



State Education Reform Within Reach? Exploring the Effectiveness of State Support Teams for Districts and Schools

Robert Hanna July 15, 2013

For the past 50 years, national education policy has focused on states as critical drivers of educational improvement. Since Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, the federal government has emphasized states' shared responsibility for improving student achievement. But states still struggle with the daunting task of improving many school systems at once—a task exacerbated by the persistence of achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, and income level. Many schools have a long way to go to produce students who will be competitive as young adults in the global economy.

When Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act, it called upon states to provide technical support to schools.¹ Specifically, Congress asked states' education agencies to organize “school support teams” to work closely with school and district staff on school improvement.² Some states have different names for them, but whatever they are called, they all help schools with developing plans for improvement and monitoring progress toward achieving their goals. In theory, the task of support teams is straightforward: Improve the performance of districts and schools. But there is nothing simple about what support teams do. Team members coach district and school leaders in the complex work of improving teaching and learning—leading them through an intensive process of self-assessment, planning, and action.

These support teams, however, are quite far from center court. To put it another way, these coaches are somewhat removed from the action. If what teachers do in classrooms—their speech and gestures, the materials they use, how they plan to use classroom time—matters most to educational improvement,³ what influence can these teams have over that process when they are far away from the classroom? State support teams typically work with district and school leaders but not directly with teachers. And as we all know, coaches do not win games. Yes, coaches coordinate practices for players, but when it's game time, it is the players who must execute and play the game. The support

teams stay on the sidelines making adjustments, giving advice, and reminding others of their specific duties and responsibilities.

This issue brief explores one part of states' work for school improvement—specifically, how state support teams have improved school performance. This brief also considers what issues school leaders face and how these support teams have attempted to help schools meet these challenges. The brief includes some examples of support teams that have changed the ways district and school leaders do their work, but their impact to date on student achievement has been limited.

Three themes emerged in this look at support teams. We consider them in turn below.

State support-team effectiveness varies widely

State support teams are staffed with experienced educational leaders and specialists, but the structure of these teams and the services and support they provide differ from state to state. Typically, support teams help districts or school leaders develop strategic plans and play a key role in monitoring progress, but teams vary in the other types of assistance they provide. Nevertheless, working in close collaboration with these teams, some local leaders have been able to significantly improve how districts and schools support teaching and learning, and the most effective teams have gone a long way in building the capacity of local school leaders.

State support teams in their current form may have done little to improve student achievement

There is scant research about the effectiveness of state support teams. What research there is indicates that local leaders can learn a lot from support teams, but when it comes to student achievement, their impact has been limited. State support teams typically work with district and school leaders—rather than with teachers—and this distance from the classroom might explain why many teams have not had more impact on student learning.

State support teams, if they are to become a more effective reform strategy, may require some redesign

As part of this brief, we looked abroad and found that education systems can spur and sustain improvement through regional support organizations. Specifically, high-performing education systems can and do provide technical support through structures between central authorities and their schools. In Shanghai, China, for example, district

leaders match low-performing schools to high-performing schools in strategic partnerships for school improvement.⁴ In the United States, state support teams could leverage their knowledge about local education systems to facilitate similar types of collaborative partnerships.

As currently designed in many states, the support-team strategy has great potential to improve the practice of school leaders. Nevertheless, if policymakers hope to improve student outcomes, states should ensure that teams work with district and school staff to support teachers' growth. As such, this brief recommends strategies that states can employ to more directly impact teaching and learning.

What are state support teams, and how have they supported schools?

Increasingly, states have been providing support to schools and districts through support teams. States have assembled teams of experienced practitioners to work on school improvement. These teams might include former principals or superintendents, and they might also be staffed with specialists in math or English language arts or in analyzing data. Irrespective of their makeup, the purpose of these teams is to help districts and schools become higher-performing organizations.

The state-support-team model is not new. It can be traced back to the early 1990s. One early support-team model is the Distinguished Educators initiative of Kentucky's School Transformation Assistance and Renewal, or STAR, program.⁵ Beginning in the 1990s through the present, Kentucky's Distinguished Educators have supported the work of school leaders around improvement.⁶ The distinguished educators are experienced education practitioners who have demonstrated excellence in teaching or education leadership. They are hired by the state to help school leaders develop improvement plans, locate resources for improvement activities, and recommend professional-development opportunities for teachers.

Today a number of state support teams include distinguished educators, but the teams are configured somewhat differently across the states. In New Jersey, for example, the teams include coaches for principals and teachers, content specialists, and data specialists.⁷ In California, District Assistance and Intervention Teams can include one of several types of state-approved support organizations.⁸ The Orange County Department of Education, for example, is a state-approved organization, and as such, it can provide support services beyond its geographic jurisdiction.⁹ This particular team includes the directors of various departments within the Orange County office.

States provide guidance about what effective schools and districts should look like. In New Jersey, Regional Achievement Center teams work with schools and districts according to eight "turnaround principles," including "effective instruction" or "enabling

the effective use of data.”¹⁰ The Iowa Department of Education has “seven characteristics” of effective schools and districts to inform the work of its Iowa support teams. The list of characteristics includes things such as professional learning, learning environment, and collaborative relationships across school staff and stakeholders.¹¹

Very similar to business consultants, state support teams work together with district and school leaders primarily on the design of action plans and then the monitoring of the implementation of these plans. When asked which tasks they spent the most time on, support-team members in four northwest states gave the highest rankings to meetings related to planning, improvement, and/or implementation, according to a study by the Regional Education Laboratory at Education Northwest.¹² Even more specifically, these teams work with principals, teachers, and other leaders on goal setting and establishing metrics to measure progress toward goals. Most team members in these northwest states, for example, spent a great deal of time helping educators design so-called SMART goals—“specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound.”¹³

Typically, support teams follow a common approach to continuous improvement: diagnose issues, identify strengths, make plans, monitor progress, and adjust.¹⁴ Essentially, support teams act as a combination of doctors, accountants, and tutors for local education leaders. Team members work with local education leaders to diagnose the major issues that they face in regard to improving schools, and then they develop plans for improvement. Teams review student-performance data, how districts or schools spend their money, and how local leaders and teachers work and what they know. A plan might include, for example, the goal of improving student reading skills by the third grade.¹⁵ The improvement plan might describe how teachers should teach reading in the early grades and how to give teachers opportunities to learn more about the proposed reading techniques.

The teams often take what is best described as a “triage” approach, where, similar to nurses or doctors in the emergency room, they devote much more attention to districts and schools with the highest perceived needs. Depending on the magnitude of the issues facing a school or district, team members may become more closely involved with helping educators follow through on their improvement plans and assist in making midcourse corrections. While plans might help clarify the work and set priorities, plans do not enact themselves. Actually, changing how educators do their work requires more than just setting goals and determining first steps. Support teams must change educators’ routines, have different types of interactions with principals and teachers, and provide new resources or materials to help educators learn how to do their work differently.¹⁶

It should come as no surprise that there are many low-performing schools and districts in every corner of the country. To deal with the scale of their improvement efforts, some states deliver support teams to different regions in the state. This often occurs through regional offices affiliated with the state education agency. There are, for example, 6 regional teams in Massachusetts, 7 regional teams in New Jersey, and 10 regional teams in Iowa.¹⁷

What impact have these teams had?

There is little research about how effective these teams have been, and what studies do exist suggest the following: Effective support teams can change the way district staff members do their work, but their impact on student outcomes is relatively small.

According to an evaluation of the Kentucky support-team program, schools working with these teams improved student performance at a higher rate than the full set of schools across the state.¹⁸ Interestingly, while many teachers reported that the support teams changed their teaching practices, only half of the surveyed teachers reported that their students actually learned more because of their schools' work with the teams. When educators were asked about how to improve Kentucky's program, they said that the support teams should "spend more time in the school and in classrooms."¹⁹

More recently, in Massachusetts, the District and School Assistance Center teams have worked with low-performing districts and schools. There is a support team in each of the six regional centers. The centers—an entire collection of services and supports for schools—have improved how some district staff members do their work, according to a 2012 evaluation of the program.²⁰ These results are based on survey responses from a small set of local education leaders from across the state. School and district leaders responded to questions about how the state support teams assisted them and how their districts or schools changed as a result. Seventy percent of these leaders indicated that the District and School Assistance Centers contributed "moderately" or "greatly" to their "capacity to address improvement priorities." Similar proportions of school leaders—66 percent—reported that the centers contributed to their "capacity to monitor progress toward improvement."

Leaders, however, reported less support closer to the classroom. While 77 percent agreed that the centers contributed "moderately" or "greatly" to "dialogue about teaching and learning," only 66 percent of these leaders said that the centers helped them improve "staff collaboration around teaching and learning." The Massachusetts program was not evaluated for its impact on student learning, and the evaluation did not consider the teams separately from other center services. Nevertheless, 58 percent of these leaders reported that the centers contributed to "the quality of instruction," which suggests—but does not demonstrate—that these programs may have had some impact on student learning.

California has a somewhat similar support-team system known as District Assistance and Intervention Teams. There are a variety of organizations in California that can provide support services, and the state's Department of Education must approve each organization as a support team.²¹ Many are county offices of education, comprising many districts. California's support teams, on the whole, had some impact on students' growth in math learning but none on student learning in English language arts, accord-

ing to one evaluation of the program.²² The growth in math scores was too small to have any practical significance, though. The evaluation compared districts with support-team assistance and those without it, adjusting for the lower average performance of the assisted districts before they had support-team assistance.

The study also suggested that educators learned new things from the California support teams. This new learning, however, did not lead to noticeable improvements in student achievement, according to interviews with district leadership teams and their support teams. Nevertheless, given the differences in the types of activities these teams provided, these results likely mask the impact of very effective teams.

Why have support teams had such limited impact?

In other education systems around the world, support teams do register an impact of student learning, and regional centers and similar teams serve an important role in enabling and sustaining school improvement. “In every system we looked at, the first focus of school reforms was on the schools and the center [National Ministry of Education],” according to a 2010 McKinsey report. “Efforts to strengthen the mediating layer usually came later, as the need for an active intermediary in delivering the system improvements became clearer.”²³

This so-called mediating layer includes both regional-level and district-level organizations. In many education systems in this McKinsey study, intermediary organizations support schools’ unique needs, but these organizations also communicate the center’s (for example, the National Ministry of Education’s) priorities and preferred improvement strategies. In one example from the Western Cape province of South Africa, the McKinsey report authors described how work in the “mediating layer” brought the education center closer to the school: “As the level of support increased significantly, the relationship changed from one of occasional visits from the province or district to one in which a team was housed ‘on the doorstep of the schools.’”²⁴

The problem in both the United States and abroad is that support teams face challenges directly related to the distance of their work from the classroom. There are multiple layers of governing bodies and decision makers between states and teachers. One layer of separation, and perhaps the most significant, is the school district where district staff and local school boards have certain powers related to how they run their schools. Though states have the ultimate authority over education, local control is still a major factor in education oversight and management.²⁵ As such, districts enjoy a large amount of autonomy, and this provides their staff the leeway to make their own decisions. To make the point: District staff could learn about and fully grasp the elements of effective reading instruction, for instance, but there are a number of layers that separate the district staff’s learning experiences on the one hand and teachers’ work in classrooms on the other. What all these

individual players—states, districts, and teachers—do is certainly related, but only loosely so.²⁶ Teachers, of course, still make a great deal of independent decisions, particularly about how to organize lessons and direct classroom-learning activities.

Michael Lipsky’s concept of “street-level bureaucrats” might shed some light on these limitations.²⁷ Lipsky, a fellow at the public policy organization Demos, notes that decisions made at higher policy levels need to be enacted on the ground level by practitioners who must interpret policy directives and adapt them to “make policy” in their local context.²⁸ When support teams recommend strategies for school improvement, it is therefore district staff that have to embrace and live them, which entails acting and communicating in new ways.

Moreover, there is very little evidence that districts themselves contribute to school performance and improvement. One recent Brookings Institution study by Grover J. Whitehurst, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael R. Gallaher attempted to isolate how much districts contributed to academic achievement in two states—Florida and North Carolina.²⁹ These three researchers found that the district’s contribution to student achievement is quite small compared to the influence of school leaders, teachers, and the students themselves.³⁰ District-level interventions, therefore, might not have much impact on student learning.

Nevertheless, state education reform can lead to meaningful changes in teaching if teachers are provided with the opportunities to learn about enhanced teaching techniques. David K. Cohen and Heather C. Hill, both education scholars and researchers, showed that ambitious policy reforms in math curriculum, instruction, and assessment can lead to improved teaching and learning when given the right supports. Specifically, teachers can successfully use teaching strategies if the state provides teachers with opportunities to learn about the new instructional practices required by the reforms.³¹ But just communicating new strategies to local educators was not enough. Educators needed to participate in certain learning activities, such as multisession workshops focused on math teaching.

Of course, state support teams might have more influence on teaching and learning than we can know based on existing research. The studies from California and Massachusetts described above did not collect information about teachers’ work in classrooms and how they changed their practices, as Cohen and Hill did using teacher surveys.

Limited impact, but compared to what?

As has already been stated, it is clear that state support teams have done little to move the needle on student achievement. That does not mean, however, that support teams should be eliminated entirely. Instead, there is a need to build their capacity and make their efforts

more targeted. There is also a need to come to terms with the fact that there are few other on-the-job opportunities for district or school leaders to acquire the types of skills and knowledge necessary to improve teaching and learning. While there are many external organizations and individuals who participate in educational improvement, relatively few provide direct coaching to education leaders. What's more, the most effective ones—though there is scant evidence to demonstrate this—would likely still have scarce time and resources to provide personalized support simultaneously to many districts.

Some states have offered even more-intensive professional-development experiences for their school leaders, but even these efforts have had little impact on students. Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, for example, have offered their principals multiple-session courses through the National Institute for School Leadership, where leaders engage in classroom-based, online, and homework activities over more than a year to explore various roles, responsibilities, and effective practices of school leaders. The schools of those leaders participating in the course showed greater improvement over four years in both English language arts and mathematics when compared to matched schools whose leaders did not participate in the National Institute for School Leadership program, but this impact was small and was not observed until the fourth year, according to a study of the program.³²

Recommendations

The support teams described in this brief are intensive interventions in districts and schools that are focused on improving how educators organize and support the work of teachers in schools. There is evidence that these teams serve an important role in the larger system, improving how district and school leaders carry out their duties, but it is less clear that support teams improve teaching and learning directly, which is the ultimate goal.

These support teams vary in quality, but the studies referenced here have not isolated the effects of particular teams. This research, then, might mask the potential impact and effectiveness of some teams. Clearly, more states should conduct evaluations of these teams if we are to be able to gauge their usefulness and value.

If subsequent evaluations continue to show limited impacts on student outcomes, then states should adjust how support teams do their work to ensure that their work benefits both teachers and students. To that end, we offer the following recommendations of ways states might improve the effectiveness of their support teams.

Ensure that support teams' work impacts teachers

In order to improve teaching and learning, states should provide more support directly to teachers. To do this, states could consider assembling teams of high-performing educators to provide comprehensive coaching to teachers based on Kentucky's

Distinguished Educators program model. Following Kentucky’s lead, teams of exemplary teachers could visit with teachers regularly to observe their teaching, discuss it, make recommendations, and then repeat the cycle.

Decrease the caseload of support teams and increase their engagement with educators

Given the scale of low school performance, the triage approach to improving outcomes certainly seems appropriate. States should take advantage of recent policy changes at the federal level, including new flexibility from certain No Child Left Behind Act requirements, to ensure that teams provide high-quality, sustained support to those districts and schools that need the most assistance.³³ In particular, states should commit to limiting the caseloads of support teams so that the experienced educators on these teams can provide even more personalized and extensive support to districts and schools.

Encourage support teams to match high- and low-performing schools to work collaboratively on improvement

In many high-performing nations, organizations situated between the central authority and schools form and sustain networks between schools to ensure that educators have the opportunity to learn from each other.³⁴ In Shanghai, school-district officials match high-performing schools with low-performing schools sharing similar features.³⁵ The higher-performing school establishes a contract with the low-performing school to provide tailored services and supports, and the two schools work directly together, typically for at least a period of two years. While there is no research available about the impact of this program on student achievement,³⁶ the Shanghai program provides an example of a support system targeted closer to schools and classrooms.

Following the Shanghai model, state support teams might consider matching schools with demonstrated excellence with the low-performing schools in their portfolios. The support teams could leverage their local knowledge about their state’s lowest-performing schools to provide close matches with higher-performing schools in the state.

Conclusion

State support teams are a powerful tool that states can use to better collaborate with educators to achieve ambitious school improvement. These teams provide strategic advice and coaching to schools and districts that have so far struggled with driving improvement. Staffed with experienced educators, these support teams have worked hard to identify specific problems and to develop plans for educators to overcome them. Research suggests that state support teams have improved the work of district and school leaders. But as we look more closely into schools and classrooms, their impact is much less clear. These findings may flow from how this research has been conducted, but irrespective of the methodology, there is definitely room for these teams to improve their influence on teachers and students.

This issue brief proposes that states consider redesigning their support teams with an eye on making sure that teams work as closely to the classroom as possible. Furthermore, as states increase the depth of the work carried out by support teams—enabling team members to better help teachers—policymakers should also consider implementing complementary decreases in these teams’ caseloads. While these redesigned teams may influence fewer schools, the new approach may increase the odds of their success.

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Endnotes

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