

Meeting the Challenge of Statewide Systems of Support

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Statewide Systems of Support and No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has charged the state education agencies (SEAs) with providing technical assistance to schools identified as in need of improvement. Each state must create and sustain a statewide system of support (SSOS) to assist local districts and schools in providing the necessary technical assistance to improve student performance. Upon review of the revised July 21, 2006, *LEA and School Improvement: Non-Regulatory Guidance* (www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/schoolimprovementguid.doc), it becomes clear that the SEAs' duties and responsibilities in providing assistance and support to local education agencies (LEAs) have multiple facets and that coordinating and sustaining those state efforts is no small task. To establish the SSOS, according to the guidance, the SEAs must do the following:

- Establish school support teams to work in schools throughout the state that are in corrective action status, school improvement status, or otherwise in need of support and assistance. The SEA must provide these teams with all of the support they deem necessary to ensure their effectiveness.
- Designate and use distinguished teachers and principals from Title I schools that have been especially successful in improving academic achievement.
- Devise additional approaches to provide technical assistance by drawing on the expertise of other entities, such as institutions of higher education, educational service agencies or other local consortia, private providers of scientifically based technical assistance, and the regional comprehensive assistance centers and regional educational laboratories.

At the same time, SEAs are charged with determining district needs, monitoring district progress, developing and carrying out a state technical assistance plan, and assuring that LEAs communicate effectively with parents.

This article provides an overview of the requirements for SSOS and offers information based on a Great Lakes West review of states' approaches to SSOS.

Determining a Plan and a System

For the states to design appropriate SSOSs, it is first necessary for the districts to determine the nature of their support needs. To that end, a number of states have worked to determine their needs by surveying LEAs. District self-assessment tools, such as the one used in Wisconsin, encourage districts to actively reflect on current practices as well as consider suggested future actions and plans. School support teams can and should play a key role in this planning as well.

While the U.S. Department of Education recommends that states give schools in corrective action the highest priority for support, a number have states also have chosen to provide service to lower priority districts and schools in the hope that the prompt attention will prevent continued decline. A review of technical assistance approaches in a number of states found that no single approach to SSOS emerges—rather states are using a variety of systems and strategies to provide support. While NCLB establishes technical assistance priorities based on levels of need of improvement, it is left to the SEA to determine specific areas of need and technical assistance possibilities.

States have taken different approaches to determining and monitoring the status of districts within their own accountability systems although federal legislation and guidelines provide the overall guidance. Schools first answer to their districts when addressing student achievement. The districts work with the states or state-designated agencies. In prioritizing technical assistance requests, most attention and focus for assistance usually has been given to those districts that have been identified as in need of assistance for the longest time. However, both Illinois and Wisconsin have taken steps to offer planning to all districts to promote reflection and self-assessment so fewer districts will find themselves in need of improvement in the future.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has developed Illinois e-Plans so districts uniformly can record both required and desired data. Templates are available online for districts to develop any or all of the following:

- District improvement plan
- Technology integration plan
- Restructuring plan
- LEA plan
- School improvement plan

After the initial introduction of the plans, an ISBE spokesperson said that the SEA has been pleasantly surprised at the proactive planning sought by districts. Schools and districts wanted to carry out planning above and beyond what was required, including districts that were not designated as in need of improvement. During the 2007–08 school year, ISBE will introduce newly revised templates based on district feedback on the initial formats, and Title III programs will use e-Plans for the first time. A pilot project for special education to use e-Plans also will take place during the upcoming school year. More information regarding Illinois e-Plans can be found at www.isbe.state.il.us/sos/htmls/improvement_process.htm.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), after carrying out an SSOS pilot in seven districts, will publish its self-assessment handbook for districts to utilize in the 2007–08 school year. The initial step in that self-assessment process is found in the Wisconsin DPI's *Characteristics of Successful Districts* (dpi.state.wi.us/ssos/pdf/characteristics.pdf), a set of rubrics that can help guide Wisconsin districts as they build on their unique strengths. According to the Wisconsin DPI, these rubrics are tools for school districts to gain a fuller understanding of their strengths and needs, and they represent the cornerstone of the district self-assessment process and Wisconsin's SSOS. The online document provides the initial issues to be addressed

and serves as a preparation for the self-assessment handbook, which will be available to all districts as guidance for school improvement and excellence. The Wisconsin DPI already has provided training on the use of the handbook, which has been provided successfully to 60 facilitators of the process.

Issues of restructuring are complex and far-reaching. Urban and rural districts differ in their needs, and their options for addressing them vary. State and regional meetings—such as the technical assistance retreat on restructuring in February 2007 sponsored by the Texas Comprehensive Center and the New York Comprehensive Center, with collaboration from the Center on Innovation and Improvement (CII)—have offered states both information and the opportunity to discuss and share options and alternatives.

Increasing Need and Decreasing Resources

In the face of ever-increasing numbers of schools designated as in need of improvement, states are finding it more difficult to meet district needs and to help them carry out the NCLB requirements to improve student achievement. The Center on Education Policy (CEP) issued a report after carrying out a survey of education officials in all 50 states, as well as in-depth interviews in 11 states, in late 2006 and 2007. The resulting report, *Educational Architects: Do State Education Agencies Have the Tools Necessary to Implement NCLB?* (www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document.showDocumentByID&nodeID=1&DocumentID=195), concludes that SEAs find themselves lacking in funding as well as personnel to design, carry out, monitor, and sustain the effective SSOS that they are both required and attempting to provide. Most federal funding for education flows through state agencies directly to local districts, leaving increased responsibilities and duties for SEAs with little access to increased funds to pay for the needed time, personnel, and activities.

Internal Communication and Collaboration

Before states look to external partners to develop new technical assistance options, it is often useful to look inward to closely examine their own expertise and system of response to requests for assistance. SEA staff in some state agencies point to a lack of communication and collaboration within the agency as an initial obstacle to delivering effective and efficient technical assistance. They refer to the closed nature of their working divisions or units as silos that offer only hierarchical communication and sharing. The stress and lack of time brought on by the assignment of multiple roles and responsibilities to many SEA staff has caused a shortage of opportunities for discussion and internal sharing of important information. The comprehensive nature of SSOS requires contributions and participation from all SEA working groups. To help ensure that the SEA can offer effective assistance to its districts, an SEA can examine the extent to which its structure and processes facilitate information sharing and collaboration across the SEA. These structures and processes might include internal communication systems, agencywide calendar sharing, and systematic ways to disseminate information. These examples can be important aspects of providing service to districts as well as other educational and service providers outside the SEA. Looking inward can be an important first step in developing more effective and efficient service to those served outside the agency.

The Role of Intermediate Technical Assistance Providers

According to the U.S. Department of Education's *Non-Regulatory Guidance*, a state's SSOS should include collaborations with external providers, such as institutions of higher education, educational service agencies or other local consortia, private providers of scientifically based technical assistance, and the regional comprehensive assistance centers and regional educational laboratories. While the organization and function of intermediate providers (educational service agencies and consortia) vary from state to state, they are seeing an expanded role and relationship with the SEAs as part of an SSOS to local districts. Many of the additional approaches designated by the revised *Guidance* have included these entities. In some states, intermediate technical assistance providers contract with other teams or individuals in addition to providing staff and expertise themselves. In California, regional educational services agencies are not the only possible technical assistance option for districts. Together with accredited colleges and universities and California-based nongovernmental organizations, they are eligible and must apply to become providers of a School Assistance and Intervention Team. At the same time, there is an opportunity to work together with the state school support teams and to play complementary roles in working with LEAs. Clarifying roles and identifying areas of expertise was the goal at a June 2006 South Dakota SEA meeting with school support team members and the education service agency staff. Such meetings and discussions can help the SEA more effectively and efficiently direct the provision of technical assistance by first assuring that all providers collaborate and understand each other's roles and expertise.

In Illinois, the state-funded Regional Education Service Providers (RESPROs), provide technical assistance to districts in need of improvement in their designated geographic areas. Working as an outreach arm of the state agency, RESPROs can better assist and plan service that is responsive and tailored to the needs of a particular area or local school district. It is the RESPRO—not the state agency—that plans technical assistance and contracts with the appropriate providers for the schools and districts in need of identified service. The RESPROs meet monthly with the SEA to discuss general and common issues and challenges as well as to share recent information. The RESPROs also have access to the Illinois e-Plans of the districts with which they are working, enabling them to discuss the plans with client districts to better discuss needs and useful technical assistance. The state also has provided a sample plan that is available on the ISBE website. Schools and districts are encouraged to use the ideas and elements in the plan if appropriate. In Wisconsin, cooperative educational service agencies are able to provide similarly appropriate services to its local school districts.

The Future of SSOS

Additional research and gathering of long-term data needs to be carried out to determine the most successful approaches to creating and maintaining SSOS. While names and configurations of statewide technical assistance and support efforts vary from state to state, it is clear that the need for such support will increase as the number of schools and districts in need of improvement increases. States will need to ensure the existence of plans and personnel to meet this growing need, making SSOS an important initiative in most states. States themselves can further this effort by sharing successful efforts with each other and reaching out to their regional comprehensive assistance centers and other external providers for support. At the same time, it

will be necessary for SEAs to look inward to appraise their own capacity and efficiency in providing service to LEAs in a coordinated manner. The CEP report indicates that as states are called upon to carry out an increasing number of federal education responsibilities, it is important to encourage discussion on the role of SEAs in improving schools and their current capacity to do so. In view of the increasing calls for assistance and the documented need for funding, it is imperative that SEAs efficiently use the resources and personnel that are currently available as they look to increase their support to local districts. In the spirit of continuing improvement of educational services at all levels, SSOS promises to be an interesting and constantly evolving dialogue. Great Lakes West looks forward to assisting states in their ongoing efforts to develop and improve their SSOSs.

Resources

The national network of Comprehensive Centers as well as the National Content Centers are funded by the U.S. Department of Education to assist states in enhancing their capacity to carry out the mandates of NCLB. SEA personnel can contact their regional comprehensive assistance center for information and assistance. CII (www.centerii.org) provides especially useful information on SSOS and other important related topics. CII also maintains an online database that allows the user to target and access information and data about specific states to learn about and compare efforts.

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (www.centerforcsri.org) houses an online research center that includes a database of useful articles and research reports on whole-school reform and improvement; and it provides access to information about reform models, technical assistance providers, and program evaluation. The Center, in conjunction with Learning Point Associates (www.learningpt.org), has developed a series of white papers, *School Restructuring Options Under No Child Left Behind: What Works When?*, identifying best research-based practices with respect to NCLB restructuring options. These resources are available as follows:

- *A Guide for Education Leaders*—www.centerforcsri.org/files/RestructuringGuide.pdf
- *Reopening as a Charter School*—www.centerforcsri.org/pubs/restructuring/KnowledgeIssues2Chartering.pdf
- *Turnarounds With New Leaders and Staff*—www.centerforcsri.org/pubs/restructuring/KnowledgeIssues4Turnaround.pdf
- *Contracting With External Education Management Providers*—www.centerforcsri.org/pubs/restructuring/KnowledgeIssues3Contracting.pdf
- *State Takeovers of Individual Schools*—www.centerforcsri.org/pubs/restructuring/KnowledgeIssues1StateTakeovers.pdf

A link to each approved state accountability plan under NCLB can be found at this U.S. Department of Education website: www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplans03/index.html.

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