Retool state-to-district intervention for better outcomes

Moves by state education departments to improve struggling districts are hampered by a focus on tactics rather than strategy, insufficient capacity building, and community input.

By William J. Slotnik

When school districts chronically underperform, we now expect state departments of education to step in. But are these state agencies positioned to take charge and do what the districts have not done? Can the state succeed where the district has failed?

The national track record for state-to-district assistance is not stellar. It is characterized by tactics in the absence of strategy and activities in the absence of accomplishment. Why? The key lesson from more than three decades of state-to-district interventions is that the problem is systemic: The infrastructure of traditional state departments of education evolved from purposes that did not include providing on-the-ground assistance to underperforming school districts. That fundamental flaw makes state intervention akin to trying to use a hammer to turn a screw. The structural problem hobbles effective results.

At the Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC), we’ve worked with school districts, state departments of education, and over 40 state-level teams around the country as they strive for sustained improvements in student achievement. We’ve seen firsthand what’s gone wrong and what’s needed. State departments need to transform their organizational structures to facilitate rather than hinder effective assis-
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Where states go wrong

In the 30 years since the Nation at Risk report, the U.S. has seen multiple state interventions with schools and districts. Each is generally accompanied by a lengthy strategic plan with numerous goals, priorities, and expected outcomes. The scenario is tantamount to a film epic: years in the making, lots of special effects, and casts of thousands. But with state intervention, there’s rarely a happy ending.

Until the mid-1990s, most interventions focused on district financial problems or mismanagement. Then the emphasis shifted to accountability for results. No Child Left Behind in 2001 clearly signaled that the primary target for intervention was student academic progress. NCLB and, in turn, Race to the Top also called on states to lead the charge in meeting federal goals, ushering in a major role shift and set of challenges for state education departments. For starters, they faced the daunting task of playing catch-up on technical data infrastructure. But their much greater challenge has been providing high-quality, evidence-based technical assistance to low-performing districts.

As states have grappled with that challenge, the biggest barrier to their success has been using the wrong tools. To choose the right tools, states first need to closely examine their current predicament.

State departments have built strengths in monitoring and supporting existing policies and regulations. But those same policies at times contribute to the very underperformance that department staffs are striving to address as service deliverers. They are, in short, working at cross-purposes with themselves. Further, when states operate in compliance mode, they set up an overabundance of priorities, checklists, and to-do’s. They then press districts to do the same. Negative incentives such as withholding funds, attaching the stigma of probation, or threatening reconstitution tend to focus districts on getting probation or on quick-fix strategies, like adopting a new model for reading instruction or teaching to the test to get an immediate and often fleeting jump in test scores.

What’s really happening? Under great public pressure to show positive change, a reflex to attack every problem at once has prevailed. The core purpose of the state’s intervention — student learning gains — becomes blurred. Critical diagnostic steps are overlooked. The state fails to recognize that intervening with a district differs profoundly from intervening with a single school. The nuanced complexities of systemic dysfunction go unaddressed, and critical players such as parent and community organizations are not involved, informed, or mobilized. Finally, the state department itself is hobbled by its own organizational deficits akin to those of the district it is trying to assist.

Getting assistance right

Getting out of this bind requires that state education departments translate their leadership role into an overall strategy. That strategy needs to be based on a clear idea of the problem at hand and designed to help local educators, policy makers, parents, and students succeed.

The starting point is rethinking the problem of underperforming districts. To date, most players, including the federal government, have framed school and district underperformance as an education issue. But the history of intervention efforts shows us that this conception is too narrow and leads to insufficient approaches. The problem is not only educational, but organizational and political as well. Unless solutions harness all three of these levers in an integrated strategy, the frustrating results of the past will continue to repeat.

To reconfigure the current policy compliance system into an effective service-delivery system, state departments need to examine lessons learned and determine the levers for change that will most effectively address the specific educational, organizational, and political challenges of the district being served.

Educational lessons learned

The overall purpose of the state intervention is often unclear. State departments are often frustrated because their purpose and good intent are often unclear or misunderstood in the districts and communities the state is trying to help. A good rule of thumb: The state’s purpose should be captured in a statement so concise that you can shout it across a parking lot to a reporter or educator in a way that gets right to the point of the intervention. Otherwise, the state generally encounters misunderstandings that can linger for years, prove difficult to overcome, and interfere with desired outcomes.
The exit strategy must be clear. State interventions need clarity from the outset about what the exit strategy will be, which means establishing clear criteria for success. Those criteria keep the focus throughout on meaningful reform, not compliance.

**Educational levers**

The core educational challenge is to balance state responsibilities with federal statutes and traditions of local control. Critical steps include:

- Start with the end in mind: Establish and communicate the exit strategy.
- Be clear on the criteria used to select districts and interventions.
- Diagnose the readiness and capacity of both the district and its community.
- Establish goals that balance rigor and realism.
- Establish school improvement planning as a foundation of the educational strategy.
- Use the school site as the locus for parent and grassroots community involvement.
- Make the district improvement plan an evolving reference document.
- Be mindful of the differences between reform-related strains and political turmoil.

States often overlook critical steps of diagnosis. Many states have developed substantive review processes and instructional standards for examining and monitoring district performance. Equally important is spending time upfront diagnosing the reasons for a district’s underperformance. In districts characterized by a multitude of problems, a state department can easily fall into the trap of rushing to address symptoms, rather than causes.

**Having too many priorities is tantamount to having no priorities.**

Changes in student achievement are underanalyzed. Even when achievement has increased at a small scale, states need to examine the data to understand which students showed gains and to ascertain what led to those gains.

The distinction between activity and accomplishment is often blurred. States are characteristically under tremendous pressure to produce master plans to identify and articulate a strategy to address every major problem in the district. Yet having too many priorities is tantamount to having no priorities. The end result is a plethora of activity and little change in performance.

The focus is on adopting models rather than on changing systems. There are no silver bullets or magic wands. The key to success is not a particular program model. Rather, it is how well the state implements whatever strategies it undertakes and how well it strengthens how the district supports the schools.

**Evaluating progress requires multiple measures.** Gauging progress calls for more than just examining student pretest and posttest results. Analysis of several valid student-learning measures is required, along with ascertaining the contributions of classrooms, programs, and schools to student progress. State departments need to use intentional processes to ensure that meaningful progress is actually being achieved and that it will be sustained.

**Standards and assessment data can provide a needed foundation for change.** In districts with large numbers of underperforming schools, a core challenge is to determine where to anchor the reform process. Today, the good news is that states have improved content standards and student achievement data systems that provide a solid starting point for reform.

State-to-district interventions are similar to other educational initiatives in that they’re focused on improving the education of children. But they aren’t the same. It is important not to underestimate, for example, the depth of diagnosis required to understand causes of underperformance and the need to catalyze change at multiple levels of the district.

Similarly, states can’t underestimate the persistence of cultural norms in underperforming districts, including organizational inertia, lack of urgency, and a focus on remediation rather than reform. The result may be development of boilerplate plans or tactics with little or no stakeholder input that are rarely referenced. Remember that chronic underperformance comes from goals, plans, and educational interventions that have not improved student achievement. The state should make few assumptions, conduct thorough diagnoses, probe for the causality of underperformance, and then ensure a focus on evidence-based strategies rather than tactics.

**Organizational lessons learned**

District-level interventions create strains on and reveal gaps in the service delivery abilities of state education departments. Intervening at the district level is more complex than at the school level. The state department encounters a range of interrelated challenges at the district level including the need to develop new partners, to overcome organizational
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deficiencies at district and state levels, and to make mid-course corrections. More specifically:

States have a better track record in triage than in building the foundation for educational improvements. The major strengths to date in state-to-district interventions have been in stopping the hemorrhaging. This includes getting basic systems on track in areas such as finance, human resources, legal compliance, facilities, and operations. State strengths also include weeding out corruption related to malfeasance, as well as the more subtle forms of what is essentially managerial and policy malpractice. Increasing and sustaining gains in student achievement, as well as developing responsible community oversight of the school district, often prove more challenging to achieve.

Intervening at the district level is not just a scaling up of state-to-school interventions. Many states have developed excellent protocols and strategies for intervening in and improving individual schools. State-to-district interventions are a fundamentally different, more visible, more charged, and more complex form of engagement.

A state department of education needs partners — starting before the intervention. Before is the key word. States want and need joint ownership of the intervention. In districts just as in countries overseas, the intervening parties need substantive and trustworthy collaborators working with them early on in the process. When a state encounters major problems after several years of intervention in a district, it is late in the game to be seeking partners.

The state’s lack of organizational capacities often mirrors the same deficiencies in districts. The state’s learning curve and the district’s learning curve may be remarkably similar — particularly with respect to having comparable gaps in capacity and organizational policies. Districts and states also share a tendency to operate in silos. Even when a state has areas of significant content knowledge, it may lack the ability to provide capacity-building services in those areas. For example, many state departments of education have developed expertise in assessments and growth modeling. But that doesn’t necessarily translate into a state’s ability to train district and school leaders in how best to analyze and use data to improve instruction at the classroom level.

The state needs mechanisms for making mid-course corrections. Regardless of how anticipatory or thoughtful the state’s strategies are, there is characteristically an ongoing need for the state department, together with the district and community, to adjust the course of the intervention to reflect changing realities and ongoing learning. As the intervention encounters difficulties, the state needs a mechanism to determine if the problems result from flawed strategies, poor tactics, or the lack of fidelity in their execution.

Organizational levers for change

The core organizational challenge is to reconfigure a state compliance system into a service delivery system. Critical steps include:

- Determine the state’s capacities and resources necessary to understand district needs and implement interventions.
- Assess the capacity of the state’s existing structures and personnel.
- Maximize the state’s convening role.
- Ascertain data requirements and measurements.
- Establish standards and selection criteria for organizational partners.
- Ensure that the state’s management structure and culture are conducive to making mid-course corrections.
- Determine the vehicles for evaluating and disseminating lessons learned within the department, district, and state.

State-to-district interventions require a pivotal conjunction of organizational capacity building: While providing technical assistance to districts as they improve their systems to support student learning in schools, the state also must be reforming its own systems in ways that allow for successful intervention in another system or entity.

“Does that include state legislatures?”
Political lessons learned

The political dimension of a state-to-district intervention is often the aspect most visible to the public. People make judgments about the underperforming district and education overall in the state. Moreover, functions that are outside the expertise of many state departments of education—community capacity building, convening, and community organizing—become extremely important to the success of the intervention. And again, when all is said and done, the state must be clear about its exit strategy.

The exit strategy must be clear.

The entire state educational system will be judged by its weakest components. When a district has large numbers of underperforming schools or even testing improprieties at a single school, it raises questions about the quality of the district as a whole and of units responsible for specific functions such as assessment or accountability. The state-to-district terrain comes with high stakes and, fairly or unfairly, plenty of scrutiny for the state department of education, the district, and the local community.

Few states focus on building community capacity—and suffer for it. Ultimately, no state wants to be in a district, particularly for the long term. However, local parent advocacy organizations, grassroots neighborhood groups, church-based organizing groups, and activist community development corporations are all examples of entities that understand the importance and effect of an astute, organized community. Informing and mobilizing these and other community groups as well as individual community members is essential. A district turnaround always depends on community capacity.

The power of convening is a core part of an intervention. Constituency building provides support and political protection for state-to-district interventions. Developing and broadening the base of support before and during the intervention can build on what state or federal statutes are requiring the state to do. The state education agency needs to convene and be convened by others.

The communications strategy has to be vigilant and multi-tiered. State-to-district interventions are akin to an earlier era of desegregation processes in that the forces of misinformation are more powerful than the forces of accurate information. States can be taken by surprise by the number and diversity of issues on the public agenda. While it may be a district-level intervention, the state department will nonetheless be dealing with constituent groups at district, local community, and state levels. The communications strategy needs to anticipate their respective requirements for information and engagement.

Political levers

The core political challenge is to balance political pressures with educational wisdom.

Critical steps include:

• Identify the public policy requirements of the interventions.
• Build a constituency that can understand, support and own the interventions with the state.
• Lay the groundwork for a community organizing strategy.
• Establish a communications strategy based on the information needs of multiple audiences.
• Keep thinking creatively about partners.

The ivory tower leanings of educational institutions often mean they willingly and myopically distance themselves from the larger community and political context in the interest of objectivity and self-protection. Yet educational institutions and their constituent communities are interdependent, whether they recognize it or not. Using an expansive political lens when designing and implementing state-to-district interventions strengthens the quality of the intervention, generates greater diversity of ideas, anticipates and addresses potential obstacles before they become insurmountable, and builds a constituency committed to the success of the district.

Looking ahead

Policy makers in Washington and across the country understand that our future prosperity depends on having schools that are effective in educating all children. Underperforming schools exist in the context of underperforming districts, but too little is done to ensure that those districts with the greatest problems are brought up to speed thoroughly and permanently.

National lessons in state-to-district assistance show that to achieve better results, state education departments must revamp their own structures to gear themselves for using educational, organizational, and political levers in district interventions. States need to use all three levers and embrace strategy rather than tactics. By doing so, they can directly address the challenges of district and community capacity that are essential for making real and lasting improvements in student learning.