategic and comprehensive System of Recognition, Accountability and Support (SRAS), which identifies and coordinates key policy levers states have for supporting low-performing districts and schools (see Table 1).

Managing the SRAS for performance will not be business as usual. States will need to be deliberate in:

- Strategically mobilizing all of their tools, including:
  - Building systemic and local capacity for change;
  - Creating opportunity for local agencies to pursue new strategies;
  - Offering incentives to improve; and
  - Intervening in the hardest cases.
- Differentiating the application of specific tools to deal with schools’ and districts’ varied performance challenges and trajectories.
- Including school districts as both partners and targets of reform.
- Continually assessing their own efforts and identifying ways to improve their system to more effectively support higher student achievement.

### From Compliance to Performance Management in the SRAS

SEAs have been shifting, over the last two decades, from compliance-focused bureaucracies to more agile and proactive agencies that catalyze improvement in districts and schools (Rhim and Redding, 2011). The new SEA:

- Develops college- and career-ready standards and assessments.
- Provides support for effective leadership and instruction, including performance-based staff evaluations.
- Tailors supports to individual district and school needs.
- Develops sophisticated measurement systems to assess student achievement and turnaround strategies for the lowest-achieving schools.

Increasingly, states bring coherence to disparate funding streams and programs, match resources with operational need, and validate regulatory compliance with an eye toward effectiveness. Intentional systems of recognition, accountability, and support replace random acts of technical assistance, scattered programs and projects, and loose affiliations with external partners. States more readily examine student learning data and carefully scrutinize operational effectiveness, including assessing how the daily professional work of adults

is impacting student outcomes. At the same time, successful SEAs evaluate themselves—and their systems of recognition, accountability, and support—using the same rigorous performance metrics and evaluation tools that they apply to districts and schools.

### Strategically Mobilizing and Aligning the SRAS to Support Schools and Districts

Even when SEAs repurpose themselves as catalysts for improvement, they still struggle with designing and managing an effective SRAS, one that is responsive and flexible enough to deal with constantly shifting political environments and expectations, and broad enough to incorporate the full scope of the agency’s levers for change.

An effective SRAS rests upon a coherent framework that includes five levers for change (see Table 1) described by Rhim, Hassel, and Redding (2008) as:

1. **Opportunities** for improvement by reducing regulatory burdens and encouraging innovation.
2. **Incentives** (positive and negative) for districts and schools to take the reins in their own improvement.
3. **Systemic capacity** development, including data and planning systems and policies that promote the supply of high-quality leaders and teachers.
4. **Local capacity** to identify gaps in operational effectiveness and professional practice in districts and schools, and provide supports to address them.
5. **Interventions** that direct the most aggressive turnaround tools toward the most persistently low-achieving schools and districts.

These levers work in concert to provide a rising tide that gently lifts most boats and more dramatically lifts others; the power of these levers is far greater than the sum of their individual parts. A strong SRAS exercises all five levers of change in a systematic and balanced manner, with careful attention to the status and growth of performance indicators.

A key challenge in many states—stemming from weak authority, capacity, or both—is the over-reliance on one lever to the detriment of the others. For example, applying incentives to schools and districts may not catalyze improvement if weak teacher and leadership preparation programs in universities stem the supply of high quality human capital necessary for school turnaround. Similarly, restrictions on the use of funds may limit the strategies districts use to turnaround low performing schools.

Table 1. SEA Levers for Change

Lever for Change	Examples
Opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Routine scrutiny of state regulations to make them less burdensome</li> <li>• Policies to encourage new starts (e.g., charter schools)</li> <li>• Policies to encourage innovative schools, programs, and practices</li> </ul>
Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public disclosure of school performance</li> <li>• Recognition and rewards for individual, district, and school achievements</li> </ul>
Systemic capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statewide data systems</li> <li>• Web-based planning and implementation tools</li> <li>• Pipelines for leaders and teachers</li> <li>• More effective credentialing requirements</li> <li>• Alternate routes to certification</li> </ul>
Local capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation to diagnosis deficits in capacity and practice</li> <li>• Training and coaching for district administrators and instructional staff</li> </ul>
Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recovery districts</li> <li>• State takeover</li> <li>• Staff replacement</li> <li>• Turnaround models</li> <li>• External partners</li> <li>• School closure</li> </ul>

Further complicating matters, responsibility for the SRAS often spans multiple divisions across the SEA and relies on different statutory authorities and regulatory powers. In some states, the SRAS may be pigeonholed within the Title I office, with little integration with other offices that impact school improvement. The SEA may view the SRAS as simply a vehicle for technical assistance to low-achieving schools and not consider the state policies and regulations that may be burdensome to districts and schools embarked upon focused improvement efforts.

These factors make strategic alignment difficult but not impossible. As a starting point, SEAs need to reconceptualize, position, and promote their SRAS as a real system that works to coherently support schools and districts, rather than as a set of isolated parts moving independently. And, like any system, an SRAS needs a manager—an individual or team that ensures its continued usefulness to the SEA’s strategic objectives related to student achievement.

## ***Differentiating the SRAS***

In differentiating its recognition, accountability, and support, the SRAS varies the opportunity, capacity-building supports, incentives, and interventions according to the needs of each district and school. Typically, high-capacity districts and schools respond well to incentives and greater opportunity, such as the autonomy to innovate. While these same levers may be applied in varying degrees

to stimulate improvement in low-performing districts and schools, they often need help developing capacity, including talent, professional practice, and operational effectiveness.

States are moving toward systems of support that vary the type, intensity, and duration of assistance for districts and schools along two metrics. First, they differentiate based on the current level of performance as measured by disaggregated student learning outcomes, especially scores on state assessments and graduation rates. Second, they consider the demonstrated capacity for change and operational strengths and weaknesses as determined by student learning data and patterns of operational practice, particularly in leadership, curriculum, and instruction.

States are making greater use of student learning outcomes to classify all the schools in a state along a continuum, from those that are consistent high-performers to those that are persistent low performers despite repeated interventions and thus candidates for closure. For schools and districts on a satisfactory trajectory of continuous improvement, the state may provide an improvement plan, based on the needs identified by district and school improvement teams. For schools and districts in need of rapid improvement, the state may recommend or require interventions, including those consistent with turnaround principles. Schools in need of rapid improvement may require more guidance in diagnosing current practice and planning reforms. This guidance can be provided by the state, district, or external partners.

Just as the SEA differentiates its supports and interventions based on an assessment of districts' and schools' capacity for change, performance, and operational and professional practice, it differentiates the allocation of its resources to achieve the greatest impact in the districts and schools with the greatest need for improvement. This targeted resource allocation is often met with political resistance from communities receiving less support than their lower-performing neighbors. An argument can also be made that focusing resources too sharply on the lowest-performing districts and schools while neglecting those with marginally better performance only results in more districts and schools falling into distress. Thus, there is an opportunity cost in how resources are allocated and in how supports and interventions are differentiated.

### **Interventions**

SEAs, with encouragement and funding from the U.S. Department of Education, are targeting persistently low-achieving schools for interventions when less intensive improvement efforts have been unsuccessful. The intervention strategies include:

- **Transformation**—Replacement of the principal, rigorous staff evaluation, and significant reforms.

- **Turnaround**—Transformation strategies plus significant staff replacement.
- **Restart**—Charter schools and external management.
- **Closure**—Assignment of students to higher-performing schools.

The possibility of a state-initiated intervention can act as an incentive for districts and schools to conscientiously engage in substantial improvement, but it also provides a fail safe for the state, as well as students and parents, for those schools that fail to improve despite concerted effort.

State interventions differ in their reliance on turnaround partners. In a district-managed turnaround, the district is the primary partner, working to replace staff and develop a turnaround strategy within the basic confines of local governance, including collective bargaining agreements and district-provided supports. In a state-managed turnaround, the state may bypass the district and take over management of the school directly, via a state-sponsored district or, more commonly, contracts with charter management organizations or other operators to manage the school.<sup>1</sup> In a third variation, the SEA and school district may assume shared responsibility for the design of the intervention.

Recovery school districts place persistently low-achieving schools in a state-managed district with intensive turnaround requirements, including changes in personnel and substantial scrutiny of operations. As states such as Louisiana, Illinois, Tennessee, Indiana, Massachusetts, and Michigan gain experience with their recovery districts and similar interventions, more will be known about the effects on the districts from which the schools are removed; the ability of the state to build the capacity of the districts so that more schools do not fall into disrepair; the effective use of external providers; and policies through which the state can remove the school from the recovery district.

One thing is certain—changes in personnel and governing status will only be effective if they impact the proximal influences on student learning (Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1997). Those influences include:

- Internal decision-making processes must be nimble and based on sound and rigorous data.
- Instructional planning and delivery must comport with effective practice;
- Student learning time must increase.
- Teacher collaborative planning must increase in time and rigor.

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<sup>1</sup> Another approach, most clearly articulated in Colorado, focuses the state's turnaround efforts at the district level and includes authority to reconstitute the district if performance challenges persist over five years. While it is yet to be seen how this novel use of state oversight authority plays out, it has the potential to be more impactful by focusing more explicitly on district leadership—or lack thereof—as a lever for school improvement.

- Supports for students' academic, social, and emotional learning must be strengthened.
- Family engagement must be improved.
- Intervention must result in dramatically reformed professional practice.

### The Role of Local School Districts

School districts are both the targets of the state's system of recognition, accountability, and support, and partners in implementation. Just as a state may incentivize constructive change by rewarding success and providing consequences for failure, so can a district. States provide greater opportunity for change by removing regulatory barriers, granting more local autonomy, and encouraging innovation; districts can do the same for their schools. States enhance the supply of leaders and teachers, and so can districts, especially by moving high-quality, motivated personnel into the schools that need them most. States provide rich and accessible data systems and planning processes, and so can districts. Just as states differentiate supports to efficiently address district operational deficits, districts can approach school improvement in the same manner.

Effective state systems include the district as a central player in the improvement of its schools and give due attention to building the district's capacity to do its part. This requires district capacity at three levels:

1. Operational effectiveness of the central office and board in taking care of district functions.
2. Infrastructure for school leadership, teaching, and learning.
3. Support for the improvement of individual schools (Lane, 2009).

The state builds school district capacity for improvement by providing supports at all three of the district levels. Especially, the state ensures that the district applies its own differentiated supports for schools, including turnaround strategies and, in extreme cases, procedures for closure. When the state intervenes or provides support directly to a school, it includes the district as an integral participant, thus modeling an appropriate district role and building district capacity for school improvement.

The advantage of SRAS focusing on districts rather than schools is that state resources are more sufficient for the scope of turnaround work. Likewise, school improvement is more likely to be sustained if key elements of improvement are embedded in district policy and the district provides ongoing monitoring and support. One danger of a district-only focus is that resources, supports, and interventions may not be adequately targeted to the schools in greatest need of improvement or may not reach the school level with the necessary focus and power to effect change. Another pitfall is that some districts do not have the capacity to do the work. A balanced approach, tailored to the state's context and engaging the district with its schools, seems to be the most appropriate.

### Evaluating and Improving the SRAS

The Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP Center) has developed a rubrics-based process for evaluating and improving the SEA's Differentiated System of Recognition Accountability and Support. This document, called the SRAS Performance Management Rubric (SRAS Rubric)—along with technical assistance from the BSCP Center and additional resources at [www.bsccpcenter.org](http://www.bsccpcenter.org)—enable an SEA to assess its system of support and to develop, implement, and monitor plans for improvement. The SRAS Rubric is based on the authors' previous work with statewide systems of support, including the Academy of Pacesetter States, and reflects lessons learned in this work, as well as changes in federal guidance and state programs.<sup>2</sup>

The BSCP Center works with Regional Comprehensive Centers as partners to provide a technical assistance process for an SEA as it introduces a performance management mindset and methods to its SRAS. The challenge for SEAs has been to achieve a high level of sustainable implementation often in a climate of declining state resources and political change. The challenge for the BSCP Center and the Regional Comprehensive Centers is to help SEAs gain traction and achieve sustainable implementation that produces results.

The SRAS Rubric is not a compliance monitoring process, a rating system, or a means of comparing one state system with another. Rather, the state's profile produced from using the rubric informs an SEA's immediate planning process by determining which indicators have priority and are manageable.

Each SEA brings its own structure, tradition, and history to the task of improving education. The SRAS Performance Management Rubric does not present a model for a system to support schools, but provides a framework within which many different strategies may fulfill the same purpose.

The BSCP Center has adapted Academic Development Institute's Indistar<sup>®</sup> web-based planning and implementation tool for use by SEA teams with the SRAS Performance Management Rubric. This new system, called IndiSEA<sup>™</sup>, facilitates states' movement beyond initial evaluation toward construction of a more effective SRAS.

### Conclusion

A strong state system of recognition, accountability, and support will prune away ineffective programs, policies, and regulations, and create effective initiatives to spur district and school improvement. States adopting a systems approach to school improvement align their organizations, resources, and staff to fulfill their new performance-driven missions. These structural alterations are a rudimentary form of performance management. The next step is fine-tuning the SRAS processes and system components in response to operational and outcome data.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Kerins, Perlman, & Redding (2009); Redding & Walberg, (2008).

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