

The Capacity Challenge: What It Takes for State Education Agencies to Support School Improvement

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Introduction and Summary of Findings

Do state education agencies (SEAs) have the capacity to deepen their work improving outcomes for students? The answer from a long list of policy advocates and observers is “no”—or at least not without significant changes to the way they currently function.

This capacity problem has occupied observers of SEAs since at least the 1980s.¹ It suggests that in the absence of significant new resources, reforms to agency organization, and newfound sources of authority, SEAs will be unable to develop and implement policies that effectively support school and district improvement.

This project sought to more systematically examine SEAs' existing capacities to understand the seriousness of the problem and the strategies state chiefs are using to confront it. The 10 states we analyzed represent a variety of approaches and political contexts for the work of reform, as well as varied records on student achievement. For each of these states, we asked:

- **What are the primary obstacles that inhibit SEAs from supporting school and district improvement?**
- **What levers can chiefs utilize to transform their agencies into more effective drivers of reform?**

To understand what SEAs are doing to transform themselves to meet new and existing obligations, we interviewed state chiefs and their deputies, analyzed agency budgets, and reviewed publicly available documents.

The most visible dimensions of an SEA's organizational structure, resource set, and authorities were not, on their own, reliably associated with improved agency capacity. Formal reorganizations, for example, were being planned or implemented in nearly every state we spoke with, but such changes were just as likely to reinforce existing agency silos or create new ones as they were to improve agency coordination and service delivery. When we examined resource expenditure patterns, both in general

and specifically around school improvement functions, we found little evidence that the state agencies with the most money had better data systems or more comprehensive accountability systems. Similarly, while the lack of legal authority to intervene in failing schools sometimes limited the ability of states to act on their school improvement strategies, states that had such authority did not always wield it strategically.

These findings suggest that a shift in thinking is needed about the options available to reform-minded state administrators and elected officials. When they focused their attention on “hard” reforms—those that require major changes in laws or significant amounts of new money—SEA chiefs and their deputies, as well as supporters in state legislatures and governors' offices, overlooked other, less intensive strategies that might have proven just as effective at improving agency practice. In most cases, these do not require significant new resources or herculean legislative efforts. Instead, chiefs and those who support them can look for ways to repurpose existing resources, increase communication across relevant divisions within their agencies, and, sometimes, simply get out of the way of those who are already doing good work.

Collectively, our findings suggest that in some cases, the biggest barrier to transforming SEAs is not the lack of resources or the need for organizational restructuring, but rather the commitment. Those looking to support the work of school and district improvement in SEAs must identify the sweet spot where the will, authority, and resources to act come together.

1. See, for example: Gail L. Sunderman and Gary Orfield, “Do States Have the Capacity to Meet the NCLB Mandates?” *Phi Delta Kappan* 89, no. 2 (2007): 137–139; Andrea Boyle, Kerstin Le Floch, and Susan Bowles Therriault, *State Systems of Support Under NCLB: Design Components and Quality Considerations* (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2008); Michael Gottfried, Brian M. Stecher, Matthew Hoover, and Amanda Brown Cross, *Federal and State Roles and Capacity for Improving Schools* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011).

The Capacity Challenge

Conventional wisdom suggests that SEAs were (and are) poorly prepared and positioned to take on new roles.

Starting in the 1980s, states began to take an active role in setting educational standards, developing assessments, and creating accountability systems. This work was accelerated by federal reforms, including the 1994 Improving America's Schools Act, which increased federal aid to states to develop systems of support for struggling districts and schools; Goals 2000, which provided financial support for states developing and implementing standards-based reforms; and the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, which called on states to deepen their work on accountability systems to improve outcomes for students.

While these reform pressures increasingly focused attention on state education agencies (SEAs), conventional wisdom suggests that SEAs were (and are) poorly prepared and positioned to take on these new roles.² Observers of these agencies point to three challenges: SEAs lack the financial and human resources to implement policy initiatives well, federal programs dominate SEA organization and result in poor integration across agency initiatives, and SEAs have limited legal and political authority to effect change in district-level actors.

Flat or Declining Resources in the Face of New Responsibilities

It has long been said that for SEAs to be more effective, they need new funding. For example, in 2001 the Institute for Educational Leadership found that inadequate budgets constrain SEAs from taking on a larger role in education policy.³ In 2006, in a report by the American Institute for Research, 42 states suggested that lack of staff was a serious or moderate challenge to implementing No Child Left Behind.⁴ By 2012, the problem had not gotten any better, as 26 states expected SEA budget cuts for the upcoming fiscal

year.⁵ Historically, SEAs have had difficulty securing state aid, and federal dollars tend to dominate agency operations.⁶

Poor Integration and the Compliance Mindset

A central and longstanding critique of SEAs is that they have become little more than administrators of federal programs and are thus poorly organized to meet the needs of low-performing schools and districts. Historically, SEAs grew in response to new federal and state education programs, which needed administration and oversight.⁷ They were charged with channeling funds to districts and ensuring the funds were used according to legislative intent. Compliance responsibilities define how SEAs structure funding, offices, programs, and the work and talents of people in the agency. Compliance officers work in silos, unable to contribute to other priorities, yet their influence dominates decisionmaking throughout the agency.⁸ SEAs have struggled to break free from this mindset, even as the scope of their responsibilities has expanded.⁹

Local Control and the Limits of State Authority

SEA capacity is also limited by the lack of authority vested in the state and the preeminence of local control as a cornerstone of American education.¹⁰ State accountability systems are based on the presumption that some districts or schools don't lack the capacity but rather the will to improve outcomes for students. Research has consistently shown that state accountability systems—including the ability to sanction and reward schools and districts—can improve student achievement.¹¹ Sometimes a district simply refuses to take

2. Sunderman and Orfield, 2007; Boyle, Le Floch, and Therriault, 2008; Gottfried et al., 2011.

3. Institute for Educational Leadership, *Leadership for Student Learning: Recognizing the State's Role in Public Education* (Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001).

4. Boyle, Le Floch, and Therriault, 2008

5. Nancy Kober and Diane Stark Rentner, *State Education Agency Funding and Staffing in the Education Reform Era* (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, 2012).

6. Patrick Murphy and Monica Oujidani, *State Capacity for School Improvement: A First Look at Agency Resources* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2011); Boyle, Le Floch, and Therriault, 2008; Christine M. Dwyer, *Leadership Capacities for Changing Environment: State and District Responses to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (Providence, RI: The Education Alliance at Brown University, 2006).

7. Sam Redding and Herbert J. Walberg, eds., *Handbook on Statewide Systems of Support* (Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation and Improvement, 2007); Thomas Timar, "The Institutional Role of State Education Departments: A Historical Perspective," *American Journal of Education* 105, no. 3 (1994): 231–260.

8. Cynthia G. Brown, Frederick M. Hess, Daniel K. Lautzenheiser, and Isabel Owen, *State Education Agencies as Agents of Change: What It Will Take for the States to Step Up on Education Reform* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2011).

9. Susan F. Lusi, *The Role of State Departments of Education in Complex School Reform* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); Sundermand and Orfield, 2007; Brown et al., 2011.

10. Timar, 1994.

11. Martin Carnoy and Susanna Loeb, "Does External Accountability Affect Student Outcomes? A Cross-State Analysis," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 4 (2002): 305–331.

action to improve a persistently low-performing school. Or a district may be willing to try to turn around a failing school but proves incapable of doing so. In these cases, one would expect the state to take strong actions to improve district or school performance, through mandates, inducements, and replacement of failing units. Historically, however, these types of interventions have been outside SEAs' normal range of action and often challenged as beyond their authority.

A Path Toward Improved Agency Capacity?

Collectively, these findings produce a fairly clear path for enhanced agency capacity, one that many chiefs tried to follow: acquire more resources; align agency organization with school improvement objectives, not federal programs; and obtain the necessary authority to influence recalcitrant and/or inept district partners. With respect to each of these lines of action, we sought evidence on whether the conventional strategy yielded enhanced capacity, as well as what alternative strategies SEAs are using to improve.

Research Design and Methods

We focused our analysis on 10 states: Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, South Carolina, and Washington. It is not possible to claim that some subset of states is fully representative of all states. For this work, we sought a group of states that presented a broad array of approaches and experiences. We intentionally did not focus only on states that aggressively sought to transform their education agencies to implement ambitious agendas around school and district improvement.¹²

To capture this variability, we used a set of four indices that relate to the work of school and district improvement: teacher evaluation, data systems, accountability, and policies toward charter schools. Descriptions of these are reported in appendix A. These policy domains represent different theories of action about how SEAs can and should shape school and district practice. Teacher evaluation policies, for example, are an effort to drive student achievement by shaping teacher quality, whereas charter schools introduce market competition into education.

We first ranked states across the four indices. We then selected states that fell in the “high” and “low” categories for each index, while also attempting to achieve some level of geographic variation. Table 1 reports the values on these indices for our 10 states. As is clear from the table, the sample reflects a wide range of approaches across these dimensions of school and district improvement. For example, at the time of study, neither Kentucky nor Washington allowed charter schools, while Colorado had a robust and burgeoning charter sector.¹³ The sample average closely approximates the national average.

Table 1. Variation in Approaches to School and District Improvement

State	Teacher evaluation	Data systems	Accountability	Charter schools
Colorado	0.0	0.8	0.9	0.6
Connecticut	0.0	0.8	0.2	0.5
Florida	1.0	1.0	0.4	0.8
Kentucky	0.0	0.5	0.3	0.0
Maryland	0.0	0.7	0.7	0.2
Michigan	1.0	1.0	0.7	0.6
Nevada	1.0	1.0	0.4	0.5
New Jersey	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.7
South Carolina	1.0	0.8	0.7	0.5
Washington	0.5	0.8	0.4	0.0
Sample average	0.5	0.8	0.5	0.4
National average	0.4	0.8	0.5	0.4

Notes: Values range from 0 to 1. Higher values indicate more comprehensive teacher evaluation systems (source: “Quality Counts,” *Education Week*, 2012), more sophisticated data systems to track student outcomes (source: Data Quality Campaign, *10 Essential Actions*, 2012), more state accountability (source: Education Commission of the States, State Policy Database, accessed June 15, 2012, and “Quality Counts” 2012), and more comprehensive charter school laws (source: Ziebarth, 2012). See appendix A.

The selected states also capture a reasonable degree of diversity in terms of student populations, state size, governance structure, and predominance of local control (see table 2).

12. This was the approach taken by Brown et al., 2011.

13. Todd Ziebarth, *Measuring Up to the Model: A Ranking of State Charter School Laws*, third edition (Washington, DC: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2012). Washington has since opened the door to charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of the States Studied

State	Students*	Schools*	School districts*	Low-income*	English Language Learner*	Ratio of state: local revenues*
Colorado	843,316	1,714	181	40%	12%	43.6 : 48.1
Connecticut	560,546	964	196	34%	5%	35.0 : 56.4
Florida	2,643,347	3,395	73	56%	9%	31.5 : 52.3
Kentucky	673,128	1,148	176	57%	2%	52.1 : 31.3
Maryland	852,211	1,375	25	40%	5%	41.5 : 50.7
Michigan	1,587,067	3,409	844	45%	4%	54.2 : 32.5
Nevada	437,149	629	18	50%	19%	32.6 : 58.8
New Jersey	1,402,548	2,314	557	32%	4%	36.4 : 54.2
South Carolina	725,838	1,126	89	54%	5%	43.8 : 42.3
Washington	1,043,788	2,203	295	40%	12%	58.7 : 29.5

* Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *State Education Data Profiles*, 2011.

Data Collection

Between March 2012 and December 2012, a team of researchers from the University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) collected data on the 10 SEAs. Data collection focused on the following:

- State strategies for school and district improvement, including priorities and theories of action.
- Distribution of human and financial resources across areas of work as well as their source of funding (federal, state, other).
- Changes to organizational structure to streamline or coordinate agency activities.
- Extent of authority, especially in relation to oversight of district and school performance.

To acquire this information, we relied on three sources of data: interviews, budget analysis, and document review.

We sought to interview, either in person or over the phone, each state superintendent. We successfully conducted interviews with superintendents in Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, and Washington. We also interviewed school improvement officers and budget analysts in each state.

In addition to our interviews, we acquired detailed information on each state’s allocation of staff and expenditures across programmatic functions in the SEA. The search began with a review of each SEA’s website. When information was unavailable on the website, efforts were made to acquire the data from state budget officers. In some

cases, we turned to reports from the state legislature or governor’s office, which frequently analyze agency budgets as part of government transparency laws. We acquired a great deal of comparable data on the group of 10 states. Wherever a state’s data presents noteworthy variation in quality or format, we have noted it below in the analysis.

Findings

We examined the current and past efforts of SEA chiefs to bolster agency capacity in three areas that previous research has identified as key deficits: (1) resources, (2) organizational structure, and (3) authority. We present our findings in each area and conclude with recommendations.

1. The Role of Resources

The need for new resource investments in the SEA has long been highlighted as central to building a more effective agency. But, as evaluations of the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program illustrate, in the absence of strong strategies, new resources often fail to result in new capacity development or improved policy outcomes.¹⁴ We found that:

- SEA funding levels are not reliably related to more sophisticated school improvement infrastructures.
- While budget cuts may have weakened some states’ ability to improve the performance of low-performing schools or districts, not all states have faced declines, and school and district improvement functions do not appear to have borne the brunt of the reductions.

14. Sarah Yatsko, Robin Lake, Elizabeth Cooley Nelson, and Melissa Bowen, *Tinkering Toward Transformation: A Look at Federal School Improvement Grant Implementation* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2012).

- Resource allocations are rarely reported in a fashion that enables strong linkages between strategic priorities and agency activities.
- School and district improvement activities make up a substantial portion of most states' budgets. But how these resources are allocated differs, with many states investing significantly more in assessment, not intervention.
- States with less intensive investments in intervention tend to rely on a district-led support infrastructure.
- The talent problem looms large, with many states facing challenges developing more flexible and higher-quality talent pipelines.

SEA RESOURCES NOT CLEARLY RELATED TO CAPACITY

Table 3 presents aggregate SEA expenditures for five core agency functions (central support, executive services, teaching and learning, school and district improvement, and special education) as well as two measures of relative resources (see appendix B for a description of the categories).¹⁵ Not surprisingly, aggregate expenditures vary considerably from state to state. Maryland spends almost twice as much as Michigan, despite having about one-third as many schools. The state with the fewest schools, Nevada, spends the least, but its expenditures are just a quarter of the state with the next-fewest, Connecticut.

To account for differences in the size of the states' K-12 systems, as well as relative demand for SEA services, table 3 presents expenditures per school.¹⁶ Based on these data, South Carolina's SEA is the best-resourced, spending five times as much per school as Michigan's SEA to support the state role in public education. Nevada and Washington constitute middle-of-the-road expenditure patterns, spending approximately \$40,000 to \$45,000 per school.¹⁷

Better-resourced states have not necessarily developed more elaborate improvement infrastructures. For example, states with the most sophisticated statewide data systems (as reported by the Data Quality Campaign), including Florida, Michigan, and Nevada, spend less on average compared to

Table 3. SEA Expenditures per K-12 School

State	SEA expenditures	Expenditures per school
Michigan	\$64,618,900	\$18,955
Colorado	\$50,369,730	\$29,387
New Jersey	\$80,560,735	\$34,815
Florida	\$121,302,097	\$35,730
Nevada	\$25,131,218	\$39,954
Washington	\$96,662,122	\$43,878
Kentucky	\$69,606,849	\$60,633
Maryland	\$124,982,183	\$90,897
Connecticut	\$91,964,589	\$95,399
South Carolina	\$122,980,604	\$109,219
Median	\$86,262,662	\$41,916

Note: Reports total expenditures across five core SEA functions: central support, executive services, teaching and learning, school and district improvement, and special education.

Source: Author analysis (expenditures), National Center for Education Statistics, 2011 (number of schools).

those with the least sophisticated systems. Likewise, SEAs in states with more aggressive accountability systems, including those that mandate state reporting or sanctions for low-performing schools, are not better off financially compared to those that have weaker accountability systems. Colorado, for example, ranks highest on an index of state accountability systems but spends less than Connecticut, which has the most comprehensive accountability system.¹⁸

While financial constraints are much discussed, especially in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, not all SEAs have faced dramatic declines in resources over time.¹⁹ In Michigan, the one state for which we were able to acquire time series data on SEA expenditures and staff, both spending and full-time employees (FTEs) are up significantly since 2002, with increases of approximately 75 percent for expenditures and 25 percent for FTEs (see figure 1).²⁰

When considering funds devoted to school and district improvement as a percent of core budget functions over the

15. Our focus is on the set of core functions that all SEAs perform. This minimizes differences in expenditures that are the result of SEAs administering different types of activities. For example, not all SEAs administer early childhood education programs.

16. Given our focus on school and district improvement, ideally this measure would capture demand for SEA services by considering those schools most needing assistance. Yet because No Child Left Behind allows states to define proficiency levels, it is impossible to develop a measure that would yield accurate comparisons. We also calculated expenditures per recipient of School Improvement Grant expenditures per K-12 school, and these were correlated at 0.74, suggesting that we are capturing some of this demand with our existing measure of relative resources. Because SEAs shape student outcomes by their influence over schools, tracking expenditures by schools instead of students better captures SEA capacity, recognizing that school size can and does vary.

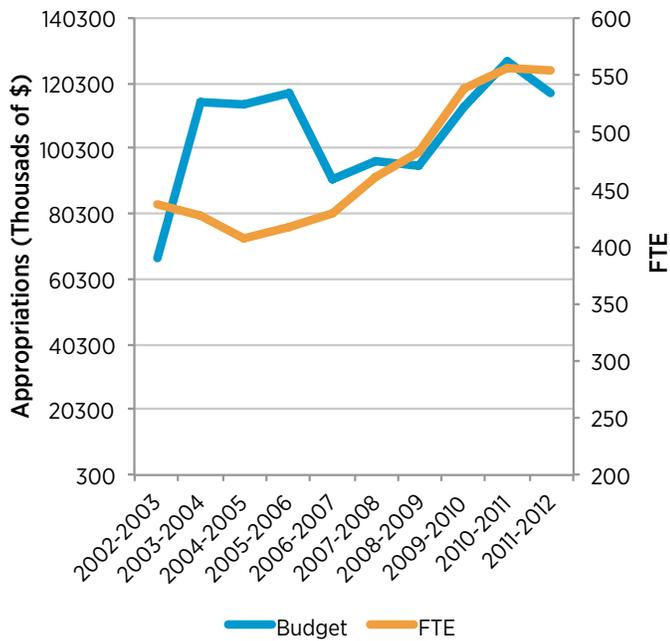
17. Note the median is preferred to the mean here due to skew in the data.

18. The correlation between relative expenditures and the quality of data systems is -0.35, and between relative expenditures and the accountability index is -0.05. See appendix A for a description of the accountability index.

19. Many states cut their SEA budget in 2011-2012, when the last stimulus funding for education ended. According to the Center on Education Policy, 26 states faced declines between the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 budget years. See Nancy Kober and Diane Stark Rentner, *State Education Agency Funding and Staffing in the Education Reform Era* (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, 2012).

20. The budget for the Michigan Department of Education increased substantially in the 2012-2013 fiscal year as a result of a reorganization initiated by Governor Rick Snyder. The reorganization consolidated early childhood education and child-care programs into the department. Zeroing out the Office of Great Start, where the programs were consolidated, yields a budget roughly comparable to the one that existed prior to the consolidation, at approximately \$120 million.

Figure 1. Spending and Personnel Are Up, Not Down, in Michigan



same time period, the Michigan Department of Education has increased spending by 20 percent. This suggests that even if SEAs are facing resource declines, school and district improvement may not be bearing the brunt of these cuts.

SEA BUDGETS LACK CONNECTION TO STRATEGY

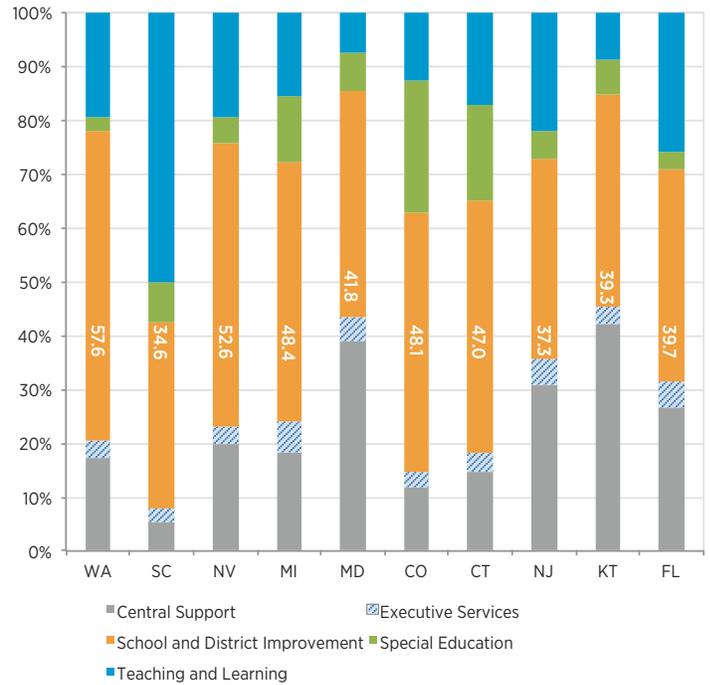
Most SEAs report expenditures by program or organizational division, even when program goals coincide or organizational structures are oriented toward similar strategic priorities. For example, a typical SEA budget disaggregates expenditures related to administering federal programs to support high-poverty schools (such as Title I), SIG programs, and other state programs that target assistance. This makes it exceedingly difficult to make any conclusions about how states have invested in school support infrastructures and obscures the fact that these programs are working toward very similar goals.

In order to understand how states are making investments in school and district improvement, we had to reaggregate programmatic data. Drawing on data collected from each SEA, we tracked SEA expenditures in five core functions: central support, executive services, teaching and learning, school and district improvement, and special education.²⁴

We sought to understand how states' investments in school and district improvement varied, as well as whether states differed in what types of investments they were making. Figure 2 presents spending data across the five core functions. All of the states in our sample allocated significant resources to school and district improvement functions (on average, 45 percent). Because these are reported as percentages, they reflect relative, not absolute,

differences in expenditures, recognizing that some SEAs are better resourced than others (see table 3).

Figure 2. Spending Across Functions Varies Considerably, FY 2011-2012



The actual dollar investments illuminate more significant differences in how much each state invests in school and district improvement (see table 4). On a per-school basis, Connecticut spends nearly five times as much as Michigan, the least resource-rich state, and twice as much as the \$23,912 average.

Table 4. Who Spends the Most on School and District Improvement?

State	Expenditures	Expenditures per school
Michigan	\$31,249,200	\$9,167
New Jersey	\$27,923,730	\$12,067
Colorado	\$24,246,503	\$14,146
Florida	\$48,143,624	\$14,181
Nevada	\$13,216,032	\$21,011
Kentucky	\$27,356,019	\$23,829
Washington	\$55,679,209	\$25,274
South Carolina	\$41,156,507	\$36,551
Maryland	\$52,265,902	\$38,012
Connecticut	\$43,268,848	\$44,885
Average	\$36,450,557	\$23,912

Source: Author analysis of expenditure data from 10 states. School and district improvement function includes all expenditures related to Title I, student assessment, and efforts to close the achievement gap.

24. Budgets covered the 2011–2012 fiscal year. It is possible that such patterns evolve from year to year, though our analysis of expenditures for the Michigan Department of Education suggests that large fluctuations are not likely.

Whether these differences in spending result in differences in outcomes is impossible to tell from this analysis. Nonetheless, they do reveal the importance of moving beyond programmatic accounting methods to understand whether existing resources are adequate for achieving strategic objectives.

MOST STATES SPEND MORE ON ASSESSMENT, NOT INTERVENTION

In order to assess how states invested their resources, we coded expenditures within the school and district improvement function according to whether the activity related to assessment (efforts to assess student learning outcomes or evaluate practice) or intervention (direct intervention or capacity-building services).

The ratio of assessment to intervention activities is presented in table 5. Most states spend significantly more on assessment than intervention, and in some states the difference is large. Florida is an extreme outlier, spending

more than \$26 on assessment for every \$1 of intervention services. New Jersey, by contrast, spends nearly equally on the two activities, and Michigan reports spending more on intervention tasks than assessment.

Table 5. Spending on Assessment Compared to Intervention

State	Assessment Expenditures Per Dollar of Intervention
Michigan	\$0.60
New Jersey	\$1.20
South Carolina	\$2.00
Connecticut	\$2.80
Nevada	\$3.30
Washington	\$4.10
Kentucky	\$4.40
Maryland	\$6.20
Florida	\$26.40
Colorado*	-

Note: Cell values display the number of assessment dollars per dollar of intervention, with values greater than one indicating a surplus of expenditures used on assessment, compared to intervention.

* Because of how the Colorado data were reported, we were not able to perform a subfunction analysis.

Source: Author analysis of expenditure data from 10 SEAs.

Following the Money

Policy analysts often assume that a greater share of K-12 expenditures by the state corresponds with greater authority for the SEA to oversee and intervene in local educational systems.²¹ Controlling a greater share of resources, the theory goes, creates both the desire and the capacity to influence local actors. To test this assumption, we collected a variety of indicators on the centralization of K-12 policymaking at the state level and used these to create two indices of state policymaking centralization, one related to accountability and a second related to curriculum.²² We then considered how these related to financial centralization, as measured by the state share of spending on K-12 education. The results surprised us: Financial centralization appears to have little relation to policymaking centralization.²³

The skew toward assessment is at least partly the result of history; states have been in the business of assessment longer since the 1970s and 1980s, long before SEAs were actively working to turn around low-performing schools.²⁵ In at least two states, though, the focus on assessment was somewhat intentional. Both Maryland and Florida deliberately limited their direct intervention activities, preferring instead to facilitate districts turning around low-performing schools. These states differentiated the supports they offered based on the scope of the underlying performance challenges. In Maryland, for example, low-performing schools are concentrated in two districts, Prince George’s County and Baltimore City, and the turnaround office works directly with district staff to establish support teams. For the state’s other 22 districts, the SEA focuses on less people-intensive levers, including talent pipeline development.

21. See, for example, Kenneth K. Wong and Warren E. Langevin, *The Diffusion of Governance Reform in American Public Education* (Nashville, TN: National Center on School Choice, 2005).

22. We used latent variable analysis to analyze the following indicators: textbooks adopted at the state level, state mandates number of English language arts (ELA) and math units for high school graduation, state requires specific ELA courses, state requires specific math courses, state requires career/college-ready curriculum, state has authority to take over districts, state has authority to take over schools, and state has authority to reconstitute schools or districts. The resulting two-dimensional solution included one dimension that captured variation in centralization of curriculum (including textbook adoption, high school graduation mandates, other course mandates) and a second dimension that captured accountability.

23. The correlations were 0.16 for the accountability index and -0.14 for the curriculum index. We also did a more sophisticated time series analysis of the implementation of state takeover laws, for which the results were same: states that aggressively fund K-12 public education systems do not intervene any more often than their less-well-funded peers. See Patrick Denice, Ashley Jochim, and Patrick Murphy, “Following the Money: How Funding Streams Shape Authority in a Federalist System,” poster presented at the Association for Education Finance and Policy (New Orleans, March 2013).

25. See, for example, Laura S. Hamilton, Brian M. Stecher, and Kun Yuan, *Standards-Based Reform in the United States: History, Research, and Future Directions*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

While both Florida and Maryland are characterized by a small number of relatively large districts, Colorado relies on a similarly differentiated, district-led support structure with its 179 more modestly sized districts.²⁶ Four staff provide intensive support to approximately 21 districts in turnaround status. These “performance managers” provide detailed feedback on district improvement plans.

While state investments in intervention activities remain modest when compared to those related to assessment, several of our sample states were able to leverage these relatively limited resources for intervention to greater effect by relying on a differentiated, district-led support system. Their experiences suggest that the deployment of resources is probably as important as the volume of them.

LACK OF TALENT IS A KEY BARRIER

Evidence from our interviews with state chiefs and their deputies suggest that the quality of talent employed by the SEA, rather than absolute numbers, is a key constraint on their ability to develop and implement needed reforms. The traditional approach to talent management in the SEA is programmatic, which has reinforced agency silos and limited agency effectiveness in achieving cross-program goals.²⁷

One frequently cited limitation in attracting the right kind of talent is salary. In Washington, for example, the state superintendent makes half as much as the superintendent of the largest district. An educational coordinator in the Maryland State Department of Education can expect to make between \$50,000 and \$81,000, depending on experience, while the same position in the Baltimore City Public Schools pays between \$75,000 and \$120,000.²⁸ The median salary of district administrators in New Jersey is approximately \$120,000; the median for administrators in the state department of education is just \$80,000.²⁹

But pay is not the only obstacle. Recently, when declining state revenues necessitated budget cuts across state agencies, vacant positions in SEAs were frozen or eliminated, resulting in some critical positions being unfilled while other, less important ones were maintained.³⁰

The permanency of positions in the state bureaucracy often reinforced the distance between SEA staff and the districts they worked to oversee and support. Lillian Lowery, the chief in Maryland, suggested that staffing flexibility—moving people temporarily from roles in districts to roles in the SEA—was critical to improving the SEA and making it more “customer-friendly.”³¹ At the same time, some chiefs suggested that too much staffing change can also impede progress. The former state chief of Nevada, Jim Guthrie, said that having some continuity of staff was critical to his progress in reforming the SEA.³²

A related issue is frequent staff turnover. Often activities and relationships built by one individual will be abandoned when he or she leaves the department or moves internally. As a consequence, there is often of a sense of starting over. Though expanding capacity will require a degree of disruption, there remains some need for continuity of relationships and preservation of institutional memory. As Ann Chafin of the Maryland State Department of Education put it, “Pick a way and stick with it ... or you’ll be the flotsam and jetsam of education.”³³

2. The Role of Organizational Structure

The traditional silo structure of the SEA has been viewed as a key obstacle to integrating state energies and funding streams toward strategic objectives. Organizationally, SEAs are designed to administer programs. Breaking down these silos and making it possible for different offices to communicate and coordinate should reduce duplication of efforts and maximize the resources available for school and district improvement. A related benefit of increased coordination is sharing of information within the state agency.³⁴

This project examined the formal and informal organizational structures of the 10 SEAs with particular attention to their evolution over time.³⁵ The lesson learned from our analysis is simple: Formal structures can impose barriers to better coordination, but these are not the only barriers nor, perhaps, the most important. More important is the extent to which staff share a commitment to common policy goals,

26. Because of data limitations, we were unable to calculate a ratio for Colorado.

27. Interview with Lillian Lowery, superintendent, Maryland State Department of Education, October 19, 2012.

28. Baltimore City Public Schools PSASA Salary Schedule, 2011–2013; Maryland Department of Budget and Management Salary Plan, 2013.

29. New Jersey Public Schools Fact Sheet, available at <http://www.state.nj.us/education/data/fact.htm> (accessed April 10, 2013). State administrators’ salaries were estimated using the 2012 version of the state employee database.

30. Interview with Ann Chafin, assistant state superintendent of student, family, and school support, Maryland State Department of Education, October 19, 2012.

31. Lowery Interview.

32. Interview with Jim Guthrie, former state superintendent of Nevada, December 21, 2012.

33. Lowery Interview.

34. Diane Massell, Margaret E. Goertz, and Carol A. Barnes, “State Education Agencies’ Acquisition and Use of Research Knowledge for School Improvement,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 87, no. 5 (2012): 609–626.

35. We focused on changes in these areas over the past four years. This period represents a rough estimate of the time frame when most SEAs were making shifts in order to better accommodate federal requirements, motivated by their own programmatic needs, or as a consequence of a change in leadership. Identifying dates and the precise changes is difficult, as there is little readily available documentation for this type of internal restructuring.

something much easier said than done.³⁶ Simply designating roles and responsibilities is not always enough to focus attention, establish desired information flows, and build organizational collaboration in support of policy.³⁷

In sum, redrawing the organizational chart can break down old silos, but the activity can be costly in terms of time, disruption, and political capital. If the goal is to enhance the degree to which related activities can be effectively coordinated to maximize their potential to improve student outcomes, that objective may be accomplished through formal organizational changes, informal relationships, or both. Informal structures such as cross-functional groups may be as effective as major reorganizations at getting staff to work toward common ends, and may require less of an investment in terms of time and political capital.

ON CHIEFS' TO-DO LISTS: BREAKING DOWN SILOS

Most states we examined were in the process of making adjustments to their structures, and dramatic reorganizations were on the to-do list of every new state superintendent with whom we spoke (see table 6). In terms of school improvement, we observed three different organizational approaches:

- **Internal evolution** | Five of the 10 states (Florida, Michigan, Nevada, South Carolina, and Washington) are doing little to alter the organizational structures of their agencies, instead making the responsibilities for school improvement an extension of or addition to existing activities and structures.
- **Adding a box** | Both Colorado and Maryland added a box to their structure, in essence, raising the profile of school and district improvement within the organization. In these two states, the existing structure was amended with a newly created, separate improvement/support entity, directly reporting to a senior staff member.
- **Major overhaul** | Three of the 10 states (Connecticut, Kentucky, and New Jersey) underwent major structural reorganizations across the SEA, with the new structure organized around broad goals or responsibilities as opposed to programs.

It is hard to gauge the impact of major reorganizations. New Jersey arguably made the most dramatic changes to its department with the creation of chief officer positions, and supporting offices, in academics, performance data, talent, and innovation. The reorganization has taken considerable time and effort, including at least two supplementary

changes to the organizational chart between 2011 and 2013. Perhaps more problematically, it left intact the divisions between the assessment, improvement, and compliance offices, in addition to a separate office handling charter schools and innovation, which would seem to reinforce rather than eliminate existing silos.

Kentucky replaced the more traditional programmatic structure with a new set of divisions intended to align the work more closely to the stated goals of a package of education reforms passed by the legislature in 2009. The new offices carried names such as Next Generation Schools and Districts, which is responsible for school improvement, and Next Generation Professionals, which focuses on developing high-quality teachers and principals. While the names were selected to communicate strategic priorities, they also resulted in some confusion. As one staff member noted to us, “We’ve reorganized, and now we have all those goofy names. No one really knows what they are.” When we asked about the impact of the reorganization on communication and coordination within the department, department staff were generally neutral in their assessment. As Commissioner Terry Holliday put it, “We reorganized around the [Race to the Top] application. But even with the new structure, you ... still end up with silos.”³⁸

It is tempting to expect dramatic structural changes to have a significant impact on the capacity of the department to manage school improvement. And, indeed, it is possible to realize greater integration and better communication across related activities by reorganizing. Reorganizations, however, require considerable time and can cause significant disruption. Our conversations with state administrators suggested that more structural change did not necessarily lead to a better or bigger impact in terms of reported alignment in agency activities. One seasoned deputy who had seen more than one chief and set of reorganizations come and go said that the actual relationships between people mattered much more than how their offices are divided.³⁹

INFORMAL STRUCTURES IMPROVE COORDINATION

The Kentucky Department of Education substantially reorganized after the legislature passed a major reform package in 2009.⁴⁰ Senior staff universally credited cross-functional groups, with data support from the department’s Commissioner’s Delivery Unit, with bridging the gaps inherent in the formal organizational structure. Cross-functional groups support each of the SEA’s main

36. Donald Chisholm, *Coordination Without Hierarchy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

37. James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “Organizing Political Life: What Administrative Reorganization Tells Us About Government,” *American Political Science Review* 77, no. 2 (1983): 281–296.

38. Interview with Terry Holliday, Kentucky Commissioner of Education, October 11, 2012.

39. Chafin Interview.

40. Kentucky Legislature, Senate Bill 1, “AN ACT Relating to Education Assessment and Declaring an Emergency,” 2009.

Table 6. Changing Organizational Structures of SEAs

State	Type of structural change	Location of school improvement/support activities	Location of accountability and student assessment
Colorado	Added a box	Established a separate District and School Performance Unit	Established a separate Accountability and Data Analysis Unit
Connecticut	Major overhaul	Integrated Office of School Improvement into new division on turnaround	Combined existing activities under new chief performance officer
Florida	Internally evolved	Expanded existing School Improvement Office and Regional System of Support	Part of existing Accountability, Research, and Measurement Office
Kentucky	Major overhaul	Created a new Office of Next Generation Schools and Districts	Restructured a new Accountability and Assessment Office
Maryland	Added a box	Established Breakthrough Center for School Turnaround	Existing Division of Curriculum, Assessment, and Accountability
Michigan	Internally evolved*	Existing Office of Education Improvement and Innovation	Existing Educational Assessment and Accountability Office
Nevada	Internally evolved	Added a School Improvement Office to be included with Federal Programs	Existing Program Accountability Office
New Jersey	Major overhaul	Created regional structure under chief school improvement officer	Monitoring student performance under chief performance officer
South Carolina	Internally evolved	Established School Transformation Office within School Effectiveness Division	Existing Assessment Office within Accountability Division
Washington	Internally evolved	Existing Office of Student and School Success	Existing Office of Assessment and Student Information

* Michigan has undergone a dramatic structural shift in K-12 education, but the Educational Achievement Authority (the entity designed to operate the state's lowest-performing schools) was established outside the Michigan Department of Education.

Source: Author review of organizational charts from SEAs and interview data.

performance goals, and draw together relevant staff from across the agency to coordinate efforts and resources. A data fellow from the Delivery Unit supported each group. These groups are not permanent and may be established to complete a single, specific task, such as establishing criteria to address district financial solvency. Once the task is completed, the group is disbanded. As Commissioner Holliday observed, “They provide a quick-strike capability.” For topics such as improving high school graduation rates or third-grade literacy, the cross-functional groups are more longstanding. In interviews, SEA personnel from the Delivery Unit, budget office, and school improvement office all credited the cross-functional groups with improving intra-

agency communication as well as identifying areas where resources could be combined or used more effectively.

Administrators in Colorado credited the formation of cross-functional groups with improving how the department approached school improvement. Though the department merely added an office responsible for turning around low-performing schools to its existing organizational chart, that office is able to work across division lines through the cross-functional teams. Peter Sherman, executive director of the Office of School and District Performance, said these teams helped staff triangulate district needs across accountability, planning, and support dimensions.⁴¹

41. Interview with Peter Sherman, executive director, Office of School and District Performance, Colorado Department of Education, November 27, 2012.

Cross-functional groups also feature prominently in Maryland. The Breakthrough Center, housed in the Division of Academic Reform and Innovation, is a cross-divisional initiative in which compliance officers sit at the same table with staff supporting school turnarounds. Department administrators noted that this collaboration improved coordination between the offices and contributed to less of a compliance orientation for Title I activities.

3. The Role of Authority

In order to understand the role of authority, we focused on three questions:

- How is authority delegated to the SEA?
- What kind of authority bounds the relationship between state and local education agencies?
- Under what circumstances does authority create power?

Our findings suggest that legal authority is an enabling condition—SEAs that lack legal authority have limited leverage to influence school and district-level actors directly. However, the presence of legal authority does not on its own make intervention in low-performing schools or districts very likely. More often than not, SEAs lack not the authority but the will for intervention, and politically insulated agencies are more willing to translate authority into power. Taken together, our findings suggest a more nuanced understanding of how authority shapes SEAs’ constraints and opportunities.

AUTHORITY TO ACT DOES NOT ALWAYS LEAD TO ACTION

Table 7 outlines the various authorities available to our group of SEAs. Of the 10 states examined, no more than six of the SEAs have the authority to take over a district, take over an individual school, and/or reconstitute a school or district. Only Maryland, Connecticut, and South Carolina possess all three

Table 7. Intervention Authority Given to SEAs

State	Does state have legal authority to take over school districts?*	Does state have legal authority to take over individual schools?*	Does state have legal authority to reconstitute schools and/or districts?*	Number of times takeover authority exercised in the past 15 years	Does state make site-based management mandatory, recommended, or voluntary? **
Colorado	Yes	Yes	Yes	0	Mandated
Connecticut	Yes	Yes	Yes	2 ⁴²	Recommended
Florida	No	No	Yes	NA	Mandated
Kentucky	Yes	No	Yes	4 ⁴³	Mandated
Maryland	Yes	Yes	Yes	1 ⁴⁴	Voluntary
Michigan	Yes	Yes	No	0 ⁴⁵	Mandated
Nevada	No	Yes	No	0	Voluntary
New Jersey	Yes	No	No	1 ⁴⁶	No statute
South Carolina	Yes	Yes	Yes	1 ⁴⁷	Mandated
Washington	No ⁴⁸	No	No	NA	No statute

* For academic mismanagement. Institute on Education Law and Policy, “50-State Report on Accountability, State Intervention, & Takeover,” available at http://ielp.rutgers.edu/docs/developing_plan_app_b.pdf.

** Jennifer Dounay, *Site-Based Decisionmaking: State-Level Policies* (Education Commission of the States, 2005).

42. The 1997 legislation that established takeover authority included provisions for the state to take over the Hartford school district. Subsequent legislation led to the state taking over the Bridgeport school district, though the state supreme court declared that act unconstitutional in 2012.

43. The state took control of the Floyd County School District in 1997 and the Breathitt County School District in 2012. It also designated the Covington (2000) and Monticello (2012) districts to be “state-assisted,” which places significant restrictions on the local education agency’s autonomy for decisionmaking. Commissioner Holliday noted that while technically these are not takeovers, districts feel that they are.

44. In 1997, the Maryland State Department of Education entered into a unique partnership with Baltimore City Public Schools, which may or may not be termed a takeover. The state essentially forced the district to reconstitute four schools in 1999. Then, in 2006, the SEA tried to take over the 11 schools in the district, but the state legislature blocked the attempt.

45. To date, the Michigan Department of Education does not have control over any schools. The Education Achievement Authority, established by the governor, is run as a partnership with Eastern Michigan University and the Detroit Public Schools. Legislation has been proposed that would expand the role for the SEA, but it has yet to be passed.

46. New Jersey took over the Camden School District in 2013 because of poor academic performance. The state had already taken control of three other districts decades earlier: Jersey City (1989), Paterson (1991), and Newark (1994).

47. South Carolina took over the Allendale County School District in 1999.

48. In the 2013 session, a bill was introduced in the Washington Legislature (SB 5329) that would have created a “superintendent’s school district.” The law that eventually emerged assigns the SEA “the responsibility to intercede, provide robust technical assistance, and direct the necessary interventions” in districts with persistently low-performing schools. The legislative language makes it clear that the superintendent is working “in partnership with the local school board.” How this authority is interpreted and used remains to be seen.

powers. Maryland has exercised its takeover authority in the past but has faced pushback from the state legislature and local policymakers.

All of the SEAs examined possessed some power to encourage, cajole, or even exert force on districts to at least present a plan for turning around the lowest-performing schools in the state.⁴⁹ Recently, federal stimulus funds and the SIG program added a powerful financial incentive for districts to explicitly outline a turnaround approach. Fewer states, however, have made provisions for the SEA to intervene should the district appear unwilling to take the necessary steps to address persistently low-performing schools. In other words, there is more enthusiasm for giving carrots to districts than sticks to SEAs.

In practice, having authority and acting upon it are two very different things. In South Carolina in 2012, seven schools were presented to the state board of education as takeover candidates, but State Superintendent Mick Zais argued against the move. The board agreed, and the schools were left under local control. Though the Maryland State Department of Education has the legal authority to take over schools and districts, when the department attempted in 2006 to take control of 11 Baltimore schools, the state assembly thwarted the effort.⁵⁰

The decision to exercise authority and wield power more often than not related to political factors. SEAs assess whether aggressive action would result in opposition from the legislature, key legislators, or even the governor's office, and only then do they proceed.

The case for state intervention encounters less pushback when there is evidence of financial mismanagement along with academic shortcomings. For example, in 2012, the state board in Kentucky voted to place day-to-day operations of the Breathitt County School District in the hands of the Kentucky Department of Education.⁵¹ The SEA already had the authority to take control of the district, but it acted only after getting state board approval, which was forthcoming because of the desperate condition of the district. Despite some earlier progress, academic achievement in the

district had recently dipped. The problems in Breathitt, however, clearly went well beyond test scores: The district superintendent had recently pleaded guilty to charges of vote-buying, and a financial audit had revealed inappropriate use of school resources.⁵²

Conflict within the SEA can also affect efforts to intervene in low-performing schools and districts. Michigan's Educational Achievement Authority (EAA) created a state-sponsored school district for low-performing schools. The initial creation of the EAA, however, was spearheaded by the governor's office, and appears to sidestep providing a direct role for the Michigan Department of Education. Instead, an interlocal agreement with Eastern Michigan University and the Detroit Public Schools governs the EAA. Currently, the EAA has responsibility for 15 schools, all formerly part of Detroit Public Schools.⁵³ Unlike its counterparts in Tennessee and Louisiana, the Michigan Department of Education does not play a direct role in the management of the EAA, and conversations with agency staff suggest that the SEA's relationship with the state-run district remains ambiguous.⁵⁴

Interestingly, Florida, which has a consistent track record of improving student outcomes, provides relatively few direct intervention powers to the SEA. The Florida Department of Education, for example, does not possess the legal authority to take over a school or a district. Florida's school accountability system is based upon an A-to-F grading system. As an incentive, schools that achieve A status or improve a grade level receive a payment of \$100 per student from the state.⁵⁵ For low-performing D and F schools, districts are required to develop an improvement plan and adhere to a specific timeline for implementation. The SEA prescribes the outline of the plan, which includes designation of an improvement team, articulation of the perceived causes of low performance, and a strategy to address those shortcomings.⁵⁶ The department's Regional Support System oversees the formation of the plan and monitors compliance. The biggest threat to a district that has a persistently low-performing school (two F's in a four-year period) is that students in that school would be free to transfer elsewhere.⁵⁷

49. This is at least partly the result of No Child Left Behind, which empowered SEAs to hold low-performing schools accountable.

50. Michael Dresser, "Despite Critics, New Deal for Grasmick," *Baltimore Sun*, December 12, 2007.

51. Bill Estep, "Kentucky Board of Education Takes Over Management of Breathitt School System," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, December 5, 2012.

52. Bill Estep, "Rare State Takeover of School District Came After Audits Found Disarray," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, December 7, 2012.

53. Legislation to give the EAA authority to take over schools throughout Michigan passed the state house in 2013. Similar legislation had failed to make it through the legislature the previous year.

54. It should be noted that Michigan Superintendent Michael Flanagan has explicitly expressed a desire to work with and support the EAA in its efforts to improve student outcomes. Interview with Michael Flanagan, December 14, 2012.

55. The state also gives bonuses to teachers whose students pass AP and International Baccalaureate exams. Bonuses start at \$50 per student, up to a maximum of \$2,000.

56. Florida Department of Education, *Differentiated Accountability: Strategies and Support for Districts*, Form DA-3, April 2012.

57. Foundation for Excellence in Education, *Florida's Education Revolution: Accountability, Choice, and High Expectations Create Student Success* (Tallahassee, FL: Foundation for Excellence in Education, 2012).

Over the past 10 years, there has been little change in the number of A schools in Florida relative to the number of D and F schools. From 2003 to 2012, the number of A schools rose, from 1,168 to 1,323, but the number of D and F schools also rose, from 196 to 242. Significantly, the department changed how the grades are calculated five times over those years, arguably raising the bar each time.⁵⁸ During that same period, scores for Florida students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress increased, and the number of high school students passing Advanced Placement (AP) exams rose dramatically, including a fourfold increase for the state’s Hispanic students.⁵⁹ Given the progress Florida students have been making, it is difficult to argue that takeover authority is a necessary condition for improved student performance. Instead, the state has relied upon high-capacity local districts and state incentives and support.

While the presence of intervention authority does not mean it will be used or used effectively, its absence clearly has implications for how SEAs can proceed. New Jersey lacks authority to intervene with individual schools. As a consequence, its SEA is left only with the authority to take over entire school districts (see box below), a move that stretches already-limited capacity at the state level.

Similarly, Jim Guthrie, Nevada’s former superintendent of public instruction, expressed his desire to see the powers of the state department enhanced with regard to intervention in low-performing schools. Guthrie noted that nearly all of the state’s low-performing schools were in a single district, Clark County, but that there was little he could do to force the district to take certain steps: “My authority is more political than statutory.”⁶⁰

DIRECTLY ELECTED SEA CHIEFS EXERCISE POWER WITH LESS AUTONOMY

As with most public organizations, elected officials delegate implementation of policy and day-to-day operations to the SEA. The political status of the SEA and its chief, however, can determine the degree to which the department can function autonomously. In general, one would expect less willingness to exercise authority and a greater deference to the status quo when the SEA is more directly accountable to voters and interest groups, as compared to departments with appointed chiefs.⁶¹

At a general level, the 10 states selected for our project support this premise. Overall, the most politically insulated SEA chiefs were the most aggressive in restructuring their agencies and changing how they functioned internally.

In Kentucky and New Jersey, the two most active states, the governor appoints both the state board members and state chief, providing considerable political buffer (Table 8). Connecticut, which is in the process of implementing major reform legislation and changing how the department operates, also relies on gubernatorial appointments for the SEA chief and state board.

Table 8. SEA Governance in Study States

State	SEA chief selection	School board selection	Type of SEA restructuring	
			Major overhaul	Internally evolved
Colorado	Appointed by state board of education	Elected		
Connecticut	Appointed by state board of education	Appointed by governor	X	
Florida	Appointed by state board of education	Appointed by governor		X
Kentucky	Appointed by state board of education	Appointed by governor	X	
Maryland	Appointed by state board of education	Appointed by governor		
Michigan	Appointed by state board of education	Elected		X
Nevada	Appointed by state board of education	Four elected; seven appointed by governor		X
New Jersey	Appointed by governor	Appointed by governor	X	
South Carolina	Elected	Majority appointed by legislature		X
Washington	Elected	Combination of appointed and elected positions		X

Source: Education Commission of the States and state board websites.

58. Florida Department of Education, “School Grades for Elementary and Middle Schools,” October 2012, and “School Grades for High Schools,” revised April 2013.
 59. Christy Hovanetz and Matthew Ladner, “The Florida Formula for Student Achievement,” paper presented at the Excellence in Action: National Summit on Education Reform, November 28, 2012, Washington, DC.
 60. Guthrie Interview. Guthrie’s frank manner may have shortened his tenure in the position. In March 2013, he abruptly resigned after only one year in the job.
 61. This is the case in local educational governance. See Kenneth K. Wong and Francis X. Shen, “When Mayors Lead: Assessing the Effects of Takeover,” in William G. Howell, ed., *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2005).

At the other end of the spectrum, SEAs in Michigan, South Carolina, and Washington are the most politically exposed, because their chiefs and/or state boards are elected. They have been less aggressive restructuring their organizations or challenging their relationships with local districts. In both South Carolina and Washington, voters directly elect the SEA chief for a four-year term. In Michigan, voters elect members of the state board, which appoints the superintendent. South Carolina's board of education consists of 17 members, with 16 appointed by legislators and 1 appointed by the governor.⁶²

Legal Basis of State Intervention in Schools and Districts

New Jersey became the first state to take over a school district in 1989. That year, the SEA took over the Jersey City School District, the second-largest in the state. Two years later it took control of Paterson, the third-largest district. And in 1994, it took control of the Newark schools, the largest district. In 2013, after 18 years of state control, the Newark Advisory Board filed a petition to restore local governance.

Since New Jersey took these steps, states have become increasingly interventionist in cases of financial or academic mismanagement. By 2010, 32 states had authority to intervene directly by taking over the management of a school or district. Few states have used this authority systematically, however, and intervention often stems from a variety of reasons, including scandal, financial insolvency, and performance.⁶³

This is changing, as states make intervention a key part of their accountability systems. Louisiana, Michigan, and Tennessee created state-run school districts for the lowest-performing schools. In each case, the local school district temporarily loses control of low-performing schools, with the state often contracting with charter management organizations to run the schools. While early results are promising, it remains to be seen how the inevitable return to local governance will affect the long-term prospects of these efforts.

Washington's board consists of 16 members, 5 of whom are appointed directly by local boards.⁶⁴ These three states have been more restrained in their approach to reforming their SEAs, in no small part because reforms can generate conflict among the communities that elected superintendents represent.

While political insulation can enable an SEA to be bolder in its reform efforts, more exposed SEAs can still make change with strong leadership. Colorado, for example, which aggressively pursued a stronger role in school and district improvement, is politically exposed, given that its chief is appointed by a wholly elected state board. Colorado's SEA benefited from a change-minded state legislature, as well as a chief committed to reforming the agency.

In sum, among our sample, where political structures were the least insulated from political pressure, states tended to be the most cautious and the least willing to use their authority to alter the SEA and/or intervene directly in schools. But one state, Colorado, did manage to take more aggressive action in spite of this limitation, supported by a strong chief and influential allies.

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS

SEAs faced an important opportunity to intervene in low-performing schools when the federal Department of Education launched the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program in 2009, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The SIG program allowed states to offer an incentive, in the form of millions of dollars, in exchange for big changes in participating schools and districts. The funds served as a channel for SEAs to provide additional support and oversight to low-performing schools. Importantly, these capacities existed whether or not the state had the legal intervention authority discussed above.

To understand the strength of each state's SIG strategy, we considered two aspects of their programs: the type of intervention model used in participating schools and the frequency with which states used the grant renewal process to oversee implementation.

To apply for SIG funding, schools were required to choose one of four intervention models: transformation, turnaround, restart, or closure. Of the four, the transformation model is the least disruptive in terms of staff and school organization, requiring only a change in principal and a comprehensive plan for instructional reform.

62. A description of the South Carolina State Board of Education is available at <http://ed.sc.gov/agency/stateboard/>.

63. Kenneth K. Wong and Francis X. Shen, "Measuring the Effectiveness of City and State Takeover as a School Reform Strategy," *Peabody Journal of Education* 78, no. 4 (2003): 89–119.

64. Of the 16 members of the Washington State Board of Education, 7 are appointed by the governor, 5 are elected by local education agency boards, and 1 is elected by the boards of private schools. The directly elected SEA chief is also a member of the board, and the board itself determines a process to select 2 student representatives. Revised Code of Washington, RCW 28A.305.011, available at Washington State Legislature website, <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.305.011>.

Table 9 presents data on the type of intervention model selected. Nearly 70 percent or more of schools in six states—South Carolina (95 percent), Washington (78 percent), Florida (76 percent), New Jersey (70 percent), Nevada (70 percent), and Michigan (68 percent)—chose the least disruptive intervention. Only Maryland did not select the transformation model at all, opting instead for turnaround and restart, both of which required major changes in staff and/or school sponsorship. Colorado, Connecticut, and Kentucky relied on a mix of intervention strategies.

How much of a problem is it that most schools most states chose the least aggressive reform model? We cannot answer this question definitively. However, research on school turnaround consistently suggests an aggressive talent-seeking strategy can be critical to success.⁶⁵ In relying heavily upon the transformation model, which requires few staffing changes, many of our sample states appear to have missed an opportunity to reshape the talent set in low-performing schools.

Regardless of the type of intervention model, implementation fidelity—the extent to which reforms to instruction are implemented as designed—is an important factor shaping whether the grants have their intended impact on students. To understand how SEAs monitored district and school-level implementation of their SIG programs, we considered their plans for monitoring as stated in their applications.

We also reviewed their renewal histories to assess whether any individual schools had their funding pulled as a result of inadequate implementation.

All 10 states included a monitoring process that evaluated progress toward stated objectives, including student outcomes, at least annually. In theory, lack of progress toward stated objectives or poor implementation would result in non-renewal. Yet an analysis of state SIG applications for FY 2011 and FY 2012 suggest this option was exercised just a handful of times. Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, Nevada, South Carolina, and Washington never declined a school or district’s request for continued funding. Colorado suspended funding for five schools because of poor performance, though the funding for all but two of them was eventually reinstated. In perhaps the most aggressive effort, seven Michigan schools lost funding as a result of inadequate progress toward goals.

The near-universal renewal rate in most states should not be taken as a sign of strong implementation. U.S. Department of Education monitoring reports in 7 of our 10 cases (Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Michigan, Nevada, South Carolina, and Washington) document significant oversight gaps, with many schools failing to implement essential components of promised reforms, including staffing changes and increased instructional time.⁶⁶

Table 9. Most States Choose the Least Aggressive Intervention Model

State	Transformation	Turnaround	Restart	Closure	Percent Transformation
Maryland	0	6	5	0	0.0
Kentucky	4	6	0	0	40.0
Connecticut	6	6	1	0	46.2
Colorado	10	7	1	3	47.6
Michigan	19	9	0	0	67.9
Nevada	7	3	0	0	70.0
New Jersey	7	3	0	0	70.0
Florida	54	17	0	0	76.1
Washington	14	3	0	1	77.8
South Carolina	18	0	0	1	94.7

Source: School Improvement Grant State Summaries FY 2009, U.S. Department of Education, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>, accessed January 15, 2013.

65. Rebecca Herman et al., “Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: A Practical Guide” (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

66. Office of School Turnaround Monitoring, Department of Education, accessed December 15, 2012, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/monitoring/index.html>.

These failures to incentivize more dramatic turnaround efforts and oversee implementation of what amounted to million-dollar investments in low-performing schools take on renewed importance when viewed in the context of the SEA's sometimes limited authority for intervention. In making significant new resource investments, the SIG program could make state interventions more palatable. But many states failed to aggressively leverage these to make substantial and sustainable changes to low-performing schools. This assessment largely mirrors the findings nationally.⁶⁷

“GETTING OUT OF THE WAY”: A POWERFUL, IF UNDERUTILIZED, APPROACH

If the intervention strategies discussed above set something of an adversarial relationship between the state department and districts, SEAs are quick to point to their more cooperative efforts to support school improvement. Maryland Superintendent Lowery cited deregulation as key to bringing about a more performance-oriented SEA. District-state interactions, she said, often have a “because I said so” quality that undermines relationships between the SEA and districts.⁶⁸ Instead, Maryland has worked to create a more relational, customer-friendly SEA that districts would want to seek out.

In a similar vein, the New Jersey Department of Education is in the process of exercising its available authority in an effort to provide regulatory relief to all districts. Following the issuance of an executive order, the governor established a task force with the explicit charge of conducting a complete review of all education regulations “to determine the extent to which they increase the quality of instruction for students, improve academic achievement of students, improve teaching effectiveness within schools or improve the safety and wellbeing of students ... or are overly prescriptive.”⁶⁹

The result of that review was the identification of “rules that are wholly unrelated to student learning; in other cases, they are unnecessary reaches beyond statutory requirements that diminish local flexibility.”⁷⁰ In its initial report, the task force made 40 recommendations to the SEA for improving departmental code, followed by a list of 428 specific proposed changes. Beginning in the spring of 2013, the department began to forward many of those changes to the state board of education. The recommended changes

ranged from addressing the internal function of the district (for example, a change to code that would free a district to organize itself as it thought best) to eliminating some reporting requirements to the state to stipulating which issues will and will not be part of local collective bargaining. The task force even recommended that districts should be permitted to use electronic notices to replace required newspaper advertisements.⁷¹ At this writing, similar efforts are underway in Washington State.

Bolstering SEA Capacity

Based on our findings, the following recommendations are presented as a guide for state administrators and policymakers seeking to build capacity at the state level. They are neither a definitive nor exhaustive list. Instead, they represent five tools that, if used, could enhance SEA capacity even in the absence of new resources. We understand that some SEAs may already have embraced these measures. Others may have made progress on one or two. The intent here is to encourage an assessment of where a department currently stands and guide the steps that could be taken to build a department better able to take a leadership role in efforts to improve low-performing schools and districts.

Recommendation #1: Be Transparent About the Use of Financial Resources

Resources can be aligned toward strategic objectives only if existing resource investments are identified. Expenditures on K-12 educational programs are routinely generated and publicly released, yet few SEAs engage in the type of budget analysis that would enable them to assess whether their investments align with their priorities or are paying off.⁷²

The difficulty in identifying how resources are distributed within the SEA is not the result of intentional efforts to conceal information. Rather, state legislatures and budget offices have long focused their reporting and analysis requirements on broader K-12 budgets, which make up a much larger share of the state's budget than the budget to run the agency itself and are typically of greater interest to policymakers. But just because external reporting requirements are driven by such constraints does not mean that the internal agency budget should evade close analysis.

67. A 2012 report by the Government Accountability Office suggests that many states did not receive student achievement data in time to use these data in their renewal decisions. Other states chose to renew grants despite significant implementation problems. See Government Accountability Office, *School Improvement Grants: Education Should Take Additional Steps to Enhance Accountability for Schools and Contractors* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2012), http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_SIG_Tinkering_mar12__0.pdf.

68. Lowery Interview.

69. New Jersey Executive Order 58, cited in the Education Transformation Task Force's Final Report, September 5, 2012, p. 3. 69. Ibid, p. 8.

70. Ibid, p. 8.

71. Ibid, p. 34.

72. Over the course of two projects, we examined the budget documents of 17 states. Detailed information for how personnel and administrative expenses were allocated within the SEA could be found on only two departments' web pages. Some of these data could be gleaned from state budget office submissions, but in most cases, central budget process information offered little insight into the functional spread of resources. Even SEA fiscal officers, contacted directly, did not have the information readily at hand, and in two cases lacked a formal staffing table. We are not alone in identifying a lack of fiscal transparency. See Brown et al., 2011.

Such analyses provide an important opportunity for SEAs to consider whether their existing resource allocations are adequately serving their strategic objectives. If not, this provides them with an evidence base to examine the cost drivers behind skewed allocations, as well as data to bring to legislators, governors, and their own team to bolster the case for reallocations. In Kentucky, for example, Commissioner Holliday successfully used an improved budget planning process to end a variety of legislator-initiated projects that, while well intentioned, did not directly align with the strategic goals for education. Working with legislative staff and other executive branch agencies, it may be possible for the SEA to identify opportunities to redirect resources in support of school improvement.

Recommendation #2: Seek Flexibility in How Resources and Staff Can Be Used

If resources are not aligned toward strategic objectives, then SEAs will likely need to repurpose existing resources. Unfortunately, external factors, including funding for federal programs, drive many of the decisions SEAs make about resource allocation. Looking for ways to make the best use of limited funds will require flexibility and creativity.

There are ways to leverage federal programs that do not show up in organizational charts. Traditionally, rules that require SEAs to account for the time employees spend working on federal programs led to a reluctance to repurpose staff or cross-list an individual employee across several related programs. But this need not be the case. Colorado explored how resources such as federal Title I funds could serve as a possible source to bolster the SEA's capacity to support school and district improvement. Instead of having individual compliance officers for each federal program, the state looked for ways to combine the oversight responsibility of multiple grants under one position. The state then allocates portions of the salary of a single staff member to more than one grant program's administrative set-aside. The allocation reflects the fact that one person is performing the oversight tasks associated with multiple funding streams. Consequently, the state freed up a position, or at least part of one, to work with schools or districts in a supporting role, consistent with the goals of the federal program. Of the 10 states, Colorado appeared to be the only one engaging in this practice.

The first step in seeking flexibility is to identify the cause of the restriction. Constraints on the use of funds are sometimes real, and sometimes the product of agency practice and lore. If they are the former, they can be waived. If they are the latter, it becomes a matter of determining how best to repurpose the funds.

Recommendation #3: Develop a Talent Pipeline

All the resources in the world mean little without people to invest in. In our interviews, the lack of talent was routinely identified as a key constraint. While the research on developing and managing talent pipelines in SEAs is in its infancy, recent evidence from districts suggests that talent management is crosscutting work that must extend well beyond the human resource department.⁷³ It is likely that SEAs will need to draw upon all possible approaches to make the most of their staff resources. This might include hiring people for new strategic initiatives, using contractors for specialty skills or short-term technical assistance projects, and growing existing employees for areas of work that are already developed.

In many cases, finding the right people is only part of the challenge. Getting them hired presents obstacles too, given the constraints of state civil regulations. A successful talent strategy requires not only a plan to identify the right individuals, but also a plan to clear the hurdles that the state bureaucracy presents in terms of salary and tenure of employment.

Recommendation #4: Recognize the Limits of Formal Reorganizations

Nancy Grasmick, who served as the Maryland state superintendent for 20 years, speculated that Lillian Lowery, her replacement, would probably reorganize the department. When asked if she thought reorganization was needed, Grasmick replied, "No. But that's what new superintendents do."⁷⁴

The underlying assumption behind a structural reorganization is to align the activities of the department with its goals. Ideally, the new structure provides clear lines of accountability and facilitates coordination between individuals and units working on similar tasks. For example, some SEAs have begun to place personnel working on Title I program oversight with others in the organization working on school improvement activities, as noted above.

Moving the boxes around, however, is not a guarantee that the goals of reorganization will be realized. Such reorganizations can be disruptive and costly in terms of staff morale, regardless of whether that structure will actually serve agency goals.

The challenge of facilitating coordination across units representing different programs that contribute to the same goal is a significant one. But it may be possible to address this challenge through either formal restructuring or less

73. Christine Campbell and Michael DeArmond, *State Education Agencies Overlooked in Education Reform? Talent Is the First Place to Start*, prepared for the PIE Network 5th Annual Summit, September 2011.

74. Interview with Nancy Grasmick, former Maryland State Superintendent, October 19, 2012.

formal means. The cross-functional groups in Colorado, Kentucky, and Maryland offer examples of flexible models that can overlay formal structures to make coordination easier and adaptive to emergent problems.

State leaders looking to build the capacity of their education department through improved communication and coordination across related programs should consider the potential costs and benefits of different options. Formal restructuring can achieve these objectives but may require a great deal of effort. Less formal routes may achieve the same end, while expending fewer resources.

Recommendation #5: Differentiate Relationships With Districts Based on Capacity

Not all districts are alike. Prior research has discussed the relationship between state and local education agencies as though a single approach to all local districts was both necessary and desirable.⁷⁵ What is more practical, and probably more effective, is for the SEA to differentiate its approach to local districts, based upon their needs and existing capacity to manage performance themselves. SEAs will need to exercise more power when a local district lacks the ability to manage school performance and, conversely, less power when districts can manage performance on their own.

Maryland provides a useful example in this regard. With a high-capacity school district such as Montgomery County in suburban Washington, D.C., the Maryland State Department of Education can look for ways to provide flexibility and remove barriers at the state level that could hinder innovation. The relationship with the Baltimore City Public Schools will be different. Though Baltimore may be willing to reform its approach to school improvement, the SEA may still need to both provide both assistance and remove barriers.

For some of the state's smaller, rural districts, where capacity is lacking, the SEA may have to play a much more direct role in guiding school improvement.

Other states have started to differentiate their approach to districts. For example, Clark County in Nevada has 300,000 students, tremendously more than the other 18 school districts. Thus, the Nevada Department of Education's relationship with Clark County must be different than its relationships with the other districts. New Jersey's SEA-run Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) are designed to provide precisely this type of differentiated support. By focusing on a small number of districts with low-performing schools—one RAC interacts with just a single district—the state response can be more tailored to the specific needs of a handful of actors. In the absence of the RACs, administrators in Trenton would be trying to implement improvement strategies for more than 600 school districts.

The approach of the Colorado Department of Education to accountability reflects the notion that the state role in school improvement goes beyond intervention. The legislature has granted the SEA explicit authority to impose sanctions on districts whose schools remain on the list of low performers for successive years. But the department's Office of District and School Performance also seeks to foster a climate that supports innovation, looking for ways to support districts that need help from the capital in pursuing strategies that may not neatly fit the confines of existing regulations.

What is clear is that no single response from the state will fit all of the variation in terms of capacity and need. SEAs need to recognize this variation and calibrate their response accordingly.

75. Patrick Murphy and Lydia, Rainey, *Modernizing the State Education Agency: Different Paths Toward Performance Management* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2012).

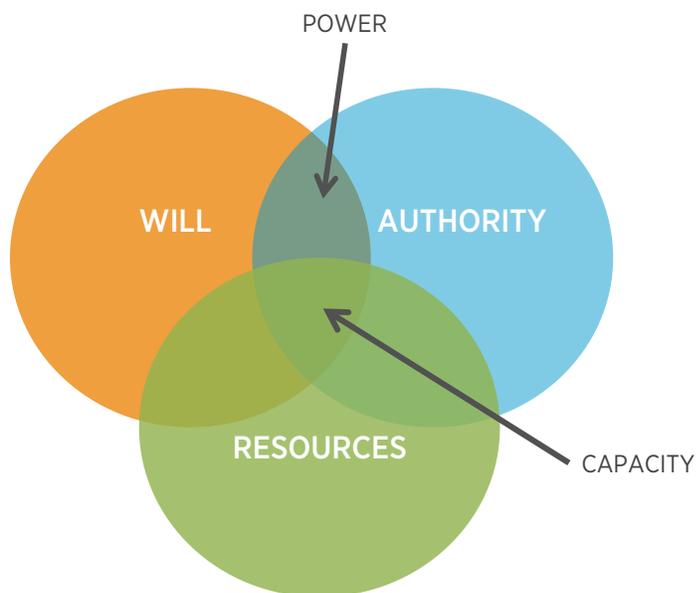
Conclusion: In Search of State Capacity

This project began as an effort to identify how states can build capacity to support school and district improvement. Our examination revealed that there are steps that leaders of SEAs can take to improve their capacity. Some steps can be taken without engaging in major legislative battles or securing a huge influx of resources. Chiefs and their deputies can look for ways to repurpose existing resources, increase communication and coordination across relevant divisions within the organization, and identify districts where they need to intervene, as opposed to districts where they just need to get out of the way. Perhaps most important, they can aim to recruit, retain, and develop the talent needed to support a culture of performance management.

Importantly, our findings suggest that absent strong leadership and a commitment to improving the performance of low-performing schools and districts, more resources or legislative victories are unlikely to result in meaningful change. And, in many cases, the will to act is the biggest barrier to transforming agency practice.

In sum, enhanced agency capacity rests at the intersection of will, authority, and resources (see figure 3). The key challenge for leaders of SEAs is to find strategies that enable alignment between these three elements. Bold strategies and substantial resources mean little in the absence of authority to put plans into practice. Similarly, significant authority and ample resources mean little without a leader willing to steer the agency forward. Understanding what a given state is missing provides a map for leaders looking to improve agency capacity.

Figure 3. Capacity Rests at the Intersection of Will, Authority, and Resources



Appendix A: Methodology

The 10 states in our sample were chosen to maximize variability in how SEAs are organized, as well as how they approach the problem of school turnaround. Specifically, we considered four indicators of the policymaking environment: charter laws, teacher evaluations, data systems, and state accountability. Scores were then compiled into a single index, with a 100-point scale.

Comparing State Policies

Charter laws | We used the National Alliance for Public Charter School's 2012 report, which scores states with charter school laws on 20 components, including measures of quality control and autonomy.⁷⁶ We divided each state's score by the total possible points (208) to come up with a percentage score. States that do not allow charter schools receive a score of 0, under the assumption that they have forgone this avenue of flexibility and change for their districts and schools.

Teacher evaluations | We included a measure of what states require in terms of teacher evaluations. States were scored on two binary measures, indicating whether teacher evaluations are tied to student achievement and whether both tenured and non-tenured teachers are evaluated at least annually.⁷⁷ A state's score (ranging between 0 and 2) was then divided by the total possible (2) to get an overall teacher evaluation percentage score.

Data systems | Our measures of data systems focus on how states mandate that data is gathered and used.⁷⁸ To measure how data are gathered, we used five binary indicators, of whether states require the following: the ability to match students' test records from year to year to measure academic growth, information on untested students, a statewide teacher

identifier with a teacher-student match, student-level course completion (transcript) data, and student-level graduation and dropout data. To measure how data are used, two binary indicators, denoting whether schools and districts must create progress reports using individual student data to improve student performance and must create reports using longitudinal statistics to guide system-wide improvement efforts. A percentage was calculated for each grouping (data gathering and data use), and the two percentages were then weighted equally for an overall average data score.

State accountability | This indicator was measured by an average of scores on three areas: sanctions, growth, and reporting.⁷⁹ To construct the sanctions sub-score, a state received 1 point for each sanction it could levy against a school or district, including school closure, reconstitution, permitting student transfers, withholding funds, converting schools into charters, turning schools over to private management, offering supplemental services, implementing new curriculum, and turning over school management to a state agency, as well as an additional point if high-performing or improved schools were rewarded (for a total of 10 possible points). Similarly, to construct the growth sub-score, a state received 1 point if it uses measures of individual student growth to rate schools, for adequate yearly progress, or for state ratings (for a total of 3 possible points). To construct the reporting sub-score, a state received 1 point each if it publicly reports scale scores defining performance levels for statewide assessments, reports average scale scores on statewide assessments for all schools on its website, or uses school report cards (for a total of 3 possible points). Each sub-score was converted to a percentage by dividing the points a state earned by the points possible. Then the sub-score percentages were added together and divided by 3, thus obtaining an average accountability score in which the three sub-areas are weighted equally.

76. Ziebarth, 2012

77. Education Counts, 2012.

78. Data Quality Campaign 2012.

79. Education Counts 2012.

Appendix B: Understanding Resource Allocations

To understand states' resource allocations, we categorized line-item budget data into seven budget functions reflecting distinctive areas of work. This includes five core functions (central support, executive services, teaching and learning,

school and district improvement, and special education) in addition to two secondary functions (nutrition and community). These functions are designed to be mutually exclusive, meaning every dollar was allocated to one and only one function. In some cases, a line item cut across two or more functions. In these cases, we disaggregated the line item based on our best knowledge about how the funds were disbursed.

Categories of Expenditures by SEA Function

Function	Description
CORE FUNCTIONS	
Central support	Manage the agency's operations, including human resources, financial management, facilities management and information technology, and provide support for districts and schools in the areas of grants administration and accounting
Executive services	Develop policy, provide leadership to the state agency, and oversee legislative and government affairs
Teaching and learning	Manage the certification and training of teachers, develop curriculum and instructional practices, and oversee unique instructional programs (e.g., for English language learners and gifted students)
School and district improvement	Assess student performance and oversee efforts to close the achievement gap
Special education	Oversee the special education program, including program administration, direct service, and compliance
SECONDARY FUNCTIONS	
Nutrition	Manage the state's school-based nutrition program
Community	Provide resources and services to the community (e.g., health services, preschool, adult education, and after-school activities)

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