



AP PHOTO/DANNY JOHNSON

# Levers for Change

Pathways for State-to-District Assistance in  
Underperforming School Districts

William J. Slotnik September 2010



Center for American Progress



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## A true incident

### Pay attention to Mom

The room bristled with expectation and hostility. The state department of education had taken over this large urban district two months earlier. On this evening, the state's corporate consultants were presenting the new direction for the school system in a public meeting. The consultants and state officials sitting at the front of the room provided a marked contrast to the largely African American audience of more than 200 parents.

One of the consultants rose to the microphone and said, "We're here to present the 'Transformational Paradigm' for this school system." Before he could turn on the projector, a parent rose, pointed her finger at the speaker, and stated, "I don't know anything about a paradigm. I want to know why my son's in the fifth grade and reads at the second-grade level, and why it's okay for the teacher to yell racial slurs at him." The room exploded with applause and shouts.

That comment marked the end of the Transformational Paradigm. The state department of education had to go back to the drawing board. It had learned in a very public way the importance of communicating and interacting with both the district and the local community.

# Contents

## 1 Introduction and summary

## 4 Phases of state-to-district assistance

## 8 Learning from three decades of state-to-district interventions

- 10 Educational learnings
- 15 Organizational learnings
- 18 Political learnings

## 23 Moving from mission impossible to mission possible

- 24 Educational requirements
- 32 Organizational capacities
- 38 Political Implications

## 44 Conclusion



# Introduction and summary

Two consecutive federal administrations in Washington, from two different political parties, thrust state departments of education into the role of intervening in underperforming schools and districts. Both the federal government and the states identified thousands of schools that are failing students. The sheer numbers underscore the problem: Focusing on individual schools alone is not a winning strategy. Simply put, underperforming schools exist in the context of underperforming school districts.

When school districts fail to meet their responsibilities to educate students, state departments of education by law have to step up and become the responsible party. But do these state agencies have the knowledge and capacity to do what the districts have not done? Are they oriented and equipped to get better results?

The national experience in state-to-district assistance is characterized by tactics in the absence of strategy, and activities in the absence of accomplishment. The traditional state department of education infrastructure simply is not up to the challenge of providing effective state-to-district assistance in underperforming school districts. If every system is perfectly designed for the results that it is getting, state-to-district assistance is the poster child for recurring flawed practices. Transforming underperforming districts is a nuanced and complex challenge that requires substantial changes in thinking, behavior, and systems. In sharp contrast, the strength of state departments of education is in the area of supporting the existing policies and regulations that can at times contribute to the very underperformance that is so prevalent in many districts.

What's particularly troubling is that the problems of state-to-district interventions all take place under the watch of the same organizations that are now being called upon to significantly strengthen underperforming districts. If state departments of education are to achieve better results, there is a fundamental need for new approaches and new sets of players. Fortunately, there are many lessons emerging from the nearly 30-year track record of state-to-district interventions. Unfortunately, these lessons will not be learned unless they result in changes of practice.

*The most critical lessons* are in the effective use of three levers for change. State interventions at the district level have educational, organizational, and political dimensions, but these interventions are largely approached from just a one-dimensional perspective—educational. Unless the organizational and political dimensions are addressed concurrently with the educational dimension, successful state-to-district interventions will continue to be elusive for the states.

These three levers—educational, organizational, and political—need to be used together to achieve better results. Educational approaches alone do not get the job done. Success in state-to-district interventions requires a focus on strategy over tactics, plans that are rigorous and realistic, and high-quality technical assistance during implementation. Success also depends on the will to make mid-course corrections as well as the importance of having an explicit and transparent exit strategy.

A state department of education must translate its leadership role into an overall strategy to help others succeed, among them school board members, central administrators, school teachers and principals, and as many parents and their children as possible. There is more to state-to-district interventions than changes in governance and funding levels. Demonstrating state leadership requires building leadership within the school districts themselves. This is a systemic challenge with a dual focus on increasing student learning and the community's capacity to support and advance the reform process. This means emphasizing capacity building in the central administration, the individual schools, and parent groups, and using the state's power to convene and be convened by others such as community organizations and partnering agencies.

This is no easy task. My perspectives on state-to-district assistance in underperforming school districts draw from more than 30 years of experience with the non-profit Community Training and Assistance Center. As CTAC's founder and executive director, I have helped school districts and state departments of education around the country try to achieve the educational goals of sustained student achievement, discovering along the way the many ways in which the focus on education alone is never the answer. I have assisted 40 state-level teams and numerous individual states on the dual issues of state-to-district and state-to-school interventions. This includes providing the technical assistance within state-to-district interventions in states ranging from New Jersey to Ohio to California, with student achievement increases in all participating districts, and conducting the major longitudinal evaluation of the impact of a state takeover on student achievement and systems change. From these experiences, there are learnings and first-hand

evidence of why state-to-district assistance has so often gone wrong and what's needed to get better results for children in underperforming school districts.

This paper begins by briefly identifying the phases of state-to-district assistance from the time of the publication of the seminal report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education on our nation's educational failures, "A Nation at Risk," in 1983 to the present. Since then, in each successive phase of reform, state departments of education have had to assume greater responsibility for school and district underperformance. The paper then highlights what we've learned from this national experience by examining the educational, organizational, and political aspects of state-to-district assistance. It provides the platform for learning from and avoiding the recurring examples of unsuccessful practices.

The third section describes the components needed in a strategy to move from mission impossible—essentially the current state of affairs—to mission possible, wherein states can achieve better results. It focuses on the threefold challenge of:

- Meeting the **educational** requirements of balancing state responsibilities with federal statutes and traditions of local control
- Building the **organizational** capacities necessary for reconfiguring the current policy compliance system into an effective service-delivery system
- Addressing the **political** implications of balancing political pressure with educational wisdom

The arena of state-to-district assistance includes some better practices, but not yet best practices. Therefore, this third section also includes litmus questions that state departments of education can use to guide their decision-making about where to exert leadership and utilize resources for greater impact. In short, these questions can be used to shape a new generation of interventions that are characterized by best practices.

Getting markedly better results requires leadership that understands and uses these three key levers for change to maximize the state's impact in transforming underperforming school districts and building community capacity, thereby ensuring a better future for students. This paper will describe how these levers for change can make the state the difference maker.

# Phases of state-to-district assistance

During the past 27 years, many different kinds of state interventions have taken place up to the most extreme—a takeover—in districts and schools across the country. These interventions have generally been accompanied by a lengthy strategic plan with numerous goals, priorities, and expected outcomes. For the states and districts involved, the experience can seem tantamount to a Steven Spielberg epic, with lots of special effects, casts of thousands, and years in the making. But one thing is different—rarely a happy ending. Indeed, one can easily feel that state interventions are like a dog chasing a car. Once he catches it, he has no idea what to do with it.

Interventions during these years cover a wide range of assistance and approaches. Types vary from watch lists, reorganizations, and the replacement of personnel to the redirection of funds, school closures, and district takeovers.<sup>1</sup> Even takeovers, though, are not a single intervention. They involve multiple steps, different degrees of severity, and escalating consequences for both the districts and the states, and of course for students and their parents.

State efforts in intervening at the district level over the past three decades can be understood by seeing them in three phases:

- Phase I—States and early interventions
- Phase II—Enter the No Child Left Behind Act
- Phase III—Enter the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

Let's briefly examine each of these phases in turn.

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## Phase I: States and early interventions

From the time of the publication of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983 until the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, or NCLB, there were 49 district-level interventions, largely consisting of takeovers, across the nation in 18

states.<sup>2</sup> During this time, state statutory authority to intervene at the district level expanded. As an example, prior to NCLB, 29 states had the authority to take over school districts.

The mid-1990s were a turning point. Until then, the triggers for the interventions varied considerably. For instance, 60 percent of state takeovers of districts had been triggered by financial factors or mismanagement at the district level. Just 27 percent were comprehensive takeovers that included academic goals.<sup>3</sup> Yet as the broader public and policy makers became increasingly focused on educator accountability, district-level interventions by states broadened in scope and addressed academic performance as a greater part of the intervention. The percentage of comprehensive interventions rose to 67 percent of all state interventions in the three years after 1997,<sup>4</sup> with these interventions including a combination of financial, managerial, and academic goals.

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## Phase II: Enter NCLB

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 brought higher stakes to *all* states in the arena of state-to-district assistance. It increased the visibility and awareness of school and district underperformance while signaling that the primary trigger for state interventions was student academic progress.

NCLB essentially called on states to lead the charge to meet the goals of the federal government. Further, it introduced specific sanctions and consequences for underperformance, and aggressive timelines. This call to action was a major shift for state departments of education. They were now expected to serve in a leadership role in the nation's movement toward greater accountability in public education. Specifically, NCLB required states to take new corrective actions, among them:

- Deferring programmatic or reducing administrative funds
- Replacing school district personnel
- Removing schools from local education agency jurisdiction
- Appointing receivers or trustees
- Abolishing or restructuring districts

This phase of interventions presented states with significant challenges. Many states lacked the technical infrastructure needed to collect, disaggregate, and report on data at the school, district, and state level. Yet during this period, 48

states developed the capacity to track a student's gains in academic performance from one year to the next, and some school districts started to link such gains with particular teachers.<sup>5</sup>

Most critically, few states were on track to provide high-quality, evidence-based technical assistance to low-performing districts. While virtually all states developed protocols and implemented approaches to strengthen underperforming schools, often using a blend of state educational personnel and retired principals and superintendents to deliver services, the challenge of transforming underperforming districts remained daunting and unmet. David Driscoll, former president of the Council of Chief State School Officers and former Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, underscored the magnitude of the persisting problem: "Intervening effectively at the district level is the overriding challenge that lies ahead for states."<sup>6</sup>

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### Phase III: Enter the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, often referenced as the economic stimulus program, provided a substantial level of new resources for public education. Much attention focuses on the Race to the Top Fund, an infusion of \$4.35 billion through which states have been asked to advance reforms in four specific areas: adopting standards and assessments; building data systems that measure student growth and success; recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective educators in high-need schools; and turning around the lowest-achieving schools.

But a potentially more critical set of Recovery Act funds are the School Improvement Grants, which total \$3.54 billion. These resources include support for four school-level intervention alternatives:

- **Restart:** The school district would close failing schools and reopen them under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an educational management organization
- **Closure:** The district would close a failing school and enroll the students who attended that school in other high-achieving schools in the district

- **Transformation:** The district would develop teacher and school leader effectiveness, which includes in some instances replacing the principal who led the school prior to commencement of the transformational model, implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies, extending learning and teacher planning time, and providing operating flexibility and sustained support
- **Turnaround:** The district would, among other actions, replace the principal and at least 50 percent of the school's staff, adopt a new governance structure, and implement a new or revised instructional program

Because so much attention is focused on the Turnaround model's more draconian requirements around changes in school personnel, two key aspects of these grants are generally overlooked.

First, this is not an unfunded requirement, which is different from many past federal initiatives. The new funding can provide several hundred thousand dollars and even millions to individual schools. Second, the funds are channeled through and overseen by the states. If states approach these grants as core elements of a strategy for addressing root causes of district underperformance—rather than just as a short-term tactic for helping individual schools—then they can incrementally become a lever for change that helps both districts and schools. In short, these School Improvement Grants can provide states with an opportunity to think more broadly about ways to leverage financial resources to bring about and sustain institutional change.

But this third phase of state-to-district intervention takes primarily an educational approach to the problems of providing effective state-to-district assistance. If states are truly to become the catalysts for systemic change at the district level, then their strategies need to be based on what has been learned from the national experience to date in state-to-district interventions. Specifically, these interventions require an understanding of the organizational and political dimensions of the process that inform and interact with the educational dimension if lasting success is to be achieved. To this we now turn.

# Learning from three decades of state-to-district interventions

Accountability and improved performance cannot be achieved just by introducing a plan, adopting a new model, or changing personnel. Fundamental and continuous improvement in a school district requires very thoughtful, granular work. The devil is in the details, particularly the attention given to the quality of implementation and the actual results for children.

The challenges facing states are systemic. Just as in any district-wide reform effort, piecemeal approaches do not work. The often-overlooked consideration in state-to-district assistance is that two systems are involved: the statewide educational system and the local community system.

The challenge for the educational system is to keep student learning center stage. The bottom line in district improvement is increasing student achievement in ways that are sustainable. As such, it requires catalyzing fundamental changes in districts from the boardroom to the classroom.

When states operate in a compliance mode, with an overabundance of priorities, check lists, and to-do's, and then press districts to do the same, negative incentives—such as withholding funds, attaching the stigma of probation, or making threats of reconstitution—can move attention away from district actions that focus on initiating and sustaining student achievement gains. Instead, districts typically focus on how to get off probation or emphasize “teaching to the test” in order to get an immediate jump in test scores that then plateau or decline. If continuous student achievement gains are truly to become the driver and end result of the intervention, then states need to focus on building capacity within the districts.

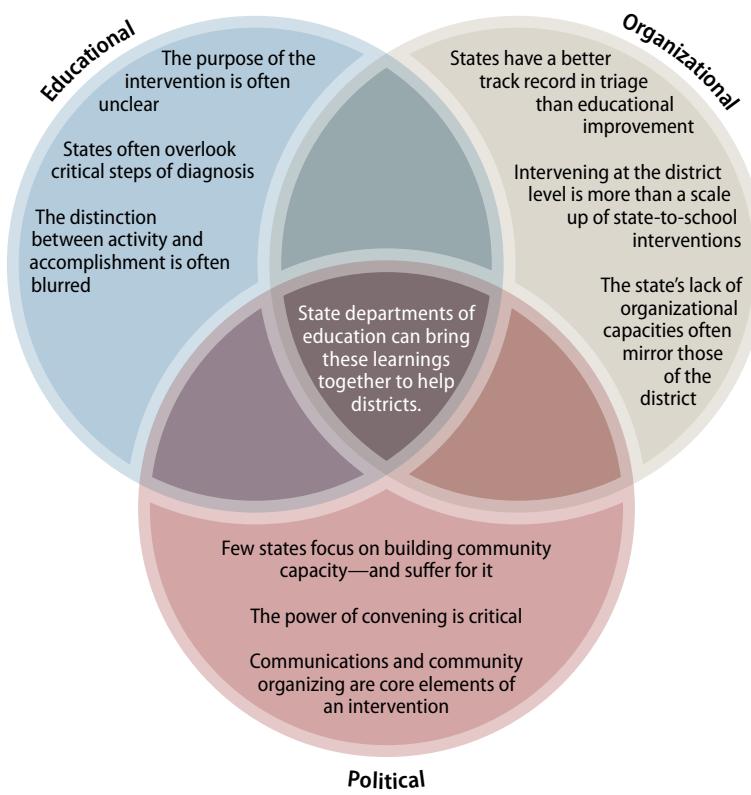
The challenge at the community level is to increase capacity in ways that are also sustainable. Doing so is essential for bringing about the long-term improvement of the district as well as ensuring the broad-based ownership of that improvement

by the community whose district is underperforming. Engaging multiple communities and constituencies is part of the state's charge when trying to improve school and district performance.

Making meaningful change take place in district and community systems requires state departments of education to have a vigilant focus on how best to leverage its resources and networks. Leveraging is particularly important because the state focus on improving districts for the long term can be at odds with the short-term availability of funding, and also with the state's need to develop a wide range of partnerships in support of the intervention.

## States at the fulcrum

State-to-district intervention requires the state to integrate educational, organizational, and political strategies to ensure sustained student improvement



State departments of education need more than an educational lens to understand and address the challenges that lie ahead. Simply placing the latest educational strategy into place in a district will not produce better results. With this in mind, let us now examine state-to-district assistance from three perspectives:

- Educational
- Organizational
- Political

As we will demonstrate, they come together and dovetail with the state in the fulcrum position. (See graphic illustration.)

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## Educational learnings

While Charles Dickens wrote of two cities, state-to-district interventions provide a tale of multiple cities. It is largely a tale of recurring patterns of mistakes that undermine the potential impact of state educational improvement efforts within districts. These include: a lack of clarity of purpose; insufficient diagnoses of the causes of problems; unrealistic goals; a focus on adopting models rather than changing systems; a lack of multiple measures for determining the impact of the intervention; and, as always, the tendency to underestimate the required resources.

On the positive end, however, state standards and assessment data provided some underperforming districts with a starting point for improvement. We will examine both the positive and negative lessons learned educationally in greater detail below. Specifically, we'll examine why:

- The overall purpose of the state intervention is often unclear
- States often overlook the critical steps of diagnosis
- The impact on student achievement is decidedly mixed
- The distinction between activity and accomplishment is often blurred
- The focus is on adopting models rather than on changing systems
- Evaluating progress in student achievement, organizational change, and community capacity requires the use of multiple measures
- Standards and assessment data can provide a needed foundation for change

Each of these lessons offers policymakers an avenue to align educational priorities with the organizational and political priorities examined in the next two sections of this paper.

### The overall purpose of the state intervention is often unclear

It has been frustrating for state departments of education that the purpose of their involvement—and the states' good intentions—are often unclear or misunderstood within the districts and communities that the state is trying to help. One case in point: After four years of state takeover of the Newark Public Schools in New Jersey (which was preceded by 11 years of reviews and monitoring efforts), there remained substantial confusion among district educators, parents, and the community at large regarding the purpose of the state's involvement in the district.<sup>7</sup>

This finding—mirrored in interventions in underperforming school districts across the country—suggests that if the purpose of state intervention cannot be shouted across a parking lot to a reporter or educator in a way that is concise and gets right to the point of the intervention, then the state generally encounters problems of understanding that can linger for years. Indeed, these problems so often prove difficult to overcome and interfere with desired outcomes.

### States often overlook the critical steps of diagnosis

Many states have developed substantive review processes and instructional standards that they use to examine and monitor district performance, but it is equally important to spend time upfront on diagnosing the reasons for a district's underperformance. In districts characterized by a multitude of problems, a state department of education can easily fall or be pressured into the trap of rushing to address the symptoms of the problems, rather than their causal factors. Rushing to select and implement a reading program before knowing the starting points of the students, the instructional skills of the teachers, the content and quality of the professional development offered in the underperforming district, and the reasons why the previous reading program was not effective is unlikely to result in change in district performance or student achievement.

By contrast, when the New York State Education Department intervened in the Roosevelt Public Schools, it initially focused on symptoms of underperformance, such as a board that was not leading, a school administration incapable of guiding school improvement, and hiring processes that were driven by patronage. As the department of education probed into the causes of these conditions, it discovered that the community was not engaged in the schools, needed support in learning how to manage the school district, and did not see the schools as providing hope to the community's broader turnaround.

So the state removed the standing school board and handpicked new members. More importantly, the state engaged the community in a learning process focused on how to govern a school district. The state has gradually been returning control of the district to elected school board members who were paired with and then replaced the appointed board.<sup>8</sup> The new board members are more focused on student needs and better able to assume policy and oversight responsibilities. Under the oversight of the new board, with the state's assistance, district finances and student achievement are improving.<sup>9</sup> The state department

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of education had learned that diagnosing the causes of underperformance was pivotal to the state's intervention at the level of governance.

### The impact on student achievement is decidedly mixed

States have learned a great deal about the impact of interventions on student achievement and have also discovered a lot of holes in what has been learned. A study of the state takeover of the Newark school system by the Community Training and Assistance Center found that the state's intervention led to increased student achievement in elementary schools but to mixed results in secondary schools. Similarly, the New York State Education Department experience in the Roosevelt district showed that test scores at the elementary schools rose early during the intervention but progress at the middle and high schools lagged.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, there is a national pattern of similar results.<sup>11</sup> Even when achievement has increased at specific grade levels in a district, those gains need to be examined to understand which students show gains and which gains are being sustained, and to ascertain the causal factors leading to these results.

### The distinction between activity and accomplishment is often blurred

States are characteristically under tremendous pressure to produce master plans to identify and articulate a strategy to address every major problem in the district. Yet having too many priorities is tantamount to having no priorities at all. In several states, this is known as the “paper porpoise” syndrome—the state’s plans are perceived as a mass of paper lying on the surface of the water, which then fall to the bottom on the weight of their own ideas. The end result is a boatload of activity, but problems of underperformance persist.

The specific goals of improvement must be understandable and realistic (see the box on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education on page 26 to see how its articulation of an exit strategy before intervention keeps everyone focused on the endgame). When goals are unrealistic, particularly relating to the plan for district improvement (and there often is political pressure for that), then it characteristically undermines the credibility of the state process. The battle for having realistic goals for the district is an important one to fight at the state board of education, state department of education, district and community, and media levels.

## The focus is on adopting models rather than on changing systems

No single approach to district improvement has distinguished itself in terms of student achievement gains. There are simply no silver bullets or magic wands when states intervene in districts. Rather than adopt a particular program model, the key to success is more how well the state implements whatever strategies it undertakes,<sup>12</sup> and how well it strengthens district systems of support to the schools.

In any reform context, the challenges of systems quality and organizational alignment have to be addressed in tandem. Students and teachers perform at higher levels when a school system is functioning systematically on behalf of the classrooms. Bringing about higher performance requires aligning the district in support of the classrooms *and* upgrading the quality of services to the schools.<sup>13</sup> Doing the former without the latter results in a more coordinated delivery of insufficient services.

Let's look at what this means. If addressing school conditions is truly the priority for the district, then both the schools and the district have to be realigned to best meet the needs identified. If parent involvement is a gap, then the state department of education needs to assist the district to find a mechanism to promote, support, and evaluate the impact of parent involvement at each of the schools. The key is to leverage the state's leadership to change the district, particularly the central administration, into an organization based on school-responsive functions rather than centrally defined fiefdoms.

## Evaluating progress in student achievement, organizational change, and community capacity requires the use of multiple measures

There is more to gauging the progress of a state intervention than just the student achievement results on a pre- and post-test. While all districts have a range of assessments, they characteristically lack a system of multiple measures. In the area of student achievement, the challenge in a state-to-district intervention is to take several valid measures of student learning and use them together to more effectively identify student progress and ascertain the contributions of classrooms, programs, and schools to that progress.

State departments of education need to learn from some of the better practices emerging in the field. Delaware's Christina School District, for example, in 2004-06 used results from the Delaware Student Testing Program, Stanford

## State departments of education have made considerable progress in developing standards and improving assessment systems.

Achievement Test, and Measures of Academic Progress together to inform and guide reform efforts.<sup>14</sup> The Fremont Union High School District in Santa Clara County, California, used different types of assessments, such as the state tests and performance-based assessments, and used the analyses of their results together to continuously improve the schools.<sup>15</sup> Linking assessments in this manner is what is meant by multiple measures.

Short-term impact is rarely sustained unless it is undergirded by district and community systems of support. For instance, state intervention might focus on developing leadership, providing professional development, meeting the social and emotional needs of students, and building parents' and other community leaders' understanding of school and district performance. If so, then it will be necessary to have measures of success for each of these areas of involvement. What is the evidence that the district is becoming accomplished in these areas? What is the evidence that the community is equipped to oversee the school district? The state department of education needs to be intentional in ensuring that progress is actually being achieved in meaningful terms and that it will be measured and sustained.

Standards and assessment data can provide a needed foundation for change

This type of educational learning is perhaps the most positive. State departments of education have made considerable progress in developing standards and improving assessment systems. The work on standards and assessments that many states have carried out to date, including California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York, are very helpful in informing and guiding interventions.

In districts with large numbers of underperforming schools, a core challenge is to determine where to anchor the reform process. The availability of high-quality content standards and student achievement data from the states provides a solid starting point for reform. When the New Jersey Department of Education took over the Newark Public Schools, for example, the New Jersey standards and the accuracy of the state's student achievement data base provided a foundation for the launch of a new instructional strategy for the district.

By contrast, when the Ohio Department of Education took over the Cleveland Public Schools, it initially rooted the district improvement effort in meeting the requirements of a longstanding court desegregation order. While this order was essential for ensuring the civil rights of students, it is one thing to comply with

a remedial order and quite another to undertake a district-wide reform strategy.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the state needed to make mid-course corrections early on in the intervention process by articulating a more proactive rather than a remedial strategy for district improvement.

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## Organizational learnings

District level interventions create strains on and reveal gaps in the service delivery abilities of state departments of education. While states have generally been effective in putting fingers in the dysfunctional dykes of basic district operating systems, it has been more difficult to make significant and sustained educational improvements.

In part, this is because intervening at the district level is more complex than at the individual school level. It is also because state departments of education encounter a range of interrelated challenges at the district level, among them the need to develop new partners, to overcome organizational deficiencies in both the district and the state, and to be prepared to make mid-course corrections. These organizational lessons include:

- States have a better track record in triage than in building the foundation for educational improvements
- Intervening at the district level is not just a scaling up of state-to-school interventions
- A state department of education needs partners—starting prior to the intervention
- The state's lack of organizational capacities often mirrors the same deficiencies in many of the districts
- The state needs mechanisms for making mid-course corrections

Let's look at each of these lessons in turn, bearing in mind the educational lessons detailed in the previous section.

States have a better track record in triage than in building the foundation for educational improvements

The major strengths to date in state-to-district interventions are in stopping the hemorrhaging. This includes improving and getting basic systems on track in

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areas such as finance, human resources, legal compliance, facilities, and operations. State strengths also include weeding out corruption related to malfeasance as well as the more subtle forms of what is essentially managerial and policy malpractice, in which district and school officials fail to understand that there are ways of conducting business professionally that differ markedly from prevailing practices in many underperforming districts.

The New Jersey Department of Education, for example, made progress in Newark by introducing professional standards and practices, characterized by integrity, to such functions as accounting and human resources management. The state's earliest wins were in the area of improving basic and essential business procedures. Increasing and sustaining gains in student achievement, as well as developing responsible community oversight of the school district, proved more challenging to achieve.

#### Intervening at the district level is not just a scaling up of state-to-school interventions

Many states have developed excellent protocols and strategies for intervening in and improving individual schools. State-to-district interventions are a fundamentally different, more visible, more charged, and more complex form of engagement.

When a district lacks a deep understanding of what works in schools and what is required from central administrative systems to support schools effectively, the state department of education has to address these deficiencies. This is a complex challenge that requires the state to diagnose the causes of the organizational gaps while building district understanding of better practices. At the same time that the state works to introduce better systems in such areas as instructional support, assessment, and professional development, it must also build the capacity of the district to manage these systems with fidelity and professionalism.

Further, it must do so in a district whose political environment and organizational culture can often be hostile to the state's presence. Here, again, New Jersey's experience provides important lessons. The department of education took over three districts only after many years of chronic underperformance in student achievement. Yet the perception persisted in the districts and communities that the state was an occupying force. More complex than a school-level intervention? You bet.

## A state department of education needs partners—starting prior to the intervention

Prior is the key word. States want and need joint ownership of the intervention. In districts just as in countries overseas, the intervening parties need substantive and trustworthy collaborators working with them early on in the process. When a state encounters major problems after several years of intervention in a district, it is late in the game to be seeking partners.

Partnerships serve different purposes, yet they all require the state department of education to be anticipatory about the needs of the district level intervention. Nurturing a partnership with a teachers' union, for example, can increase the receptivity of teachers at the sites to a new approach to school improvement planning. Developing a partnership with a local university can provide a way to introduce research-based practices into an instructional strategy.

By contrast, the very same state legislative committee that is pushing the state department to intervene in underperforming districts may have individual legislators who lash back when the intervention takes place within their particular legislative region. The state department of education needs to anticipate this kind of development and have legislative partners prepared to step to the fore.

## The state's lack of organizational capacities often mirrors the same deficiencies in many of the districts

The state's learning curve and the district's learning curve may be remarkably similar—particularly with respect to having comparable gaps in capacity and organizational policies. Districts and states share in common the tendency to operate in silos, as well as the recurring needs to disaggregate data in ways that can inform practice and policy, to build the capacity to convert data into information, and to build skills through professional development and leadership development.

Even when a state has areas of significant content knowledge, it may still lack the ability to provide capacity building services in these areas. Many state departments of education, for example, possess expertise in assessments and growth modeling. Yet that does not necessarily translate into the state's having the ability or sufficient personnel to train district and school leaders in how best to analyze and use these data to improve instruction at the classroom level.

There also needs to be leadership across the state department of education. Traditional state internal structures have characteristically underutilized the state's resources. Depending on the size of the state, the charge of overseeing assistance at the district level often takes the form of a single state staff member who concurrently has other areas of responsibility, or an individual handling underperforming schools and districts who may have a modicum of administrative support, or a specialized unit or sub-structure within the state.

The result is ownership of and accountability for the intervention by a very small number of people. It also means they lack sufficient departmental resources to address the problems in the districts. Most states have come to feel that they want to have more cross-fertilization across the resources of their education department as well as with those of other state-level departments as they pursue district interventions.

### The state needs mechanisms for making mid-course corrections

There are numerous impediments, internal to the state department of education and the districts, which affect the state-to-district intervention role. Regardless of how anticipatory or thoughtful the state's strategies are, there is characteristically an ongoing need for the state department of education, together with the district and community, to adjust the course of the intervention to reflect changing realities and ongoing learning. As the intervention encounters difficulties, the state has to have a mechanism to determine if the problems result from flawed strategies, poor tactics, or the lack of fidelity in their execution.

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### Political learnings

The political dimension of a state-to-district intervention is often the most publicly visible. People make judgments about the underperforming district and education overall in the state. Moreover, functions that are outside the expertise of many state departments of education become extremely important to the success of the intervention, among them community capacity building, convening, and community organizing. And when all is said and done, the state needs to be clear about its exit strategy. These political learnings include:

- The entire state educational system will be judged by its weakest components
- Few states focus on building community capacity—and suffer for it

- The power of convening is a core part of an intervention
- The communications strategy has to be vigilant and multi-tiered
- Community organizing is a necessary element of a state intervention
- The exit strategy must be clear

When reading the details of each of these political lessons below, keep in mind the educational and organizational lessons discussed in the previous sections to gauge how they all need to come together for effective state-to-district interventions.

The entire state educational system will be judged by its weakest components

Because of the significance of student academic achievement to communities and the visibility and highly charged nature of the interventions, the national track record is one of impressions and generalizations forming about the state educational system based on the level of success in the underperforming district.

The credibility of statewide agencies is largely a function of their actual and perceived ability to effectively serve local institutions and communities. When the media or the state legislature focus critiques on New Jersey's special needs districts or California's hundreds of underperforming schools, it shapes public perceptions about the quality of a state's public education enterprise and the skills of the state department of education.

Similarly, when a district has large numbers of underperforming schools or even testing improprieties at a single school, it raises questions about the quality of the district as a whole and of units responsible for specific functions such as assessment or accountability. The state-to-district terrain comes with high stakes and, fairly or unfairly, plenty of scrutiny for the state department of education, the district, and the local community.

Few states focus on building community capacity—and suffer for it

Whether the intervening agency is a state department of education, educational service agency, or a regional service center, the part of a state apparatus responsible for improving educational performance in districts is not set up for community engagement. Further, conventional thinking and experience both lead states to feel that building community capacity is not part of their role.

The credibility of statewide agencies is largely a function of their actual and perceived ability to effectively serve local institutions and communities.

Here is where the fields of community development and community organizing provide a base for learning and partnership because ultimately a state does not want to be in the district, particularly for the long term. However, local parent advocacy organizations, grassroots neighborhood groups, church-based organizing groups, and activist community development corporations are all examples of entities that understand the importance and impact of an astute, organized community.

Informing and mobilizing these and other community groups, as well as individual community members, is essential if districts are to be held accountable for student performance and are to succeed in gaining access to community resources. Further, mobilizing the community is an ongoing activity, not something that is done once. Parents graduate or leave the school district with their students. Business leaders move on or retire.

The question can arise as to whether the state should take steps to engage the community and partners or help the district to do so. The answer depends on the circumstance. Ideally, it's the latter. However, the power structure of the district at executive or school board levels may well be oppositional to broad community involvement because, for example, it can interfere with and put an end to a patronage system of hiring within a dysfunctional system. This type of malpractice is known as "using the district as a job bank." The key to counteracting such behavior is to develop a broad base of informed parent and community leaders who own the responsibility for ensuring professional conduct and improved performance in the district. That's what the state intervention needs to encourage and nurture.

What's clear is that a district turnaround depends on community capacity. It provides the foundation for engaging parents and community members as equal partners in school improvement planning. It is a requisite for holding elected and appointed officials accountable. It is also a bottom line necessity for ensuring the long-term fiscal responsibility of a district. None of these things happens without an active and informed community.

### The power of convening is a core part of an intervention

The state needs to convene and be convened by others. States are finding this involves an important set of functions. When the Ohio Department of Education took over the Cleveland Public Schools, for example, the state brought diverse constituencies to the table, but others assumed the convening role as well—

including the mayor, local foundations, and state legislators. As a result, the community pushback to the intervention was less severe than in interventions in some other states.

This kind of community engagement is particularly important when issues and perceptions related to race and ethnicity are involved. There can be considerable tensions when state departments of education, often staffed by a disproportionate number of white professionals, enter districts whose students, educational leaders, and political officials are more diverse.

Constituency-building provides support and political protection for the state-to-district interventions. Well before and continuing through the intervention, developing and broadening the base of support can build on what state or federal statutes are requiring the state to do. Washington State's relationship with the Washington Association of School Administrators provided an early example of collaborative base-building. In this case, the school administrators were able to inform the state's thinking on the best approaches for assisting districts to improve their performance.

Similarly, Massachusetts' efforts to work closely with the state unions and diverse statewide associations are also exemplary. Both of these states' efforts have expanded the base of key constituencies that are knowledgeable about and able to contribute insights to the state's intervention strategy.

But remember, too, that political protection in support of a state intervention is a moving target. The state needs to have allies that it can call on at critical junctures. However fragile, the protection comes from base-building activities.

### The communications strategy has to be vigilant and multi-tiered

State-to-district interventions are akin to an earlier era of desegregation in that the forces of misinformation are characteristically more powerful than the forces of accurate information. From their experience in disseminating test scores, all states know how hard it can be to build public and policy understanding of educational underperformance or progress. The challenge of communications is even more pressing when trying to build understanding and support of a state's intervention at the district level.

States can be taken by surprise by the number and diversity of public agendas they encounter in this process. A state school board association, for example, may be reluctant to support a state-to-district intervention if it means an elected board will be replaced by an appointed board. Or a district that is failing to meet the academic needs of students may concurrently be providing jobs to parents and other community members. Or a local teachers' union and a statewide union may view parts of the intervention differently.

While it may be a district-level intervention, the state department of education will nonetheless be dealing with constituent groups at district, local community, and statewide levels. The communications strategy needs to anticipate their respective requirements for information and engagement.

### Community organizing is a necessary element of a state intervention

States need grassroots constituencies working with them. Doing the right thing for children by intervening in an underperforming district does not mean that the community is going to be aligned with the state. It only happens if the state has the right partners to help make community support happen.

The California Department of Education, for example, encountered open hostility from the community when it initially intervened in the Compton Unified School District. But in a subsequent phase of the intervention, the state-appointed administrator reached out to community organizations and parents in an effort to organize and engage the grassroots community. These organizing efforts built a constituency in the community that became supportive of the reform initiatives underway in the district.<sup>17</sup>

### The exit strategy must be clear

State interventions share in common with foreign policy interventions the need for clarity from the outset about what the exit strategy is going to be. Having an articulated exit strategy essentially means that the state has established clear criteria for determining the success of the intervention. Absent an exit strategy, the relationship between the state and the district quickly becomes strained and focused on compliance rather than meaningful reform. The exit strategy in effect is where the educational, organizational, and political dimensions of interventions all come together.

# Moving from mission impossible to mission possible

Given what we have learned about state interventions as previously discussed, how can a state department of education recognize and plan more strategically for building educational, organizational, and political success as it assists districts to improve student achievement? The points below describe the capacities and choices that lie ahead if states are to make their interventions strategic rather than tactical, and illustrate the issues that, when poorly anticipated and addressed, have derailed states' good intentions.

This section also includes litmus questions to guide state-level deliberations around the educational, organizational, and political dimensions of state-to-district interventions. These questions are provided to assist states in assessing their respective capacity to:

- Maximize plans and resources
- Analyze the gaps between current competencies and future needs
- Perform successfully during interventions

State impact depends on using the right levers for change. This section focuses on levers for moving toward a reconfiguration of state approaches and organizational frameworks—moving from compliance-based, model-driven interventions at the school site level toward supportive, service-based interventions at the district level that increase student achievement and build community capacity to support and oversee the school system. In the pages that follow, we'll examine first the educational requirements for success, then the organizational requirements, and finally the political requirements, after which we'll return to the fulcrum role that state departments of education must play to bring all these requirements to bear to ensure successful state-to-district interventions.

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## Educational requirements

The core educational challenge is to balance state responsibilities with federal statutes and traditions of local control. The critical steps:

- Start by establishing and communicating the exit strategy
- Be clear on the criteria used to select districts and interventions
- Diagnose the readiness and capacity of both the district and communities
- Establish goals that effect a balance between rigor and realism
- Establish school improvement planning as a foundation of the educational strategy
- Use the school site as the locus for parent and grassroots community involvement
- Make the district improvement plan an evolving reference document
- Be mindful of the differences between reform-related strains and political turmoil

Let's now examine each of these steps in turn.

### Start by establishing and communicating the exit strategy

One of the major reasons that President Kennedy's comments about making it to the moon in 10 years continue to resonate with the American public is because we all knew where Earth was and where the moon was—the accomplishment was in bridging the distance between the two.

Similarly, the state has to have an exit strategy—an explicit definition of the criteria for the success of the intervention. Diverse publics need to understand the goals and ending points of the overall strategy. Massachusetts provides an excellent outline of how to put a viable exit strategy in place that can be communicated concisely to districts and communities (see box on page 26).

### Be clear on the criteria used to select districts and interventions

When a state makes determinations about where to intervene and in what ways, it is sending messages—both to the districts identified and to other districts in the state. Some districts may welcome the state's help. Others may view the state as a potential occupying force or simply as a source of funds.

Regardless of the level of receptivity to the intervention, other districts and communities in the state are going to be watching the state. So the criteria used to justify the intervention will need to hold up to examination. The criteria need to clearly demonstrate that the state departments of education are focusing their interventions on the districts and schools in greatest need of improvement. While every state-to-district intervention is different and states weight their criteria differently, some of the key criteria include:

- Severe and chronic underperformance in student achievement within the identified district
- Failure to show gain and growth in achievement over a period of time of four years or more in specific identified subject areas and grade levels
- Dropout rates and graduation rates that over a longitudinal period of time fail markedly to meet district mean performance in the state

The point is that criteria should leave no doubt in the minds of educators or the lay community that the state is intervening in the lowest-performing and least-improving districts.

These criteria will become anchors of the state's constituency-building and marketing strategies. Therefore, the state will want its decisions to be conveying the right message in the best and most accessible language.

### [Diagnose the readiness and capacity of both the district and community](#)

The key here is that diagnosing readiness and capacity requires a major upfront commitment of time and leadership at both the state and district level. The state's goals for district improvement need to be based on an accurate appraisal of the district's readiness to undertake a pathway of serious reform and its capacity to do so.

If a state determines that many of the basics needed for district success, both systems and supports, are either not in place or not of sufficient quality in practice to support effective improvement, the state then needs to factor these assessments into a concrete, building-block strategy to strengthen the district. Otherwise, it will simply document district deficiencies and expect the most progress from districts that have demonstrated the least capacity to make progress.

# An effective exit strategy

## Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

As part of the effort to improve chronically underperforming schools and their districts, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education\* focused on defining the state's exit strategy. The purpose was to capture the key state requirements and to do so in an elevator speech format. A cross-departmental team prepared the following working document. The result is an easily understood exit strategy that identifies the state's expectations for improved student achievement, strengthened district systems, and sustained improvements at the school level.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the district will have succeeded when we see:

1. Improved Student Achievement: Evidence that student achievement has been on the rise for three years for students overall and for each subgroup of students:
  - a. Increased student achievement as measured by Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System scores, particularly:
    - i. Average student growth percentile
    - ii. 3rd-grade reading
    - iii. 8th-grade mathematics, and
    - iv. first-time 10th-grade proficiency rate
  - b. Higher graduation rate
  - c. Greater percentage of graduates enrolled in higher education within one year of graduation
2. District systems and practices that meet state standards: Evidence that the district can continue to improve student achievement

because it has well-functioning and sustainable district systems and practices in place, particularly:

- a. Curriculum and Instruction
  - b. Leadership
  - c. Governance
  - d. Human Resource Development
  - e. Financial and Operational Management
3. School conditions that support student learning: Evidence that the district will continue to improve student achievement because the 11 conditions for school effectiveness are in place in schools and classrooms, with particularly strong evidence of:
    - a. Effective leadership
    - b. Effective instruction
    - c. An aligned taught curriculum

\* Community Training and Assistance Center provided technical assistance to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in the development of the exit strategy.

The result? Both the state's credibility and the prospects for a successful intervention will be diminished. Therefore, the state has to determine what is causing these deficiencies and what financial, political, and technical assistance resources are needed to address them.

In assessing a district's readiness and capacity, a state department of education should examine such issues as the current level of performance of systems that support student achievement, such as the focus, frequency, and reliability of formative and summative assessments in use or under consideration for use in a district, and the ability of the district to follow individual student gain at the classroom level.

In addition, the state will want to examine the accessibility and transparency of data systems for principals and teachers. The assessment also needs to determine the quality of the performance evaluation systems for central administrators, principals, and teachers, as well as whether and to what extent they are used to assign identified top performers to schools with the greatest needs. Further, the assessment should look at the capacity of principals and the criteria they use to conduct classroom evaluations. Important considerations include the capacity of supervisors and the criteria they use to conduct school evaluations, and the ways the district provides and tracks the impact of differentiated professional development to teachers at the classroom level.

By taking a comprehensive approach, the state's assessment of district readiness and capacity will extend to the instructional, supervisory, assessment, professional development, and community engagement units of the district, as well as the technical capacity and usage of the student achievement, human resources, and financial data systems. This diagnosis is particularly important when forming judgments on personnel.

Case in point: The New Jersey Department of Education encountered problems when it was perceived as painting all staff in the Newark Public Schools with the same negative brush.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, skilled staff members, whom the state needed to be successful, felt stigmatized, particularly during the early phases of the state's intervention in the district.

#### Establish goals that effect a balance between rigor and realism

Doing so will make the process more manageable, while keeping ammunition away from those who oppose or may potentially be antagonistic to the state's intentions and actions. Building on the diagnosis of readiness and capacity, the goals and schedules of the intervention need to be sufficiently rigorous so that the district is striving for meaningful improvement, but realistic so that the state and district plans are not perceived as empty rhetoric or as political posturing.

This blend of rigor and realism will help potential partners see that the state is not on a seek-and-destroy mission. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education took this approach in its work with district and union leaders through its Level 4 Network,<sup>19</sup> which includes the nine districts that have chronically underperforming schools. The result is that the state has more cred-

ibility in these districts than is often the norm. In this context, for the first time, the state is taking on the lead role in convening management and organized labor to focus together on issues of best practices and systemic reform.

In a systemic and aligned reform effort, school site needs drive the district agenda and district needs drive the state's agenda. It is easy to get away from this focus when states and districts are faced with long compliance checklists. An old maxim, "the main thing is to remember to keep the main thing the main thing," applies to the state's performance benchmarks and publicly visible benchmarks. The state needs to be vigilant in checking that it is on track with regard to its student achievement and community capacity-building goals.

#### Establish school improvement planning as a foundation of the educational strategy

Building on the strong protocols that many states have already developed, the question is whether school improvement planning is going to be an exercise in compliance in the intervention or a real driver of district-wide reform. Part of the leadership challenge for states is to ensure the latter so that the needs and priorities of the sites drive the district agenda.

An effective school improvement planning process examines data on student achievement and organizational conditions, engages the entire school community—teachers, administrators, parents, and students—and identifies and addresses the root causes rather than the symptoms of school underperformance.<sup>20</sup> The state needs to ensure the integrity of the school planning effort. Questions that can be helpful include:

- Are the plans based on meaningful data analysis that can drive instruction?
- Who is involved in analyzing the data and developing the plans?
- Can the plans focus grade levels and get a school on track?
- Does the planning focus on getting to root causes of underperformance?
- Does the school have the internal capacity to implement the plans?
- What kind of help does the school need in both planning and implementation?
- How will the state make this determination?
- Are unacceptable plans treated the same way as acceptable plans? If they are, the wrong message is being sent to all parties.
- Can the plans be used managerially to identify recurring issues across multiple school sites?

- How will the process and content of the plans be evaluated?
- Is improved student achievement the demonstrable driver and end result of the planning?

A state shows leadership when it drives down to this level of detail in support of school improvement. Moreover, this approach to leadership provides a model for others—one that focuses on substantive improvement that will benefit both students and educators.

#### Use the school site as the locus for parent and grassroots community involvement

A serious school improvement planning process can be a pivotal vehicle for engaging the community. In Newark, for example, more than 9,200 parents became actively involved in school site planning over a period of four years.<sup>21</sup> Because parents are not under contract to anyone, their voices are particularly important in keeping the focus on student learning. Newark achieved its highest levels of parent participation in schools and, particularly at the elementary school level, showed its greatest increase in student achievement in many years.<sup>22</sup>

This kind of meaningful involvement, supported by training and policy, is where a state intervention can begin to build the base of informed community members who can hold the district accountable for the long term. It is an essential element of a strategy to make and sustain improvements in the district.

#### Make the district improvement plan an evolving reference document

Increasingly, states are placing their bets on the importance of the district improvement plans. During the intervention, as the state learns more about the district and both disaggregates and analyzes more data on district performance, the plans have to be flexible and amended as necessary.

In part, the states and therefore the district plans have to be prepared to navigate between improvement strategies based on progress (as evidenced, for example, by student learning growth) and requirements for meeting thresholds (such as proficiency targets). Also, the plans have to reflect the increasing levels of capacity and ownership that the state is trying to develop within the districts.

A serious school improvement planning process can be a pivotal vehicle for engaging the community.

### Be mindful of the differences between reform-related strains and political turmoil

This is a distinction with a difference. District-wide reform is a messy process, but it is different from political turmoil, which experience shows can undermine a state-led improvement effort. Stated differently, just because there is a lot of dust in the air does not mean anything is getting accomplished.

Serious reform is more often a recursive process than a simplistic straight-line march forward. The Minutemen taught this lesson to the British during the American Revolution. It involves fits and starts, anticipating and addressing problems when initiatives temporarily go off track—and having the knowledge and ability to read the political tea leaves that can portend emerging impediments to change.

All of these factors contribute to the importance of making mid-course corrections as necessary to keep the focus of the state and district on the dual goals of improving student learning and building community capacity—the cornerstones of sustainable improvement.

### Bottom line

State-to-district interventions are focused on improving the education of children—and therefore, have similarities in form to any other successful educational initiative. But it is important not to be lured into thinking that they are the same, thereby underestimating, for example, the depth of diagnosis required to understand causes of underperformance and the need to catalyze change at multiple levels of the district.

Additionally, when a state intervention underestimates persistence of cultural norms in underperforming districts—norms such as the prevalence of organizational inertia, a lack of sense of urgency, and a focus on remediation rather than reform—the result may be the development of boilerplate plans or tactics, with little or no stakeholder input, rarely referenced, except as a joke, and almost no evaluation.

It is essential to remember that chronic underperformance comes from goals, plans, and educational interventions that have not improved student achievement. Whether it is because of cursory diagnosis, weak implementation, a lack of will, or the presence of extraordinary circumstances, the effort has not worked. Thus, it is the role of the state intervention to make few assumptions, conduct thorough

diagnoses, probing for the causality of underperformance, and then ensure the focus on evidence-based strategies rather than simply tactics.

Since a lack of fidelity to the intervention impacts the effectiveness of implementation, regular monitoring and the provision of skilled technical assistance are both critical. Below are 12 educational litmus questions that state departments of education can use as they make decisions and choices about where best to exert leadership and utilize resources for maximum impact.

### Educational litmus questions

1. What will be the elements of the state's exit strategy?
2. What criteria will the state use to identify the districts whose needs are greatest?
3. What messages does the state want conveyed by its selection of such districts?
4. What metrics should guide the process of matching a district with a particular intervention approach?
5. How will the state assist the districts to assess regularly the organizational factors that are affecting student achievement and influencing the nature of school-site leadership accountability?
6. How will the state diagnose the district's current level of readiness and capacity to pursue a path of meaningful improvement?
7. What steps will the state take to develop a portfolio of intervention approaches, consistent with federal statutes and state legislation, that can be customized based on individual district needs?
8. What does the state foresee as the basic elements of a system to raise expectations, build educational capacity, monitor ongoing performance, and make mid-course corrections?
9. How will the state balance educational improvement strategies based on continuous progress with federal requirements for meeting thresholds of achievement?

10. What steps will the state take to understand and build community capacity?
  11. How will the state review, recommend, and assess technical assistance and professional development services to ensure that these services are research-based and that the providers have a track record of success?
  12. How will the state anticipate and contain political turmoil, and maintain the focus on student achievement and community capacity?
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### Organizational capacities

The core organizational challenge is to reconfigure a state compliance system into a service delivery system. The critical steps:

- Determine the state capacities and resources necessary to understand district needs and implement interventions
- Assess the capacity of the state's existing structures and personnel
- Maximize the state's convening role
- Ascertain data requirements and measurements
- Establish standards and selection criteria for organizational partners
- Ensure that the state's management structure and culture are conducive to making mid-course corrections
- Determine the vehicles for evaluating and disseminating learnings within the department, district, and state

Let's look at each of these steps in more detail.

#### Determine the state capacities and resources necessary to understand district needs and implement interventions

The demands and costs of state-to-district interventions are always higher than originally anticipated, largely due to the “what ifs” involved in the interventions. Changes in organizational culture and systems generally take longer to bring about and institutionalize than do the initial changes in student achievement. For example, quick fixes can sometimes lead to short-term jumps in test scores, but they are not sustained because the district remains mired in a state of maintaining its traditional ways of doing business.

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The changes in culture and systems are critical to achieving long-term, sustainable improvement in a district. Consequently, they need to be reflected in the resource strategy—how and where the state deploys technical assistance and financial resources—as well as in the exit strategy—whether the state can build the district capacity to meet the identified exit targets.

### Assess the capacity of the state's existing structures and personnel

The state unit in the education department does not have to do all the work of a district intervention by itself. But the state does need to know what functions it can perform effectively and then build on these capacities by collaborating with other parts of the state department of education, other state agencies, non-profit organizations, and potentially for-profit organizations.

The state needs to understand where it will be the doer and where it will be the catalyst. This understanding of the state's strengths and weaknesses becomes the linchpin for identifying partners. The Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, a creation of the State Assembly, administered by the Kern County Office of Education,<sup>23</sup> takes this approach when intervening in California's districts in fiscal crisis. It's a good approach to follow.

### Maximize the state's convening role

The convening role is a linchpin for leveraging both human and financial resources in support of the intervention by the state's education department. The human-resource dimension includes developing the relationships and building the base of expertise needed to support the district for the long term. It includes tapping into the resources of community leaders, churches and other places of worship, community organizing networks, and private sector funders, as well as inter- and intra-department resources from multiple state departments.

The financial-resource dimension begins with identifying and leveraging public-sector funds. Every community receives a range of public funds that either originate with or are channeled through the state. Through strategic convening, the state department of education can identify the amounts and sources of funding streams that come into the home community of the underperforming district. Building on the initial convening, subsequent convening can then focus

on strategies to leverage educational funding with human service, community development, and economic development funding to achieve a greater impact on the community in such areas as early childhood, youth development, and parent involvement.

Michigan's school-focused Family Resource Center initiative is a good example of this kind of convening role. A forthcoming paper by the Center for American Progress<sup>24</sup> on school-based anti-poverty programs around the country examines this collaborative program involving the county government, the school district, and foundations supporting the effort. Schools with family resource centers set goals and target services to the specific needs of the school population by using both student achievement data and information gathered through the state's Department of Human Services.

In Genesee County, for example, the district found that a large number of students were not finishing the school year at the school where they first enrolled. During the 2002-03 school year, at least two schools experienced mobility rates of over 50 percent for families with children enrolled at the schools. To decrease the number of highly transient students, the district began providing a rent subsidy to families at risk of residential displacement.<sup>25</sup>

The result was a win-win for the community and for the state agencies.

#### [Ascertain data requirements and measurements](#)

Different parts of the intervention will need to be measured differently, among them student achievement, teacher effectiveness, management capacity, organizational change, and community capacity. Accordingly, the state leadership role includes establishing standards and benchmarks for local accountability systems, providing resources and guidance, and setting in place processes for quality support and review of such systems.

Districts can and should be held accountable to students and schools, their primary clients, for much more than test scores—in a way that supports improvement rather than punishes deficiencies. The Albuquerque Public Schools in New Mexico, for instance, implemented a Comprehensive Human Services Collaborative on a pre-K through grade 12 spectrum. The collaborative integrated the educational program at select schools with health and human services.

Significant and measurable improvements resulted, including increased student academic achievement, attendance, family involvement at the schools, lower drop-out rates, and a higher rate of early identification of problems.<sup>26</sup>

### Establish standards and selection criteria for organizational partners

There are partners with which the state will directly work and contract. Similarly, there are partners with which the state's relationship will be indirect as the underperforming districts will do the contracting. In both cases, the states will want to establish experiential and performance standards that can guide the selection of partners. Even and perhaps particularly when service procurement regulations preclude the state from identifying preferred partners, it will prove valuable to have standards that can help both the state and districts when deciding upon the appropriate partners needed to build student achievement and community capacity.

The availability of funds always brings out a plethora of vendors. While some vendors are very substantive in terms of the quality of their services and experience, others are to public funding what sharks are to blood in the water in a James Bond film. The key is to know their respective track records with interventions and the kinds of districts and communities in which they have produced demonstrably positive results. Concomitantly, the state should have specific methods of soliciting feedback from service providers who can contribute to improving strategies and processes used in districts.

As part of its effort to help districts with Level 4 schools prepare school turnaround and redesign plans, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education prepared rubrics and tools to guide thoughtful and accountable planning. These materials make explicit the standards for high quality district-level and school-level redesign and identify key criteria for what should be expected in a comprehensive planning process.<sup>27</sup> They also provide districts with questions to guide the selection and oversight of vendors who would assist in the redesign process.<sup>28</sup> This approach improves practice in the districts and strengthens district and state collaboration.

Districts, though, can also be dysfunctional to the point where a lack of accountability for results becomes an organizational norm. In these instances, it is very difficult for a district to hold contractors accountable because the district itself does not always understand what constitutes high-quality professional practice.

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In these instances, the state needs to help the district by providing clear criteria but also hands-on training that define the purpose of the contracting, what the successful result looks like, the ways of reaching this result, and what changes in district policy and practice are needed to ensure effective oversight of the vendors.

#### Ensure that the state's management structure and culture are conducive to making mid-course corrections

A tough challenge for any institution, particularly in the public sector, lies in making visible mid-course corrections. Starting at the very beginning, the state department of education needs to intentionally establish mechanisms through which it can make changes and adapt strategies as it learns more about the effect of and impediments to the intervention. State-to-district interventions always occur in changing terrain.

Leadership needs to be nimble in response. Being prepared for mid-course corrections proved pivotal to New York State when changes in local political leadership threatened to derail the state's intervention in the Roosevelt Union School District. The state senator serving the Roosevelt area, a pivotal figure who had drafted the bill enabling the state to take over the district, passed away. His replacement had little knowledge of the intervention and, as a result, was skeptical of the state takeover of the district. The state department of education, though, was prepared to help the new state senator learn the history, process, and intent of the intervention. He consequently supported the state's role in Roosevelt and the district by securing additional funding for the intervention.

#### Determine the vehicles for evaluating and disseminating learnings within the department, district, and state

States learn a great deal when they intervene at the district level.<sup>29</sup> It is important to give focused attention to how what is being learned can be made explicit and shared. When districts see that the state is learning with and from them, it helps to build a constituency more supportive of the intervention. Further, the more other districts can learn from the intervention process, the more it can help preclude the need for comprehensive interventions in other districts in the state.

## Bottom line

There is a pivotal conjunction of organizational capacity building required in state-to-district interventions: While providing technical assistance to districts as they improve their systems to support student learning in schools, the states must also be in the process of reforming their own systems in ways that allow them to intervene successfully in another system or entity. This circumstance may seem somewhat like crafting a set of Russian matryoshka dolls, requiring a deft touch.

Even more than school districts, state departments tend to operate in silos,<sup>30</sup> a complication that needs to be addressed if services to districts are to be integrated and effective. Thus, many of the measures that are suggested for district improvement, such as conducting an assessment of readiness and capacity, are sound strategies for states as well. Simply put, the states now have an opportunity to transform themselves into service-driven organizations that can improve the performance of both the underperforming districts and the state departments of education.

Answering the following eight questions can help shape the state's response to the types of capacity-building needed within, respectively, the state department of education and the districts.

### Organizational litmus questions

1. What capacities and resources will the state need, such as student achievement, human resources and related school/district data, established criteria, and the availability of multiple measures, to determine the districts in most need of assistance?
2. How will the state assess and map the capacity of the state's existing structures and personnel to conduct effective district-level interventions?
3. What strains to existing capacity does the state foresee in areas such as technology infrastructure, organizational alignment within the department, relationships with intermediary organizations, and regional service agencies?
4. What partnerships and strategic alliances offer promise for supporting the reconfiguration of state capacity?

5. What capacities will the state need to develop in the underperforming districts that may also need to be developed in the state department of education?
  6. What barriers or which opponents—both internal and external—could present the biggest impediments to the state moving from a compliance system to a service delivery system?
  7. What options does the state anticipate for funding effective interventions, such as reallocating existing resources or minimizing duplication of efforts?
  8. How will the state maximize the power of its convening role?
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### Political implications

The core state political challenge is to balance political pressures with educational wisdom. The critical steps:

- Identify the public policy requirements of the interventions
- Build a constituency that can understand, support, and own the interventions with the state
- Lay the groundwork for the community organizing strategy
- Establish a communications strategy based on the information needs of multiple audiences
- Keep thinking creatively about partners

Let's examine each of these steps in turn.

#### Identify the public policy requirements of the interventions

The goal is for state intervention to be based on an assessment of district readiness and capacity, applications of evidence and best practices, and commitment to rigor and realism. Advancing this goal often means bridging the requirements of the state and those of the federal government. It can also require balancing state legislative prerogatives or collectively bargained agreements with what research indicates are sound educational practices.

In short, meeting the public policy requirements of an intervention is not a stop-and-start effort.

An intervention at the district level is a policy decision that triggers other policy decisions. This can prove to be a fuzzy area even when the federal government is not involved. Mississippi, for example, encountered problems in an intervention when it sought to replace a county district superintendent but was impeded because he was elected to that position.

There are three tools of public policy—legislation, regulation, and the role of the bully pulpit. The state needs to know its key policy audiences, identify its key collaborators, and use all three of these tools.

#### Build a constituency that can understand, support, and own the interventions with the state

The constituency-building effort begins well in advance of the intervention. In Massachusetts, a governor’s commission, chaired by a local foundation chief executive, provided an early, politically protected context for the discussion of interventions.<sup>31</sup> In subsequent years, and through two commissioners, Massachusetts built on that earlier effort to expand incrementally the base of actual and potential supporters of interventions.

When engaged in constituency building, a state always has to be careful and anticipatory about its entry points into this general terrain as well as into a particular district. Just as with a first date, a state has only one chance to make a first impression. This is a consideration that is noteworthy and potentially treacherous. Even after extensive experience with major interventions in Jersey City and Paterson, the State of New Jersey continued to find the points of entry into the district and community to be challenging when engaged in the Newark intervention.<sup>32</sup>

#### Lay the groundwork for the community organizing strategy

Most states recognize the value of broadening their pool of community contacts. While states understandably lack detailed knowledge of community organizing, it is a fundamental error to dismiss its importance due to a conventional view of the role of a state department of education. Community organizing is an area for both the state and district to explore, learn more about together, and embrace. It is an essential tool to have in the state’s toolbox. Again, this is an area where the state needs to leverage its involvement in a community.

The state does not have to be expert in organizing or serve as a community organizer in order to link effectively to organizing groups and networks. In most communities, there are non-profit organizations or community groups that engage in organizing. They include, for example, advocacy groups, faith-based coalitions, community development corporations, and local affiliates of statewide or regional organizing networks.

The key is for the state and district to take the initiative to meet with grassroots groups on their own community turf and engage them as partners in the intervention effort. In other words, open up the door to the very public constituencies that have been shut out of the public schools. Even when the organizational structures at the community level are weak, this approach makes for a winning strategy.

In Roosevelt, the New York State Education Department co-sponsored community forums, spoke at churches, and took the mini-steps needed to engage the community as rightful partners in reform. These sessions established the foundation for collaboration and provided the vehicles for training the community on best practices in district oversight, school leadership, and instruction. The greatest levels of subsequent parent involvement came at the elementary schools that also showed the first significant increases in student achievement.<sup>33</sup>

#### Establish a communications strategy based on the information needs of multiple audiences

District-level interventions present state departments of education with serious communications challenges. The communications strategy is stronger if approached as a steady drum roll, rather than as a one-time event. For each audience, the state has to be prepared to answer such questions as:

- What do they need to know?
- When?
- With what frequency?
- In what forms?
- Through what vehicles?
- In what languages?
- Who are the third parties they trust?

The state department of education cannot be afraid of taking the lead in reaching out to diverse publics and asking all of these questions across a range of political and community groups.

Unlike mathematical computations where there are definite answers, successful communications in public education is not an exact science. That notwithstanding, all leadership efforts in advocacy are about strategic communications. If the state is trying to inform and persuade, then it needs to understand messaging and strategic communications.

The principles are the same regardless of the size and scale of the district. In this context, it is important to bear in mind the three components of communication when dealing with politically charged issues: the image, the message, and the deed.

The area of communications is not discrete and separate from the district improvement plans. The greatest plans imaginable accomplish very little if they are sitting in a desk drawer. Without a strategy for communicating and advocating for the state's vision for the public schools, the state's plans are effectively sitting in a desk drawer. (See box on page 43 for examples of how communications strategies for state-to-district interventions need to be overlaid across a variety of constituencies.)

#### Keep thinking creatively about partners

Here, again, state departments of education benefit by approaching partnerships from a community organizing perspective. When initiating partnerships, states often ask the question, "Who do we know?" The goal of that query is to come up with a solution to a short-term problem. There's a better way to proceed. In contrast, community organizers ask three questions:

- Who do we know?
- Who do they know?
- How can they be coalesced to change results and relationships for the long term?

This approach recognizes tactical considerations, but as they exist in the context of an overall strategy. Just as with its organizational partners, the state needs to have standards and screening criteria for its political partners.

Unlike mathematical computations where there are definite answers, successful communications in public education is not an exact science.

## Bottom line

The ivory tower leanings of educational institutions often mean they willingly and myopically distance themselves from the larger community and political context in the interest of objectivity and self-protection. Yet educational institutions and their constituent communities have interdependence, even when they do not recognize it. Today it is not just “taking a village” to educate a child, but a state as well.

This is all the more apparent when one considers the deepening stake that states and the federal government have in education and the increasing demand for transparency and accountability in all government institutions. Using an expansive political lens when designing and implementing state-to-district interventions strengthens the quality of the intervention, generates greater diversity of ideas, anticipates and addresses potential obstacles before they become insurmountable, and builds a constituency committed to the success of the district. Here are seven questions that can help state departments of education focus on the political and policy dimensions of effective state-to-district interventions.

## Political litmus questions

1. What changes to state laws and regulatory practices should result from the foregoing discussions regarding the educational requirements and organizational capacities required for successful state interventions?
2. Who are the key policy audiences, what are their interests, and how likely are they to support or oppose a redirection of state efforts?
3. Who are the key collaborators in addressing and minimizing conflicts between federal, state, and local legislative, legal, and regulatory authorities?
4. What are the main public policy requirements related to the intervention approaches?
5. What are the main public information requirements related to the intervention approaches?
6. What communication vehicles can and should be used to manage the flow of reliable and accurate information?

## Getting the message out

### Communications and key constituencies—making the links

For all key constituencies affected by the state-to-district intervention, the communications strategy needs to be anticipatory about their information requirements, the time frame for the communications, and the vehicles for the communications. The strategy needs to extend to all phases of the intervention. Key constituencies at the district, local community, and state levels are listed below.

District	Local community	State
School Committee	State Representative /Senator	Governor
Superintendent	Mayor	Legislature
District Leadership Team	City Manager	State Board of Education
Union Leadership	City Council	State Department of Education
Site Administrators	City Departments & Department Heads	Other State Departments
Site Teams	Chamber of Commerce	Major Newspapers
Teachers	Local Business Community	Business Associations
Specialists	Local Higher Ed	
Other School Staff	Local Non-profit Organizations	
Parent Advisory Council	Local Television/Cable News	
Parent Teacher Association	Local Radio	
Parents	Local Newspaper	
Student Leaders	Churches	
School Website/Webmaster	Community-at-Large	
	Day Care Parents	

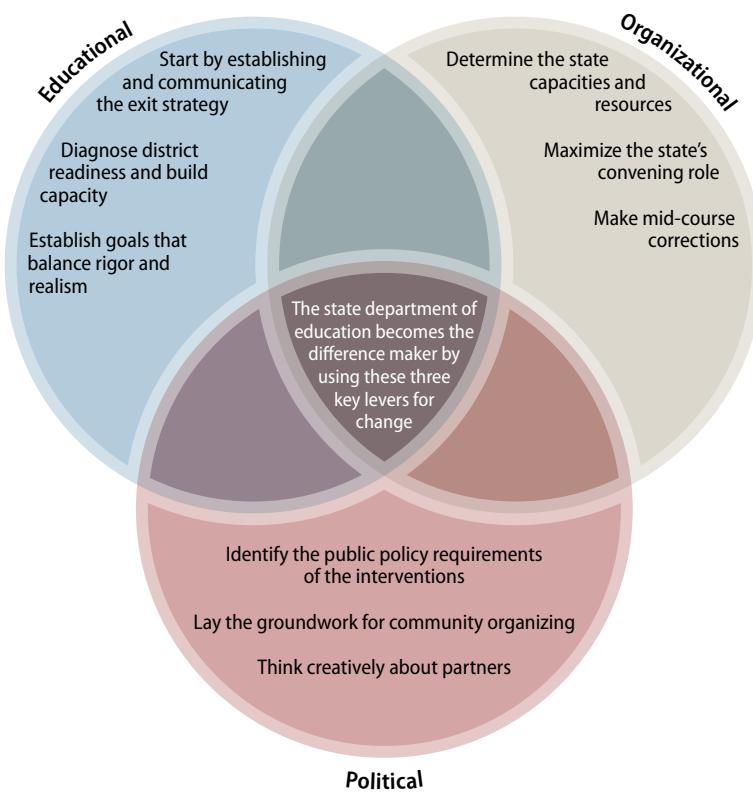
7. What new partners can be engaged—such as higher education, corporations, philanthropic sector, non-profit organizations, community activists, other state or regional departments—and in what ways, to strengthen, fund, and otherwise support interventions that increase student achievement and build community capacity?

# Conclusion

A state intervention on behalf of students and communities is critically important work, requiring new approaches and levers for change. Our nation's future depends on educating all of our children effectively so they can contribute to the solving the challenges of the 21st century. Policymakers today in Washington and across the country understand that this is critical to our nation's future prosperity. Underperforming schools exist in the context of underperforming districts, but too little is done to ensure that those districts with the most problems are brought up to speed thoroughly and permanently.

## Bringing it all together

The levers of change are there to use across state political, education, and organizational arenas



National lessons in state-to-district assistance need to result in changes of practice and policy.

State interventions must use three levers of change—educational, organizational, and political—to achieve better results. The failure to do so will mean that students continue to suffer from the recurring mistakes of adults. A state department of education needs to translate its leadership role into an overall strategy that helps others succeed. It is now time for states to embrace strategy rather than tactics in directly addressing the dual challenge of increasing student learning and community capacity.

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- 17 California took over the Compton Unified School District in 1993 due to financial and later academic insolvencies. Randy Ward served as the state-appointed administrator in Compton for more than six years (1996-2003).
- 18 Eglinton, Gratz, and Slotnik, "Myths and Realities."
- 19 The Massachusetts framework for district accountability and assistance is a five-level system for the purpose of improving student achievement. For more details, please go to [www.doe.mass.edu](http://www.doe.mass.edu).
- 20 For additional ideas on school planning, see "Guide for Standard Bearer Schools" at <http://www.ctacusa.com>.
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- 23 Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team was created in 1991 by the California Legislature (Assembly Bill 1200) to help school districts with their fiduciary duties and other services. It is the agency that conducts a comprehensive audit of districts that come under state supervision due to financial difficulties. To learn more, go to <http://www.fcmat.org>.
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## About the author

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CTAC builds capacity and addresses root causes of poverty at local, state, and national levels by providing technical assistance, conducting research and evaluation, and supporting public policy initiatives. CTAC's staff comprises nationally recognized executives, educators, policy makers, researchers, and organizers. Since 1979, Slotnik has led CTAC in assisting and partnering with hundreds of school systems, states, unions, non-profit organizations, coalitions, and philanthropic institutions to achieve positive and lasting results in low-income communities. This includes catalyzing major innovations throughout the United States in such areas as state-to-district assistance, performance-based compensation, school and district turnarounds, desegregation, and community development. He regularly provides briefings to members of the U.S. Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, state legislatures, and state departments of education. More information is available at [www.ctacusa.com](http://www.ctacusa.com).

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