

## *Improving Schools by Working with Districts: What Does the Research Tell Us?*

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### *Why Should States Work with Districts?*

1. States have to work with districts as part of NCLB
2. States do not have the capacity to help all low performing schools
3. To sustain school improvement efforts, district supports are needed

### *What Does the Research Say About the Effectiveness of State Interventions?*

According to a review by the Education Commission of the States (2002):

1. **Technical assistance to schools:** evaluations demonstrate a positive impact on student achievement
2. **Additional funding:** research does not show a clear impact on instruction or achievement.
3. **Improvement plans:** the evidence linking improvement plans to increases in achievement is mixed.

### *Effectiveness of State Interventions Continued.*

4. **School choice:** the evidence regarding school choice policies is mixed
5. **Reconstitution:** there is little evidence that this impacts student achievement, but it may improve school order
6. **Takeovers:** there is limited research on the effects on districts. They appear more effective at improving central office management than at improving instructional practices.

### *What Does The Emerging Research on District Improvement Say?*

According to Charles A. Dana Center (2002) the following characteristics matter:

- State context of accountability for achievement and equity
- “Shared Equity Beliefs” among school leaders and focus on changing teacher beliefs.
- Specific practices, policies, programs, actions and structures that promote “Focused Equity Practices”

### *Promising District Improvement Practices Continued*

The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) identifies 8 characteristics:

1. Leadership focused on results and instructional improvement
2. A focused, multiple year strategy for improving instruction.
3. The alignment of critical policies to guidance practice and support improvement.
4. The provision of resources to implement the reforms.

### Promising District Improvement Practices Continued

CPRE characteristics continued:

5. Clear expectations about classroom practice.
6. Support for teacher learning and adequate investments in professional development
7. Development of communities of practice in central offices and schools
8. The use of data and evidence to drive decisions and revise strategies

### Promising District Improvement Practices Continued

The Washington School Research Center (2003) draws similar findings.

1. Focused, meaningful professional development
2. Decentralized decision-making
3. Staffing policies that enable the removal or transfer of poorly performing teachers
4. District policies that ensure strong and stable school leadership
5. District accountability for success

### Promising District Improvement Practices Continued

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform articulates 3 features of districts who reorganize themselves into "Local Educational Support Systems" (2002):

1. Provide schools, students and teachers with needed support and timely interventions.
2. Ensure that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions.
3. Make decisions and hold people throughout the system accountable by using "leading indicators" of school and district performance and practice.

### Promising District Improvement Practices Continued

MDRC and the Council of Great City Schools (2002):

- The districts created accountability systems that went beyond the state system.
- The districts focused on the lowest performing schools.
- They adopted or developed district-wide curricula and instructional approaches.
- They committed themselves to data-based decision making and the extensive use of assessments
- They began their reforms in the early grades
- They provided intensive instruction in reading and math to secondary students.

### Challenges to District Improvement

The Learning First Alliance (2003) offered findings similar to the aforementioned studies and also describe three key challenges:

- Old system structures do not easily support new approaches to professional development.
- High schools struggle to improve achievement.
- Finding funding to support new approaches to instructional improvement remains difficult.

### What Can States Do?

CCSSO (2002) recommends that states:

- Shift from compliance-based work to capacity-building efforts to promote change.
- Increase their internal capacity to collect and analyze data, support continuous learning among staff, & hire & train staff with the appropriate knowledge & skills.
- Help districts & schools recruit & retain highly qualified teachers, particularly in low performing schools.
- Build strong partnerships with parents, higher education, businesses, health and human services, and other organizations to help address the challenges of low performing schools.
- Provide training to district and school level personnel on data-based decision making.

### What Can States Do?

Additionally, Mintrop (2003) recommends that:

- States should offer 'baseline stabilization' to help low performing schools deal with basic problems such as student behavior and staff turnover.
- After those issues are addressed, the intervention can focus on instructional changes.

### What Can States Do?

Elmore (2003) offers a similar recommendation to states (create incentives to stabilize turnover) and adds that state should:

- Develop an infrastructure at the state and local levels to provide expertise and support to low performing schools.
- Ensure accountability systems can distinguish among schools that are improving and those that are not.
- Require school districts to develop system-wide instructional improvement strategies.
- Continue to examine and improve the design of accountability systems.

### What Can States Do?

CCSSO's State Support Team Network (SSTN, 2002) also offers recommendations for states to support district and school improvement:

- Align assessments to clearly established standards that permeate the system of public education
- Ensure that assessment data are readily available to districts and classroom teachers and assist them in understanding how these data may be used to improve instruction
- Build support systems that facilitate on-going, sustained assistance to low-performing districts and schools
- Extend improvement efforts across all departments or divisions of the state educational agency

### What Can States Do?

CCSSO's SSTN continued:

- Focus on the goals and desired outcomes of statewide support efforts (i.e. improve instruction)
- Join forces with external facilitator to strengthen efforts to improve the statewide system of support
- Ensure that those charged with district and school improvement are well grounded in the kinds of processes that effectuate instructional change
- Infuse into low performing districts and schools research-based programs and professional development to improve instruction
- Create and implement a strategic, consolidated, all-inclusive plan focused on district and school improvement.

### For more information...

Regarding how states can work with districts, the High Poverty Schools Initiative, the State Support Team Network, or the proposed partnership with John Hopkins University to develop a Center for Data-Driven Research in Education and Consortium on School Improvement, please contact:

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### **Resources Cited in "Improving Schools by Working with Districts: What Does the Research Tell Us?" presentation at DLC Spring Academy (Morristown, New Jersey) on May 16, 2004.**

Slide 3 & 4: State Interventions in Low Performing Schools and School District, Education Commission of the States, August 2002 <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/41/52/4152.pdf>

Slide 5: Equity Driven, Achievement Focused School Districts: A Report on Systemic School Success in Four Texas Districts Serving Diverse Student Populations, The Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin, 2000  
<http://www.utdanacenter.org/research/reports/equitydistricts.pdf>

Slide 6 & 7: Changing District Culture and Capacity. The Impact of the Merck Institute for Science Education Partnership, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, November 2003  
<http://www.cpre.org/Publications/irr54.pdf>

**Resources Cited in "Improving Schools by Working with Districts: What Does the Research Tell Us?" presentation at DLC Spring Academy (Morristown, New Jersey) on May 16, 2004.**

Slide 8: [A Decade of Reform: A Summary of Research Findings on Classroom, School and District Effectiveness in Washington State](http://www.spu.edu/orgs/research/ADecadeofReformOctober192003v5.pdf), Washington School Research Center, Seattle Pacific University, April 2003  
<http://www.spu.edu/orgs/research/ADecadeofReformOctober192003v5.pdf>

Slide 9: [School Communities that Work for Results and Equity](http://www.schoolcommunities.org/portfolio/results_equity.html), Annenberg Institute for School Reform, October 2002  
[http://www.schoolcommunities.org/portfolio/results\\_equity.html](http://www.schoolcommunities.org/portfolio/results_equity.html)

Slide 10: [Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement](http://www.cqcs.org/pdfs/Foundations.pdf), MDRC for the Council of Great City Schools, 2002  
<http://www.cqcs.org/pdfs/Foundations.pdf>

Slide 11: [Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools](http://www.learningfirst.org/ifa-web/rp?pa=doc&docId=62), Learning First Alliance, 2003  
<http://www.learningfirst.org/ifa-web/rp?pa=doc&docId=62>

**Resources Cited in "Improving Schools by Working with Districts: What Does the Research Tell Us?" presentation at DLC Spring Academy (Morristown, New Jersey) on May 16, 2004.**

Slide 12: [State Support to Low Performing Schools](http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/statesupport.pdf), The Council of Chief State School Officers, 2002  
<http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/statesupport.pdf>

Slide 13: Mintrop, Heinrich – "The Limits of Sanctions in Low-Performing Schools: A Study of Maryland and Kentucky Schools on Probation," [Education Policy Analysis Archives](http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n3.html), January 15, 2003  
<http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n3.html>

Slide 14: Elmore, Richard – [Knowing the Right Thing to Do: School Improvement and Performance-Based Accountability](http://www.nga.org/cda/files/0803KNOWING.PDF), The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2003  
<http://www.nga.org/cda/files/0803KNOWING.PDF>

Slide 15 & 16: [State Support Team Network: Improving Achievement in Low Performing Schools](http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/sstn.pdf), The Council of Chief State School Officers, February 2003  
<http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/sstn.pdf>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR  
CCSSO'S 2004 ANNUAL POLICY FORUM BREAKOUT SESSION

*"SUPPORTS TO LOW PERFORMING SCHOOLS"*

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2004, 10:15-11:45

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**A. Framing the discussion**

As Tom Houlihan will outline, CCSSO sent out a Topic Survey to chiefs, deputies, and FLRs in the early stages of organizing the 2004 Annual Policy Forum in order to determine the issues of most interest to Council members. *SEA Capacity Building and Leadership* and *Supports to Low Performing Schools* nearly tied as the top two topics of interest to members – and they were head and shoulders above the next tier of interests. We know that the challenge of providing supports to low performing schools has stretched the capacity of state education agencies. We will spend time together thinking about how to answer questions such as:

- How do we support low performing schools?
- What roles can we play to support school transformation?
- What resources, tools, strategies, and assistance can we offer?

We will next take that discussion as a lens through which to examine the capacity of our SEAs.

**B. Facilitated Conversation Around State Actions to Support Low Performing Schools**

**1. What are people demanding of you?**

- i. What challenges are schools and districts facing?
- ii. How are they articulating their needs to you?
- iii. What is the capacity at the district level for responding to the needs?
- iv. How is that capacity being enhanced?
- v. Who else is demanding action from you regarding supports to low performing schools?

## 2. How are you responding?

- i. What are you currently doing at the state level to support low performing schools?
- ii. Are you focusing on providing supports directly to schools or primarily to districts?
- iii. How well is that working?
- iv. What else do you need/want to do?
- v. What partnerships are you developing to meet the needs of your low performing schools?
- vi. How does what LEAs and schools are doing (or need to be doing) help you to think about what your SEA must do?
- vii. How is your work modeling what LEAs and schools need to be doing to impact student achievement?

## C. Facilitated conversation around capacity building implications for the SEA

1. **Hedgehog:** If you were to choose supports to low performing schools as your priority/hedgehog issue, what would this mean about your agency and its ability to turn around student performance?
  - i. Can you best at in the world at providing support to low performing *schools*? ... at providing support to *districts*?
  - ii. Are you passionate about this work? Can you instill passion within your SEA for the work?
  - iii. Can you make a compelling case for public investment in this work?
  - iv. How will you prioritize those you serve?
  - v. If this isn't the *right* hedgehog issue, what is another way to define your hedgehog that encompasses supporting low performing schools?

2. **Organizational Design:** What roles/functions will your SEA staff need to play in order to effectively provide supports to low performing schools? Does providing supports to low performing schools fit within your SEA's vision and mission statements? Is it a clean fit, or do you have to stretch definitions to make it fit?
  - i. What other roles/functions are you being asked to play?
  - ii. What are your delivery mechanisms of these core roles/functions?
  - iii. What are alternate ways of getting the work done? What capacities would you need in these scenarios?
  - iv. How many of your current staff are now available to do *this* work? . . . to lead and develop the kinds of partnerships you may want to do this?
  - v. What needs to be done in your SEA to align the mission, vision, goals, and how you are functionally organized (organizational chart) to better meet the needs of your internal and external customers?
3. **Organizational Development:** How are you developing your staff (individually and collectively) around these core functions and developing among them the knowledge and skills they need to deliver?
4. **Organizational Leadership:** How is your state education agency defining the education agenda in your state?
  - i. What capacities do you need on your staff to be able to define the education agenda?
  - ii. What are your personal needs in terms of leadership development as you help your SEA through this work?
5. **Organizational Needs:** What supports, information, and capacity do you need?