

**Strengthening School District Capacity as a Strategy
to Raise Student Achievement in California**

**Policy Brief
for**

Getting From Facts to Policy: An Education Policy Convening
Hosted by EdSource • October 19, 2007, in Sacramento

Russell W. Rumberger
UC Santa Barbara

Jim Connell
Institute for Research and Reform in Education

Topics covered: Governance, personnel and leadership, state data systems

Contact Information:

Russell W. Rumberger
Gevirtz Graduate School of Education
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA 93106

Phone: 805-893-2250

Email: russ@lmri.ucsb.edu

Problem Statement

Student achievement in California lags behind most other states, and if current achievement levels persist, the state's work force will be wholly under-prepared for California's future economy.¹ The state is pursuing a range of strategies to improve student achievement, from creating a strong accountability system to providing resources to schools for teacher professional development and program support. Another strategy for improving student achievement is to strengthen the capacity of school districts to launch and sustain effective reform in their under-performing schools.

This strategy is based on a simple premise: *improvement depends on capacity*.² This premise underlies all training and professional development designed to develop the *individual capacity* of educators. Yet relatively little attention has been focused on improving the *institutional capacity* of schools, districts, and state education agencies.³ This brief focuses on building capacity of school districts to quickly improve under-performing schools. More specifically, we offer suggestions for how districts and states can work together to infuse local school systems with high yield reform strategies within relatively short periods of time.

The Importance of District Capacity

School districts carry out a number of important functions in supporting their schools: *managerial functions*, such as providing materials along with support and personnel services to schools; *political functions*, such as representing community interests through local school boards; and *instructional functions*, such as developing curriculum and providing professional development.⁴

Some critics of public education have argued that some or all of these functions should be decentralized and carried out by individual schools; others call for outside for-profit and non-profit entities to provide some or all of these services; still others see market forces fed by parental choice, charter schools, or vouchers as correctives for school districts where problems exist in executing these functions.⁵ While experiments reflecting all of these perspectives are underway, their efficacy and scalability remains uncertain. In the meantime, many school districts continue to perform all of these functions in ways that are producing unacceptable results for millions of California's children, while continuing to act as the primary conduits for large sums of state and federal dollars targeted at improving struggling schools. For these reasons, the state needs to adopt strategies to strengthen school districts' capacity to adopt and sustain school reform.⁶

What does district capacity to transform struggling schools look like? Where systemic district reform has occurred and shown meaningful results,⁷ these systems have specified and institutionalized:

1. an overall vision specifying a clear set of "critical conditions for teaching and learning" that all students and teachers deserve, and toward which all reform efforts are aimed—conditions that credible evidence suggest are necessary and sufficient to make a difference in student commitment and performance, such as:⁸
 - *organizational structures* small enough and structurally sound enough to ensure teachers and students can build more respectful, mutually accountable and longstanding relationships in the classroom and the school;
 - all students and their families having *personal relationships* with at least one caring adult, working together for extended periods of time toward each student's success;

- *instructional leaders equipped* to measure, coach, and support teachers’ instructional practices effectively; and
 - teachers having *high quality curricular materials* and *sufficient planning time and training* to discuss students and their work in productive ways;
2. a structured, participatory and timed process for creating those conditions in all targeted schools specifying clear implementation benchmarks and outcomes;
 3. the technical support and assistance to move the schools through this process from the current conditions to the desired conditions;
 4. a comprehensive data system providing data at all levels of the system, both to inform educators about their practices and their results, and to monitor the implementation of the teaching and learning conditions;
 5. a sustained relationship with an external partner providing new ideas and technical support, both in the reform process and in substantive areas of curriculum, restructuring, professional development for administrators and teachers, and data systems.

In addition, these districts have successfully managed two inherent tensions. One is the tension between the district and the schools—between a “top-down” or control strategy that emphasizes coherence, efficiency and accountability within and across schools, and a “bottom-up” or local autonomy approach that emphasizes participatory and close-to-the ground decision making over instructional, curricular and professional development activities. Both reform approaches have documented strengths and weaknesses, and neither alone has proven sufficient to instigate and sustain widespread instructional and school improvement.⁹

A related tension is between the district (and its schools) and their external partners—determining the roles, responsibilities, and resources provided by each partner and ensuring that the partnership best serves the district’s instructional vision, addresses any community resistance, and ultimately builds the local capacity of districts and schools.¹⁰ Clearly, external partners will need to share the district’s commitment to create the specific learning and teaching conditions; but they also need to bring new expertise to that work, adding value to the district’s existing capacity, not simply re-crafting their mission to fit new market demand.

Building District Capacity

There are several steps in building these capacities: 1) marshalling the will of the district, community, and school leaders to change specific conditions in struggling schools; 2) specifying the new conditions that will ensure success for *all* students and staff; and, 3) committing to a timeline for delivery of these conditions.

What characterizes successful efforts for systemic change are the clarity and precision of the district’s promise to all its students and staff in these struggling schools. For example, what began in Kansas City, Kansas, with *broad principles* such as “personalizing all students’ learning environments” and “rigorous and engaging curriculum for all students”, became, within two years, district-wide commitments to create a set of *specific conditions*: small learning communities in all schools, with equitable distribution of qualified staff; with staff in these communities staying with students all four years of high school; trained advocates for all students and their families; and regular common planning time for all teachers within *and* across disciplines—time used primarily for instructional improvement around shared instructional goals. In four years, the achievement and graduation trends began to move dramatically, and have continued to improve since.¹¹ We believe these timelines could be accelerated if the

insights from these successful sites get built into policies and support structures for California's struggling schools.

Successful capacity building also depends on district and outside partners committing themselves—meaning their time and their people—to making sure that capacity is built in all key reform areas, that mastery of concepts and practices is checked, and that fidelity is maintained, as district and school personnel take increased responsibility for expanding and sustaining reform within the district. Taking these actions has proven challenging, both for the outside partners and for the districts themselves. Outside partners are typically quite proprietary toward their intellectual capital, and in this scenario would now be asked to transfer it to their district “clients”. District leaders may have trouble managing the demands of running their district and protecting and promoting the change process, while still making time to learn and master new technical and staff development skills from outside partners.

The Role of the State in Developing District Capacity

So how can the state encourage and support school districts to move beyond lofty goals and vague guidelines, to guaranteeing their students and teachers *specific* teaching and learning conditions shown to improve the performance of struggling schools? The following is a set of strategies the state could pursue:

1. **Create “portfolios” of *critical conditions for teaching and learning*.** The state would create several portfolios to serve as blueprints that districts in various stages of program improvement could choose to adopt. The portfolios would be created through a deliberative process bringing together knowledgeable educators, reformers, and researchers. Portfolios would include instructional strategies for specific populations, such as English learners and special education students, drawing on research-based practices.¹² Portfolios would vary from more sparse and customizable interventions to more comprehensive and prescriptive ones, depending on the severity of the district's performance problems and their current capacity to address those problems. Districts with multiple schools having severe performance issues, and with low capacity to address these issues, would be required to adopt the same portfolio of conditions for all these schools in order to ensure district-level capacity can be built quickly and effectively to address these critical situations. The state would also provide financial support to implement the portfolio.
2. **Match districts with external providers.** The state would then match districts with external providers who would help build the district's capacity to promote this set of conditions in struggling schools.¹³ The state would then provide introductions and support a short but intensive “courtship period”, followed by a proposal from the district and the external partner laying out both the district reform plan for the struggling schools and the capacity building activities and outcomes of the partnership. This proposal would be reviewed, and required funding provided if acceptable. Throughout the “courtship” and proposal writing process, external evaluation/research entities would be engaged in developing both local and state-wide evaluation strategies for accountability and learning purposes, should the work move forward.
3. **Support and certify external providers.** The state would identify and certify qualified outside partners with track records supporting schools and districts in implementing one or more of these portfolios, and having evidenced the

- characteristics of effective partners described earlier. The state could also invest in strengthening and expanding potential outside partners to perform the district capacity building activities. State support of external providers could mean accessing training for, and then allocating its own staff to become, outside partners to districts supporting planning and implementation of one or more of the portfolios of “conditions for teaching and learning”; and/or providing support to qualified reform support organizations to expand their capacity to act as outside partners with districts in the state.
4. **Modify accountability system.** Adjustments in state and federal accountability mechanisms (slowing down or stopping the clock) might be required to provide more time and flexibility for successful implementation of the agreed-upon teaching and learning conditions and to build sufficient district capacity to sustain and extend them to all targeted schools. To maintain the state’s commitment to district accountability for student performance, the monitoring system would also include a series of “progress indicators” of implementation of these conditions, and ensuring that districts are “on track” to achieve meaningful reform and improved student performance.
 5. **Develop a statewide educational data system.** Some of the functions now carried out by school districts—such as developing an educational data system—may be more efficiently carried out by the state or other agencies. All districts need comprehensive data systems that serve both internal uses—to help local educators improve their practices and to monitor the performance of programs and schools—and external uses for accountability. Currently, the state is developing a longitudinal student data system to monitor the performance of students over time; there is also some work being done on developing a longitudinal teacher data system.¹⁴ But the state could also help develop a more comprehensive educational data system that districts could use to help transform themselves into “learning organizations” in which all members of the organization engage in ongoing, data-based, professional learning activities designed to improve their practice.¹⁵ Such a system would include student survey data providing information on students’ reports of teacher expectations, teacher and school support, their own engagement, and school academic and disciplinary climate. It could also include classroom measures that teachers could use to improve their instructional practice. Such a system would be “on-line” to enable educators throughout the system to access information in real time and to participate in multi-district professional development training with results from these shared data systems used as grist for these training.
 6. **Establish a state education inspectorate system.** This system, modeled after the British system, would serve an *inspection* rather than an *audit* function.¹⁶ In an inspection function, trained professionals would visit schools and districts that have received state funds for school improvement and offer constructive feedback to the district and its external partner around agreed-upon benchmarks of implementation and student outcomes, to address any ongoing problems in the reform process.

Cautions and considerations

Suggesting that school districts be targeted for increased investments on the part of the state may raise some concerns—“sending good money after bad,” for instance. This new

strategy would differ from the state’s current method of working with school districts in the following ways:

- the state would establish “progress indicators” around points closer to where teaching and learning actually occur—classroom instructional practices, quality of professional development and coaching, student/teacher relationships—rather than using structural indicators, such as class size, or focusing solely on outcomes further downstream, such as graduation rates and test scores;
- the state pairs its expectations for this investment with explicit and credible supports for achieving these expectations in the form of partnerships with qualified outside partners;¹⁷
- the state explicitly validates the districts’ efforts to build their own capacity to meet the needs of their struggling schools through these partnerships.

Finally, these strategies also require that the state develop its own capacity to carry them out, requiring an infusion of resources and training to build up the Department of Education. However, the costs may be lowered if current categorical programs were consolidated or eliminated, reducing the need for departmental officials to manage these categorical programs.

Notes

¹ According to projections of employment demand and the population, in 2020 California will have a shortfall in the proportion of college-educated workers, and a surplus of workers with less than a high school education. See Public Policy Institute of California, *California’s Future Economy*, Just the Facts (San Francisco: PPIC, 2006). Retrieved October 1, 2007, from http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/jtf/JTF_FutureEconomyJTF.pdf

² Norm Fruchter, *Urban schools, public will: Making education work for all our children* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), p. 56.

³ See Richard F. Elmore, *School reform from the inside out* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2004).

⁴ Jonathan A. Supovitz, *The case for district-based reform: Leading, building, and sustaining school improvement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2006), Chapter 7.

⁵ See, for example, John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, markets, and America’s schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990).

⁶ Although states, external providers and other intermediate organizations, and individual school leaders play a role in school reform, “local districts must orchestrate the delivery of resources to schools and lead the charge for systemwide improvement” (Supovitz, p. 219).

⁷ Fruchter (2007) examined district reform in New York City (District 2), New York, Kansas City, Kansas, and Hamilton County Tennessee. Supovitz (2006) examined district reform in Duval County, Florida.

⁸ For a discussion of features and challenges to reforming high schools, see: National Research Council, Committee on Increasing High School Students’ Engagement and Motivation to Learn, *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students’ Motivation to Learn* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2004) and Janet Quint, *Meeting five critical challenges of high school reform: Lessons from research on three reform models* (New York: MDRC, 2006), retrieved September 8, 2007, from <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/428/overview.html>

⁹ See Supovitz (2006), pp. 223-225.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-216.

¹¹ Fruchter (2007), pp. 105-112.

¹² For example, the federal government is developing a series of Practice Guides around specific educational practices based on the best available evidence. See <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguides/>

¹³ County offices of education could serve as external providers along with national and local organizations.

¹⁴ See <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sp/cl/nl.asp>

¹⁵ See Supovitz (2006), Chapter 6.

¹⁶ See Fruchter (2007), pp. 48-53.

¹⁷ Elmore refers to this as “...reciprocity of accountability and capacity—for each increment in performance I require of you, I have an equal and reciprocal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to produce that performance.” See Richard F. Elmore, “Conclusion: The problem of stakes in performance-based accountability systems,” In S. H. Furchman & R. F. Elmore (Eds.), *Redesigning accountability systems for education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), p. 294.