

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



HOW CAN STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES SUPPORT DISTRICT IMPROVEMENT A CONVERSATION AMONGST EDUCATIONAL LEADERS, RESEARCHERS, AND POLICY ACTORS JUNE 2008

The Context and Urgency

State education agencies are in the midst of developing state systems of support for increasing numbers of districts and schools identified for improvement under state and federal accountability systems. As states work to develop coherent and aligned systems of support, district leaders have sometimes, but not always, been included in this discussion. In an effort to highlight the district perspective and provide an opportunity for cross-role dialogue and sharing of expertise, The Education Alliance and The Urban Education Policy program, both at Brown University, convened and co-hosted a two-day symposium in August 2007 entitled *Designing and Catalyzing Effective District Improvement: The Role of State Education Agencies*. We invited state education leaders, superintendents and district leaders, researchers, directors of non-profit organizations deeply involved in district and school improvement efforts, and educational actors.

Guiding Questions

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

Purpose

The purpose of the Symposium was to create dedicated space for various educational leaders to share their experience and expertise regarding the challenges of engaging in significant improvement efforts across the educational system, and to leverage shared expertise to better refine the challenges facing public education and craft innovative and catalyzing ideas for addressing these challenges.

Areas of Agreement and Considerations of Promise

Participants identified a number of interrelated themes and innovative strategies as critical to the success of efforts to improve public education.

- ▶ ***State education agencies must develop new organizational structures***, reorient their approach towards working with district and school leaders, and develop or access the expertise needed to effectively support districts and schools.
- ▶ ***Developing a shared focus, a common language, and greater coherence*** within and across levels of the educational system, including federal policymakers, state and district leaders, school boards, and local schools.
- ▶ ***Right-sizing the work as a means of resolving core challenges at both the district and school levels***. Right-sizing the work involves agreeing on goals and objectives, agreeing on the core challenges to district and school improvement, and appropriately allocating resources within and across agencies (state, district, and others) to address these challenges directly.
- ▶ ***Using the shared expertise of state officials and district leaders to jointly define what “district capacity” means***, how to appropriately “diagnose” district capacity, and what might be the focus of efforts to build district capacity.
- ▶ ***Developing appropriate and differentiated services and supports*** for districts.
- ▶ ***Creating “safe zones for improvement”*** that remove many of the barriers that have typically hindered various improvement efforts.
- ▶ ***Networking educational agents for improved capacity***. Use the positional leverage of the state education agency to facilitate networks of districts and external agents that can collectively and collaboratively address the shared challenges across districts and throughout the state.

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Central Themes from Stakeholder Group Conversations

Perspectives of District Superintendents

- ▶ We need to develop system-wide capacity that meets the challenges posed by different types of districts (e.g. rural, suburban, urban) and provides SEAs with access to more predictable streams of resources (financial, human, and material).
- ▶ We need to develop greater top-down and bottom-up coherence around issues such as what good instructional practice means and the appropriate use of assessments.
- ▶ A need for broader political support and will and the need to make substantive changes with respect to teacher contracts and outdated laws and regulations.

Perspectives of State Education Agency Leaders

- ▶ We need to create professional relationships and collaborative partnerships within and across SEAs and districts in order to breakdown silos and change outdated mindsets.
- ▶ We need to establish professional learning communities that enable SEAs and districts to share common practices, experiences, and resources.

Perspectives of Researchers

- ▶ The nature of the system is characterized by ongoing instability.
- ▶ There is limited capacity and resources, primarily but not exclusively within state education agencies.
- ▶ There are concerns about the continued inability of the education system as a whole to fully acknowledge and address issues related to race/ethnicity, poverty, and health.

Perspectives of Educational Actors

- ▶ We need a new perspective within education that shifts the focus from “what is taught” to “what is learned”, such as moving to a framework that is student-centered, and includes consideration of students’ readiness to learn and creating operating conditions where states, districts, and partners collaborate on this model.
- ▶ We need to create partnerships among SEAs, districts, and with external partners that can better serve the needs of schools and districts.
- ▶ We need to redefine the role of the state to catalyze district improvement, reduce common barriers or obstacles to improvement, and create statewide supports.

Closing Themes

- ▶ ***Educational stakeholders must continually engage in collaborative dialogue*** to develop a shared theory of action, reduce policy fragmentation, build organizational coherence, develop opportunities for learning, and increase knowledge about the types of strategies that are being utilized across and within states;
- ▶ ***Expand partnerships outside of the sphere of education*** so that the work of education improvement can be explored from different perspectives, to develop a common language with which to discuss and resolve issues and concerns, and to mobilize greater support for public education and reform;
- ▶ ***Stakeholders should “right-size” the work*** by maintaining an unrelenting focus on goals and priorities;
- ▶ ***Stakeholders should examine their own perspectives*** regarding district/school reform and improvement in order to identify critical opportunities for change; and
- ▶ ***Stakeholders must think innovatively about how to build and rebuild institutions*** to develop institutional structures, systems, and processes that will best support the work.

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