STATES CHART NEW DIRECTIONS FOR EDUCATION WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM THEIR FRIENDS

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The Question

How will states now repurpose their education agencies in this era of devolved control?

Issue

If the Wall Street Journal (”No Child”, 2015) proves prescient in describing the 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as "the largest devolution of federal control to the states in a quarter century," (para. 2) then the states have a lot of thinking to do. For decades, the regulations attached to federal education funds have shaped the forms and functions of state education agencies (SEAs), especially as state funding for these agencies has stagnated or diminished. In fact, the relationship between the SEA and the state's districts and schools has been colored by the strong tint of federal influence. How will states now repurpose their education agencies in this era of devolved control? How will SEAs step back from the grinding demands of daily government activity, stave off the always-blazing fires of education politics, and with ample time and collective intelligence, reshape their organizations and reset their goals and strategies? How will they reconceive their relationships with their districts, schools, and communities? How will these agencies manage their own personnel in different ways as the nature of their work changes?

Purpose

Recognizing that ESSA would open opportunities for new thinking about the role of the state in education, the Building State Capacity and Productivity (BSCP) Center—one of seven national content centers supported under the U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive Centers program—developed a strategic performance management (SPM) technical assistance process to assist SEA leadership in redefining their agency's direction, creating an organizational structure to carry out that direction, and putting in place a performance management system to encourage productivity and innovation. The process brings *strategic planning* together with *performance*

management to build a cohesive system to engage people in performance-focused work, report on progress, adjust course based on results, and seek better ways to carry out the agency's mission.

Background

With a facilitation manual hot off the press, two BSCP Center consultants began working with the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) in September of 2015, just ahead of ESSA's passage. Two consultants from the South Central Comprehensive Center (SCCC) joined the BSCP Center personnel, meeting for two days in Little Rock each month. The first day, the four consultants and ADE Chief of Staff (designated as Chief Performance Officer for this project) nailed down the agenda for the following day's mental calisthenics with the ADE Commissioner and 15-member leadership team. In January 2016, the BSCP Center's consultants launched the same SPM process with the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE), assisted by the Florida & Islands Comprehensive Center (FLICC), meeting with the VIDE team for three days each month. In both Arkansas and the Virgin Islands, the days with the BSCP and regional center consultants were matched by meetings and work between these sessions. Part of that work was the methodical vetting of the emerging strategic direction with internal and external constituencies, getting feedback, and making adjustments.

The Strategic Performance Management process (Redding & Layland, 2015) consists of three stages of work:

- Module A–Establishing the SEA purpose and direction (Vision, Mission, Values, Goals, Strategies, Milestones, and Performance Measures),
- Module B–Aligning the organization functions, structure, and personnel to its purpose and direction, and
- Module C–Planning, executing, and monitoring Actions aimed at Milestones.

A BSCP Center database captured the evolving work in Modules A and B and allowed for convenient editing. The BSCP Center's online SPM system facilitates the work in Module C.

The Chief State School Officer (CSSO) designates a Directions Task Force for Module A and an Operations Task Force for Module B. In Module C, virtually every person in the agency becomes involved in planning, executing, and monitoring progress with Actions aimed at the annual Milestones. Also, the CSSO appoints a Chief Performance Officer, a primary contact person between the agency and the consultants. At key points throughout the process, the Task Force applies a *productivity analysis* to ensure that the strategies represent the most efficient and efficacious use of available resources. For each goal and strategy, the group composes an Explanation, which proved useful in sharing the thinking behind the goal and strategy to stakeholders.

Arkansas and the Virgin Islands took different approaches to Module A. As the Task Forces met monthly with consultants to hash out a clear direction for the agencies and, in fact, for their state

education systems, the Arkansas Commissioner first held meetings with groups of SEA staff to discuss the evolving thinking and encourage feedback, then met with external groups such as district administrators, state legislators, community groups, and teachers to do the same. The Virgin Islands Commissioner, on the other hand, included district and school personnel on the Task Force. With only two districts in the Virgin Islands, the districts operate much closer with the Department of Education, more like a single system, than is typical in states. So each approach served the context of the agency.

Likewise, the experience of Arkansas and the Virgin Islands in Module B varied. In examining the effects of their freshly defined directions on their organizational structures, functions, and personnel, Arkansas confronted pressure points but decided to make changes over time as the performance management system took root and the work progressed. The Virgin Islands made key changes to its organizational structure and that of its districts before moving to the Action planning stage of Module C.

For both Arkansas and the Virgin Islands, the months of thinking and planning reached a pivot point in June and July 2016 as the two SEAs moved to Module C; the strategic directions were converted to Actions by dozens of teams within each agency. Again, the BSCP Center, SCCC, and FLICC were there to help. Every Action planned by every unit in the agency is now directly aimed at an annual Milestone which is derived from a Strategy, aligned to a Goal. All these links in the performance management system are actionable expressions of the agency's Vision, Mission, and Values. Each month, each unit will update the status of each Action, giving the agency multiple metrics to gauge progress through the year, as displayed in the BSCP Center's online SPM tool.

In keeping with its performance management philosophy, the BSCP Center is now reviewing the experience of the past year, studying notes from each session with each state team, examining participant feedback forms, and making adjustments to the SPM process. The facilitation manual is being revised, new tools developed, and the technical assistance process strengthened. As the BSCP Center prepares to assist additional states with strategic performance management, it remains connected with Arkansas and the Virgin Islands, supporting the regional centers and the SEAs in the full implementation of strategic performance management.

Recommendations

Lessons Learned in 2015–16

Module A: Establishing the SEA Purpose and Direction

The Work. In Module A, Purpose and Direction, the SEA Task Force creates vision, mission, and values statements or revisits existing ones to determine if they still represent the purpose of the SEA and where it wants to go. This may sound like the same old stuff—your grandfather's strategic planning, but there are marked differences. The vision represents how the agency wishes to be ultimately perceived, the mission what it does and the values the qualities its personnel will possess as well as the way the agency interfaces with its constituencies. The goals are not time limited but

express ultimate ends the agency may, over years, more closely approximate. The goals, typically four to six in number, are stated as desired results for students, including both student outcomes at the time of graduation and through the years of schooling, and include both academic outcomes and desired personal attributes not always measured by academic markers. Performance measures for both goals and strategies include multiple indicators, data sources, baselines, and targets. All of Module A requires extensive discussion, reflection, and wordsmithing.

As the goals begin to emerge, they are submitted to a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, threat) analysis and a clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the state and districts—what each goal would mean for students, educators, students' families—and where conflicts and gaps must be addressed. Obviously, all of this group thinking takes time, patience, focus, and the signal from the leader that all opinions are welcome and respected.

Participant Feedback. One state leader shared that the Module A process goes much deeper than typical strategic planning in education or business. Participant responses on an evaluation survey indicated that more than 92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the discussions and reflection were meaningful and relevant to creating a clear direction for the agency and meeting the needs of districts and schools. Words used to describe the process included "collaborative," "thought-provoking," "dynamic," "necessary," and "critical." Participant responses indicated that 90% or more of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the activities, materials, and assignments were relevant, useful, and of high quality.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations. The logic, materials, activities, and assignments of the SPM process proved solid, but the time required to complete the Module is greater than originally estimated. Single-day sessions are insufficient, creating the stress of much to do in a short time and not enough time to let the ideas sink in before making decisions. This work cannot be done without the full participation of the CSSO, and the leader must provide both encouragement for divergent thinking and boundaries for what the CSSO can support. Likewise, consistent participation by all Task Force members at all sessions is critical. The recommendation is to base the SPM process for Module A on monthly, two-day meetings of the Task Force for about four months. An additional prior day of preparation by the BSCP and regional center consultants and confirmation of plans with the Chief Performance Officer (and, at times, the CSSO) is also critical.

Communication of the evolving work with stakeholder groups and opportunities for feedback were suggested in the original design of SPM but not well defined. The example of the Arkansas Commissioner and Chief of Staff—seeking feedback from both internal and external groups—provides guidance for future states and should be included as a recommended approach in the revised manual.

Module B: Aligning the Organization's Functions, Structure, and Personnel to Its Purpose and Direction

The Work. In Module B, the SEA Operations Task Force (which may now be composed of a subgroup of the Module A Directions Task Force, at the discretion of the CSSO) identifies the functions necessary to carry out each strategy, the optimal organizational structure, and the necessary personnel competencies. The SEA Task Force then maps out an organizational structure aligned to the SEA's functions and massages the structure as resources and restrictions dictate. Structures for effective performance management align the organization to best follow its strategic direction, allow for clearly defined roles and responsibilities, pull together people who need to work closely with each other, and allow for effective flow of information (Redding & Layland, 2015; Rhodes, 2011).

Both SEAs identified a smaller group to complete Module B, largely consisting of some members of the Module A Task Force, but now also including heads of Human Resources. For those who had not participated in Module A, the Module A participants shared the direction created as well as the "why" so all participants understood the context of their work on functions and structures. Identifying the functions needed to implement the strategies and comparing them to the current SEA functions revealed some gaps in function. For example, research was identified as a function for a number of strategies, yet there was no research function being carried out by SEA staff.

Different approaches to restructuring were taken by each SEA. For the Virgin Islands, the need to address the structure was very apparent after identifying the functions. In addition, the relationship between VIDE and its districts is so integrated that the team not only revised the SEA structure, but also reorganized and aligned the district structures with the involvement of the District Insular Superintendents and other key district personnel.

In Arkansas, the SEA Module B Task Force felt it was important not to conduct a top-down reorganization, even though apparent organizational misalignments began to appear in the analysis. Arkansas decided to move forward with the Milestone assignment and implement the performance management system within the current organizational structure, closely monitoring the effects to make more informed structural alterations as the process continues. In this way, possible revisions in structure will arise from the work and from the personnel on the ground rather than being imposed from above.

Participant Feedback. Regardless of the approach, the task of aligning or adjusting the organization structure to the functions was a more difficult task than articulating agency purpose and direction in Module A. Getting to the ideal structure meant reconsidering the way business had been done for quite some time. In one instance, political overtones and the different levels of power associated with title and job classifications were recognized as significant challenges to revising the structure. Some participants felt more time was needed to discuss the structural implications of functions. One participant shared that "we truly needed more time to analyze the

[SEA] organization towards strategic alignment…and it was difficult to navigate the complexities of the process."

Lessons Learned and Recommendations. The Module B activities, for both SEAs, were successful in bringing functional, structural, and personnel competency issues to the forefront so they could be addressed to increase overall productivity and effectiveness of the SEAs. But the time and procedures necessary to make orderly changes in agency structure are substantial, and to achieve the optimal structure before moving to Module C would surely be a dead end for the process. The function, structure, and personnel considerations are the most difficult and most often ignored part of strategic planning. The BSCP process needs to be reexamined to determine how much of this can be done within the SPM process and how much needs to be given more time and a different map to arrive at the right conclusions.

Module C: Planning, Executing, and Monitoring Actions Aimed at Milestones

The Work. In Module C, the SEA leadership assigns annual, Strategy-aligned Milestones to divisions, and division leaders assign them to units within their divisions. Each unit then develops an Action Plan for each Milestone. The Action Plans include actions, persons responsible, necessary collaborations with other units, timelines, and outputs. The actions lead to the completion of the Milestone by the end of the project year. Unlike traditional strategic planning, Milestones are identified for only two years and actions for one year. At the end of each year, the next year's Milestones are modified in light of experience, another year's Milestones are added, and actions are created for the year. A performance management cycle is then set in motion to manage, monitor, and report on progress in completing the Actions and Milestones. Each unit reports progress on each action monthly, divisions review progress quarterly, and the Leadership Team makes annual adjustments. Thus the cycle becomes "a living system that provides direction for people's work while allowing for innovation and adjustment in course to produce better results more efficiently" (Redding & Layland, 2015, p. 4). The BSCP Center's SPM online tool manages the performance management cycle in Module C.

Participant Feedback. At this writing, Milestones have been assigned and both SEAs are engaging in the action planning process. Module C expands the work to SEA staff at all levels of the agency. In Arkansas, 75 people were involved in action planning over two days and followed that with additional planning by their entire units. Unit teams shared actions and received feedback from colleagues. Team members had the opportunity to engage with other teams to discuss the impact of their work on Milestones and Actions and on the work by other units on different Milestones and actions. The level of discussion and engagement transcended individual units and Divisions, resulting in shared ownership and accountability. Participants observed that this level of inclusion of personnel in planning was new to the agency, and they found it both challenging and energizing.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations. Much more will be learned as both SEAs complete the action planning and engage fully in the ongoing performance management cycle throughout

the upcoming school year. Processes employed in both Arkansas and the Virgin Islands proved fruitful, including the sharing of evolving Action Plans across units and the identification of needed collaborations. The SPM online tool made the process manageable in ways a paper-and-pencil system would not. Arkansas, the Virgin Islands, and both regional comprehensive centers are contributing to a list of recommended new features for the online platform.

A Recipe for Successful Technical Assistance

Impact on SEA Participants

A participant feedback form administered at the end of Module C showed a high level of satisfaction with the project and significant gains in understanding of key concepts. Table 1 summarizes the responses of team members in both Arkansas and the Virgin Islands on the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the project. Table 2 reports the team members' gains in understanding of key concepts.

Table 1. Strategic Performance Management Process

Item	Arkansas Results $N = 8$ (57% response rate)	Virgin Islands Results $N = 21$ (81% response rate)
Percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that assignments, materials, and activities used for the SPM process were of high quality.	100%	90%
Percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that the discussions that took place during the sessions were meaningful and relevant to developing a clear direction for the state.	100%	93%
Percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that developing Strategies, Milestones, and Actions was useful in helping the state move toward the ideal SEA.	100%	93%

Table 2. Capacity Building

Item	Arkansas Results $N = 8$ (57% response rate)		Virgin Islands Results $N = 21$ (81% response rate)	
	Before	**After**	**Before**	**After**
Percentage of respondents that indicated they had a good understanding of the direction the SEA is setting for education.	25%	100%	29%	75%

Percentage of respondents that indicated they had a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the SEA, districts, schools, and stakeholders.	63%	83%	24%	86%
Percentage of respondents that indicated they had a good understanding and skill in developing strategies to move forward in an ideal education system.	25%	100%	27%	89%

Impact on SEA

The goal of the strategic performance management (SPM) process is to assist SEA leadership in redefining their agency's direction, creating an organizational structure to carry out that direction, and putting in place a performance management system to encourage productivity and innovation. A self-assessment completed by the teams in both Arkansas and the Virgin Islands at the beginning of the project and again after Module C indicates they are well on their way to having a structure and system to improve performance and productivity. The self-assessment contains 18 elements of a strategic performance system. The level of implementation of each element is rated using a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 is no or little implementation and 4 is full implementation. In addition, each element is assigned a priority level using a 3-point scale where 1 is a high priority level and 3 is a low priority level. The SEA teams also indicated the level of change necessary to move to full implementation (from easy to address to significant level of change). Table 3 summarizes the results of a pre- and post-self-assessment completed by each SEA team.

Levels of implementation moved from little or no development to partial or full implementation and, in many instances, to the fully functional level of development. At least 77% of the self-assessment items moved from high priority to a lower priority because the SEAs were able to put many SPM pieces in place. However, both SEAs recognized that there is a great deal of work ahead that requires moderate to significant change in the way they do business (61% and 27% respectively). The need for continued technical assistance to assist leadership and staff in change management and continuous monitoring and adjusting of work is critical in this next year of implementation.

Table 3. SEA Self-Assessment of Level of Implementation, Priority, and Difficulty of Change of Elements of Strategic Performance Management

	% and # of elements where level of implementation moved up at least one level	% and # of elements where level of implementation moved up more than one level	% and # of elements where priority level moved from high to low	% and # of elements requiring a moderate to high level of changes for SEA
Arkansas	50% (9 of 18)	50% (9 of 18)	77% (14 of 18)	61% (11 of 18)
U.S. Virgin Islands	22% (4 of 18)	44% (8 of 18)	77% (14 of 18)	28% (5 of 18)

Capacity Building

The goal of the BSCP Center is to "build the capacity of SEAs to support local educational agencies (LEAs or districts) and schools, by providing high quality information, tools, and implementation support to help them shift from a 'compliance-based' to a 'performance-oriented' approach" (BSCP Center, n.d., para. 1). The SPM process is designed to build the SEA's capacity to implement a performance management system to increase productivity and effectiveness in carrying out the agency's strategies and moving closer to the accomplishment of its goals. Ideally, the SEA staff will take what is learned through the process and apply the learning to other situations to increase productivity and effectiveness. When asked to compare understanding prior to the learning experiences with understanding afterward, at least 75% of respondents indicated a better understanding of various concepts as a result of the learning experiences. Some examples of how staff will apply the learning include "applying SWOT to new tasks and initiatives," "taking a systemic approach to decision-making," "creating goals, measures, and indicators that can streamline my productivity," and "learning will be used at other meetings for further clarification of a goal or task."

Technical Assistance

As one of seven national content centers supported under the U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive Centers program, the BSCP Center focuses on a specific area of expertise: building SEA capacity and enhancing productivity. The BSCP Center, as well as each of the other content centers, "is responsible for providing in-depth knowledge, expertise, and analyses in its focal area to Regional [Comprehensive] Centers (RCCs) and the States they serve" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 4). The BSCP Center disseminates research-based products and information on effective practices and provides expertise related to capacity building and productivity that RCCs can use in delivering technical assistance to States.

Great thought was given to the design of the technical assistance to bring SPM to SEAs to ensure the BSCP Center is meeting its responsibilities as a content center. SPM requires an intensive level

of technical assistance because it focuses on systems-level change to address multiple long-standing issues across multiple systems. It is designed to result in changes in purpose, structure, operations, and practice that support increased capacity and/or improved outcomes at one or more systems levels (Layland, 2013). By design, the BSCP Center partners with the RCC serving the state to provide the technical assistance for the SPM process. The BSCP staff teach the RCC staff the SPM process while facilitating the process with the SEA. The RCC staff play a critical role in sharing context and assisting the BSCP staff in customizing the process to address contextual needs. As work progresses, the BSCP staff co-facilitate with the RCC staff, then advise as the RCC staff facilitates. By the end of the intensive sessions, the RCC is poised to provide ongoing assistance throughout the initial year of implementation, with coaching and check-ins by BSCP staff. The RCC may then initiate the process with other states in its region.

In reality, the SPM process is complex and calls for the right people in the right places to be successful. Technical assistance providers are used to being the experts because of the nature of the job, and shifting into a learning role may be difficult for some. At times, SPM calls for the facilitator(s) to push the thinking of SEA staff or ask tough questions to get critical ideas and issues to the surface which several SEA staff shared was needed and very useful. However, not all facilitators or technical assistance providers can do this and do it with the right touch. The right people are needed to be successful in this work. In addition, the competitive nature of the Centers' technical assistance work, as their organizations vie for advantage in the competition for continuation, at times inhibits or can be in direct conflict with goals of collaboration and capacity building. These potential problems with facilitation were not experienced in the BSCP Center's work in Arkansas and the Virgin Islands but are anticipated in moving forward with other states.

The BSCP Center used the SPM technical assistance approach by partnering with the RCCs serving Arkansas and the Virgin Islands. As a result, both RCCs have staff who are continuing the support at each SEA, and the SEAs report confidence in the support they will continue to receive. In addition, the process has increased the RCC knowledge of SEA activities and expanded relationships with the SEAs that result in more opportunities for technical assistance.

Conclusion

The BSCP Center has engaged two SEAs over the past year in the process of strategic performance management to build capacity to carry out new responsibilities and address challenges related to the evolving role of SEAs. While work with more SEAs is needed to build a strong body of evidence, the process, capacity building, and technical assistance have resulted in positive and substantial work at each SEA. In addition, the RCCs serving the two SEAs are poised to carry on support through initial implementation as a result of BSCP's capacity building. The BSCP Center is using lessons learned through this initial work to improve SPM and expand the work to other SEAs.

SEAs are ready for a shift in role and responsibility, in part as a result of ESSA. Over the last decade, SEAs have had frequent changes in leadership, fits and starts in direction, and adjustments

to diminishing resources; they often had to do a great deal more with much less. Some SEAS still struggle with hierarchical structures, siloed departments, poor communication channels, and lack of transparency, all barriers to setting a steady direction and operating with a high level of productivity (Burnette, 2016; Redding & Nafziger, 2013; Kerins, Perlman, & Redding, 2009). ESSA may provide a turning point for all SEAs to thoughtfully reexamine their roles and implement performance management systems that will produce the greatest results from the capabilities of their personnel.

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The Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP Center) focuses work on helping state education agencies (SEAs) throughout the country, as they adapt to constrained fiscal resources and increased demands for greater productivity. The BSCP Center provides technical assistance to SEAs that builds their capacity to support local educational agencies (LEAs or districts) and schools, and to the other 21 regional and content comprehensive centers that serve them, by providing high quality information, tools, and implementation support. The partners in the BSCP Center are Edvance Research, Inc., the Academic Development Institute, and the Edunomics Lab (Georgetown University).

Solutions emerges from specific questions or problems facing an SEA that arise during the work of the BSCP Center with the SEA in a consultancy. It represents information that is highly responsive to an SEA's practical needs. The writing of a *Solutions* issue is also stimulated by questions from Comprehensive Centers or SEAs regarding the use of a BSCP Center tool, the application of a new concept, or an implementation challenge.

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