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# Building State Capacity for School Improvement: Lessons for Federal Policymakers

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Last spring, the Sandler Foundation asked key congressional staffers and Obama Administration officials what research they needed to reauthorize ESEA. Democrats and Republicans said they could use a synthesis of what experts know – and don't know—about state capacity and efforts to promote continuous improvement for all schools and turn around the lowest-performing schools.

To understand more about what strong state capacity to promote and support school improvement looks like and what federal officials might do to bolster state efforts, the Sandler Foundation funded studies by RAND Corporation, a non-partisan research organization, to review the literature on the state and federal roles in education, examine the effectiveness of states' ongoing school improvement efforts, and suggest options for framing future federal guidance and support. This paper – based on the RAND Corporation study and information from other expert sources – describes: (1) the role that states play in the improvement process; and (2) how federal policy might be strengthened to help build the capacity of states to take on the increasingly important task of creating high-performing systems for school improvement.

## THE STATE ROLE IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Good federal and state policy must be informed by an understanding of the best and most effective roles for states to play in school improvement. States play a key role in education policy reform – setting the systems and conditions within which districts and schools can drive dramatic improvements in student achievement and close achievement gaps, toward the goal of all students graduating from high school ready for college and career. A highly-effective state will develop and lead a cycle of reform from (1) setting high expectations for student outcomes (e.g., college and career ready standards) to (2) ensuring access to high-quality resources (e.g., funding, effective educators, etc.) to (3) monitoring performance (e.g., assessments, accountability, data reporting, etc.), to (4) promoting continuous school improvement, including, but not limited to, the turnaround of the state's lowest-performing schools. All of these elements should be aligned around a coherent agenda for local practice in terms of student instruction and achievement, and should be continuously evaluated and improved.

The state role in school improvement is relatively new, however, developing over the past decade as NCLB requirements were implemented. During the last few years the evolution of statewide systems has begun to gain momentum as state accountability systems have matured, targeted federal school improvement funding has emerged, and the federal focus on school turnaround has become much more prominent. There is now strong consensus (though varying models) on the role of the state in developing overall

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systems of school and district improvement and leading significant, systemic efforts to turnaround the lowest performing schools as well as targeting efforts to address persistent achievement gaps.

Even as statewide systems of support have started to mature, this has highlighted limitations in state capacity, and the need to build state capacity by addressing the range of factors necessary for state success in policy development and implementation, including:

- Infrastructure, such as financial resources, staff and delivery systems, and data systems and technology to support schools and districts;
- Professional resources, such as leadership and authority, and infusion of expertise; and
- Political resources, such as strong communications and support from key stakeholders within and beyond government.

A state's performance when measured against these factors likely helps explain state readiness for school improvement, and may help distinguish a state education agency with a compliance-based mindset and siloed resources according to the revenue stream from a highly effective SEA that has a proactive, integrated, and systemic approach to preparing all students for college and career.

Operating a coordinated but still flexible approach to school improvement instead of leaving struggling districts and schools to flounder on their own allows high-performing states to address the needs of each school at every place along the improvement continuum. Targeting supports in this manner requires states to establish a diagnostic review process that identifies the nuanced challenges of different schools and responds by creating plans and interventions that effectively move each school forward. For example, schools receiving inadequate resources have different needs from those where teachers have insufficient knowledge of reading strategies and those schools suffering from a toxic climate.

Another critical component of the state's role is ensuring that knowledge is developed and disseminated at the state, district and school levels. The success of state interventions depends on capacity throughout the system – a statewide system of supports. States need to develop knowledge and skill at the local level and share information about successful school strategies so that breakthroughs can be used and built on throughout the system. To do this effectively, states need personnel with the right kinds of expertise at the state level as well.

RAND Education's report, "Federal and State Roles and Capacity for Improving Schools," included an examination of 15 states that have formally evaluated their ongoing school improvement policies or practices. RAND found that states have a broad range of approaches that have had varying degrees of effectiveness, **but no model has yet demonstrated a proven enough track record to warrant widespread adoption.** In other words, there is currently no clear best pathway for states to follow. However, RAND's research does suggest a number of federal policy directions that provide a foundation for the specific recommendations that follow:

- Encourage continued state experimentation and innovation;
- Support ongoing evaluation of school improvement efforts;

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- Disseminate knowledge and best practices.

The mixed results of past federal, state, and local school improvement efforts suggest that educators and policymakers need to continue to *develop* new, successful strategies to boost low-performing schools, rather than simply replicating existing strategies. Federal policy should account for the fact that states have significant variability in their improvement strategies and their capacities to improve low-performing schools. These differences reflect states' individual history and governance, character (including the unique needs of isolated rural communities), and economic conditions, and they should not be ignored in favor of a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement imposed by the previous NCLB accountability statutes. In fact, given the pressing need to learn more about effective school improvement, state variation in approaches offers an opportunity to learn at a more rapid pace about promising improvement strategies, if efforts are evaluated and the results are widely disseminated.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the policy directions suggested by RAND above regarding state capacity for school improvement, and what we know from other sources, we recognize there are both points of consensus and open questions among policymakers about how to tackle school improvement.

The Obama Administration's approach to school improvement (and current congressional discussions) proposes to leave greater judgment to states about how to promote continuous improvement while taking a more prescriptive approach to turning around the lowest-performing schools. The Administration's current school improvement guidelines target greater resources for the nation's persistently lowest-performing schools in exchange for implementing one of four specified school improvement models, an approach that is also reflected in the Administration's ESEA reauthorization blueprint.

Consensus is emerging among policymakers on both the necessity for overall state systems of continuous improvement that meet the needs of schools along the whole performance continuum and also the obligation to focus greater attention on the nation's lowest-performing schools. But policymakers have not reached agreement on how to best address the varying support needs of schools, nor the appropriate balance between federal, state and school district roles. Policymakers are also grappling with how prescriptive federal law should be, or not be, with regard to the strategies used to improve the lowest-performing schools.

And while the issue of state capacity gets a lot of rhetorical attention, it has not received as much policy focus. The following recommendations address each of these areas. We recommend the following for federal policymakers considering ESEA reauthorization, potential waivers under the No Child Left Behind Act, and federal education policy more broadly:

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## Investing in State School Improvement Systems

**Federal law must make deeper investments in state capacity to further the development of statewide systems of school improvement, including a focus on delivery and capacity among school districts and other actors.** Traditionally, federally funded state set-asides have been intended to address the costs that states bear in administering federal programs. State capacity investments have a different purpose—to enable states to put in place a proactive, coordinated system of successful school improvement. To this end, federal law should:

- Maintain and increase state set-asides when they are used to build comprehensive systems of support for continuous improvement and school turnaround;
- Create a “state capacity program,” a new dedicated funding stream to be used to build statewide systems of school improvement that would give districts and schools real resources, architecture, and assistance to implement school improvement efforts, including turnaround of lowest performing schools.
- Require reasonable matching funds to increase state-level investments in state capacity. Further, states should demonstrate maintenance of effort and that federal funds are not supplanting state investments.

## Enabling Effective Innovation

**Given the lack of research demonstrating clear methods to promote efficient and effective school improvement at scale, federal law should encourage state and local innovation – acting within clear performance goals and guiding principles – rigorous evaluation, transparent review, dissemination, and continuous improvement.** The federal government should hold states to common expectations for outcomes and require statewide systems of support tied to ensuring all students are college and career ready, while giving states more control over improvement strategies. Present policy allows states to set their own standards while requiring them to follow the same formula for action. Given the diversity in educational practice and capacity at the state level, the federal government should take advantage of state variation to develop and test new solutions to the problem of low-performing schools.

- Federal policy should expect states to establish comprehensive systems of continuous improvement for all schools, with an unyielding commitment to promoting college and career readiness, and equity, but leave room for states to design those systems.
- There should not be a single set of specific models for turning around the lowest-performing schools, but rather an expectation that such interventions require significant, systemic, authentic, comprehensive plans and sustained investment, with freedom for states and districts to experiment with a variety of approaches that will be well-documented, evaluated, and used for continuous improvement.
- Federal requirements for evaluation of school improvement efforts should have greater focus and more investment. Policies to encourage innovation might be coupled with policies to support increased research, evaluation, and dissemination (tied to clear standards and measures) to ensure that new knowledge is shared meaningfully

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and rapidly.

- There may be a unique federal and state role in supporting turnaround of the lowest-performing schools, but statewide systems are far broader and should provide support to additional schools, such as early intervention in underperforming schools to avoid systemic problems, and should also have clear, high expectations for continuous improvement for all schools.

### **Federal Framework for School Improvement**

**While promoting effective innovation, federal policy should set in place broad parameters that make sure states are implementing the essential elements necessary for effective school improvement.**

- Federal policy should require states to demonstrate that they have a system for improving schools that include core elements, such as strong outcome measures, tailored supports and interventions based on a strong knowledge base. Such systems will include processes to build the professional capacity of staff, and strong evaluation and continuous improvement.
- Federal law should support state efforts to establish tighter connections between school and district accountability determinations and delivery of supports and interventions, through data reporting, analysis, and diagnostic reviews.
- Federal policy should hold the expectation that states have clear, coherent delivery systems; support the capacity of districts; increase knowledge of effective practices; etc.