Policy Brief

Accountability – School Improvement

The State Role in Accelerating Student Growth in Low-Performing High Schools

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The goal of state intervention in a school or district designated as low-performing is not to punish. It is to help figure out how to improve student learning. The challenge, particularly for a chief state school officer or state board of education, is how best to leverage assistance to schools that have varying degrees of need. Most state legislatures have provided the state board the authority to act. How to proceed with limited funding and staffing is the truly difficult question. This paper examines what has been learned from research and looks at the subsequent implications for state policy. It also makes suggestions for specific actions and provides examples of approaches that states have taken to amend governance and organizational structures, improve instructional conditions and increase instructional capacity.

What are we learning?

From a **state-level, nonprofit point of view**, only dramatic improvement will do. In 2007, Mass Insight Education, a nonprofit organization focused on improving student achievement in Massachusetts public schools, sponsored a state-level analysis of what is necessary to address the needs of low-performing schools. The core principles which the group identified are:

1. **Marginal change yields marginal results.**
   Chronically underperforming schools require dramatic change that is tuned to the high-poverty enrollments they tend to serve. "Light touch" school improvement and traditional methods are not enough.

2. **Dramatic change requires bold, comprehensive action from the state.**
   With rare exceptions, schools and districts – essentially conservative cultures – will not undertake the dramatic changes required for successful turnaround on their own.

3. **Dramatic change at scale requires states to find ways to add new capacity – and galvanize districts to unleash it where it exists.**
   States cannot implement turnaround on the ground at the scale that's needed. Their role is to trigger new approaches that (a) build on what we know from high-performing, high-poverty schools; (b) expand turnaround capacity; and (c) create the conditions in which people can do their best work.

From the **academic point of view**, a 2005 RAND study, *The Role of Districts in Fostering Instructional Improvement*, found district success was tied to the degree to which strategies: (1) were aligned with other existing or new programs; (2) enabled multiple stakeholders to engage in reform; (3) found an appropriate balance between standardization and flexibility; and (4) were enforced by local accountability incentives for meaningful change to instructional practice.

A 2005 University of California report examined corrective action in low-performing schools and drew eight lessons from that experience:
1. Sanctions for schools and districts are not the fallback solution
2. No single reform strategy has been universally successful

3. Staging (setting up the conditions for change) should be handled with flexibility
4. Intensive capacity building is necessary (state, district and school)
5. A comprehensive bundle of strategies is key (stronger curriculum; focus on discipline; expert advice, coaching; new leadership or leadership training, etc.)
6. Relationship-building needs to complement powerful (academic, curricular) programs
7. Competence reduces conflict
8. Strong state commitment is needed to create system capacity.

This California study also found – contrary to the common myth that predicts teachers and principals will resist a strong district role – a weak central office actually limits schools' reform progress. A strong district role is effective and welcomed when it uses a strategic conception of responsibilities and leadership between system levels.

Another 2005 study from RAND, *Policy Options for Interventions in Failing Schools*, found that under the right circumstances, interventions of varying intensity and scope can be successful in having significant, positive impact on performance. Providing the right circumstances, however, is very hard to do. According to this study, the two things that matter most are (a) the intervening body's capacity, and (b) school leadership during or after the intervention. The balance between supporting the school and providing clear boundaries – and escalating sanctions if they are overstepped – is difficult, say the authors, but crucial to get right.

From a **national point of view**, a 2007 Center on Education Policy report found that most states pointed to limited staffing and infrastructure as the greatest challenge to their ability to implement various No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements. Three other areas of challenge that were noted were inadequate federal and state funding; a lack of sufficient guidance and technical support from the U.S. Department of Education; and barriers in NCLB and within state education agencies.

North Carolina was one of the early implementers in providing expert support teams to schools. From the **state point of** view, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction added its own set of key questions as early as 2001:

■ Can states **afford** – and **sustain** – the amount of support they promised and that which is needed?

■ Do states have the **capacity** to provide the necessary services, including identification of underlying problems and effective assistance for turning around performance?

■ How can states **identify** and **replicate** effective support programs across schools and districts, and **eliminate ineffective** programs?

Implications for the State Role

So what does this mean for the **state role?** Dramatic change needs to be coupled with flexibility and sustained effort. But it also needs to be feasible, which means the system of assistance must remain affordable.

State leaders might want to consider developing a state-level framework. Mass Insight Education has developed one model to consider. Briefly, it includes the following actions:

■ Build a **leadership coalition** that represents: school districts (superintendents, board chairs); the legislature (education committee chairs, Ways & Means); state leadership (governor, state education commissioner and state board of education); business and institutions (key reform leaders, nonprofits, universities); and media (education writers, editorial boards).

■ Create a public/private entity such as a **state turnaround enterprise** – to manage the turnaround initiative (Louisiana's Recovery School District, for example; connected loosely or tightly to the state department, but dedicated to managing the network of schools)

■ Establish a **portfolio of management and authority options** (see below) and **differentiate** among "clusters" of schools or districts; carve out **protected space** for turnaround; establish cohorts of turnaround schools with special operating conditions and supports:

- Those needing augmented support and control (e.g., oversight of districts' school turnaround plans; district management yet management within turnaround guidelines)
- Those needing shared support and/or control (e.g., formal partner along with district management)
- Those needing full support, control (e.g., alternative governance; schools pulled from districts).

■ Install **conditions** for turnaround success. Retain **state control over key resources** such as people, time and money to implement effective models. Provide **incentives** for change.

■ Develop **capacities**. This includes supporting the development of principals and other leaders with turnaround skills, providers to help districts and organizers with political skills.

Building a leadership coalition is the most straightforward of these actions and probably needs no further discussion here, except to note that state leaders might want to consider establishing a separate statewide **committee of practitioners** to advise the state board of education and the state commissioner of education**.**

The others seem to fall into three bins: 1) governance and organizational structures; 2) instructional conditions; and 3) instructional capacity.

1. Realign Governance and Organizational Structures

The goal: Build and sustain political will, provide vision and ensure the necessary structures for support and alignment.

All states have established sets of options for intervening in schools identified as low-performing, and in many cases districts or schools select from a menu of options.

Trends in state policy options for intervening in schools identified as low-performing:

Options	Number of States Education Commission of the States 2004	Number of States Education Week 2007
Close and reopen as charter schools	12	16
Reconstitute staff	12	30
Contract with an entity to operate	14	18
Turn over operation to state education agency (or agency designees)	24	20
Implement "other" major governance arrangement	12	29

However, the line between intervention and support is frequently muddy. If the goal is to remove bureaucratic barriers, then state leaders need the capacity to replace or amend the governing body. If the goal is to improve instruction, then the ability to replace building leadership and impact the selection and retention of teachers is essential.

The Mass Insight model suggests that states consider an **intermediary entity** that can provide the overall management of schools identified as low-performing. A state might choose to have this entity manage only the lowest performers or manage all of them – from those needing the most support, to those needing the least. Establishing the three cohorts (augmented support and control; shared support and control; full change in governance and control) might provide some level of efficiency to keep the state department burden more affordable and sustainable.

State Model Approaches

Louisiana has established the Recovery School District to help manage cohorts of schools. This special district may assume jurisdiction over a chronically low-performing school if the local school board fails to present a plan to reconstitute the school to the state board of education; or if a local school board presents a reconstitution plan that is unacceptable to the state board.

New Jersey has established a performance continuum. School status is evaluated every three years and goes as far as "full state intervention" but also allows for "partial" intervention. State leaders may order budget changes, and may appoint a new superintendent if the position is vacant. They also may appoint a highly skilled professional for direct school oversight and may add three members to the board of education.

Massachusetts recently established the Commonwealth Pilot Schools Option. Schools on the verge of being identified as chronically underperforming have a choice: (1) become a pilot school, patterned on the pilot school model developed and implemented in the Boston Public Schools, or (2) be declared a chronically underperforming school and subject to increased state intervention and oversight. Pilot schools are exempt from district policies, although not from state or federal policies. Their school councils have increased authority; teachers are exempt from contract rules, although they receive union salary and benefits.

In **Virginia**, the state board writes a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for low-performing schools or districts. The MOU can include a turnaround specialist. Local boards may reconstitute or close a school.

2. Improve Instructional Conditions

Structures aside, there are broad options for establishing the conditions underlying improved instruction. Some emanate directly from the state department; others are established through legislative requirements. Some focus on providing assistance regionally. Some provide access to expertise, whether through providing vetted lists of providers, assistance teams or online resource banks.

State Model Approaches

Rhode Island uses a "progressive support and intervention model" that provides the most support to the neediest programs. In Providence, 2006 efforts focused assigning "turnaround coaches" to one middle school and assigning oversight of a "special master" to one of the high school complexes. For one other high school and a middle school, the department assigned "leadership mentors." Also, a leadership coordinator was assigned to work at the administrative level in one of the school districts.

Ohio provides assistance through regional service teams – each of which concentrates on an area of focus. **Florida** requires school improvement plans to address the means of alternative instruction delivery methods, including remediation, acceleration and enrichments.

The **North Carolina** Department of Public Instruction provides districts with "guided assistance training modules." Each module represents an independent unit of training, and districts select the modules based on their particular needs. Once the districts' needs have been determined, the state department sets a calendar of training dates and clusters these to more efficiently meet common needs in geographic areas. Clustering helps decrease the number of sessions and allows greater dialogue and sharing of district personnel. The following grid represents an assortment of training modules.

Roles of the Central Office	Data Analysis – District and School	Framework for Developing the District and School Improvement Plan Focusing on All Subgroups Making AYP	Techniques for Monitoring and Supporting the Instructional Program at the School Level	Best Practices and Instructional Strategies for Effectively Teaching Exceptional Children

Leadership for Change Preparing Staff for Changing Expectations – Closing the Gaps/AYP	Setting District and School Priorities Based on Data	Aligning Professional Development to Support Instructional Priorities Basics of Quality Professional Development	Curriculum Alignment and Balanced Curriculum	Best Practices and Strategies for Promoting Language Acquisition
Culture of Poverty	Best Practices for the Elementary Level	Best Practices for the Middle School Level	Best Practices for High School	Aligning Principals' Executive Program (PEPs) to Address Student Needs
Multiculturalism and Diversity	Effective Use of the Instructional Support Staff	School Climate and Health Services	Curriculum Integration	

In **Tennessee**, selected educators model innovative teaching strategies; serve as mentors to principals and teachers; analyze student performance data; connect schools with professional development providers; and build capacity for continuous improvement. **South Carolina** takes a similar approach.

In **Kansas**, the Improvement and Support Team (IST) provides appropriate technical support to districts and schools designated as needing improvement, which can include: assistance with data analysis and root cause analysis; facilitative coaching on the improvement process; systematic review of and guidance through the District Self Assessment Continuum process; guidance on reading components and math strands; assistance in identifying appropriate strategies that reflect needs identified by data; coordination of best practice in professional development to support instructional strategies; school and/or district action plan review; and monitoring of plan implementation.

2.5 Consider also the following mechanisms for establishing conditions that support instructional capacity.

a. Help districts and schools identify root causes of problems and act efficiently to address them

State policy should ensure improvement strategies are aimed at the right stuff – not merely at the symptoms of the problems.

- Provide a list of **experts available** for consultation (short-term and long-term, by category of need)

- Ensure this list recommends experts with records of successful assistance or provide an **online review mechanism** for quality assurance purposes.

b. Target assistance to areas of greatest need

Direct professional development or expert assistance toward instruction of any student population where data indicates a core need (students with disabilities or English language learners, for example). Focus on content areas such as reading or math – where data indicates need.

c. Provide accessible models

Promote the use of the best-performing, whole-school **reform models**. American Institutes for Research (AIR) recently published a study of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program (CSRD) that found models can matter when implemented "faithfully and consistently for three to five years." Not all models perform well, but those identified as having the strongest learning gains or that build "social

capital" by fostering an atmosphere of continuous improvement where staff work together on common goals are worthy avenues for schools to adopt.

Provide **self-study tools**. The New Hampshire Learning Interchange provides online resources where educators can access frameworks and lesson plans, New Hampshire Public Television TeacherLine offerings, a survey to help teachers identify their technology needs and other resources.

d. Strengthen the power of improvement plans

State leaders should consider:

- ■ Focusing proactively on early identification of low school performance. A 2006 law enacted in **Texas** requires a technical assistance team (TAT) to be selected and assigned to any campus that might currently be rated "Academically Acceptable" but which will be rated Academically Unacceptable for the subsequent year.

- ■ Requiring a review process for improvement plans.

- ■ Shortening the timeline for development and implementation of improvement plans.

- ■ Providing **examples of improvement plans** that have demonstrated results.

State Model Approaches

Illinois legislation passed in 2006 established a peer review process for evaluating school improvement plans. The bill also requires parents and outside experts to be involved in the development.

A **Florida** law enacted in 2006 requires local boards to annually approve improvement plans. Beginning with plans approved for implementation in the 2007-08 school year, each secondary school plan must include a redesign component based on the **principles** of the High School Redesign Act (e.g., strongest teachers for struggling students, applied/integrated coursework and intensive interventions). At a minimum, school improvement plans must include professional development; continuous use of disaggregated student achievement data; ongoing informal and formal assessments to monitor individual student progress; and alternative instructional delivery methods to support remediation, acceleration and enrichment strategies.

Pennsylvania provides an assessment and intervention tool as part of its system for continuous school improvement. The Local Self-Study (LSS) is designed for school-level review and operates under district or central office management. It is aligned to the state's quality review process and can be particularly valuable prior to writing or revising a school improvement plan.

Arkansas Act 57 (enacted in 2007) expanded **state department monitoring** of school district implementation of school improvement plans. New legal provisions require that improvement plans are (1) based on student performance data, and (2) include a plan of action that addresses performance deficiencies. Plans must include how a school will use its categorical funding for alternative environments, professional development, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and Title I students. Schools are required to file revised comprehensive improvement plans and assess the effectiveness of interventions or other actions included in the plan. Such analysis is to be included in the following year's school improvement plan.

e. Provide a list of anticipated problems – and match professional development or resources to those problems

If state leaders can anticipate common problems, professional development and best practices can be matched to them and broadly disseminated. Conversely, it could also be very helpful to identify what has NOT had a positive effect on addressing common problems.

A 2005 study of the Virginia turnaround specialist program found that the turnaround principals typically encountered four primary **"predictable predicaments"** (see box) and a larger number of secondary conditions that influenced these four problems.

Primary conditions that represent obstacles to overcome
Reading problems
Math problems
Attendance problems
Discipline problems

The secondary conditions included personnel problems, lack of focus, unaligned curriculum, ineffective scheduling, data deprivation, lack of teamwork, inadequate infrastructure, dysfunctional school culture, lack of effective instructional interventions, lack of inclusion of special education students, lack of specialists, low parent involvement, negative perceptions of school, inadequate facilities, inadequate instructional materials and central office instability.

f. Establish guiding principles for interventions

In 2003 the **Texas** legislature authorized the Texas High School Completion and Success (THSCS) Program, which was designed to target underperforming high school campuses through campus- and student-level interventions. The Texas Education Agency identified eight guiding principles for applicants to use. Schools were free to design and select their own interventions based on these principles:
1. High expectations and performance-based accountability
2. Personalized learning environment
3. Common focus and shared values
4. Staff development and time to collaborate
5. Learning partnerships with parents and the community
6. Support and networking
7. Technology as a tool
8. Coordinated resources.

g. Target dollars for continuous improvement

Spend money on what matters most.

- Enhance funding for at-risk and English language learners. (Tennessee study)

- Seek funding for **statewide, comprehensive induction program** for new teachers. (Tennessee study)

- Enhance **funding for improved working conditions and recruitment** of teachers and leaders who bring a proven track record of accelerating student learning.

- Provide assistance to districts and schools in **evaluating their use of resources**.

- Provide means of **electronic conferencing and other electronic tools** (videos, etc.) for more efficient professional development.

  The annual South Carolina report, "What Is the Penny Buying for South Carolina?" recommended that the department consider the possibility of disseminating information or conducting training using properly monitored (who attends, how is the information used, etc.) technology as a substitute for some on-site meetings; methods of sharing information such as two-way video or audio conferences, Web-based seminars, CDs, and podcasts tailored to the message and the audience could be utilized.

- For any state that has not yet done so, seek funding and invest in the development of a **state data system** that includes the 10 components recommended by the Data Quality Campaign – and provide the training and quality control necessary for its successful implementation.

- Invest in **measurement of the impact** of assistance provided to low-performing schools.

h. Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate

The **Texas High School Project** (THSP), a public/private initiative, has provided High School Redesign and Restructuring (HSRR) grants to high school campuses rated "Academically Unacceptable." Goals for these resources are to: (1) correct the specific area of unacceptable performance; (2) increase overall student achievement; (3) raise academic standards and expectations for all students; (4) demonstrate innovative management and instructional practices; (5) ensure every student is taught by highly qualified, effective teachers; (6) develop leadership capacity in principals and other school leaders; and (7) engage parents and the community in school activities. To date, two cycles of grantee campuses (29 campuses) have been funded for this program; Cycle 1 funding began in April 2005 and Cycle 2 funding began in February 2006.

An initial evaluation was published in January 2007, finding varied results among the schools depending on whether implementation was at the high, medium or low level. For example, researchers found "staff turnover, limited resources, shifting accountability ratings, and pre-existing reform initiatives influenced the context in which initial implementation of the HSRR efforts occurred. Texas *Redesign* funds equipped needy schools with basic materials and enabled them to develop credit recovery options, facilitate teacher collaboration, and increase professional development." Also, "redesign plans included a variety of models, but awardee schools did not consistently research selected redesign plans; nor did they involve staff in their selection and development."

Close the loop on the provision of services. Implement **regular, ongoing evaluation** of state, regional, local or external expert services. The **Delaware** state department commissions an annual independent survey to determine satisfaction of school boards, administrators, teachers, parent organizations and the business community.

3. Improve Instructional Capacity

Efforts to improve instructional capacity should include not only improving the knowledge and skills of teachers, but the knowledge and skills of school and district leaders.

a. Help teachers get a year's growth from all of the students they teach

Empower teachers with the knowledge, tools and authority they need to accelerate student learning.

- Make available **data** on student performance and adult performance

- Rely heavily on **data analysis** to identify students who need help and design remediation to address specific weaknesses

- Don't provide training and go away forever; provide professional development that builds **incrementally** upon new knowledge; once new knowledge has been incorporated, provide further training to scaffold upon it and move to the next level

- Provide access to formative (diagnostic) assessments

- Provide training in ongoing use of data

- Provide for **staff time** that is dedicated to learning and sharing:

  - In "Complexity, Accountability, and School Improvement," Jennifer O'Day recommends fostering connections within and across units to allow access to and reflection on information relevant to teaching and learning
  - O'Day also recommends that policymakers pay particular attention to developing the knowledge base necessary for valid interpretation of information

- Consider establishing a **statewide professional development network**; a 2002 New Hampshire Professional Development Task Force Report recommended such a network for:

  - Teachers and principals
  - Professional development consumers; professional development providers
  - Policymakers
  - Community/taxpayers.

b. Remove barriers to hiring and retaining teachers
who successfully demonstrate the ability to get a year's growth
from the students they teach

Put and keep teachers in place who can accelerate student learning.

- Use research based selection criteria for teachers (and principals). Schools can be no better than the teachers and principals who work with students. Pre-screening and other selection tools can help identify teachers and leaders who bring the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to be successful with students in high poverty schools. A strong selection process also contributes to teacher retention.

According to school leaders at Buffalo Creek Elementary School, in Spring Branch ISD, Houston, Texas, the twenty-seven staff members who were originally hired in 1997 using the Haberman Urban Teacher Selection Interview Instrument as an integral part of the teacher selection process are still teaching at Buffalo Creek. Ten staff members have since been added and they too, were hired using the same protocol. In 2004-2005, this high-poverty school received an "Acceptable" rating and in 2006, the school received Recognized status.

- Provide significant incentives for teachers to move to low-performing schools (pay, working conditions)

- Audit the extent of state-level authority to intervene in staffing, governance decisions; consider strengthening policies related to staff observation, evaluation and employment.

State Model Approaches

California law forbids the state superintendent from assuming management of a "state-monitored school," but it allows the state superintendent to renegotiate a collective bargaining agreement at the expiration of the existing agreement.

In **Missouri,** if a school is found to be "academically deficient," the local school board may suspend (after due process) the indefinite contracts of "contributing teachers." The local school board may not grant tenure to any probationary teacher until one year after the "academically deficient" designation is lifted and may not issue new contracts or renew contracts to either the superintendent or the principal for a period of longer than one year.

A study conducted by the **Center on Education Policy** (CEP) in **Michigan** from August 2006 to January 2007 found that the percent of schools replacing the school principal declined from 63% in 2004-05 to 8% in 2005-06. During the same time period, schools increased their use of turnaround specialists from 16% of schools in 2004-05 to 72% in 2005-06.

c. Help leaders learn what they need to know to accelerate student learning – and provide them with the authority to act

School and district leaders drive improvement of instructional practice and performance.

In **School Reform from the Inside Out**, Richard Elmore asserts that five principles lay the foundation for a model of distributed leadership.
1. The purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of role.
2. Instructional improvement requires continuous learning.
3. Learning requires modeling.
4. The roles and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution.
5. The exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity.

State leaders need to develop a strategy for investing in the knowledge and skills of leaders, and to base such a strategy on Elmore's principles would be optimal. Such a strategy also might consider how to:

- Provide continuous training and expert assistance

- Provide authority or remove authority

- Provide incentives to attract and retain the best where they are needed most

- Buffer leaders from noninstructional issues

- Leave no school board behind; ensure elected local leaders have access to the professional development required to lead improvement efforts within their district systems.

State Models

For several years, **Virginia** has had a program in place to develop a cadre of principals who specialize in turning around chronically troubled schools. Training reflects a focus on business and education strategies that have proved effective in turning around low-performing organizations. Each specialist serves under contract as the principal of a low-performing school for a minimum of three years, and each is eligible for such incentives as additional retirement benefits or deferred compensation. **Arkansas** has a similar program. Additional compensation is significant, ranging from $10,000 to $25,000 annually.

Also in **Arkansas**, a 2005 law established the Arkansas Leadership Academy School Support Program to train principals and teachers in schools and districts designated as being in school improvement. Any school district in school improvement may be invited, strongly encouraged or required to participate in the program.

Georgia recently implemented the Georgia Academic Coach Program. Middle and high school math and science were targeted in 2006-07. Academic coaches work with principals to develop a focus plan.

Conclusion

These options reflect a growing knowledge base and are not intended to provide definitive answers to very difficult issues. They are meant to provide policymakers and other state leaders with a basis for discussion and a foundation on which further improvements can be built. Continuous improvement is, after all, a means of building on data; crafting solutions based on the best knowledge available; and reaching for the future rather than blaming the past.

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Helping State Leaders Shape Education Policy