THE CENTER ON SCHOOL TURNAROUND WestEd

Balancing Act

State and District Roles in School Improvement Under ESSA

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Background and Purpose

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, signaled a major shift in the roles of states and districts in supporting school improvement. Under ESSA, state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) have more responsibility and flexibility in developing and implementing plans, informed by local context, to support the bottom 5 percent of schools, high schools with graduation rates of less than 67 percent, and schools with chronically struggling subgroups of students. Although states have historically worked directly with low-performing schools, many SEAs have begun supporting both LEAs and schools (Unger et al., 2008).

A growing body of research suggests that LEAs should play a larger role in the school improvement process, particularly in the core functions of teaching and learning (Dunn, Scott, Chapman, & Vince, 2016; Knudson, Shambaugh, & O'Day, 2011; Zavadsky, 2013). For states, districts, and schools, ESSA has provided an opportunity to reevaluate how they work together to improve their lowest-performing schools and support chronically struggling subgroups of students. Within this context, the role of LEAs in the school improvement process, and how SEAs support that role, is of increasing interest and importance to the field.

The purpose of this brief from the Center on School Turnaround (CST) at WestEd is to provide examples of how states and districts are working together to improve low-performing schools under ESSA. This brief includes a description of state and district roles in school improvement based on an analysis of 23 state ESSA plans. It also provides examples, based on interviews, of how 10 states are carrying out those roles.

SEA and LEA Roles in ESSA State Plans

To understand the SEA and LEA roles in school improvement under ESSA, CST staff reviewed 23 state ESSA plans that were approved in

Table 1. SEA and LEA Roles in State ESSA Plans

SEA/LEA roles	Role description	Number of ESSA state plans that emphasize this role*
LEA Independence	The SEA emphasizes building LEA capacity to support school improvement, as they are the "agents of change."	3
SEA Oversight	The SEA emphasizes developing systems of accountability to monitor LEA progress in supporting school improvement.	3
SEA Resource	The SEA emphasizes providing tools and resources to help LEAs support CSI/TSI schools.	10
SEA–LEA Collaboration	The SEA emphasizes collaboration with LEAs to support CSI/TSI schools.	7

*These numbers are based on 23 ESSA state plans that were reviewed by CST staff.

2017–18 and 2018–19. Although the ESSA state plans differed in their content and level of specificity, we identified several overarching SEA approaches to school improvement. States, in their description of their support to comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) schools and targeted support and improvement (TSI) schools, included a variety of differentiated technical assistance strategies to LEAs. School improvement and turnaround was typically framed as a systemic issue with a large role for LEAs in leading school turnaround and improvement. In fact, most state plans emphasized the role of districts in school improvement over the role of the SEA. This is a notable change from school improvement under *No Child Left Behind,* in which states generally took the lead in working directly with schools in the improvement process.

The SEA and LEA roles described in the state ESSA plans fell into four main categories: LEA Independence, SEA Oversight, SEA Resource, and SEA–LEA Collaboration. While most state plans described elements of each role in their support for school improvement, one role was usually emphasized as the SEA's overall approach (see Table 1).

LEA Independence

Three of the 23 state ESSA plans that we reviewed emphasized the autonomy of LEAs to design and implement improvement plans at the local level. In these state plans, the SEA role was described as providing assistance to LEAs to increase their capacity as the "agents of change" in school improvement. The SEA role, then, was to help LEAs focus their efforts by providing capacity-building supports to engage in needs assessment, planning, and prioritization of school improvement interventions.

SEA Oversight

While accountability is a responsibility for all SEAs, three SEAs emphasized this oversight role in their ESSA state plans. These states described their primary role as monitoring district progress in school improvement efforts. In turn, these SEAs expect LEAs to directly manage school

performance; monitor progress; submit plans, benchmarks, and outcome targets to the SEA; and report on school improvement progress.

SEA Resource

The role of the SEA as a resource provider for LEAs was emphasized by 10 of the 23 state ESSA plans. These state plans described providing resources to LEAs, such as web-based systems to support LEAs in school improvement planning and implementation or tools to help LEAs identify evidence-based strategies. SEAs also described augmenting these resources with technical assistance and support to help LEAs use the resources in their school improvement efforts.

SEA–LEA Collaboration

Seven states emphasized the role of the SEA in working with and through districts as collaborators to support CSI/TSI schools. These state plans described SEA staff working side by side with LEA staff to identify root causes, develop improvement plans, and monitor student outcomes.

Across all of these approaches, state plans identified LEAs as a key lever for school improvement. How SEAs chose to work with LEAs varied, but all of these roles aimed to build district capacity to develop school improvement plans that meet local needs.

SEA and LEA Roles in Action

As SEAs began implementing their state ESSA plans, we were interested in understanding how the SEA and LEA roles described in the plans were being carried out. In 2018–19, three CST staff interviewed school improvement leads from 10 SEAs[1] about the primary role of their SEA in school improvement efforts and to what extent that role shifts in relation to LEA performance or capacity. CST staff chose the 10 SEAs based on knowledge of their approach to school improvement and the roles they described in their ESSA state plans. CST's aim was to interview SEAs that had well-established, well-respected, and varied approaches to school improvement. From these interviews, we identified six key strategies that were present in each of the 10 SEAs' approaches to implementing SEA and LEA roles in improvement.

SEAs are taking on multiple roles in their work with LEAs.

In their description of working with districts supporting CSI and TSI schools, SEA personnel referenced shifting roles based on identified needs, capacity, and context considerations at the LEA and school levels. Even in instances where one role dominated the SEA approach to supporting LEAs, all interviewees described the state's role as largely malleable in order to address specific LEA and school needs. In particular, each SEA described ways they served in the roles of SEA Resource and SEA Oversight.

> **Arizona:** *Our primary role is to . . . provide support and resources to our schools and LEAs…alongside this guidance, we hold schools and LEAs accountable for implementing their ESSA-required school improvement plan. . . .we partner with schools and LEAs to support the specific work that they need to accomplish in their unique context.*

SEAs are balancing support and accountability.

SEA staff described their role as providing both support and accountability to LEAs. Several SEA leaders described the struggle of balancing these two roles, especially as the role of SEAs has shifted from primarily monitoring outcomes to providing LEAs with resources and technical assistance to improve outcomes in recent years. Leaders in Vermont, for instance, pointed to the importance of forging relationships with LEA leaders and creating a safe environment in which

1 CST staff interviewed school improvement leads from Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Vermont.

people can be honest about school improvement efforts. SEA personnel in South Carolina have prioritized setting clear expectations for districts and schools, and providing support for them to meet those expectations. Others described the importance of working together with districts and creating systems of support and accountability that allow for effective collaboration.

> **Alabama:** *As a state department . . . we're not out to get school districts. We're not out to get schools. We really want to walk alongside and provide support. At the same time, we do need to hold them accountable in a number of different ways.*

SEAs are differentiating support based on district characteristics.

With increased flexibility provided by ESSA, states also have an opportunity to reimagine how they structure their support systems for all of their districts and schools. During interviews, SEA personnel described differentiating support based on factors such as the number of CSI/TSI-identified schools, district capacity, and district willingness to engage with the SEA. Districts with more low-performing schools are typically provided more attention. In these cases, the SEA may also limit district autonomy and provide more oversight. SEAs may also tailor their approach to districts based on district size, personnel, and capacity. For example, in Alaska, the SEA provides less direct support to high-capacity districts, intervening as needed.

> **Colorado:** *We strive to provide a wide-ranging menu of supports for districts. Our goal is that each district that is interested and willing in partnering with the Colorado Department of Education has an option for support that fits their needs and context. We solicit feedback from districts on where their gaps are to keep our options for support relevant and rigorous. We have also maintained grant resources specifically for district-designed and district-led interventions, which allows districts to propose their own supports for low-performing schools.*

SEAs are building district capacity to create sustainable change.

Given the central role of LEAs in school improvement under ESSA, SEAs recognize the need to develop LEA capacity to lead and sustain change. South Carolina noted the importance of helping districts establish a framework when they begin improvement efforts to ensure the sustainability of those efforts. To build district capacity, some SEAs, like Alaska and Kentucky, work directly with districts to provide tools and resources that enable them to identify and implement high-leverage interventions and structures. Others, like Louisiana, help districts identify external vendors who can build capacity around specific skills. Regardless of their approach, SEA leaders aim to build local capacity so that improvements are sustained without direct external supports.

> **Kentucky:** *As you go through the improvement process and you build capacity with [LEAs], then they eventually can start putting systems into place. Modeling for them what a good system looks like is key. You put something in place, you monitor, you follow the continuous improvement cycle, and you adjust as you need to go.*

SEAs are prioritizing local contexts and needs.

ESSA's emphasis on prioritizing the local context, coupled with the flexibility of the new guidelines, presents both opportunities and challenges for states, districts, and schools to strategically design school turnaround policies that satisfy the needs of their stakeholders. In order to meet these requirements, several SEAs are prioritizing local contexts in their support to districts. Some states, like North Carolina, are matching districts and schools with specialized personnel that assist with a variety of jobs, from defining goals to engaging community leaders. SEA personnel in Alabama work with districts who want to adapt state tools to reflect the needs of their schools. Leaders from several states also mentioned providing districts more autonomy with their funding, allowing them to

determine how to best use their funding to meet local needs.

> **Georgia:** *ESSA provides changes where districts can really look at the needs of the children they serve. Within district communities, the LEA can make decisions for selecting evidence-based strategies, programs, and interventions of which they choose to spend their funds in order to support learning and increase outcomes for children. . . . We're giving local districts more control than ever with their funding, their school improvement efforts, including choice of guaranteed and aligned curriculum options.*

SEAs are leveraging ESSA requirements to specify SEA and LEA roles in improvement.

SEAs have many new considerations when developing school improvement policies. Not only are they tasked with developing new policies under ESSA, but states also have to design systems to support the implementation of those policies. Many SEAs are using ESSA requirements to help define an increased role for districts in improvement efforts. South Carolina has also leveraged ESSA to guide districts in using evidence-based interventions, contextualized to local needs, to improve outcomes. In addition, the majority of interviewed personnel described leveraging the increased flexibility under ESSA to design and implement improvement plans that meet the specific needs of their districts.

> **Louisiana:** *ESSA has allowed states to establish a list of persistently struggling schools, outline the parameters for quality school improvement plans, and focus LEAs and schools on specific evidence-based strategies that are most likely to lead to student improvement. For example, among other components of the plan, Louisiana asks that our ESSA-identified schools choose high-quality curricula for English and math and a high-quality professional development vendor to ensure all teachers are trained on the use of these curricula. We publish guidance on the options that LEAs have in making these decisions and we competitively allocate our 7% school-improvement set aside to the LEAs that have promising improvement plans. This ensures that our schools that have struggled the most have access to the high-quality curricular materials and teacher support our country has to offer.*

SEAs engaging in this balancing act use multiple roles to engage with LEAs, balance support and accountability priorities, provide differentiated support, build district capacity to sustain improvements, prioritize local context and needs, and leverage ESSA requirements to define roles. As states and districts define their roles in school improvement, these six strategies can help build a comprehensive, cohesive, and coherent system of support for school improvement.

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