

Definition

We will be discussing the potential of two different kinds of communities to actively support statewide school and district improvement:

- (1) The networking of state-wide educational agents (TA providers, higher education institutions, non-profits, for-profits, districts, and schools) to provide direct services to districts and schools in need of improvement; and,
- (2) The networking of districts and/or schools to gain collective expertise, learn from one another, and/or engage in mutual inquiry regarding specific challenges facing them in their improvement (and/or innovation) efforts

Rationale

With the ever-increasing demands on state education agencies to support district and school improvement, SEA capacity (both expertise and resources - human and fiscal) to effectively respond is often limited. While the need for improvement support and resources continues to rapidly increase, SEA resources available for these efforts have not kept pace and, in many cases, have declined. Adding to the pressure of this growing reality is the fact that there are many schools and districts that have been chronically underperforming for years.

One strategy for addressing this challenge is to conceive “state capacity and expertise” to support substantive school and district improvement as existing not only within the SEA but throughout the state - across districts and through potential university partners, non-profits, for-profits, and technical assistance providers. If one considers state capacity as existing throughout the state and across a variety of communities and institutions, including schools and districts and themselves, the question then becomes how that “capacity and expertise” might be leveraged to support school and district improvement efforts throughout the state?

The reality faced by most (if not all) SEAs is that they have limited capacity – in terms of personnel, funding, and expertise – to sufficiently support school and district improvement efforts statewide. So how might SEA’s consider leveraging the resources and expertise “in the state” to best address the real needs of schools and district statewide?

Case Examples

One way to tap existing knowledge throughout the state is the development of learning communities across the system to learn from one another and from experts. Several states have taken the lead in initiating and supporting such communities.

Massachusetts, for example, has created the **Urban Superintendents' Network**, which provides a forum for districts with common challenges to meet together and with Department of Elementary and Secondary Education staff. The network now includes 23 urban districts with student enrollments over 5000 with significant numbers of low-income students and English language learners. Monthly meetings, planned collaboratively by the department and superintendents, provide opportunities for information sharing, problem solving, and collaboration among the districts and with the state education agency.

The Maryland Department of Education is developing a **Breakthrough Center**, which will be governed as a semi-autonomous entity of the Department of Education. The express purpose of the center will be to coordinate, broker, and deliver support services and professional development to districts and schools in need, identifying successful programs, practices, and people from other districts, for-profit and non-profit organizations, and government agencies that would fit the needs and the circumstances of participating districts.

The **Southern Maine Partnership** (<http://www.usm.maine.edu/smp>) is a higher education collaborative of the University of Southern Maine and 36 member districts in which the member districts with higher education support attempt to address collective issues and challenges faced by districts.

Finally, the **Alabama Accountability Roundtable** (http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/section_detail.asp?footer=sections§ion=88) consists of representatives from multiple departments throughout the state education agency as well as the Southwest Educational Development Lab and SERVE who work together to “provide a seamless system of technical assistance and support to schools.”

For further examples of such networks, visit the **Center for Innovation and Improvement's** (CII) state database search engine (<http://www.centerii.org/centerIIPublic>); CII also provides links to research, and tools on school and district improvement at its website at <http://www.centerii.org/improvement/spotlights/>.

Research

There is a wealth of technical assistance organizations, higher education institutions, and regional educational centers providing services to districts and schools, yet these resources are not intentionally networked statewide to leverage their collective expertise to districts and schools in need of improvement. While each state is engaged in developing its own system of statewide improvement for schools and districts, we are unaware of a comprehensive statewide network using the state education agency as an active broker or service agent for collective statewide expertise to be directly and coherently employed in districts of need.