



Chronicling One State's Progress in Building A Statewide System of Support

A Report on the New Jersey Restructuring Schools Project

Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center

at The George Washington University
Center for Equity and Excellence in Education
1555 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 515
Arlington, VA 22209
Tel: 703.528.3588
Fax: 703.528.5973

MACC at GW-CEEE
1555 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 515 Arlington, VA 22209
www.ceee.gwu.edu

The mission of The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (GW-CEEE) is to advance education reform so all students achieve to high standards. GW-CEEE conducts policy and applied research, designs and implements program evaluations, and provides professional development and technical assistance. GW-CEEE's clients include state education agencies, school districts, schools, foundations, and federal agencies.

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About the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center

The Mid-Atlantic Regional Comprehensive Center (MACC) is one of 16 federally funded centers charged with providing support to state departments of education (SEAs) to implement No Child Left Behind (NCLB). MACC is located at The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (GW-CEEE) and serves SEAs in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

Through its state and regional work, MACC identifies, develops, and delivers services to SEAs based on their needs and aligned to MACC's three goal areas:

Goal 1. SEAs foster relationships, resource sharing, and comprehensive planning across divisions for the purpose of meeting technical assistance needs of districts and schools identified for improvement.

Goal 2. SEAs use data to identify and differentiate the needs of districts and schools identified for improvement so that appropriate assistance can be delivered to address these needs.

Goal 3. SEAs design and use ongoing, job-embedded, professional development that helps district instructional leaders build effective practice in schools identified for improvement.

These goals summarize MACC's theory of action about the organizational strategies that are essential if SEAs are to provide effective support to districts and schools in need of improvement.

About MACC's Work

Through its work, MACC assists mid-Atlantic SEA staff in refining and developing new knowledge and skills necessary to deliver coordinated and coherent technical assistance customized to meet the needs of schools and districts identified for improvement.

MACC's work in New Jersey, as in other states, is initiated and driven by SEA staff. Thus, SEAs set the parameters of their state projects. However, there are some activities within each project that MACC initiates. MACC's role is to provide assistance within state parameters and, when feasible, initiate activities that will enhance project outcomes. Finally, while MACC often assists states in analyzing existing data to determine district and school needs, MACC does not conduct research.

Building Statewide Systems of Support

MACC's primary mission is to build the capacity of each SEA in the Mid-Atlantic region to implement NCLB. Specifically, MACC focuses on empowering SEA officials with the knowledge and skills they need to implement an effective statewide system of support, in the form of differentiated technical assistance (TA) for Title I districts and schools in need of improvement.

The framework MACC uses for this work is based on research conducted by the Center on Innovation and Improvement (CII), one of five federally funded national content centers that support the work of the regional comprehensive centers in states.

CII's [*Framework for an Effective Statewide System of Support*](#) (Redding, 2009) is a theory of action for ways SEAs can encourage and support change in districts and schools. The CII framework recognizes that schools and districts are social systems made up of people who perform roles to fulfill the purposes of their subsystems and the system as a whole. The framework identifies three elements of an effective statewide system of support, which address continuous improvement and coordinated roles within district and school systems. These elements are:

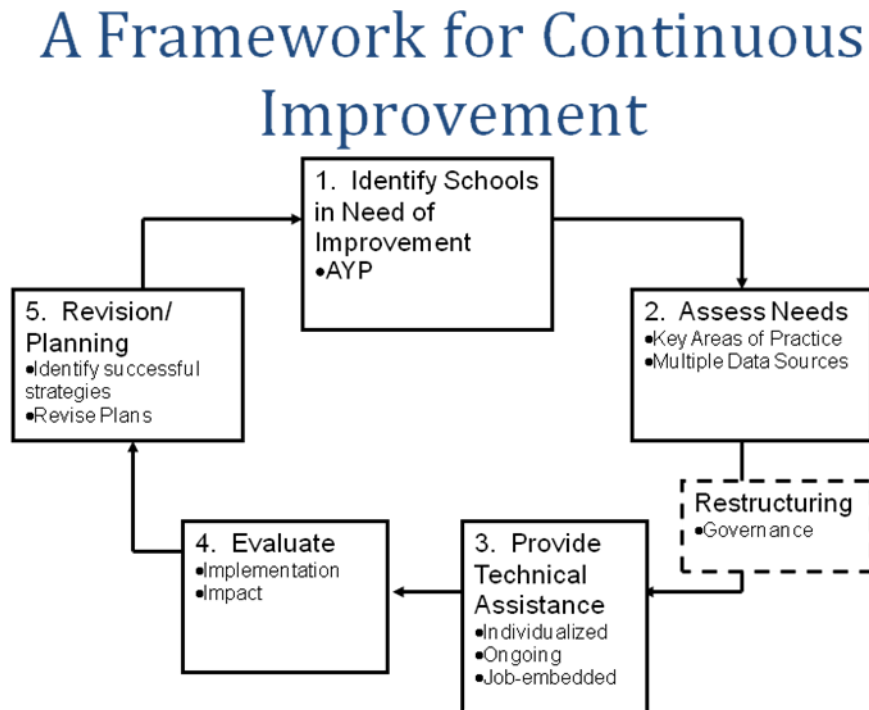
- Providing **incentives** for change. Incentives are state pressures, rather than mandates, that motivate district and school personnel to change or improve. Incentives may encourage or discourage certain district or school actions.
- Providing **opportunities** for change. States provide opportunities for districts and schools to change or improve by removing obstacles to improvement (with waivers, exemptions from rules and regulations, or alternate routes to certification, for example) and creating new space for schools (charter schools, pilot schools, or schools-within-a-school, for example).
- Building **capacity** for change and improvement both systemically and locally. Building system capacity includes creating and disseminating knowledge on improvement processes or effective teaching practices, enhancing the supply of personnel, and developing a strong data system. Building local capacity includes coordinating capacity-building structures and roles for the statewide system of support, differentiating support to districts and schools, providing and delivering services to districts and schools, and allocating resources for services.

States can address the first two elements of the framework—incentives and opportunities—through policies and procedures.

Capacity building—and, specifically, *local* capacity building—often requires organizational changes at the SEA level to enable SEA staff to perform this function. Organizational changes include redefining existing SEA structures and defining new SEA roles and responsibilities so a capacity-building service delivery system can be put into place. Many states attempt to build local capacity for school improvement without making these organizational changes, which often results in uneven TA services to districts and schools.

This report chronicles the development of New Jersey's state system of support for schools and districts. The work with the New Jersey schools has been guided by a Continuous Improvement Framework developed from examples from Victoria Bernhardt and others (see Figure 1). This framework provides guidance for a state department of education in the necessary steps for addressing the needs of schools and districts in need of improvement. The framework also establishes the roles and responsibilities of the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE).

Figure 1-Theoretical Framework for New Jersey's State System of Support



Principles of the Framework

- Work with schools in need of improvement is guided by a framework.
- The framework includes steps for needs assessment, providing support, planning for improvement and evaluation.
- The framework differentiates for schools in different stages of improvement, and for those of different contexts and capacity levels.

The Format for This Report

This report describes MACC's experiences with the NJDOE during its major, multi-year Restructuring Schools Project, which is aimed at supporting the Title I lowest-performing districts and schools in the state. The report chronicles four stages of the project, which began in MACC's Year One (2005–06) and continued through MACC's Year Four (2008–09).

- Stage 1: Establishing Policy on Restructuring Schools
- Stage 2: Analyzing Needs Assessment Data to Identify Power Indicators
- Stage 3: Developing and Conducting School Case Studies in the Power Indicator Areas
- Stage 4: Establishing the No Child Left Behind Learning Community

This report describes the work MACC conducted with the SEA in each stage and the driving questions for this work, along with reflections from MACC and SEA staff. Each section concludes with thoughts from MACC staff regarding the provision of technical assistance to an SEA.

New Beginnings

In the fall of 2005, the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center was beginning its first year of a five-year grant to support the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence and Education (GW-CEEE, where MACC is housed) had just completed a nine-year period as the administrator of the Region III Comprehensive Center, MACC's predecessor under the previous cycle of comprehensive centers established under the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994. Thus, GW-CEEE brought a wealth of experience and knowledge in providing technical assistance to states and districts. An added benefit was that the staff assigned to the District of Columbia and New Jersey had worked with the same state education agencies (SEAs) with the Region III Comprehensive Center.

One of the key lessons from this earlier work was that projects with SEAs often lacked a framework or theory of action to guide the activities. Thus, the work tended to be driven by various—and often disconnected—requests and needs of the SEAs and was not coherent. The new comprehensive centers were tasked with building the capacity of each SEA to implement NCLB. Within this context, MACC's specific mission focuses on building SEA capacity to operationalize a statewide system of support that provides differentiated technical assistance (TA) for Title I districts and schools in need of improvement.

To guide this new focus of work with states, MACC leadership reviewed the available research on state capacity to improve low-performing Title I districts and schools and identified three areas of need in which MACC could support SEAs:

Goal 1. SEAs foster relationships, resource sharing, and comprehensive planning across divisions for the purpose of meeting technical assistance needs of districts and schools identified for improvement.

Goal 2. SEAs use data to identify and differentiate the needs of districts and schools identified for improvement so that appropriate assistance can be delivered to address these needs.

Goal 3. SEAs design and use ongoing, job-embedded, professional development that helps district instructional leaders build effective practice in schools identified for improvement.

Using the three goals, MACC's Associate Director of Field Services and the New Jersey coordinator contacted the Commissioner of Education for New Jersey and offered MACC's services to support any of the SEA's initiatives. The commissioner enthusiastically accepted the offer and the new partnership with MACC.

The Work Begins: Research, Policies, & Best Practices

Guiding Question:

What Does Effective School Restructuring Look Like?

Stage 1. Establishing Policy for the Restructuring Schools

In the fall of 2005, the New Jersey Department of Education had identified 67 Title I schools in need of restructuring under NCLB, the first cohort of NJ schools to reach this stage. These schools represented the lowest-performing schools in the state, having failed to make adequate yearly progress for five consecutive years. In addition, these schools had a high proportion of low-income students, with an average poverty rate of 67 percent.

As these schools began to submit their federal restructuring plans to the department, SEA officials realized that many schools had opted to (1) remove their principals and other staff, and (2) make other governance changes that aligned with the principles of restructuring. This information framed how the SEA would provide technical assistance to the schools.

However, the SEA wondered whether the schools were identifying changes in their operations that would lead to substantive improvements in the quality of instruction. Without specific efforts to improve teaching and learning, these schools would be hard-pressed to improve student achievement or exit restructuring, SEA officials believed. At that point, therefore, the New Jersey Office of Title I (now the Office of Student Achievement and Accountability) contacted MACC to ask for assistance in developing guidance for schools as they prepared their restructuring plans. This work coincided with the creation of the Title I Unified Plan, which was developed to align the federal, state and local requirements of schools in need of improvement to maximize their reform efforts.

Using Research and Best Practices to Guide School Restructuring Plans

NCLB challenged SEAs to turn around the lowest-performing Title I schools in their states. For most SEAs, however, this was a new responsibility for which there was limited precedent. However, New Jersey had a recent history in working with high-need districts after the “Abbott” decisions, which were two landmark state Supreme Court rulings in the late 1990s that ordered the state to provide adequate education programs to more than 360,000 underserved preK–12 students in 30 districts. While most of NJDOE’s focus after the first few years of the Abbott decisions was at the district and not the school level, most of the schools in Restructuring in New Jersey were in Abbott districts where the NJDOE had working knowledge of the challenges and issues.

In this stage of the project, MACC staff examined and synthesized research and best practices on school improvement and, particularly, the strategies of high-performing, high-poverty schools whose demographic challenges mirrored those of the New Jersey cohort of schools in restructuring (see, e.g., Center for Public Education, 2005; Fox, 2005; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; School Improvement Planning in Washington State, Zavadsky & Hunt, 2004).

Dennis Fox’s *Look Before You Leap* proved especially relevant for New Jersey schools in restructuring. This policy guide, which is based on the experiences of California schools in

restructuring, explains six key components of school governance (organization, systems, policies, procedures, practices, and personnel). The guide also provides critical questions and practical advice for educators to consider as they develop their restructuring plans. This resource was used to develop technical assistance for New Jersey's districts in supporting their restructuring schools.

From this review of the literature, MACC developed *Next Steps for the New Jersey Restructuring Initiative*, a document that provided the SEA with language for introducing its NCLB restructuring policy to districts and schools and the steps that districts could take to assist schools in preparing their restructuring plans.

The New Jersey Department of Education integrated much of this content into its guidance document for restructuring schools, *District Restructuring Team Handbook*. This handbook provided districts with much more detailed information on the restructuring process, including a full-year schedule and a continuous improvement framework that outlined tasks, tools, and resources to support a rigorous planning process for schools in restructuring. Using this handbook, MACC staff participated in training sessions to support districts in developing restructuring plans that could effect real change and improvement in schools.

Once the 67 schools had submitted their restructuring plans, the New Jersey Office of Title I turned to MACC again for assistance in reviewing the plans. In particular, SEA officials wanted districts to understand the requirements for the plans as well as provide specific feedback for the schools that would help them strengthen their plans for successful implementation. In response, MACC developed a *School Restructuring Plan Evaluation Rubric*, with defined levels of best practice for each of the required key components of the restructuring plan, including the following.

- Stakeholder involvement in the development of the plan
- The rationale for the proposed restructuring option
- A description of how the proposed changes would improve student achievement
- The planned use of additional resources
- The professional development planned for school leaders and staff
- A description of the strategies, evidence of student work, and data that would be used to assess the implementation of the restructuring plan

The Office of Title I used the rubrics to review and provide feedback on the 56 plans that were submitted for the schools in restructuring. Excerpts of the rubric are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Excerpts from the School Restructuring Plan Evaluation Rubric Rating Indicators

Each of the required components will be assessed according to the presence of Best Practices in that area. The choices for rating the indicators are listed below:

Rating Category	Score
Component was fully addressed	3
Component was adequately addressed	2
Component was minimally addressed	1
Component was not addressed	0

School Restructuring Plan Evaluation Rubric for One Key Component

Component	Component was <i>fully</i> addressed	Component was <i>adequately</i> addressed	Component was <i>minimally</i> addressed	Component was <i>not</i> addressed
Description of how the proposed restructuring option(s) have improved/will improve student achievement in the area(s) for which the school is identified for NCLB school improvement, including additional resources that will be required.	<p>The School Restructuring Plan provides a general explanation of how the Restructuring choice will influence student achievement through change in its practice.</p> <p>The School Restructuring Plan references the research in school improvement related to its Restructuring choice.</p>	The School Restructuring Plan provides a general explanation of how the Restructuring choice will influence student achievement through change in its practice.	The School Restructuring Plan provides a general explanation of how the Restructuring choice will influence student achievement but without reference to change in its practice.	The School Restructuring Plan provides no explanation of how the Restructuring choice will influence student achievement.
Score				
Comments:				

Challenges of Stage 1

Developing relationships with SEA officials and building their awareness of MACC's role were recurring themes in MACC's first two years.

In this case, New Jersey's Title I officials were familiar with MACC's New Jersey team because they had worked together through the Region III Comprehensive Center. Still, Title I officials had questions about the purposes and capabilities of the new center. MACC responded by distilling relevant research and best practices into useful documents, tools, and technical assistance, which positioned the SEA to provide meaningful support to its neediest schools.

Reflections on Stage 1

The MACC Perspective

This activity represents what we sometimes refer to as a "door opener." This type of activity is often driven by a short-term SEA need that is narrowly focused on a specific policy issue. While this activity may not be directly linked to MACC's three goals, it provides an opportunity for MACC to connect with the client in an area of need and to establish the professional relationship that will be critical for the more systemic, ongoing work to come.

The SEA Perspective

"MACC staff members were instrumental in bringing research from a national perspective that was relevant to issues in New Jersey—such as the *Look Before You Leap* materials."

—From an internal evaluation of MACC's services by Edvantia

The Work Turns to Systematic Examination of Data

Guiding Questions:

How do we assess the needs of low-performing schools to plan for delivery of technical assistance?

Which school practices are more closely related to gains in student achievement?

Stage 2. Analyzing the Needs of Schools: The Power Indicators

Once the school restructuring plans had been reviewed, revised, and ultimately approved, the New Jersey Office of Title I turned its attention to the most effective ways of providing technical assistance to the schools. SEA officials knew that technical assistance would depend on their understanding of the needs of the schools in Restructuring, based on their practices in research-based areas.

Since 2004 the New Jersey Department of Education had been conducting comprehensive needs assessments through its Collaborative Assessment and Planning for Achievement (CAPA) initiative for all schools in school improvement II, corrective action, or restructuring status. MACC and New Jersey Title I officials believed that the CAPA reviews would provide a rich source of data for analysis, discussion, and strategic planning for supports to the schools. This strategy is reflected in Step 2 of New Jersey's Framework for Continuous Improvement.

The Collaborative Assessment and Planning for Achievement (CAPA) Initiative

The CAPA initiative was designed to assist Title I schools in identifying practices that are effective in advancing student achievement. CAPA identifies programs and systems that need to be improved or eliminated to ensure delivery of a thorough and efficient education for all of New Jersey's students.

CAPA reviews identify areas of strength and areas needing improvement in several key areas. Schools are rated on a four-point scale of indicators of effective school practice in each of these areas:

- Curriculum
- Assessment and evaluation
- Instruction
- School culture
- Student, family, and community support
- Professional growth, development, and evaluation
- Leadership
- Organizational structure and resources
- Comprehensive and effective planning
- Quality of whole school reform implementation
- Adequacy of supplemental services

During the 2004–05 school year, the New Jersey Department of Education conducted CAPA reviews of 99 schools that had been identified for School Improvement II. During the 2006–07 school year, 56 of the 99 schools transitioned to Restructuring, having failed to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years.

While these schools were implementing their restructuring plans, the Office of Title I asked MACC to assist with analyzing the results of the CAPA reviews from 2004–05 to develop a baseline of where these schools were in their practice before they entered Restructuring. Title I officials intended to use the results to plan technical assistance to the schools as the follow-up CAPA reviews were conducted during the 2006–07 school year.

Analyzing the Results of the CAPA School Needs Assessments

MACC created a database to organize and manage the results, entered the data, and analyzed the results to determine the areas of strength and areas for improvement across the schools. MACC's report to SEA officials of the findings, *Analysis of Schools in Restructuring*, revealed that the schools in restructuring were more likely to have effective practices in the infrastructure elements:

- aligned curriculum,
- evaluation of teachers,
- effective use of resources, and
- development of leadership plans.

The schools were less likely to have effective practices in the areas more closely aligned to instruction:

- collaboration on assessment,
- reviewing student work,
- varied instructional strategies, and
- use of assessments and other data.

To further assist with the analysis of the needs assessment data, MACC and NJDOE conducted a crosswalk of the CAPA indicators with Marzano's *What Works in Schools*, a meta-analysis of the education research over the last 30 years on indicators of effective schools (*Crosswalk Marzano and CAPA*). This crosswalk provided confirmation for NJDOE's identification of the CAPA indicators that are predictors of schools' ability to support high student achievement.

The MACC team for New Jersey convened a meeting for Title I and other SEA staff to discuss the results of the analysis, which led to in-depth, cross-departmental conversations about the work of schools. MACC also presented the results of the analysis to the Title I Committee of Practitioners for discussion with critical stakeholder groups, such as the principals' and teachers' union, district leaderships, parents groups and others.

Identifying the "Power Indicators" of Student Achievement

One key issue that emerged from these discussions was whether certain school practices measured by the CAPA reviews were more important than others in improving student achievement. SEA staff wanted to make sure that technical assistance would be aligned to the schools' needs—and affect those practices that would be most likely to lead to gains in student achievement.

In response, MACC suggested that Title I and Abbott Division staff engage in an exercise to align the CAPA indicators with school practice factors that are most highly correlated to improved student achievement. MACC believed that an examination of the research, which reflects the experiences and results of schools in other states, could broaden New Jersey officials' understanding of effective school practices.

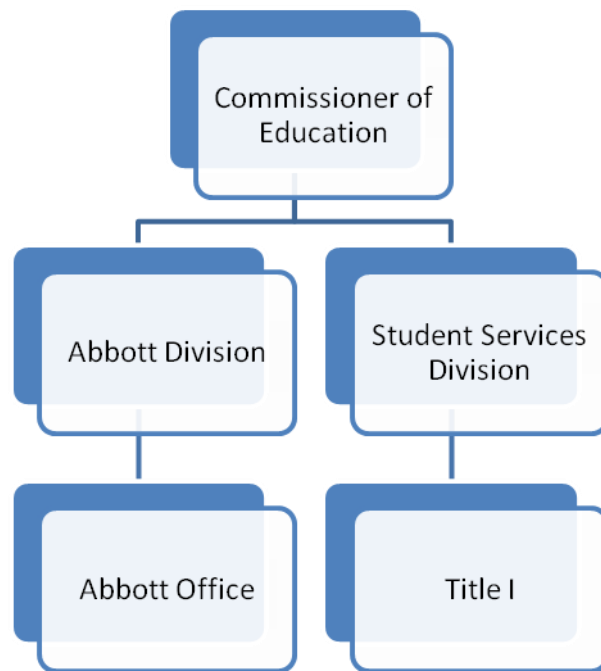
The New Jersey Department of Education agreed to this alignment analysis. MACC then analyzed the needs assessment data from the schools in relation to their student achievement scores to identify the school practices that had stronger relationships with student achievement. To accomplish this step, MACC compared the schools with proficient practices in the needs assessment areas to schools that did not have proficient practices. The areas that revealed the greatest differences in student achievement between the proficient and non-proficient schools were identified as key areas of practice, or "Power Indicators."

MACC developed a report on this work, *Analysis of Schools in Restructuring 2004 to 2007 Report*, which became a foundational document for planning technical assistance for schools in Restructuring.

Challenges of Stage 2

One of MACC's challenges in working through Stage 2 with New Jersey Department of Education staff was helping them to "stretch" beyond their current practice. MACC and the Title I office also observed that there would need to be changes in how the different divisions provided technical assistance to schools. The department organizational structure at this time, which is shown in Figure 3, consisted of two separate divisions, Abbott and Title I. Title I provided services to schools, whereas at this time, the Abbott division was providing services to districts.

Figure 3. Organizational Structure for Key New Jersey Department of Education Divisions, 2006



Against this backdrop, a critical component of this stage of the work was presenting a clear purpose and vision for how the activities would help the SEA to accomplish its goals. In this case, the analysis of the CAPA data to identify the Power Indicators helped the SEA to focus its technical assistance to schools and districts on practices that are critical to improving student achievement.

MACC's contributions helped the state make good use of research and data—and fostered meaningful SEA engagement and collaboration to plan for technical assistance. As department officials pointed out, the state did not have the capacity to do this work on its own. The work in this stage gave the SEA a clear understanding of the needs of schools in Restructuring.

With MACC's support, SEA staff transitioned to discussing the importance of curriculum, formative assessments, analysis of student work, observations of instructional practice, professional development, and other factors critical to student achievement. The activities also engaged multiple divisions and offices, which supported MACC's Goal 1 (*fostering SEA collaboration among different offices and divisions*).

The SEA Perspective

The CAPA data discussion was a valuable activity and an example of the types of behaviors the department should encourage (analyzing school data and discussing findings across departments and offices). From this discussion, staff members concluded that schools need more technical assistance focused on specific instructional issues. Staff members also observed that the schools had many needs across the CAPA areas, which raised the concern about whether the SEA had the resources and capacity to provide the intensive and long-term support that would be needed to improve schools' practice.

MACC was involved with the New Jersey school restructuring initiative in a variety of ways. MACC staff actively participated in the Title I School Improvement Committee planning meetings, which involved different Title I stakeholder groups (districts, schools, unions, parents, colleges and universities, etc.) in discussions of NJDOE's school and district improvement efforts. MACC also convened meetings with NJDOE staff to guide the MACC projects. Both of these committees provided critical guidance to the restructuring schools project.

MACC services enhanced state efforts by providing "internal credibility" within the department and at the district and school levels—a result of the broader perspectives gained from other state or national research. One staff member described the limited resources available at the state level,

Reflections from Stage 2

The MACC Perspective

In this stage of the project, the New Jersey

Department of Education began moving from simply complying with NCLB to engaging in a more comprehensive and systemic approach to school and district improvement.

Department staff valued MACC's assistance in identifying research and "tools," and for helping them "see the national perspective." MACC staff also were instrumental in analyzing data from CAPA school visits, comparing baseline data from recent visits, and providing their findings to department staff through multiple avenues: written reports, oral presentations to the School Improvement Committee, interactive work activities, and presentations at state conferences.

MACC's technical assistance services do align with state needs for restructuring schools. One staff member described these services as "meeting somewhere in the middle" between state and federal needs and requirements. MACC's role will be even "more critical" in the future, as plans for monitoring school and district progress take shape.

and noted, “thanks to [MACC’s] research, we know where we can focus our efforts.”

One staff member described the timeliness of MACC’s services, reporting, “it was phenomenally quick actually” for the data analyses.

Although MACC is involved in other New Jersey projects, MACC services were focused to meet the specific goals of the School Restructuring initiative. One person commented that, “Just from our conversation, you can tell that it [MACC’s services] has been useful. And, I think as we move along, they’re fluid enough to adjust to what we need.”

MACC’s services “definitely” help the state to support districts and schools identified for improvement. One noted, “Our role and responsibilities are huge, they’re complex, they’re intricate. There’s legislation, guidance, regulations, best practices—and we need help bringing all that together.” Another suggested a more distal outcome of MACC’s involvement—to “eventually help improve the academic achievement of students.”

Reflections from Stage 2 / Continued

One of the specific outcomes resulting from MACC’s involvement was the “physical presence” of MACC staff in New Jersey. One staff member believed MACC’s “presence is a product” that helped internally within the department and also with their schools and districts. Another agreed, noting, “They’re an active member of the group [the School Improvement Committee].”

—From an internal evaluation of MACC’s services by Edvantia

The Work Deepens With a Library of Best Practices

Guiding Question:

What does effective school practice look like?

Stage 3. Developing Case Studies of the Power Indicators in Action

Identifying the CAPA Power Indicators in the school practice areas that were most important to student achievement led to a new question: What do these practices look like in real life?

Indeed, when the New Jersey Department of Education recommended that schools in restructuring make changes to their practices, school leaders were confused about exactly what they should do. SEA staff realized they needed to provide schools with specific strategies, examples, and resources that would help them address their questions, such as:

- How can schools use classroom walkthroughs to provide feedback to teachers on their instruction?
- What does an effective walkthrough form look like?
- How can a principal provide effective feedback to a teacher?
- How can a principal compile the results of the walkthrough in a format for providing direct professional development to the teacher?

Collecting Concrete Evidence of School Improvement

The results of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (the New Jersey state assessment in grades 3-8 and 11) offered a starting point for answering questions like these. On the 2007 assessment, 15 of the 56 schools still in Restructuring had made sufficient gains in achievement to reach adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years and exit improvement status.

These 15 schools also had established some effective practices in the CAPA Power Indicator areas—so they represented an important opportunity to learn how their school leaders were able to implement effective practices under challenging circumstances (including a history of low performance and high-poverty and high-mobility student populations).

Working in collaboration with the New Jersey Department of Education and a private educational consulting firm, SchoolWorks, MACC helped to develop a protocol for conducting visits to the successful schools to gather evidence of their practices. Included in the protocol were student and staff profiles; student performance data, instructional background on curriculum and staffing; interviews with principals, school leadership teams, and teachers; school walkthroughs; and classroom observations.

With department staff members, MACC used the protocols to conduct visits to 10 of the schools that had improved to investigate how school leaders were able to establish and maintain effective practices in the indicator areas. The visits included collection of evidence of instructional practices, such as lesson plans, performance rubrics, and student work.

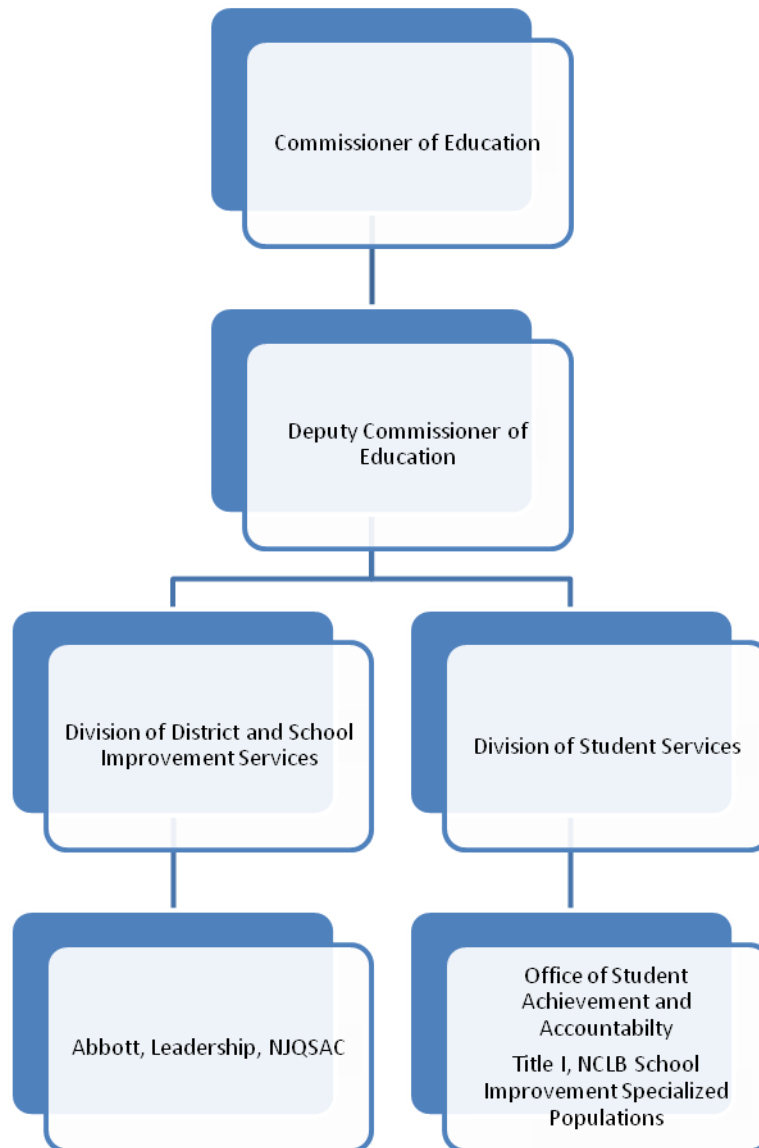
MACC then developed detailed case studies for each of the 10 schools. These case studies were used to build the knowledge of both SEA staff members and the leadership teams of schools in Restructuring that had not yet shown improvements. The artifacts collected from the 10 schools provided concrete examples of effective practices to guide technical assistance to still-struggling schools.

Challenges of Stage 3

New Jersey Department of Education assigned staff to visit schools with MACC. NJDOE policy makers were not always available for many of the school visits, which limited what could have been valuable personal contact and eyewitness insights into the schools for some SEA staff. MACC responded with a consistent and knowledgeable presence for all school visits, serving as the SEA's eyes and ears in the field. The greatest challenge had been working around the organizational structure at the SEA, which had changed from the previous year, as shown in Figure 4.

The case studies also required significant staff time for MACC to collect, analyze, and present the findings for the report. These realities could complicate the department's efforts to conduct structured school visits on their own without MACC support.

Figure 4. Organizational Structure for Key New Jersey Department of Education Divisions, 2007



Reflections on Stage 3

The MACC Perspective

The decision to conduct the case studies represented a commitment by the SEA to be a resource of effective practices for districts and schools. The discussion between the NCLB School Improvement and Leadership Development offices concerning the role of leadership in supporting school improvement was particularly valuable. The case studies would also provide an opportunity for New Jersey Department of Education staff to visit successful schools and see the practice of schools in person, which would help to maintain the connection between SEA policy, districts, and schools.

The SEA Perspective

MACC's assistance with the School Restructuring Initiative was of particularly high quality, especially MACC's assistance in analyzing CAPA and state assessment data. One department official commented generally that MACC has "been part of the conversation," with respect to how the SEA identifies schools that have the greatest needs and identify appropriate services for these schools. This work speaks directly to the mandates of NCLB and is a strong endorsement for MACC.

Other staff members characterized MACC's impact in providing added capacity to analyze assessment and school review data from schools in need of improvement, critical capacities with respect to NCLB. One staff member stated succinctly that MACC has "helped us come up with ... a way of digging deeper into that data" and using it to work with all schools, not just those identified for improvement.

Other department staff said that this work has "evolved into schools formerly in Restructuring," and that MACC is now encouraging the SEA to look at effective practices in their own constituencies. Department staff anticipated that this work "has the potential to provide good content for professional development and training."

—From an internal, independent evaluation of MACC's services by Edvantia

The Work Extends to Sustaining Momentum

Guiding Question:

How can an SEA work to support school and district improvement across different offices and divisions?

Stage 4. The No Child Left Behind Learning Community

The 10 case studies of low-performing schools that had successfully improved are a treasure trove of information—and far too useful to sit on a shelf.

The New Jersey Department of Education and MACC realized that the case studies provided an unprecedented opportunity to deepen the state's knowledge base about effective school

improvement practices. Therefore, department officials and MACC shared the information with the NCLB Learning Community, using the case studies as core content for SEA staff and consultants who support approximately 200 schools identified as in need of improvement.

The NCLB Learning Community was designed to develop a shared understanding of the effective practices and leadership activities that contributed to gains in student achievement in schools similar to those still in restructuring, which would help ensure quality and continuity of services to these schools. The NCLB Learning Community also satisfies federal assurances under School Improvement Part G.

The NCLB Learning Community initially consisted of consultants hired to conduct the CAPA visits to the schools that remained in restructuring. The consultants—including former teachers, reading and math coaches, principals, and other professionals with a variety of expertise and experiences—were expected to assess the needs of the schools and assist with the development of their action plans. These activities led to a critical next step, providing technical assistance to the schools in implementing their plans.

MACC worked with New Jersey Title I officials to prepare activities for the NCLB Learning Community to review two of the Case Studies in depth. MACC and Title I officials then engaged NCLB Learning Community members in a discussion of the importance of leadership in school improvement and strategies for establishing and maintaining effective practices. However, changes to the structure of the New Jersey Department of Education would bring some changes to the NCLB Learning Community.

Working Across Divisions in a Time of Transition

Under this restructuring, the newly designated Division of District and School Improvement Services was charged with providing technical assistance to the schools identified for improvement, corrective action, and restructuring, as shown in Figure 4. The CAPA consultants continued to conduct the CAPA school reviews and benchmark meetings and perform other services to support NCLB compliance and monitoring.

The Division of District and School Improvement Services consisted of three offices, from which 17 staff were assigned to work with 29 of New Jersey's lowest performing schools. Each of the 29 schools still in restructuring were partnered with a division staff member, who would provide and broker services to the school based on its identified needs. This change meant that the discussion of the case studies in the NCLB Learning Community needed to be broadened to include the staff of the new division.

Division staff members assigned to work with the restructuring schools as School Support Specialists (S3) had a long history of school and district improvement work, with many having experience from the Abbott rulings and subsequent reforms in Abbott schools. The division staff ranged from former teachers and principals to content coaches to researchers.

The S3 project was a result of a partnership between the NCLB School Improvement Office and the Division of District and School Improvement Services. The Office of Leadership Development also provided technical assistance to principals in other schools in need of improvement through peer discussions of effective practices in establishing an educational vision, school climate, collaboration and other strategies to turnaround low-performing schools. These changes

provided MACC staff with an opportunity to assist the SEA with “working across the silos” to build a shared understanding of the unique needs of the individual schools for which both divisions were now responsible.

Exploring New Roles and Responsibilities

MACC participated in a series of meetings with NCLB School Improvement and District and School Improvement Services on NCLB, the S3 project, and other topics. MACC facilitated a discussion of the Case Studies, an activity intended to build a shared understanding of school needs and mutual trust for meeting them. To ensure continuity, the CAPA consultants participated in this meeting as well.

Participants valued this activity and the new relationship between the CAPA consultants and the District and School Improvement Services staff—but there were questions regarding the SEA resources and time that would be needed to provide appropriate supports to school and districts.

Even so, the meeting and MACC’s sustained involvement in the work of the SEA led to a commitment from division staff to participate in the NCLB Learning Community beginning in summer 2009. To help division staff build a deeper understanding of the shared needs and contexts of schools in restructuring, MACC partnered with the NJDOE to work in the field with two S3 project schools, attending CAPA visits and working with school staff.

The initial sessions focused on a school and district improvement framework based upon the effective implementation of effective practices in the schools’ action plans, which are part of their Title I Unified Plans. Division staff and CAPA consultants worked well together and readily shared their observations and experiences concerning the schools and districts. In several instances, NCLB Learning Community members expressed their concerns about the politics of school districts and schools, often sharing examples of feuding school boards, changes in leadership at the district level and disconnects between improvement planning and use of resources.

At the time of this writing, the work of supporting schools in restructuring remains in flux. A recent change in the governor’s office likely will lead to changes in leadership at the New Jersey Department of Education, which includes staff who have been actively engaged in the restructuring schools project. Additionally, the School Improvement Grant and the possibility of a Race to the Top award will impact New Jersey’s state system of support to low-performing schools. MACC support will continue to evolve to meet NJDOE’s needs.

Challenges of Stage 4

Four circumstances converged to make this a particularly challenging stage of the project:

- **The Restructuring of the New Jersey Department of Education.** The creation of a new division—with different staff members, roles, and responsibilities—required taking a few steps back in order to position the SEA to move forward in providing technical assistance to schools. Bringing the new staff members up to speed and forging productive working relationships were unplanned but essential activities.

- **Inadequate Capacity.** As anyone who is familiar with SEAs can attest, the demands to comply with various federal, state, and local mandates are intense. From Title I, Title II Highly Qualified Teachers, Title III, the Individuals with Disabilities Act, technology and state policies, New Jersey Department of Education staff already have a full plate of responsibilities. They have only a limited amount of time to devote to any one of them. There is also a need for building the knowledge and expertise of SEA staff to support schools in implementing the effective practices that will improve schools.
- **Inadequate Resources.** The economic downturn across the nation and in the state led to hiring freezes in the New Jersey Department of Education, which increased staff workloads even as policy mandates increased.
- **Potential Leadership Changes.** The 2009 New Jersey state election resulted in leadership changes and new policies, priorities and directions in the New Jersey Department of Education, casting an air of uncertainty on next steps.

MACC responded to these challenges by providing consistency and continuity throughout the changes to structure, staffing, and work of the department. MACC is one reliable constant in times of transition. And MACC is a critical source of institutional memory for this important project—and a strong partner for continuing progress.

Reflections on Stage 4

The MACC Perspective

The work in stage 4 represents what MACC considers to be one of the most essential roles and the highest level of work for SEAs—providing direct, needs-based technical assistance and professional development to schools and districts in need of improvement. This stage was MACC's original vision for this project. The work also was a promising step toward realizing SEA transformation from a compliance-oriented to a support-oriented organization.

The Division of District and School Improvement Services (DSIS) staff who were newly assigned to provide supports to the schools and districts already had a number of other responsibilities that required their focus. However, only about 5 to 10 percent of DSIS staff time was devoted to the S3, which made it difficult for the staff to devote more than a few days each month to the effort.

Still, this stage of the project brought together New Jersey Department of Education staff and consultants from different divisions to engage in critical conversations and planning for schools in a learning community—which could bear fruit in the future.

The SEA Perspective

MACC played an active role in identifying and providing relevant, current research and best practices for several efforts, such as the NCLB Learning Community and for related projects in which MACC was involved (including developing a teaching and learning tool for the case studies and supporting a leadership network). Department staff members also appreciated the sharing of what other states were doing to address similar issues. One staff member noted that MACC served as a clearinghouse to keep the department abreast of the “latest and greatest materials.”

One staff member noted that MACC services were very useful because they were both relevant and of high quality, as were MACC products—including the case study protocols, guidebook, and reports; leadership materials; the Teaching and Learning tool used in the CAPA visits; and the comprehensive analysis of effective school change research.

—From an internal, independent evaluation of MACC's services by Edvantia

Conclusion

One of the themes of working with the New Jersey Department of Education on the School Restructuring Project is that school and district improvement is “work for grownups.” The work requires a faith in the role of the public education system that is not shaken by politics, budgets, community issues, and local history. The work requires an understanding of the research on various topics in education, ranging from curriculum and assessment to the nature of quality instruction to teacher professional development to school leadership to community engagement. The work also requires an understanding of the nature of SEAs, large organizations that develop and implement policy that affects students throughout hundreds of districts and thousands of schools. The work requires an understanding of a framework or theory of action that helps SEAs to reshape their roles and responsibilities to schools and districts. Finally, the work requires a long-term commitment to change on the part of the SEA and MACC, regardless of turnover in SEA and MACC staff.

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The Collaborative Assessment and Planning for Achievement (CAPA) initiative at the New Jersey Title I Office website: <http://www.nj.gov/education/capa/>