Championing Effective Instruction

A Discussion Paper on State Innovations for
Prioritizing and Improving Instruction in Turnaround Schools

June 2013 Peer-to-Peer State Convening
U.S. Department of Education
Office of School Turnaround

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September 2014

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Foreword

The Office of School Turnaround (OST) recognizes the importance of placing a high priority on quality instruction in order to make real progress in turning around low-performing schools. We know that states are striving to implement efficient and effective ways to support instructional improvement at the local level. Influencing work at the classroom level in meaningful ways can be challenging for state staff, and can require shifts in roles and methods of working. State education agency staff are learning how to develop effective partnerships with districts in the service of accelerating improvements in student achievement. We have observed states trying many approaches to partnering for such results—regionalizing support, concentrating on developing district capacity to support quality instruction in schools, organizing expertise across departments and agencies, engaging external partners, and aligning support delivery structures along a common vision. We also organized a convening of states in June 2013 so that they could share their initiatives for and lessons from implementing evidence-based instructional practices to improve instruction in turnaround schools. We are excited to release this paper based on the convening, highlighting different efforts across states to accelerate instructional improvements in turnaround schools. I would like to thank the staff from states, districts, and schools from Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, and Missouri who participated in the convening.

Scott Sargrad

Deputy Assistant Secretary for
Policy and Strategic Initiatives

Executive Summary

Increased student achievement is the ultimate goal of all school turnaround efforts. While states are making progress in bringing about changes in low-performing districts and schools, some initiatives focus primarily on structural and procedural changes, and pay insufficient attention to the goal of quality instruction.

> *"The restructured school must make a quick shift in emphasis from structural reconfiguration to microscopic examination of each student's learning and careful attention to each staff member's performance." (Redding 2007)*

While ample research describes effective school practices, "these practices do not provide insight into the process of transforming a critically failing school into a successful school." (Public Impact 2007) Districts and schools struggle with understanding the steps needed to quickly and dramatically improve student performance.

States play a pivotal role in ensuring that instruction provided at the school and classroom levels is successful. But finding the most efficient, effective ways to support instructional improvement at the local level is challenging. To influence student achievement, states are recognizing that they need to take on new roles. The shift in roles is exemplified by the use of new terms such as "state systems of support" and by an increased focus on developing effective partnerships.

States feel a sense of urgency to learn from the innovations and promising work of peers to prioritize instruction, to work with districts to meet turnaround needs, and to create regional partnerships to provide technical assistance and professional development about research-based practices.

In its ongoing effort to support state education agencies that are learning from their peers, the Office of School Turnaround (OST) organized a small convening of state education representatives to share current initiatives and their learnings about strategies for implementing evidence-based instructional practices. The convening in June 2013 brought together representatives from five states that had introduced policy initiatives focused on their responsibilities for supporting and promoting quality instruction in turnaround schools. State education agency teams from Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, and Missouri were in attendance. State presentations and discussions were structured around a framework that included some of the major approaches that can be leveraged by state education agencies (SEAs) to place priority on research-based instructional practices. The framework suggests policy actions states can take to create a platform from which to focus on research-based practices, build partnerships with districts to implement research-based instruction, establish a structure for connecting technical assistance focused on effective practices to districts and schools implementing interventions under the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, authorized under section 1003(g) of the *Elementary and Secondary*

Education Act of 1965, as amended (*ESEA*), and provide professional development associated with instructional standards.

This discussion paper summarizes the findings from this convening of states on current research, policies, and innovative approaches. Included in the paper are synopses of state initiatives and emerging lessons and implications based on peer-to-peer discussions during the convening of state practices, challenges, and future plans.

State Initiatives

There is no one proven way to promote the use of research-based instructional practices. Each state is putting together the pieces in its own way, using policies and strategies shaped by the individual needs and local contexts of districts and schools in the state. Nevertheless, a dominant theme emerged across all approaches—the need for state education agencies to partner with districts to support instructional improvement in schools. Districts must be engaged if schools are to be successful in implementing best practices at the classroom level.

This paper organizes information about state initiatives into four clusters, illustrating the different approaches states are using for prioritizing and supporting instructional changes:

1. **Common vision and new staff roles.** The Florida Department of Education has clarified its vision for turning around low-performing schools and staff have assumed new roles as connectors, listeners, and facilitators to help bring about systemic changes and extend the state's capacity for providing instructional support at the school level. Florida's systemic approach starts with a focus on changing the beliefs of school and community members and agreeing on common expectations.

2. **State education agency-district partnerships: Demonstrating differentiated support.** The Missouri Turnaround Network helps the state promote a sense of urgency for instructional improvement and establish a clear focus on results through differentiated technical assistance. Instructional support is tailored ("differentiated") and precise, centering on activities such as conducting classroom observations, coach and principal walkthroughs, and administering surveys to gather information about the use of instructional strategies, and teacher and student perceptions.

3. **Structures for technical assistance: Regional partnerships broaden content expertise.** In Illinois, regional partnerships, connections with national content centers, and additional content area specialists at the regional level have helped the state procure instructional expertise for schools. Instructional partners treat the district as the unit of change, foster and sustain instructional improvements at the school level, and provide on-the-ground support for the implementation of SIG plans.

    The Minnesota Department of Education's shift from a centralized delivery system to regional partnerships has freed the state to work in partnership at the district level and with superintendents while Regional Centers of Excellence provide support at

the school level, building leadership capacity for improved instruction. Center teams include content specialists who visit schools weekly to support principals in their role as instructional leaders.

4. **High-quality instructional support: Research-based standards, content, and pedagogy.** The goal of Maryland's Department of Education is an integrated approach to instructional support and service delivery based on the specific needs of schools. This approach functions across agency and department boundaries. The state has achieved greater alignment and integration of support by targeting the right services for delivery to the right districts and schools at the right time through its Breakthrough Center. This virtual center forms collaborative partnerships with schools, districts, and other state education agency divisions. State specialists work directly in schools as coaches and mentors, using instructional improvement cycles to boost teaching quality through content and skill development.

While this paper summarizes the common themes about instructional practices that emerged during the convening from state presentations and discussions, states not in attendance are encouraged to contact these five states directly to learn more. Such discussions will help provide the level of specificity needed to implement these practices in other settings.

Lessons and Implications

Although most state efforts are relatively new, lessons are beginning to emerge about policy levers that states can use to prioritize and improve instructional quality. Advice from states implementing improvement in instruction is organized here in a framework of four implementation components:

1. **Vision: A robust reform vision with priority on high-quality instruction**
   Champions for a strong vision. Unless the SEA's top leaders are consistent and vocal champions of high expectations and effective instruction as key ingredients in turning around a school, other state education agency staff are unlikely to invest the time and energy to align their efforts with turnaround initiatives. Communicating a robust vision that places a high priority on quality teaching and learning improves the chances of achieving meaningful and comprehensive reform.

   Vision supported by communicating consistent messages about instructional priorities. Tight relationships across all levels of the school support system are essential for maintaining clear communications about instructional priorities. State education agency staff can set the tone by streamlining communications with superintendents and other district-level staff so that they can, in turn, push out a consistent message to turnaround schools about what is important.

2. **Governance: State education agency-district partnerships to strengthen achievement and ensure equity**

Having experienced decades of staff cutbacks, state education agencies are now finding it difficult to provide schools with the type of instructional content and support, and professional development opportunities they once were able to offer. As a result, SEA leaders are seeking ways to influence the content of instruction that are less labor intensive than previous practices. Establishing SEA-district partnerships is one important way states are building district capacity to support instructional improvement in schools.

Attitudes and beliefs. Moving toward a posture of support begins with an attitude shift on the part of SEA staff—away from being the "expert" conveyer of information toward becoming a problem-solving colleague. Navigating this new territory requires training and support for SEA staff so that they continuously improve their skills and abilities for helping to improve instruction at the school level.

Competencies and skills. To become a valued capacity-building partner in a turnaround role, SEA staff need a varied set of skills, ranging from synthesizing student data and other information to understanding trends and determining what may be necessary to make course corrections, to modeling the principles of adult learning and facilitated professional development for adult learners. Having familiarity with the resources various education agency departments can offer and the reform experiences of multiple districts enables SEA staff to serve as "connectors" or brokers who can help schools identify and procure the specific types of expertise, technical assistance, and resources needed.

3. **Structure: Structures to provide technical assistance to improve instruction**

District turnaround teams. A consistent district-level turnaround leader or team is essential for facilitating relationship building with state and regional personnel, which in turn can bring benefits such as providing access to resources in a timely fashion. A close and sustained working relationship is a prerequisite to addressing the many factors that quality instruction comprises, e.g., curriculum, professional development, and teacher evaluation.

Partnering mechanisms. In some cases, states are moving away from approaches that have proven to be too cumbersome to sustain at the desired level of consistency and quality on a statewide basis. Partnering mechanisms need to be sufficiently robust and flexible to tap the expertise needed for helping with issues schools and districts face.

Desired features of support structures. While states have established different structures to accomplish the goal of improving instruction, certain features of technical assistance are especially important. More explicit coordination is needed at the state level to harness various capacities from different state entities and, as a result, SEAs

are assuming increasingly active roles in this effort on behalf of districts and schools. Significant support for high-quality instruction requires differentiated assistance, which is likely to require specific content expertise.

Honest dialogue. The essence of a partnership is trust and the ability to participate in open dialogue. SEA staff need time to develop relationships and earn the trust of district staff in order to move beyond superficial compliance-oriented structural changes and address instructional improvements. SEAs need to hear from districts and schools about what types of support are helpful and what is distracting; districts and schools need to hear directly from SEA staff about what they perceive to be working well and not working well. A shared culture enables state, district, and school staff to speak openly and honestly about instruction and the challenges inherent in each school's context.

4. **Content: Research-based standards, content, and pedagogy**
    Teachers and students in turnaround schools have no time to waste on instructional programs that have not proven to be effective. State education agencies have a critical role to play in promoting research-based standards and practices so that the additional resources allocated to turnaround schools can be invested wisely, with payoff in terms of results for all students, including English learners and students with disabilities. As many states have found, districts with limited capacity to support instructional improvements and low-performing schools may often not be in the best position to make wise choices about new instructional programs and external providers. SEA and regional technical assistance staff can play critical roles in these choices, especially in providing research-informed content expertise.

Part I:
Introduction: Effective instruction as a turnaround priority

Improving student achievement is the end goal of all school turnaround efforts. While state turnaround initiatives typically begin with changes in state education policies and school staffing practices, the quality of instruction is a critical aspect of turning around low-performing schools. Ultimately, student learning depends on effective instruction. Assessing, identifying, and implementing effective instruction must be a high priority for underperforming schools.

The introduction of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* in 2001 required states to take steps to improve achievement for all students. For example, schools with inadequate yearly progress across five consecutive years were required to restructure, thrusting the schools into intense planning to ensure a rapid and successful school improvement effort. The state education agency (SEA) plays a key role in this process. "Improving state supports to low-performing schools and districts is the central challenge of the next phase of education reform" (Reville et al. 2005). However, in an environment that lacks solid evidence on effective ways to improve failing schools and sustain improvements, states grapple with the fundamental steps for providing support to improve student performance quickly and dramatically.

Schools and districts receiving School Improvement Grants (SIG) must take urgent action for changing course in order to meet the requirements of this grant program; thus, the term "turnaround." The initial focus of this work is on making structural and procedural changes, such as restructuring the school (e.g., reorganizing the school day, replacing or reorganizing school leadership and staff), engaging external providers, selecting and implementing new curricula, facilitating parent and other stakeholder support, incorporating meaningful family engagement, and attending to school climate issues. This focus on so many operational issues may fall short in addressing the critical role of instruction. While structural and procedural changes are important, without instructional changes they are likely to be insufficient for accelerating student achievement at the pace needed to turn around a failing school. As Redding (2007) points out, "the restructured school must make a quick shift in emphasis from structural reconfiguration to microscopic examination of each student's learning and careful attention to each staff member's performance."

The Office of School Turnaround (OST) recognizes the need to identify, disseminate, and implement effective instructional practices. Based on research findings about the relationship between effective instruction and achievement, SIG funding is awarded to districts that not only show the greatest need but that also show the "strongest commitment to use the funds to provide adequate resources in order to raise substantially the achievement of students in their lowest-performing schools" (SIG program description,

available at http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html). Many SIG schools have high proportions of populations with specialized instructional needs, including students with disabilities and/or students who are English learners.

In a research synthesis on high-performing, high-poverty schools, the Center for Public Education (2005) found that "hard-working, committed, and able teachers" are a critical piece to academic success in these schools. Marzano (2002), in a review of studies on the impact of schooling on student achievement, also found "consistently significant effects" of teachers on achievement. Hanushek (2002) noted that the range of quality among teachers is so great that "within a single large urban district, teachers near the top of the quality distribution can get an entire year's worth of additional learning out of their students compared to those near the bottom. That is, a good teacher will get a gain of one and a half grade-level equivalents, whereas a bad teacher will get a gain of only a half a year for a single academic year." He goes on to state that "having three years of good teachers in a row would overcome the average achievement deficit between low-income kids (those on free or reduced-price lunch) and others." Thus, it is clear that in all schools, but especially in the lowest-performing schools, it is imperative that all teachers provide effective instruction to all of their students. For more on this evidence, see Hassel and Hassel (2009), Imazeki and Goe (2009), Redding (2013), and Redding and Walberg (2012).

Role of the state education agency in supporting high-quality instruction

Research identifying effective instructional practices and practice guides offering recommendations to improve instructional quality can help teachers and school leaders better understand what constitutes effective instruction. For districts receiving SIG funds, the development of school improvement plans can help define the steps to improve academic performance, especially when plans address the specifics of effective instructional practices and describe how the school will elevate the teaching practices of all staff. State education agencies too play a pivotal role in ensuring that effective instruction is provided.

> *"[The state education agency] needs to engage districts more in analyzing why a school is not improving and how districts can assist." (Florida team presentation 2013)*

The state's position in the funding and accountability structure of the education system means that it has the ability to offer opportunities, incentives, and capacity-building initiatives to support local-level change (Rhim and Redding 2011; Briggs et al. 2013). Given the SEA's strategic positioning, understanding the most efficient and effective ways to support instructional improvement at the local level can lead to the dramatic changes sought in turnaround schools.

While ample research describes effective classroom practices, "these practices do not provide insight into the process of transforming a critically failing school into a successful school" (Public Impact 2007). With the unprecedented resources of the School Improvement

Grants and Race to the Top funding, and the flexibility provided to some SEAs through waivers of certain requirements of *NCLB* (known as "*ESEA* flexibility"), state education agencies are at the forefront of exploring innovative approaches to support districts and schools in transforming educational environments. In many ways, these endeavors challenge the traditional role of the state education agency, which has been to interpret and enforce policies established by Congress and state legislatures and to facilitate data collection in partnership with district policymakers and school-level practitioners (Rhim et al. 2008).

Today, in contrast, and particularly since the passage of *NCLB*, high-stakes accountability systems have forced states to play an increasingly supportive role for districts and schools in order to influence student achievement at local levels. The shift is exemplified by the use of new terms such as "state systems of support," or SSOS, and by statements at the convening from state representatives. The Maryland State Department of Education representatives noted the shift in the state's role from "strictly a compliance monitor to a performance breakthrough partner."

As the state examples in this paper illustrate, much is happening quickly around the country, and states now feel a new sense of urgency to learn from the innovations and promising work of other states to prioritize instruction, work with districts to meet turnaround needs, and create regional partnerships to provide technical assistance and professional development on research-based practices.

Intensifying federal support for states: The Office of School Turnaround

Recognizing the critical and shifting roles that state departments of education and their state support teams can play in addressing the needs of turnaround schools, the Office of School Turnaround extended its support to provide more direct technical assistance and to enable states to learn from the innovative turnaround work being accomplished in other states.

In 2011, OST introduced the State-to-State Technical Assistance Initiative, which proved to be successful in delivering intensive, on-site assistance to nine states. Based on lessons learned from this initiative and the growing urgency from states to learn from each other, OST refined its plan of action in 2012 and introduced the Turnaround Peer-to-Peer Learning Initiative to facilitate strategic discussions about turnaround efforts at the state level. Through this 2012 effort, OST was able to provide direct assistance to 12 additional states. Six of them each hosted an on-site visit from six other states to share information about their effective turnaround strategies and assist each other in designing improvement plans. In addition, expert consultants participated in these state visits and provided relevant resources and other support.

OST further refined its efforts with the goal of creating peer-to-peer environments in which small groups of states would share their approaches to a critical set of issues they face in improving low-performing schools. Two small group convenings were held in 2013. The first convening, held in May, addressed the challenges of developing and sustaining effective leaders. Findings from the first convening were presented in an earlier discussion paper, *Crafting a New Generation of Leaders* (USDE 2014). The second convening in June dealt with the state's role in supporting instruction. Both convenings focused on policy levers states can use to influence change.

The June convening, on which this paper is based, was planned in direct response to states' pressing need for information and promising approaches for identifying and implementing effective instructional practices. Representatives from five states (Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, and Missouri) that had introduced promising policy initiatives were invited to participate in the convening. More information about the convening is in the Appendix. Presentations and discussions were structured around a framework recommending some of the major approaches that can be leveraged by SEAs to place a priority on research-based instructional practices. A description of the framework is in Part II of this paper. The five states had the opportunity to learn from each other as well as from experts about policies and practices currently being used to improve instruction in turnaround schools, to identify major questions and concerns they are tackling, and to share specific actions they are taking to support districts and schools.

The intent of this paper is to share findings from the June convening about states' initiatives to support districts and schools in identifying, planning, and implementing effective instructional practices. During the convening, state staff, as well as district and school representatives within each state, discussed their experiences, including actions taken, obstacles overcome, successes, and disappointments. Among the topics that generated the most discussion were the state's responsibility for setting a high priority on instruction, shifting staff roles from "tellers" to listeners and facilitators, working with districts rather than directly with schools to bring about instructional improvement, and the nuances of building authentic and trusting relationships in this new environment. The paper's summary is a snapshot of lessons learned, next steps, and advice about the critical factors to consider when making choices about ways to support districts and schools in improving instruction.

> *Topics that generated the most discussion at the June convening:*
>
> - *Responsibility of state education agencies for instruction;*
> - *Shift in staff roles at state, district, and school levels;*
> - *State focus on building district capacity; and*
> - *Building trusting and collaborative relationships.*

Part II:
State Initiatives: Innovations for implementing effective instruction

In preparation for the June convening, a set of actions, roles, and policies that states may take to improve instruction were identified by the Office of School Turnaround and organized into a framework to guide peer-to-peer discussions and help states highlight promising and innovative strategies. The framework was based on insights that planning team members have developed through their work with state education agencies in various school improvement efforts. The framework suggests policy actions states can take to create a platform for highlighting research-based practices, building partnerships with districts to implement research-based instruction, establishing a structure for connecting technical assistance focused on effective practices to SIG districts and schools, and providing professional development associated with instructional standards.

Framework: State education agency leverage for supporting and promoting effective instruction

The framework from the June 2013 convening outlined four components of SEAs leveraging support for and promoting effective, evidence-based instruction in turnaround schools:

1. Promote a vision that places the highest priority on teaching and learning.
2. Create partnerships with districts to strengthen achievement and ensure equity.
3. Develop structures to support and provide technical assistance to districts and schools.
4. Provide high-quality instructional support grounded in research-based practices.

States partnering with districts is essential for supporting instructional changes in schools.

The framework is further delineated at the end of Part II of this paper. There is no one proven way to identify and implement research-based instructional practices. Each state represented at the convening is addressing some aspect(s) of the framework, putting together the pieces in its own unique way. Yet, a dominant theme found across all state approaches is the importance of partnering with districts as the "unit of change" to support instructional improvement. Districts must be engaged in helping schools implement best practices at the classroom level, which raises the challenge of how states can engage with districts in ways that directly affect the classroom. Initiatives implemented by states are organized into the following four clusters:

1. *Common vision and new staff roles:* What steps can a state take to clarify its vision for change? What are effective approaches for communicating the high priority of improving instruction? How does a common vision change the roles of SEA staff? What steps can states take to help staff adjust to their new roles?

2. *State education agency-district partnerships: Demonstrating differentiated support:* What are efficient and effective ways to provide differentiated technical assistance to turnaround schools? How do you move districts from "light-touch" change efforts to deep change, that is, from mere tinkering to transformation? How can the state make meaningful connections with districts and schools in the most efficient way? What are the benefits of providing instructional support to districts to help build capacity to support schools rather than providing support directly to schools?

3. *Structures for technical assistance: Regional partnerships broaden content expertise:* What systemic changes are needed to improve the content and delivery of professional development and staff training? How have states identified the best sources of content expertise at the regional level? What are the priority needs in specific content areas for teachers in turnaround settings?

4. *High-quality instructional support: Research-based standards, content, and pedagogy:* Can turnaround schools lead their districts in implementing higher standards and new practices? How can states identify and support promising innovations in turnaround schools? What type of needs assessment information from staff can help customize instructional support? In what ways are states tailoring professional development for turnaround settings? What are the priority learning needs of turnaround staff?

State summaries presented within each cluster offer insights into how some states are approaching the complex challenges of turnaround work in an environment of limited research findings, offering possible solutions for other states to consider. While states have some commonalities, they vary in their philosophies, emphases, approaches, and processes for turning around schools. These differences can help inform other states' turnaround work.

Common vision and new staff roles

States are developing new approaches to creating a shared vision of instructional improvement, which may result in a major shift in roles for state education agency staff. The Florida Department of Education represents one model for taking on this challenge.

FLORIDA: *A clarified vision and new roles for staff as connectors, listeners, and facilitators help bring about systemic changes that extend the state's capacity for providing instructional support.*

The Florida Department of Education has been supporting its lowest-performing schools through its Differentiated Accountability (DA) State System of School Improvement, which allocates resources regionally. The state is divided into five regions with over 100 staff serving approximately 350 schools. Each regional DA team consists of an executive director, reading coordinators, administrative assistants, and specialists in, science, technology,

engineering, and mathematics (STEM), data use, and Career and Technical Education (CTE). In reflecting on the support it has provided through DA, the state's Bureau of School Improvement recognized that some structures were not working as well as originally planned in light of the need to support many turnaround schools. The bureau found that some DA activities and materials, including reports and documents, were inconsistent across the state and with the expressed policies and values of the DA system; moreover, the theory of action, i.e. working directly with schools, appeared flawed and the evaluation of the DA's effectiveness seemed too simplistic. It was clear that the Bureau of School Improvement needed to clarify the mission, vision, and theory of action of its DA system.

Florida's school improvement leaders are in the early stages of proposing and implementing solutions to these issues. To begin, they accepted that "the role of the state education agency needed to change fundamentally." To achieve a common vision and provide schools and districts with effective DA support, the state understood that it was critical for agency staff to move to a position of "listening, learning, sharing, then doing … and in that order." In the past, the state served as the expert, "telling schools what to do," but now the state pursues a collaborative role, requiring staff to act as

- *connectors* of teachers and leaders to successful peers, strategies, and tools;
- *servant leaders* who engage instructional leaders as colleagues in collaborative processes designed to improve instructional practice;
- *modelers* of facilitated professional development for adult learners; and
- *analysts* who use data to clarify challenges and inform continuous improvement.

In addition, Florida Department of Education leaders recognized that, in their attempt to improve classroom instruction by providing school-level support, they had neglected other key variables. School-level support often lacked the necessary infrastructure to be successful, including strong district and school leadership, instructional planning systems, and strategies for team building. As a result of recognizing this, the state now takes a systemic view and approaches change more systematically. It starts with changing the beliefs of adults and agreeing on common expectations of high standards, then moves to engagement of adults and capacity building, and, finally, reviewing results to see if the system is working as planned.

As part of the shift in mindset for providing support, the state's relationships with districts and schools are evolving. Although the state began by providing "direct to school" support, it soon discovered that direct support to teachers did not address the systemic reasons for weak instructional quality, e.g., teacher selection and evaluation. Over the last few years, Florida has focused on working with district offices so they understand the state's role and can work more effectively with it. Florida team members agreed that this approach has allowed the state to "build structures

so that the state and districts have common language and protocols in place to work together." The district joins with the state to identify key messages for the schools, thereby ensuring alignment across state requirements and reducing duplication of work. For example, one district finds that it now is able to "take things off the schools' plates" so that schools can focus on instruction.

Together, the state's common vision and shift in staff roles are moving the systemic factors that have affected instructional quality in the past toward better results for the future. Over time, the Florida Department of Education will be able to review progress in schools across the state and see how its new system focused on instructional quality is advancing student performance.

State education agency-district partnerships: Demonstrating differentiated support

State education agency-district relationships that have formed around the implementation and oversight of SIG schools represent a wide spectrum of theories about the appropriate allocation of responsibilities and optimal investments in building the capacity needed to improve instruction. In some cases, state education agencies chose, at least initially, to provide support directly to turnaround schools; at the other end of the spectrum are states that work largely with district turnaround offices and liaisons for all their communications with schools. Missouri represents a hybrid on this continuum: a consistent team of state-sponsored consultants works with district liaisons and turnaround school staff from each site, modeling on a regular basis the review of and reflection on improvement data that simultaneously builds continuous capacity for progress of both districts and schools.

MISSOURI: *The Missouri Turnaround Network helps the state promote a sense of urgency for instructional improvement and establishes a clear focus on results through differentiated technical assistance for individual turnaround settings.*

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education oversees 58 SIG schools in districts that received grants in one of three cycles. These are the state's priority schools approved through ESEA flexibility and they are part of the Missouri Turnaround Network (MTN) through which they receive direct support from the state.

As other states have discovered, building stronger relationships with districts seems to be an important component of a successful turnaround effort. Missouri found that visits to schools and districts separate from monitoring visits helped to minimize drift in implementing the schools' SIG plans. The state works closely with the district to help keep the schools on target, providing it a state-level "LEA shepherd," who serves as a liaison to the schools and meets monthly with the state team.

Two experienced state consultants — a coordinator and a resource specialist — lead the MTN support activities. They focus on accelerating school turnaround and promoting a sense of urgency for change in SIG schools by developing internal accountability, establishing a clear focus on results, targeting achievement, attendance and behavior in the SIG schools, and building leadership capacity.

"Personalization with precision." (Missouri team presentation 2013)

The MTN coordinator and resource specialist work directly in SIG schools so that the relationship is up close and personal, in accordance with the SEA's motto: "Personalization with precision." While they do monitor for accountability purposes, they also serve as critical friends, providing instructional support. At each school they meet regularly with the principal and district liaison, especially to review and reflect on data. Their roles include a set of six activities, all geared toward improving instruction:

1. Monitoring implementation of the SIG plan through a review of the schools' ongoing implementation record;
2. Holding monthly accountability meetings;
3. Reviewing the data dashboard for indicators of progress;
4. Examining the benchmark assessment data;
5. Leading conversations about staffing; and
6. Providing leadership coaching and feedback.

Moreover, MTN instructional support is tailored to the needs of a particular school, centering on such activities as conducting classroom observations with a tool used by coaches and state monitors; joining coaches and principals on walkthroughs; and administering and reviewing the results from surveys to gather information on instructional strategies and teacher-student perceptions.

"More people now have the skill and will to do team work for instructional planning, collaboration … Teaming is essential to their success and their sustainability." (Missouri team presentation 2013)

The MTN's direct involvement with districts and schools has resulted in several emphases: differentiated instruction; improvement in the quality of "everything related to instruction" such as planning, data review, and walkthroughs; and an increased focus on literacy. Differentiated support for the staff has increased and is based on the mapping of each teacher's skill sets. In monthly meetings, strengths and weaknesses are reviewed, and professional development is planned to address areas of concern, leading to greater accountability. Professional

development services to schools and districts are provided through Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDC), which the state established but does not run.

The state provides feedback to SIG schools that communicates the importance of instructional improvements and builds a trusting relationship. The state staff note that their job is to have "constructive tension" with a school—to ask the right questions so that schools ask themselves those questions. They coordinate with the state's professional development providers to ensure that they are *showing* and not just telling educators how to do things. The state reports that this has made a significant difference in the climate and attendance at professional development activities.

Structures for technical assistance: Regional partnerships broaden content expertise

Currently, many state education agencies lack the content and pedagogical expertise that are necessary for influencing instruction in turnaround settings. To supplement state education agency expertise, many states have formed relationships with existing education service providers, but not all states have approached this task systematically. Illinois and Minnesota are two states that have been purposeful in creating regional partnerships that provide support for high-quality instruction in turnaround schools.

ILLINOIS: *Forming regional partnerships helps procure the instructional expertise and training that districts and schools need to implement rigorous, research-based, high-quality instruction.*

Illinois made three key changes to promote high standards and improve support for effective instruction in all schools, which highlighted the need for additional support to improve instruction:

1. Enactment of the *Illinois State Performance Evaluation Reform Act of 2010* (the teacher and principal evaluation requirement).

2. Adoption of the Eight Essential Elements for Effective Education along with the Rising Star system to track school and district improvement planning.

3. Founding of the Illinois Center for School Improvement (Illinois CSI), a comprehensive and complex restructuring of the statewide system of support.

The *Illinois State Performance Evaluation Reform Act of 2010* required "districts to design and implement performance evaluation systems that assess teachers' and principals' professional skills as well as incorporate measures of student growth" for the purpose of focusing on quality instruction (Illinois Board of Education Performance Advisory Council, n.d.). The teacher evaluation system has been redesigned to align with standards of effective practices and provide descriptions to help clarify what high-quality teaching

looks like. This new, more objective system will clearly define professional excellence, using observation and evidence to rate teachers. The system requires a teacher evaluation training process, with online training for all evaluators so that they understand what effective instruction looks like, how to collect evidence, and how to provide helpful, timely feedback.

The Eight Essential Elements for Effective Education were identified and adopted by the state to address school improvement concerns. The state believed that successful districts use this tool as their foundation and as a framework for providing support to schools. These indicators provide a common language statewide to identify gaps and measure progress for continuous improvement. Formerly unidentified and absent in the system, these elements and indicators provide substantive direction for all Illinois schools through diagnosis followed by targeted interventions to improve student achievement (Illinois State Board of Education 2012).

The Illinois State Board of Education has established partnerships within the Illinois Statewide System of Support (SSOS) to supply a comprehensive continuum of research-based support services to districts and schools. The state offers all schools access to instructional support, with intensified support for turnaround schools. To keep track of progress, the state implemented Rising Star, a tool that offers a structure in which school improvement teams can examine practices, and create and monitor improvement plans. The professional learning opportunities developed for Rising Star serve all schools but the delivery system is tailored for SIG schools and coaches.

In recent years, the Illinois state education agency has had a shortage of content experts who can provide intensive support to districts and turnaround schools for implementing rigorous, research-based, high-quality instruction. Implementing the *Performance Evaluation Reform Act of 2010* and the Eight Essential Elements plus Rising Star required content expertise that was beyond the capacity of agency staff resources.

"Establish partnerships and networks to share best practices with districts and schools." (Illinois team presentation 2013)

The state's response to the shortage was to institute a regional support system, complemented by a deliberate effort to bring in instructional expertise through relationships with outside groups (the lead partners). The state selected partners who were prepared to treat the district as the unit of change, foster and sustain instructional improvements at the school level (e.g., curriculum audits, alignment of instruction with best practice, and coaching), and provide on-the-ground support for the implementation of SIG plans.

In 2003, the Illinois State Board of Education's regional support system provided technical assistance to all districts and schools in academic improvement status. In 2010, Illinois' SSOS focused on serving Title I schools in corrective action or restructuring improvement status, and in 2012 launched the new Illinois Center for School Improvement to provide leadership, consistency and coordination across the many SSOS partners assisting districts and schools with continuous improvement processes. Below are brief descriptions of the major components of the state's current comprehensive support system within the System of Support and District Intervention Division (Division), which directs SSOS operations and oversees SIG, high-priority districts, and Center for School Improvement activities.

- **Regional Offices of Education/Intermediate Service Centers**—The education offices and intermediate service centers (that serve public schools and districts in the western Cook County suburbs) form a regional network that provides support directly to schools on behalf of the state. The regional offices and centers are led by locally elected Superintendents. The state hired 14 content area specialists, residing in 44 regional offices and intermediate service centers. These specialists have proven critical to implementing research-based practices in turnaround schools.

- **Lead Partner**—Districts with SIG awards engage lead partners who have the expertise needed to assist with turnaround and transformation activities, such as recruiting teachers and principals, aligning curriculum with state standards, planning instruction, and conducting external audits and needs assessments.

- **Center for School Improvement (CSI)** — To provide leadership and coordination across diverse support efforts, the state instituted the Illinois Center for School Improvement, which directs the overall operations of the state's system of support for persistently low-achieving schools. The Illinois CSI will increase the state's ability to promote a common vision, standards, and approach to supporting these schools consistently through the SSOS, ensuring that districts and schools receive expert, timely, and relevant assistance. The CSI will build district-level capacity for improving student performance and preparing students for college and careers. The state has assumed operations for two chronically underperforming districts. District accountability and oversight for these "high-priority" districts will eventually be embedded in the Illinois CSI structure. In addition, the Illinois CSI will provide targeted support to those districts with schools designated to receive "priority" services.

The Division also works closely with the Regional Comprehensive Center and Content Centers to bring research-based practices into the statewide system. While the role of the state is to monitor activities and coordinate the work of the lead partners, the latter serve as "system interventionists" in SIG districts (for example, assisting in the hiring of a new principal). They focus support on assessment, instruction, and curriculum, and generally help schools implement their selected intervention models. Lead partners work at the building level to increase the capacity of principals and teachers through coaching, setting

up systems and structures, and guiding the school through data-based decision making. They also help the school understand best practices, scale them up, and take advantage of lessons learned.

MINNESOTA: *The shift from a centralized delivery system to regional partnerships frees the state to work primarily at the district and superintendent levels while Regional Centers of Excellence provide support at the school level and engage school leaders in instruction.*

During its first round of SIG awards, the Minnesota Department of Education found it difficult to foster urgency for change among the SIG schools, and noticed that schools were not taking advantage of resources the state was offering. Furthermore, the state knew it had to take action because SIG schools were not making the kind of gains the state was expecting. Acknowledging a need to adopt a different approach in order to provide equitable, effective, and efficient services to those schools across the state, Minnesota moved from a centralized support delivery system to regional partnerships and a two-tiered support system that allows the state to take a more intense hands-on and consistent approach to SIG schools.

"Regional Centers of Excellence work at the school and principal levels, promoting a sense of urgency for change among staff at SIG schools and "getting instructional leadership engaged." (Minnesota team presentation 2013)

Now, the state works primarily at the district and superintendent levels, and school-level support is provided through the Regional Centers of Excellence, which is the statewide infrastructure to support common, coherent implementation of the school improvement plans. The three Regional Centers of Excellence work at the school and principal levels, "getting instructional leadership engaged" in order to have all teachers in a school engaged in the school improvement efforts. Each of the three regional centers has a director, licensed math specialist, licensed reading specialist, and other specialists in special education, implementation of research-based practices designed to increase the quality of instruction, and English language learning. The regional team works with schools to develop and implement their school improvement plans. For example, members of a regional team meet with a school's principal and leadership team to review information about teachers' professional development needs and identify appropriate learning opportunities. These include such options as training sessions provided by regional experts, job-embedded coaching, facilitating grade-level meetings to review student work and design lessons, and providing specific resources for professional learning communities. In some cases, regional team members might also be called upon to provide executive coaching to the school's principal or to consult with the principal and central office staff on topics such as curriculum choices, school support needs, and extended learning time.

Team members are in the schools once a week and use CESTAR (Center of Excellence Staff Time, Activities, and Resources), a formal communication protocol and electronic record and planning system, in order to ensure that the team identifies and responds to the schools' needs efficiently. In this new support structure, one of the state's roles is to build the

capacity of the regional center staff so that they in turn can build the capacity of the leaders and leadership teams in schools.

Regional Centers for Excellence

a. Center of Excellence Staff

b. School Leadership Implementation Team

c. Instructional Learning Team (PLC) Facilitators/Teams

d. Instructional Staff

This illustration shows the link between the SEA-funded Regional Centers and school-level instructional staff, that is, instructional facilitators working directly on-site through school leadership teams. (Source: Minnesota team presentation 2013)

In its second round of a SIG competition, the Minnesota Department of Education brought districts into the application discussion and planning process earlier, aiming to secure superintendent buy-in and involvement from the beginning. The state recognized the importance of keeping districts, particularly superintendents, involved in the SIG work and invited them to participate in the instructional leadership academies, formal SIG meetings, and periodic visits to schools (state visits to SIG schools always involve the local superintendent). These efforts have led to stronger partnerships with districts.

Minnesota believes that the SIG schools should focus on a few select programs or practices rather than institute many, and encourages the schools to review their school improvement plans on a regular basis to assess progress on student achievement goals. Regional center staff reinforce this expectation during regular interactions with their schools.

To ensure that the state's vision is clearly communicated, a state team of six staff members works exclusively with the SIG program. One staff person is assigned to each SIG school to give it a point of contact who provides support directly to the school's leadership team in matters related to SIG requirements, expectations, and continuation. The state team also provides monthly training to the regional specialists in SIG requirements and expectations. The state has created a cross-agency team of staff from other areas across the department to develop a consistent approach to all focus and priority schools approved through *ESEA* flexibility, beyond the SIG schools.

To monitor and evaluate progress in SIG schools, Minnesota sends a staff person to each school. The resulting monitoring report is used by the state to evaluate a school's current status and determine where it needs professional development or technical assistance. That same report also goes back to the school to be used as a formative assessment. Last year, the state implemented the Indistar system (called "Northern Star" in Minnesota) with the SIG schools to help them keep track of their school improvement planning and implementation. Additionally, the state is incorporating a systematic evaluation and planning of the implementation of changes to ensure the state is promoting high standards and best practices for instruction, and utilizing what is known about best practices to inform evaluation and the implementation of changes.

Clearly, building relationships has been a critical factor in impacting instructional changes in Minnesota.

> "In our first cohort of schools, we considered it a success if we could get past the front door. It was by invitation only … Now with the relationship building, it's a different feeling in the schools. The advocates and regional center staff have formed relationships even in cases where the schools weren't immediately open to their involvement. We want to make sure that we work with the instructional leaders to make sure that they communicate best practices to the teachers." (Minnesota team presentation 2013)

High-quality instructional support: Research-based standards, content, and pedagogy

MARYLAND: *To achieve greater alignment and integration of instructional support for SIG schools, the Maryland state education agency takes an active role in coordinating services to improve instruction.*

Maryland's initiative is focused on bringing expertise and knowledge about research-based instruction directly into schools. The state education agency provides support for instructional planning and feedback, and related professional development directly to the lowest-performing schools, working in close partnership with each district's turnaround office. While the state education agency can manage only a limited number of such intense partnerships, the "close in" work on delivery of high-quality instruction functions as a laboratory for implementing innovations and higher expectations to accelerate student achievement. Through this work, state staff members gain experience and credibility for moving higher standards and instructional practices to schools statewide.

Breakthrough Center Mission

The Right **People**   The Right **Time**   The Right **Services**
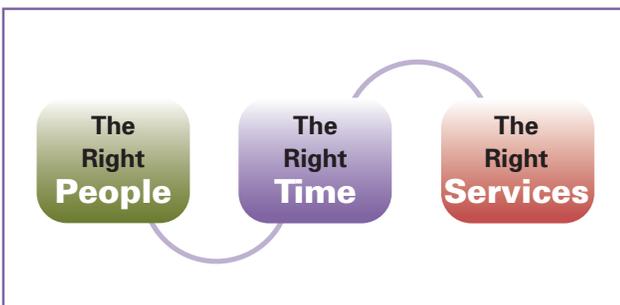
(Source: Maryland team presentation 2013)

Partnerships are formed across divisions within the state education agency to focus on the needs of individual schools in an innovative, collaborative effort. These efforts are coordinated, brokered, and delivered through the conceptual state hub known as the "Breakthrough Center," which is designed to transition the state education agency from "strictly a compliance monitor to a performance breakthrough partner." The Breakthrough Center aims to create communities of practice among various offices within Maryland's State Department of Education through the coordination of existing services available across all divisions at the state level to break down silos, improve agency relationships, and ensure that all staff are working together to focus on the quality of teaching and learning. The center aims to maximize resources available from education, business, government, and research centers, and to create cross-district and cross-sector access

The Breakthrough Center

21 Priority Schools
- Federal Intervention
- Reform Plan
- Title 1 Funding

Build Capacity through Support Services

Differentiation Support

Breakthrough Center Support Services
- Leadership
- Interactive
- Student Services

Partner to Accelerate and Sustain Improvement

School System
- Policy Revisions
- Resource Allocation
- Human Capitol Practices

(Source: Maryland team presentation 2013)

to people, programs, and resources. Its mission is "the right people, the right time, the right services." That is, the center aims to create greater alignment and integration of instructional support for SIG schools.

Maryland staff are assigned to work with districts in intense partnerships. Through the Breakthrough Center, they are able to draw on expert knowledge of research-based instruction to ensure that they are modeling effective approaches. For example, one initiative of the Breakthrough Center has been helping SIG schools transition to the Common Core State Standards—in some cases helping schools become leaders within their districts in the knowledge of Common Core expectations. The state has accelerated professional development on the Common Core standards by addressing the required shifts in practices and crafting tailored professional development to teachers in turnaround schools. This professional development taps experts within the state whose knowledge base is from current research.

The Breakthrough Center's core strategies are to develop and accelerate school performance and improve the capacity of individuals to lead and teach. The center works across all levels of the education system in the state to improve student achievement by

- creating state conditions to accelerate improvement,
- supporting appropriate district conditions and capacity building,
- nurturing a supportive school community, and
- developing principal and teacher skills.

Maryland utilizes "instructional improvement cycles" that focus on improving instructional quality through content and skill development. State specialists with research-based knowledge work directly in schools, serving as coaches and mentors for teachers. The specialists are in each school four to five days per month, planning lessons and implementation activities collaboratively with teachers, observing, and modeling as a way of developing teachers' understanding of content. Instructional support may include working on a unit design with teachers, or observing and providing feedback on key practices such as text complexity.

The state specialist brings principals, coaches, and other leadership staff together to talk about what is working and not working. Depending on a school's needs, state specialists will bring in other experts. The goal is an integrated approach to service delivery based on the needs of schools and includes ample support from across state education agencies.

Twice a year, the coach/mentor conducts a structured walk-through in the school, a modified instructional rounds approach, observing 20 minutes in each classroom and looking for signs of change in practice, pedagogy, and student results. The school receives feedback from the state about its progress and recommended next steps. Teachers attend the feedback meetings and use that information to improve instruction. As a result of this process, greater ownership has started to develop in some schools, with principals and teachers discussing together how to improve instruction.

The changes being made in turnaround schools are driving systemic work throughout Maryland. The state has structured instructional support to SIG and priority schools approved through ESEA flexibility in such a way that high-performing schools are now interested in receiving the same types of instructional supports. Expectations are now aligned across evaluations, competencies, and the instructional framework. Maryland sees a direct thread from the micro-work it has accomplished at the turnaround level through to impacting the full system. One state team member remarked that SIG has "shown the way as a model for other schools in terms of instructional practices."

> *"It is critical for us to be at this level of micro work if we are going to be able to influence the macro work." (Maryland team presentation 2013)*

While a collaborative process for improving instructional quality at the school level has been put in place, the state says it wants to do more to guarantee changes. During the team presentation, one member commented, "If we can harness the capacity from each of the entities, we'll have a better chance of seeing sustained impact in the schools." While some states are allowing support to occur outside of the state education agency, Maryland believes it is critical for the SEA to be at this level of micro work if they are going to be able to influence the macro work.

Summary: Putting it all together

As the examples illustrate, states have undertaken initiatives of all types with the goal of improving instruction. It is clear that action on multiple fronts is required to meet the goal of implementing high-quality classroom instruction. As previously referenced, the convening employed a framework of options (see following pages) for state actions, organized in four categories: (1) a common vision that places a high priority on high standards and quality instruction; (2) partnerships with districts to strengthen achievement and ensure equity; (3) structures to support and provide technical assistance; and (4) high-quality instructional support with research-based practices. The framework can be used by states as a guide to plan systematic and intentional approaches for instructional improvement. It defines a range of programs, policies, and practices that support the development of high quality instructional practices in school turnaround environments. The discussion in Part III is also aligned with the framework.

FRAMEWORK: SEA Leverage for Supporting and Promoting Effective Instruction

There are many ways that states and state support teams can assist in helping to improve instruction in turnaround schools. This framework suggests some of the major approaches used by SEAs to place a priority on research-based effective instructional practices and then support implementation by turnaround schools.

Vision places Priority on Teaching and Learning: State's theory of action prioritizes effective teaching and learning.

- Alignment of various state requirements associated with curriculum/instruction
- Coordination of initiatives/departments to make explicit the links across goals
- State operates from a clearly articulated instructional improvement model
- State communicates attention to effective instruction during development, review, approval, and renewal of district/school turnaround plans

Establishment of Partnerships with Districts: State builds relationships with districts with goal of improving instruction, increasing achievement and sustaining changes.

- Establishment of liaisons with districts and district turnaround offices
- Expectations for regular reporting about instructional changes and achievement progress
- Principal evaluations are expected to incorporate instructional improvements
- SEA provides support for instructional leadership development at district level
- Differentiated assistance to districts/schools depending on need

Technical Assistance Structures: State support structure makes subject matter/instructional experts and resources available to districts and turnaround schools. State support teams may provide coaching or professional development directly to district and school/teacher leaders or teams.

- State support teams include staff skilled in content and instruction
- Support structures are designed to be responsive, e.g., regional teams for ready access to support
- Protocols for support team visits to schools include classroom observations; support team staff are frequently present in schools
- States make available resources to support focus on instructional improvements, e.g. self-assessments re: instructional priorities, observation and feedback forms tailored to learning standards
- Supports include ongoing capacity development/networking for technical assistance providers
- Promotion of opportunities to share best practices for effective instruction among turnaround/priority schools
- Support for implementation of acceleration practices
- Monitoring visits include focus on instructional practices
- Reports/feedback to district and school provide specific recommendations re: curricular/instructional practices
- Focus on data use for improving and targeting instruction

High-Quality Instructional Support with Research-Based Practices: State promotes standards and practices that reflect research-based content consistent with high expectations.

- SEA adopts standards for what students should know and be able to do across the curriculum
- State provides professional development associated with standards
- State aligns assessments with standards
- SEA defines or provides guidance to define quality instruction based on research-based instructional practices
- SEA supports policies encouraging sufficient time, money, and resources for professional learning
- State policies on teacher and principal evaluation promote excellent instruction and local policies that support professional learning
- SEA sets standards for quality professional development/professional learning
- SEA vets and evaluates external professional development providers, including requiring annual review of effectiveness
- Support team members participate in/observe school's professional development

Part III:
Lessons and Implications

Over the past several years, states have tackled numerous questions and concerns about the best ways to ensure that SIG turnaround efforts are implemented in ways that effectively improve the quality of instruction to challenge and engage students. SEA staff have learned important lessons about ways to approach the work. At the convening, state departments of education, districts, and schools shared their experiences and lessons learned, and their implications for the way they (and likely other states, districts, and schools) will need to proceed in the future. This section summarizes those lessons and their implications for addressing the challenges of turning around low-performing schools, and also raises questions for further reflection and exploration.

The discussion is organized by the framework put forth to guide SEAs in developing their policies and actions for improving the quality of instruction in turnaround schools. The framework focuses on four key goals:

1. Vision: Promote a robust vision that prioritizes high standards and quality instruction.

2. Governance: Create partnerships with districts to strengthen achievement and ensure equity.

3. Structure: Develop structures to provide technical assistance for improving instruction.

4. Content: Promote standards, practices, and programs based on current research.

For each goal area, we include ideas and questions that SEAs might consider as they strive to place greater emphasis on quality instruction in turnaround schools.

Robust reform vision with priority on high-quality instruction

Champions for a strong vision. Education leaders who want to make bold reforms must ground their intentions in a compelling vision—a vision that promotes high expectations for students and calls for meaningful and challenging content acquired through expertly crafted instructional opportunities. A vision that places a high priority on quality teaching and learning has a better chance of achieving meaningful and comprehensive reforms than if it focused on narrower directives aimed only at increasing basic test results. As representatives from Minnesota indicated, "system reinvention begins at the state level." A robust vision is informed by a shared understanding of the roles of key players in the turnaround process, i.e. who is expected to marshal and apply resources and supports to follow through on the major structural and behavioral changes required for real reform.

Unless the SEA's top leaders are consistent and vocal champions for high expectations and effective instruction as key ingredients in turning around a school, other state education agency staff members are unlikely to invest the time and energy to align their efforts with turnaround initiatives. But more than a well-communicated message is required from agency leaders; ideally they will personally lead the efforts to convene stakeholders (department leaders, state boards, superintendents of large districts) and gain their commitment to align system resources to support turnaround schools. Commitment includes removing distractions from the focus on teaching and learning, including contradictory and duplicative administrative requirements.

Communicating consistent messages about instructional priorities. Representatives from SEAs, districts, and schools at the convening frequently mentioned the importance of establishing a common language across all levels of the education system that communicates clearly the turnaround priorities. SEAs are responsible for setting the tone by streamlining communications with districts so that they can, in turn, push out a consistent message to turnaround schools about what is important.

Turnaround schools may sometimes feel they are drowning in requirements, and may find it difficult to prioritize actions and develop a focused sense of direction. Without a vision of effective teaching and successful learning at the core, a reform agenda can too quickly devolve into a set of discrete actions on a checklist. The constellation of aligned components required to improve instruction (e.g., curriculum, professional development, teacher evaluation) is much more complex than many other types of changes associated with turnaround practice (e.g., extending school days).

Tight relationships across components of the school support system are essential for maintaining clear communications. Otherwise, as some states have learned, investments in distributed support systems (e.g., regional service providers) may not pay off as intended. For example, as the state representatives from Minnesota noted, the relationship between state staff and regional teams needs constant attention to maintain alignment and focus. In Florida, after several years of distributing responsibilities for school support to regional teams, state education agency staff found that activities and documentation of activities were inconsistent across the regions and sometimes even inconsistent with policies and values. They now recognize the need for a more detailed understanding of roles and relationships, and a more cohesive approach to districts.

❑ How have Chief State School Officers and other agency leaders framed and communicated support for the importance of instructional quality in turnaround schools?

❑ During leadership transitions, who has assumed the role of champion for quality instruction?

❑ What features of state support systems and structures promote the use of common language and common protocols?

❑ What types of implicit messages (e.g., those found in artifacts such as monitoring and reporting forms) promote or hinder a focus on quality instruction?

State education agency-district partnerships to strengthen achievement and ensure equity

For several reasons, the theme of SEA-district partnerships in turnaround efforts garnered more attention than other topics and issues during the June convening. Some aspects of turnaround practices are well within the experience and capacity of SEAs and districts (e.g., creating new structures, hiring different staff, and setting up accountability targets). However, fundamentally altering teaching and learning in turnaround settings (e.g., by acceleration strategies or extended time or project-based personalized work) is likely to be a greater challenge for both SEA and district staff. This is true even though the roles of some departments within SEAs are changing in essential ways—moving from sources of information and other resources to becoming more active in providing assistance. These types of changes create space to think differently about how SEAs and districts can work together in enhanced ways.

Many SEAs have now experienced decades of staff cutbacks that have made it almost impossible to provide the type of support for professional development and content support for schools and teachers that they might have provided at one time. As a result, SEA leaders are seeking ways to influence the content of instruction that are not as labor intensive as previous practices. Even those SEAs that provided direct support to turnaround schools and teachers through SIG efforts in recent years have now come to realize that they cannot meet the demands nor sustain the level of ongoing support required. It seems that almost everyone now realizes that, even though district staff may not yet have developed the capacity to support turnaround schools, they are in a better position than SEAs to sustain support if they have the opportunity to develop the necessary skills to do so.

SEA-district partnerships represent one way to build local capacity. For these and other reasons, SEAs are very interested in learning how to partner effectively with districts. As the SEA staff from Maryland noted, while it may not be possible to pay the same amount

of attention to all districts, working side-by-side with a district that has a high proportion of low-performing schools can have tremendous payoff for district and school staff as well as provide a credibility boost to SEA staff when they communicate to others about what is possible. But as SEA participants shared at the convening, good intentions sometimes founder when state education agency staff members are not prepared for the new roles.

Attitudes and beliefs. SEAs are realizing that moving to a posture of support begins with an attitude shift on the part of SEA staff— moving from the position of "expert" conveyer of information to the role of problem solving colleague. As several SEA participants noted during the convening, not everyone on their staff has been able to make a comfortable transition to new roles. In some cases, this has resulted in mixed messages provided to the field. Navigating this new territory requires training, support, and continuous improvement for SEA staff even when they are handpicked on the basis of demonstrated competencies. The situation is even more complicated when SEA leaders have a limited pool of staff to draw from for district liaison work, or when they can exert only second-hand influence on staff selection, such as in cases where existing regional staff are designated as frontline liaisons.

Florida is paying a great deal of attention to the vision of a new role for state personnel, describing the intended attitude shift in aspirational and bold terms: "We are servant leaders who engage Florida's instructional leaders as colleagues in collaborative processes designed to improve instructional practice." (Florida team presentation 2013)

Competencies and skills. Parallel to the lessons being learned about the competencies required to be an effective turnaround principal, there are competencies and skills required by SEA staff who aspire to become valued capacity-building partners in turnaround roles with districts. First, staff require the ability to synthesize a wide variety of student data and other information in order to understand trends and determine what may be necessary to make course corrections. In some cases, district and school personnel may need basic support in interpreting data trends; in this case, SEA staff can play valuable roles in modeling how to synthesize, review, and discuss information. Florida describes the application of data-oriented skills as "clarifying challenges and informing continuous improvement." The external perspectives of SEA staff can be especially valuable in helping districts see the patterns in data from schools, districts, and sub-populations in comparison to relevant benchmarks.

Those SEA staff who have familiarity with the resources of agency departments as well as knowledge of the experiences of multiple districts can serve valuable roles as "connectors" or brokers for districts and schools. Districts with limited capacity to support instructional quality, a large number of low- performing schools, and/or new and inexperienced staff can be at a real disadvantage when it comes to identifying appropriate solutions—even in a state with robust resources. The concerted attention of an SEA liaison who is "well plugged into" options and proactive in seeking out opportunities for technical assistance can help level the playing field for turnaround schools.

SEA staff who step forward to work in partnership with districts must be role models of positive persuasion. Florida describes the role as "modeling facilitated professional development for adult learners." At the convening, we heard several times that SEA staff could benefit by knowing more about principles of adult learning. As representatives from Illinois reminded the group, "You must be able to change adults' behaviors to successfully turn around schools."

Key questions for further exploration:

❑ What are the positive signs that SEAs are improving culture, climate, and relationships between themselves and districts and schools?

❑ How does a state education agency build an internal culture of learning and change so that it can model behaviors for districts?

❑ What qualities of state structures promote the potential for building district capacity to improve turnaround schools?

❑ How can SEAs best assess progress in district capacity development?

❑ What role can SEAs take in developing the capacities of local school boards?

Structures to provide technical assistance to improve instruction

States are experimenting with different ways to highlight the priority on quality instruction in turnaround schools and provide direct support to districts and schools. Structures that are designed to focus on quality instruction in low-performing schools may take on different forms and qualities than statewide structures developed for other purposes, such as compliance monitoring or serving particular populations.

District turnaround teams. As many states have discovered, establishing a consistent district-level turnaround leader or turnaround team is an essential ingredient in making any state support structure work. A consistent district-level team facilitates relationship building with state and regional personnel, which in turn can bring many benefits, including providing access to resources in a timely fashion. A close and sustained working relationship is a prerequisite to addressing the many factors that impact quality instruction, including choice of curriculum, professional development, instructional leadership, teacher evaluation, and teaching staff recruitment and induction, with enough depth and expertise to affect important improvements.

Partnering mechanisms. States are experimenting with ways to guide and support districts in their work with low-performing schools, and in some cases, states are moving away from approaches that have proven to be too cumbersome to sustain statewide at the desired level of consistency and quality. As would be expected, variations in approaches

are a result of scale, including the number and locations of low-performing schools, and the governance structure, and the historic and legal relationships between the state and districts. For example, a state such as Maryland in which low-performing schools are clustered in a small number of districts has different options than a state with low-performing schools in many districts, including small rural districts. A state's history (or lack of history) with coordinated regional delivery mechanisms will likely affect the decision to employ distributed technical assistance structures.

For the five states participating in the convening, a set of drivers unique to each state was responsible for shaping approaches to designing technical assistance structures. Maryland's "close in" work with a small number of schools is designed in part to move the state education agency from "strictly a compliance monitor to a performance breakthrough partner." From this "micro-level" work, state staff are building the skills and credibility to influence work at the "macro level." Missouri's approach of consistent "circuit riders" who host monthly accountability meetings with each turnaround school reflects urgency, pressure for results, and a strong concern about focusing school leadership on targeted short-term plans that devote more time to learning, consistent with their motto: "Change adult behaviors first!"

Desired features of support structures. While states have set up different mechanisms to accomplish the goal of improving instruction, there are features of technical assistance structures that states agree are important. First, states agree that significant support for high-quality instruction requires the ability to provide differentiated support to districts and schools. Unlike consultation related to compliance requirements, support for instructional improvement is likely to require specific content expertise. Illinois' decision to place content-area specialists in regional offices and intermediate service centers is an example of the recognition of the need for specific expertise.

In most cases, states recognize that more explicit coordination is needed at the state level to harness the capacity from different state entities, and, as a result, they are taking increasingly active roles in coordinating the resources available within their agencies on behalf of districts and schools. An example would be Minnesota's work on bringing together cross-agency implementation teams with the specific expertise to solve local problems. The desired coordination is both horizontal and vertical and also cross-agency. Another example is Maryland's virtual Breakthrough Center, which coordinates the expertise of multiple departments within the state education agency to bring services to turnaround schools. Finally, the ability to ensure some degree of consistency in core technical assistance personnel is key in order to build familiarity with the context and background of the district or school (its experiences, issues, etc.). In addition to core liaisons, structures should be sufficiently robust and flexible to tap specific expertise in the issues facing schools and districts.

Honest dialogue. The essence of a partnership is trust and the ability to participate in open dialogue—a very delicate road to navigate in the high-stakes and urgent discussion around school turnaround. SEAs need to be able to hear from district and school partners what is helpful and what is distracting, especially where the SEA application of policies may sometimes seem to conflict with districts' and schools' expressed vision and values.

At the same time, districts and school administrators need to hear the message directly from SEA staff about what they perceive to be working well and what does not seem to be working. The trust between SEA and district administrators will partly be a reflection of the climate and culture of "safety" developed throughout the district. A shared culture enables all staff to speak openly and honestly about instruction, what supports are needed, and what impediments should be removed. Improving instructional quality is a complex continuous improvement process; without a shared culture, it is unlikely that achievement gains can be sustained.

When districts have not yet been able to establish a positive climate of continuous instructional improvement, the SEA staff have the challenge of coaching the district staff (and perhaps external providers) in how to do so, including identifying the necessary supports to promote quality instruction and setting up peer supports, such as professional learning communities, to strengthen staff cohesion. SEA staff working with districts need to take care not to shake the foundations of that trust when communicating with teachers and administrators.

Above all, SEA staff need time to develop relationships and earn the trust of district staff in order to get beyond superficial compliance-oriented structural changes and address instructional improvements. To do so requires frequent and sustained contact. In Florida's terms, it requires that SEA staff be "listeners, connectors, and facilitators."

Key questions for further exploration

❑ How do the desired features of support mechanisms vary when low-performing schools are concentrated in urban areas vs. in rural areas of a state?

❑ In what ways do SEAs need to change or adapt so that they can most effectively support successful instruction in schools?

❑ What are the advantages and disadvantages of centralized and distributed (e.g., regional) support structures?

Research-based standards, practices, and programs

Turnaround schools and their mentors and service providers can be distracted by an avalanche of administrative demands, which may obscure (or delay) instituting higher expectations for teaching and learning. Yet teachers and students in turnaround schools have no time to waste on programs that have not proven their effectiveness. States have a special role to play in promoting research-based standards and practices so that the additional resources allocated to turnaround schools can be invested wisely. The payoff should be in terms of results for all students, including English learners and students with disabilities.

While it can be argued that all schools should be implementing research-based practices, it is especially critical that turnaround schools select curricula and practices that have a proven track record and research base. As many states have found, districts with limited capacity and low-performing schools are often not in a good position to make wise choices of new instructional programs and to monitor the performance of external providers. These include providers of instructional supports such as curricular review, support in transitioning to college- and career-ready standards, high-quality professional development, effective instructional leadership, and coaching and mentoring.

Curricular and instructional program choices are rightfully in the hands of local decision makers but district and school administrators have many planning decisions to make that require well-informed guides and unbiased sources of information. SEA and regional technical assistance staff can play critical roles—especially in providing research-informed content expertise. In the words of one SEA representative, a benefit of a close working relationship with districts and turnaround schools is that SEA staff are brought in to key decisions that affect instruction, e.g. choice of curriculum and professional development providers: "When big decisions are made we are at the table."

Key questions for further exploration

❏ What is the optimal balance between school-based decision making and research-based standards?

❏ How can states work with turnaround schools so that they become models of accelerated use of research-based practice?

❏ How does a state assess the effectiveness of professional development, coaching practices, and technical assistance services that it provides as well as those offered by outside providers?

❏ How can states help districts and schools better meet the needs of English learners and students with disabilities?

Appendix A

Summary of peer-to-peer convening: State education agency's responsibility to support and promote instruction in turnaround schools

The June 2013 convening discussed in this paper focused on identifying specific initiatives states have put into place to support districts and schools in identifying, planning, and implementing effective instructional practices. Although improving student achievement is the foremost goal of all school turnaround efforts, some initiatives tend to focus on changes in state policies and school staffing practices and overlook instruction as a priority for immediate change. Ultimately, student learning is reliant on effective classroom instruction. This convening was designed to address this urgency by helping states learn from each other and experts about promising approaches for assessing, identifying, and implementing effective instructional practices.

Five state teams attended the two-day convening held by the Office of School Turnaround (OST) in Washington, D.C. Teams included state staff (e.g., SIG and Title I directors, school transformation staff, state superintendents, deputy commissioners) and district and school representatives (e.g., program directors, principals, teachers). Experts presented the research and addressed key instructional supports, such as coaching and implementation frameworks; teams described their approaches for improving instruction at the state, district, and school levels; and facilitated discussions provided teams with the opportunity to raise questions and share information about current efforts. Through peer-to-peer discussions, states were able to learn about how others have dealt with roadblocks to implementation and ask for feedback on their instructional improvement plans and the challenges ahead. The meeting agenda is presented at the end of this section.

Convening goals for states included:

- Learning about promising approaches for prioritizing and supporting effective instruction in turnaround schools, including the use of an organizing framework outlining key components for leveraging state support for instruction; discussion of other state's initiatives and progress; and presentations on current research and effective coaching and implementation practices.

- Receiving technical assistance in analyzing their initiatives and adapting ideas into their processes for instructional improvements, including identifying next steps, additional information that would facilitate improvements, and desired supports for implementation.

- Establishing relationships with regional comprehensive center staff and others for ongoing support for states.

Day one began with a brief overview of OST technical assistance and an outline of the first day's objectives. They included building a common foundation around an instructional support framework and grounding it in research and policy; learning about each state's goals, progress and challenges; and identifying cross-cutting issues and common questions. States also were introduced to options for follow-up technical assistance activities, such as joining a virtual community of practice with other states.

Day-one activities concentrated on building a common foundation and understanding among participants. The day began with a review of the framework addressing the SEA role in promoting instruction and its components (included in a previous section of this paper entitled, Summary: Putting it all together). That was followed by an expert presentation and group discussion on instructional coaching in turnaround schools, and state and school presentations and discussion extending through the morning and afternoon sessions. Presentations included team highlights of instructional support initiatives, challenges, lessons learned, and shared questions about what teams wanted to learn from other states. At the end of the day, state teams met to begin work on planning and refining their activities for promoting and supporting instruction.

Day two began with a panel discussion of cross-cutting themes and issues that emerged during day one, followed by a presentation on planning for success guided by implementation research and frameworks. The majority of the second day was dedicated to providing time for individual state and school team reflections and discussions, and peer-to-peer conversations and feedback rounds. Afternoon sessions concluded with a group discussion of team insights, plans, and recommendations. The day ended with a discussion of ways to improve the SIG program.

SEA's Responsibility to Support and Promote Instruction in Turnaround Schools

June 10–11, 2013 Washington, DC

June 2013 Convening AGENDA *(abbreviated version)*

Monday, June 10

LEARNING ABOUT FRAMEWORK, SEA/LEA/SCHOOL GOALS AND EXPERIENCES, RESEARCH

9:00–9:30   **Welcome, Purpose and Introductions**
Carlas McCauley, Group Leader, Office of School Turnaround, U.S. Department of Education

Overview of OST Technical Assistance
Carlas McCauley, Group Leader, Office of School Turnaround, U.S. Department of Education
Fred Tempes, Director, Center on School Turnaround
STLC Community of Practice and National SIG Conference
Chris Dwyer, Senior Vice President, RMC Research, *Doing What Works*

9:30–10:00   **Framework: SEA Roles in Promoting Effective Instruction Getting into the Discussion**
Chris Dwyer, Senior Vice President, RMC Research

10:00–11:00   **State/School Presentations with Discussions**
Moderator: **Chris Dwyer,** Senior Vice President, RMC Research
Presenting States: Maryland, Illinois

11:10–12:20   **Conditions for Effective Instructional Coaching and Discussion**
Rita Bean, Professor Emerita, University of Pittsburgh

1:30–3:45   **State/School Presentations with Discussions**
Moderator: **Peggy Simon,** Senior Research Associate, RMC Research
Presenting States: Minnesota, Missouri, Florida

3:45–4:15   **Discussion of Ideas for SIG Re-Regulation**
Carlas McCauley, Group Leader, Office of School Turnaround, U.S. Department of Education

4:15–5:00   **State Team Work Time for Focused Reflection**

Tuesday, June 11

EXPANDING INFLUENCE, DEVELOPING NEXT STEPS WITH FEEDBACK

9:00–9:45 **Panel: Reflections on Cross-Cutting Themes & Issues Day #1**
Carlas McCauley, Group Leader, Office of School Turnaround, U.S. Department of Education
Sam Redding, Associate Director, Center on School Turnaround
Rachel Trimble, Senior TA Consultant, Great Lakes West and North Central Comprehensive Centers

9:45–10:45 **Planning for Success with Active Implementation Frameworks**
Barbara Sims, Co-Director, State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices (SISEP) Center

10:55–11:30 **State Team Work Time for Focused Reflection**
What ideas have you heard about sustaining and scaling up policies and practices that have application to your state?

11:30–1:45 **State Team Dialogue: Informal Feedback (Round 1)**
For states: How have states overcome challenges to sustaining and scaling up practices?
For schools/districts: What recommendations do schools and districts have for how SEAs can best support quality instruction?

1:45–2:15 **Highlights of Next Steps: Sharing Insights, Plans, and Recommendations**

2:15–2:45 **Ideas for SIG Reauthorization: Reactions & Comments**
Carlas McCauley, Group Leader, Office of School Turnaround, U.S. Department of Education

2:45–3:00 **Conclusion and Next Steps**
Carlas McCauley, Group Leader, Office of School Turnaround, U.S. Department of Education

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