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Five-State Partnership Seeks Better Ways to Help Districts

By Alan Richard
Washington

A new partnership of five states and a nationally known policy group is tackling what some experts are calling the next big education challenge facing states: targeting entire school districts, not just individual schools, for improvement.

The State Collaborative Supporting Effective Assistance to Underperforming Districts has begun work to help state education agencies raise their ability to improve student achievement in academically lagging districts as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Leaders of the project, put together by the Boston-based Community Training and Assistance Center, or CTAC, hope to combine funding from major foundations, Congress, and the U.S. Department of Education to pay for the five-year, \$1.5 million effort. Participants in the collaborative met at a law office here last week to unveil their plans.

The participating states are Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Virginia.

States must “retrofit and reconfigure” their education agencies into school improvement organizations to help them avoid a “train wreck” that could happen as states struggle to deal with massive numbers of schools requiring intervention under the federal law, said William J. Slotnik, the founder and executive director of CTAC. The nonprofit group works with districts and other entities on education policy, community development, and related activities.

Already, CTAC is meeting with state participants to gauge the abilities of state education agencies to adapt to change.

Mr. Slotnik said each state’s system for tracking student data will be a key part of developing each agency’s school-improvement capability, since students in low-rated districts often change schools or move across district lines. CTAC plans to consult with the agencies as they look for ways to retool their work.

The No Child Left Behind Act, passed by Congress almost four years ago, not only requires states to make sure every school meets state-mandated test-score goals. It also requires that districts meet similar goals. States must take corrective action in school districts if adequate yearly progress on the goals isn’t met by the second full year that a district is marked as needing improvement. (“**NCLB Law’s Focus Turns to Districts**,” Sept. 15, 2004)

Many states are familiar with taking over management of academically troubled districts or removing district-level leaders who are accused of corruption or mismanagement, Mr. Slotnik said. But few states are well equipped and experienced at helping entire districts—including some of the nation’s largest school systems—improve student achievement at the levels federal law now requires.

“States’ intervening at a district level is a little like a dog chasing a car: What does one do with it once he catches it?” Mr. Slotnik said in an interview here.

Shifting Focus

State education agencies need the help, said James A. Kadamus, who is involved with the project as New York’s deputy commissioner for elementary, middle, secondary, and continuing education.

His state faces the overwhelming challenge of working with more than 500 schools rated as “needing improvement,” which means that addressing the needs of entire districts is the only reasonable way to manage such work, Mr. Kadamus said.

So far, New York has focused on sending intervention teams to advise low-rated schools and districts, providing workshops for educators on ways to improve schools, and convening educators from the state’s lowest-rated high schools to share ideas and struggles.

But Mr. Kadamus confessed the state needs to do more. “It is a shifting role for state agencies,” he said. “We need a new strategy.”

In New York, the districts in need of the most assistance are in urban areas and “generally have multiple problems,” Mr. Kadamus said. Those districts include the 1.1 million-student New York City school system as well as districts in smaller cities such as Utica and Newburgh and older suburbs on Long Island, he said.

The process of helping districts will look different in every state and district, Mr. Slotnik said. “There are terrible districts that have great individual schools. There are terrible schools that have great individual classrooms,” he said.

The collaborative aims to help state education agencies profoundly change the way they operate, then will share its findings with other states, he added.

“If the districts are going to change how they think and behave, the states are going to have to change how they think and behave,” Mr. Slotnik said.

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