

Overview

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 requires state education agencies (SEAs) to develop systems and mechanisms for providing support to districts and schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring. Faced with often decreasing human and fiscal resources, SEAs are striving to find ways to support to districts and schools appropriately and effectively. With decreases in state capacity and increases (in some states) in the numbers of schools identified for improvement, SEAs are moving towards working directly with districts rather than schools, and considering how they can effectively build district capacity to support identified schools (Sunderman, G.L. & Orfield, G., 2006; Lane, 2007). Indeed, emerging evidence suggests that effectively managed districts are best positioned to support school improvement efforts across multiple schools (Childress, et al., 2006).

Rationale

If SEAs are going to provide meaningful and credible support to districts, capacity-building efforts must be informed by accurate and mutually agreed upon ways of understanding district need and overall performance. While numerous examples of school-based diagnostic tools emerged from the effective schools movement and federal comprehensive school reform program, there are relatively few tried and tested means for understanding and measuring a school district's "health." Further, in conversations across the region, district and state leaders have asked: ***How can state education agencies accurately assess and understand district needs? Furthermore, how can we (districts) assess and better communicate what we need? How might an accurate measure of district need help in developing a tiered system of support?***

These questions continue to rise to the surface as both potential stumbling blocks and opportunities for constructive conversations and the co-development of accurate and meaningful ways to diagnose district strengths and needs (Unger, et al., 2008).

Case Examples

A number of states have developed district-level diagnostic tools, including frameworks, protocols, and rubrics that describe the "characteristics" of high performing districts and thus offer districts (superintendents, district officials, and school administrators) descriptions of what it means to be a high performing district. For instance, Kentucky now uses a rubric for analyzing district strengths and needs. New Jersey has, as mandated by legislation, created a fairly hefty self-assessment instrument for district diagnosis (although the state has only used it with chronically underachieving districts).

Wisconsin, with district assistance, has constructed a rubric and peer-review process for assessing district health, and Washington State has developed a set of rubrics based on the characteristics of effective districts.

These efforts have been aimed at creating a formal instrument for assessing districts' strengths and needs, so that districts can clarify what they already do well – and perhaps more important, identify major shortcomings and suggest ways for the state to provide support. In some cases, the instrument serves to highlight a district's significant shortcomings, which can give the state leverage to mobilize pressure (if not also support) in an area of significant district need.

Questions for Consideration

Questions remain, however. What should the assessment assess? How is this assessed? And who does the assessment? One answer to this question has revolved around the notion of “district capacity.” When discussing district-wide success and the supports needed to ensure that *every* school in a district is successful, some districts argue that they simply do not have the “capacity” to do the work. In some cases, a well-informed state education agency will say the same. But this notion of “capacity” is used in several different ways. Sometimes it signifies person-power: “We simply do not have enough people to do the work of supporting these schools adequately.” Sometimes “capacity” is meant to communicate a lack of expertise: “We do not have the skill or experience to support these schools adequately.”

For this discussion, we would like to focus on district assessment: How can it be valuable? What should it assess? How? And by whom? And, finally, to what end?

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