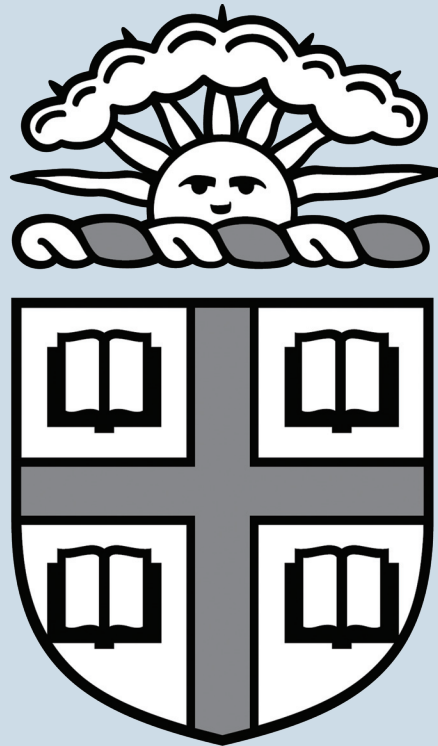


A Brown University Symposium

# Designing and Catalyzing Effective District Improvement

## The Role of State Education Agencies

The Viking Hotel  
Newport, Rhode Island  
July 30 - August 1, 2007



The Comprehensive School Reform (CSR)  
Support and Capacity Building Program



Urban Education  
Policy Program

Dear Participant:

The Education Alliance at Brown University and Brown University's Urban Education Policy Program welcome you to our 2007 Symposium, *Designing and Catalyzing Effective District Improvement: The Role of State Education Agencies*. The 2007 Symposium is the second annual event held by The Education Alliance as part of our efforts to build leadership capacity and assist states and districts in developing aligned and cohesive systems of support for districts and schools.

The guiding theme of our symposium—exploring the role of state education agencies in supporting district improvement efforts—is driven by our experience working with states and districts as well as our recognition of the reality that many state education agencies are moving towards working more intensively with districts to build district capacity. There are no definitive answers to the question of how states can best support districts to enhance learning for all students. Fortunately, there is a growing literature and experiential base upon which to consider how states can design and implement systems to effectively support and catalyze district improvement efforts.

We welcome and invite you to use the time afforded during these two-plus days to share your experience and expertise with others who share similar interests, to build and renew relationships with colleagues, and to engage in collective problem-solving informed by the diverse experience of symposium participants. The intentional mix of state education leaders, district leaders, researchers, and policy actors is based on the premise that defining the “problem” and figuring out practical and innovative solutions requires (1) input from individuals with different perspectives and from multiple levels of the educational system and (2) the time and opportunity to think deeply and critically about the challenges to scaling up district- and school-improvement efforts. This symposium is intended to provide such an opportunity.

And last (although definitely not least) please take some time to enjoy beautiful Newport, Rhode Island and the surrounding area!

Thank you for attending the symposium and for your commitment to these issues. We look forward to an exciting and thought provoking time together!

Sincerely,

Adeline Becker  
Kenneth Wong  
Brett Lane

## The Education Alliance at Brown University

The Education Alliance, a department at Brown University, promotes educational change to provide all students equitable opportunities to succeed. We advocate for populations whose access to excellent education has been limited or denied. Since 1975, The Education Alliance has partnered with schools, districts, and state departments of education to apply research findings in developing solutions to educational challenges. We focus on district and school improvement with special attention to underperformance and issues of equity and diversity. The Education Alliance designs and delivers expert services around planning, professional learning, and research and evaluation.

The Education Alliance's **Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Support and Capacity Building Program** provides support and technical assistance to states and districts towards the development of aligned and cohesive systems of support for districts and schools. Through the CSR Support and Capacity Building Program, The Education Alliance offers a number of opportunities and resources for states, districts, and schools working toward inclusive and sustainable school improvement. For additional information, please visit The Education Alliance's District and School Improvement Web site ([www.alliance.brown.edu/improvement](http://www.alliance.brown.edu/improvement)) or the CSR Support and Capacity Building Web site ([www.alliance.brown.edu/projects/csraqi](http://www.alliance.brown.edu/projects/csraqi)).

## The Urban Education Policy Program at Brown University

The Urban Education Policy (UEP) program within the Education Department at Brown University offers a master's level program leading to an A.M. in Urban Education. The UEP program is a twelve-month program dedicated to the study of policy analysis, planning, and development in urban public education. The tightly focused academic curriculum, integrated with a nine-month internship, is designed to impart a set of core skills and competencies that are necessary for successful careers in urban education policy. The UEP program also provides a solid foundation for those anticipating advanced study in areas related to urban education policy.

### Context

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 requires that state educational agencies (SEAs) assess district and school performance and subsequently identify and monitor those districts and schools that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). When schools are unable to improve student academic achievement, districts are responsible for helping those schools make the changes needed to improve student performance. In addition, SEAs are responsible for developing strategies and resources to support and monitor those districts and schools identified for improvement, corrective action, and restructuring.

While much is known about the characteristics of effective districts and schools, there is a relative lack of information and evidence about how SEAs can effectively design, support, and catalyze district improvement efforts, and how these agencies can differentiate and scale up improvement efforts across growing numbers of districts and schools with diverse needs and student populations.

### Purpose

The purpose of this symposium is to provide a forum for state and district leaders, researchers, and other key experts to engage in collaborative and meaningful discussion about the ongoing challenges faced by state education agencies in their efforts to support district improvement. To do this, we will focus our discussions on the following key questions:

- How can states and state education agencies effectively design, support, and catalyze district improvement efforts?
- Given that an increasing number of schools and districts are being identified for improvement and corrective action, how can state education agencies strategically differentiate and scale up intervention and support strategies?

## Organizational Coherence

*How can state education agencies best be organized (e.g., through a certain configuration of state offices and different ways of working together) to leverage state and federal resources, catalyze district improvement, and provide effective support to targeted districts?*

Topics and questions include:

- Developing a coherent organization with clear goals, shared assumptions, and reinforcing roles and responsibilities
- Developing clear communication channels and expectations
- Addressing monitoring and intervention responsibilities related to federal regulations and requirements
- What factors or conditions are obstacles to creating organizational coherence?
- What are some of the strategies that states have used to increase organizational coherence?

## Effective Intervention and Support Strategies

*What types of strategies are states using to support district and school improvement, and how are states making decisions about the effectiveness and use of these intervention and support strategies?*

Topics and questions include:

- Identifying the different ways that states are providing support, at what level, and at what intensity
- Discussing whether or not the content of state-level interventions matters, and if so, which support strategies have evidence of effectiveness
- Exploring the role and importance of building strong relationships between SEAs and districts
- What limits the ability of a state to work with districts and provide meaningful support?
- How have states effectively resolved the obstacles that prevent the development and implementation of support strategies?

## Catalyzing Conditions

*What are the conditions and incentives needed to catalyze and support district improvement efforts?*

Topics and questions include:

- Identifying the appropriate mix of sanctions and incentives for catalyzing change
- Developing policies and reallocating resources as a means of shifting the conditions within which districts and schools are asked to make improvement
- What prohibits a state from altering the conditions and/or providing the incentives needed to catalyze change?
- How can SEAs create conditions and incentives to effectively catalyze change?

## Resource Allocation

*What is the level of resources needed to meaningfully support, assist, and catalyze change in underperforming districts?*

Topics and questions include:

- Considering the cost of actually bringing all students to standards or increasing graduation rates and the relative benefits of making this investment
- Discussing the role of “adequacy” litigation and advocacy coalitions in accessing and providing the level of resources needed to support underperforming schools
- Exploring the political dimension of allocating resources to underperforming schools and the political will to make this effort
- What factors prevent or limit the strategic allocation of resources needed to fully support underperforming districts and schools?
- How can SEAs remove the obstacles that limit the allocation of fiscal, technical, material, and human resources?

## Monday, July 30

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**5:30 p.m. Registration**

**7:00 p.m. Welcoming Dinner**

Dr. Adeline Becker – *Clinical Professor of Education and Executive Director, The Education Alliance at Brown University*

Dr. Kenneth Wong – *Walter and Leonore Annenberg Chair for Education Policy and Program Director, The Urban Education Policy Program at Brown University*

Brett Lane – *Managing Specialist and Project Director, CSR Support and Capacity Building Program, The Education Alliance at Brown University*

## Tuesday, July 31

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### Articulating the Problem Space

*What do we mean by “district improvement?”*

*What are the central challenges to district improvement?*

*What role (can, do, should) state education agencies (SEAs) play with regard to district improvement?*

**7:30 a.m. Breakfast**

**8:30 a.m. Opening Remarks**

Dr. Adeline Becker, Dr. Kenneth Wong, Brett Lane

**8:45 a.m. Panel Presentation: Perspectives of District Administrators**

Dr. Basan Nembirkow – *Superintendent, Brockton Public Schools, Brockton, MA*

Dr. Jerry Weast – *Superintendent, Montgomery County Public Schools, Rockville, MD*

Dr. James Williams – *Superintendent, Buffalo Public Schools, Buffalo, NY*

Moderator: Dr. Saeyun D. Lee – *The Education Alliance*

- *From your perspective, what are the central challenges impeding your district improvement efforts?*
- *What should be the role of SEAs with regard to supporting improvement efforts in your district and districts throughout your state?*
- *How can SEAs best support your work and enhance district capacity to improve student learning in schools that have been identified for improvement or corrective action?*
  - *Which support strategies have contributed to your district improvement efforts?*
  - *What are your suggestions for alternative state-level supports and intervention strategies that would better support your work?*

**9:45 a.m. Panel Presentation: Perspectives of State Education Agency Leaders**

Dr. James Butterworth – *Professor of Education, College of Saint Rose and University of Albany*

Iris C. Wilson – *Deputy Chancellor for Student Achievement, Florida Department of Education*

Lisa Zeig – *Administrator, School & District Intervention, Massachusetts Department of Education*

Moderator: Brett Lane – *The Education Alliance*

## Tuesday, July 31 (continued)

- *From your perspective, what are the central challenges impeding district improvement?*
- *Based on your experience, how can (or how could) SEAs most effectively support and build district capacity to assist schools that have been identified for improvement or corrective action?*
  - *Which types of state-level support and intervention strategies have positively contributed to district improvement efforts?*
  - *What are your ideas for alternative state-level strategies that could truly catalyze district improvement efforts across multiple districts and schools?*
- *What are the primary challenges that are impeding the design and implementation of effective strategies to support district improvement efforts? How is your organization addressing these challenges?*

**10:45 a.m. Break**

**11:00 a.m. Panel Presentation: Perspectives of Researchers**

Dr. Angela Minnici – *Senior Research Associate, Center on Education Policy*

Dr. Jennifer O'Day – *Managing Research Scientist, American Institutes for Research*

Dr. Gail Sunderman – *Senior Research Associate, The Civil Rights Project, University of California, Los Angeles*

Moderator: Dr. Christopher Unger – *The Education Alliance*

- *Based on your research and work with various stakeholders, what are the central challenges impeding district improvement efforts?*
- *Given your research and experience, which state-level strategies have the most promise and potential to build district capacity and bring district improvement efforts to scale?*
- *What are the central challenges limiting the ability of SEAs to design and implement district improvement strategies? How are SEAs addressing these challenges?*

**11:45 a.m. Group Discussion**

**12:00 p.m. Lunch**

**1:30 p.m. Small Group Problem-Solving Conversations**

The symposium participants will engage in cross-role, problem-solving discussions to collectively generate and propose alternate definitions of the problems affecting district improvement, identify innovative ideas, and develop potential recommendations for how SEAs could better support district improvement efforts. In particular, the groups will consider the following questions:

- *How can SEAs best catalyze and support district improvement efforts, especially with respect to those districts targeted for support?*
- *How should the challenges to SEAs' efforts (e.g., issues related to organizational coherence, capacity issues, and resources) be addressed, and by whom?*

**3:15 p.m. Break**

**3:30 p.m. Gallery Walk and Group Discussion Session**

Facilitator: Dr. Mary-Beth Fafard – *The Education Alliance*

**4:30 p.m. Break**

**5:30 p.m. Cocktail Reception**

## Wednesday, August 1

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### Catalyzing Conditions for District Improvement

What are the political and structural conditions (e.g. policy levers, incentives, and alternative governance structures) needed to help SEAs catalyze and meaningfully support district improvement efforts?

**7:30 a.m. Breakfast**

**8:30 a.m. Opening Remarks**

Dr. Adeline Becker, Dr. Kenneth Wong, Brett Lane

**8:45 a.m. Panel Presentation: Perspectives of Policy Actors**

Andrew Calkins – *Executive Director, Mass Insight Education and Research Institute*  
 Jacquelyn Davis – *Executive Director, New Leaders for New Schools, Washington, DC*  
 Moderator: Dr. Saeyun D. Lee – *The Education Alliance*

- How can states, SEAs, and other stakeholders develop and sustain the political and structural conditions needed to help SEAs catalyze and meaningfully support district improvement efforts? In particular, what are bold and innovative ideas to better support and enact district improvement throughout a state?

**9:45 a.m. Small Group Discussion Sessions**

Participants having similar roles will consider and reflect upon the previous day's discussions in light of the broader observations and ideas presented in the morning's panel presentation. The following questions will guide the discussion:

- What conditions would best support district-wide improvement efforts throughout a state?
- What role could you or others play in creating these conditions?
- Which policies do you feel have the greatest potential for high impact?

**10:45 a.m. Break**

**11:00 a.m. Large Group Discussion: Sharing of Ideas and Perspectives**

Facilitators:  
 Dr. Mary-Beth Fafard – *The Education Alliance*  
 Brett Lane – *The Education Alliance*

Each stakeholder group will briefly share ideas about the conditions that would best support district-wide improvement efforts throughout a state, and the roles that various stakeholders could play to mobilize these conditions.

**12:00 p.m. Lunch**

**1:30 p.m. Final Session: Identification and Articulation of Central Themes and Open Discussion**

Facilitators:  
 Dr. Susan Lusi – *Superintendent, Portsmouth School District, Portsmouth, RI*  
 Dr. Kenneth Wong – *Walter and Leonore Annenberg Chair for Education Policy and Program Director, The Urban Education Policy Program at Brown University*

**3:00 p.m. Closing Remarks**

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