

Building Regional Capacity to Support Schools and Districts in Need of Improvement Under NCLB

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Introduction

The American Institutes for Research (AIR), as a partner in the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, identified five states with comprehensive regional systems for supporting districts and schools in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. We then interviewed selected state education agency (SEA) staff in the five states — Georgia, Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Texas — to learn about their regional capacity-building strategies and to identify common system characteristics.¹

The intent of this report is purely descriptive. That is, we have not attempted to evaluate the states' regional systems in any way. Consequently, we do not know how effective these systems are in improving schools and districts, nor the extent to which the systems are implemented as intended.

In this summary we first describe how we selected the states for our sample. Next, we summarize the five states' demographics, regional structures, funding sources, service models, and staffing. Finally, we describe strategies and processes for building capacity at the regional level from the point of view of SEA staff.

State Selection

We selected states that have comprehensive regional systems for supporting schools and districts in need of improvement under NCLB. We defined the key elements of a comprehensive regional system as follows:

1. A mission statement or a set of goals related to school and district improvement;
2. Funded with the aim of providing services to schools and districts in need of improvement;
3. Provision of specific school and district improvement services; and
4. Designated staff to carry out these services.

Through expert nominations, web searches and literature reviews, we selected a sample of five states — Georgia, Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Texas. While other states have regional systems in place, the states in our sample appeared to have the most comprehensive regional systems for supporting districts and schools in need of improvement under NCLB.

¹ We initially interviewed and reported on Iowa as well. However, although Iowa has a regional system of support, its main purpose is not to provide support to schools and districts in need of improvement under NCLB, partly because Iowa has relatively few schools and districts in need of improvement (1 percent and 4 percent, respectively, in 2006-07). We therefore chose not to include Iowa as an example of a state with a comprehensive regional system of support for the purpose of this report.

We initially created state profiles that summarized each of the five states' structure and organization, funding sources, service models, and regional staffing. We then conducted interviews with SEA staff to confirm the information in the state profiles and learn about each state's strategies for building the capacity of regional support staff and providers. The information in the interviews was analyzed across the states to identify common system characteristics and strategies to build regional capacity.

State Demographics

We provide an overview of each state's demographics in terms of its size and the percentages of schools and districts in need of improvement. This information provides the context for understanding each state's regional system of district and school support.

As shown in the table below, the demographics of the five states vary widely. In 2006-07, Georgia had the smallest number of students, with about 1.6 million students, and Texas had the most, with approximately 4.6 million students. States also varied in the percentage of schools and districts that had been identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under NCLB. Only four percent of schools in Texas were in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring in 2006-07, compared with almost one-fifth (19 percent) of schools in Ohio. In 2006-07, Texas also had the lowest percentage of districts in improvement or corrective action (5 percent), and Illinois had the highest percentage (17 percent).

State	Number of Students in State*	Number of Schools in State**	Number/ Percentage of Schools in Improvement, Corrective Action, or Restructuring 2006-07**	Number of Districts in State**	Number/ Percentage of Districts in Improvement or Corrective Action 2006-07**
Georgia	1,598,461	2,100	186 (9%)	180	18 (10%)
Ohio	1,839,683	3,599	669 (19%)	613	69 (11%)
Illinois	2,111,706	3,888	509 (13%)	871	150 (17%)
New York	2,815,581	4,669	506 (11%)	794	56 (7%)
Texas***	4,576,933	8,061	286 (4%)	1,222	58 (5%)

* Data retrieved January 2008 from <http://www.schooldatadirect.org/>

** Data retrieved January 2008 from <http://www.centerii.org/centerIIPublic/>

*** Data provided by the Texas Education Agency in May 2008

Structures of Regional Systems

There is significant variation in the structure of regional systems across states. Broadly speaking, four of the five states (Georgia, Illinois, New York, and Texas) have two-layered regional structures, with a

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new layer added on top of an older regional layer. Ohio recently integrated all of its regional pieces into one overall system. Below, we describe these regional structures in more detail.

Georgia, Illinois, New York, and Texas all have two layers of regional support; New York's newer layer was added in 2000, prior to NCLB, whereas the other three states added a second layer in response to NCLB. In Georgia, the original layer is the 16 Regional Education Services Agencies (RESAs), and the newer layer is composed of five Regional Support Teams (RSTs). Both layers provide school and district improvement services.

In Illinois, the original layer consists of 45 Regional Offices of Education (ROEs), which are grouped by counties across Illinois. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) created the Regional Service Provider (RESPRO) system in 2002-2003 in response to the large number of schools designated as in need of improvement under NCLB. Ten RESPROs work in collaboration with the 45 ROEs.

In New York, the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) system has existed since the 1940s, with 38 BOCES that provide shared educational programs and services to school districts.² New York created seven Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs) in 2000. These centers work collaboratively with three other state-wide networks—Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRCs), Bilingual ESL Technical Assistance Centers (BETACs), and the Statewide Student Support Network (SSNs)—to support schools and districts in need of improvement. Most of the RSSCs are operated by BOCES.

Texas has 20 Educational Service Centers (ESCs) that were established in the 1970's. All 20 ESCs provide general and special education support to the schools and districts in their service areas. In addition, two ESCs (Region 13 and Region 16) host statewide initiatives focusing on school improvement and operate independently from the hosting ESCs. Region 13 houses the School Improvement Resource Center (SIRC). This center focuses on providing assistance to all schools in Needs Improvement status in the state. Region 16 hosts another statewide initiative that focuses on all Potential schools—those that have missed Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for one year. In addition, Region 16 oversees professional development for Title I schools and coordinates parent involvement efforts statewide. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) considers these two statewide initiatives and the Texas Comprehensive Center to be partners in their statewide system of school support.

Ohio's integrated system came into existence in July of 2007. At this time, Ohio changed its system of regional support from separate Regional School Improvement Teams (RSITs) and Centers of Special Education to a combined network of 16 State Support Teams (SSTs) in order to consolidate services and to encourage communication among these previously disconnected but related school and district improvement efforts.³

² <http://www.monroe2boces.org/about.cfm>

³ Ohio still has Information Technology Centers (ITCs), but Regional Advisory Councils coordinate all efforts in each region.

Funding of Regional Systems

The source of funding to regional school and district improvement systems also varies significantly from state to state. Regional systems are funded with a combination of federal, state, and local funds. Illinois, New York, and Texas use mainly federal funds for their school and district improvement efforts. A larger proportion of these funds (approximate \$3 million) are allocated to the two regional offices in Texas (in particular Region 13) that serve statewide functions.⁴ In Illinois and New York, the RESPRO and RSSC systems are each funded using about \$20 million of federal money (e.g., Title I and III, Reading First, IDEA funds). Conversely, the five Regional Support Teams in Georgia have \$11 million in state funds, and the 16 RESAs receive about \$12 million in local funds. Finally, Ohio has been able to pool all of its funding (about \$50 million) from a combination of approximately \$30 million in state funding (school improvement and literacy funds) and about \$20 million in federal funding (from IDEA) to pay for its integrated system.

In all five states, the funding level in each region is determined by school and district improvement needs.⁵ Three states, Ohio (SSTs), Illinois (RESPROs), and New York (RSSCs), use a competitive RFP process by region to fund agencies to administer their regional services on two- to five-year contracts.

Regional Service Models

All of these states' regional systems provide services to both schools and districts in improvement (with an emphasis on the school level in most of the states) and use similar overall improvement processes. These processes usually include data analysis and identification of school and district needs, development of goals and creation of school and district improvement plans, targeted professional development and technical assistance in the areas identified for improvement, and progress monitoring.

In addition, all five regional systems have some degree of autonomy from the SEA. As mentioned, Ohio, Illinois, and New York issue RFPs for agencies to provide regional services on two- to five-year contracts. In these states, the SEA works with the regional levels to determine deliverables and performance standards, and provides some monitoring and professional development. Once agencies are contracted to the states, they have a high degree of autonomy in how they implement school improvement strategies as long as they are meeting the specific deliverables set out in their contracts. Texas has a grant application process for its ESCs with predetermined performance measures that are monitored annually. Georgia appears to provide the most oversight of their regional system since SEA staff serve on each of the state's five Regional Support Teams.

Finally, three states (Georgia, Ohio, and Texas) use a tiered approach to providing school and district improvement services. They all prioritize the schools and districts with the greatest needs, but do so in

⁴ Other Texas ESC services not related to school and district improvement are funded by the state.

⁵ Ohio also takes into consideration the needs of students with disabilities in addition to school and district improvement needs.

different ways. In Georgia, the 16 RESAs focus on schools and districts in their first and second years of improvement, whereas the five state Regional Support Teams address schools and districts that have been in improvement for three years or longer. Similarly, the SIRC, located in Region 13 in Texas, is specifically designated to serve all schools in Needs Improvement status, whereas the Title I Statewide School Support/Parental Involvement Initiative located within Region 16 focuses on Potential schools—those that have missed AYP for one year. In addition, Region 13 provides schools in Stage 1 of school improvement with an administrative mentor and schools in Stage 2 with intensive technical assistance provider support focusing on implementing an effective school reform strategy. In Ohio, funding is prioritized by district need: 80 percent of the funding goes to priority districts, 15 percent to districts at risk, and 5 percent to region-wide professional development and technical assistance for all districts.

Staffing at Regional Levels

Across the five states, most staffing decisions are made at the regional level. In four of the states (Georgia, New York, Ohio, and Texas), regional leadership (e.g., Executive Directors in Texas) are appointed by regional-level boards. Only in Illinois is the regional leadership, in the form of Regional Superintendents, elected.

Most states have few staff members devoted to school and district improvement at the state level. In Illinois, for example, five state-level staff oversee the overall process, but it is the ten RESPROs that carry out the work. Each RESPRO includes up to ten part-time staff members, and all RESPROs hire experienced educators. Similarly, Texas has four full-time staff dedicated to school and district improvement at the state level. Most school improvement work takes place in the SIRC and the Title I Statewide School Support/Parental Involvement Initiative located within two of the ESCs, with about 12 and 6 staff members, respectively, as well as through hired administrative mentors, site visit specialists, and technical assistance providers. In Ohio, six regional managers at the state level oversee two to three regions each. At the regional level, the 16 State Support Teams employ about 300 staff across the state. In contrast to Illinois, Texas, and Ohio, Georgia's School Improvement Division employs 96 staff, most of whom work in the field. Three SEA staff serve on each of the five Regional Support Teams, and other staff members serve as leadership facilitators in schools that have been in improvement for three years or longer.

Strategies for Building Regional Capacity

Regional capacity building is defined here by the overall strategies that the five states reported using for building capacity at the regional level to assist districts and schools in need of improvement. Each state was asked which specific steps they had undertaken to build capacity at regional levels. These steps included coordinating and aligning services, building relationships, and engaging stakeholders, as described below.

Georgia's overarching regional capacity building strategy, as described by the Georgia SEA representative, is based on "the three Cs—Communication, Coordination, and Collaboration." As an

example, each of the five Regional Support Teams holds monthly meetings with the Regional Education Support Services Agencies in its region. In addition, the School Improvement Division meets five times a year with the 16 RESAs and other state school improvement agencies (e.g., Georgia Learning Resources Systems, Educational Technology Training Centers, colleges and universities) to coordinate school improvement efforts and align support, language used, and resources in the field.

Related to the communication, coordination, and collaboration strategy is an emphasis on developing a common language and ensuring uniformity so that everyone speaks with the same voice and implements processes the same way. The Georgia state representative explained it this way: “If a state school improvement person were to go into a school and RESA went into the school, everybody uses the same language.”

To enhance communication, Illinois holds monthly meetings between SEA staff, RESPROs, and state associations (e.g., Association of School Boards and Association of School Administrators). Ohio holds an annual school improvement leadership conference, which entails four days of professional development, focusing on coordination and integration of improvement efforts. Texas also holds an annual conference focusing on technical assistance for schools in improvement, as well as three-day quarterly meetings to provide school support team staff with updates and trainings on the latest research-based strategies for school improvement. Finally, New York conducts quarterly reviews of Regional School Support Centers. As the New York state representative noted, “You have to make sure that, if they are an extension of the State Education Agency, you have to keep them close and work with them in partnership and give them credibility.”

State representatives also noted the importance of breaking down silos within state departments (i.e., working collaboratively across departments) and avoiding competition between SEAs and regional offices. Again, increasing the communication, coordination, and collaboration both within and across agencies and levels can decrease competition and break down silos.

Building trust and ensuring buy-in was another capacity building strategy noted by some state representatives. Ensuring buy-in and building trust is important at all levels. In particular, districts and schools must come to trust the providers; one way to do this is to ensure that districts and schools have some input in developing the process and choosing who their providers are. Central to building trust and ensuring buy-in is an effort to engage stakeholders—including regional and local stakeholders and others (such as state associations and universities). As noted above, both Illinois and Georgia are engaging these types of stakeholders in the process.

Because some state departments have very few staff dedicated to school and district improvement efforts, it becomes important for them to rely on regional providers and even more important for them to retain them. Increasing communication, coordination, and collaboration between the state and regional levels is a way to increase providers’ knowledge and ownership of the process as well as their retention.

Conclusion

We found significant variation in the structure of regional systems and funding sources across states. There is more uniformity in the service models and staffing in the five states. All states' regional systems provide services to both schools and districts in improvement and use similar overall improvement processes. In addition, in all five states, most staffing decisions are made at the regional level. The overarching regional capacity building strategy noted by Georgia is predicated on what they describe as the three Cs—Communication, Coordination, and Collaboration. Most strategies identified through the five SEA interviews fell under this general theme. For example, the five state representatives all reported holding regular meetings and training as a way to enhance communication, coordination, and collaboration. In addition, some SEA staff emphasized the importance of using common language and ensuring uniformity, breaking down silos and avoiding competition, building trust and ensuring process buy-in, engaging all stakeholders in the process, and, finally, relying on providers and retaining them.