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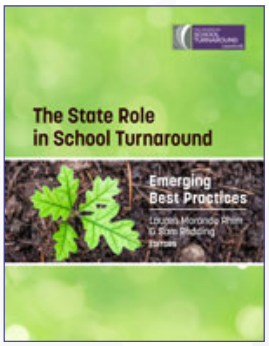

Engaging State Intermediate Agencies to Support School Turnaround

from The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices

Eileen Reed and Sally Partridge

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About the Center on School Turnaround

The national Center on School Turnaround focuses on providing technical assistance to, as well as building the capacity of, states to support districts and schools in turning around their lowest-performing schools. The Center is led by WestEd in partnership with the Academic Development Institute, the National Implementation Research Network, and the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia.

Focus Areas

- Developing SEA Staff Capacity and SEA Organizational Structures
- Building District Capacity
- Creating Policies, Incentives, and Partnerships to Ensure a Pipeline of Turnaround Leaders
- Promoting Cooperative Labor-Management Relations
- Promoting the Use of Expanded Learning Time
- Creating Systems and Processes to Ensure a Pool of High-Quality Turnaround Partners
- Ensuring the Availability and Use of Data Systems at the SEA Level
- Supporting Schools and Districts in Establishing a Positive School Climate
- Monitoring and Evaluating School Turnaround Efforts
- Improving Capacity of School Boards to Support Turnarounds
- Engaging Families and Communities
- Building Political Will for Dramatic Change

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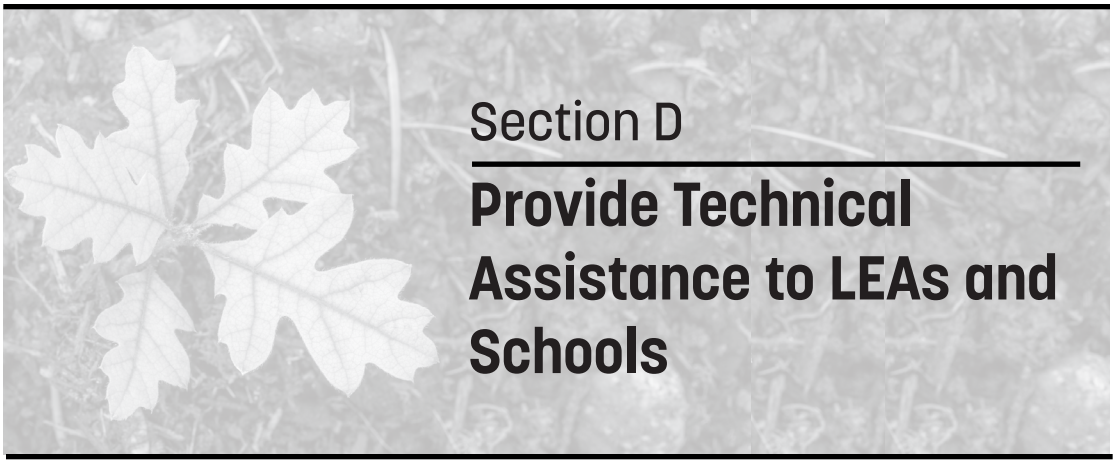


Section D

Provide Technical Assistance to LEAs and Schools

Engaging State Intermediate Agencies to Support School Turnaround

Eileen Reed and Sally Partridge

The impact of increased accountability in public education is not limited to classroom teachers, principals, and district staff. The responsibility of state education agencies (SEAs) to directly support school turnaround has expanded under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), while at the same time, budget cuts and consequent staff reductions have decreased the resources available for SEAs to engage in direct technical assistance to districts and schools. In light of these contextual realities, SEAs must acknowledge the increased demands on their internal capacity and explore possible collaboration with external entities to build local capacity to support school turnaround.

A valuable partner for the SEA's consideration is the educational service agency (ESA).[1] Also referred to as intermediate agencies, ESAs can provide a critical bridge between SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs). According to the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA), ESAs exist in 45 of 50 states and play an important role in direct services and technical assistance to districts and schools.

These organizations provide SEAs and the LEAs they serve with additional capacity, amplified expertise, increased efficiency, expanded geographical impact, and expanded collaboration in the education community. Examples of services include LEA cooperatives for high cost programs, such as special education and career and technology education, and purchasing cooperatives for items such as food services, utilities, and instructional supplies. Many ESAs provide

[1]Education service agencies typically have state specific names, such as Texas regional education service centers, New York Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES), Pennsylvania intermediate units, and Illinois regional offices of education. For additional information on ESAs, visit the Association of Education Service Agencies website at http://www.aesa.us

professional development services to LEAs and, in some cases, manage central office functions, such as payroll and state reporting functions.

For an SEA charged with fulfilling a variety of roles, the ESA serves as a conduit from the SEA to the LEA. State level initiatives can be quickly deployed to the LEAs through the ESAs. For example, implementation of a statewide initiative, such as a new approach to teaching reading, can be deployed through professional development provided by the ESAs to the LEAs.

While the scope of work, funding, available resources, and relationship between the SEA and the ESA varies from state to state, and sometimes even within a state, the opportunity exists for a more productive collaboration than is the current norm. In particular, we encourage SEAs to tap into the talent and resources of the system of ESAs to better meet the needs of low-performing schools.

Our recommendation is based largely on our experience in Texas where we both served in senior leadership roles at the Region 13 Education Service Center in Austin, Texas. Region 13 is one of 20 ESAs in Texas, and a very strong partnership exists between the Texas system of ESAs and the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The strength of the partnership between the Region 13 ESA and the TEA will be illustrated later in the chapter within the context of a school turnaround leadership development initiative.

This chapter focuses on the role of ESAs to influence the interpretation and implementation of policies and practices to turn around low-performing schools and districts. We first present a brief review of the literature regarding the role and potential of ESAs and then describe a successful partnership between an SEA, an ESA, local school districts, and an external provider as an example of what is possible when the SEA and an ESA engage in creative collaboration to address the needs of a state's lowest performing schools. We conclude the chapter with a set of recommended action principles we propose will help SEAs effectively leverage ESAs to support their district and school turnaround priorities.

Education Service Agencies

As the traditional capacity of SEAs is hit with increased demands from national federal requirements and state legislative statutes, including developing revised systems of standards and assessment and monitoring district, campus, and teacher performance, the necessity to rely on a network of expertise and knowledge is paramount. ESAs are one resource that can assist SEAs in providing guidance and support to districts and campuses facing academic challenges. Based on her research on ESAs, University of Washington Professor Meredith Honig (2004) explains, "school district central office administrators, school principals, and other education leaders face contemporary policy demands that exceed their traditional capacity for action and, increasingly, they call on 'intermediary organizations' to help with implementation"(p. 65). This relationship is

evident where SEAs often work with organizations that provide interpretation of policy and applicable resources and support for educational practitioners charged with implementing such policy.

Honig documented that ESAs provide "new resources—knowledge, political/social ties, and an administrative infrastructure—necessary for implementation but traditionally unavailable from school district central offices or school–community partnerships and that they faced different constraining and enabling conditions in carrying out these functions" (2004, p. 66).

At one end of the continuum, ESAs may provide limited services to promote the financial efficiency of the member school districts, such as the creation and management of purchasing consortiums. At the other end of the continuum, agencies like the Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) in New York state provide direct services to students. ESAs can be an invaluable partner to the SEA, especially when focused on filling the gap between the SEA capacity and LEA needs. For example, Pennsylvania's intermediate units serve the educational needs of assigned geographic areas and function as a step of the organization between the public school district and the Pennsylvania Department of Education by providing "cost-effective, instructional, and operational services to school districts, charter schools, and over 2,400 non-public and private schools" (Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units, n.d).

Based on our experience, the most successful partnerships have occurred when there is a process of co-creation between the SEA and the ESA. For example, in the Texas leadership development initiative (illustrated later in this chapter), the SEA identified the area of need, secured the funding, and then worked side-by-side with ESA staff to design the specifics of the service provided to school districts. As a result of the collaborative development process, all members of the partnership were invested in the success of the initiative, and a relationship of mutual respect and accountability was established.

Leveraging an ESA to Extend SEA Capacity

Partnerships with ESAs are essential to increase both the cost-effectiveness and the quality of the technical assistance provided to school districts. The geographic distribution of ESAs allows SEAs to leverage resources across the state. The geographic proximity of ESAs to their local school districts cultivates a level of knowledge that fosters a heightened responsiveness to specific school district needs.

When an SEA decides to partner with an ESA, it is essential there is clarity around the scope of work and that the SEA conducts a careful assessment of the ESA's ability to deliver the requested services. Additionally, the SEA needs to assess the extent to which the requested service matches the existing mission of the ESAs. For example, many states prohibit ESAs from engaging in LEA monitoring and evaluative activities. In this case, designing a scope of work for

the ESA that requires evaluating and making recommendations for the continued employment of a principal in a low-performing school would be in direct conflict with the purpose and authority of the ESA.

Once an SEA outlines a clear scope of work and conducts an assessment of the ESA's ability to provide the service, the next step in the partnership is to develop accountability measures for both organizations. This is ideally accomplished through the development of a performance contract that clearly articulates the expected services and metrics for performance, as well as communication and reporting requirements. The establishment of a project budget is an integral part of the performance contract and should be part of the ongoing reporting requirements.

The Texas Story

Texas has a long established (i.e., since 1968) system of 20 regional education service centers (RESCs) that work closely with the SEA. The role and authority of the system of RESCs is defined in statute with their mission and priority clearly articulated in the Texas Education Code (TEC) §8.002:

PURPOSE. Regional education service centers shall:

1. assist school districts in improving student performance in each region of the system;
2. enable school districts to operate more efficiently and economically; and
3. implement initiatives assigned by the legislature or the commissioner (p. 1).

The TEA, with limited technical assistance capability relative to the size of the geographic region for which it is responsible, relies on the system of RESCs as one of its key partners for disseminating and supporting statewide education initiatives. The collaborative relationship between the SEA and the system of RESCs is an essential and well-embedded component of the public education infrastructure in Texas.

A unique feature of the collaboration between the Texas RESCs and the SEA is the designation of lead centers for "decentralized functions." For example, the Region 13 Education Service Center (RESC 13), located in Austin, Texas, serves as the state's primary technical assistance provider for schools in improvement under NCLB. These services are provided through the Texas Center for District and School Support (TCDSS) housed within RESC 13. The TCDSS, while funded by the TEA, is physically located within and operates under the direction and supervision of RESC 13. A TEA created performance contract clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of each entity as well as the major activities and deliverables. The staffs of the TEA and TCDSS meet regularly to review progress and address ongoing and anticipated needs.

Due to the number of statewide initiatives located at RESC 13, including improving the technical assistance capability of all 20 regional education service centers to better serve their region's lowest performing schools, a division (i.e., Texas Initiatives) uniquely devoted to managing statewide projects for the TEA was established by the Executive Director of RESC 13. It is led by a senior level executive who reports directly to the Executive Director.

The Texas Turnaround Leadership Academy

An example of a statewide initiative, the Texas Turnaround Leadership Academy (TTLA), was the direct result of collaboration between an ESA and the SEA and illustrates the potential benefit to local school districts when the two organizations enter into purposeful collaboration. The following sections introduce the approach Texas took to leverage ESAs to extend the SEA's capacity and describes how one of these regions served as the key force driving turnaround in the state.

An advantage of designating lead centers for special projects is the synergy of funding, expertise, and resources that can be leveraged to address identified needs. The TTLA is an example of this synergy. As the number of projects and programs at RESC 13 focused on serving the lowest performing schools in the state grew, RESC 13 recognized the need for a leadership development program focused on building the capacity of principals of low-performing schools and their district central office teams to improve the academic performance of their chronically underperforming schools.

In 2008, members of the leadership team of Texas Initiatives at RESC 13 presented a proposal to representatives of the TEA. The proposal described the need to improve the leadership skills of principals and central office staffs and outlined a concept for a leadership development program. With encouragement from the TEA, RESC 13 leaders developed a preliminary budget, and agency staff worked to successfully secure funding to develop and implement a two-year leadership development program focused on turning around some of the state's lowest performing schools.

Following funding approval by TEA, a collaborative process of co-creation with RESC 13 program staff and the TEA developed a more detailed design for the turnaround leadership development program. As in all other projects managed by RESC 13 on behalf of the TEA, performance contracts outlined the scope of work, timeline for implementation, expected outcomes, evaluation criteria, program budget, and reporting requirements. With this foundation in place, RESC 13 staff went to work to gather district input and to finalize and implement the TTLA.

Design of the Texas Turnaround Leadership Academy

The TTLA was designed by a team at RESC 13 in partnership with the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business and Curry School of

Education's Partnership for Leaders in Education (PLE) turnaround specialist program. The PLE program is a two-year executive education program that focuses on building district and school leader capacity to drive and sustain dramatic change efforts in low-performing schools. RESC 13 personnel selected the PLE because of its track record of success as well as its unique focus on developing district leadership teams in addition to the campus principal.[2] The PLE program emphasizes developing district and school level leadership capacity through the implementation of policies and practices that establish the necessary environment and support needed to effectively turn around low-performing schools.

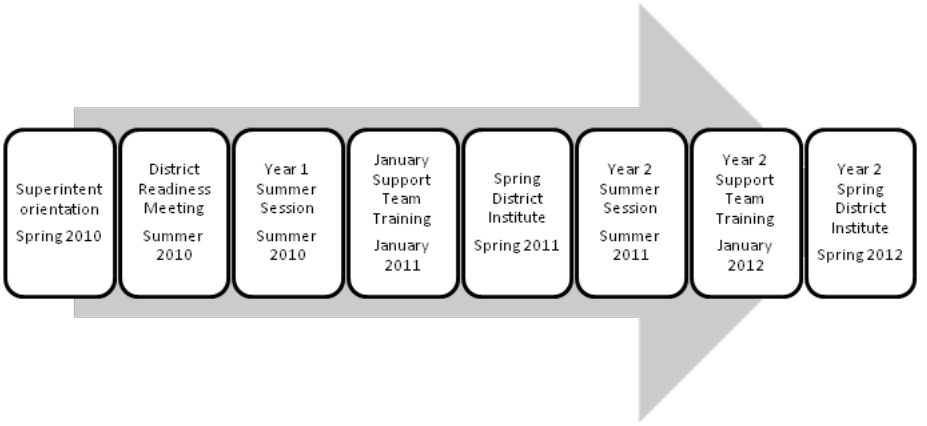
In consultation with the TEA, RESC 13 identified districts with multiple low-performing schools or schools that had been failing for multiple years. The key criteria were schools identified as 1) Title I School Improvement Program, 2) SIG recipients, and 3) those identified under the state accountability system as "academically unacceptable." RESC 13 personnel made an effort to consider geographic and district size diversity and to consider district leadership to ensure that the district would support participation in a turnaround leadership program. Once these criteria were finalized by RESC 13, eligible districts were invited to participate in the program. In the first year, 5 districts and 29 schools participated in the TTLA. After the first year, recognizing that the program did not align with the district's current school improvement strategy, one district exited the program, leaving 23 schools and 4 districts in the program.

An additional goal of the TTLA was to establish aligned leadership and systems of support at the state, regional, district, and campus level to better serve the participating schools. In designing the program, RESC 13 placed a special emphasis on reducing and streamlining reporting and other redundant requirements, such as district and school site visits and mandatory technical assistance. To accomplish this, teams from RESCs with districts participating in the program, technical assistance providers working with the schools because of their federal or state accountability designation, as well as TEA representatives, attended the various activities of the two-year program in Virginia and Texas along with the participating district and campus leaders.

The program consisted of summer training sessions at UVa and school team training sessions in Texas. The following graphic provides a snapshot of the professional development activities the participating districts engaged in over the two years of the program.

In addition to the professional development sessions, program representatives from the UVa and the TTLA formally visited districts and schools at least twice a year. Throughout the program, RESC personnel provided targeted professional development based on identified need. To provide focus to the school's

[2]For a detailed analysis of the inaugural School Turnaround Specialist Program, see Duke et al. (2005) and Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education (2009).



turnaround work and site visits, principals crafted 90-day action plans throughout the two years of the program. The 90-day plan breaks the turnaround work into clear, actionable steps. Additionally, the 90-day plans were helpful for monitoring purposes and holding the principal and school teams accountable for progress.

An important design feature of the PLE is the designation of an individual to serve in the role of district shepherd. TTLA asked each participating district superintendent to designate a senior level staff member as the district shepherd. The shepherd served as the liaison between the superintendent's office and the campus principal to 1) ensure that district departments were responsive to campus turnaround efforts, 2) provide a direct line of communication to the superintendent, and 3) monitor the principal's progress on 90-day plans.

In addition to the district shepherd, TTLA assigned each participating district a case manger from the TTLA staff and an RESC liaison from the participating regions. Case managers maintained regular contact with the district shepherd and the PLE program staff. The RESC liaison assisted with access to professional development and technical assistance from the participating district's RESC.

Implementation Challenges

Leveraging the RESC network in Texas proved to be an effective approach to leveraging state resources to support a high priority initiative: school turnaround. Yet, reflecting the extent to which school change efforts rely heavily on the individuals charged with the effort, the initiative in Texas revealed two key challenges: district buy-in and identifying the right district shepherd. States interested in utilizing their ESA network to support turnaround should keep these challenges in mind.

District commitment to the TTLA project was essential to effective implementation of the program. Although each district superintendent agreed to participate in the project and meet the expectations of the program design, the high expectations for active central office engagement in the turnaround efforts

produced some consternation at the district level. For example, the district shepherd was expected to conduct meaningful weekly campus visits and hold the central office accountable for providing needed support at the campus level. For some districts, this represented a significant change in the relationship between the central office staff and campus principals.

Effectively leveraging the role of the district shepherd was a significant hurdle of the TTLA process. For instance, a number of districts named a district shepherd without fully appreciating the expectations of the role. In response to this challenge, TTLA restructured the support and technical assistance originally planned by the ESA for the turnaround campus leader to increase the training for the district shepherd and central office staff around responsibilities and purpose of the shepherd role.

Program Lessons to Date

The districts involved in the TTLA completed the program in May 2012. The lessons that emerged for TEA, RESC 13, and the participating districts were meaningful and impactful. Texas introduced new assessments in the middle of the TTLA program thereby making it difficult to discern absolute or valid impact on student outcomes. Overall, some schools demonstrated strong gains while others, in particular those schools in which the program was not fully implemented for a variety of contextual reasons, did not. While academic outcomes after two years were not as strong as anticipated, we culled lessons that have shaped practice that we anticipate will have a positive impact on schools across the state. For instance, a direct outcome at the SEA level is the redesign of accountability and support systems to enhance the district's ability to improve their own schools. The Texas Accountability Intervention System now clearly outlines commitments and provisions expected of districts regarding support for their low-performing schools, and there is a renewed emphasis on the vital role of districts in the improvement process.

The participating RESC turnaround teams directly improved their services to districts based on new learning including redesigning their school support services to reflect a greater emphasis on engaging the district central office in the improvement process. Participating districts adopted many of the practices learned in the TTLA for all of their low-performing schools such as the enhanced use of data and district-wide adoption of 90-day plans to monitor implementation of school improvement efforts.

An area that exceeded expectations as a crucial component of the TTLA was the participation of potential campus and district leaders in the Behavior Event Interview based on the identification of competencies for turnaround leadership identified by Public Impact (2008). All districts responded positively to this component of the program and voiced a need for more support about ways to effectively develop pipelines of turnaround leaders at the local and state level

based on the identification of competencies unique to working in a turnaround environment. Improving district recruitment and hiring practices for principals serving in low-performing schools has a far-reaching impact and is an area of future work for the TEA.

The TTLA is one example of how SEAs can leverage their ESAs to create initiatives to address SEA priorities. While the funding was for only one cohort of districts, the lessons learned have been far-reaching and continue to impact and inform the direction of the TEA and the RESCs as they work to meet their responsibilities in the area of school turnaround. The TEA is designing future statewide turnaround projects that build on the experiences from the TTLA and incorporate lessons learned from the Title I School Improvement Program and the federal SIG program.

Action Principles

Strengthen the role of ESAs to support the SEAs work

- Build funding for ESAs into the SEA appropriations budget.
- Define rigorous performance expectations and responsibilities of ESAs in statute in return for funding.

Promote accountability

- Create performance contracts that clearly state the scope of the turnaround work, the roles and responsibilities of each party, clear outcomes, and performance measures.
- Establish regular and ongoing reporting requirements between SEA and ESA to maintain ongoing communication, ensure project milestones are met, and to make any necessary midcourse corrections.
- Establish realistic performance measures that acknowledge the unique role and limits of the ESA.
- Establish consequences for failure to meet expectations (e.g., award contract for services to a different entity).

Select an ESA with the core competency for turnaround work

- Contract with ESAs with proven experience and ability in turning around districts and campuses. States with multiple ESAs may partner with different ESAs for individual projects, dependent on each ESAs specific areas of expertise. Include sharing of resources and information to other ESAs as part of the project requirements.
- Connect multiple ESAs, based on their strengths, into a web or network that works collaboratively to accomplish the work. For larger states, one ESA may facilitate the statewide approach to turnaround work while regional ESAs provide coordinated support to local districts and campuses.

Anticipate and prevent role confusion between the SEA and the ESA

- Clearly define how roles and responsibilities within the entities will change as new partnerships are defined. For example, will school and district site visits historically performed by SEA staff transition to ESA staff?
- Ensure the policy guidelines of the ESA support the function that the SEA is requesting the ESA to perform.

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