



Handbook on

# Statewide Systems of Support

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## Acknowledgement

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### Information • Tools • Training

Positive results for students will come from changes in the knowledge, skill, and behavior of their teachers and parents. State policies and programs must provide the opportunity, support, incentive, and expectation for adults close to the lives of children to make wise decisions.

The Center on Innovation & Improvement helps Regional Comprehensive Centers in their work with states to provide districts, schools, and families with the opportunity, information, and skills to make wise decisions on behalf of students.

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**Part A: Introduction and Commentary**



## **A Mountain Beyond Mountains**

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Paul Reville

One of the strengths of standards-based accountability systems is that the data they provide not only force educators to re-examine their practices, but also compel policymakers to continually confront the gap between their expectations for student achievement and the realities in the field. Performance data motivates the search for gap-closing solutions in practice as well as policy. In practice, the persistent achievement gaps have led us into much deeper discussions about our core business of teaching and learning, to strategize on the improvement of instructional practice, to utilize data to inform practice, and to invest in higher quality professional development.

Meanwhile, policymakers, desperate to find solutions to these same persistent gap problems, are considering measures like wrap-around services to boost student readiness to learn, expanded school time to provide for additional instruction, and early childhood education to ensure that all students enter school prepared to learn. While there isn't yet consensus on which policy and practice strategies are most likely to succeed in closing the gaps and boosting student achievement, it is safe to say that we wouldn't even be talking about these subjects without the pressure applied by our standards-based accountability systems.

Another important subject that arises from standards/accountability/gaps discourse concerns building the capacity of states, and particularly state education agencies (SEAs), to fulfill the implied obligations incurred during the 1990s when states assumed a leadership role in setting standards and holding districts

and schools responsible for performance. Although the subject of building “state systems of support” is lately often discussed in the context of the legal obligations mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), there has been an educational and moral imperative to provide such systems of support ever since the states began enacting standards-based reform in the early 1990s. Nonetheless, most states have failed to adequately meet the challenge of providing adequate technical assistance and support as a function of their new accountability role.

These “capacity building” obligations, unforeseen in many states, followed directly from the logic of standards-based reform: if a state was going to publicly “call out” a district or school for “under-performance” then that state was obligated to provide technical assistance and support to help the district/school improve performance. My colleague, Richard Elmore, has described this concept as “reciprocal accountability.” Elmore posits, “For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation” (2002).

Translated into the world of educational accountability, it goes like this: if the state is going to expect districts and schools to dramatically improve their performance to unprecedented levels where all students attain proficiency, then the states must help educators to accomplish this new demand. Ideally, support should be provided to educators prior to the full demands of accountability taking hold, but at a minimum, once accountability stakes are implemented, the state must stand ready to help.

NCLB makes explicit the new, substantially higher expectations for SEAs by demanding a variety of support functions from the states. However, little effort is made through NCLB to build state capacity. This leaves under-staffed, under-funded education agencies, with a history and culture of compliance monitoring, to suddenly reinvent themselves into leadership agencies. Cast in this new role, they are now expected to provide in-depth support to schools and districts that are striving to achieve policymakers’ ambitious proficiency goals for all students.

The NCLB mandates attain urgency by the ever-increasing number of schools and districts identified as needing assistance. This urgency creates a rare opportunity for rebuilding SEAs into potent leadership and support organizations. However, the focus of the new work needs broader definition than simply conducting interventions in poorly performing schools. Rather, these new efforts should be shaped by a conception of the state’s role in the general improvement of all schools.

Serving all schools is a tall order, especially in light of the prevailing limits of expertise and financial resources. Even in the narrow field of intervention, SEAs are hampered by constraints. As Sunderman and Orfield (2006) have argued, “...the record on intervention was poor, the amount of funding appropriated under NCLB was small and did not represent additional money but a reallocation of Title I funds.”

States will need to curtail certain existing roles, locate and build new school improvement capacity, consolidate current strengths, integrate services, and rely on a variety of outside providers in order to get this job done. At the same

time, SEAs will need to cope with persistently glaring capacity limitations of the schools and districts they are trying to serve.

Rhim, Hassel, and Redding's impressive essay describes the new challenge facing SEAs in detail. They review the limited literature on this subject and point to some important considerations, next steps, and cautions in the execution of this work. Their major contribution is to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of experience and literature in this domain, a framework that offers three significant categories for viewing this work: incentives, capabilities, and opportunities. This framework is a helpful guide for analytical purposes and for planning future policy and practice.

Rhim, Hassel, and Redding's introduction to the challenges of building state systems of support will enable us to move forward to meet this often neglected accountability obligation. With any luck, we will seize the opportunity presented by the urgency of this current predicament (large numbers of schools in need and limited capacity to help) to launch the state education function into a new, more constructive era.

The transformed SEA will need to guide its systemic school improvement work with a clear action plan toward school betterment. The focus of that plan should point to the systemic improvement of instruction, and by extension, on the state's role in improving instruction. How can states assist districts to help schools to help teachers improve instruction? How can teachers, through enhanced practice, help students to learn more?

This new work for SEAs must be informed by current practice that recognizes some SEAs are already doing pieces of this work, even if those pieces are sometimes fragmented and in need of focus and coherence. Advocates for strengthened SEAs will need to confront the political realities of this work. Most SEAs have small to non-existent constituencies. They typically have little political influence and are sometimes regarded as annoying bureaucracies.

Although more and more educators in the field will clamor for SEAs to provide guidance and support "if they expect us to achieve a high standard of proficiency for all students," the reality is still that if you put a dollar on the typical superintendent's desk and ask whether it should go to the district or the SEA, the superintendent will, almost always, and for obvious reasons, favor the district.

Doing this work will undeniably require new resources. There's no avoiding this reality. It's fine to talk about using all kinds of partners to build capacity, but partners need support, too. Certainly, efficiencies can be achieved in the implementation of existing work, but most state agencies are already painfully lean, while their staffs are usually underpaid and overburdened.

SEAs will need to engage in serious new strategic planning to support districts and schools. They'll need to do rigorous and penetrating analyses of current operations coupled with realistic assessments of their respective environments and opportunities. Tough decisions will be required for coordination and prioritizing.

The Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy has identified several key points of entry for this work: leadership development and strategic planning; professional development with particular attention to guidance on curriculum and instruction; and assistance with assessment, especially formative assessment, as well as guidance on data utilization for informing instructional practice.

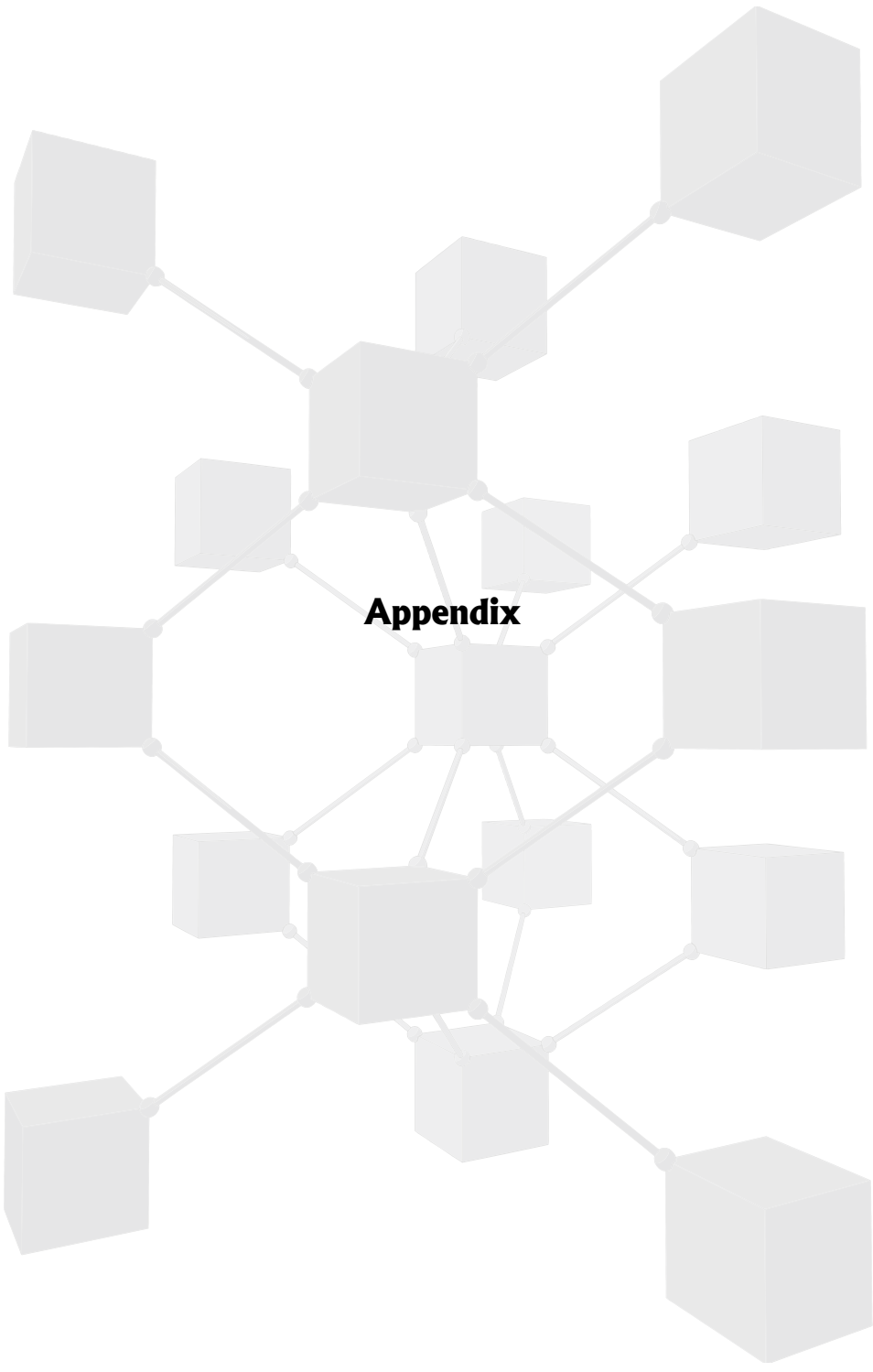
For most SEAs, this will be risky, experimental work that, at least initially, will not be well supported. Agencies will need to attempt and sometimes fail at this work. Such work will require strong leadership and a robust dialogue with the field, especially with districts that should be the prime customers of new SEA support work. States cannot possibly provide substantial support at the school level because of the sheer numbers, so the district level is the logical place to target capacity-building interventions.

From cultural and organizational points of view, this will be ground-breaking work for many SEAs. SEAs will have to strike a delicate balance between the incentives, opportunities, and capabilities functions that Rhim, Hassel, and Redding describe. In other words, SEAs will have to balance their accountability, regulatory, and technical assistance roles in a new way that focuses sharply on school improvement.

The challenging work described in this volume is certainly daunting, yet an absolute prerequisite if we are to realize the ambitious goal of education reform—all children achieving proficiency. Let's get started.

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**Appendix**

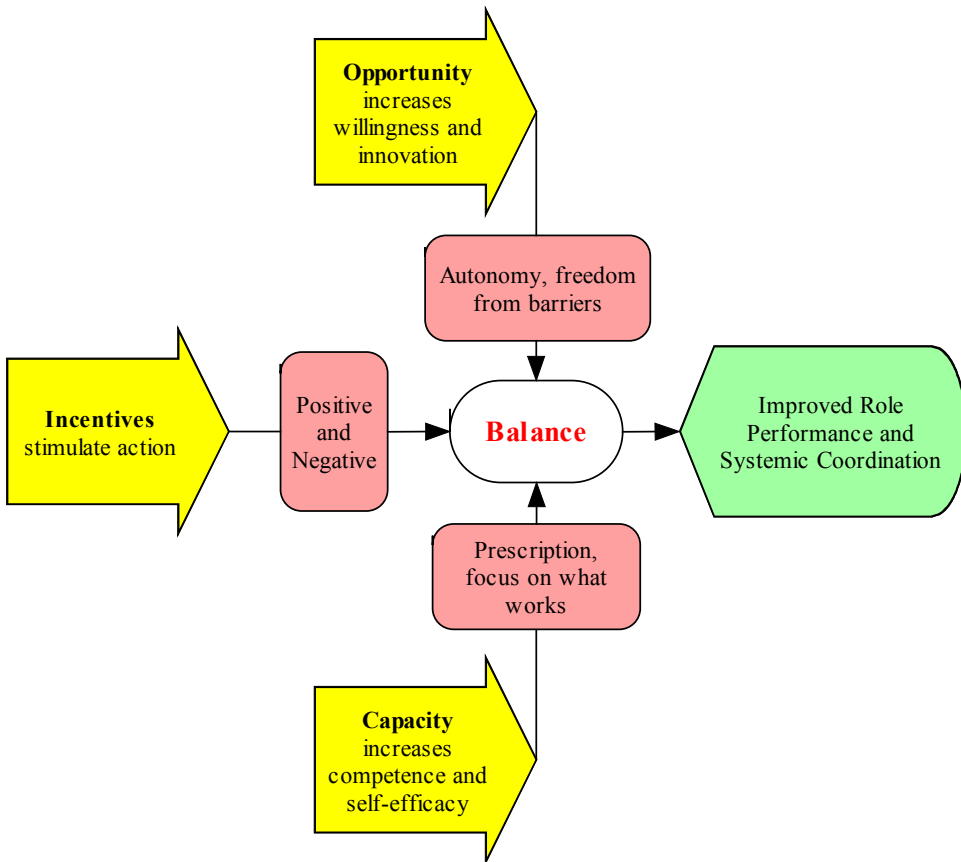


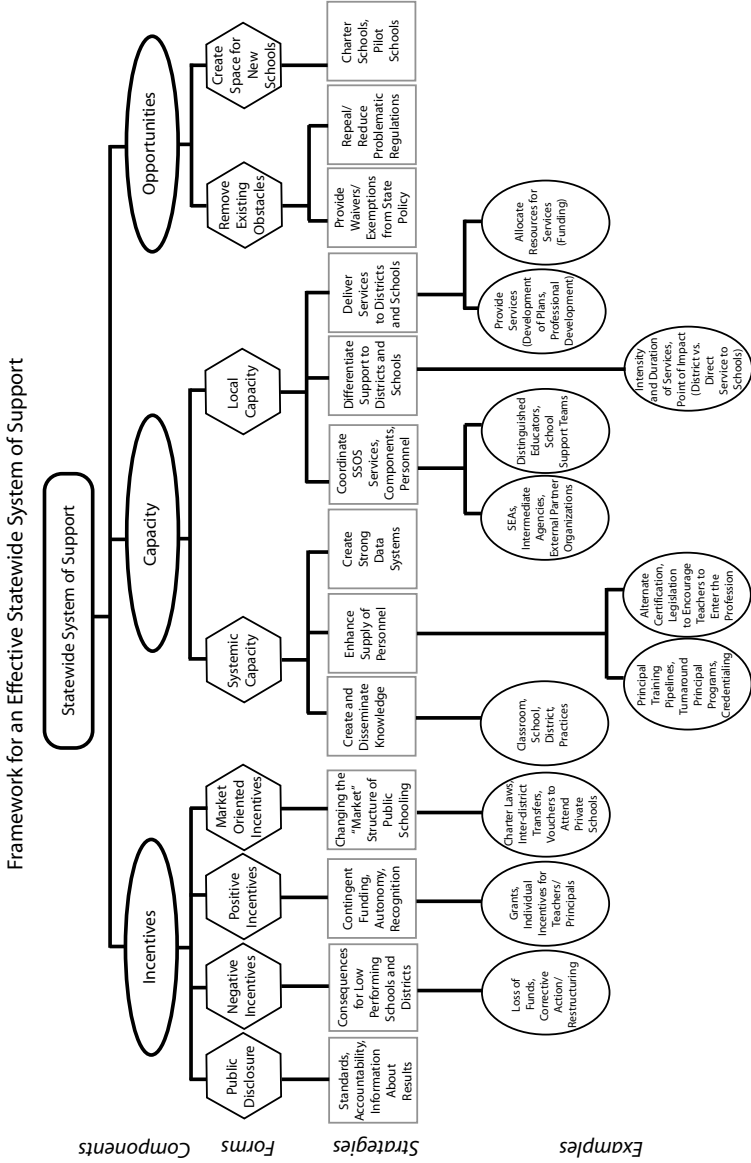
**Theory of Action of the Framework for an Effective Statewide System of Support**

A statewide system of support is a system that supports the improvement of districts and schools that are themselves systems. The theory of action of the Framework for an Effective Statewide System of Support for School Improvement may be stated as follows:

A system is a group of linked parts, assembled in subsystems that work together toward a common end. Schools, districts, and statewide systems of support are all social systems in which the parts are people who perform roles to fulfill the purposes of their subsystems and the system as a whole. Social systems fulfill their purposes (achieve their ends) when the people within them understand their roles and play them competently. People improve the performance of their roles when provided incentives, opportunity, and capacity, thus enhancing their competence and self-efficacy. A social system functions optimally when the roles played by people within it, and the subsystems they compose, are efficiently coordinated. An effective statewide system of support offers incentives, builds capacity, and provides opportunity to the people in districts and schools so that they might continuously improve the performance of their coordinated roles toward the end of all students meeting or exceeding learning standards.

**Theory of Action of the Framework for an Effective Statewide System of Support**





**Monitor, Report, Evaluate, and Continuously Improve the Statewide System of Support**

Framework for an Effective Statewide System of Support  
 from *Handbook on Statewide Systems of Support*, Center on Innovation & Improvement  
 Graphic created by JT Lawrence and Danette Paisley, Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center at Learning Point Associates