

California Comprehensive Center

Summary of State Strategies for Districts Identified for Improvement Under NCLB

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Introduction

The American Institutes for Research (AIR), as a partner in the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, conducted interviews with selected state education agency (SEA) staff to determine what supports and interventions states have developed for districts identified for improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The purpose of these conversations was to better understand how far along other states are in developing processes for districts identified for improvement, particularly those in corrective action, and to identify promising strategies the California Department of Education (CDE) may want to consider while developing a process to assist districts in corrective action. AIR asked each SEA representative to describe support systems the state has in place for districts identified for improvement, sources of funding for these efforts, support providers identified to help with these efforts, sanctions in place for districts that fail to make improvement, and any challenges or lessons learned regarding district assistance. AIR also asked respondents to describe any specific tools the state uses to assess district leadership capacity and to evaluate districts' resource allocation.

In spring 2006, AIR conducted telephone interviews with SEA staff from 16 states, supplementing the interviews with Web site and document reviews. The sample is *not* a nationally representative sample, but rather was designed to include states that have unique or established systems of district assistance in place. The table below shows the states AIR included, the total number of districts in each state, the number of districts identified for improvement, and the number of districts in corrective action.

State	Total Number of Districts	Number of Districts Identified for Improvement (as of spring 2006)	Number of Districts in Corrective Action (as of spring 2006)
Florida	67	64 ¹	0
Georgia	180	12	0
Illinois	873	240	0
Iowa	367	14	0
Kansas	299	7	0
Kentucky	176	59	0
Louisiana	66	2	0
Massachusetts	242	10	0
Michigan	530	10	0
New York	698	56	8
North Carolina	115	43	0
Ohio	614	59 ²	0
Pennsylvania	501	52	5
Texas	1,229	14	0
Virginia	132	79	0
Washington	296	29	0

This summary reviews overall trends in district assistance across these states and identifies specific practices and strategies that may be of interest to other states developing systems of support. This summary also provides examples of tools that states are using within their district-level systems.

¹ This number includes districts identified by the state accountability system in addition to those identified by NCLB.

² Ohio's Statewide System of School Improvement Support provides a Tri-Tier Model of delivery of services to districts that extends beyond those districts identified in district improvement status. In Academic Year 2005-06, Ohio's differentiated model provided services to all districts in Ohio with 368 districts receiving the greatest intensity and priority of services.

Summary of Trends

State support structures for districts identified for improvement vary greatly depending on state capacity, district need, and state models for support. The states in our sample have structures in place that range from fairly extensive support systems focused at the district level, to systems that focus primarily on the school level.

Seven states³ appear to have multi-level systems of support in place that provide strategic support based on district need. While all districts receive some technical assistance, districts most in need of improvement receive more intensive support. This support is often managed at the regional level to ensure coordination of multiple local initiatives. Six states⁴ have systems that provide more individualized support to district leaders. While some of this support is regionally-based, these systems do not usually have a common coordinated system of district support; rather, support is customized based on each district's needs and capacity. The three remaining states have school-level focused systems⁵ that focus on curriculum and instruction and less directly on district functions and leadership.

Regardless of the extent of district support, the states in our sample have consistently adopted technical assistance strategies and/or tools to improve the performance of districts identified for improvement. These strategies and tools are outlined in greater detail below. It is important to note, however, that at this time most states have focused less on strategies to address corrective action districts than on general district improvement strategies. Few states have districts in the more advanced stages of improvement, and few have specified plans for the future identification of districts in corrective action.

Systems of Support and Technical Assistance

As acknowledged previously, the states AIR interviewed vary widely in the extent to which they provide support and technical assistance to their districts in improvement. Overall, however, every state AIR interviewed is implementing some type of technical assistance with their districts in improvement to facilitate progress in student achievement and comply with federal legislation. The most common areas of support include:

- Needs assessment and planning
- Data analysis
- Capacity building
- Resource allocation
- Progress monitoring

Specifically, assessment and planning tools, such as rubrics to help revise district plans or data analysis tools to identify where to target resources, are a main element of technical assistance among nearly all of the states.⁶ These tools are also used to conduct needs assessments to identify areas where the state could assist districts. Similarly, some states provide districts with data analysis services or tools to help districts manage the large amount of data collected from schools. In addition to these tools, all states reported having some form of capacity-building support that focuses on enhancing districts' professional development, leadership, or curriculum and instruction activities. Experienced and qualified technical assistance and support providers are considered a key component of these capacity-building efforts. Several states also reported providing support around resource allocation, such as aligning budgets with

³ Kentucky, Ohio, Louisiana, Georgia, Kansas, New York, and Washington

⁴ Michigan, Illinois, Massachusetts, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina

⁵ Iowa, Texas, and Florida

⁶ See "Tools for District Improvement" section for examples.

priorities or providing tools to assist districts in categorizing and utilizing funds. Many, however, reported that they are just starting to develop or consider tools or services in this area. Finally, progress monitoring was reported by a few states, and includes conducting district audits and onsite reviews to analyze district functions. All states reported having some combination of these technical assistance and support strategies to target various aspects of district improvement.

The providers of technical assistance differ depending on the needs of the districts and the capacity of the state. Some states employ specialized SEA personnel who operate out of a school or district improvement division to provide coordinated technical assistance directly to districts. Other states that use a more localized system of support rely on regional center staff to provide support to local districts. These regional staff can customize their support depending upon local needs. In addition, one state reported training district staff to serve as technical assistance providers for central office staff or school personnel. Many states supplement their assistance staff with university consultants or professional organization representatives because they lack the state or district staff to adequately supply the necessary amount and quality of technical assistance. For similar reasons, a number of states utilize teams of experienced educators and administrators, such as retired district or school staff or staff that are on sabbatical, to provide targeted assistance to districts in need. While the type of provider varies, most providers have common areas of expertise: professional development, data analysis, leadership, and curriculum and instruction support.

Frontloading Assistance

While all states reported providing some form of support to improve districts identified for improvement through NCLB or state accountability systems, some states reported having systems in place to improve *all* districts. Specifically, four states in the sample⁷ appear to be providing assistance (i.e., building capacity) to all districts in their state in order to lessen the likelihood that districts are identified for improvement. The approach these states are taking toward district and school improvement is one of continual improvement for the entire state education system and is considered an iterative process based on the level of need.

For example, Kentucky's improvement process focuses on increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of planning, prioritization, and resource allocation across all schools and districts. Accordingly, all districts must undertake this process, not just districts identified for improvement. The Kentucky planning process includes:

- Creating and sustaining a vision for improved student achievement;
- Establishing a district needs-assessment process to determine what the district must do to help schools increase student performance; and
- Building upon the policy role of the local board of education and school-based decision making councils (SBDM) to provide systemic methods for improvement planning.

Similarly, Ohio uses a capacity-building model to help improve districts at risk as well as districts already identified for improvement. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) has mapped out a three-tier model or a "cone of support" to provide services to all districts, with the most intensive support targeted to a small number of districts. Pennsylvania requires every district to design and implement a strategic district plan, regardless of improvement status. Finally, in Washington, the School System Improvement Resource Guide (SSIRG) is used to help all districts, not just those identified for improvement, to develop aligned district and school improvement plans. Furthermore, Washington offers a voluntary district-level review to all districts that utilizes portions of the SSIRG guide to assess district capacity.

⁷ Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington

Regional Structure

Ten of the 16 states AIR interviewed reported employing a regional structure for providing technical assistance.⁸ For example, the Ohio state system has 12 regional service areas guided by a Regional School Improvement Team (RSIT). Members of the RSIT work collaboratively to provide a variety of services to school districts, especially districts with schools in improvement status. Their role is to build the capacity of the district, not to do the work *for* districts, using a coaching model to help improve district practices and systems. The RSIT identifies strategic and focused support for district leaders by:

- Analyzing data to identify districts most in need of improvement (priority districts);
- Building profiles of priority districts, using information from discussions with the district leadership team and a review of district accountability data;
- Creating a regional plan to provide professional development and technical assistance, targeted first to priority districts; and
- Deploying services and evaluating their effectiveness.

Each Regional School Improvement Team plans regional activities that address common areas of need in the service area. These activities are targeted to priority districts, but made available to other districts on a space-available basis.

In Illinois, Regional Service Providers (RESPROs) are teams that work in Regional Offices of Education at the county or multi-county level to provide assistance to schools and districts in improvement. The RESPRO system of support includes specific activities that:

- Focus on the school improvement plan (SIP) and district improvement plan (DIP), including working with districts to develop a district improvement plan;
- Target proven approaches and standardized processes to specific improvement components;
- Customize services based on differences among regions, districts, and schools;
- Coordinate programs, services, and funding;
- Deploy state, regional, and local staff and resources efficiently and effectively; and
- Use Academic Yearly Progress (AYP), defined by state and federal law, as the “bottom line” measure of effectiveness in helping schools and districts.

Addressing Scale Issues

Four of the states AIR interviewed-- Florida, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania -- appear to face a large number of districts in “needs improvement” status. These states are attempting to deal with scale issues by utilizing online resources, hiring outside evaluators, prioritizing district needs, or relying on regional networks to deliver services.

For example, 95 percent of Florida’s districts are currently identified for improvement, as defined by both state and federal accountability systems. One of the ways that Florida handles the large number of identified districts is by relying on online resources. Florida has an interactive, online database for schools and districts to enter and view achievement data and reports.⁹ Similarly, Ohio has 368 districts (out of a total of 614 districts) that are identified by state and national accountability systems as priority districts, or needing improvement. To fill this vast need, as mentioned earlier, Ohio has mapped out a

⁸ Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania

⁹ This database is located at http://sip.osi.fsu.edu/0506_sip_template/login.aspx

three-tier model or a “cone of support” to provide services to all districts with the most intensive support to a small number of districts. In New York, 56 of its 698 districts are identified for improvement, and eight districts are identified for corrective action. To accommodate the need for support, New York hired outside evaluators to identify areas in need of improvement, particularly with regard to curriculum, in corrective action districts. Finally, in Pennsylvania, of 501 total districts in the state, 52 are currently identified for improvement, five of which are in corrective action. Pennsylvania relies on regional systems of support to deliver services to this large number of districts. Given the limited capacities of SEAs, these various strategies are helping states address large numbers of districts identified for improvement.

Corrective Actions and Sanctions

While many states have *schools* identified for corrective action, most states do not have *districts* identified for corrective action. Only two of the 16 states AIR interviewed, New York and Pennsylvania, reported having districts in corrective action during the 2005-06 school year. Georgia, Kentucky, and Kansas anticipate having districts in corrective action starting in the 2006-07 school year. Accordingly, fewer than half of the states AIR interviewed have plans in place for corrective action districts.¹⁰

According to NCLB provisions¹¹, if the SEA identifies a district or local education agency (LEA) for corrective action, the SEA must: (1) continue to ensure that the district is provided with technical assistance; and (2) take at least one of the following corrective actions, as consistent with State law:

- Defer programmatic funds or reduce administrative funds;
- Institute and fully implement a new curriculum based on State and local content and academic achievement standards that includes appropriate, scientifically research-based professional development for all relevant staff;
- Replace LEA personnel who are relevant to the inability of the LEA to make adequate progress;
- Remove individual schools from the jurisdiction of the LEA and arrange for their public governance and supervision;
- Appoint a receiver or trustee to administer the affairs of the LEA in place of the superintendent and school board; and/or
- Abolish or restructure the LEA.

In addition to one of these options, the SEA can authorize student transfers to a higher performing school in another district not identified for improvement or corrective action. If the SEA pursues this option, it must provide transportation or the cost of transportation for those students.

Many states reported that several of the federally-sponsored sanction options conflict with their state laws; hence, some states have had to identify a subset of strategies that align with their laws and think creatively about how to implement them. Kentucky, for example, cannot institute a district-wide curriculum since state law mandates that curricular decisions be made at the school level. Consequently, Kentucky has chosen to withhold programmatic funds or to replace district personnel relevant to the failure. In the case of withholding funds, the state asks districts to adopt and fund Targeted Assistance

¹⁰ Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Ohio, Virginia, and Washington currently have plans in place for corrective action districts.

¹¹ As outlined in federal guidance retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/schoolimprovementguid.doc>.

Teams, who create a plan for district improvement. Once the plan is approved, the state releases funds back to the district. This method allows Targeted Assistance Teams to function both as a sanction and as a support to improve districts in corrective action. Similarly, Washington lacks the legislative authority to restructure the LEA, so they chose to defer programmatic funds or institute and fully implement a district-wide curriculum.

New York laws prohibit many of the NCLB sanctions, such as taking over districts or firing district staff. Instead, New York enforces curriculum audits on corrective action districts. Curriculum audits are conducted by external reviewers who assess the written and taught curriculum and make recommendations for changes based on their assessment of the district curriculum. These recommendations, which will take effect in the fall of 2006, are binding unless they cannot be implemented because of cost constraints. Districts can appeal recommendations to the state board, but none has done so yet. Since there are multiple NCLB sanctions, it appears that states are finding ways to align at least one of these options with state laws and then shape a program that adheres to its unique needs.

Several states discussed challenges associated with implementing sanctions. For Kentucky, the magnitude of district assistance is a challenge. Kentucky would like to provide more interventions and support to districts, but the state is facing capacity and budget constraints that limit the number of personnel assigned to district assistance. New York expressed similar budget frustrations, but has had more challenges with district receptivity to curriculum audits. The districts that had the same superintendent when they began the process bought in to the audit process and resulting recommendations. Other superintendents that came to the districts later in the process had questions about the audits and the utility of the recommendations. Some districts thought the recommendations should be more prescriptive or have different breadth and depth. Next year, New York will streamline the process and look more closely at the areas that sent districts into improvement status, such as the English learner or students with disabilities subgroups. Several states, including Kansas, Ohio, Virginia and Washington, emphasized that district buy-in is paramount to motivating change. Corrective action plans are still being drafted by many states; in this context, the experiences of states that have instituted sanctions are especially relevant.

Conclusion

In summary, the design and delivery of district support varies depending on state capacity, district need, and state models for support. SEA support structures for districts identified for improvement include extensive systems focused at the district level as well as systems focused primarily at the school level. All of the states AIR interviewed utilize technical assistance strategies and/or tools to support areas such as data analysis, capacity building, or resource allocation to districts in need of improvement. Though support providers may be employed by various agencies including SEAs, regional centers, districts, universities, or non-profits, they are most often experts in professional development, data analysis, leadership, and curriculum and instruction support. Furthermore, the circumstances around the delivery of district support vary. Four states offer support and assistance to all districts, not just those identified for improvement under NCLB, to lessen the likelihood that districts are identified as needing improvement. Additionally, 10 of the 16 states AIR interviewed appear to employ a regional structure for providing technical assistance instead of a centralized system of support. Though few states have districts in corrective action, four states appear to have a large number of districts identified for improvement. The development of support and intervention systems for districts is relatively new for most of the states AIR contacted; few states are very far along in planning for district corrective action.

However, several states have strategies for district improvement in place that could inform other states' district improvement processes.

- *Kentucky* has developed a corrective action system for districts that includes support from expert teams funded by the districts. In addition, they have a policy of withholding programmatic funds until the district, with the targeted assistance team, develops a plan for improvement.
- *New York* has developed a curriculum audit process for districts in corrective action. Since 2006-07 will be the first school year that districts implement reviewer recommendations, it will be important to see how districts utilize those recommendations in curricular decisions. Curriculum audits were developed in addition to a regional system of support that includes revising district plans, interpreting data, and aligning resources to priorities.
- *Washington's* District Improvement Assistance Plus program focuses on capacity building and systemic change at the district level, and includes an assessment system for the district plan. With the additional support each district receives through this effort, Washington expects targeted districts to more quickly put in place system changes to support school improvement.
- *Ohio* utilizes a regional structure for technical assistance to districts and focuses attention on priority districts, or those with the most schools identified for improvement. Ohio could be a model for considering how best to address a large number of districts identified for improvement.
- *Kansas* also has a tiered system of support for districts that provides general resources and tools for all districts, and targeted assistance and data analysis to those identified for improvement.

Additionally, many states have developed tools, often posted on-line, for districts to use in their improvement processes. Below we include a list of tools with direct web-links, which may be useful for states to peruse. As the district improvement process is further developed and finalized across states, continuing to build on other states' work could prove useful.

Tools for District Improvement

The following tools have been identified as potentially useful:

District Planning Tools:

Georgia Systems Fieldbook: A guide given to systems to create improvement plan. Pages 70-96 include templates for plans and data gathering, as well as samples.

http://public.doe.k12.ga.us/DMGetDocument.aspx/si_fieldbook_system.pdf?p=4BE1EECF99CD364EA5554055463F1FBB77B0B70FECF5942E12E123FE4810FFF5BCC5B826721EFEAB7C289FD3943F5719&Type=D

Washington School System Improvement Resource Guide (SSIRG): A guide to help all districts (not just those identified for improvement) develop improvement plans and align these plans with school improvement plans. <http://www.k12.wa.us/DistrictImprovement/pubdocs/SSIRGNotebookWeb.pdf>

Ohio Improvement Planning Framework: A tool that outlines how to develop a plan for improvement with a wealth of resources to guide districts.

http://www.ode.state.oh.us/field_relations/tools/tools_templates_resources_master.asp

Florida Educational Improvement Plan Database: An interactive, online database for schools and districts to submit improvement plans, enter data, and view reports.

http://sip.osi.fsu.edu/0506_sip_template/login.aspx

District Plan Rating Tools:

Kentucky Planning Review Rubric: A tool used for peer review of district improvement plans.

<http://www.education.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/eedfs7d4eatrnmnxvjajfe5zkghljimrbzdea6mtnh4rxrwrftk76gsgmj5rdxjhmfze62c6k5x7dnlzd4mnl336b7h/PlanningReviewRubric.doc>

Ohio District Plan Rating Tool: A document library where districts post their improvement plans, along with rating tools.

http://ccip.ode.state.oh.us/ccip/doclib/doclib_group.asp?DocGroupID=65

Washington School System Improvement Resource Guide Rubric for Districts: A tool used to rate district improvement plans. <http://www.k12.wa.us/DistrictImprovement/pubdocs/SSIRGrubrics.pdf>

Needs Assessment Tools:

Kentucky Scholastic Audit Surveys: Two online surveys designed to gather data for the Scholastic Audit process. One is a District Scholastic Audit/Review Perception Survey and the other is a District Leadership Survey to help gather data from various stakeholders (parents, school employees, district employees, etc.) to inform the scholastic audit process.

<http://www.education.ky.gov/KDE/Administrative+Resources/School+Improvement/Scholastic+Audits+and+Reviews/District+Audits+and+Reviews/default.htm>

Ohio Partnership Agreements: Agreements made between Regional School Improvement Teams and districts to identify areas of district need, improvement plan areas, timelines, and evidence of implementation and impact.

http://www.ode.state.oh.us/field_relations/report%20card%20info/Partnership%20Agreement.doc

Washington Readiness to Benefit Rubric: Washington provides additional funding and training for a District Improvement Facilitator to five districts that are chosen on multiple criteria, including their

“readiness to benefit.” This rubric assesses the capacity and aptitude of districts for change.

<http://www.k12.wa.us/SchoolImprovement/pubdocs/AppC/Readiness.doc>

Monitoring Tools:

Kentucky Implementation and Impact Check: A tool used to ensure that the district action plan is meeting needs and achieving desired outcomes.

<http://www.education.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/eoz6aztg6ksjqs7wx63kexgjm35hztlqilbdc64dlzqi6ovkh6spf6p4tjupbrmxtetqfoy6eeg2it6blarpctsmma/ImpactCheck04.doc>

Louisiana Implementation Status Report: Under the state accountability policy, districts with schools identified as being in Corrective Action Level I are required, with the assistance of the District Assistance Team (DAT), to monitor the implementation of the School Improvement Plans (SIPs) and to submit a status report to the Louisiana Department of Education on a quarterly basis.

<http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/uploads/3219.doc>

Michigan Onsite Review Guide: The Office of School Improvement Field Services Unit conducts onsite reviews of districts and rates them on several dimensions. This guide outlines the review process.

http://mi.gov/documents/Building_Study_Guide_43740_7.doc

Budgeting Tools:

Kentucky Consolidated Funding Matrix: Online tool that helps districts budget effectively and use consolidated funds with more flexibility. It lists funding sources, such as Title I, and activities, such as extra professional development days for certificated personnel, and indicates which funding source can be used for each activity:

<http://www.education.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/ebcjk7nkdnlgsbxk632atcv7ezil5l1dd7d5mogcpwqfstto5y3czv2yq52pwue3mblv7ykv6v4ym/noncompfedrev099999.doc>