SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE:

BUILDING DISTRICT CAPACITY THROUGH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

In Massachusetts, 10 districts have a high concentration of the state's SIG and low-performing schools.[1] These districts, called the Commissioner's Districts,[2] serve the majority of the state's struggling students. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) directs targeted support and resources toward the Commissioner's Districts in order to build their organizational capacity to turn around low-performing schools.

Although Massachusetts' efforts to build district capacity predate SIG, the new SIG funds offered ESE the opportunity to increase the intensity and resources of these supports. Specifically, ESE developed a combination of supports to target the needs of each Commissioner's District, including opportunities for networking with other district administrators, engaging with external support providers, and accessing ESE resources and expertise. Collectively, these efforts provide customized support, resources, and opportunities to share practices and information for improving these schools.

Massachusetts Public Schools at a Glance
Start of SIG implementation: 2010–11
Enrollment: 953,369
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 35%
Racial/Ethnic Composition: 67% White, 16% Hispanic, 8% Black, 6% Asian, 3% Other, <1% American Indian
English Learners: 7%
Students With Disabilities: 17%

Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in Massachusetts

SIG Model	# of Schools	School Level	# of Schools
Transformation	18	Elementary	20
Turnaround	10	Middle	6
Restart	2	High	4
Closure	0	Other	0

THE STRATEGY: A Multipronged Approach to Building District Capacity

As a first step, ESE conducts a district- and school-level diagnostic review. This diagnostic review is framed by the ESE-developed District Standards and Indicators,[3] which draw from the 11 research-based Conditions for School Effectiveness (the state's effectiveness framework).[4] The review, led by a team of ESE staff and external consultants with expertise in leadership and core content areas, launches and guides ESE's customization of support for each district.[5] Specifically, ESE:

- Provides prescreened *Priority Partners* (external providers)[6] that are qualified to support the Commissioner's Districts and schools in priority areas of need within the domains of the Conditions for School Effectiveness.

- Offers opportunities for Commissioner's Districts and Priority Partners to share knowledge and communicate regularly through ESE-supported *networks*.

- Streamlines communication so that Commissioner's Districts receive quick responses and continuous support through *ESE liaisons*, who broker resources and technical assistance from ESE experts or external providers.

- Manages improvement efforts in districts that are struggling to support their lowest performing schools by assigning *ESE district plan managers*, who routinely assess needs, guide plans and decisions, and ensure that these districts have the resources and support to enact improvement plans.

Priority Partners. Each Commissioner's District may choose one or more Priority Partners to help improve the district's central office functions or work directly with its low-performing schools. Funding for district Priority Partners comes from the Race to the Top (RTT) program.[7] Priority areas identified by the districts focus the work of the Priority Partners. Drawing from the District Standards and Indicators and the Conditions for School Effectiveness, ESE designated four priority areas of urgent need: (1) district systems of support, which include a focus on leadership, human resources, and financial management; (2) social-emotional supports for students; (3) maximizing learning time; and (4) effective use of data.

In 2010, ESE invited organizations to apply to become Priority Partners. ESE reviewed their approaches, experience, records of effectiveness, financial capacity, and other qualifications.[8] That year, ESE selected seven organizations to serve as Priority Partners. The following year, to accommodate districts' assistance requests, ESE expanded the list of Priority Partners to 27.

To help districts learn about and understand the support offered by these Priority Partners, ESE created a Web-based matrix of information. The matrix indicates which of the four Conditions for School Effectiveness each partner addresses, along with a brief description of its services, focus, record of effectiveness, costs, and sites where it works.

Networks. To encourage communication across districts, between districts and partners, and among Priority Partners, ESE supports three types of networks:

- *Urban Superintendents Network.* This group of 24 Massachusetts urban school districts began in the early 2000s and continues to meet monthly during the school year. Four ESE staff members assist in the planning, preparation, facilitation, and follow-up to these meetings. Three superintendent tri-chairs choose the topics that are of highest urgency and need to the group, based on feedback from ESE and participating school superintendents. Topics include issues related to SIG and school turnaround, such as resource allocation for expanding the school day or strategies to address the needs of English Learners.

- *Priority Partner-District Network.* ESE convenes this group twice annually to familiarize districts with the assistance provided by Priority Partners. District representatives use the time to meet with potential partners and assess the fit of their offerings to the needs of the district. When a district identifies a partner that fits the district's needs, the district uses the time to discuss specific strategies and details to include in its improvement plans. In addition, districts have the opportunity to share information with one another about their experiences with Priority Partners. This exchange of information allows districts to further assess the fit between their needs and the support offered by a Priority Partner.

- *Partner Network.* ESE organizes a quarterly Priority Partners meeting to share information about state goals and to enhance the alignment between these goals and the Priority Partners' supports. With the growing number of Priority Partners, these meetings are an efficient way for ESE to increase the coordination and effectiveness of partners' work. For example, ESE may use the time to coordinate the services of multiple Priority Partners that are working in a single district or provide information about the new educator-evaluation system that may influence Priority Partners' work.

ESE Liaisons. In 2005, ESE began assigning staff to serve as department liaisons to the Commissioner's Districts. In 2013, five liaisons covered the 10 Commissioner's Districts.[9] For these positions, ESE looks for individuals with prior experience in turnaround work at the school or district level or experience as a curriculum lead at the district level. ESE also looks for staff who are strategic "systems" thinkers, knowledgeable about instructional practice, and able to help district leaders establish and manage professional learning communities.

When working with their districts to identify technical assistance supports, these liaisons do not follow a set protocol. Rather, liaisons assess district needs through conversations with district personnel, including a senior district-level point person, and other ESE staff who worked in the Commissioner's Districts during the past decade. They also draw

on documents and reports—such as district reviews, state-level monitoring site-visit reports, and district and school improvement plans. The frequency of liaison-district interactions varies, depending on the nature of the support.

ESE liaisons help district leaders coordinate and align resources across funding sources, such as SIG, RTT, and local funds; offer guidance to districts regarding their SIG turnaround plans; and act as "thought partners" who provide an outside perspective on the improvement process. They also facilitate districts' work with Priority Partners.[10]

ESE liaisons meet weekly as a group to discuss progress and challenges. At these meetings, they may review research and engage in text-based discussions, share best practices and tools, use data to inform their practice, or share a "problem of practice" and reflect on a cycle of continuous improvement. To stay current on initiatives and develop expertise, liaisons also participate in occasional training sessions developed by ESE's other technical assistance providers.

District Plan Managers. To support Commissioner's Districts and other urban districts that persistently struggle to make and sustain school improvements, ESE assigns district plan managers. Two of the Commissioner's Districts have plan managers. Plan managers work with district leaders and administrators to improve the systems necessary to enact school improvements, as delineated by the District Standards and Indicators.

ESE categorizes district systems into six areas: (1) leadership and governance, (2) curriculum and instruction, (3) assessments and data, (4) human resources and professional development, (5) student support, and (6) financial and asset management. The district plan manager facilitates and supports development, tracking, and progress of these systems under each district's Accelerated Improvement Plan.[11]

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The extent to which the Commissioner's Districts use the support offered by ESE liaisons varies, but changes in state law that allow ESE to place a district in state receivership have increased ESE's ability to support and build capacity for school improvement activities. A 2010 state statute, called *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, gave ESE more authority and provides the state with the authority to place a school or district in receivership status. When a school or district is in receivership, the commissioner appoints a new leader (called a *receiver*) who can be granted the combined powers of the superintendent and school committee. The receiver reports directly to the commissioner. As a result of this law, ESE liaisons report that some of the formerly reluctant districts now are more willing to engage with the state on improvement work.

Recruiting staff with the relevant knowledge and experience to serve as ESE liaisons has been a challenge for ESE, in part because the state has a pay scale lower than what districts typically offer for this level of expertise. To address this challenge, ESE is developing a cadre of potential liaisons within the state education agency and consultants from outside the state education agency. In this way, when ESE is unable to hire external staff with the appropriate expertise, it can pull in others on a consulting basis who have the relevant content expertise—such as literacy, mathematics, and English language development—to provide assistance as needed. In addition, the cost of consultants is lower because they are on short-term contracts.

CONCLUSION

A 2010 Massachusetts state statute bolstered and empowered ESE to focus on districts as the primary unit of accountability for educational progress and as the target for driving the state's improvement work. Using SIG, RTT, and other resources, ESE sought to expand direct assistance to districts and ensure that this assistance is focused on key points that are critical in the turnaround process. As a result, preliminary findings from an evaluation[12] of these efforts suggest that some of the Commissioner's Districts have shown improvements in their operations and an increase in proactive and strategic approaches for supporting their lowest performing schools.

SOURCES

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: State at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12); and SIG school data are from SIG-Awarded Schools (2010–11, 2011–12, 2012–13) located at http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

[1] The low-performing schools include SIG Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 funded and eligible schools.

[2] The Commissioner's Districts are the 10 largest highest poverty urban districts in the state and serve more than 192,000 students, approximately 20 percent of the state's student population. Eighty percent of these students are from low-income households and 24 percent are English Learners.

[3] ESE developed the following District Standards and Indicators, which are viewed as basic requirements for enabling schools to address the Conditions for Effectiveness. For more information, see: http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/StandardsIndicators.pdf

District Standards and Indicators	
Leadership and Governance 1. Focused School Committee Governance 2. Effective District and School Leadership 3. District and School Improvement Planning 4. Educationally Sound Budget Development 5. Effective District Systems for School Support and Intervention **Curriculum and Instruction** 1. Aligned, Consistently Delivered, and Continuously Improving Curriculum 2. Strong Instructional Leadership and Effective Instruction 3. Sufficient Instructional Time **Assessment** 1. Data Collection and Dissemination 2. Data-Based Decision Making 3. Student Assessment	**Human Resources and Professional Development** 1. Staff Recruitment, Selection, and Assignment 2. Supervision and Evaluation 3. Professional Development **Student Support** 1. Academic Support 2. Access and Equity 3. Educational Continuity and Student Participation 4. Services and Partnerships to Support Learning 5. Safety **Financial and Asset Management** 1. Comprehensive and Transparent Budget Process 2. Adequate Budget 3. Financial Tracking, Forecasting, Controls, and Audits 4. Cost-Effective Resource Management 5. Capital Planning and Facility Maintenance

[4] To provide additional information about high-leverage strategies to turn around schools, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast shared with ESE a review of research related to each of the following ESE Conditions for School Effectiveness: (1) effective district systems for school support and intervention; (2) effective school leadership; (3) aligned curriculum; (4) effective instruction; (5) student assessment; (6) principal's staffing authority; (7) professional development and structures for collaboration; (8) tiered instruction and adequate learning time; (9) students' social, emotional, and health needs; (10) family-school engagement; and (11) strategic use of resources and adequate budget authority.

For more information about the Massachusetts Conditions for School Effectiveness, see: http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/ucd/CSE.pdf

[5] The review includes a site visit to the district and low-performing schools. During the visit, the team observes classrooms and conducts interviews and focus groups with district administrators, school principals, teachers, parents, and students. The team

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS (continued)

also uses extant documentation from the district and ESE analyses of the district- and school-level data. ESE staff code these data, identify multiple sources as evidence for findings, and present the findings in a report and in-person to district staff.

[6] For more information about the Massachusetts Priority Partners for Turnaround, see: http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/framework/level4/PriorityPartners.pdf

[7] In addition to supporting the work of Priority Partners, ESE used monies to create an additional "investment fund" to encourage collaboration between Priority Partners and districts toward supporting a specific problem of practice that is aligned with a state priority. The goal of this additional funding is to encourage collaboration among Priority Partners and districts to develop strategies that have the potential to be replicated in other districts.

[8] The review teams consisted of ESE staff and external members, including a former superintendent. ESE subsequently interviewed providers that met the criteria and contacted their client references. Approximately 100 providers were preapproved and invited to submit proposals to work with schools. ESE requires each selected Priority Partner to receive annual re-approval based on satisfactory performance in their sites. To determine the level of partner performance, ESE collects information from the partners about the impact that they have had in the districts they are working in—similar to information collected during the application process. Thus far, no providers have been taken off the approved list.

[9] The number of districts in an ESE liaison's portfolio depends in part on the extent of districts' needs and the liaison's additional responsibilities at ESE. Two of the liaisons support a single district each—one of which is the highest need, now under the control of a receiver because of its lack of progress. The other liaisons work with two to four districts each.

[10] For example, in one district failing to make substantial progress on its measurable annual goals, ESE staff and the district's ESE liaison collaborated with the superintendent and a committee of central office staff to review the list of qualified Priority Partners to identify a good match for supporting the district's struggling middle and high schools. Then, the ESE liaison and other state staff met weekly with the superintendent and central office staff to identify and allocate resources (including ESE, local, and RTT funds) to implement the Priority Partner's strategies.

[11] For more information about the Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Process for Level 4 (underperforming) districts, see: http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=7210

[12] University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute. (2013). *District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) evaluation: Annual DSAC evaluation report: 2013*. Hadley, MA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/dsac/2013EvalReport-DSAC.pdf