



Levers for Change

Pathways for State-to-District Assistance in Underperforming School Districts

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Introduction and summary

Two consecutive federal administrations in Washington, from two different political parties, thrust state departments of education into the role of intervening in underperforming schools and districts. Both the federal government and the states identified thousands of schools that are failing students. The sheer numbers underscore the problem: Focusing on individual schools alone is not a winning strategy. Simply put, underperforming schools exist in the context of underperforming school districts.

When school districts fail to meet their responsibilities to educate students, state departments of education by law have to step up and become the responsible party. But do these state agencies have the knowledge and capacity to do what the districts have not done? Are they oriented and equipped to get better results?

The national experience in state-to-district assistance is characterized by tactics in the absence of strategy, and activities in the absence of accomplishment. The traditional state department of education infrastructure simply is not up to the challenge of providing effective state-to-district assistance in underperforming school districts. If every system is perfectly designed for the results that it is getting, state-to-district assistance is the poster child for recurring flawed practices. Transforming underperforming districts is a nuanced and complex challenge that requires substantial changes in thinking, behavior, and systems. In sharp contrast, the strength of state departments of education is in the area of supporting the existing policies and regulations that can at times contribute to the very underperformance that is so prevalent in many districts.

What's particularly troubling is that the problems of state-to-district interventions all take place under the watch of the same organizations that are now being called upon to significantly strengthen underperforming districts. If state departments of education are to achieve better results, there is a fundamental need for new approaches and new sets of players. Fortunately, there are many lessons emerging from the nearly 30-year track record of state-to-district interventions. Unfortunately, these lessons will not be learned unless they result in changes of practice.

The most critical lessons are in the effective use of three levers for change. State interventions at the district level have educational, organizational, and political dimensions, but these interventions are largely approached from just a one-dimensional perspective—educational. Unless the organizational and political dimensions are addressed concurrently with the educational dimension, successful state-to-district interventions will continue to be elusive for the states.

These three levers—educational, organizational, and political—need to be used together to achieve better results. Educational approaches alone do not get the job done. Success in state-to-district interventions requires a focus on strategy over tactics, plans that are rigorous and realistic, and high-quality technical assistance during implementation. Success also depends on the will to make mid-course corrections as well as the importance of having an explicit and transparent exit strategy.

A state department of education must translate its leadership role into an overall strategy to help others succeed, among them school board members, central administrators, school teachers and principals, and as many parents and their children as possible. There is more to state-to-district interventions than changes in governance and funding levels. Demonstrating state leadership requires building leadership within the school districts themselves. This is a systemic challenge with a dual focus on increasing student learning and the community's capacity to support and advance the reform process. This means emphasizing capacity building in the central administration, the individual schools, and parent groups, and using the state's power to convene and be convened by others such as community organizations and partnering agencies.

This is no easy task. My perspectives on state-to-district assistance in underperforming school districts draw from more than 30 years of experience with the non-profit Community Training and Assistance Center. As CTAC's founder and executive director, I have helped school districts and state departments of education around the country try to achieve the educational goals of sustained student achievement, discovering along the way the many ways in which the focus on education alone is never the answer. I have assisted 40 state-level teams and numerous individual states on the dual issues of state-to-district and state-to-school interventions. This includes providing the technical assistance within state-to-district interventions in states ranging from New Jersey to Ohio to California, with student achievement increases in all participating districts, and conducting the major longitudinal evaluation of the impact of a state takeover on student achievement and systems change. From these experiences, there are learnings and first-hand

evidence of why state-to-district assistance has so often gone wrong and what's needed to get better results for children in underperforming school districts.

This paper begins by briefly identifying the phases of state-to-district assistance from the time of the publication of the seminal report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education on our nation's educational failures, "A Nation at Risk," in 1983 to the present. Since then, in each successive phase of reform, state departments of education have had to assume greater responsibility for school and district underperformance. The paper then highlights what we've learned from this national experience by examining the educational, organizational, and political aspects of state-to-district assistance. It provides the platform for learning from and avoiding the recurring examples of unsuccessful practices.

The third section describes the components needed in a strategy to move from mission impossible—essentially the current state of affairs—to mission possible, wherein states can achieve better results. It focuses on the threefold challenge of:

- Meeting the **educational** requirements of balancing state responsibilities with federal statutes and traditions of local control
- Building the **organizational** capacities necessary for reconfiguring the current policy compliance system into an effective service-delivery system
- Addressing the **political** implications of balancing political pressure with educational wisdom

The arena of state-to-district assistance includes some better practices, but not yet best practices. Therefore, this third section also includes litmus questions that state departments of education can use to guide their decision-making about where to exert leadership and utilize resources for greater impact. In short, these questions can be used to shape a new generation of interventions that are characterized by best practices.

Getting markedly better results requires leadership that understands and uses these three key levers for change to maximize the state's impact in transforming underperforming school districts and building community capacity, thereby ensuring a better future for students. This paper will describe how these levers for change can make the state the difference maker.

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