

## Authors

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## Summary

Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), state education agencies are required to assume new roles and responsibilities. Among these is the establishment of a state system to support schools identified for improvement under the Act. Conceptualizing and operationalizing these systems of support has been a challenge for many state agencies, in part because this role is a departure from the traditional compliance monitoring activities with which state officials are most familiar. This brief presents data from a national survey of state administrators to describe trends in the implementation of this NCLB mandate. We begin by outlining the common components of state systems of support under NCLB and then suggest a set of research-supported indicators of the quality of those supports. Our purpose is to provide state officials and policy analysts a framework with which to assess and refine current and planned systems of state support. This brief is a companion to *Help Wanted: State Capacity for School Improvement*.

## State Systems of Support Under NCLB: Design Components and Quality Considerations

### Introduction

State education agencies are actively seeking to improve their low-performing schools. The recent focus on “turnaround schools” and “dropout factories” has led to a lively policy dialogue about the very lowest-performing schools (see Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, and Lash, 2007), but state officials are also concerned with a broader range of low-performing schools, including those on the cusp of failure. The current level of state activity is driven not

only by NCLB but also by state accountability laws and state economic, political, and equity concerns. Whatever the impetus that has motivated state officials, national data indicate that all states have implemented some sort of system to support low-performing schools, and most states are seeking to refine their supports—particularly when confronted with chronically failing schools (Le Floch, Martinez, O’Day, Stecher, Taylor, & Cook, 2007; Rhim, Hassel, & Redding, 2008).

**State officials cannot be sure if they have adequate capacity to assist increasing numbers of schools identified for improvement, whether accountability strategies are making in-roads in the most challenging schools, or whether hard-won improvements can be sustained.**

In the past, many policy efforts have focused on state content standards, assessments, performance targets, and public reporting of school-level accountability results. However, most schools that are identified for improvement need more than goals and public pressure to improve—they need outside assistance to diagnose problems, identify solutions, and build internal capacity (Finnigan & O’Day, 2003).

At present, all states have designed and implemented supports and interventions to help schools identified for improvement. However, state officials cannot be sure if they have adequate capacity to assist increasing numbers of these schools, whether accountability strategies are making in-roads in the most challenging

schools, or whether hard-won improvements can be sustained. In short, they cannot be sure if the support provided is of adequate quality to stimulate and maintain the desired achievement gains. In the next few years, we are likely to witness further change—if not overhaul—among state systems of support as states work to address these challenges by expanding and/or rethinking their provision of support. To inform this revision process, it may help to consider the features and quality of the systems of support currently operating throughout the nation.

In this research brief, we address two central questions in the design of a state

system of support. First, what are the primary *components* of state support to low-performing schools? Second, what are key indicators of the *quality* of supports provided to schools? In response to the first question, we will map the terrain of current state support systems so that state officials can consider the array of choices open to them and potentially identify gaps in their own approaches. In response to the second question, we will offer a set of indicators (supported by prior research) that state officials can use to evaluate the quality of their supports. While we do not offer a roadmap for improving state systems of support, our intent is to inform the on-going work of state education officials, policy analysts, and technical assistance providers by stimulating dialogue, system refinements, and evaluations of effectiveness.

To address these questions, we present national data on features of states’ systems of support. In February, 2008, staff from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) surveyed state officials in all 50 states on their capacity and approaches to providing ongoing support to schools identified for improvement. This online survey, which attained a response rate of 100 percent, included questions on the structure of state systems of support, states’ capacity to support school improvement, the types of staff that states employ within their systems of support, and the functions staff members perform to facilitate school improvement. Respondents were state officials with primary responsibility for their state system of support for schools and districts identified for improvement. The survey also included several opportunities for state officials to provide open-ended responses. All quotations in this research brief, unless otherwise cited, are compiled from state officials’ responses to this survey.

## Accountability Context

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act took aim at the nation's persistent achievement gap by asserting that all students must demonstrate grade-level proficiency—as defined by states—in math and reading by the year 2014. In service of this ambitious goal, the law called upon states to institute stronger school accountability measures that would identify under-performing schools and monitor their progress toward meeting specified growth targets. To ensure that schools had the capacity to achieve their growth targets, Section 1117(a)(1) of NCLB instructed states to “establish a state-wide system of intensive and sustained support” that would provide assistance to under-performing schools and their corresponding local education agencies in order to facilitate academic improvement.

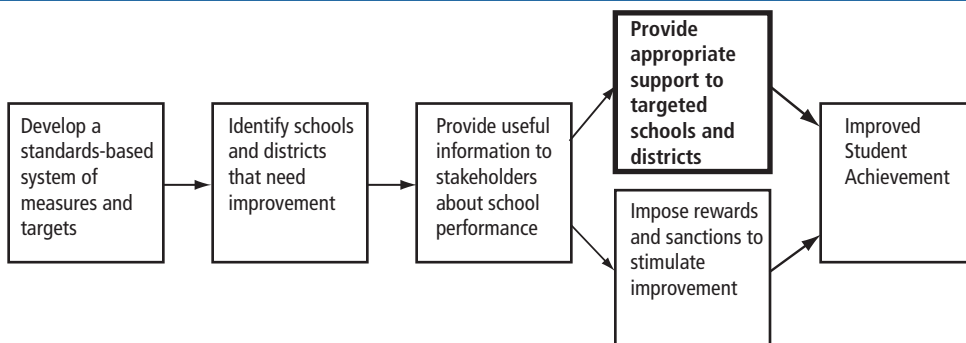
Federal laws (NCLB, and before that, the Improving America's Schools Act), have been major stimuli in the development of state systems of support. Many states—among these California, North Carolina, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Massachusetts—had established mechanisms and programs to support low-performing schools well before NCLB made statewide strategies mandatory. Although these state supports still exist, and in many cases are more firmly established, the data presented in this

research brief relate to support systems established in response to the mandates of NCLB. In surveying states, we chose to focus on NCLB systems of support because they are a common requirement of all states and thus allow us to examine trends on a national scale. However, our discussion of system components and research-supported indicators of quality could apply equally to other state initiatives to support low-performing schools.

Supports for school improvement should be understood within a broader framework of school accountability. A results-based accountability system is designed to focus attention on student performance (by setting performance targets), to motivate educators to change (by public disclosure of performance and through rewards and sanctions), and to build capacity (through external assistance and resources) (O'Day and Bitter, 2003). A summary overview of the NCLB accountability process is depicted in Exhibit 1.

The focus of this research brief is just one component of this broader framework: provide appropriate support to targeted schools (the bolded box, below). For this reason, we will not discuss other important elements of the accountability system, including possible rewards and sanctions.

**Exhibit 1: NCLB Accountability Approach to Improving Student Achievement**



## Design of State Systems of Support

When NCLB went into effect, research on effective state support strategies was limited,

yet states were required to make numerous design decisions. States' designs for systems of support were shaped by their own internal capacity (Rhim, Hassel, and Redding, 2007), federal law and guidance (Le Floch et al., 2007; Laguarda, 2003) and each state's assumptions about how to achieve better results (Reville, 2007; Education Alliance at Brown University, 2006). State capacity—which we explore more fully in a companion research brief<sup>1</sup>—includes

financial and human resources, technological capacity and the political will to make and support required changes. Together, these shape the breadth, depth, and intensity with which states can respond to the demand for support.

Although rarely articulated, state officials generally share a number of assumptions about how school improvement takes place, inherited from the framework set out in NCLB. State officials hold a set of beliefs (sometimes described as a *theory of action*) about how schools work, why schools fail, how schools change, and how to help schools change effectively (see, for example, Argyris & Schoen, 1974; Argyris, 2000; and Fullan, 2007). Many officials adhere to the general premise that failing schools lack some degree of internal capacity and will, but that with adequate infor-

mation, external guidance, pressure, and funding, they should be able to improve. Other assumptions vary from state to state and underlie a host of decisions about how to most effectively design, implement, and sustain school improvement. Such decisions include how much and what types of external support should be provided, who should provide support and to whom, to what extent and on what basis should support be differentiated, what should constitute the sequence of steps in the school improvement process, and how much authority schools should have in selecting improvement strategies.

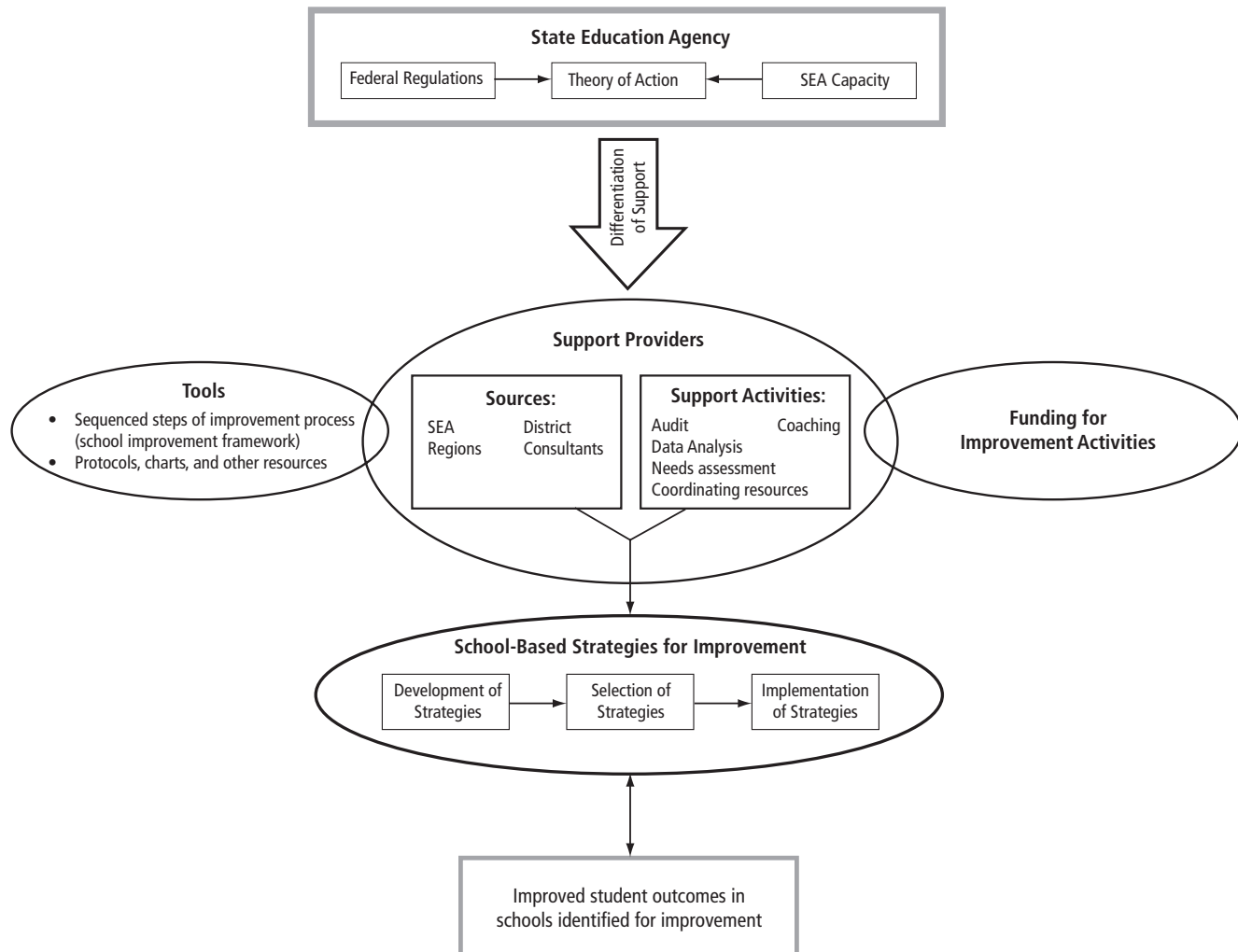
North Carolina is among the few states that explicitly articulate the theory of action that grounds its state system of support. For example, North Carolina specifies how its approach is anchored in the principles of building district capacity to support all schools, providing more intensive support to chronically low-performing schools, and tailoring support to specific district and school needs (for more details see North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007; see also Reville, 2007 for a discussion of how theories of action can inform the design of state system of support).

## Components of state support

In our review of the structure of state systems nationally, we have identified key components of these systems, each of which we discuss below. These components are: (1) tools to support the school improvement process, (2) providers who deliver support, (3) support activities, (4) funding for school improvement, and (5) the content of the improvement strategies themselves (see Exhibit 2).

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**Exhibit 2. Components of State Systems of Support for Low-Performing Schools**



**Tools to support the school improvement process**

By 2008, most states had developed a *comprehensive framework for school improvement*, that is, an outline of key components and/or steps that schools should consider as they plan their improvement strategy. Associated with these frameworks, state officials often develop tools (templates, rubrics, on-line protocols) that take schools through a step-by-step process of planning and implementation. For example, Michigan’s framework identifies five “strands” on which low-performing schools should focus: (1) teaching for learning, (2) leadership, (3) personnel and professional learn-

ing, (4) school and community relations, and (5) data and information management. For each of these strands, the state education agency has delineated standards, benchmarks, and key characteristics. Similarly, New Mexico’s “Education Plan for Student Success” is anchored by (1) quality teaching and learning, (2) professional culture and collaborative relationships, (3) effective leadership, and (4) support for system-wide improvement.

In states that have developed frameworks for school improvement, the intent is for these to guide each step of the school improvement process, including the use of planning tools, activities of support per-

sonnel, and funding priorities. Based on our review of state education agency websites in early 2008, 32 states had developed frameworks and 43 states had developed tools designed to support the school improvement process.

### ***Support providers***

Under NCLB, state systems of support are required to include individuals or groups who provide external support to identified schools. Support is provided by staff from a range of public organizations—including state education agencies, regional assistance centers, and school districts—as well as external consultants and private organizations.

Results from AIR's 2008 survey indicated all states had designated SEA staff who were engaged in activities related to their system of support; in addition, all but one state employed other individuals or groups to supplement the efforts of their SEA. In some states, particularly those with large numbers of schools identified for improvement and/or limited SEA staff resources, the decision to add external service providers into their system of support resulted from sheer necessity, due to their lack of internal capacity. In other states, the inclusion of external staff has enabled SEAs to offer schools more specialized or intensive levels of support. Only one state indicated that its system of support was comprised solely of SEA staff, and state officials emphasized the coherence inherent in a centralized approach. One state official explained, "Since our team works out of the Department of Education office, we are cohesive in our service delivery efforts. We do coordinate with other state department units to deliver coordinated services to schools and districts."

Among states that have incorporated additional personnel, 46 reported using consultants in 2008, either by hiring individuals with specialized expertise or, in some cases, by contracting with external organizations to provide support. In Tennessee, for example, the "exemplary educator" program is administered through a private organization, Edvantia, Inc., which selects, trains, and monitors the activities of exemplary educators.<sup>2</sup> A sizeable number of states (29) noted their support system's use of district staff. States generally provide training to the district staff operating within their system of support and provide some level of oversight and monitoring to ensure school needs are met.

Half of all states (25) built their system of support around a regional network of service centers or county offices, many of which existed prior to NCLB. Regional systems can be particularly important for geographically large states where travel to schools can be a challenge for centrally-located SEA staff. Regional units still fall under the purview of the SEA but focus on schools and districts within their region.

Professional networks, or other activities to foster collaboration among school improvement professionals, appear to be an emergent trend in state systems of support (Reville, 2007). Massachusetts, for instance, established a School Support Specialist Network wherein district- and state-based School Support Specialists would meet at least once a month to share information, resources, and strategies for assisting low-performing schools. Massachusetts also convenes its urban superintendents on a monthly basis to facilitate professional networking. In Michigan, principals from schools in need of improvement participate in a series of leadership institutes, which helps establish professional networks among principals in high priority schools.

## ***State Systems of Support under NCLB: Design Components and Quality Considerations***

## Support activities

Federal statute specifies some of the functions of a state system of support (see NCLB section 1117(a)(5)(B)) including analyzing data, designing a school improvement plan, and monitoring implementation of the plan. Additionally, scholars of state systems of support have suggested activities that are appropriate (and desirable) for state systems of support including planning and implementation, leadership support, use of data, instructional support, and professional development (Reville, 2007).

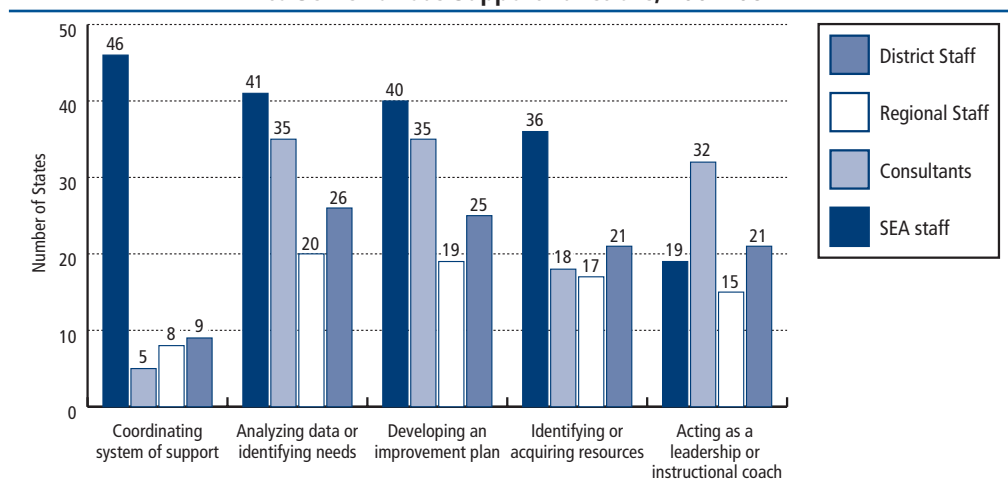
In many states, SEA staff are directly involved in performing these support functions, especially providing assistance with needs assessments (in 41 states), resource acquisition (in 36 states), and school improvement planning (in 40 states). Fewer states (19) employ SEA staff to serve as leadership or instructional coaches, but a fair proportion of states engage consultants (32 states), district staff (21 states), and regional service providers (15 states) to perform these roles.

District and regional staff often serve many of the same school support functions as SEA staff, though the number of states that use them in such capacities is somewhat low overall since fewer states incorporate district and regional staff into their support systems (29 and 25, respectively). Consultants, who are active in more state support systems (46) than staff from district or regional offices, frequently are used to support needs assessment (in 35 states) and improvement planning (in 35 states) processes; however, only 18 states use consultants to help identify or acquire resources (see Exhibit 3).

## Targeted Funding for Improvement Activities

Financial resources are another critical ingredient of state systems of support. Money alone cannot solve the problems facing low-performing schools, but additional funding can often enable schools to make recommended changes designed to improve student outcomes (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005; Dwyer et al., 2005; Reville et al., 2005; Ascher, Ikeda, & Fruchter, 1998; Davis, McDonald, and Lyons, 1997). NCLB

**Exhibit 3: Number of States Using Particular Types of Staff to Serve Various Support Functions, 2007–08**



Source: AIR Survey of State Education Agency Capacity, February 2008.

Note: Three states that did not provide data on their support activities have been excluded from this analysis.

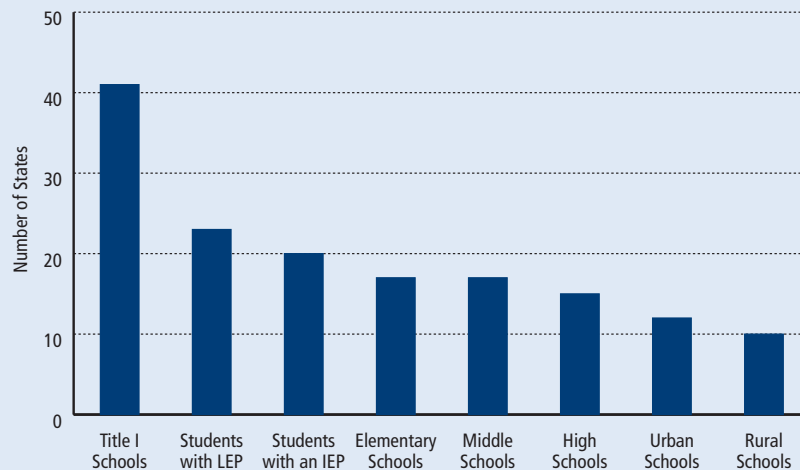
### Design Questions: To what degree should support be differentiated?

States differ greatly in the degree to which they tailor support based on school characteristics. Often, such differences are related to capacity constraints as much as state-specific approaches to improvement. For example, states typically commit the most support to Title I schools, which are backed by federal funding, and offer either reduced or no support to non-Title I schools because less, if any, funding is available to assist them (see Exhibit 4).

In the face of limited resources, several states have opted to target support to their lowest performing schools to ensure that their neediest schools receive assistance. By 2008, 38 states had developed tiered systems of support in which the form and intensity of support increased according to the severity of a school's accountability designation. For instance, in Texas, Title I schools identified for improvement receive support from a technical assistance provider (or TAP). The number of days that a TAP is required to spend on the school site varies both by school size and by the number of years a school has been identified for improvement: as few as 20 days for a small school that just entered school improvement, but as many as 45 days for a large school that reaches restructuring status. States may also consider indicators other than school improvement status, such as school achievement levels or reasons for failing AYP.

SEA capacity is not the only driver of support differentiation. State officials may also have assumptions about the extent to which successful school improvement is related to school context. In 2008, many states indicated that they adjust their support strategies in response to specific school and district contexts (see Exhibit 4). States may, for instance, modify their provision of support based on a school's district setting. Minnesota, which uses a regional system to provide support for the majority of its school districts, has developed an alternate approach for serving schools in its two largest cities where greater concentrations of schools are identified for improvement. SEA staff work directly with these schools, providing assistance that is similar to what is offered by the state's regional staff but customized to meet the needs of these two urban districts. States may also tailor their services to address school needs regarding special student populations such as students with limited English proficiency (LEP) or students following an individualized education plan (IEP). For example, Michigan is developing a targeted audit process for schools that miss their AYP targets only for the English language learners or special education subgroups. Frequently, states will support schools with such needs by assigning individuals with specialized expertise in these areas to work with these schools.

**Exhibit 4: Number of States that Differentiate Support Based on Various School Criteria, 2007–08**



Source: AIR Survey of State Education Agency Capacity, February 2008.

Note: Two states that did not provide data on their approach to support differentiation have been excluded from this analysis.

Lastly, more than a third of all states (19) indicated that they differentiate support for low-performing schools according to schools' grade levels: 17 states reported tailoring support specifically for elementary schools and another 17 states reported doing so for high schools while 15 states indicated that they differentiate support for middle schools. Recognizing that schools face different sets of challenges depending upon the grade levels they serve, these states have endeavored to align the support schools receive with the challenges associated with their particular grade spans.



provides some funding for school improvement through provisions detailed in section 1003(a) of the law. States are required to set aside a portion of their Title I funds to establish a School Improvement Fund, which is then disbursed to schools on either a competitive or formulaic basis. Because states vary greatly in the size of their Title I allocation in proportion to the number of schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring, the size of the section 1003(a) grants to schools varies. For example, in 2004–05, Arkansas had \$2.1 million for 272 schools identified for improvement, while Minnesota had \$2.3 million in school improvement funds for 38 schools identified for improvement (McClure, 2005). Federal funds are not the only source of financial support for low-performing schools. States also provide targeted state funds to support school improvement (often through targeted grant programs), and private foundations support improvement strategies as well.

### **School-based strategies to stimulate improvement**

At the heart of the school improvement process is a set of strategies and activities through which stakeholders hope to stimulate school-level changes that will lead to improved student outcomes. As described earlier, state-level supports in the form of tools, funding, and external service providers are generally geared toward helping schools select appropriate strategies in response to their identified needs and toward empowering schools to carry out those interventions to generate improvement.

School improvement strategies vary in scope from those that encompass numerous areas of a school's operation to those that hone in on particular school activities or content areas. At the most *comprehen-*

*sive* end of the spectrum are whole school reform models such as America's Choice, Success for All, Talent Development, and High Schools that Work, which offer a cohesive package of what are designed to be mutually reinforcing practices to increase student achievement. Collectively, the behaviors prescribed by these models address many different school functions, including instruction, scheduling, organizational structures, and staff development, among others.

More focused *programmatic* interventions tend to concentrate on particular school activities (such as parent involvement or teacher collaboration) or content areas (often reading or math), though some of these targeted interventions may cut across multiple aspects of the school. For example, a school might

alter its instructional schedule to create common teacher planning time as a means of fostering the development of a professional learning community, facilitating interdisciplinary approaches to instruction, and/or improving school climate (Morrissey, 2000; Maclver, 1990; Warren & Muth, 1995).

Another popular school improvement strategy is the organization of classroom "data walks" through which school leaders conduct regular teacher observations to collect and analyze data on

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### Design Question: Who should decide which improvement strategies are appropriate?

A key question influencing states' approaches to providing support is how much authority schools should have in determining which interventions they will implement. Answers to this question, which reflect important assumptions about the relative capacities of schools and their external stakeholders, shape not only the types of support states choose to provide but also how these chosen supports interact with schools.

Some states endorse a view that school-level stakeholders (generally with some external assistance) are in the best position to understand their own context and challenges. In these cases, school staff themselves decide which solutions are appropriate, often with some level of facilitation from the state. The assumption is that having schools develop their own approaches to tackling their most salient problems will more naturally encourage school-level buy-in, implementation, and sustainability. It also supposes that schools have some basic level of internal capacity, and just need a little help to articulate, refine, and implement solutions. Accordingly, states subscribing to this approach might focus their support structures on helping schools make informed choices, for example by coordinating a school-based planning process or providing information or research on promising improvement strategies. Such states might position their support providers to serve as critical friends, process facilitators, and/or information resources rather than decision-makers or advocates of particular strategies.

In Washington state, which explicitly empowers school-based staff to choose which interventions to implement, teams of school staff engage in a year-long process of analyzing data, identifying goals, and proposing strategies. To support these school teams in composing a set of interventions that will best address their needs, the state hosts conferences that introduce research-based strategies (such as Professional Learning Communities or Data Walks), allocates funding to pay for school staff's improvement planning time, provides tools to guide the improvement planning process, and assigns a school improvement facilitator to assist in the development of a school improvement plan.

Other states opt to exert greater influence over the selection of underperforming schools' improvement strategies. They may require or endorse the use of particular interventions, either by establishing state-level policies to that effect or by authorizing external service providers to select interventions for schools. The most frequent scenario where states constrain schools' decision-making authority is one in which authority is progressively retracted from the school as their accountability designation becomes more severe. For example, schools identified for improvement might retain a good deal of decision-making authority, working closely with external support staff (perhaps a leadership coach or a school improvement team) that guide the school but do not impose solutions. If a school enters into corrective action or restructuring, the district, a regional organization, or an external governing board becomes the decision-maker. In such cases, state officials rely on the expertise of these organizations to select an appropriate intervention and do not second-guess their decisions. Such policies reflect assumptions about the level of internal capacity in failing schools (i.e., this capacity is increasingly in doubt as school failure persists) as well as assumptions about the appropriate level of state control. In Arkansas, schools that reach the corrective action phase of school improvement are strongly encouraged to implement the strategies prescribed in the America's Choice school reform model, unless the schools can demonstrate that they have the capacity to substantially improve outcomes across all student groups under their existing set of improvement strategies. Somewhat less prescriptive is Hawaii, which in 2005 identified three external organizations (America's Choice, ETS Pulliam, and Edison Schools) to work with schools at the restructuring level.

Instances in which states enter into exclusive contracts with providers of externally-developed interventions within the context of their system of support are relatively rare. However, reliance on external interventions—ideally backed by scientifically-based research—is a feature of all state systems of support, to varying degrees. In states that choose to emphasize the utility of externally-developed strategies, the premise is that low-performing schools lack the capacity to improve by themselves and will best be served by external organizations that bring knowledge, on-going research, professional development and other supports. Developer organizations have generally mapped out the steps for implementing their strategies (and may provide associated supports, for a fee). Moreover, there is often (but not always) evidence of the effectiveness of these interventions through third-party research reviews such as those provided by the What Works Clearinghouse or directly by the intervention developer. For these reasons, externally-developed strategies may seem like a safer bet for schools; however, locally-developed or “homegrown” strategies may also be successful in stimulating improvement, depending on the scale of the challenge and the capacity and resourcefulness of school stakeholders (Simmons, 2006).

pedagogy and instruction (Bloom, 2007; Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2004). Other interventions may address the use of instructional time (either extending or re-organizing the use of time) or involve changes to the internal organization of the school (creating grade clusters or small learning communities). Because programmatic interventions tend to be somewhat limited in scope, schools typically rely on an array of such strategies to provide a more comprehensive approach to their improvement needs.

Once schools have conducted a needs assessment, identified weaknesses, and selected improvement strategies, they must *implement* the strategies. Relatively few states provide support throughout the implementation process. One example of a state that does provide implementation support is Delaware. Through the Delaware Educational Support System (DESS), school improvement facilitators provide support for districts with schools identified for improvement. These facilitators work with districts as long as the schools are identified. An important component of their work is to facilitate school-to-school relationships that promote implementation of common strategies.

## Indicators of Quality of State Supports

Research has highlighted several characteristics of external assistance that appear to be related to change in practice. To date, however, there is little research on the actual quality of the support provided through state systems, and few studies have attempted to link state supports with student achievement effects.<sup>3</sup> To advance policy discussions, we offer a possible framework of indicators of the quality of state supports. We identify eight indicators of quality that

policymakers and state officials should consider both in the *design* and *implementation* of state systems of support. These build on the framework of policy attributes developed by Andrew Porter and colleagues (1988) as well as others who have used and modified this framework (for example, Finnigan & O'Day, 2003; Desimone, 2002). In addition, we have reviewed studies of external support to schools, including support from both states and districts, to identify additional attributes that scholars cite as strengths (or, conversely, attributes whose absence scholars cite as shortcomings) in contributing to effective school improvement efforts.

When considering quality, there are two sides of a state system of support: the systemic features (that is, the set of policies and structures that compose the system of support), as well as the actual support that is provided to school-level staff. The first four indicators listed below may be used to gauge the quality of *systemic features* as well as *local support*.

The latter four indicators are primarily measures of the support received at the school level. Although states may set policies that enhance or constrain the latter four measures, they are most relevant in the context of school needs. These eight indicators include:

- ◆ **Coherence:** *There is a need for coherence within a system of support, as well as among the supports offered to low-performing schools* (Lane, 2007; Reville, 2007; Education Alliance at Brown University, 2006; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003; Porter, 1994).

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State policies should collectively reinforce and not contradict one another. Various state approaches should not create unnecessarily duplication of efforts, work at cross purposes, or confuse school staff. For example, if states have multiple support initiatives (perhaps a high school improvement initiative and an NCLB system of support) the various support providers should be encouraged to communicate and coordinate efforts for specific schools.

- ◆ **Comprehensiveness:** *Although an individual school may only need to target one type of challenge, the state system as a whole should be comprehensive; that is, the system should be designed to address the wide range of variables that can limit student learning* (Rennie Center, 2004; Weinbaum, 2005). School challenges are often multi-faceted. For example, students may exhibit specific academic weaknesses that may be associated with a lack of alignment between instruction and standards, inadequate professional development, a lack of community support, or ineffective school leadership.
- ◆ **Stability:** *State systems should be flexible enough to adapt to feedback from the field but yet feature a stable core of supports and strategies* (Porter, et al., 1988; Porter, 1994; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003). If stakeholders are tempted to conclude that financial supports will be discontinued, the individuals providing support are not committed to the process. Likewise, if political will is lacking, they will be less likely to buy into the change process with the degree of commitment that puts long-term success within reach. In addition, excessive turnover or shuffling among support

providers at the local level can pose challenges as schools are frequently forced to adjust to providers' varying personalities, recommendations, and expertise (David, Kannapel, & McDiarmid, 2000).

- ◆ **Responsiveness:** *If state officials monitor their support system, pay attention to the feedback from stakeholders, and subsequently refine their policies, this will ultimately strengthen the system as a whole* (Le Floch & Boyle, 2005). In contrast, systems that are unresponsive to emergent challenges will stagnate and lose credibility among stakeholders.
- ◆ **Intensity:** *The intensity of support—both in terms of the number of days of assistance or the absolute dollar amount of grants—is an important feature influencing the extent to which state-provided supports can foster and sustain school-level change.* As such, questions regarding intensity are central policy considerations for all states (Rhim, Hassel, & Redding, 2007; Reville, 2007; Education Alliance at Brown University, 2006; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003; Laguarda, 2003; Davis, McDonald, & Lyons, 1997). If resources are spread too thin, the support will have limited impact on school practices and student outcomes. On the other hand, highly intensive support may stimulate change but can reach fewer schools. States vary greatly in terms of the intensity of support provided, from one-shot meetings to nearly full-time support staff assigned to targeted schools. There is little evidence, however, on the factors that might determine the right level of support in a particular context or on the strategy states can use to attain an appropriate balance between high-intensity

support and reaching the maximum number of schools.

- ◆ **Prescriptiveness:** *Although there is there is no “right” level of prescriptiveness appropriate for all contexts, the degree to which choices of school-level reform approaches should be constrained or interventions specified is a key consideration as states endeavor to provide high-quality support* (Porter, et al., 1988; Porter, 1994; Finnigan & O’Day, 2003). Clearly, there are undesirable extremes: guidance so vague that it provides no information of value, or minutely detailed protocols that are burdensome and fail to acknowledge educators as professionals or the local context. As with intensity, state officials must seek the appropriate balance.
- ◆ **Fit:** *The “fit” of support encompasses many features, including the alignment of the expertise of a support provider to a specific school’s needs and the fit between a school’s challenges and the selected intervention* (Rennie Center, 2005; David, Kan-

napel, & McDiarmid, 2000; Ascher, Ikeda, & Fruchter, 1998). If there is a mismatch—for example, a school improvement facilitator with suburban experience is assigned to a rural school—it may be more difficult to foster meaningful dialogue, to identify appropriate interventions, to implement with fidelity, and to sustain improvement strategies.

- ◆ **Timeliness:** *Many steps in the school improvement process fit within a sequence of activities that is constrained by the school year itself. Delays with the provision of resources—whether financial or human—can limit the capacity of a school to undertake improvement strategies.* For example, if a school improvement facilitator is not assigned to a low-performing school until February, the school staff will have lost over half the school year during which productive activities could have been initiated. If funds are not disbursed in a timely manner, then school leaders may need to scramble to cover budget shortfalls,

#### Additional Design Questions

- Has the state articulated the principles and priorities that drive the state system of support? Do components of the system align with those priorities?
- How do state improvement initiatives complement (or interfere) with each other? Do schools receive support from multiple organizations, and if so, are there requirements that they communicate and collaborate with each other?
- Based on state capacity, how much time should support providers spend on-site? Should the state consider increasing levels of low-intensity supports, or decreasing high-intensity supports?
- Does the state provide adequate information to schools on research-based strategies? How can the state ensure that support staff are make informed and strategic decisions about interventions?
- Does the state have mechanisms in place to ensure that support providers are well matched to the schools in which they work?
- Does the state have appropriate expertise to address different challenges schools face? How can the state leverage additional expertise?
- Can the state remove any barriers that might inhibit the timeliness of support?
- How long do schools work with a given support provider? How can the state ensure that support providers are not withdrawn at critical junctures?

or will hold off on expenditures for key resources.

## Conclusion

Although rubrics to evaluate statewide systems of support are still rather nascent in their development, scholars as well as school- and district-level stakeholders have underscored the importance of states' efforts to regularly assess their provision of support, to foster ongoing and meaningful feedback loops with stakeholders across the system, and to carefully hone their delivery of support in response to school and district needs (Rhim, Hassel, & Redding, 2008; Kerins, Hanes, and Perlman, 2008). We hope that the indicators of quality above—and our discussion of components of state systems of support—will be used to advance dialogue, design, and evaluation of state systems of support. Evaluators may opt to include these elements when developing interview protocols, evaluative rubrics, or survey scales. The quality indicators may also serve as a lens through which state officials can consider informal feedback from stakeholders, or quick-turnaround data collections that provide a snapshot of support services. In the coming years, additional schools across the country will have to begin the hard work of improvement in the coming years. We have proposed a purposefully straightforward framework in the hopes that it will be useful to the policy community as it designs and implement ever more effective state systems of school support.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See “Help Wanted: State Capacity for School Improvement” available at [www.air.org](http://www.air.org).

<sup>2</sup> Note that when states contract with consultants or private organizations to supplement the activities of SEA staff, their roles are substantively different from those of developers of whole-school reform models, curricular programs, or other vendors of school-based interventions. Indeed, some states have established ethical guidelines prohibiting consultants from proposing school strategies in which they have a financial stake.

<sup>3</sup> There are some exceptions: some scholars have studied the relationship between state systems of support and student achievement. For example, O'Day and Bitter (2003) reported that the contribution of California's Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program to improved student achievement was minimal. Likewise, Huberman, Dunn, Stapleton, and Parrish (2008) analyzed student achievement in schools that received assistance through Arizona's system support.

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