

## **How can State Education Agencies and Local Education Agencies be Organized to Best Support District and School Improvement?**

### **Definition**

State educational agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) are uniquely positioned to design and implement profound improvement efforts across the educational system—in classrooms, schools, districts, and the state. However, the increasing demands on these agencies raise critical questions about their capacity to catalyze and support district and school improvement efforts:

- How can SEAs and LEAs be organized to support district and school improvement most effectively?
- What organizational processes and systems can state and district administrators use to support district and school improvement effectively?

### **Rationale**

As a result of the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and continued emphasis on increased accountability for district, school, and student performance, the roles and responsibilities of both SEAs and LEAs have evolved. For example, while SEAs have traditionally been responsible for monitoring compliance with state and federal policy and allocating fiscal and material resources, they are now required to participate actively in and support district and school improvement efforts. However, most SEAs are still organized to respond to more bureaucratic responsibilities and in accordance with federal and state funding streams; as such, they consist of multiple offices or “silos” that limit effective collaboration among SEA personnel and impede the alignment of instructional and other initiatives.

School districts (LEAs) are influential agents of educational policy because they are often the primary source of instructional, organizational, technical, and material support for schools and practitioners (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2003; Consortium for Policy Research in Education [CPRE], 1998; Laguarda, 2003; Massell, Kirst, & Hoppe, 1997; Massell, 2000). In addition, district structures may be an advantage because high levels of differentiation and specialization among district administrators could result in increased efficiency, the development of key areas of expertise, and the possibility of bringing reform efforts to scale (Hannaway & Kimball, 1998). However, there are concerns that district offices are not organized to support improvement efforts across all classrooms and schools effectively.

The growing numbers of districts and schools in need of assistance is challenging SEA and LEA capacity to differentiate and scale up intervention and support strategies. It is critical to examine how these agencies are organized, which systems and processes are in place, and how state and district administrators are working together to support district and school improvement efforts.

### **Research**

There is a growing body of research on the evolving role of SEAs with regard to supporting district and school improvement, strategies that selected SEAs have implemented in response to the requirements of NCLB, and the need for SEAs to build capacity. Researchers have also asserted that SEAs must develop and refine existing organizational, technical, fiscal, and other systems to promote and support comprehensive improvement efforts (Alston, 2006; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). Many SEA administrators are examining how to re-organize their agencies in response to new roles and responsibilities, but research is limited on strategies in use to re-organize and re-structure SEAs, on refinements of developments of organizational processes and systems, and on the impact of these efforts on the agency operations. However, a review of recent research on SEAs has identified the following strategies that state administrators can apply to organizational concerns:

- Regularly examine the roles and responsibilities of SEA administrators to assess whether the distribution of responsibility, leadership, and authority promote progress toward stated goals. In particular, examine the extent to which the organization of staff with different types of specialized knowledge (instructional improvement, curriculum and instruction, student services, special education, and district improvement, among others) maximizes expertise and aligns strategies to meet federal and state requirements;
- Establish mechanisms for communication and regular reporting not only within the SEA but also with external and community stakeholders;
- Establish and maintain efficient and effective systems to manage operational, financial, technological, and other non-instructional issues (Datnow, Lasky, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2006; Massell, 1998; Mintrop, 2006; Rennie Center, 2005).

Researchers have identified organizational characteristics that are common to more effective school districts, including stable and proactive leadership, unequivocal focus on improving instruction and student learning, and the development of professional cultures within which learning is supported at all levels of the system and leaders are held accountable for their work (Bowles, Churchill, Efrat, &

McDermott, 2002; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Sheinker, Hambrick, Lowery, Lamitina, Steele, St. Clair et al., 2005). However, researchers have not identified a unique organizational structure or management system that characterizes effective districts; rather, there is variation in how these factors interact to promote district success (Sheinker et al., 2005). A review of recent research about districts has identified similar strategies that district administrators can apply to organizational concerns:

- Examine the roles and responsibilities of district administrators regularly to assess whether the distribution of responsibility, leadership, and authority promote progress toward district goals and effective collaboration. Where necessary, restructure the organization to stabilize governance, ensure that qualified personnel occupy critical positions, ensure that programs and initiatives are aligned, and enable strategic progress toward articulated goals;
- Establish mechanisms for communication and regular reporting not only within the district but also with external and community stakeholders;
- Establish mechanisms for continuous evaluation of the quality of organizational infrastructure to support district goals, and use these evaluation data to continually inform district work (Banathy, 1991; Childress, Elmore, & Grossman, 2006; Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005; The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005; Stupski Foundation, 2006; UCLA, 2007; Wong, 2007).

#### **Case Examples**

- In Maryland, state administrators are developing a semi-autonomous agency, The Breakthrough Center, which will fundamentally alter how state administrators and external partners are organized to provide services to districts and schools.
- In Florida, state administrators are assessing how to re-organize personnel and offices to best support the development of a statewide system of support for districts and schools.

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