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**State-Sponsored Technical Assistance to Low-Performing Schools:  
Strategies from Nine States**

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## Introduction

School accountability is a key element in the current model of standards-based school reform. According to the logic of this model, strong accountability systems are based on clear standards for student achievement, aligned assessments that measure student performance against those standards, procedures for tracking school performance over time, identifying those schools that are not performing adequately, and intervening with support and incentives to improve student achievement. Support for school improvement is a key link in standards- and accountability-based reform models. Studies of standards-based reforms conducted over the last decade suggest that accountability mechanisms are ineffective without substantial investments in building schools' capacity for instructional change (Fuhrman, 1999; Elmore, 1999; Shields, David, Humphrey & Young, 1999).

Although states have provided some form of technical assistance to schools for many years, new accountability laws have spurred them to step up their efforts and to support improvement in low-performing schools in a more strategic manner. Since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of state legislatures have passed accountability laws that require state education agencies (SEAs) to identify low-performing schools and to provide technical assistance and other support for school improvement efforts. By 2002, according to *Education Week*, 28 states identified schools for improvement under their own accountability systems and provided them with some form of assistance for improvement, up from 19 states in 1998 (*Education Week*, 2003; *Education Week*, 1999).

Added to this, the most recent reauthorization of Title I under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) mandates that states and districts intervene to turn around low-performing schools more quickly than ever before. NCLB requires that each state "establish a statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement" for districts and schools that have been identified for improvement under Title I, and especially for those schools that have been targeted for corrective actions. School support teams will review and analyze all facets of the school's operation, assist it in developing and implementing a plan for improving student achievement, evaluate the effectiveness of school personnel, and recommend additional assistance. To support an expansion in services to schools identified for improvement, NCLB increases the proportion of Title I funds that states can set aside for technical assistance.

Many analysts predict that NCLB's new accountability provisions will propel many more schools onto their state's low-performers list than in the past. This, in turn, will place tougher demands on states to provide meaningful assistance over the next several years. These increasing accountability

pressures—both state and federal—are now prompting states to expand the scope and the intensity of their school improvement support in low-performing schools.

Prior research on state support for low-performing schools has raised questions about the capacity of states to bring about meaningful improvement efforts in schools that need help. An evaluation of state implementation of the Chapter 1 program, for example, reported serious limitations on states' ability to provide programmatic leadership with local grantees and concluded, "As states are called upon to play an increasing role in program improvement, the limits on SEA capacity will pose increasing problems" (Millsap et al., 1992). Eight years later, another study of state implementation of ESEA programs found that agency downsizing in many SEAs adversely affected their capacity to provide technical assistance to schools and districts. With limited resources, state program administrators frequently reported that they were unable to get to every district that needed or required help, and that they were unable to provide ongoing, sustained assistance or follow-up (Anderson & Welsh, 2000). Studies of state accountability systems have found that the nature and intensity of assistance received by schools identified as low-performing often varies widely (O'Day, 1999; Goertz & Duffy, 2000).

In summer 2000, Policy Studies Associates (PSA), an education evaluation and research firm located in Washington, D.C., conducted a review for the U.S. Department of Education of what SEAs were doing to assist their lowest-performing schools during the 1999-2000 school year. We reviewed activities in nine states: Arkansas, California, Florida, Indiana, Nevada, North Carolina, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming. All of these states were particularly active in providing assistance to low-performing schools. They provided more assistance, and more intensive assistance, than many other states, and so, were not typical of states nationwide. For the purposes of this review, however, each was illustrative of how states were organizing and delivering assistance to low-performing schools in response to new accountability laws.

Our review included assistance provided to schools considered seriously low-performing under their own state's accountability system, as well as to those identified as in need of improvement under Title I. During data collection, PSA site visitors interviewed virtually all of the SEA staff responsible for organizing or delivering technical assistance to low-performing schools in each SEA. Respondents included staff in the state's accountability and school improvement offices, staff in the Title I office, other federal program staff who were responsible for providing technical assistance to low-performing schools, and a select number of technical assistance providers who operated both within and outside the SEA. In addition, PSA conducted telephone interviews with district administrators in one or two districts in each state to learn about the state's collaboration with districts in the delivery of technical assistance to schools identified as low-performing. PSA also interviewed a sample of principals of low-

performing schools in those districts. Study findings are based on a qualitative analysis of interview data collected across the nine states.

Our primary goal in conducting this review was descriptive: to take an empirical look at state education agencies' arrangements and capacity for delivering help to low-performing schools. We described what states were doing to help their lowest-performing schools meet state and federal accountability requirements and examined the issues and challenges states face as the demand for their assistance becomes even more prevalent. Together, the states included in this study illustrate a range of approaches that jurisdictions may adopt in the years ahead to support low-performing schools, as well as some indicators of the challenges as states attempt to scale up both the reach and intensity of their assistance.

## **How States Organize and Deliver Technical Assistance**

Whether failing schools are identified under Title I, state accountability laws, or both, states face the challenge of developing capacity in those schools for improvement. School staff need the knowledge and skill to design interventions that have a good chance of improving student outcomes. Teachers need the opportunity to develop their content knowledge and pedagogical skills, and administrators must be able to organize the work of schools to support improvement goals.

### **The Work of School Improvement**

A wide array of activities can be undertaken to build this kind of capacity for reform. Schools can upgrade teachers' knowledge and skill by engaging in various forms of professional development, both formal training and more job-embedded forms such as coaching and mentoring in the classroom. Schools can adopt new curriculum and/or instructional programs to prompt changes in instruction. Districts and schools can take steps to ensure that their key resources—both staff positions and instructional time—are allocated in ways that best support improvement goals. For example, they can create new teaching positions, such as reading support teacher or school improvement coordinator, and eliminate others judged less effective for advancing reform goals. They can create opportunities for students who need extra help and instruction to get that assistance. Schools can extend instructional time for core subjects by reorganizing the regular school day schedule or by adding afterschool or summer programs.

To help schools make sound decisions about which activities to undertake, most districts and states require schools to develop a school improvement plan which draws on a careful analysis of student achievement data and other forms of needs assessment to determine the strategy or set of strategies best suited to that school's needs. Because states identify schools as low-performing on the basis of state assessment results, needs assessment often begins with a careful analysis of test scores. Ideally, the school has access to these data disaggregated by grade, student subgroup, and by sub-test. Schools also use other data sources to identify strengths and weaknesses, such as teacher surveys, review of instructional programs, and parent focus groups. The result of these needs assessment activities should be a school plan that outlines a set of interventions specially tailored to the particular needs of the school.

Recent experience with low-performing schools has suggested that schools identified as needing improvement under state or federal accountability systems are often those with the least capacity to undertake serious improvement efforts (USDE, 2001; NASBE, 2002). Often they are so consumed by day-to-day survival needs that they have little time left over for planning change and seeking out the resources needed to support those changes. Most state-sponsored technical assistance efforts are designed to connect schools with the outside resources they need to undertake meaningful reform: consultation in the needs assessment and planning phase, professional development for teachers, or assistance in researching and selecting new instructional programs. These strategies for building school-level capacity are key elements in states' efforts to promote continued improvement in student learning (Massell, 1998).

For most states, the challenge of providing technical assistance to low-performing schools is just this—to provide the additional human and financial resources needed to plan and carry out improvement efforts. A Vermont principal described how the state's technical assistance provider contributed to her school's capacity:

Two things you need for good TA. First, we needed the plan. Someone needed to get staff development for me; someone who was embedded and was going to be there for the school. I knew exactly what I wanted to do but didn't have time to do it. Second, you have to know where you are going because you need to have a lot of problems to be on the list [of schools identified for improvement].

In the remainder of this section we describe the ways in which nine states organize, fund, and deliver assistance to build capacity for improvement in low-performing schools.

## Targeting Schools for Assistance

The terms “low-performing school” and “school in need of improvement” mean different things in different states. Not only do criteria for identifying schools for improvement vary across states, but also these criteria vary within states. States identify schools for improvement and technical assistance under their own state accountability system, under Title I, or both, depending on the degree of alignment between the state system and Title I.

Once states identify schools for improvement under their accountability system or under Title I, they also vary in the way that they target schools for assistance. In Florida, Nevada, West Virginia, and Wyoming, for example, being identified for improvement under the state accountability system automatically triggered a standard set of technical assistance services for schools. In most cases these services were mandatory for all identified schools. For example, West Virginia assigned a school improvement team to all of its “seriously impaired” schools. Nevada made grants to all of its schools identified for improvement that they used to support the adoption of a state-approved instructional program. All Title I schools in need of improvement in Wyoming received assistance from a consultant hired by the state education agency.

Other states did not automatically serve all schools identified for improvement; instead, they targeted a subset of the very lowest-performing schools for their most intensive set of services. North Carolina, for example, selected up to 20 percent of its lowest-performing schools in need of improvement to receive mandatory assistance from its school assistance teams. Other North Carolina schools identified for improvement received technical assistance from school teams on a voluntary basis; this assistance was less intensive than it was for the lowest-performing schools. In Arkansas, similarly, the state provided more intensive assistance to its Phase II Districts in Distress (identified for improvement for more than one year) than it did to Phase I Districts in Distress (identified for improvement for the first time).

With the exception of Wyoming, the assistance that most states provided to schools identified for improvement under Title I accountability provisions was voluntary; schools could choose whether or not to participate in technical assistance activities. Title I staff in Indiana explained that the voluntary nature of the assistance they offered was an important feature of its design:

It creates a different atmosphere if you don't make [schools] come. We tried to create a partnership rather than an adversarial relationship. . . . If you require technical assistance, there is no ownership.

One implication of this choice, however, was that the intensity of the assistance that schools received under Title I varied tremendously from school to school, even among schools that had all been identified for improvement under Title I.

Finally, in some cases, eligibility for state-sponsored technical assistance did not depend on designation as low-performing under the state accountability system or under Title I. Under California's accountability system in 1999-2000, for example, schools ranked in the lowest decile on the state's Academic Performance Index were identified for program improvement. Participation in the state's Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program was open to all schools scoring below the median on the state's assessment program—a much larger group. Indiana's technical assistance to Title I schools was available to schools in need of improvement as well as to other Title I schools. In both cases, the technical assistance provided to the lowest-performing schools was the same as the assistance provided to schools that performed relatively higher. Vermont described its assistance to low-performing schools as part of a continuum available to all schools in the state; the SEA provided “direct assistance” to its lowest-performing schools, although SEA staff were careful to dissociate the assistance from schools’ status as in need of improvement:

We don't use the term lowest-performing schools because we don't think of it that way. There are places with a lot of poverty and they need more assistance directly. It's a philosophical difference in order to support that, to make this something that is supported by schools. . . . Schools don't like to be identified like a scarlet letter.

### **State Strategies for Delivering Technical Assistance to Low-Performing Schools**

The nine states reviewed here adopted a variety of strategies for building capacity for improvement in low-performing schools. Each had its own particular approach to serving schools, which drew on one or more of the following strategies for providing assistance to schools: (1) SEA-based consultants, liaisons, or brokers; (2) school assistance teams; (3) special grants to support school improvement; and (4) special access to the services of regional educational agencies and statewide professional development resources. Table 1 summarizes the technical assistance strategies employed by each state, under both Title I and under the state's own accountability system.

***SEA-sponsored consultants, liaisons and brokers.*** The use of consultants, liaisons, or brokers hired by the SEA to oversee or coordinate school improvement efforts was the most common technical assistance strategy among the nine states in our sample. These consultants or liaisons helped schools develop improvement plans and played some role in overseeing their implementation. Liaisons also clarified state policies and helped to ensure that district plans fit with state requirements. They provided generalized assistance in managing the school improvement. They also helped schools obtain special

assistance from other sources when schools needed it, either brokering the services themselves or suggesting where schools might secure additional help.

In Arkansas, for example, five “standards assurance specialists” (supervised by a coordinator) worked with schools and districts in distress to conduct their initial data analysis, needs assessment, and planning. As schools implemented their plans, the standards assurance specialists secured additional services from math, literacy, and field specialists located in regionally-based cooperatives and within the SEA. In some cases, standards assurance specialists provided assistance beyond the initial needs assessment and planning, though it tended to be somewhat limited. “Our business is about brokering resources,” explained one.

Brokering resources was also a high priority activity in Florida and Vermont. Florida’s Office of School Improvement assigned what it called “regional team members” to work with all of the F schools in the state. Two regional team members worked with F schools in each of five regions created for this purpose. These team members helped schools develop improvement plans and review and provide feedback on them. They suggested sources of technical assistance, clarified state policies, and helped ensure that districts’ assistance and intervention plans fit with state requirements. Similarly, Vermont’s four full-time school improvement coordinators served as liaisons or “critical friends” who reviewed and strengthened schools’ actions plans, assisted in identifying and securing external technical assistance providers, scouted for resources, and monitored the implementation of technical assistance.

Nevada and Wyoming routinely provided consultants or liaisons to all Title I schools in need of improvement. Assistance to Nevada schools was coordinated by educators participating in the Outstanding Nevada Educators Cadre. They helped schools identify needs, develop a plan, and adopt a remediation strategy. In Wyoming, an SEA consultant brokered and provided services to the 25 Title I schools identified for program improvement.

***School Assistance Teams.*** School assistance teams typically provided a higher proportion of direct support and assistance to low-performing schools than did liaisons or brokers. School assistance teams usually had three to five members and were made up wholly of SEA staff or a mix of SEA staff and field-based practitioners, both current and retired. These teams visited schools regularly, often up to several times a month, and provided direct assistance as well as brokered assistance from other sources.

**Table 1**  
**Primary Strategies for State-Sponsored Technical Assistance, 1999-2000**

State	Services Provided to Schools Identified Under the State Accountability System	Services Provided to Schools in Need of Improvement Under Title I
<b>Arkansas</b>	Seven districts in distress received assistance from teams made up of SEA staff and field-based reading and mathematics specialists (14 schools total). Teams assisted with the development of the school improvement plan in Phase I districts and write the plan in Phase II districts. Specialists provided follow-up support and professional development.	Not applicable
<b>California</b>	The state awarded planning grants of \$50,000 to 353 low-performing schools, which schools used to hire external evaluators and to support other improvement activities. During the planning year the external evaluators focused on the development of the school improvement plan.	Title I schools accessed services from the Statewide System of School Support (S4).
<b>Florida</b>	Seventy-eight “F” schools received assistance from regional teams, who helped broker services from intermediate units and other organizations. The state also encouraged low-performing schools to apply for funding available from the state.	Title I resources, such as SEA and intermediate unit staff, provided assistance to 73 schools identified for improvement.
<b>Indiana</b>	Twenty-six schools without full accreditation received technical assistance grants ranging from \$4,000 to \$40,000 and assistance from SEA staff in brokering services. The grants supported a variety of professional development activities.	Title I operated a five-year, voluntary technical assistance program open to all Title I schools. Participating schools (25 total) received a combination of workshops and on-site visits over the five-year period.
<b>Nevada</b>	Five low-performing schools received grants to support the implementation of one of 26 research-based models, with the size of the grant depending on the costs associated with implementation. The primary role of SEA liaisons is to oversee implementation and monitor the technical assistance provided by model vendors.	Title I and accountability staff work together to coordinate technical assistance. The Outstanding Nevada Educators (ONE) Cadre, made up of practicing and retired teachers and principals, provides assistance to 35 Title I schools in need of improvement, particularly with the development of school improvement plans.
<b>North Carolina</b>	School assistance teams made up of four to five educators on loan spend one year in residence at 7 schools, providing technical assistance and coaching to school staff. Voluntary assistance schools (45 total) receive assistance from off-site school teams.	Five Title I program improvement schools that are also identified by the state receive assistance through the ABC program, and Title I resources support activities under that program.

<b>State</b>	<b>Services Provided to Schools Identified Under the State Accountability System</b>	<b>Services Provided to Schools in Need of Improvement Under Title I</b>
<b>Vermont</b>	Forty “direct assistance” schools received two years of support from SEA-based school improvement coordinators and field consultants. Technical assistance revolves around the development and implementation of an action plan.	Thirty of the state’s direct assistance schools are also identified for improvement under Title I. Title I resources help support the state’s own assistance efforts.
<b>West Virginia</b>	Approximately 25 schools receive assistance from teams made up of SEA staff and field consultants. Teams visit schools frequently and assist with the development of school improvement plans.	Schools identified for improvement (100 total) may participate in Reading and Math Academies. In addition, SEA-based Title I staff serve on technical assistance teams, and field consultants provide services as needed to Title I schools.
<b>Wyoming</b>	Not applicable	An SEA consultant provides direct services to all 25 schools and brokers other services for them.

In our sample, North Carolina developed the most intensive version of the assistance team model, assigning assistance teams to work full time in residence for one year at each school targeted for mandatory assistance. Each team consisted of a principal and three or four teachers who were retired or on special assignment for the state. These teams helped develop the school improvement plan, evaluate teachers and other staff, and provide professional development, demonstration teaching, coaching, and feedback to school staff. The following year, SEA consultants monitored these schools with weekly or bi-weekly visits. For schools that had been identified for improvement but not mandatory assistance, North Carolina offered the services of non-resident State Assistance Teams that served two to four schools each.

Nevada’s accountability law mandates the creation of a panel of helpers for schools that fall into the state’s lowest achievement category three years in a row. Made up of practitioners, administrators, parents, and community members, panels are responsible to the state board of education and ultimately to the legislature. The panels begin their work by conducting a detailed needs assessment: panelists conducted site visits, toured buildings, interviewed staff, conducted faculty meetings, carried out classroom observations, and met with parents. They then made recommendations for improvement to local boards of education and to the SEA, which acted on those recommendations. According to one principal whose school was assigned a panel, the panel made a huge contribution to school improvement—not because they were experts, but because they took their mission to represent community interests seriously, learned enough to see what would help, and pushed the district to provide needed resources and assistance.

*Special grants to support school improvement.* Another strategy that states use to support improvement efforts is to award grants to low-performing schools. The amount of these grants range from a few thousand dollars to as much as \$100,000. How schools are to use these grants varies from one state to another. Generally, however, the funds are for one of two purposes: to support the implementation of a school reform model or to allow schools to “purchase” their own technical assistance services. In our sample, Nevada and California specified how schools should use their grants while Indiana and Florida allowed schools considerable discretion in spending their grant monies. Schools used the grants to develop and implement action plans, or earmarked them specifically for activities such as mentoring programs, reading initiatives, staff development, including hiring substitutes while teachers attended workshops, conferences, or visited model schools.

In 1999-2000, 353 California schools received planning grants of \$50,000 each, funded through state allocations. These schools worked with an external evaluator to develop an action plan that was funded for implementation the following year. That same year, CSRD funds supported implementation grants for 77 schools.

Some schools used their awards to bring in outside experts. Indiana, for example, gave schools a list of outside field consultants—often current or former administrators or elementary and secondary subject-matter experts—that schools could contact if they chose to do so. Of the states in the study sample, Indiana’s technical assistance was the most “hands-off.” The state saw its role primarily to provide oversight and to develop local capacity to improve—not necessarily to provide direct support.

Nevada grants, ranging from \$70,000 to \$100,000, were intended to help schools needing improvement pay for the implementation of whatever school improvement model they chose from the list of 26 models approved by the state. Program vendors provided technical assistance and professional development related to the models and the state closely monitored their work.

In states that awarded grants to low-performing schools so that they could “purchase” their own technical assistance, SEA staff reported that such a strategy usually resulted in highly individualized services. In Florida and Indiana, schools took primary responsibility for deciding on the content and the format of the technical assistance they received. In Indiana, SEA respondents noted that the state’s guidance to low-performing schools regarding the technical assistance grants emphasized the importance of individual school needs. In this state, an SEA staff member explained that in Indiana, technical assistance was a hands-off enterprise, with the state playing merely an oversight role: “We are trying to develop local capacity and to avoid providing direct support,” that individual told us.

*Special access to statewide infrastructure to support school improvement.* States have also given low-performing schools special priority access to their resources. For example, West Virginia teachers from the 25 lowest-performing schools were eligible for special professional development programs such as those offered by summer Reading and Math Academies or the state’s Center for Professional Development. Low-performing schools in Arkansas were first in line for help from that state’s math, literacy, and field specialists, usually located in regional cooperatives.

The two largest states in the sample, California and Florida, also relied on well-developed regional systems to provide technical assistance to low-performing schools. In California, Title I schools identified for improvement received services from the Statewide System of School Support Centers—known as S4 Centers. These centers provided information about resources and a variety of training opportunities, workshops, and institutes. Florida funded various centers that provided free technical assistance to low-performing schools. The state has six regional Area Centers for Educational Enhancement (ACEs) and two Title I Regional Centers, all of which help all schools and districts, but play a particularly significant role in helping low-performing schools.

### **Working With and Through Districts**

School districts are important partners in any effort to build capacity in low-performing schools. In our sample of nine states, approaches to working with districts varied widely both across and within states, depending on the state and on the size and capacity of the district. Districts supplied state-sponsored technical assistance providers entrée into schools, and offered them a wealth of information about ongoing reform efforts in the district or in the school that was the target of assistance. After that, however, district participation in assistance activities varied enormously. Some districts acted primarily as fiscal agents. Others were more active in collaborating with the state to provide support to schools. In general, the partnerships between states and districts were not particularly active, although there were exceptions.

A few states described district support for schools in need of improvement as a key, but undeveloped, strategy for sustaining their work. For example, school assistance team members in one state reported that districts often relinquished responsibility for troubled schools once the state was involved. SEA staff in another state noted that in their state the district role in technical assistance was undefined under current law. The state’s school accountability act called for the state to play a limited role in technical assistance; but did not specify how districts should provide assistance, other than to serve as fiscal agents for school improvement funds and to receive action plans before they were sent to the state.

Overall, the extent to which districts do participate in technical assistance depends on several factors, including statutory requirements, district capacity, and the respect SEA staff garner at the district level. Where state laws have outlined clear roles and responsibilities for districts, districts can complement the state's efforts. For example, in Florida, districts were strongly encouraged to re-direct local resources to low-performing schools. In places where SEA staff members were well-regarded, districts often worked actively with them.

Across the nine states, large urban districts tended to be the primary source of assistance to low-performing schools, relegating the state to a secondary role. For example, the largest school system in one state provided most of the services to low-performing schools through its own system of regional directors authorized under a special state law governing large districts. These regional directors worked to build the leadership capacity of principals, help create benchmarks to pace instruction, incorporate data into decision-making, work with parents and community groups on school-related issues, and introduce research-based practices to school reform. In another state, SEA staff worked most intensively with small rural districts that had no capacity to assist schools; in larger districts, the same SEA limited its role to monitoring and oversight.

A number of states provided technical assistance to school districts as well as schools. This was particularly the case in rural states like Arkansas, Vermont, and Wyoming, where most districts contained only one school. There, assistance to the school and assistance to the district was nearly the same thing. In West Virginia, whether a district received technical assistance depended on the number of schools in distress in its jurisdiction. In districts that have many schools, state education agencies may also provide technical assistance, but tailored to central office needs. This was the case in California, where the state's District Collaborative Partnership provided intensive technical assistance to staff from 10 school districts, all with large numbers of low-performing schools, to improve their own capacity to provide technical assistance to troubled schools.

### **The Content and Format of Technical Assistance to Low-Performing Schools**

Some states offer grants to low-performing schools; most provide some consultation directly; some orchestrate assistance provided by others. While the strategies for delivering technical assistance varied among the nine states in the study sample, the content and the format of state technical assistance was often similar. Technical assistance providers typically followed a common protocol for providing services. A few states even published handbooks that outlined goals, expectations, and procedures for state-sponsored providers to follow. For example, ensuring buy-in, assessing school needs, and developing and improvement plan were first steps to organizing assistance everywhere. Beyond these

initial activities, services varied, although monitoring the implementation of school improvement plans and planning professional development activities were common features of technical assistance.

*The personal touch: gaining acceptance in schools and districts.* In all the states in the study, technical assistance providers recognized the importance of gaining credibility and acceptance by school staff. SEA staff and other providers of technical assistance emphasized the importance of good relationships in working with schools, and explained that approaching a school as a partner and a critical friend was key to establishing such a relationship. As one technical assistance provider in Indiana described it, “It’s as much about relationships as it is expertise and support for school improvement. . . It’s about trust.” To this end, school assistance teams in West Virginia began their work in schools by assessing strengths and acknowledging the progress that schools had made. One team member probably said it best when she remarked, “A mistake a lot of people make is that they go in with an agenda and don’t listen. One can’t go in on the first day slinging parameters at them. . . . We have to be partners. We can’t pretend we know it all.”

Just as important, respondents observed, was explaining to school staff, in detail, the state’s system for identifying low-performing schools, why their particular school was identified as needing assistance, and how technical assistance providers “got to their doorstep.” Establishing these positive relationships were seen as important beginning steps in overcoming schools’ resistance to both change and external assistance, as well as low staff morale that often exists at schools that have been identified as low-performing. A school improvement coordinator in Vermont commented: “Trust, collaboration, and relationships are what help make schools improve.”

*Needs assessment.* Once technical assistance providers established a collaborative relationship with a school, assistance focused on the development and implementation of a school improvement plan. The first step in this process was often a needs assessment to help organize assistance. In most of the states in the study sample, SEA staff had access to school-level assessment and attendance data in advance of their initial visit. However, the real focus of the needs assessment process occurred at the school during face-to-face discussions and observations.

In North Carolina, school assistance teams investigated all facets of school operations, including the evaluation of school faculty and administrators, before they developed recommendations for improving student performance. These evaluations then became the basis for monitoring and providing professional development to staff. In Vermont, state liaisons brought district staff into the school improvement process in order to learn more about school culture and climate, as well as to develop in-depth working relationships. They also reviewed and analyzed school profile data and used other sources within the SEA to familiarize themselves with the schools targeted for assistance. The

needs assessment process in West Virginia looked at both school leadership and climate, and included a survey that asked what school staff had already done to increase test scores, what had or had not worked, and what areas the school had yet to address.

***Developing and implementing school improvement plans.*** Most states expend a large portion of their technical assistance on helping schools develop and implement their school improvement plans. The plans themselves are more important in some states than in others, depending on if they are required under state law. However, at a minimum, they provide schools with a framework through which they can look at their needs, identify strategies for improvement, and organize technical assistance. One principal told us, “We need the plan . . . . Schools have to know where they are going. You need to have a lot of problems to be on the list [of low-performing schools]. Five out of the nine states in the study sample made the development of school improvement plans a critical component of technical assistance to low-performing schools.

In Arkansas, State Standards Assurance Specialists and field specialists worked together to assist districts identified for the first time as being in distress to develop their school improvement plans. Arkansas has specific guidelines for improvement plans, including a focus on leadership and the delivery of instruction, and the process takes place over several months. In districts identified as being in distress for more than one year, Standards Assurance Specialists actually wrote the school improvement plan for the school. Content specialists also contributed to the plans.

California made development of school improvement plans a public process. Schools in the Immediate Intervention/Under-performing Schools Program hired consultants known as external evaluators to: (1) notify parents and guardians that a school has been targeted for assistance because of its below-average performance, (2) hold a public meeting where parents and guardians express their ideas about what needs to be done to improve the school’s performance, (3) review school operations for weaknesses and recommend improvements, and (4) develop an action plan to improve students’ academic achievement that then becomes the basis of the school improvement plan.

Planning school improvement in Nevada centered on schools’ adoption of a research-based reform model. Low-performing schools submitted an improvement plan to the state that outlined the implementation of one or more of the 26 programs on the state’s list of approved “remedial” programs. Low performing schools worked with either the state or the district to identify their needs and choose a program that addressed their needs while complementing other initiatives at the schools.

***Professional development.*** Once school improvement plans are in place, technical assistance providers often broker or provide professional development for school staff to support implementation.

Among the states in the study, professional development activities ranged from state-sponsored workshops for large numbers of participants to school-specific training sessions tailored to a school's individual needs, and often was a combination of both.

In North Carolina, where technical assistance providers worked full-time in residence at the school, one-on-one coaching and mentoring were critical components of professional development. An SEA representative from North Carolina maintained that the coaching and mentoring that followed professional development was essential because, "That's where teachers fall down as they try new strategies. Too many people think professional development is a workshop."

In Indiana, the school leadership team in Title I schools that received technical assistance attended four two-day workshops during the first planning year, with each workshop followed up by a full-day, on-site visit from consultants who tailored the workshop topics to the needs of each school. In Arkansas, teachers attended a one- or two-day inservice session during the summer and were visited weekly through the fall, and sometimes longer, for feedback and coaching.

In Arkansas, regional specialists worked intensively with schools identified for more than one year on instructional improvement. For example, a math specialist at the SEA set up summer school programs in four districts. Teachers received a one- or two-day inservice and weekly classroom visits as they taught, and continued to receive feedback and coaching through the fall. In another school, math specialists worked intensively with several individual teachers over the period of a year. Principals were asked to develop their instructional leadership skills by observing teachers for 30 minutes a week and providing written feedback.

*Intensity of services.* Most of the nine states included in this review had clearly designed their services to be frequent and sustained over a long period of time. For example, schools in most states reported that they received five or more visits over the course of the school year, as well as frequent telephone calls. Other schools saw their provider monthly or more often. Most of the school principals interviewed for this study experienced this level of interaction just as intensively. Very few of the principals said that their schools did not receive enough help.

Patterns of intensity, however, did vary. Of the nine states, North Carolina provided the most intensive assistance to its low-performing schools, with four to five working full-time in mandatory assistance schools for an entire year. In other states the standard package of assistance was somewhat less intensive.

In Arkansas and Nevada, the state's assistance became more intensive and hands-on the longer a school was categorized as needing improvement. An SEA administrator in Arkansas explained, "Even though our staff is designated to work with all districts in distress, those in Phase II (the second year of improvement) get more time. We cannot get to the point of Phase III." Conversely, the "watch list" districts often got considerably less assistance because technical assistance to those districts was voluntary and of lower priority to SEA staff.

Nevada classified low-performing schools in three priority levels. In the first year, Nevada schools could request SEA assistance in developing an improvement plan, do it alone, or do it with the help of their school district. In the second year, if their plan didn't produce the necessary gains, the school had to accept technical assistance from the state. If student achievement hadn't gone up by the third year, the state appointed a panel to oversee improvement efforts. Vermont, in contrast, provided more intensive assistance during the first two years a school was eligible for assistance.

The level of assistance to schools and the frequency of services can also vary according to a school's own motivation and capacity. This is especially true in states that give schools a great deal of discretion in technical assistance. States may make resources available, such as California's grants for schools to purchase technical assistance, but a school's own leadership and willingness to take advantage of these resources determines if these resources are used.

### **Building Capacity for Sustained Reform and Improvement**

The exercise of writing and implementing a school improvement plan can teach school staff how to assess their own needs and how to be more astute consumers of other sources of assistance. It also focuses school staff on improving student achievement and creates a new sense of purpose within the school. As a result, schools can develop the capacity to sustain reform efforts after the initial period of technical assistance ends.

The comments of some school and district staff members suggested, however, that these longer-term capacity-building goals were much more difficult to accomplish than the short-term tasks related to the development and implementation of school improvement plans. Schools that had received large grants from the state to adopt new instructional programs observed that they would find it difficult to continue with those programs once the state's funding ended. In other schools, respondents were grateful for the state's help in developing an improvement plan, but unsure that they would be able to do it again without the state's help. In still other schools, respondents pointed out that high rates of staff turnover could easily undo progress made the previous year.

In states that provided grants to low-performing schools, respondents pointed out the irony of placing so much responsibility for school improvement in the hands of schools that have been identified as failing. They questioned whether low-performing schools, which have demonstrated problems with their own capacity for improvement, should be given so much responsibility for developing an improvement strategy and for choosing appropriate assistance. In one state, district respondents argued that the effect of the state’s grant program has been to put the “solution” into the hands of the same weak managers who contributed to the problem of low achievement:

Most of the schools that are eligible [for school improvement grants] are not in the position to take advantage of this amount of support. . . . There’s not enough money to help if the teachers are so occupied with survival that they can’t even figure out how to find an intervention.

SEA staff observed that the capacity of low-performing schools to accommodate change is a factor in designing services for them. For example, states were trying to find ways of reducing staff turnover so that their investments in professional development and school improvement planning would not be wasted in later years. To this end, the Nevada legislature passed a measure that provides incentive pay for teachers who stay in designated at-risk schools. Principals in that state reported that the state money for low-performing schools had a stabilizing effect on faculty mobility. In North Carolina, school assistance teams formally evaluated principals and teachers several times a year and replaced those who were deficient in an effort to bolster school capacity.

Across the nine states in the study, SEA staff searched for an answer to the problem of building long-term capacity in schools to sustain improvement. A few states, including Arkansas, California, Nevada, and Vermont, organized their technical assistance in multiple-year cycles, as opposed to only one year of guaranteed assistance. State respondents argued that multi-year cycles helped prevent “flip-flopping”—reappearing on the state’s low-performing list after brief periods of success. Several of the states in our sample had taken steps to extend services to schools that were not formally identified for improvement—both “bubble schools” in danger of being identified and those that recently came off the state’s list—in order to ensure some continuity in improvement. For example, the SEA in Nevada received permission from the state legislature to allocate “leftover” funds to schools that were exiting identification status as well as those on the verge of being identified. North Carolina schools that completed their year of mandated assistance continued to receive weekly monitoring visits from SEA staff, even though they were no longer among the state’s lowest-performing schools. Vermont continued to serve direct assistance schools that made improvements in student achievement, albeit at a lower level of intensity. An SEA administrator from Arkansas described the reasoning behind this continuing engagement with schools:

Before I free them from support, I want to make sure they can stand on their own two feet . . . .  
Every year we're looking for a reduction in the number of kids performing in the bottom quartile.  
The improvement has to be consistent.

To address the challenge of sustaining improvement in targeted schools, states had found ways to keep serving them for as long as available resources would allow. No one we interviewed, however, was ready to claim that they had achieved permanent improvements in the schools that they had served.

## **Design Challenges for the Development of New Technical Assistance Systems**

States are central actors in the implementation of school-based accountability systems: they develop state standards and assessment systems, and in most cases, identify failing schools. As such, they are also a logical source of assistance for schools as they undertake improvement. As a result of new accountability systems, SEA officials in our sample of nine states emphasized that their approaches to technical assistance have changed. They described old approaches as ad-hoc and reactive; when school districts or schools asked for assistance, they supplied it. They described their current efforts as more strategic and coordinated.

This review of state-sponsored technical assistance illustrates the choices nine states made as they worked to develop more comprehensive support systems. Its findings are significant for what they tell us about the challenges states faced as they tried to scale up both the reach and the intensity of their assistance to low-performing schools. As more states undertake to develop more effective school support systems, they will come upon similar design challenges.

### **Targeting Schools for Assistance**

In our sample of nine states, as noted earlier, state strategies for targeting schools for assistance were only loosely coupled with the process of identifying schools for improvement. States used a range of criteria for identifying which schools should be served, and a school's designation as in need of improvement did not always trigger a standard set of technical assistance services.

In seven of the nine states, the number of schools targeted for assistance under the state's own accountability system was also relatively small—between 10 and 40 schools. Many states effectively limited the number of schools they assisted by making their services voluntary, by mandating their assistance in only the very lowest-performing schools, or by providing tiered assistance that was more intensive for some schools than for others. Respondents in several states explained that the lack of

capacity and funding restricted their assistance and that they had adopted these strategies to provide adequate levels of assistance to the schools they did serve. As one SEA administrator noted, “We can’t serve all schools because we don’t have enough capacity or money. The idea is to provide quality technical assistance.” Other states believed that technical assistance was more effective when schools chose to receive it.

This ability to limit the number of schools served, and to offer assistance on a voluntary basis, were important features of the technical assistance systems described here. As the stakes become higher under new accountability systems, such as the accountability requirements in NCLB, states may find themselves with fewer options for targeting schools. This presents new challenges to states: they may have to work harder to gain entree to schools that would not necessarily seek out assistance on their own, and they may have to work with schools with a wider range of achievement levels and educational needs.

### **Marshalling Resources to Support Technical Assistance Activities**

The question of where the resources would come from to support technical assistance activities loomed large in all of the states included in this study. The nine states in our sample relied on a combination of existing staff, special appropriations, and other funding streams to support technical assistance services; as a result, it was difficult to map precisely all of the resources that supported technical assistance to low-performing schools. State resources—both financial and human—accounted for the largest share. Under state accountability laws, legislatures had appropriated special funding for technical assistance to low-performing schools in seven of the nine states (West Virginia and Wyoming had not). However, states also relied heavily on existing SEA staff to serve as consultants and liaisons to low-performing schools, often in addition to their other duties, and they used existing programs and funding streams to provide support as well.

There are several challenges associated with these arrangements for funding and staffing technical assistance in these nine states. First, the number of full-time equivalent SEA staff assigned to assist low-performing schools was generally small, ranging from 2 to 10 in most states (California was the exception, with more than 20 staff assigned to the II/USP program). In most cases, SEA-based worked with field-based practitioners to provide services to schools. For example, SEA staff might conduct an initial orientation and oversee the development of the school improvement plan, and then turn over professional development and the delivery of other services to practitioners and other specialists. These individuals were usually veteran teachers and school or district administrators, many of whom had previously “turned around” a low-performing school, or experts in a particular

curriculum or specialty area. Developing a strategy for recruiting and training field-based practitioners is an important consideration as states get new technical assistance systems up and running. North Carolina, for example, runs a selective application process to recruit and select 70 or more teachers and principals to serve as school assistance team members. New team members receive approximately two months of training to prepare them for their new roles in the summer before they take up residence in their new schools. Other states, such as West Virginia, also provide extensive training for field-based technical assistance providers.

Second, the use of existing programs and funding streams to deliver assistance poses challenges for coordinating services to individual schools. Respondents in several states expressed frustration that they were not able to work more closely with staff in other offices and programs providing services to the same groups of schools.

Finally, most states drew upon resources within their own borders—both people and information—to serve low-performing schools. Few, if any, had access to information about school improvement efforts in other states that could be used to guide their own work. Nor did they go seeking such information. States designing new technical assistance efforts might be well-advised to tap other states and regions of the country for ideas and personnel to support their work.

### **Providing Technical Assistance on a Larger Scale**

As we have noted, states have limited capacity to serve large numbers of schools with SEA-based staff, or staff supervised directly by the SEA. Larger states, with larger numbers of low-performing schools, rely on special grants and brokering with other technical assistance providers to expand their reach to low-performing schools. However, the success of brokering and purchasing services as an assistance strategy depends on the resourcefulness and skills of the brokers, the talents of external providers, and the readiness and willingness of the school to seek out and welcome assistance. On the down side, at least from the state's perspective, is that the state has little control over the content and quality of the assistance a school receives. In fact, in states like Florida or California that rely heavily on brokering and purchasing arrangements, rather than direct assistance to schools, state-level respondents reported that it was difficult to know what services schools had received and what difference the services had made.

In general, the more schools a state serves, the more difficult it becomes to ensure that all schools receive high-quality assistance and support. With larger numbers of schools to monitor, SEA staff must work harder to keep track of what schools have planned to do, and where they are going for

additional help. States like Vermont, Indiana, and Arkansas purposefully limited the number of schools in which each SEA liaison worked to just a handful so that liaisons could learn the needs of the schools, keep in close contact, and ensure that all the schools' needs are being met. However, this kind of close contact is impossible in states with large numbers of schools, given their staffing limits.

One way that states in our sample guaranteed the quality of services that schools received was by contracting with a relatively small group of consultants and vendors with a proven track record. Wyoming, for example, retained one consultant to provide technical assistance to all 25 schools identified for improvement under Title I. Similarly, the same two consultants worked with the state's Title I office to provide assistance to Title I schools in Indiana. When much larger numbers of schools seek assistance, contractors who are known quantities get spread thin. This happened in California, according to SEA respondents, with the result that a significant portion of the 353 schools that engaged external evaluators under the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program were disappointed with the services they received. Faced with having to get the system up and running in a short amount of time and few capable evaluators from which to choose, explained one district administrator, "The few competent people were inundated and ended up working with too many schools . . . They were spread so thin that they gave generic rather than specific help."

Recognizing this as a problem, some states began to institute measures to help guarantee quality. Florida required external providers to document their services to low-performing schools and stored the information in an SEA database. Nevada required schools to choose from a relatively short list of approved vendors and programs, and monitors the services school receive. In Nevada, one of the most important functions of SEA-based liaisons was to help negotiate contracts with the school reform model vendors, and then to monitor the vendor's work to ensure that schools got what they paid for.

In short, for states that must expand their technical assistance systems to serve increasing numbers of schools, a key design challenge is ensuring quality service from a large number of providers. States' traditional quality-control mechanisms—working in very close contact with a limited number of schools, and working with a small number of providers—will not work on a large scale.

### **Tailoring Services to Individual School Needs**

One of the challenges associated with providing high-quality technical assistance is making sure that assistance is appropriately tailored to the individual needs of each school. One advantage of brokering assistance is that schools can seek out the services that are most suitable to their needs.

However, delivering highly-individualized assistance is a challenge for states: when services are specially tailored, they become more difficult to monitor for quality, and require the participation of a larger number of providers, who in turn are more difficult to supervise. The more flexibility schools have to seek out assistance that responds to their own particular needs, the more difficult it becomes for a state to ensure that all schools are receiving the most appropriate and effective assistance available. Just as states need effective mechanisms for monitoring the quality of assistance delivered on a large scale, they need mechanisms for monitoring the quality of highly-specialized assistance.

Most of the technical assistance providers we interviewed in the course of the study pointed out the necessity of customizing assistance to the individual needs of each school, and SEA staff maintained that they had strategies in place to accomplish this customization—with brokering services being the most common. The states in our sample had done relatively little, however, to develop or adapt their services for special categories of schools that might be identified for improvement, such as high schools or schools serving large numbers of English language learners. In the case of secondary schools, SEA staff observed that secondary schools pose special challenges because teacher specialization in secondary schools creates resistance to external assistance providers, who tend to be generalists. In addition, school improvement planning can be more time consuming in secondary schools that are heavily departmentalized (because departments may choose to meet separately to develop their own plans). With the exception of Wyoming, states had not developed any special training or assistance for schools enrolling large numbers of students whose English proficiency was limited. Across states, when adaptations were made to accommodate special circumstances, they were made by individual technical assistance providers according to their own knowledge and experience.

States that find a variety of schools on their low-performing lists—for example, high schools as well as elementary schools, rural as well as urban, and schools with large enrollments of racial and ethnic sub-groups—may want to invest in developing training and other resources specifically designed for those types of schools. Based on the experience of the nine states in this review, states that set out to design services for these types of schools may be leading the way for others.

### **When Has a School Improved?**

Most of the state-sponsored technical assistance providers we interviewed understood their role as building capacity within schools to begin and sustain an improvement process. They differed, however, in how they framed the concept of capacity. Nevada, for example, defined capacity as the ability to successfully implement a research-based reform model. To build capacity, the model vendor provided professional development to teachers on the instructional and organizational changes that the

model required. In Indiana, technical assistance providers defined building capacity as helping school improvement teams and practitioners to develop the longer-term skills of using data to inform instruction. As we have seen, most states have taken steps to continue providing assistance to schools for as long as their resources would allow. In fact, respondents in most of the states in our sample admitted that they did not have a clearly defined “exit strategy” in place for ending the state’s support for school improvement efforts.

A key design challenge facing states as they get technical assistance systems up and running is defining the end point of technical assistance. What characteristics will a school have when its improvement efforts have concluded successfully? In our sample of nine states, SEA staff typically chose not to define this end point in terms of test scores. Rather, they described their end goal as developing schools’ capacity to sustain reform over the long term. However, it becomes important to define and measure that capacity so that states can track the success of their efforts to help schools improve.

In sum, some of the design challenges facing states as they develop or expand their technical assistance systems include: (1) targeting schools for assistance so that the state can meet its statutory obligations and deliver reasonably intensive services at the same time; (2) marshalling adequate resources, both financial and human, to support technical assistance; (3) developing quality-control mechanisms to ensure that large numbers of schools can receive assistance of good quality that is tailored appropriately for their needs; (4) developing specialized services for types of schools, such as high schools and schools serving English language learners, that may have been underserved in the past; and (5) defining a clear end point for technical assistance services.

Together, these findings provide a preview of possible characteristics of state assistance to low-performing schools as the implementation of new state accountability systems and Title I accountability provisions embodied in NCLB unfold. The question is, will states have the capacity and resources to fulfill their obligations and if not, what will this mean to schools and school districts who must still find a way to raise student achievement? State efforts to develop schools’ capacity for reform and improvement in the long-term are a key, if underdeveloped, link in the chain of accountability. The next several years should prove to be an important test of this element of accountability systems.

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