

## The State of the State: New SEA Structures for a New Approach to Turnaround from *The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices*

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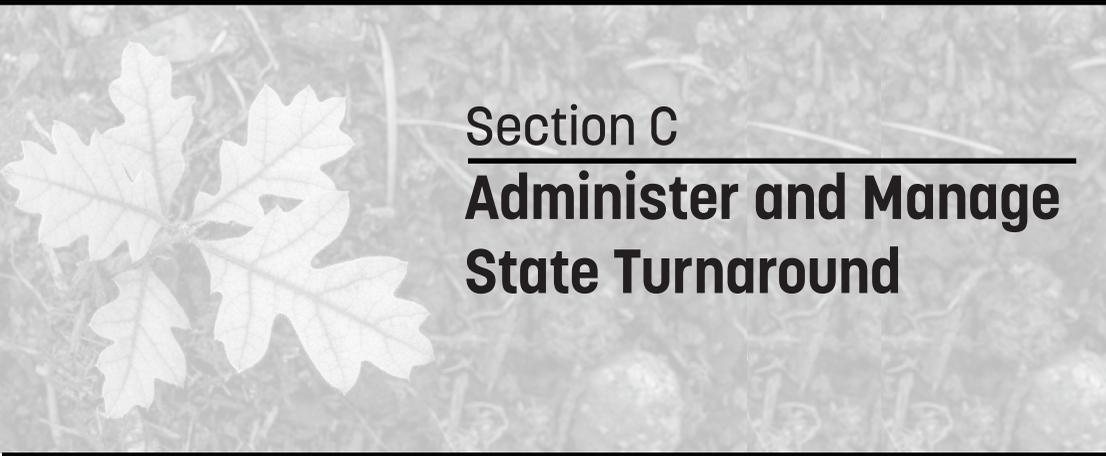
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## About the Center on School Turnaround

The national Center on School Turnaround focuses on providing technical assistance to, as well as building the capacity of, states to support districts and schools in turning around their lowest-performing schools. The Center is led by WestEd in partnership with the Academic Development Institute, the National Implementation Research Network, and the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia.

## Focus Areas

- Developing SEA Staff Capacity and SEA Organizational Structures
- Building District Capacity
- Creating Policies, Incentives, and Partnerships to Ensure a Pipeline of Turnaround Leaders
- Promoting Cooperative Labor-Management Relations
- Promoting the Use of Expanded Learning Time
- Creating Systems and Processes to Ensure a Pool of High-Quality Turnaround Partners
- Ensuring the Availability and Use of Data Systems at the SEA Level
- Supporting Schools and Districts in Establishing a Positive School Climate
- Monitoring and Evaluating School Turnaround Efforts
- Improving Capacity of School Boards to Support Turnarounds
- Engaging Families and Communities
- Building Political Will for Dramatic Change



Section C

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**Administer and Manage  
State Turnaround**



## **The State of the State: New SEA Structures for a New Approach to Turnaround**

*Justin Cohen & Alison Segal*

It has been more than a decade since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Despite that law's effect of heightening state and federal governments' attentiveness to school accountability, the state's role in turning around chronically underperforming schools is still nascent and underdeveloped. This is exacerbated by the fact that, despite some interesting models, there is no "silver bullet" solution for chronic school failure, and there most likely never will be. Moreover, there is arguably no single best structure for the state education agency's (SEA) role in turnaround given how differently various states and their local education agencies (LEAs) are configured. In other words, what can be done in a country wherein both California and Washington, DC have SEAs?

In order to provide optimal support for turnaround schools, an SEA must intentionally organize to support those schools' needs. In addition, despite the fact that federal accountability reforms have driven extraordinary focus on the school and classroom levels, an SEA must also carefully consider the role—or lack of a role—of the district (LEA) in school turnaround.

This chapter examines existing literature on SEA organizations and how these organizations provide support for schools and districts. While there are a range of approaches and organizational structures, we pay particular attention to shifting SEA practices and culture to better support districts, attending to an SEA's reorganization, and the general range of SEA structures and activities implemented to support turnaround.

Through both our examination of extant research and the accumulated knowledge of Mass Insight’s<sup>1</sup> fifteen years of experience working with SEAs, we have observed that states’ strategies for addressing chronic underperformance at the school level fall somewhere on a spectrum between (a) *laissez-faire* (i.e., the state collects data and encourages LEAs and schools to act on that data) and (b) complete takeover of a district or school. While these two points of reference occupy the poles of the approach, most SEAs employ a suite of strategies that exist between these two poles. Despite some nationally recognized work in state takeover, however, the preponderance of evidence suggests that most states still pursue strategies closer to the “*laissez-faire*” approach. We will often refer to the “*laissez-faire*” approach as being “light-touch,” meaning that the SEA is not heavily involved with LEAs beyond compliance monitoring and specific instances where a close relationship with an LEA incites action.

While most SEAs will struggle to serve and react to all of their LEAs equitably, we suggest that SEAs take a strategic approach to developing and deploying intervention strategies. Rather than creating customized protocols for each LEA, SEAs could identify the highest leverage services that it can reasonably deploy, and then apply those practices to the LEAs whose needs are most aligned to those high-leverage services. In addition, SEAs should identify “proof points” wherein they deploy resources more aggressively to achieve faster, bolder gains. For instance, to provide support to several struggling LEAs, the SEA may foster the development of zones, essentially mini-districts, to provide persistently low-achieving schools with localized heavy-touch support to help them succeed. This method allows the SEA to cluster schools based on their needs and add on-the-ground capacity through Lead Partners. Others may create a lighter-touch internal turnaround office to guide LEAs with turnaround schools, consistent with the “*laissez-faire*” approach, while others may opt to create an independent, state-led LEA that takes schools out of their existing LEAs, such as the Achievement School District in Tennessee, which we will discuss later in this chapter.

### **Emerging Knowledge Base**

While somewhat thin, the existing research on how SEAs organize to support school turnaround highlights a real range of approaches. The Academic Development Institute’s Center on Innovation & Improvement supplied SEAs with a number of handbooks and reports, which is where we found the majority of our resources. It is important to note, too, that SEA structure is just one

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<sup>1</sup>Mass Insight Education, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Boston, MA, was founded in 1997 to help create and implement strategies that close educational achievement gaps. Through its two major efforts, The School Turnaround Group and The Mass Math + Science Initiative, Mass Insight Education partners with school districts to dramatically improve student achievement through increasing academic rigor and reinventing district systems. It is the sister organization of Mass Insight Global Partnerships, which has worked since 1989 to help businesses and institutions remain globally competitive. In 2007, Mass Insight Education published *The Turnaround Challenge*, a call-to-action style report that challenged the nation to improve the nation’s lowest performing schools (bottom 5%).

ingredient in the state intervention infrastructure (Rhim, Hassel, & Redding, 2007). In particular, state legislation and constitutions may restrict what an SEA is able to do and not do, particularly with respect to intervening in local governance. Our literature review found that engraining change in the organizational culture of an SEA is often the best way to begin reorganization, especially in cases where the political will does not exist or is “shaky” (Hess, Lautzenheiser, Brown, & Owen, 2011; Mass Insight Education, 2012b; Murphy & Rainey, 2012).

### The Practice Continuum

Any meaningful restructuring of SEA capacity implies a concomitant rethinking of practice. Murphy and Rainey (2012) discussed a necessary “shift from ‘compliance monitor’ to ‘performance monitor’” (p. 3) for SEAs working with turnaround and how that requires a realignment of positions and responsibilities. Speaking to the continuum described at the beginning of this chapter, Murphy and Rainey’s research culminated in the development of a linear spectrum, where “All In” lies at one end of the line, with a counterpart of “Results Without Rancor” at the opposite end. Between the two is “Bounded Equilibrium.” They found a majority of SEAs employed a “Results Without Rancor” strategy, which restructures some parts of the SEA to focus on performance management. In the end, though, this strategy often relies on relationship building to help LEAs support their lowest performing schools rather than more politically aggressive strategies. Generally, an SEA hopes that this method will build the foundation for a sustainable approach to building a stronger district for school support. Murphy and Rainey found that this strategy requires a large cultural shift within both the SEA and the LEA. The SEA must embody two firm beliefs: first, believe that the LEA has the necessary foundation/organization to support its schools; and second, believe that the LEA has knowledge/understanding of the day-to-day work of schools. Finally, the LEA must be comfortable with the changes the SEA imposes and work collaboratively to support the SEA’s reforms.<sup>2</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, “All In” shifts the major responsibility from the LEA to the SEA for direct school support. In this case, states create an entirely new entity to lead a complete takeover of failing schools. In some states, such as New Jersey, the SEA does not have the legal power to do this, although they may use other legislative or constitutional powers to exact a higher level of control. Other states, such as Tennessee (Achievement School District) and Louisiana (Recovery School District), have developed either an office or statewide LEA specifically for this purpose. As a result, some states wishing to pursue an “All In” strategy will instead find themselves working in a “Bounded Disequilibrium” framework. This framework relies on a “carrot-and-stick” policy approach to encourage LEA behavior that should best support failing schools. Michigan,

<sup>2</sup>In some cases, LEAs may lack capacity to support their own schools. In this case, SEAs can explore takeover, creation of Zones, or include Lead Partners in the state or local structure to build LEA capacity.

Illinois, Indiana, and several other states also have moved to institutionalize a more direct approach to intervention.

As for physical reorganization, Murphy and Rainey cite some SEAs' reorganization efforts that resulted in either creating or strengthening existing regional offices. While they concede that this approach does indeed add an additional layer of bureaucracy, it also allows for SEA staff to focus on a smaller, regional cohort of schools in need of improvement. This helps to develop stronger relationships, while also placing more focus on accountability and reporting. Regional offices may have the most impact in states with either large geographic coverage or many different major metropolitan areas.

### **SEA Structural Challenges**

Research documents that SEA structures should allow for provisions of political cover to LEAs and schools (Hess et al., 2011). SEAs can provide this political cover by owning the ability to move to the "All In" or "state takeover" end of the spectrum of intervention when necessary. In doing so, the SEA can selectively exercise its more politically aggressive tactics—namely takeover—in an effort to provide incentives and political cover for other reform-minded LEAs to act. However, before threatening takeover, the SEA must determine that it does have the capacity to follow through. A state may not even consider this option without its own political cover from the governor, state board of education, or federal government. Others may simply not have the legislative ability to execute a takeover.

Hess et al. (2011) found, as did we, that it is very difficult to discuss trends and comparisons in SEA organizational makeup, because there are so few original research studies. This is mainly due to the constant flux that SEA structures experience, especially in response to new federal initiatives. For example, the report found that the most recent, published document that explicitly focused on SEA staffing and funding was a compilation by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) that was created almost two decades ago. Though this report's study was on a smaller scale, it did find similar results: Many SEAs experience lower than ideal capacity because they lack human capital. The authors claimed the blame here lies partly in pay grade regulations: Districts often offer higher pay grades than the SEA. For example, they cited that while the chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools earned \$230,000 in 2011, the Illinois state superintendent earned \$190,000 without any room for salary growth. This may result in districts' positions being more attractive to talented individuals.

Hess et al. (2011) called for a reorganization of brain power; above all, the structure of the SEA should "de-silo" efforts. The office charged with school improvement efforts should not be an "island" unto itself, and particularly not nested within the broader distribution of federal title funds. Hess et al. (2011) challenged SEAs to push the envelope in their restructuring and build bridges

among and between departments. The report cited Delaware as an example, which, in 2012, reorganized its SEA to best suit the state's LEAs by merging some office branches to create a "one-stop" service with stronger alignment to LEA operations. Based on our experience with 12 states, we agree that the School Improvement Office needs to have tentacles throughout the SEA, and states need to further differentiate "improvement" into varying degrees of intervention intensity.

Running through all considerations of SEA restructuring is the question of sustainability. We can change the structure, but what happens when there is leadership or staff turnover? How can we ensure that a restructure survives personnel changes? Hess et al. (2011) say that a strong culture of high expectations for students and adults is key. They suggest maintaining political pressure, through public communications, to avoid going back to the old way of doing things. This includes drawing out a plan to encourage buy-in both internally and externally to a new turnaround unit and creating strong lines of open communication and collaboration up to the state chief as well as among other department of education offices.

As Hess et al. (2011) make clear, culture also seems to be a critical component of sustaining reform. The report found that along with the siloed departments that often exist, there is sometimes an additional fragmentation that appears between federal employees at the state level and their state-employed counterparts. Although they are all working for the same cause, the two types of employees tend to be in different silos. Many SEA leaders found that to accomplish a cultural change, they needed to shift from a compliance-focused environment to one that focused on the real reason every employee held their respective jobs—to support district reform and effective educational opportunities for all students. If this resonated with everyone in the SEA and the organization could change to put students first, then collaboration within the organization became more feasible, which is the first step to developing strong relationships with LEAs. From here, LEAs must also be open to a change in norms; rather than playing into compliance, local education leaders must also become comfortable with taking the lead on local school improvement.

Research also indicates that funding shouldn't be a barrier to reorganization efforts. Kober and Renter (2012) documented that many state legislatures cut costs to the SEA as opposed to districts to find savings. While cost-cutting might result in overall decreases in SEA staffing levels, many states were able to increase staff levels in reform-critical offices while dismissing staff aligned to less relevant functions. In fact, Kober and Renter (2012) found that many states were even cutting staff from other departments to maintain—or in some cases increase—their capacity within educational improvement offices. Additionally, in some cases technological advances helped increase capacity in those departments that have been forced to downsize due to budgetary constraints. This is

especially true in terms of evaluation analytics and longitudinal data tracking. In some instances, federal dollars may be used to supplant state dollars and avoid downsizing. For example, some SEAs might seek guidance for supplementing grant streams with Title I dollars for schoolwide funding.

### **Support Systems and State-Level Intervention**

The best structure for an SEA depends on the specific needs of the schools that require the strongest supports. Public education is a state's responsibility, as the constitution leaves responsibility for educating the public to the states. However, the federal government has become a powerful influence in education by providing funding attached to conditions (i.e., SIG, NCLB waivers), leaving implementation up to the state. We found that there are various methods for determining which schools need what kinds of support (Mass Insight Education, 2012b). School Improvement Grant (SIG) accountability structures, NCLB performance measures, funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and state Elementary and Secondary Education Act Flexibility waivers provide frameworks for identifying chronically underperforming schools and their needs. However, while these programs should incentivize SEAs to restructure their services, there is no mandate to do so. Neither is there a mandate to require LEAs to concomitantly change their approaches. The various programs continue to evolve over time—especially as administrators and their views change. As such, SEAs cannot afford to provide a one-size-fits-all service to the schools they serve; rather, they must remodel their procedures and policies to reflect variable school and district performance.

Federal accountability and intervention strategies can drive urgency at the state and district level, but other external forces can also influence action. However, Murphy and Rainey (2012) cautioned that waiting for a crisis to appear is not the best practice to infuse urgency. For Louisiana, the disaster of Hurricane Katrina forced the state to start anew. While unfortunate events such as this often spur a state to take action, Murphy and Rainey (2012) advised that the current state of education is a “disaster” in itself and should be an ample catalyst to drive change to help these struggling schools and serve as the basis for communicating the rationale for a transformation of current systems and the status quo.

Finally, our own research provides a useful framework for rethinking the structure of the state intervention system. We found that successful school intervention strategies generally relied on creating stronger policy “conditions” for intervention; investing selectively in increased “capacity” to drive interventions, either at the SEA or LEA level; and “clustering” interventions—particularly in K–12 feeder patterns—in order to maximize the impact of investments. These so-called “3 Cs” offer a policy framework for states looking to make more aggressive, targeted investments in remedying chronic underperformance (Mass Insight Education, 2012b).

To cultivate the conditions, capacity, and clustering for turnaround, we recommend that states move the turnaround function out of the traditional “Title I/School Improvement” hierarchy. While there are good reasons to maintain a statewide approach to incremental improvement, states need a specialized unit to handle the most entrenched problems. In other sectors—such as state infrastructure investment and transportation—states create special authorities with unique powers, particularly for massive challenges. SEAs could learn from this approach. For instance, Massachusetts created an independent Massachusetts Water Resource Authority to manage the Boston Harbor cleanup in the 1980s. This authority existed outside of the normal constraints of bureaucratic authority and was able to attract a different kind of transformational talent to a major initiative (Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, 2005).

Outside of the creation of a special purpose authority, we have also supported and written about a number of states that fostered the creation of protected in-district improvement zones through competitive grant processes. While all states have created subcompetitions for SIG dollars, a smaller number of states created processes that actually account for the quality and intensity of proposed interventions, while requiring the use of preapproved Lead Partners for turnaround. It is possible that creating competitions for SIG funds preferences better organized and prepared LEAs. That said, this is probably a feature of competitions rather than a glitch, because the program already is limited to the country’s lowest performing schools, and requiring some preparedness is a safeguard against investing in hopeless situations. The SEA’s support of Lead Partners for districts or zones takes a great deal of direct service and technical assistance toward capacity building off the plates of both the SEA and the LEAs it serves. Virginia, Delaware, and Illinois all have pursued such an approach.<sup>3</sup> In this model, the SEA moves from a compliance mindset to a competitive mindset, incentivizing more aggressive methods of turnaround. We called this the “intra-state Race to the Top” approach. We cautioned that many states require a self-evaluation of current practices before they launch into this structure, as it requires significant managerial and investment sophistication. Without the proper planning, developing a zone will leave schools without the support they need from a partner, district, or state-level liaison.

From the review of available recent literature on SEA organization and structure, we find three major takeaways:

1. The actions carried out by specific SEA structures lie across a continuum ranging from light-touch strategies to complete takeover. The majority of SEAs currently do not rely on a clear organizational imperative, but rather

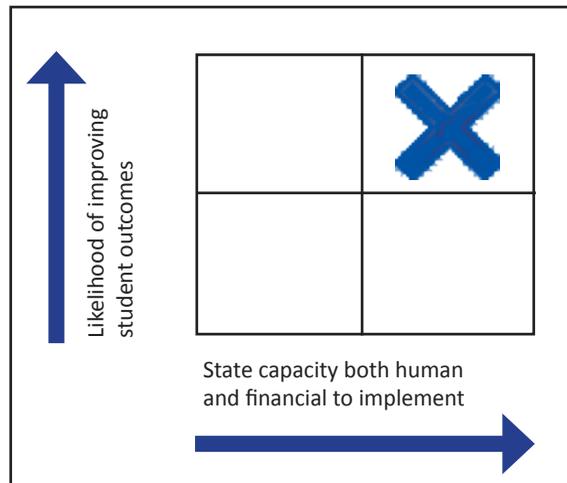
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<sup>3</sup>In addition to research, we at Mass Insight Education also worked in partnership with the Delaware Department of Education and assisted in identification and development of Lead Partners, as well as the creation of the state’s Partnership Zone.

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- on relationships with LEAs to provide support. To build capacity for all LEAs and turnaround schools, SEAs should reevaluate this approach.
2. The key to maintaining any reorganization is changing the culture. Engraining the new missions in the soul of the organization will outlast turnover in staff and leadership.
  3. Through the financial crisis, many SEAs have maintained or built upon the capacity and human capital of their turnaround units. Although some of this investment was driven by shrewd actions by the federal government, these investments provide a long-term platform for building the capacity of SEAs to invest in turning around chronically underperforming schools.

Based on the findings from the literature review and our experience working with both SEAs and LEAs, we submit that the structure of an SEA should both create and provide for: (1) a mechanism for assessing the kinds of intervention a district requires (a diagnostic function); (2) a strategic review process for determining the financial and talent capacity of the SEA to provide those kinds of interventions; (3) aligned system for delivering those interventions that are both feasible and of the highest yield vis-à-vis student outcomes; and (4) a quasicompetitive process for making investments in turnaround in order to create “proof points” for bold strategies.



### Focusing SEAs on Turnaround

In the end, our proposed SEA structure requires one particular characteristic: a district- and school-facing focus. Especially in the turnaround or school improvement office, it is important for the SEA to maintain a strong customer-service attitude. This includes actively communicating to schools and districts in need of support that the state will direct appropriate resources to turnaround efforts, provide a structure of political cover for bold decisions and actions, and

maintain transparency by inviting input on decisions that will affect the schools and districts it supports.

The diagnostic function is fairly straightforward. SEAs need a mechanism for determining what kinds of interventions are most likely to succeed given a particular school and/or district environment. A chronically underperforming school in a relatively high-performing district is going to need a different kind of attention than a school in a district that contains 50% of a state's chronically underperforming schools. Similarly, a school with a 98% free or reduced price lunch population probably needs different supports than a school with relatively high socioeconomic status but a high percentage of English language learners. Note that both the school conditions and the district conditions—and practices within those districts and schools—are critical to consider. For example, interventions that require significant district structural cooperation, like aligned coaching schemes, are unlikely to succeed in a low-capacity district. Any reasonable diagnostic mechanism ought to take into account leadership team capacity at both the school and district level. Even in the smallest states, such as Rhode Island or Delaware, an assortment of persistently low-achieving schools can require the full gamut of support. It may seem simpler for an SEA in this situation to provide individualized menus of support, but it still might not be the best investment of SEA time or resources or even of the LEA's time.

The strategic review process is the mechanism through which SEAs make realistic assessments of their own abilities to deliver on intervention protocols. The revamp of the SIG program was helpful in sharpening SEAs' ability to target investments, in that states can differentiate both funding levels and intensity of interventions. While "state takeover" might seem like an attractive and expedient mechanism for quickly turning around a school, states have, at best, a mixed track record of assembling the capacity to run schools in perpetuity. Oftentimes, state takeover suffers from a short planning process or lack of clear communication to the community. For example, Maryland's state takeover process of individual schools in Baltimore was rushed and did not give the state time to identify and vet potential external partners; Pennsylvania's oversight of Philadelphia schools was implemented too quickly and failed to include local stakeholder input; and four years into state takeover in New Jersey, local stakeholders still did not understand the rationale or process for the state's takeover of their schools (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2005). States should use the results of a diagnostic process—ideally over the course of multiple years—to assess the kinds of interventions they are capable of providing and leveraging. The strategic review should consider human capital, long-term fiscal sustainability, local governance, statewide governance, and political cover.

The aligned systems are critical for delivering the kinds of interventions identified through the earlier parts of the process. While organizational structure

certainly is not sufficient to drive change, a strategy misaligned to structure is destined to fail. SEAs should create enough autonomy for their turnaround strategies to have a chance at working, and burying such strategies under layers of bureaucracy stifles the ability to be nimble and innovate.

Finally, the competitive process—though potentially politically unpopular—can help states make smarter investments. When districts and schools compete to win grants, they are pushed to invest in rigorous planning to be successful. Backed by a rigorous plan, actions are more likely to be sustainable, first because school leaders feel ownership over the proposed plan, and second because in writing the plan, conversations have already been started about change and reform around current practices. Moreover, while competitive grant processes might favor better-resourced competitors, the SIG program is limited to a small subset of chronically underperforming schools, in which case all schools are at a level of operation requiring intervention and some sort of increased support. The distinction among the schools is their ability to create and implement a strong plan for improvement. Perhaps most importantly, a competitive process enables the emergence of “proof points,” the success of which can accelerate outcomes and provide political cover for future endeavors.

Whichever interventions are selected, an effective structure for SEA support to high-need schools requires removing some layers of bureaucracy. These schools cannot afford to wait, and bureaucracies are designed to institutionalize reforms, not generate them. Going upwards, the state’s predominant turnaround unit should have a line of direct report to the State Education Chief. The unit also should have an external, politically insulated advisory council that provides cover for difficult decisions. In addition, the turnaround unit should be both a sustainable force and able to collaborate with other SEA departments. SEAs should secure funding to keep the office in play, while also encouraging the development of strong human capital and capacity within the department. This includes working with external partners at the state level (Mass Insight Education, 2012a).

Some states create a Deputy Superintendent position at the state level to be responsible specifically for school improvement. In Georgia, for example, a cohort of SEA school improvement staff was transferred to a newly established Office of School Turnaround to focus on school improvement and accountability (Murphy & Rainey, 2012).

### **Examples from the Field and Concrete Practices**

Though we cannot say that any state has found an absolute best practice (if they had, they would not have any schools left to support!), some states are employing practices that seem to be working. These strategies include partnering with third-party organizations to provide turnaround expertise, creating SEA-level leadership positions specific to turnaround, or creating zones of schools.

At least three states make it easier for districts to work with third-party organizations with turnaround expertise. The state of Illinois preapproves Lead Partners for school turnaround, and LEAs must select a Lead Partner in order to be eligible for turnaround funds. Indiana conducts a similar pre-approval process, and the state uses third-party management organizations when intervening directly in schools. The Virginia Department of Education also uses a Lead Partner model; the state also tailors the Lead Partner requirements to serve the needs of the state, adding in stipulations such as collaboration with social service organizations, assisting in student funding research, and working with the local community to garner support for reform (Rhim & Redding, 2011; Smith & Shannon, 2011).

In our work, we advocate for SEAs to build a marketplace for Lead Partners to develop and grow. Corbett (2011) believed Lead Partners (or Lead Turnaround Partners) could serve as an external unit to evaluate, plan, and partner with schools. A Lead Partner does not need to be a preexisting organization; rather, it can be a homegrown 501(c)(3) that is held accountable to an external board of local stakeholders, or even an in-unit component of the LEA's central office. In our work, an effective Lead Partner has four characteristics:

1. The organization has signed a 3–5 year performance contract for student achievement with the district or state;
2. The organization has assumed authority for decision making about school staffing;
3. The organization has agreed to provide core academic and student support services either directly or through subcontracted “Supporting Partners”; and
4. The organization has an embedded, consistent, and intense relationship with each school—including physical presence—during the turnaround period for five days per week.

Other states have gone so far as to create a new entity in addition to the SEA. Going back to Murphy and Rainey's (2012) research, the approach that Louisiana took in developing the RSD represents the “All-In” approach. This strategy assumes that the district requires SEA action to move forward; in its current state, the district is unable to change the schools. The RSD was created in 2003—before Hurricane Katrina—and although it used that event to quickly step in to take over operations of schools that the district was unable to operate, the so-called necessary “crisis” to spur its creation was truly the state of the LEA's education system. On the intervention spectrum discussed at the beginning of this chapter, this strategy falls closer to the end of complete district takeover (Reform Support Network, 2012).

The ASD in Tennessee is another example of an SEA focusing enhanced resources on a cluster of the lowest-performing schools across the state (namely

in Memphis and Nashville) that require the greatest support. The model focuses on building capacity for districts and schools. In this instance, the state created an independent entity at the state level to directly control a zone of schools spread across multiple districts that were seriously underperforming. This lays the foundation for the SEA to be (1) school-facing, and (2) bolder in its actions to support and encourage improvement at chronically low-performing schools. The truly unique aspect of this structural model is that the ASD handpicks schools that have been identified as Priority Schools within districts to support, as opposed to identifying and taking over entire districts (Murphy & Rainey, 2012). The state of Tennessee granted the ASD the ability to authorize Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) to serve the schools within the LEA. Schools are then managed for at least five years by either the ASD or by the authorized CMO after a comprehensive assessment identifies the best support system for each school (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012).

Other states have stopped short of direct takeover, while still aiming to incentivize dramatic action through state intervention. The Delaware Department of Education created a statewide Partnership Zone of low-performing schools. The School Improvement Unit in Delaware is able to offer targeted support to these schools, including funding and technical assistance, partly due to the Partnership Zone's added capacity. These serve as the carrot while the schools must pursue innovative ideas and strategies to improve their standards, and LEAs have to renegotiate collective bargaining agreements in order to provide more operating flexibilities to participating schools. The expectation is that the added autonomy along with special SEA supports will lead to a better environment for academic growth (Mass Insight Education, 2012a). In fact, this structure could be marketed as a proof point within the state: In summer 2012, test score analyses showed that every Partnership Zone school saw progress and that the Partnership Zone schools' growth outpaced the state average in both reading and math for similar grades (Delaware Department of Education, 2012).

### **Action Principles for SEAs**

In conclusion, there are a variety of steps SEAs can take to organize more effectively to support turnaround LEAs and schools. The following six steps aim to provide starting points for states to more effectively organize to provide the strongest support to their LEAs.

- **Be bold.** While there are no silver bullets for school turnaround, light-touch solutions alone rarely work. Schools that have failed for years are unlikely to change through modest interventions. SEAs should determine whether they or other entities are best positioned to provide the supports necessary to be bold, but politically popular paths of least resistance should be avoided.

- Focus on what schools need to succeed, as opposed to creating additional regulatory and compliance burdens, and create “proof points.” By focusing on adding capacity—either with or without the cooperation of LEAs—an SEA that employs productive customer service techniques and provides technical assistance is likelier to see strong outcomes. Creating “proof points” quickly will get the outcomes and political cover SEAs need to push further.
- Pursue legislative and policy actions that provide the SEA with the authority to create a nonbureaucratic space—perhaps even a statewide LEA—for turnaround. SEAs that created new entities within their overall structure, or zones of schools across districts, did so with political support. SEAs must work to garner political will from the legislative branch, the school board, and the state chief in order to create conditions at the state level for school success.
- Encourage collaboration with third-party Lead Partners. Organizations with specialized turnaround experience can help to integrate and deliver solutions in low-capacity LEAs. Creating a homegrown 501(c)(3) organization that is accountable for improving student achievement—and maintains that accountability through oversight by community stakeholders—adds capacity at both the state and school level.
- Identify, own, and intentionally communicate strategies. States that have seen any success have done so through an intentional and sustained strategy—which includes clear communication of state strategy to LEAs and public stakeholders. While there is no silver bullet solution, muddling through will never suffice.
- Identify outside accountability partners. Turnaround decisions are bound to be unpopular. Identify an outside organization that can publish a data-rich annual report on the “State of Turnaround,” so that states have the political credibility to continue successful reforms while discontinuing unsuccessful ones.

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