

**The Evolving Role of the State Education Agency in the Era of ESSA:
Past, Present, and Uncertain Future**

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Executive Summary

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states have considerably more flexibility and authority in K-12 education than they had under the previous federal education law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). And with this increased power comes the increased responsibility to support the improvement of educational outcomes for every student in the state. Leaders at the helm of state education agencies (SEAs) therefore find themselves in a moment of both great change and great opportunity, as many agencies move away from a predominant focus on compliance with federal regulations and programmatically dictated uses of funds, and toward a broader focus on supporting districts and schools. For many advocates of low-performing students, it is also a moment of potential peril if states fail to embrace their new responsibilities and work hard to improve educational opportunity and outcomes.

As the definition of – and responsibility for – success changes in this new environment, the roles of the SEA deserve reconsideration. There is no “correct” set of roles for the SEA, no consistent answer to the question of which activities a state agency should – or should not – engage in. Each SEA is starting from a different place along a change management continuum, and each has different educational strengths and assets to build upon, different needs to address, and a unique set of laws to follow and traditions to respect.

ESSA presents fewer federal mandates, which opens the door to state creativity and innovation. But having fewer mandates also raises questions about state capacity and removes the political cover that was, until recently, provided by federal rules. With this reduction in federal direction and oversight, the onus to define and implement a vision for the state’s educational future will rest almost entirely with the state’s educational leadership. And while leading change is done by a few, it is work that can be undone by many. States therefore should be very deliberate in fostering conditions within the state that are conducive to educational improvement and consistent with the state’s vision — building statewide understanding of the problems, support for the proposed solutions, and pressure to perform at higher levels.

This will not be easy. Driving educational change from the state capitol all the way down to the classroom is extraordinarily difficult. For reforms to succeed, state policy changes must change district practice, district practices must change the behavior of principals and teachers, and school-level changes must deliver improved student performance.¹ As a result, the vigor and effectiveness of SEAs — and their ability to support local districts — will be critical, particularly as states now have more discretion over education policy in the wake of ESSA.

But state commitment alone may not be sufficient, for, as many scholars have noted, states suffer from a “capacity gap” that undermines their ability to monitor and enforce policy mandates and provide technical guidance to districts. States must acknowledge the SEA’s critical role in the ESSA era and fund them accordingly so they have adequate resources to do this work. For their part, SEAs will need to reorganize themselves and

prioritize their functions to adapt to the new demands being placed on them. As they do so, they will need to identify areas of comparative advantage and economies of scale — where the state can do something better and/or more efficiently than districts. If we are to close the country’s longstanding racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps and address concerns about the nation’s overall educational performance, states and SEAs will increasingly need to lead the effort.

The Evolution of State Education Agencies (SEAs)

The historical evolution of SEAs provides important context for understanding the ways in which their role has shifted over the past two decades and is likely to shift further in coming years. Until recently, state education agencies were not deeply involved in K-12 education policymaking or school district oversight, and school districts and local school boards were the dominant decision-makers for elementary and secondary schools. Beginning with the federal National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, however, national policymakers used the grant-in-aid system to push states to pursue federal goals in public education. In order to claim their share of a growing pot of federal education funds, states had to agree to comply with a wide array of federal policy mandates, and over time the relationship between state education agencies and local school districts began to change.²

The creation of federal categorical programs in the NDEA and ESEA necessitated the creation of new federal and state administrative capacities to oversee the administration of the programs and ensure compliance. State eligibility for federal education funds was often contingent on the provision of state matching funds, the creation of central implementing offices, and the collection of a variety of statistical data, which necessitated that state education agencies expand their size and activities and become more institutionalized. This was a clear objective of ESEA, as Title V of the original legislation provided \$25 million over five years for the agencies to build up their administrative capacity so that they would be better equipped to handle their new, federally imposed, responsibilities. The result, as Paul Hill has noted, was that state education agencies often became so dependent on federal funding and pliable to federal direction that they were effectively “colonized”.³

State education agencies—that had generally been poorly funded and staffed prior to ESEA—became a crucial partner of the U.S. Office of Education (USOE – the precursor to today’s U.S. Department of Education, or USED) and the key implementing agency for federal education policy. For most of the next thirty years, this was a cooperative and symbiotic relationship, as the federal government depended on SEAs to funnel national grant monies to local school districts. Moreover, the states were thrilled to accept such funds, particularly when not accompanied by federal mandates. However, the federal reliance on SEAs created the potential for a serious principal-agent⁴ challenge for USOE and the department would later struggle to get SEAs to align state priorities and resources with federal educational goals.

Initially the USOE relied on the assurances of state education officials that they were in compliance with federal guidelines.⁵ However, one of the fundamental premises behind the idea of compensatory education, and of ESEA more generally, was that state and local education authorities had failed to ensure equal educational opportunities for

their students and that they could not be trusted to do so in the future without federal intervention. The distrust of local education authorities—and mounting evidence that states and localities were diverting federal funds to purposes for which they were not intended—ultimately led Congress and federal bureaucrats to increase the regulation and supervision of federal aid.⁶ The ongoing consolidation of school districts across the country facilitated this effort as administrative centralization ultimately made schools more susceptible to state and federal regulation.⁷

Federal education mandates initially focused on ensuring more equitable school funding and access rather than on improving the academic performance of students and schools. It was not until the seminal *A Nation at Risk* report of 1983 drew national attention to the subpar performance of American students compared to their international peers that states began (slowly and variably) to engage more directly in making education policy for their schools.⁸ Mike Cohen, the President of Achieve, notes that “in the post-*Nation At Risk* era there was a flurry of state-led activity. There were literally hundreds of state education reform commissions (several per state) and a burst of reform initiatives that put state testing and accountability reporting programs in place, raised high school graduation requirements, lengthened the school day and year, and supported school improvement and school ‘restructuring’ programs. Many of the most comprehensive programs (e.g. Arkansas, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Mississippi, and New Jersey among others) were governor-led and also had strong components to professionalize teaching, and support early childhood programs as well. States were already leading, and the 1989 National Education Summit was used by the governors to push the federal government to line its programs up to align with their leadership. The governors and states stepped up to the plate for many of the same reasons they need to now under ESSA – overall performance is too low, achievement gaps are more visible and more persistent now than before, the knowledge and skill demands of the global economy are increasing rapidly while our population is growing more diverse, etc.”

A new federal (and thus state) focus on accountability for student achievement and school reform was outlined in the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 and was given more ‘teeth’ in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001. NCLB required states to implement accountability systems, annually test children in reading and math in grades three through eight and test them once in high school, identify proficient students as well as schools where an insufficient number of students were proficient, ensure that specified measures were taken with regards to schools that failed to make “adequately yearly progress” (AYP), and set targets that would ensure that 100 percent of children were proficient in reading and math by 2014. One of the most important mandates in the law was that school report cards must disaggregate student test score data for subgroups based on race or ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status, limited proficiency in English, and classification as in need of special education. Crucially and controversially, a school that did not meet the proficiency target for *any one of these groups* was placed in “in need of improvement status” and states were required to take an escalating series of steps and interventions (including the offering of public school choice, tutoring, technical assistance, and restructuring) aimed at schools and districts that persistently failed to meet AYP targets.

The law—combined with rigorous enforcement by the USED—pushed states to rapidly and fundamentally transform their student testing, data collection, and district monitoring systems. A 2008 Rand study, for example, concluded that: “states, districts, and schools have adapted their policies and practices to support the implementation of NCLB.”⁹ The USED closely monitored state compliance efforts on both the front end—through the use of detailed accountability plans that each state must submit for review—and on the back end, through regular state reporting and federal audits.¹⁰ The USED’s Office of Inspector General conducted audits of state policies and their compliance with NCLB mandates and demanded that states make changes where necessary.

NCLB thus pressed states to become more involved in core matters of school governance—such as academic standards, student assessment, teacher quality, school choice, and school restructuring—and fundamentally altered the educational relationship between the federal government and states, and between states and schools districts. State departments of education approached these new responsibilities under NCLB with widely divergent levels of commitment and success.¹¹ Many observers felt that the law’s focus on generating improvement in student proficiency as measured by standardized tests, and its prescriptive improvement models for schools that failed to do so, constrained states’ ability to design their accountability systems in the way they thought best.¹² And as Vergari has noted, states rebelled against federal mandates in education and sought to reshape them on the ground.¹³

NCLB ultimately forced states to change many of their educational practices, but political resistance and capacity gaps at the state level meant that these changes were often more superficial than substantive. The law did not generate as much meaningful school improvement or progress in closing student-achievement gaps as was originally hoped,¹⁴ making it abundantly clear that most state departments of education were ill-equipped to monitor compliance with their own policies or engage in effective district- and school-level interventions.¹⁵ It also renewed doubts about whether states even had the political will to address the problem of underperforming schools. States used their discretion under NCLB to manipulate their accountability systems by lowering their standards, making their tests easier, and/or decreasing their proficiency cut scores. Such actions were widely criticized for dumbing down the curriculum and undermining the law’s school accountability system and led to the call for the creation of common standards and assessments.¹⁶

With a divided Congress unable to reauthorize NCLB or enact new education legislation, President Obama used his executive authority to push states and SEAs in important ways. The centerpieces of his first-term education agenda were the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top (RTT), \$3.5 billion School Improvement Grant (SIG), and \$650 million Investing in Innovation (i3) programs.¹⁷ The RTT, SIG, and i3 funds were distributed through competitive grant processes in which states and districts were rewarded for developing school reforms that were in line with federal goals and guidelines. In particular, RTT state applications were graded according to the rigor of the reforms proposed and their compatibility with five administration priorities: the development of college and career readiness standards and assessments; improving teacher training, evaluation and retention policies; developing better data systems; the implementation of preferred school turnaround strategies; and building stakeholder

support for reform. The Department also established a number of criteria that states had to meet to even be eligible to apply for the RTT funds. The process had a major effect on state school reform efforts and SEAs were given a central role in designing and implementing these reforms.

RTT ultimately attracted applications from all but 4 states over the first two rounds. (Alaska, North Dakota, Texas, and Vermont were the only states that did not apply in either round of the competition.) In the most in-depth analysis of the impact of RTT conducted to date, William Howell found that in the wake of the competition (2009-2014) states on average enacted 68% of the “reform policies” it encouraged while they averaged only a 10% adoption rate in the seven years before the competition (2001-2008). Howell concludes that “The surge of post-2009 policy activity constitutes a major accomplishment for the Obama administration. With a relatively small amount of money, little formal constitutional authority in education, and without the power to unilaterally impose his will on state governments, President Obama managed to jump-start policy processes that had languished for years in state governments across the country.”¹⁸ A 2015 report by the Governmental Accountability Office (GAO), however, found that states struggled to implement their RTT reforms effectively and often lacked adequate capacity in their education agencies to do so.

In response to these struggles, CCSSO pressed federal policymakers to give states greater flexibility from NCLB mandates.¹⁹ In 2012 the Obama administration initiated an ESEA flexibility plan that would enable states to apply to the U.S. Department of Education for a conditional waiver from NCLB’s accountability provisions.²⁰ The administration declared that in order to be eligible to receive a waiver, states must adopt college and career ready standards (such as the Common Core State Standards), develop a plan to identify and improve the bottom 15 percent of schools; and develop teacher and principal evaluation systems “based on multiple valid measures, including student progress over time.” Despite protests that the program amounted to executive and federal overreach,²¹ the program proved appealing to the 45 states which applied and received waivers, eager as they were to escape NCLB’s accountability system.²²

As states struggled to meet NCLB’s ambitious goals and chafed at the reforms rewarded by RTT and waivers, some of the initial philosophical reservations within the Democratic and Republican parties regarding the new federal emphasis on testing and accountability came storming back to the surface. Many Republicans resented the “coerciveness” of the new federal role, while many Democrats were concerned about the impact of standardized testing on instruction and teacher evaluation and about the focus on education over broader economic and social change.²³ States put considerable pressure on Congress to ensure that federal policy show greater deference to state and local priorities. And the Obama administration, concerned that education policies were being enacted through executive action, was anxious to codify them into law. The result was the bi-partisan passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015.²⁴ While the law maintains the annual testing and reporting provisions at the heart of NCLB, it reduces the federal role in accountability considerably and reigns in the authority of USED. It also prevents the federal government from mandating or incentivizing state policies around teacher evaluation and standards adoption.

A federal focus on compliance auditing for waste, fraud and abuse will continue, but beyond this, the feds will have to rely on guidance more than enforcement to steer state policy. This is not terribly different from the dynamic that caused SEAs throughout the 1990's and 2000's to become compliance-focused entities. If the goal, however, is for SEAs to become enablers of educational improvement (while continuing to use federal funds appropriately), then state leadership teams will have to be deliberate in driving this change throughout their agencies. In many states, this process began close to a decade ago; in others, the process is in its infancy.

ESSA for the most part is *not* likely to result in a return of education policymaking authority to the local level, but rather to the state level. A 2015 report from the Council of Chief State School Officers, for example, proclaimed that “Regardless of this uncertainty at the federal level, state education leaders remain firmly committed to state accountability systems that support educators, parents, and students by providing useful information that leads to improved outcomes for all students.” (CCSSO, 2015) While states have historically been relatively minor players in school reform, one of the lasting legacies of the Obama presidency may well be the invigoration of the state role in education.²⁵

Cohen cautions, however, that “state education systems remain ‘loosely coupled’ organizations in which the technical core of the enterprise is protected from external forces by the very design of the system and there is little connection between and among different parts of the system (e.g., state-local, pre-K/K-12/post-secondary etc.). Much of the state-led reforms over the past 20 years or so have been designed to rectify many of these weaknesses, and have made a fair amount of progress, to be sure. Yet to a considerable extent, the various vertical and horizontal parts of the system are still quite loosely coupled, and both governance structures and vested interests of large numbers of stakeholders seem at times quite intent on keeping it that way.” He adds that, “There is the growing understanding that we won’t get better results – higher achievement and deeper learning for all kids – through higher standards, better tests and strong accountability alone. Those are essential, but often blunt tools. And in any event, they don’t alone penetrate the instructional core of schools. Meaningful, sustained professional development, a more professionalized teaching and school leader work force (which requires changes to the preparation, licensure, recruitment/selection, evaluation, rewards, etc. for educators) are all necessary to produce needed results.”

Jeremy Anderson, President of the Education Commission of the States, highlighted a further challenge to doing this work: SEA leadership turnover. He notes that 60% of chief state school officers are new within the last 16 months and that the average tenure in the office is only about two years.

Going forward, states will have considerably more latitude to determine their own education agendas, though also less political cover from federal mandates. What remains to be seen is if states have developed (or can develop) sufficient political will and administrative capacity to maintain the momentum that has built up behind education reform over the past three decades. Anderson cautions that “there are still battle wounds from some of the big political fights over assessments, accountability, and teacher evaluation during the past few years, so in some states, while there may be an opportunity

to rethink these policies, there may not be an appetite to do it because the scars are still fresh even though the policies are a few years old.”

Organizing and Resourcing SEAs for Success under ESSA

State Role vs District Role

As the state role in education continues to grow and evolve, it is important to recognize that all SEAs are not the same—each state’s education agency has a unique history and operates in a different fiscal, political, statutory, and constitutional context. In particular, states vary significantly in their attachment to local control of schools and the proper role of the state in education and this has a major impact on how SEAs approach their work. States vary widely in the amount of centralization/standardization they have mandated in their policies—either in statute or in regulation—and this has a major impact on the SEA’s approach to supporting school districts. A clear tension exists between districts’ desire for flexibility to adopt policies that local officials see as best suited to their particular circumstances, some states’ desire for more uniform policy, and SEAs’ limited capacity to provide oversight and implementation support for widely divergent district approaches.²⁶

As a recent Fordham Institute analysis noted, many states are simply philosophically opposed to an active SEA role and resistant to the idea of standardizing policies across districts.²⁷ There are also constitutional limitations on the role of the SEA in some states such as Colorado. Tennessee State Board of Education Director Sara Heyburn has added that “the state role varies drastically from state to state in terms of how much local control exists. It has huge implications for what the state attempts to do or doesn’t do and the kinds of support you offer at the state level versus how you facilitate the right things to be happening at the district level.” Furthermore, even where an SEA may have the resources and constitutional and statutory authority to be active in education policy, it may lack the relationships and trust with district leaders that are essential to ensure effective collaboration.

SEAs need to think about comparative advantage and economies of scale—where the state can provide something that districts cannot. Sam Franklin, the former Director of Teacher Effectiveness for Pittsburgh, concurred, remarking that “SEAs should pay attention to the aspects of the work where they have a unique ability to solve a problem and where there is a good return on their investment.” Franklin also cautioned that “just because districts don’t have the capacity to do this work doesn’t mean that states do.”

Compliance and Support

SEAs are also struggling with the balance between compliance monitoring and service delivery; but the reality is that they are—and will always remain—responsible for both. LEAs understand that SEAs have the power—and the statutory responsibility—to ensure compliance with legislative mandates and that divulging information about their implementation struggles can get them into hot water and bring sanctions. The traditional SEA focus on compliance and accountability activities has made LEAs wary of being

candid about whether and how they might be struggling to implement reform and reluctant to seek out assistance.

Daniel Weisberg of TNTP reiterated this point, noting that “there is this perception that the agency that has the ability to take money away and take other punitive action against districts can’t also be a support to the entities they regulate.” He drew a parallel with the challenge that the health and safety agency OSHA has in balancing its inspection and fining function with its workplace safety improvement function—“there is nothing mutually exclusive about the two functions – in fact the dual role is absolutely critical. There are not enough districts that are going to be able to do this work successfully without both support and accountability.” Harmonizing their support and compliance monitoring functions will continue to require a delicate balancing act for SEAs, but getting the balance—and the communication—right will be crucial to the education reform effort going forward.

Organizational Structure

To support their new responsibilities, SEAs in many states are undergoing radical restructuring and re-staffing as they attempt to free up resources for new tasks and reorganize to better carry them out.²⁸ After winning its RTT grant, for example, Tennessee contracted with the U.S. Education Delivery Institute to conduct a “capacity review” of the state department of education (DOE). The review concluded that “the organization and the work wasn’t organized in a way that supported implementation...[and] reinforced that intentional change had to happen in order to improve capacity, regardless of how that would affect components, departments, and people in the agency.”²⁹ After joining the state in April 2012, Tennessee’s then-education commissioner, Kevin Huffman, reorganized the SEA around four key strategic priorities: expand students’ access to effective teachers and leaders; expand families’ access to good schools; expand educators’ access to resources and best practices; and expand public access to information and data. Equally important was restructuring the regional offices which support districts (also known as the Centers of Regional Excellence, or CORE Offices) so they reported directly to the SEA and had clear objectives tied to teaching and learning. In large, rural states with a variety of different types of districts, these regional offices matter enormously.

In 2011, the New Jersey DOE surveyed its 580 superintendents and found that almost three-quarters believed the department did not play a role in helping to improve student achievement.³⁰ Then-education commissioner Chris Cerf initiated a radical re-design of the state education department with the expressed purpose of better enabling it to support district reform efforts. He restructured the organizational chart and reassigned staff around four areas: academics, performance, talent, and innovation—and all four offices are focused on service delivery. Chief Talent Officer Peter Shulman remarked that: “For our [low-performing] schools, we want to have direct intervention support. SEAs traditionally have fallen into the one-size-fits-all mantra but now we are trying to provide support at the granular school, if not classroom, level for about 250 (10%) of the lowest performing schools in the state.” New Jersey has also created seven new Regional Achievement Centers (RACs), each with a staff of 10-15 drawn from the SEA who specialize in different areas. Shulman said that “the idea is to make sure that you have

the right cure for the right ailment” and that the RACs have created an “unprecedented opportunity for two-way dialogue.”

Though many state departments of education have begun to reorganize themselves away from “funding sources” (e.g., the Title I Office) and around the work (e.g., talent office, academics office, performance office), SEA restructuring is difficult and time-consuming work. While such restructuring is necessary to carrying out new responsibilities over the long term, in the short term, reorganizations create a number of challenges. It will take some time for the organizational shake-outs to be completed and for new structures and staff to acclimate to their new roles. As a result, the structural and human capital issues of the “old SEA” may preclude the rapid emergence of the “new SEA.”

Resources and Capacity

Despite the fact that the role of SEAs has grown significantly in recent years and is likely to continue to grow in the future, the resources they have been given to carry out this work have not kept pace.³¹ States and districts have struggled to secure the financial, personnel, and technical resources to support implementation of such new reforms as Common Core and teacher evaluation. The economic downturn and budget cuts led to staff cuts in many places at exactly the moment when additional personnel were needed to carry out the demanding new work. The staff/capacity issue continues to be exacerbated by the way many SEAs and districts are structured around discrete funding streams which leads to a serious siloing problem and makes it difficult to re-assign staff to new functions.³² And the fact that SEA staff salaries are often only half of district salaries, especially at leadership levels, makes it hard to attract the state’s most talented education leaders into critical SEA roles, contributing to high churn rates and creating a lack of continuity.

Despite the clear need for SEAs and districts to provide sustained support to schools, significant capacity issues persist.³³ Daniel Weisberg of TNTP believes “that capacity is a huge challenge at the state level. State departments of education often just don’t have the resources to really do a full state-wide rollout of a major initiative and ensure quality implementation in every district. Race to the Top required them to go beyond policy to actually be the implementers and that’s a very different role.”

Weisberg is hardly alone in his concern about SEAs’ lack of capacity to fulfill their expanding responsibilities. Given the current tight fiscal climate, most states have been unable or unwilling to allocate new money to support the implementation of new reforms initiated in the wake of NCLB and Race to the Top. In a 2011 survey of SEAs, Cynthia Brown and her colleagues noted that a wave of recent reforms had “put immense stress on agencies that were originally conceived as tiny departments primarily designed to funnel money to local school districts. Yet it is not at all clear that state education agencies are prepared for this demanding new role.”³⁴ Former Louisiana Superintendent Paul Pastorek has expressed concern that the USED and many states have been insufficiently attuned to these capacity deficits, saying, “I think some [states] may be underestimating the resources and energy that these kinds of initiatives require . . . state departments of education are not designed to implement these programs.”³⁵

Limited SEA resources, combined with widely divergent district needs around implementation support, have led many state agencies to differentiate and prioritize the kinds of support they provide. New Jersey's Pete Schulman, for example, emphasized that NJ has developed a system with four tiers of state support: the state agency, implementation managers, the county offices, the regional achievement centers (RACs). He commented that "We have close to 600 school districts, and they have a diversity of needs and diversity of challenges. And when we think about the support, we think about the ability to actually be hands-on with districts. We want to make sure that the support is, wherever possible, tailored to the individual needs of the district. So if you think about different demographics, different socioeconomic problems, different sizes, we've really tried to make sure that as we deploy our resources, we do so with that lens in mind." Shulman added, "we wanted to think about how we sort of deploy our resources in a disproportionate manner...concentrate[d] on the folks that need them the most." Similarly, Weisberg from TNTP believes that "Rather than using their limited resources to provide relatively light-touch support to all districts, it may be more effective to differentiate support and to provide significant support to a few districts in order to create exemplar districts. It is important to create some real success stories and some proof points that other districts can look to in order to see what's possible."

SEAs are also dealing with their internal capacity gaps by relying on three different kinds of external capacity: outside consultants, non-profit partners, and foundation funding. There is some concern, however, that reliance on external resources may preclude or delay the development of the fiscal self-sufficiency and internal capacity that can support these systems over the long term. Another concern is that "outsiders" do not bring the knowledge of state context and networks of relationships that can build crucial trust during difficult implementation work. Some observers worry about what will happen when the outside funding that is making much of this external capacity possible—such as federal grants and private philanthropy—dries up. By contrast, others believe that the capacity demands differ over the short and long term, and that once the initial "heavy lift" and large "start-up costs" associated with developing and installing new systems are over, the SEA's role and resource needs will be less intense. Still others (Smarick, "SEA: At the Helm not the Oar") think that SEAs should NOT try to do this work themselves, but should cultivate trusted third-party partners who can be deployed when and as specific expertise is required. In this view, this will be the most flexible, effective, and cost effective approach to doing this work.

Sir Michael Barber—an architect of British education reform and of the U.S. Education Delivery Institute—has also emphasized the importance of what he calls the "mediating layer" in education reform—subsidiary structures that can build an "effective delivery chain" that translates state policy changes into positive change at the school level.³⁶ Some states (like Pennsylvania) have long had regional intermediate units, but are now changing their roles while other states (like New Jersey) have opted to create entirely new institutions (Regional Achievement Centers). In Pennsylvania, David Volkman, Executive Deputy Secretary in the Department of Education, noted in 2014 that "our agency has shrunk by over 50 percent in just the last six years and by that I mean in terms of personnel that we have on board. We really do lack capacity in terms of the number of staff members who can effectively manage many of these very, very

important projects. So, in Pennsylvania, what we have come to do is to rely heavily on our intermediate units –we have 29 of them—and then we also bring contractors to the table.”

Bill Tucker from the Gates Foundation agreed that SEAs need to figure out the kinds of activities that are best to contract out and which should stay in house, stating that “the idea of an SEA that can do everything for everyone all the time is a pipe dream—both from a resource perspective and in terms of having the nimbleness, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit that helps to move an agenda over time. They can do some of that but not all of it and need to find the right balance, even though that balance might need to shift over time in terms of where the capacity exists. But it’s fair to say that whether it is in-house or out of house that capacity is still quite thin in this arena.”

Individual states need to have a clear vision and strategic plan with measurable goals, assess the existing capacity at the LEA and SEA levels, and define an appropriate role for the SEA that is commensurate with state constitutional and statutory provisions. Given their limited resources, SEA leaders have to think about how to reallocate existing staff and budgets to focus on new responsibilities, to build capacity, and eventually to bring on-budget the work that has been funded by external grants.

SEA Roles in an ESSA Era

With this as the backdrop, then, the new ESSA law adds to the complexity. It confers on states more flexibility and authority in K-12 education than they have had in more than a decade. But with this increased power comes the increased responsibility to support the improvement of educational outcomes for every student in the state. Leaders taking the helm at SEAs therefore find themselves in a moment of both great change and great opportunity, as many agencies add a broader focus on supporting LEAs and schools to their existing focus on compliance with federal regulations, state statutes, and programmatically dictated uses of funds.³⁷ For many advocates of low-performing students, it is also a moment of potential peril if states fail to embrace their new responsibilities to improve educational opportunity and outcomes.

As the definition of – and responsibility for – success changes in this new environment, the roles of the SEA deserve reconsideration. There is no “correct” set of roles for the SEA, no consistent answer to the question of which activities a state agency should – or should not – engage in. Each SEA is starting from a different place along a change management continuum, and each has different educational strengths and assets to build upon, different needs to address, and a unique set of laws to follow and traditions to respect. As previously noted, SEAs operate under very different authorities granted by their state’s constitution, legislation, and enabling regulations. How distributed that authority is varies from one state to the next. Some SEAs operate in concert with other entities, such as state boards of education, professional licensing bodies, early childhood agencies, and/or higher education agencies. In other states, one education agency regulates most or all of these functions. Some states require the heavy involvement of stakeholders in policymaking, while others do not.

Some states vest more decision-making authority at the state level, while others devolve significant power to the local district level. Some have fewer, county-wide districts, while others have hundreds of smaller districts. Some have regional

intermediaries that support the SEA’s work; others do not. Thus, while every state has in common the responsibility of building educational systems that drive toward increasingly excellent and equitable outcomes for all students, the approach for getting there in Rhode Island may differ dramatically from that in Wyoming or Florida.³⁸

In July 2015, the Aspen Institute convened a group of education practitioners and scholars, including these authors, to discuss the roles of the SEA. The output of that meeting was a [guide for state education leaders](#) describing what roles are “essential” for SEAs to lead, what roles SEAs might “possibly” take on, and what roles are “unsuitable.” This paper draws from that framework and uses similar categories to structure our analysis, even though we recognize that some will disagree about which roles SEAs should take on—or consider essential—and which they should not. It is also important to note that our goal here is not to emphasize how states should comply with ESSA, but rather to analyze the ways in which SEAs can – and in some cases must – support the work of schools and districts in the ESSA era.

Essential Roles

Despite the variations in approach that will inevitably arise, there are five areas in which it is essential that SEAs take leading roles: articulating the state’s educational vision and goals; selecting and implementing the state’s standards and assessments; designing and implementing the state’s accountability system; administering, implementing, and overseeing state and federal funding and other programs; and communicating about critical educational issues with stakeholders across the state.

Articulate Vision, Priorities & Goals

The work of the SEA should ideally begin with state education leaders and stakeholders defining the vision for education in the state. And with its emphasis on low-income, minority, special education, and English language learners, ESSA requires that equity be at the center of this vision. The more specific the state is about its goals for improving students’ performance and narrowing achievement gaps, the clearer and easier the planning work will be.

When done well, a statewide process of articulating an education vision results in a shared understanding that is committed to and supported by key actors across the state, and is therefore less polarized, more stable, and more sustainable over time and across leadership transitions. Such a vision helps clarify responsibilities across the state’s educational system, helps ensure coherence and alignment both within the SEA and across coordinating agencies, and provides stakeholders and districts with clear mandates to shape those issues they own.

The vision must be anchored in an honest assessment of the current reality of a state’s academic performance and educational strengths and weaknesses and should describe where the state is headed and why. To realize this vision, a clear plan should be articulated. Key priorities should be outlined, together with the rationale for why these are critical to achieving the vision. For each priority, “success” should be defined and an approach articulated for how progress toward success will be measured, tracked, and reported. As part of this process, the roles the SEA will play – and on which priorities the

SEA will therefore focus – should also become clear. To support states in leading this process, CCSSO has created a [State Strategic Vision Guide](#).³⁹

Several states as well as some jurisdictions in high-performing countries have developed such plans. Two strong examples can be found in [Delaware's Student Success 2025](#) and in Alberta, Canada's [Inspiring Education](#). These plans helped align and organize stakeholders around a common vision, developed a shared sense of the work to be done, and built commitment to achieving the goals. Diverse groups of stakeholders took part, including students, parents, educators, unions, elected leaders and legislators, the business community, higher education, early childhood, healthcare, social services, local funders, and community leaders. It was a significant investment of time but thanks to this, the work in these places is better understood, stakeholders hold each other accountable for achieving goals, and the broad base of support contributes to both progress and sustainability.

ESSA contains consultation requirements that many hope will encourage SEAs to engage governors and legislators, in particular. Lee Posey from the National Conference of State Legislatures hopes that state legislators will also be critical members of education reform conversations. She noted that legislatures in many states felt “left out” during the Race to the Top and NCLB waiver application processes. Posey observed that “There will always be disagreements and different priorities but as long as there is a sense of inclusiveness and time is allowed for consensus to build then you will have progress. The legislative perspective needs to be included when articulating a state’s education vision and priorities, since legislators are the ones who will be asked to approve the spending and statutory changes to support reform and to explain the reforms to their constituents.”

Support Academic Improvement through Implementing Standards and Assessments

In virtually every state, and often in cooperation with the state board of education, the SEA leads work that is at the heart of teaching and learning. They oversee the adoption and ongoing revision of high-quality academic standards. They select, administer, and report results for standardized assessments aligned to these standards. And, in some states, they adopt or recommend instructional materials aligned to the standards.

ESSA includes several notable changes in states’ responsibilities vis-à-vis standards setting. Under the new law, states must “demonstrate” that their “challenging academic standards are aligned with entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the [state’s] system of public higher education and relevant state career and technical education standards.” While all states have a specific process for adopting new standards, few take into account the role of the business and higher education communities in arbitrating quality. Both higher education and employers have been deeply involved in developing standards – especially in more recent years, for example, as active members of the American Diploma Project and Common Core State Standards teams, providing evidence of the knowledge and skills needed for postsecondary success.⁴⁰ However, engaging these entities in “quality control” roles has been more uncomfortable, placing institutions in politically difficult situations and making expedient sign-off the likeliest path. How this new requirement will be implemented at the federal level remains to be

seen⁴¹, but it is not too early for states to (re)think their processes for ensuring and validating – through participation in standards development and/or by providing evidence of alignment – that the state’s academic standards prepare students for success in postsecondary education and the workplace.

There are also new requirements under ESSA for English language proficiency standards. These must align with the states’ other academic standards, and must include speaking, listening, writing, and reading. States whose standards for English learners do not meet these requirements might begin planning their standards review process as well.⁴² Under ESSA, the requirement continues to assess students annually in grades 3 through 8 and to assess them at least once in high school, with all results disaggregated by student subgroup. In addition, the new law requires the assessing of higher order thinking skills, and stipulates that such assessments may be partially delivered via portfolios, projects, or performance tasks.⁴³ This continues the migration away from fill-in-the-bubble tests toward more authentic evaluations of what students know and can do.

Assessments, when developed and administered thoughtfully, can be an important lever for academic improvement. Assessments animate the state’s academic standards, bringing to life the words on the page by showing educators what is expected of a student who has mastered the standards. The information reported can inform a student’s instructional path, a student subgroup’s support strategy, a teacher’s professional learning needs, a school’s quality rating, a curricular program’s effectiveness, and more. One of the SEA’s most critical roles is therefore ensuring that tests are of high quality – that the tests align to the state’s academic standards, that they assess the full range of those standards (including those higher order skills that may be difficult to assess through traditional means), and that the results are reported in useful and actionable ways. A pair of studies of four state standardized tests (Smarter Balanced, PARCC, ACT Aspire, and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) evaluated just these criteria.⁴⁴ States that choose to use other assessments should consider commissioning similar evaluations.

Finally, many states have the responsibility for selecting or recommending curriculum resources aligned to the standards. As numerous studies show, strong curricular materials are critical enablers of student learning.⁴⁵ So even in states where curriculum adoption is a local issue, SEAs might choose to support districts by publishing lists of standards-aligned curriculum materials or by providing tools for districts to use in selecting aligned materials.

Louisiana is an example of a state that recommends curricula to its districts, but does not require their use. Concerned that most curricula would not provide teachers with the support and scaffolding needed to effectively lead student learning, the SEA began in 2012 working with a cadre of master teachers to identify strong resources. Through a [fast, rigorous, and ongoing review process](#), the teachers vet both core curriculum and supplemental materials, publish the ratings, and offer guidance to educators on addressing gaps for close-but-not-fully aligned programs. The state then goes one step further, negotiating contracts and procuring master service agreements with highly rated providers so that districts don’t have to. As a result, over 80 percent of districts in the state are now using [recommended instructional materials](#) in mathematics.⁴⁶ And the state

recently published a complete [English language arts curricula](#) that it commissioned itself because it found a dearth of high-quality options.

Designing and Implementing Accountability Systems

Designing and implementing the state's accountability system is a critical role for SEAs in every state, often in cooperation with the state board of education. Accountability systems generally have three components: indicators of success (reported by school, district, and state, with test results disaggregated by student subgroup); identification of school quality based on these indicators; and consequences for the lowest performing schools. Ideally, the state designs its accountability system to embody and advance its vision, priorities, and goals. For example, if a state's vision centers around creating an educational system that improves continuously, then its report cards might focus on year-over-year progress. If, instead, a state is driving toward specific proficiency goals, its report cards might highlight statuses relative to those goals. For accountability systems to fulfill their potential to drive change, they must measure and report on the outcomes states most value and the educational conditions they are seeking to create.

The elements of the state's accountability system must, of course, comply with the ESSA requirements. They must "meaningfully differentiate" schools using multiple indicators of academic achievement (including proficiency on state assessments, graduation rates for high schools, growth or another statewide indicator for K-8 schools), an English language proficiency indicator (for English learners only), and one or more other indicators of the state's choice. This offers a wide berth of options to states in determining the key indicators of success.

Designing an accountability system that advances the state's vision for educational success is among the most critical tasks SEAs will undertake. What are the state's design principles: Clarity? Simplicity? Precision? Fairness? What are the key priorities: Closing achievement gaps? Fueling growth in reading and mathematics achievement? Providing a holistic view of school quality? What indicators provide the best measuring sticks of progress and performance? What indicators provide schools with the best insight into diagnosing and addressing potential problems? How should these be combined into ratings? Why? The [Council for Chief State School Officers \(CCSSO\)](#) and other organizations⁴⁷ are supporting states in the critical task of next-generation accountability systems design.

Once schools are rated, states are required to identify those low-performing schools in need of intervention. Three categories of schools require identification under ESSA. "Comprehensive support and improvement schools" are the lowest performing five percent of all Title I schools in the state, as well as all high schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students. "Targeted support and improvement schools" are schools where individual subgroups are consistently underperforming. (States are responsible for defining "consistently underperforming.") And "targeted support schools" are schools where the results for any subgroup of students are comparable to those of the lowest performing five percent.

While ESSA provides some high-level guidance on the supports and interventions to be provided to low-performing schools, it is largely the state's responsibility to set

parameters and requirements for design of these interventions, oversee and support implementation, and monitor effectiveness. If schools do not meet the exit criteria set by the state within a state-determined period of time (not to exceed four years), then “more rigorous interventions” must be enacted – again, as determined by the state. (See the section below entitled “Turn Around Low-Performing Schools and Districts” for more information on potential SEA roles in defining and implementing interventions.)

Finally, SEAs are required to publicly report results at the state, district, and school levels. ESSA clearly indicates a minimum set of information that must be included in these “report cards,” and it is a fairly robust list.⁴⁸ In addition states and districts have the latitude to include other information, as they deem fit. (See the section below entitled “Providing Transparency” for a discussion of using reporting to drive public support for improvement.)

Administer, Implement, and Oversee State and Federal Funding and Programs

Of course, once the vision and principles are established and the priorities are settled, the task of implementation is critical. Implementation is a shared responsibility between the SEA and districts. But the SEA’s primary implementation role is to make sense of and enforce statutes and policies, including the administration of state and federal funding programs. It does this through four key activities: regulation, funding, compliance monitoring, and technical assistance. In general, SEAs serve their districts best when they are minimalist in compliance, streamlined in their funding, and generous with technical assistance.

This has the potential to upend the structures of many SEAs, which typically allocate large teams to compliance monitoring and have fewer experts providing guidance and support. However, even where SEA expertise and resources are scarce, SEAs can still choose to prioritize support. They can, for example, narrow their focus, providing deep support only in the state’s top priority areas or only to its neediest districts. They can free high-performing districts from certain requirements and regulations through either discretionary waivers or by offering flexibility to districts that meet pre-determined provisions. The SEA can enlist educators from around the state to support one another, rather than doing all of the work directly. And outside partners can be enlisted to support priority agenda items.

Compliance monitoring activities can be reduced by focusing on those areas that have been historically problematic or by realigning the ratio of desk-to-field work. The Louisiana Department of Education, for example, has taken head-on the task of minimizing [compliance-monitoring activities in 2015-16](#) so its work is targeted on top problems and priorities and is better aligned to the state’s vision.

Regulation is another area in which work can often be better targeted for high impact. Existing regulations can be strengthened or new rules developed in ways that are consistent with the vision and priorities set forth by the state. Less critical regulations can receive less attention and obsolete rules can be eliminated. There is also an important role for SEAs in streamlining the multitude of federal and state education funding programs.⁴⁹

In general, two principles help guide the core administrative work of the SEA: impact and efficiency. Focus expertise, time, and resources on the highest impact activities – those most likely to push forward the state’s educational vision and agenda.

Make less critical functions as efficient as possible, stripping away processes and procedures that do not contribute to improved quality.

Develop Two-Way Communications with Stakeholders and the Public

Under ESSA, state communications are likely to be even more crucial than they were in the past. National narratives will take a backseat to state-driven ones. And the work of driving toward a statewide education vision will require that diverse stakeholders be kept engaged, aligned, and active. The basic communications work of SEAs will only increase. SEAs will have to keep district leaders and educators up to date on plans and requirements, and solicit input and feedback to help shape activities. SEAs will have to support their governors, state boards, and legislatures with policy ideas and policy implementation expertise. They will have to explain educational issues to educators, families and the public, report to them on progress, and solicit their comments and input. They will have to support or lead inter-agency activities – coordinating services across higher education, preschool, social services, and healthcare. And they will have to ramp up the engagement of business leaders, community organizations, and advocacy groups in their work.

To do this, SEAs must hone their ability to explain policies and actions in clear, jargon-free ways. They must provide understandable rationales so that intentions and connections to the state’s vision are clear. Every outward-facing activity – from sharing students’ assessment results to posting accountability report cards to hosting town hall events to releasing new SEA policies – must be understood as a critical communications opportunity. To meet these needs, SEAs may have to establish and manage new infrastructures and processes. They need venues that allow them to hear public and stakeholder input on policies, engage in authentic two-way dialogues around key issues, speak clearly and accurately to diverse audiences, and maintain feedback loops to support continuous improvement. Processes must exist within the SEA to adjust decisions and recommendations, as appropriate, based on this input. Then those adjustments must be acknowledged and explained publicly. And then the process begins again for the next issue in an iterative cycle.

SEAs should also employ new communications vehicles and build new types of partnerships. Social media and mobile communications reach parents, educators, and others with maximum impact and minimum disruption to their daily routines. New relationships with the media, advocacy organizations, and state-based education coalitions may be built to help spread messages. In a time when massive connectivity is the norm, educational institutions, which play a vital and very personal role in the lives of communities, have to rise to a new level in communications. Yet historically, SEA communications teams – which often consist of one or two entry-level staffers – have limited capacity to do the job that is now required of them. At this time of intense change, a deeper investment in communications is likely required.

Possible Roles

Beyond the essential roles, additional roles for SEAs will vary dramatically from one state to the next, and perhaps from one year to the next. In some states, it may be

appropriate to take on many or all of the roles described in this section; in other states, laws, funding, context, or capacity may limit what the SEA can do. Despite this, the roles described below as “possible” must all be carried out somehow. The effective execution of the essential SEA roles alone will not produce the desired results for teaching and learning. Some entity in every state has to support the acceleration of learning, the turnaround of low-performing schools, the development of a high-quality workforce, and so on. If the SEA is not going to take on these roles, it is *essential* to ensure that there is a strategy for attending to each of these crucial functions; doing this work is not “optional” for the state education system as a whole.

This said, it is important to deliberately prioritize the additional roles that the SEA assumes. A few guiding principles may help. First, every opportunity should be taken to ensure that all of the SEA’s work is aligned with the state’s vision, or to the extent that it is not, to work with legislators or others to address mismatches. Second, it is sensible to *remove* from the SEA’s to-do list any work that can be adequately done at the local level and would divert critical resources or be less useful/relevant if done by the SEA. Finally, the SEA should prioritize those roles that are most aligned to – and are likely to have the most impact on – driving the successful realization of the state’s vision.

In some cases, capacity may present itself as a limiting factor. However, capacity challenges should not prevent the SEA from taking on additional roles that, within the state’s context, are best led at the state level. SEAs could, for example, think creatively about building capacity, looking beyond their own four walls when crucial work needs to be done. They might tap into administrators in large districts that are rich in capacity, contract with master teachers or school leaders, enlist education researchers and professors, or call on third-party partners or industry experts to support state work. Lack of capacity *should be* a factor in prioritizing, but it *should not be* an excuse to avoid important action.

Keeping all of these considerations in mind, some of the most important additional SEA roles are described below.

Accelerate Sharing and Learning Across the State

The American K-12 system is notably weak at replicating and scaling successful practices.⁵⁰ Although many SEAs have, for decades, hosted sites where they share resources with districts, there are few historical examples of high-impact sharing, learning, and replication. This may be starting to change. In the past several years, examples of heavily trafficked SEA-sponsored websites and well-attended cross-state learning collaboratives have begun to emerge. It is as yet unclear what roles, if any, SEAs will play in these, but both intra- and inter-state learning and sharing are gaining traction.

Already, many states are learning from and with one another. As SEAs enter new territory on policy design, implementation, support, and communications, many find cross-state networks critical. The federally sponsored [Reform Support Network](#), for example, brought Race to the Top states together to solve challenging new problems and share the lessons they learned. The Council of Chief State School Officers runs several networks designed to support cross-state collaboration around [educator effectiveness](#), [innovation](#), [standards](#), [assessment](#), and [teacher preparation](#).

In states with a vision around district-led improvement, cross-district learning networks could become strategic drivers of change. SEAs in Delaware and Massachusetts are slowly getting into the work of sponsoring cross-district collaboratives. In many states, regional service centers or county offices are moving into the role of cross-district convener. Such is the plan in Tennessee, where the state's eight [Centers of Regional Excellence](#) are being reconfigured and re-chartered to provide collaborative support to the districts they serve. In addition, third-party networks are emerging to support cross-district learning, such as Massachusetts's [Empower Schools](#) and California's [CORE Districts](#). Whether inter-district sharing and learning turns out to be a role for the SEA, for its regional offices, or for third-party organizations remains to be seen – and the answer is likely to be different in different states. In any case, putting in place structures to identify common cross-district challenges, collectively address them, then share lessons learned, seems critical to states' educational improvement agendas.

As districts' learning needs are being met, SEAs must ensure that the particular needs of small and rural districts are attended to. Often isolated and with little or no central office staff, these districts rely heavily on their SEAs for exemplary policies, rubrics, and tools. State agencies, in consultation with such districts, must continue to ensure that they receive high quality support.

In addition to setting up learning collaboratives, some states have begun collecting, curating, and disseminating tools, rubrics, curriculum materials, and other resources. [New York](#), [Louisiana](#), and others have turned their websites into go-to resources for educators, both within their states and around the country. Though here, again, outside organizations from [EdModo](#) to [Teacher2Teacher](#) to [Better Lesson](#) to [UnboundEd](#) might prove equally effective at meeting educators' needs.

Finally, for much of this intrastate learning agenda to be effective, SEAs need strong research, evaluation, and dissemination capabilities. They must be able to evaluate evidence from diverse sources (including from the state's own accountability system), identify trends and patterns, work with educators to extract the appropriate lessons, and inform practitioners and decision makers about what is (and is not) working. This requires infrastructure as well as regulations that support data gathering and sharing. External partners, including universities, can add sophisticated research and analysis capacity (see, for example, the [Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation & Development](#)), as can national partners such as Harvard's [Strategic Data Project](#). In any case, SEAs with access to strong capabilities in these areas will be at an advantage – both in policymaking and in district support.

Turn Around Low-Performing Schools and Districts

While there are persuasive arguments to be made that SEAs should proactively intervene in their lowest performing schools and districts, under ESSA, states decide for themselves the extent to which they will do so.⁵¹ Actions that were entirely prescribed under NCLB and largely prescribed under ESEA waivers are now up to the states. Therefore, one of the critical decisions SEAs will have to make (consistent with their legal authority) is how directive to be in school turnaround. Five distinct intervention approaches appear to be emerging. And while the research on the effectiveness of these models is nascent and inconclusive⁵², SEAs might decide that urgent and aggressive

action is called for – especially in the schools and districts that have historically failed students for decades.

A model that is growing in prevalence is the state-run school district. Some states operate one school district where the lowest performing schools from across the state are placed during a period of turnaround. Examples include Louisiana’s [Recovery School District](#), Tennessee’s [Achievement School District](#), and Michigan’s [Education Achievement Authority](#).⁵³ Other states, such as [Massachusetts](#) and New Jersey, directly take over low-performing districts, then (often in partnership with high-capacity support organizations) assign new leaders to turn performance around. Lawrence, Springfield, and Holyoke in Massachusetts, and Newark and Camden in New Jersey offer important case studies.⁵⁴

In most states, SEAs take a hands-off approach, providing guidance to districts on turning around identified schools and offering funds to support the work. Guidance generally involves replacing key staff, adding support services, and ensuring that all resources and practices are evidence-based. The success of this approach is decidedly mixed and appears largely dependent on the quality of the specific leader placed in charge of the low performing school.⁵⁵ In some cases (though this appears to happen as a district option more than as a state option), schools are closed and, if enrollment warrants, reopened either as charter schools or as traditional district schools with all-new management. This approach is less common but has some of the best efficacy research behind it.⁵⁶

Finally, a new approach pairs high-performing schools with nearby lower performing ones. It is based on an extremely effective intervention pioneered in Shanghai⁵⁷ in which the high performers are contractually responsible for guiding and directing the improvement of their partner schools. The California CORE districts are experimenting with this in the U.S.

Regardless of the approach taken to school turnaround, SEAs should not be school operators. They have a very different set of core competencies from districts. Thus, SEAs should think carefully about which activities they take on, how they organize the work, and how they staff it for success, as poorly implemented approaches to school turnaround are both ineffective and rampant.

Support the Development of a High-Quality Educator Workforce

The single most important in-school influence on students' educational outcomes is the quality of the teacher in their classroom, and SEAs should seriously consider taking a lead in statewide educator development, consistent with their state’s vision.⁵⁸ However, under the new ESSA, the state’s role in developing an effective educator workforce is wholly up to the state to define.⁵⁹ NCLB’s “highly qualified teacher” requirements are gone, as are ESEA waiver’s “teacher and leader evaluation” requirements.

This offers states enormous discretion over the degree to which workforce development is a state focus. And where it is, states now have a great deal of latitude around their visions for building strong cadres of educators. In constructing their visions and developing their priorities, states should consider their own data on educator effectiveness and on the placement of strong educators with the neediest students. They should review the laws on their books governing educator effectiveness and evaluation.

And they should consider reviewing other [states' policies](#) and experiences to determine what is working and what is not. Meaningful data about educator effectiveness is at the heart of a multitude of decisions that districts and states need to make – which preparation programs are the best to recruit from, which teachers should be eligible for teacher leadership roles, how differentiated pay should be allocated, what training school leaders need, which educators to place in which schools and classrooms, and on and on.

Areas worthy of policy focus include – for both teachers and principals – attracting strong candidates into the profession, preparing them for today's instructional demands and student needs, evaluating performance, licensing them once their effectiveness has been demonstrated, incenting them to serve in high need urban and rural areas, and providing career paths and compensation opportunities that help retain and advance the best. All along this continuum, there are many opportunities for more tightly aligning a state's policies and programs with its vision and its districts' needs.

Provide Professional Learning Opportunities

The role of the state in educator professional development is much debated. Many states contend that professional development is an entirely local responsibility. Bucking this conventional wisdom, however, several states have chosen to offer professional development directly to districts, principals, and/or teachers – especially in support of such large-scale changes as the implementation of new standards and assessments.⁶⁰ These experiments with SEA involvement in professional learning are worth studying. Participation in state-sponsored professional learning opportunities has generally been voluntary. But when done well, the trainings have attracted large majorities of educators and there is evidence that such programs can contribute to improved job satisfaction and student outcomes.⁶¹

Some states have relied on external partners like the New Teacher Center or Learning Forward to run large-scale teacher trainings. Other states, including Tennessee, Idaho, Louisiana, Delaware, and Kentucky have created statewide cohorts of master teachers or state coaches. In most states, the SEA carefully selects these individuals using a rigorous application process that requires evidence of effectiveness with students and of the ability to support adult learning. These state coaches typically continue to teach fulltime in schools, but earn stipends from the SEA to take on additional responsibilities.

Though the specific programs vary from state to state, in general, they include three functions. The expert teachers create or review training materials and other content to ensure high quality. They deliver training to teachers or teacher-leaders, often regionally, by subject and grade band. And they ensure strong, two-way communication between their teacher colleagues and the SEA by actively facilitating the feedback loop. SEAs may find that taking on such non-traditional roles – especially when they are well aligned with the state's goals – can have significant impact. It appears increasingly true that if the SEA adds value to districts – if they create good programs and resources that address important needs – then districts will use the programs, even when their use is optional.

Drive Innovation

One final non-traditional SEA role is worthy of consideration: spurring innovation. Education is in a period of intense change. The world is rife with ambiguity and teachers are often preparing students for careers that have not yet been invented. Schools are equipped with more and newer technologies. Teachers are expected to master new and complex instructional practices. And students are challenged to meet higher expectations than ever before. States may find that, with the right incentives, flexibilities, or resources, educators can address important challenges in novel ways.

Against this backdrop, SEAs might decide that it is a priority to design and develop policies that not only enable innovation, but encourage and fuel it. To identify new solutions to challenging problems, new ways of measuring performance, or new pathways for student learning, some states, like [New Hampshire](#), are already taking on pilots of competency-based learning and assessment. Other states have developed grant competitions modeled loosely on the federal Investing in Innovation or Race to the Top programs.⁶² The Council of Chief State School Officers leads an [Innovation Lab Network \(ILN\)](#) that supports states-as-innovators. Directly supporting innovators, carving out funding to incent innovation in schools or districts, and creating the policy “space” to support careful experimentation, could surface as important new SEA roles.

Unsuitable Roles

It is difficult to develop a universal list of what SEAs should refrain from doing. As noted above, some of the most convention-defying ideas are proving to be among the most impactful. Yet SEAs must think honestly about their own capacity and staff expertise – and particular state context – to deliver on high-quality programs, policies, and services and must prioritize their work to match their capacity to deliver. Given this, there are three lessons that can be shared. First, SEAs should not micro-manage their districts or displace local authority. That is, SEAs should not dictate how LEAs spend their money, engage in local staffing or personnel decisions, or define school-level policies such as fixed class-size requirements or staffing ratios. This does not mean that SEAs should shy away from requiring transparency around district or school staffing, resource allocations, and other policies – just that SEAs should not make decisions that are best informed by educators who know the students and the local context.

Second, SEAs should not drive resources to ineffective programs. Yet it happens all too frequently.⁶³

Third, while effective communication by SEAs is imperative, SEAs should not be the *sole* messengers or communicators. They must ensure that there is a broad understanding of policies, goals, issues, and plans, and a broad network of knowledgeable partners. Of course, state and local media are critical and trusted channels for reaching the public, but others should be enlisted as well. Teachers and principals, for example, communicate regularly with students and parents, and should be able to explain new standards, curriculum, instructional expectations, assessments, or school report cards. Community and advocacy organizations should be able to explain relevant issues to their constituents. The business community should understand how to support their local schools, and they should help define – and demand – appropriately targeted standards for

the graduates they hire. Similarly, the preschool and higher education communities should be enlisted to advance K-12 issues to ensure clear and seamless experiences for students and their families. The SEA cannot and should not stand alone as the messengers – but they do need to ensure that strong communication occurs.

State Levers for Change in an ESSA Era

Under ESSA, there will be few federal mandates. This opens the door to creativity and innovation. It also removes the political cover that was, until recently, provided by federal rules. With this reduction in federal direction and oversight, the onus to define and implement a vision for the state’s educational future will rest almost entirely with the state’s educational leadership. And while leading change is done by a few, it is work that can be undone by many. States should therefore be very deliberate in fostering conditions within the state that are conducive to educational improvement and consistent with the state’s vision – building statewide understanding of the problems, support for the proposed solutions, and pressure to perform at higher levels. Three “levers,” traditionally underemployed by states, are likely to be particularly critical going forward: the bully pulpit, transparency, and external coalitions. Decisions about when and how to use these in support of the state’s vision and strategy may affect the competencies that SEAs need to develop.

Using the Bully Pulpit

Much has already been said about the importance of communication. But the power of the bully pulpit – as a platform from which to inform, educate, and advocate – is sorely underutilized in education. As a result, state leaders too often find themselves fighting misinformation, battling political headwinds, and responding to well-intentioned but ill-informed critiques. State education leaders – together with the compelling voices of teachers and students – have powerful stories to tell, successes to share, and visions to paint. All of these can help shape opinion, cement understanding, and build tailwinds that support the SEA’s work. A strong and strategic communications team can help realize this potential.

Providing Transparency

The vision for the state’s educational system is often described by how it is to be measured. Student performance will increase; the number of dropout factories will decrease; graduation rates will rise; enrollment in remedial college courses will fall. Underlying these statements is the assumption that data will be collected, analyzed, and the results publicly reported. Strong research, evaluation, data collection, and analytics fuel a statewide drive toward improvement and add the objective information that families and taxpayers deserve. But having the data – and sharing the data – is not enough. Data must be accurate so that the information is reliable. Data must be reported in a timely fashion so that the implications are still relevant. The right data must be collected to evaluate effectiveness and inform improvement. Data must be easily accessible (raw data and all⁶⁴), so that the media and the research community can act as watchdogs and validators, providing independent analysis and oversight. And the

reporting of the information must spark insights, so that the conclusions are evident and actionable. Transparency and communications are thus intertwined. A strong communications ethos must undergird the state's data and evaluation work. And real evidence must drive policy directions and messages.

Building or Participating in External Coalitions

State-based coalitions – grassroots parent organizations, teachers' unions, administrator associations, teacher voice organizations, civil rights proponents, business leaders, advocacy groups – will play increasingly important roles in states' education futures. As the role of the federal government wanes under ESSA, the pressure to change will come largely from in-state forces. And more often than not, state coalitions will be these mobilizers of political will. SEAs will have important decisions to make about how, when, and whether to engage with (or even lead) such coalitions. SEAs might quietly support – or oppose – groups seeking to exert pressure on the governor, on the state legislature, or on the SEA itself. Effectively navigating this landscape will require that SEA leaders have trusted relationships across diverse networks, a strong strategic sense, and great political acumen. CCSSO's recently released [Guide on ESSA Stakeholder Outreach](#) is designed to support this important new work.⁶⁵

Conclusion

ESSA contains fewer federal mandates in education than its predecessor NCLB, opening the door to state creativity and innovation, but raising questions about state capacity and removing the political cover that was, until recently, provided by federal rules. Success will require states to be very deliberate in fostering conditions that are conducive to educational improvement and consistent with the state's vision, while building statewide understanding of the problems, support for the proposed solutions, and pressure to perform at higher levels.

This will not be easy. Driving educational change from the state capitol all the way down to the classroom is extraordinarily difficult. For reforms to succeed, state policy changes must change district practice, district practices must change the behavior of principals and teachers, and school-level changes must deliver improved student performance. As a result, the vigor and effectiveness of SEAs — and their ability to support local districts — is critical, particularly in an era of declining federal leadership. But state commitment alone may not be sufficient, for, as many scholars have noted, states suffer from a “capacity gap” that undermines their ability to monitor and enforce policy mandates and provide technical guidance to districts.

SEA budgets have long been funded disproportionately by the federal government (rather than from their own state appropriations), but the state role in education is expanding while federal coffers are not. States must acknowledge the SEA's critical role in the ESSA era and fund them accordingly so they have adequate resources to do this work. For their part, SEAs will need to reorganize themselves and prioritize their functions to adapt to the new demands being placed on them. As they do so, they will need to identify areas of comparative advantage and economies of scale — where the state can do something better and/or more efficiently than districts. If the country is to

close its longstanding racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps and address concerns about the nation's overall educational performance, states and SEAs will increasingly need to lead the effort.

¹ <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Documents/Investigating-the-Links-to-Improved-Student-Learning.pdf>

² For more on NCLB see: Patrick McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005* (University Press of Kansas, June 2006).

³ Hill, Paul. 2000. "The Federal Role in Education." *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, edited by Diane Ravitch. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, pp. 25-6. By 1993, state education agencies nationwide relied on federal funds for on average 41 percent of their operating budgets, with the federal share as high as 77 percent in some states. For more on this see the GAO's report "Extent of Federal Funding in State Education Agencies," available at: <http://www.gao.gov/products/HEHS-95-3>

⁴ John Nugent notes that: "The delegation of authority to another entity to define, fund, or implement a federal policy creates the possibility of principal-agent problems, in which the entity to which authority has been delegated (the agent) uses it in ways not intended by the delegator (the principal)...When state governments are invited, induced, or compelled to participate in the implementation of federal policies, their own interests may clash with those embodied in the federal policy." Nugent, John. 2009. *Safeguarding Federalism: How States Protect Their Interests in National Policymaking*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press:176.

⁵ The USOE was ill-suited to a compliance role—it had long been a small, passive organization that focused on collecting and disseminating statistical data on education and did little else. The result, as John and Anne Hughes noted, was that "if USOE had limitations on its policymaking authority and capability—and these have been legion—its ability to enforce its policies has been even more limited. The state agencies and the local districts, by and large, were used to going their own ways, which often meant disregarding federal requirements." Hughes, John and Ann Hughes. 1972. *Equal Education: A New National Strategy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p.50.

⁶ Hughes and Hughes, 1972, p.57.

⁷ The number of districts declined from approximately 150,000 in 1900 to 15,000 in 1993. Newman, Michael. 1994. *America's Teachers*. New York: Longman, p.166.

⁸ Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, Stacey Rutledge, and Valentina Bali, "State Education Agencies, Information Systems, and the Expansion of State Power in the Era of Test-Based Accountability," *Educational Policy* March/April 2013 vol. 27 no. 2 217-247.

⁹ Stecher, Brian et al. 2008. *Pain and Gain: Implementing No Child Left Behind in Three States, 2004-2006*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., p.64.

¹⁰ For more information on the USED review process for state accountability plans see *No Child Left Behind Act: Enhancements in the Department of Education's Review Process Could Improve State Academic Assessments*. Government Accountability Office, September 2009.

¹¹ For a detailed case study of how one state (NJ) endeavored to implement NCLB see: Patrick McGuinn, "Equity Meets Accountability: The Implementation of No Child Left Behind in New Jersey," in Frederick

Hess and Chester Finn, ed. *No Remedy Left Behind: Lessons from a Half-Decade of NCLB* (American Enterprise Institute Press, 2007).

¹² Gail Sunderman, James Kim, and Gary Orfiled, ed. *NCLB Meets School Realities: Lessons from the Field*. 2005. New York: Corwin Press.

¹³ Vergari, Sandra. 2012. "The Limits of Federal Activism in Education Policy." *Educational Policy*, 26(1): 15-34.

¹⁴ David K. Cohen and Susan L. Moffitt. (2009). *The ordeal of equality: Did federal regulation fix the schools?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Heinrich Mintrop and Gail Sunderman. (2009, June). "The Predictable Failure of Federal Sanctions–Driven Accountability of School Improvement—And Why We May Retain It Anyway," *Educational Researcher*. Vol. 38, no. 5: 353–64.

¹⁵ Frederick M. Hess and Chester E. Finn Jr., eds. 2007. *No remedy left behind: Lessons from a half-decade of NCLB*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.

¹⁶ Bush, Jeb and Joel Klein. 2011. "The Case for Common Educational Standards." *Wall Street Journal*, June 23.

¹⁷ McGuinn, Patrick. 2012. "Stimulating Reform: Race to the Top, Competitive Grants and the Obama Education Agenda." *Educational Policy* 26(1): 136-159.

¹⁸ William Howell. (2015). Results of President Obama's Race to the Top. *Education Next*.

¹⁹ Council of Chief State School Officers, "Principles and Processes for State Leadership on Next-Generation Accountability Systems." http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Publications/Principles_and_Processes_for_State_Leadership_on_Next-Generation_Accountability_Systems.html

²⁰ Simendinger, Alexis. 2011. "Feeling Legislative Chill, Obama Flexes Executive Muscles." *Real Clear Politics*, , September 26.

²¹ Viteritti, Joseph. 2012. "The Federal Role in School Reform: Obama's Race to the Top." *Notre Dame Law Review*, Vol. 87:5.

²² Cavanaugh, Sean. 2012. "Some States Skeptical of NCLB Waivers: Big Strings Attached to Bid for Flexibility." *Education Week*. 18 January.

²³ McGuinn, Patrick. 2012. "The Federal Role in Educational Equity: The Two Narratives of School Reform and the Debate over Accountability." In *Education, Democracy, and Justice*, edited by Danielle Allen and Robert Reich. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁴ For a good summary of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), see this [detailed overview of ESSA](#) from The Education Trust.

²⁵ For more on the Obama administration's education agenda and legacy see: Patrick McGuinn, "From No Child Left Behind to the Every Student Succeeds Act: Federalism and the Education Legacy of the Obama Administration." Summer 2016 issue of *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*.

²⁶ For a case study of SEA efforts to implement new teacher systems see: Patrick McGuinn, “The State of Evaluation Reform: State Education Agency Capacity and the Implementation of New Teacher Evaluation Systems” (Center for American Progress, November 2012).

²⁷ Zeehandelaar, D. & Griffith, D. (2015, August). *Schools of Thought: A Taxonomy of American Education Governance*. Washington, DC: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

²⁸ For more on this transition see: http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/PIE_Changing_Role_Oct11.pdf and http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_states_ModernizingSEAs_sept12.pdf

²⁹ A summary of the U.S. Education Delivery Institute report can be found here: <http://www.deliveryinstitute.org/deliveryinaction/reviewing-tennessee%E2%80%99s-initial-capacity-deliver>

³⁰ Winnie Hu, “New Jersey Superintendents Call State Agency Ineffective,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2011.

³¹ <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/03/23/capacity-of-state-ed-departments-waning-on.html?cmp=eml-enl-eu-news1>

³² Ashley Jochim and Patrick Murphy, “The Capacity Challenge: What it Takes for State Education Agencies to Support School Improvement,” Center on Reinventing Public Education, December 2013.

³³ “State Education Agency Funding and Staffing in the Education reform Era,” Center on Education Policy, February 2012.

³⁴ Center on Education Policy. (2011, February). More to Do, But Less Capacity to Do It. Pages 13-16. See also: “After the Stimulus Money Ends: The Status of State K-12 Education Funding and Reforms,” and “State Education Agency Funding and Staffing in the Education Reform Era.” Available at: www.cep-dc.org

³⁵ Hess, Frederick. (2010, August 27). Louisiana Schools Chief Paul Pastorek Reflects on RTTT,” *Rick Hess Straight Up*.

³⁶ Mona Morshed, Chinezi Chijioke, and Michael Barber, “How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better,” McKinsey and Company, November 2010. Accessible online at: http://www.mckinsey.com/locations/madrid/recentreports/pdf/Informe_World_Improved.pdf See also Sharon Gaskins, “Partnering for Student Success: How States and School Districts Collaborate to Innovate.” U.S. Education Delivery Institute. Available online at: <http://www.deliveryinstitute.org/publications/partnering-student-success>

³⁷ http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/PIE_Changing_Role_Oct11.pdf

³⁸ Zeehandelaar, D. & Griffith, D. (2015, August). *Schools of Thought: A Taxonomy of American Education Governance*. Washington, DC: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

³⁹ CCSSO’s “State Strategic Vision Guide” can be found here: <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2016/StateStrategicVisionGuide.pdf>

⁴⁰ McDonnell, L., & Weatherford, M. (2013). Evidence Use and the Common Core State Standards Movement: From Problem Definition to Policy Adoption. *American Journal of Education*, 20(1), 1-25.

⁴¹ Under the federal [ESEA waivers](#), for example, states were expected to provide evidence that their standards were “college ready.” They did this by working with their higher education system to certify that students who met the state’s standards would not need remedial coursework at the postsecondary level. Involving the business community will be critical going forward as well.

⁴² Valuable resources are available through [WIDA](#) and [ELPA21](#).

⁴³ See Every Student Succeeds Act, S. 1177—25, Academic Assessments Requirements 2.B.vi.

⁴⁴ Gewertz, Catherine. (2016, February 11). PARCC, Smarter Balanced Assessments Better at Gauging Depth, Complexity, Study Says. *Education Week*. This article summarizes the studies’ findings and includes links to the studies themselves.

⁴⁵ Boser, U. et al. (2015, October). The Hidden Value of Curriculum Reform: Do States and Districts Receive the Most Bang for Their Curriculum Buck? Center for American Progress; and Chingos, M. & Whitehurst, G. (2012). Choosing Blindly: Instructional Materials, Teacher Effectiveness, and the Common Core. Washington: Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings.

⁴⁶ Personal communication with SEA leaders.

⁴⁷ [The Education Trust](#), [EducationCounsel](#), [Alliance for Excellent Education](#), [Chiefs for Change](#), and [The Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#) all have information to support accountability design that states should find useful.

⁴⁸ For a good summary of the “Public Reporting” requirements under ESSA, see the [detailed overview of ESSA](#) from The Education Trust.

⁴⁹ For more on this see:
<http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2016/CriticalAreaOutlineFederalFundingStreams.pdf>

⁵⁰ For more on these efforts see: Richard Elmore (1996) Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practice. *Harvard Educational Review*: April 1996, Vol. 66, No. 1, pp. 1-27 and Donald J. Peurach and Joshua L. Glazer, "Reconsidering replication: New perspectives on large-scale school improvement." *Journal of Educational Change*, May 2012, Volume 13, Issue 2, pp 155-190.

⁵¹ For more on SEAs and school turnarounds see: “State Education Agencies in Charge of Turnaround: Capacity and Delivery,” WestEd 2015. Available online at: <https://www.wested.org/resources/state-education-agencies-in-charge-of-turnaround/>

⁵² Dee, T. (2012, April). *School Turnarounds: Evidence from the 2009 Stimulus*. National Bureau of Economic Research: NBER Working Paper No. 17990; and Tanenbaum, C. et al. (2015, May 5). *State Capacity to Support School Turnaround*. National Center for Education Statistics: NCEE 20154012.

⁵³ For more on these districts see: <http://www.coweninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/History-of-the-RSD-Report-2011.pdf>; and <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/2015/06/30/louisianas-recovery-school-district-is-a-model-for-school-turnarounds>.

⁵⁴ <http://educationnext.org/turnaround-school-districts/>

⁵⁵ For more on these efforts see: <http://educationnext.org/the-turnaround-fallacy/> ;

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/21/39/12139.pdf> ; and http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/The_State_Role_in_School_Turnaround.pdf

⁵⁶ Stuit, D. (2010). *Are bad schools immortal? The scarcity of turnarounds and shutdowns in both charter and district sectors*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

⁵⁷ Jensen, B. & Farmer, J. (2013, May). *School Turnaround in Shanghai: The Empowered-Management Program Approach to Improving School Performance*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.

⁵⁸ <http://www.rand.org/education/projects/measuring-teacher-effectiveness/teachers-matter.html>

⁵⁹ For a useful guide to thinking about this work see: <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/teacher-evaluation-support-systems-roadmap-improvement>

⁶⁰ Susanna Loeb, Luke C. Miller, and Katharine O. Strunk, "The State Role in Teacher Professional Development and Education Throughout Teachers' Careers," *Education Finance and Policy* (Spring 2009, Vol. 4, No. 2, Pages 212-228).

⁶¹ Office of Research and Policy. (2013, November). *The Impact of the 2012 TNCore Math Training on Teaching Practices and Effectiveness*. Tennessee Department of Education.

⁶² See for example: <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2015/state-education-department-announces-22-million-replication-grants-fifteen-schools>

⁶³ <https://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/sites/brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/files/publications/Symposium.pdf>

⁶⁴ It is paramount, of course, that student privacy be protected, for example, through the use of anonymized datasets. In all cases, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA), and all state and local policies must be strictly followed.

⁶⁵ For CCSSO's guide on stakeholder engagement see: <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2016/ESSA/GuideonESSAStakeholderOutreach.pdf>