

The Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center

MACC Info Brief

Consolidated Planning for School Districts: Developing a Planning Process

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The Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center (MACC) at GW-CEEE is funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide technical assistance to state education agencies (SEAs) on the implementation of No Child Left Behind. Serving Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, MACC focuses on assisting SEAs with the development of policies and practices that improve their capacity to support districts and schools identified as needing improvement.

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Background

This Info Brief focuses on state efforts to implement district “consolidated planning” for school improvement, which refers to the consolidation of planning for all student educational programs into one process and one document. The notion of planning for school improvement has been around since at least the 1980s when the current school reform movement was launched. As schools and districts responded to state reform initiatives, they adapted strategic planning ideas from organizational theory to involve a variety of stakeholders in planning for school improvement.

Strategic planning became even more important in the 1990s when the reform movement began to focus more strongly on student results and states started holding districts and schools accountable for making sure their students met specific academic goals. Districts and schools were required to develop improvement plans to meet state goals but at the same time, separate plans had to be submitted for federal programs such as Title I.

In 1994 as part of the Improving America’s Schools Act (a revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act), Congress authorized consolidated state plans to encourage “cross-program coordination, planning, and service delivery.” Consolidated planning would replace submitting individual plans for each program. The idea was that states would target all state and federal program funds toward achieving student learning goals.ⁱ States rolled the consolidated planning process down to districts and schools so that they too, might coordinate resources and efforts to help reach the state’s learning goals. An added benefit of consolidated planning was that it would reduce duplication of efforts.

Some states began implementing consolidated planning at the district and school level almost immediately after passage of the 1994 legislation, while others were slower to integrate planning for all programs into a single process and document. Since 2000 however, consolidated planning has become more common across the United States.

In late 2006, the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center (MACC) began to compile information about district consolidated planning in selected states that had made or were making the transition to consolidated planning. State department of education websites and district planning guides were reviewed, and key officials in the targeted states and selected districts were interviewed. This information has twice been updated (in mid-2007 and early 2009). The research over time has included a review of district consolidated planning in Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Tennessee, and West Virginia. This *Info Brief* shares information gleaned from states about the goals, implementation, and outcomes of consolidated planning for district improvement.

ⁱ See William J. Cook’s *Strategic Planning for America’s Schools* (1990), Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators; as cited in Schmoker, M. (2004), From feckless reform to substantive instructional improvement, *Phi Delta Kappan* 85 (6), 424-432.

ⁱⁱ Bennett, L. (1996). *Consolidated state planning: School reform at risk*. Washington, D. C.: Center for Law and Education.

Consolidated Planning

Before consolidated planning became accepted practice, districts were required to submit plans for many individual programs and funding sources, both state and federal. For instance, most states required the submission of improvement plans directed toward state standards, and might also require plans for supplementary programs such as after-school programs or technology programs. In addition, districts had to submit plans for use of federal funds from such sources as Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Under consolidated planning, a single planning process and document are used for most or all of these state and federal programs. Districts identify goals for student learning and then leverage resources from all or most programs to help meet those goals. For instance, in Kentucky and Ohio districts submit a single plan to the state that incorporates all No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Title programs, IDEA, and Carl Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act. Districts are encouraged, although not required, to include in their planning any funding sources that do not flow through the state agency, such as Early Reading First grants, foundation funds, and local revenue.

Rationale

The states studied by MACC are at different stages in implementing consolidated planning. Kentucky began consolidated planning in 1996, Idaho in 1999, Maryland and Ohio in 2002, Georgia and Tennessee in 2003, and West Virginia in 2004. Titles given to the process and product also vary, including comprehensive district improvement plan, consolidated comprehensive improvement plan, county five-year strategic plan, and comprehensive system-wide planning process. In this report, the term “consolidated planning” is used to convey the underlying idea of consolidating the planning for various programs to achieve common goals for student learning.

The purpose of consolidated planning is to leverage all available resources toward helping students meet goals identified by the district. Student learning, rather than funding is the starting point. The guiding question for districts is, “What are our needs, how do we address them, and what resources can we use to do so?” rather than “How should we spend our Title I money?” When implemented effectively, consolidated planning can move district stakeholders from thinking in terms of compliance to thinking strategically about how to improve student learning. A state official remarked:

When [districts] see how much easier and more effective [consolidated planning] is, they jump on board... because they see it is about what they need to do for their students. Five years go, almost like clockwork I would hear people say they were “stuck” on the planning committee. Now I hear less of that and more people are actively involved and they are really talking about their students. They are not thinking about compliance but about the students.

Consolidated planning is also intended to foster collaboration among stakeholders and across programs toward a common goal. No longer are Title I coordinators writing a plan, special education coordinators writing a plan, etc. Instead, a district-level committee is formed that includes representatives from all programs and various stakeholder groups to identify goals and develop a plan for meeting them. Ideally, this

process will lead to the development of a unified focus that results in continuous improvement of planning, curriculum, assessment, classroom practice, resource management, leadership practices, student support, and parent and community support. The idea is that engaging in continuous improvement in these key areas will create a culture of learning among adults that characterizes the entire system.

Finally, consolidated planning has a very practical benefit—it should result in less paperwork at the district level because only one plan is developed and submitted.

Getting Started

Officials in states that have made the transition to consolidated planning suggest a series of steps toward making the transition, beginning with developing support within the agency and then working through the policy and procedural issues of creating a new planning system. Suggested steps are:

Develop support within the state education agency, starting at the top. The state education agency will be responsible for developing support for consolidated planning and providing guidance to districts; therefore, buy-in from the chief state school officer (i.e., Commissioner of Education, Superintendent of Public Instruction) is essential. Once the decision is made to proceed with consolidated planning, the chief state school officer must make clear the expectation that all programs that concern students will eventually become part of the consolidated plan. One state official commented: “You have to have at both the state and district level support from the top person; otherwise almost anything can get derailed or other things become more important.”

Identify individuals and offices within the SEA that will sponsor and facilitate the work. Without a supportive “owner” of the work, it may be difficult to move the discussion forward and create momentum for the work. State agencies typically designate an office that will manage the work, as well as a top-level staff person to facilitate. In some cases, states have hired staff specifically for this purpose.

Establish a state agency committee to develop policies and procedures for district consolidated planning. Part of building support is to involve all key stakeholders at the state agency in making the transition to consolidated planning. Said one state official: “My biggest advice to any state trying to put together a consolidated planning process like this is have all the stakeholders in the room, sit down and talk, understand that it will be a long discussion—not a one-day discussion—but ongoing. You can’t make decisions and assume someone will do something they are not willing to do or can’t do.”

Draw on the expertise of other states and external partners that have experience with consolidated planning. Given the momentum nationally for consolidated planning focused on improved learning for all students, there are many possible sources of assistance to states. As noted above, at least two states that participated in this research hired staff from outside the state who had experience with consolidated planning. West Virginia hired well-respected outside consultants and drew on the expertise of its Regional Comprehensive Center to help develop the state’s school improvement initiative, which informed the development of the consolidated planning process.

Make clear that the process will be iterative and ongoing. State agency stakeholders who work on development should understand that the process will take time, discussion, and mid-course corrections. A state official remarked: “It is like going on a long trip and you take a stop to eat and then start again. Then you realize you spent more time here than you should have, so you have to reframe the schedule. So it takes a little bit of freedom, a tolerance for chaos and disagreement but at the end of the day, it forces agreement on what is important and forces the resources to target the problem.” The planning committee can ensure that the work keeps moving by meeting regularly with key staff, following through on committee decisions and suggestions between meetings, then bringing back to the committee the next iteration of the plan or process for review and feedback.

Set deadlines for the state agency to reach key milestones. Even though the transition to consolidated planning is guaranteed to take time, coordinators of the effort will need to set deadlines to ensure that the work moves along. As one state official remarked, “Bureaucrats sometimes move slowly—or strategically delay.” Without a formal timeline, such delays can undermine the work.

Determine program areas that will be part of the plan. An initial task for the committee will be to determine which programs will be integrated into the consolidated plan. The goal will be to ultimately incorporate all programs that concern student learning. Forcing all programs to participate at the outset, however, may be counter-productive if program administrators are resistant. At the same time, a meaningful number of programs (at least 5) must be included initially to provide momentum. Ohio incorporated formula grant programs the first year, adding competitive grants the following year. Likewise, West Virginia began with the NCLB Title programs, which were viewed as a natural fit because the ultimate goal of each Title program is improved student learning. This purpose makes the Title programs an “easier sell.” To bring in competitive grant programs, Ohio articulated a slightly different set of benefits for including their programs in the district plan; i.e., once part of the plan, their program becomes more visible, viable, and of value to the district. Throughout the transition period, a clear message should come from the chief state school officer that all appropriate programs are ultimately expected to participate. One state official remarked that states may lose momentum if the chief fails to clarify this expectation.

Craft guiding questions or principles to frame the internal discussion. Guiding principles can help committee members stay focused on the ultimate goal of consolidated planning—i.e., leveraging all resources toward improved student learning—while still meeting the requirements of their programs. In Ohio, for example, a new way of thinking was encouraged: program staff were asked to think of their areas of concern as a set of financial resources with targeted populations and purposes rather than programs—and to consider how those resources could be used to meet district goals. Other states used guiding questions aimed at helping program staff get over the “compliance hump.” These questions were designed to help them meet compliance requirements within a strategic approach; for instance, “What are your needs, and what compliance pieces help you meet those needs?”

Consider policy issues relative to district planning; i.e., what will the state require and what will the state encourage? The state agency must be mindful of the information it must have from districts to fulfill program requirements—while also considering effective practices for planning and implementation. Most states, for instance, require

districts to examine state assessment data as part of the planning process, given that schools and districts are held accountable for improving student performance on state tests. Some states require—and others recommend—analysis of other types of data. Similarly, some states provide a menu of research-based strategies and encourage, but do not require, districts to draw upon these strategies in composing action steps.

Develop a timeline for districts to transition to consolidated planning. State agencies should fashion timelines that help districts make the transition without overwhelming them with too many requirements or too much information in the initial stages. For instance, states may want to keep the same submission deadlines as in the past—or develop a staged process for implementation of the new planning system. State agencies should also be aware that for the first year or two of the new planning process, districts are likely to focus on the logistics and practicalities of working through the process and submitting the plan. Once they are comfortable with the logistical requirements, state agencies can focus even more strongly on the “big idea” behind consolidated planning (i.e., student learning).

Consider the relative emphasis to place on the process vs. the plan. Many states initiated consolidated planning by thinking in terms of the plan that would be submitted. This may be a necessary first step to working out the logistics of fulfilling state and federal program requirements. Several states, however, recognized that the focus on the plan resulted in districts approaching the work from a compliance perspective. In response, several states began to focus more on the planning process, with the plan as the end product. For instance, Ohio put its Consolidated Comprehensive Improvement Plan in place in 2002, but the plans that were submitted showed evidence that district staff from various programs were submitting individual pieces rather than working collaboratively. In response, the Ohio Improvement Process was implemented in 2008-09 to provide a strategy for ensuring a systematic and coherent approach to district improvement planning. Similarly, Tennessee implemented consolidated planning for all federal Title programs in 2003 but noted that duplication of efforts continued. Consequently, the Tennessee Comprehensive Systemwide Planning Process was implemented in 2005.

Process

Once the state team is on board with consolidated planning, policies and procedures must be developed to assist districts in engaging in consolidated planning. While district consolidated planning is likely to look different in different states, certain key features are believed to contribute to a collaborative process that is data-driven and results-oriented. These features are outlined as follows.

District-level planning committee of key stakeholders. State agencies typically encourage the creation of district planning teams that include representatives of key stakeholder groups; most typically the superintendent or designee; district directors of curriculum, assessment, professional development, technology, special education, federal programs, and other special programs; school board members; building-level administrators; teachers and teachers’ association representatives; and parents and community members. These district leadership teams increase the buy-in to consolidated planning; such teams can also assist school-based teams with needs assessment and planning.

Specified planning process. The planning process developed by the state agency guides what districts will do to develop a consolidated plan focused on meeting state and district goals. The steps in the process may also correspond to a required or suggested format for the plan itself. Planning processes in the states studied by MACC were quite similar, including four major categories:

1. *Where are we?*
 - a. Articulate the district's mission;
 - b. Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment, drawing on multiple sources of data;
 - c. Prioritize needs.
2. *Where do we want to go?*
 - a. Develop a vision for student and adult learning, drawing on research on high-performing school districts and effective instructional practices.
3. *How do we get there?*
 - a. Establish 3-4 focused, measurable goals to address the prioritized needs;
 - b. Develop 4-5 strategies to meet each of the identified goals;
 - c. Outline the resources needed to implement the strategies;
 - d. Disseminate/present the plan to stakeholders;
 - e. Implement the plan.
4. *How do we know we are making progress?*
 - a. Monitor implementation of the plan continuously;
 - b. Evaluate and report on the effectiveness of the plan for changing adult practice and improving student learning.

Planning and implementation timelines. Different states have established different time frames for district consolidated plans. Most states researched by MACC envisioned two-to five-year plans. For instance, Maryland developed a five-year planning process, Ohio and West Virginia a 2-5 year process, and Kentucky emphasizes continuous planning. Even states that have created multi-year planning processes require districts to submit annual updates because districts must apply for formula grant funds each year. As districts submit these updates, they are encouraged to examine new data and consider new funding sources.

Coordination of district- and school-level planning. Typically, consolidated planning occurs at both the district and school level. States that have made the transition to consolidated planning recommend that district planning occur first so that the district provides leadership to schools, and district goals and activities inform school plans. This approach ensures greater district cohesion, particularly in districts that experience a great deal of staff and student mobility.

Supports

The success of district consolidated planning depends on the effectiveness of the state agency in developing appropriate tools and providing professional development to support the process. An obvious strategy for helping districts implement the new

planning process and submit quality plans is to make the task as efficient as possible. Some tools and strategies states have used to achieve this goal include:

- Online guidance documents and templates: Nearly all states provide detailed, web-based guidance documents and templates. In many states, these documents are available to the public, making the process accessible and transparent to all stakeholder groups.
- Links to required and recommended data: Ohio's online planning system includes a "Decision Framework" that organizes data for districts according to essential questions about student proficiency (with districts' proficiency data provided), instructional management, expectations and conditions, and resource management. These enriched data are meant to not only shape district plans, but drive service providers' decisions on the staffing, training and knowledge/skills they will need to assist districts and schools in their area. West Virginia's online strategic planning system provides direct links to various kinds of data that districts may analyze as they develop their plans.
- Resources for gathering local data: In addition to state-level data that are often "pre-populated" into online district plans, states' online resources typically provide additional resources that districts may use to gather local data. Kentucky's and West Virginia's guidance materials, for example, list numerous sources of data districts may access. Kentucky's materials provide survey instruments for assessing student and family perceptions, as well as professional development needs.
- Inventory of research-based strategies for improving student performance: Once districts analyze data, they must identify goals and develop strategies to meet the goals. Some states assist with this step by compiling and making available information on effective instructional strategies identified in the research. West Virginia's online system, for instance, includes a "Framework for High-Performing 21st Century Schools" that describes strategies used in high-performing, high-poverty school districts.
- Streamlined system for submitting program assurances: Districts must submit annually to state agencies a set of assurances that they are meeting legal requirements of each program in operation. While some states continue to require that districts submit these assurances separately for each program, others have streamlined the process. Kentucky, for instance, has compiled assurances from all programs into a single document that is kept at the local level—superintendents need only submit to the state an electronic signature indicating agreement to the assurances. Ohio incorporates assurances for all programs into the plan itself so that districts automatically agree to the assurances when they submit their plans.
- Streamlined submission requirements: Many states have transitioned to online submission of consolidated plans. In Kentucky, districts do not submit their plans to the state at all, but post them on district websites. State agency staff then accesses the plans there.

Professional development and technical assistance to districts on implementing the planning process and tools. The guidance documents just described are the primary source of information provided to districts on consolidated planning. In addition, states typically provide more formal professional development sessions in a variety of ways. Both Kentucky and Ohio utilize regional cooperatives, professional associations or other partners to assist in delivering training on consolidated planning. Ohio, for instance, has trained over 400 "needs assessment and planning facilitators" from Educational Service

Centers across the state and from regional State Support Teams to assist districts. West Virginia has increasingly integrated strategic planning training into other professional development opportunities and improvement initiatives that target district and school leaders or leadership teams.

A plan for evaluating the effectiveness of district consolidated planning. In developing a system for evaluating effectiveness, state agencies may choose to evaluate the process, the plan, the outcomes, or all three. All states regularly review district student achievement data (i.e., outcomes) and take this to provide some indication of whether effective planning has occurred. Most states also have a system in place for evaluating the plans themselves, although these systems often involve a kind of spot-checking for compliance issues. Some states provide rubrics or templates to districts for evaluating the effectiveness of the planning process. Kentucky checks district websites annually to make sure plans are current but does no further evaluation of plans unless the district is in improvement status or comes to the state's attention for other reasons. The assumption is that if districts are meeting their goals and no concerns have been raised, effective planning and implementation is occurring.

Integration of state monitoring of consolidated planning with other monitoring systems (such as NCLB, IDEA monitoring, state audits, etc.). Some federal and state programs may require intermittent or one-time monitoring visits to the district by a state team. For instance, monitoring visits may be made by Title I or IDEA staff, and districts that are not meeting state goals may receive a state audit. Some states have been exploring ways to consolidate these monitoring visits. Ohio, for instance, monitors all districts for compliance on a three-year rotation. When a district is monitored, district staff completes a self-evaluation of all formula grant programs and some competitive grant programs. If the district is selected for on-site review, a team of appropriate state staff is dispatched to the district.

Feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement of the process. Particularly in the early stages of consolidated planning, state agencies may desire early feedback on how the process is working. West Virginia, for example, holds annual meetings with district officials soon after plans are submitted to obtain their feedback on how the planning process and tools are working, then makes adjustments accordingly.

Key Lessons

The move to consolidated planning is a major undertaking for state education agencies and school districts—but one that is well worth it, according to state and district officials who were interviewed by MACC. A few remarks are illustrative:

I would encourage any state to do this; it has been worthwhile. (West Virginia state official)

In the past [before consolidated planning] it was just compliance, just get your plan in; there was no thought of benchmarks and activities. (Kentucky school district official)

Years ago when the state first started the planning process, it was a report, it was, "What are we doing this year?" We put it in a document, had the board approve it, and sent it off...[Now] when you make a plan and you thought it through and know where you are headed, when distracters come along and all the other enticements that would pull you away from your plan, it is easy to say,

“Let’s go back to the plan and see if that will help us get where we said we would go.” (West Virginia school district official)

Some of the most salient points for states to consider:

- Creating a culture of collaboration must occur at all levels of the system: state, district, and school.
- While the ultimate goal is to focus all efforts and resources around improved student learning, a secondary goal is to avoid duplication and simplify a complex, bureaucratic process. Technology and online tools make the process less onerous for school districts.
- Getting beyond a compliance mentality may take time as districts initially learn to maneuver through a new system. Once they have learned to manage the logistics, however, the state can continue to emphasize even more strongly the big picture of student achievement.
- State education agencies are unlikely to have sufficient personnel and resources to provide the optimal level of training and support to districts. States will have to think strategically, perhaps using a “triage” approach; i.e., work directly with districts in need of assistance, work through regional agencies and professional partners to support districts in the middle; and provide web-based assistance and statewide professional development for districts with less urgent needs.
- States should anticipate the need for continuous adjustment as they work through initial implementation issues toward crafting a process that will truly help districts engage in long-range planning that targets all resources toward the goal of improved student learning.