State Support for School Improvement: School-level Perceptions of Quality

Evaluating the Quality of State Support for School Improvement

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As No Child Left Behind*'s 2013–14 deadline for universal proficiency draws nearer and states face the prospect of greater numbers of schools being identified for improvement, the issue of supporting improvement in the nation's neediest schools has become increasingly pressing. To inform discussions of how states can better support improvement in persistently under-performing schools, this research brief posits a set of research derived indicators for evaluating the quality of external school improvement assistance. It then uses these indicators to investigate how teachers and administrators from low-performing schools in six states perceived the quality of assistance they received through statewide systems of support and state-sponsored high school improvement initiatives.*

Highlights

Interviews with teachers and administrators from 21 low-performing high schools in six states revealed that:

♦ Factors influencing how schools interpreted the quality of their external school improvement support included their support's perceived **fit, responsiveness, intensity, coherence, stability,** and **timeliness**.

♦ When asked to reflect upon their support's overall quality, schools were most likely to discuss issues related to their support's fit with their improvement needs and responsiveness to their requests for assistance or adjustments in course. The salience of these two dimensions suggests that external support's interaction with local school dynamics may be a key consideration in shaping support quality.

♦ School stakeholders often drew connections among multiple dimensions of support quality, identifying situations where perceived strengths associated with one dimension of quality reinforced strengths or compensated for weaknesses along other dimensions. Because the dimensions of quality seemed to act collectively to shape school stakeholders' perceptions of their support's usefulness, an important goal for states may be to establish an appropriate balance among multiple dimensions of support quality rather than designing support in a way that promotes one or two dimensions of quality.

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Introduction

States' provision of support to schools identified for improvement is grounded in the premise that chronically under-performing schools require more than performance targets and public pressure to improve: they need external assistance to diagnose needs, identify appropriate improvement strategies, and build school capacity (Finnigan & O'Day, 2003). Federal accountability laws such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* and its predecessor the *Improving America's Schools Act* championed this premise by requiring states to establish statewide systems of support that offered technical assistance to Title I schools identified for improvement. By 2004–05, every state had designed and implemented systemic supports for such schools, though the nature of these systems varied considerably. For instance, many state systems featured school support teams, improvement specialists, and/or distinguished educators that work directly with individual schools while other states focused more on conducting statewide workshops or disseminating school improvement tools and information (Le Floch et al., 2007).

In addition to establishing these federally-mandated systems of support, several states have provided another level of assistance to low-performing high schools through state high school reform initiatives developed in response to growing economic, political, and social concerns over high school students' readiness for college and the workforce (National Governors Association, 2005; National High School Alliance, 2005). The support offered through states' systems of support and high school reform initiatives comes in a variety of forms—including funding to finance reform activities, tools to guide the improvement process, and/or support providers to confer external perspective and expertise—and the support is often differentiated or targeted to schools based on their accountability status or other characteristics (See our companion brief *State Systems of Support Under* NCLB*: Design Components and Quality Considerations* for a more detailed discus-

sion of how states incorporate these elements into their support systems and reform initiatives).

Many states are now looking to augment or refine their strategies for supporting low-performing schools but are faced with a limited research base on how to evaluate their support strategies and enhance their ability to effect school-level change. Although several studies have documented the variation in states' approaches to providing support to low-performing schools (Hergert, Gleason, Urbano, & North, 2009; Redding & Walberg, 2008; Le Floch et al, 2007; Center on Education Policy, 2007; Chait, Muller, Goldware, & Housman, 2007; Education Alliance at Brown University, 2006), less is known about how state support has filtered down to the school level and how teachers and administrators—those ultimately responsible for implementing strategies to drive improvement—perceive the quality of these supports. Building on existing external school support literature, this brief offers a set of indicators for assessing the quality of support provided to low-performing schools. The brief then applies these indicators to examine school-level stakeholders' perceptions of state assistance they received through *NCLB-*mandated systems of support and through state-developed high school improvement initiatives.

Evaluating the Quality of State Support for School Improvement

While research evaluating the quality of support offered through statewide systems of support is still emerging, recent reports (see, for example: Kerins, Perlman, & Redding, 2009; Huberman, Shambaugh, Sociás, Muraki, Liu, & Parrish, 2008; Huberman, Dunn, Stapleton, & Parrish, 2008; CEP, 2007) have echoed themes from a broader literature base regarding the provision of external school assistance. Collectively, this research has identified several attributes that are associated with support quality. These attributes can be considered from a design perspective—that is, the ways in which the state system is designed to enhance the quality of supports—and from a delivery

perspective—the extent to which the individuals at the local level ensure high quality support activities. Attributes associated with support quality include:

Fit. The "fit" of support encompasses many features, including the alignment of the expertise of a support provider to a specific school's needs and the fit between a school's challenges and the selected intervention (Rennie Center, 2005; David, Kannapel, & McDiarmid, 2000; Ascher, Ikeda, & Fruchter, 1998). If there is a mismatch—for example, a school improvement facilitator with suburban experience is assigned to a rural school—it may be more difficult to foster meaningful dialogue, to identify appropriate interventions, to implement with fidelity, and to sustain improvement strategies.

Intensity. The intensity of support—in terms of the number of days of assistance, the absolute dollar amount of grants, or the span of time over which support is provided—is an important feature influencing the extent to which state-provided supports can foster and sustain school-level change. As such, questions regarding intensity are central policy considerations for all states (Rhim, Hassel, & Redding, 2007; Reville, 2007; Education Alliance at Brown University, 2006; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005; Laguarda, 2003; Davis, McDonald, & Lyons, 1997). If resources are spread too thin, the support will have limited impact on school practices and student outcomes. On the other hand, highly intensive support may stimulate change but can reach fewer schools. States vary greatly in terms of the intensity of support provided, from one-shot meetings to nearly full-time support staff assigned to targeted schools. There is little evidence, however, about the factors that might determine the right level of support in a particular context or on the strategy states can use to attain an appropriate balance between high-intensity support and reaching the maximum number of schools.

Responsiveness. State systems should also include feedback mechanisms that allow state-level coor-

dinators and support providers to monitor the provision of support and when necessary make adjustments to better serve school needs (Kerins, Perlman, & Redding, 2009; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003). In addition, support providers themselves should be responsive to the schools they serve—that is, they should respond promptly to inquiries, make themselves available at times convenient to school staff, and endeavor to provide suggestions that are sensitive to the school needs, constraints, and context.

Stability. State systems should be flexible enough to adapt to feedback from the field but yet feature a stable core of supports and strategies (Porter, et al., 1988; Porter, 1994; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003). If stakeholders are tempted to conclude that financial supports will be discontinued, the individuals providing support are not committed to the process, and political will is lacking, they will be less likely to buy into the change process with the degree of commitment that puts long-term success within reach. In addition, excessive turnover or shuffling among support providers at the local level can pose challenges as schools are forced to frequently adjust to providers' varying personalities, recommendations, and expertise (David, Kannapel, & McDiarmid, 2000).

Coherence. There is a need for coherence within a system of support, as well as among the supports offered to low-performing schools (Lane, 2007; Reville, 2007; Education Alliance at Brown University, 2006; Porter, 1994). State policies should collectively reinforce and not contradict one another. Various state approaches should not lead to unnecessary duplication of effort, work at cross purposes, or confuse school staff. For example, if states have multiple support initiatives (perhaps a high school improvement initiative and an *NCLB* system of support, or in the case of states with dual state and *NCLB* accountability systems,

separate streams of support associated with state and *NCLB* accountability designations), the various support providers should be encouraged to communicate and coordinate efforts for specific schools. Moreover, care should be taken to promote coherence between state and district strategies and supports for school improvement.

Timeliness. Many steps in the school improvement process fit within a sequence of activities that is constrained by the school year itself. Delays with the provision of resources—whether financial or human—can limit the capacity of a school to undertake improvement strategies. For example, if a school improvement facilitator is not assigned to a low-performing school until February, the school staff will have lost over half the school year during which productive activities could have been initiated. If funds are not disbursed in a timely manner, then school leaders may need to scramble to cover budget shortfalls, or will hold off on expenditures for key resources (Huberman et al., 2008).

This is by no means an exhaustive list of quality indicators for external school assistance. Research also points to such characteristics as *comprehensiveness*, the extent to which support addresses a wide range of school needs (Rennie Center, 2004; Weinbaum, 2005), and *prescriptiveness*, the extent to which supports and interventions are structured or specified at the state level (Porter, 1994; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003), as being significant in determining the quality of state support policies. However, for the purposes of this brief, we have chosen to concentrate on the indicators listed above to provide a more focused and in-depth discussion of how these dimensions of state support for school improvement play out at the school level.

The goal of evaluating external support along these indicators is not necessarily to maximize each of the dimensions they represent but rather to establish an optimal level, which may vary based on schools' individual needs and existing

Data Sources and Methodology

This brief draws from data collected as part of a study of state support for low-performing high schools funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Specifically, it uses qualitative data from case studies of 21 high schools located in 12 districts that were divided across 6 states (Texas, Washington, North Carolina, Maine, New Jersey, and Louisiana). The state sample was selected purposefully to maximize variation in the features of the SSOS across states.

The 21 high schools we visited comprise a diverse set of educational institutions, urban and rural, ranging in size from 120 to 4,000 students, with student populations that were majority white, majority African-American, or majority Hispanic. Several had significant populations of English language learners. Moreover, although all of these high schools had a high proportion of students receiving free- and reduced-price lunch, the level of resources available in each varied greatly: while some schools were newly constructed, technologically-equipped, and comfortable, others had decades of chipping paint, sparse classrooms, and limited technology. The schools also varied in terms of their performance status and improvement results, though all had been identified as low-performing at some point in the past 3 years (and indeed, many still struggle).

Data were generated primarily from hour-long, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key school improvement stakeholders (including state officials and policymakers, support providers, district administrators, school principals, and teachers) and from extant sources (including policy documents, improvement plans, and published student outcome analyses). Interview and focus group protocols featured probes about the types of state support provided to under-performing high schools, the strengths and weaknesses of that support, the relationships among different sources of school improvement support, and the challenges associated with high school improvement.

To analyze the reported quality of support provided to these 21 schools, we developed a rubric with ratings associated with the six quality indicators highlighted in the brief. For each type of support described by stakeholders (for example, a leadership coach, support team, or auditor), we coded the data according to specific dimensions of quality (including, fit, intensity, responsiveness, stability, coherence, and timeliness) using a customized Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet enabled us to explore patterns associated with different types of support by school, by district, and by state.

internal capacity. Although the nature of some indicators (e.g., fit) suggests that higher ratings will consistently be associated with higher levels of support quality, other indicators like intensity may reflect negative extremes at either end of the spectrum.

Applying the Quality of Support Indicators

To test the validity of these indicators empirically, we used them as a framework for analyzing comments from principals and teachers in 21 high schools in six states (Texas, Washington, North Carolina, Maine, New Jersey, and Louisiana) about the strengths and weaknesses of school improvement support provided to them through state systems. These data confirmed that all six of the indicators outlined in this brief were indeed meaningful in capturing school stakeholders' perceptions of the quality of support they received from their state.

To explore whether certain quality indicators seemed more salient to school stakeholders, we examined the relative frequency of commentary on these constructs—that is, for each indicator, we tabulated the number of schools where respondents cited support problems or strengths related to that indicator. The results of these tabulations are presented in Exhibit 1. Schools were most likely to describe issues related to fit and responsiveness (19 schools and 15 schools, respectively) when asked to reflect upon the support they received, indicating that teachers and administrators found these dimensions particularly salient in influencing their assessment of support quality. Most schools also noted strengths or weaknesses concerning the intensity (15 schools), stability (15 schools), and coherence (14 schools) of their support, and relatively fewer schools commented on their support's timeliness (10 schools). (Note that some schools reported both strengths and weaknesses of a given dimension.)

Exhibit 1: Number of Schools Reporting Support Strengths and Weaknesses Related to Six Dimensions of Support Quality
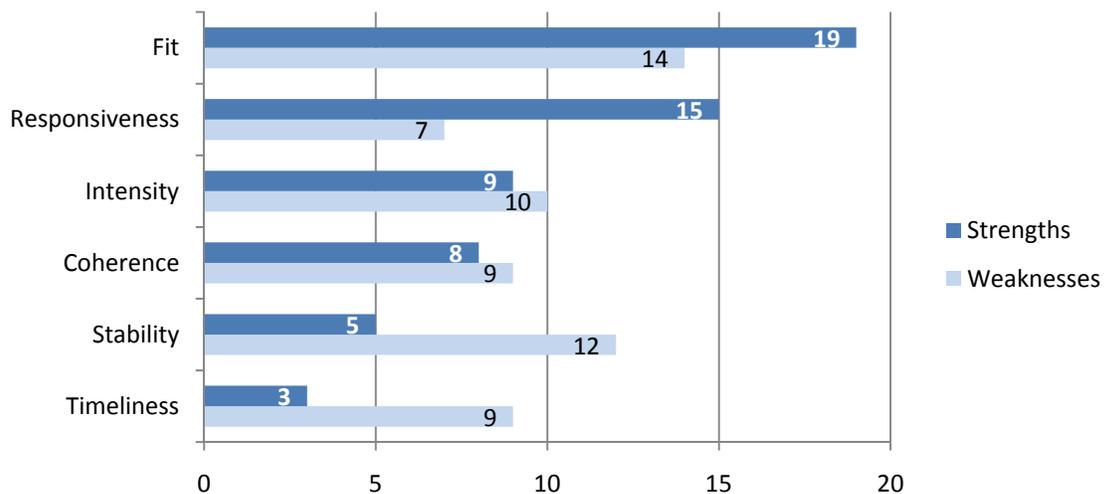
Exhibit reads: Stakeholders from 19 schools described strengths related to their state school improvement support's fit with their needs.

Source: Principal interviews and teacher focus groups conducted May–December, 2009 (n = 21 schools).

Note: In some instances, schools reported both strengths and weaknesses associated with a particular dimension of support quality and are thus reflected in the count of schools reporting strengths as well as the count of schools reporting weaknesses along that dimension.

For some quality indicators—most notably, stability and timeliness—schools were more likely to describe challenges or weaknesses in these areas than strengths, which may in part suggest that schools found these dimensions of quality more prominent when they encountered problems in these areas than when these areas went relatively smoothly.

The following sections present some of the major issues and themes that emerged from school stakeholders' discussion of these six quality indicators. Although the sections are organized by quality indicator, it is important to note that stakeholders often drew connections across multiple quality indicators when describing their perceptions of the external support they received. In some cases, perceived strengths along one dimension of quality appeared to reinforce strengths or compensate for weaknesses in other dimensions. In other cases, schools noted tensions among different dimensions of quality, explaining how conditions that improved their support's quality along one dimension sometimes held negative implications for other dimensions of quality.

Fit

High school stakeholders discussed several aspects of their support when reflecting upon its fit with their improvement needs. This section highlights how school-level respondents perceived the role and qualifications of their support providers as well as the appropriateness of the providers' recommended improvement strategies.

Support Provider Roles

As noted earlier, the schools in our sample received support from various different types of support providers, including external auditors, school improvement specialists, leadership coaches, and instructional content coaches.

External auditors or needs assessment teams tended to generate mixed reviews among school stakeholders. Some schools found it helpful to have a set of "outside eyes" come in who could "look in the fishbowl" and either confirm known challenges or provide insight into new improvement priorities. Additionally, several principals noted how they were able to leverage the results of a state audit to generate faculty or district support for their own improvement initiatives that coincided with audit findings. Despite these benefits, many schools perceived weaknesses in their state's audit process, citing how audit reports lacked sufficient detail, featured conclusions that were based on limited data, or failed to reflect an adequate understanding of the school's unique context. "We take offense when we get darts thrown at us by people who don't understand our school," one principal reported. Another school expressed similar concerns over the validity of audit findings, explaining "Some of [the suggestions] we found can help us, some of the suggestions are legitimate, and others we look at, and you think they're from Mars."

While auditors typically had fairly standard responsibilities in the schools they served, school improvement specialists and coaches tended to perform a range of different functions. In general, school stakeholders seemed to prefer specialists and coaches who played an active role in the school's improvement efforts over support providers who served chiefly as observers or monitors. School administrators often appreciated support providers who could serve as a sounding board and provide feedback on specific school improvement issues. Several administrators also expressed a desire for more hands-on support from their providers. One principal noted,

> If you want to see a big difference in performance, the people coming in have to work more with kids when they come in. They have to have a system put in place where when they are in the building, it isn't just interviewing teachers but actually working with kids: modeling, doing group

work with kids, working directly with struggling students one-on-one. We can talk all day as adults, but if we're not doing anything with students, we're wasting our time.

Another school lamented that support providers tended to serve a largely bureaucratic role (e.g., ensuring proper paperwork was completed and filed, etc.) rather than engage in more substantive aspects of the school's improvement efforts. One administrator explained, "When they do come, it's just for compliance. Our thing is, come! Come help us get it done! Come show me, teach me…help me understand…If I have a valuable tool, it would help take 10 other things off my list."

Teachers often echoed the sentiments of these administrators, favoring support providers who could model expectations and strategies over those who only performed classroom observations. Teachers also expressed a preference for support that was tied to the specific content or curriculum they were responsible for teaching, and many appreciated coming away from providers' coaching or training sessions with instructional strategies and materials (e.g., videos or Power-Point presentations) they could use right away in their classrooms. "I can go to a workshop on Saturday and be implementing lessons on Monday," one teacher reported. "They're not theory type workshops that are more a waste of time. We actually get stuff that we can implement." Other teachers, however, questioned their support providers' ability to assist with deeper issues that were influencing their student outcomes. "Our problem was that kids can't read, and their solution was to give us Jeopardy games," noted one teacher. Another teacher explained that the state's instructional coaches were "a nice concept, but we don't necessarily perceive them as support because the things that we identify that we need help with, they can't help with. We need help making every concept relevant to students, and they don't know what to tell me."

Support Provider Qualifications

One of the qualifications that school stakeholders emphasized most in determining their support providers' fit with their needs was the providers' "first-hand knowledge of being in that situation;" that is, the providers' prior experience—and success—generating improvement in schools of similar size and locale (e.g., urban or rural), and most importantly, in schools with similar student populations. Additionally, stakeholders stressed that support providers' prior experience should be recent since schools sometimes found that the retired educators serving as their support providers were promoting outdated strategies or were inexperienced working under the context of school accountability. "Things have changed!" one teacher stated. "If my only teaching experience had been in the 80s and 90s and then I was an administrator, I wouldn't understand what is still going on in the classroom."

Furthermore, several school stakeholders felt that providers' experience should align with the particular functions and responsibilities of their given role. For example, one school highlighted how their school improvement specialist's experience as a school administrator gave him valuable insight into the school change process: "Being a former principal, he understands the dynamics of an organization. He gets the fact that some people move fast, some people move slow, and some people don't want to move at all." School stakeholders also reported that providers' prior experience was important in helping them relate to and gain credibility among school staff. One school principal explained, "When we identified problems, he had suggestions. He had the ideal training background so that when someone said, 'You just don't understand,' he could say, 'I do!' He had a genuine, gentle way of persuading and dealing with individuals…He's not someone who has been sitting in an office. He went through this process himself."

State Profiles: School Improvement in Six States

Louisiana. Louisiana schools in levels of School Improvement (SI) receive support from a District Assistance Team (DAT) comprised of district and university personnel who assist schools with improvement planning, implementation, and evaluation activities. Schools in level 3 SI or above receive a Scholastic Audit in which state personnel rate the school along a set of performance indicators and make recommendations for improvement based on interviews, questionnaires, observations, and document reviews conducted during a three-day school site visit. Louisiana schools in level 3 SI and above may also be assigned a Distinguished Educator, an experienced teacher or administrator who works in the school full-time, modeling best practices and assisting with the school improvement process.

Maine. In Maine, Title I schools designated as Continuous Improvement Priority Schools (CIPS) after missing AYP for two or more consecutive years receive personalized assistance from a state administrator or external consultant from the state's Title IA Accountability Team. These support providers work with schools individually through monthly meetings and more frequent e-mail and phone communication in order to guide needs assessment, improvement planning, and implementation work. They facilitate schools' establishment of short and long term strategies for improvement and then facilitate and monitor the implementation of such strategies. Maine's Title IA Accountability Team also conducts regional workshops on school improvement and accountability issues.

New Jersey. Title I schools that are identified for improvement in New Jersey receive an on-site Collaborative Assessment for Planning and Achievement (CAPA) review from a team of specialists—including external consultants, state-level administrators, representatives from higher education, and internal district staff—who spend four days in the school interviewing staff, observing classrooms, reviewing documents, and analyzing data. Following the review, the CAPA team provides a summary report featuring specific recommendations tied to a set of core performance standards and indicators.

North Carolina. North Carolina's High School Turnaround Initiative began in 2005 and provides a three-year cycle of support to high schools that score below a specified cut-point on the state's school performance composite measure. High schools participating in the Turnaround Initiative create a Framework for Action that guides their overall improvement efforts and must either adopt a state-endorsed reform model or develop a customized reform plan. Turnaround schools receive on-site coaching from a Leadership Facilitator and from Instructional Facilitators in each of the four core content areas (English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies). Leadership teams from each school also attend an intensive executive training series.

Texas. Under Texas's state accountability system, schools on the verge of entering Academically Unacceptable (AU) status are required to form a Technical Assistance Team (TAT) to support the development and implementation of a campus improvement plan. Schools that become designated AU are assigned a district-appointed Campus Intervention Team (CIT), which performs a range of needs assessment, evaluation, improvement planning, and monitoring functions. Principals from first year AU schools also receive training through the Texas Principal Excellence Program (TxPEP).

AU high schools may choose to apply for additional support through the Texas High School Redesign and Restructuring Program (THSRRP), which offers competitive grants to fund the implementation of a whole school improvement model and the support of an external Technical Assistance Provider (TAP). THSRRP schools must also develop individualized graduation plans for all students and participate in mandatory training and networking activities.

Under Texas's *NCLB* System of Support, Title I schools in Stage I School Improvement (SI) are assigned a Campus Administrator Mentor (CAM) who provides administrative mentoring and coaching, helps the school complete a Campus Improvement Needs Assessment (CINA), and assists with school improvement planning. Schools in Stage 2 SI and above are required to work with a Technical Assistance Provider (TAP) for a minimum of 20–40 days depending on the school's size and stage of SI. Schools in all stages of SI apply for school improvement planning funding, which also increases in amount based on the school's size and stage of SI. Additionally, all SI schools must send teams to attend introductory meetings and the annual Texas School Improvement Conference (TSI).

Washington. Washington's High School Improvement Initiative (HSII) awards competitive, three-year grants to high schools that are selected based on their failure to meet AYP for one or more years, readiness to benefit, existing improvement initiatives, level of need, and access to other resources. Participating high schools undergo an initial performance audit from a team of state consultants and then receive ongoing support from a School Improvement Facilitator (SIF), an external consultant who spends 82–104 days at the school supporting the principal and school improvement leadership team as they go through the state's "Eight Stages of School Improvement Process." The school leadership team sets school improvement goals using the state's 30–60–90 plan and also attends summer and winter school improvement institutes.

In addition to their substantive expertise and experience, support providers' attitudes and interpersonal skills played a key role in influencing schools' perceptions of their usefulness. Principals and teachers responded negatively to providers who seemed threatening, standoffish, or argumentative, describing how such individuals could in fact undermine school improvement efforts by inciting conflicts or stimulating active resistance among school staff. They underscored the importance of having support providers who could establish relationships and build trust among school staff, creating an environment in which faculty and support providers were "seen as a team and not us-against-them." Staff tended to shy away from individuals they perceived to be "spies" for the state or district and instead valued individuals who made them feel comfortable trying new strategies without fear of making mistakes. For example, one school lauded their support provider as someone who "garnered support of the staff, and because of that, it wasn't like the outside Gestapo coming in. No blame, no shame. He was not judgmental, but his role was to listen and support." School stakeholders also appreciated support providers who participated enthusiastically, seemed genuinely invested in their school, and took mutual responsibility for achieving school improvement goals. In schools served by multiple support providers, stakeholders felt it was significant that providers were able to collaborate and develop a rapport with each other in order to promote coherence.

School Improvement Strategies

With regard to the actual improvement strategies that were recommended or required through state systems of support, schools emphasized the need for such strategies to be (1) viable within the specific context of their school, (2) effective in improving outcomes for students with similar needs and background, and (3) capable of stimulating meaningful change. Stakeholders in several schools noted that teachers were less inclined to implement support provider advice if it seemed unrealistic given the conditions they faced in the classroom. In some cases, teachers perceived providers' advice to be unrealistic due to time and resource limitations (e.g., recommended lessons required more time than the curriculum pacing guide afforded or involved equipment or supplies that the school lacked) while in other cases, teachers were skeptical whether recommended strategies would be effective in addressing the needs of their particular student population. When the latter was true, teachers often requested the support provider model the recommended strategy to demonstrate how it would work with their students. "I would like them to come into the classroom and to try these things themselves, and if it's feasible, then give it to me," one teacher explained. "Sometimes, it doesn't work. If you can't get it to work, then I can't get it to work."

School stakeholders also found strategies to be a poor fit when they were perceived to be documentation- or compliance-oriented, aiming to serve the needs of the bureaucracy more than the needs of students. Teachers expressed frustration with improvement strategies they described as "putting on a dog and pony show" or "a lot of extra silliness to show that we're doing something." For example, teachers reported an emphasis on ensuring that paperwork was formatted correctly (with specific items highlighted, in bold face, etc.), or as one teacher related, "They collect portfolios about my teaching. But, having these folders of stuff doesn't help me teach! They want me to have stuff on my board because they want me to have that, but the kids don't understand it! My problem is how do I get my kids to read and to be motivated and retain it." Several respondents suggested that the time and money—two very limited resources for many of these schools—being devoted to making sure their "I's are dotted and Ts are crossed" might yield a greater impact on student outcomes if it were redirected toward activities they perceived to be more meaningful in terms of instruction and student learning.

Intensity

While schools strongly emphasized the importance of fit in shaping their perceptions of support quality, they also pointed out that even when support providers had highly appropriate skills and expertise, they were still of limited utility if they could not spend adequate time working with the school. Typically, state-level support providers were responsible for supporting multiple schools throughout a state, which restricted how frequently they could visit and focus their attention on an individual school. As a result, school stakeholders reported feeling "left in the lurch" when support providers gave them tools or strategies to use but then did not return for weeks, leaving school staff with little to no implementation support in the meantime. "It's wasting time because [our support provider] is spread too thin and isn't around enough to follow through on anything," one respondent stated.

Additionally, schools observed that when support providers' focus was divided across a large number of schools, it could limit the providers' ability to offer individualized support. As one stakeholder remarked, "He had so many schools…When he was here he was successful, but he had so much on his plate, he couldn't give us all of the attention we need." Another school noted how content coaches who were shared among middle and high schools had to learn and support as many as eight different curricula, further constraining their ability to provide specialized, curriculum-focused assistance. The intensity challenges associated with support providers' heavy workloads also raised issues related to the providers' fit. Some stakeholders questioned their providers' dedication and reliability when they were unable to attend training sessions or other events. Others held reservations about providers' ability to understand their school's unique context given the limited amount of time they spent there. One teacher explained that the advice from his school's support providers tended to be "in one ear, out the other" because the providers were "not here enough and don't

have a strong appreciation of what our challenges are."

Another key factor influencing the intensity of schools' support was its span, or the period of time over which a school receives the support. Stakeholders in several schools expressed concern that a brief infusion of external resources and assistance may not be sufficient in fostering complex, sustainable change—a process that may involve multiple stages and extend across several years. "When we got our [support provider], we had someone help us with the task we thought was most important, and we had to take things in steps," one school administrator explained. After the school's designated period of state support ended, its staff was left to implement the remaining components of their improvement efforts largely on their own. Similarly, other schools indicated that ongoing support—or at least the option of receiving continued support if improvement efforts were going well—could assist them in developing long-term improvement plans and avoid situations in which the school tried to implement an array of different strategies at once because support was only available to them for a short period of time.

Finally, although many of the schools that reported concerns over their support's intensity believed that they needed *additional* time with their support providers, several schools noted situations where their support seemed too intensive. In a few cases, school stakeholders felt that support activities too often took key staff away from their daily responsibilities in the school to engage in professional development or school improvement planning. Several administrators also reported problems resulting from their frequent absence from the school to attend mandatory training sessions or conferences. As one principal remarked, "We've got about as much help as we can stand." Furthermore, just as highly intensive support could strengthen schools' *positive* appraisal of their support provider's fit, the reverse also seemed true: overly intensive support could reinforce *negative*

perceptions of the support provider's fit. For example, one school explained how an external coach was spending at least one day a week at the school, but because the coach's recommendations were consistently incompatible with the school's needs, "We're at the point where we're not sure what to ask her to do."

Responsiveness

The extent to which school stakeholders perceived support to be responsive to their needs—either in terms of being accessible or being amenable to adjustments in course—emerged as a fairly prominent factor influencing perceptions of support quality. As noted earlier, most schools in our study (17 out of 21) highlighted at least one issue related to responsiveness when appraising the quality of their support. What's more, schools were twice as likely to identify a strength associated with their support's responsiveness than a weakness (15 schools identified strengths compared with seven schools that identified weaknesses). With regard to support provider's accessibility, schools seemed to view support providers' responsiveness to their requests as a means of compensating for deficits in the overall intensity of their support. For example, one teacher explained that her state coach was "stretched thin, but I can email her, and she will come to school with a folder of strategies I can use." Similarly, another school indicated that its support provider helped make up for his sporadic visits with regular communication. "He's excellent," one stakeholder described. "Even though we don't meet with him very frequently, he does do a very good job of keeping us updated with emails. He's very responsive. Anytime we have a need, we get information about our [school improvement] status or information about something to include in our plan or even to get student assessment information."

In addition to having support providers who could promptly field their requests, schools tended to appreciate the opportunity to adjust their assistance or improvement strategies in response to identified needs or lessons learned. For instance, one teacher noted how a support provider won her over by modifying her approach to address specific needs. "The coaching is adaptable," she explained, "And at first I didn't see that. At first, I was resistant. But, she's been willing to help make sure I got what I need." Respondents in another school were pleased that their state education agency "allowed us to have a pretty fluid plan. As time goes on, they have allowed us to modify or refine the plan. We meet each summer and examine the plan, the goals, identify what we've accomplished and any potential new areas for attention."

Coherence

Many of the schools in our sample reported experiencing an influx of external assistance and/or improvement initiatives from various sources in response to low accountability ratings or persistent challenges affecting student outcomes. One school described being "slammed by attention" from the state and recounted occasions when it seemed there were "more adults than students" in the building as representatives from numerous organizations converged on the school "to put out the fire." Another school explained that teachers were given a new strategy to implement every month because, as one teacher explained, "The state has their initiatives, the district has theirs, and the principal has his." Faced with school improvement support that often came from diverse sources and featured multiple components, schools often expressed concern over the extent to which all elements of their support were working together in a coherent fashion.

Ensuring coherent support is a challenge in many states—indeed, beyond those in our small sample of six states—as they develop strategies to assist low-performing schools. Many states have support structures that are associated with state accountability systems that pre-date *NCLB*; following enactment of the federal law, these states developed parallel systems of support for schools that

missed AYP for consecutive years. In such states with dual support systems or in districts that provide school improvement supports in addition to what is offered through the state system, low-performing schools may receive assistance from multiple providers who do not necessarily communicate or coordinate activities. In other schools, the challenge to coherence may stem from an awkward intersection of state supports and district activities. Finally, grant programs targeted at low-performing schools (whether funded by federal, state, or private dollars) may add to the proliferation of (and confusion among) support providers at the school level.

Indeed, concerns over the coherence of schools' external support typically related to the presence of multiple support providers or to the abundance of piecemeal, unconnected improvement strategies. Schools with multiple support providers noted that having an extra layer of people working in the building created the potential for conflict and mixed messages. Some stakeholders recalled instances where the providers would butt heads with school leaders or other coaches working in the building. Others cited instances where support providers duplicated efforts or gave contradictory advice. Another common complaint was that teachers were asked to implement an abundance of school improvement strategies that lacked a coherent focus. One explained, "We're given so much to implement and then have to implement something new. We aren't given time to try something and work the kinks out. There is lots of add on."

Interestingly, many of the schools that voiced concerns over their support's coherence also identified mechanisms to cope with such issues. For example, one principal described how the school was initially intimidated by the thought of receiving support from two different state programs but managed to leverage the two sources of support to create more intensive assistance for the school. The school administrators felt fortunate that both of their support providers "were knowledgeable

and got along, and we would meet together. We managed to merge both seamlessly well. At first, we were concerned about the two situations, but it worked out really well in that the vision and goal supported both [federal and state accountability]." To manage multiple improvement strategies, leadership in this school often used their school improvement plan as a crosswalk to create a sense of cohesion. Elsewhere, the principal of a low-performing school actively sought coordination between the SEA staff who were providing support to his school, and district administrators:

> What's neat about it is the state department and the central office people are working together. When they came here, I introduced them to the people so that they could make the connection. That was one of the things too that the state department said that if you had [support providers] in your district, then you want them to work with their people to make sure that support is continuing and it isn't at different levels.

While some school leaders were able to effectively shoulder the "burden of coordination"—that is, finding ways to cope with frequently incoherent support—this requires a certain level of existing leadership capacity at the school level. Generally, principals that managed to establish coping mechanisms were experienced, focused, and acquainted with professional networks that enabled them to maneuver and leverage the available supports.

Stability

Although several schools noted the importance of being able to adjust their improvement strategies and support in response to school needs, frequent or abrupt changes over the course of their support were often perceived as a weakness, highlighting a tension between school improvement support's responsiveness and its overall stability. Shifts in school improvement strategies were a common concern among the schools in our sample as such

shifts could threaten the progress and momentum of the school's improvement efforts and create confusion or resistance among school staff. One teacher explained,

> It seems like we went through a period of what's the flavor of the month, how are we going to fix our problem? We're going to try this, we do half of it, and that gets thrown by the wayside. And then we're going to try this, and we do half of that, and that gets thrown by the wayside. It seems like, in the last year, there's been much more focus, and I think a lot more good outcome because of the focus.

Considering the Context: Quality Support at the High School Level

While perceptions of what constitutes quality support can depend considerably upon individual schools' unique needs and circumstances, schools also vary in systematic ways that may hold key implications for ensuring the provision of high quality support. High schools, for instance, constitute a special context over elementary and even middle schools, facing conditions that bear consideration for designing and delivering quality support along the dimensions highlighted in this brief. A few examples of these conditions include:

The demands of managing a complex, multipurpose high school consumes a great deal of school leaders' time, which may amplify the need for support to be responsive and stable. Leaders in all types of schools juggle a wide range of responsibilities from providing instructional leadership to overseeing day-to-day operations to interfacing with the community. The demands placed on leaders at the high school level can be particularly pronounced as high schools traditionally tend to be large, heterogeneous institutions that encompass a plurality of academic pathways, course offerings, extracurricular activities, and post-graduation goals. As one team of high school administrators noted, "We're here from 6:30 to 6:30 Monday through Friday and also on Saturdays...and that's not even counting [sports team] games." Because high school leaders' time comes at such a premium, it may be especially important for support providers working with these individuals to be responsive to requests for information and assistance and to be flexible and purposeful in scheduling times to meet. Moreover, stability of support providers may be increasingly important to minimize the extra time needed to bring new support providers up to speed or wait for support providers to become acclimated to the school (indeed, as complex institutions, high schools may even require a greater amount of time for support providers to gain a clear understanding of the school context).

High schools' segmentation into departments can limit interdisciplinary or schoolwide collaboration and thus may hold implications for external support's coherence, intensity, and fit. Traditional high schools are often compartmentalized by subject area, which can inhibit the interaction of staff across disciplines and foster a school culture that is more content-focused than student-centered. "They are in their own silo," one high school support provider remarked. "They are content specialists that follow a very narrow track, and for that reason, they don't talk to one another, and for that reason, management of a common school vision becomes increasingly difficult." Since promoting a unified message or instructional approach is already challenging in such diffuse organizations, mixed messages or inconsistent strategies on the part of support providers can compound schools' existing propensity for incongruity, suggesting a heightened need for coherence among supports and interventions at the high school level. Furthermore, high schools' fragmented nature can pose challenges to implementing improvement strategies on a schoolwide basis and may therefore require more intensive support to facilitate and sustain change. It may also affect the fit of the improvement strategies themselves: high schools looking to break down content area silos might, for instance, seek out strategies that create time and structures for teacher collaboration.

High schools serve an older population of students with needs that differ from students in younger grades, thereby influencing the fit of school-based improvement strategies. As adolescents on the cusp of adulthood, high school students face a range of developmental issues, social pressures, life decisions, and other circumstances that can impact their learning and engagement with what high school has to offer. Furthermore, students enter high school as the products of their prior schooling, and students underprepared by elementary and middle school may struggle to access high school's advanced academic content. Too often, high school students fail to find relevance in their course of study, develop low educational expectations, or succumb to competing priorities and choose to opt out of the system. "They might feel they need to get a job, they might need to take care of family, the quick buck, they have reasons," one set of teachers explained. "We need to give them the sense that they can be successful. Otherwise, you're just talking to half of the class that you think is still going to be there." Accordingly, high schools grappling with dwindling ranks of students may look to their support providers for expertise and strategies to help improve students' interest, motivation, sense of efficacy, and career or college readiness in order to boost school attendance and completion rates along with academic performance and post-secondary outcomes. Interventions and support that do not effectively account for challenges related to high school students' unique needs may, conversely, be perceived as a poor fit.

To avoid cycling through numerous different reforms, schools cited the utility of thoughtful, long-range planning. "You need a four year plan and vision," one principal insisted. "You don't want to start something and trash it nine months later. I think struggling schools push the panic button and don't get the chance to carry things out."

Schools also related how turnover among their support providers led to disruptions in support services and required time for new support providers to become acclimated to the school and build relationships with staff. Indeed, several schools in the study sample experienced unanticipated shifts in the individuals assigned to support their school—in one case, a school improvement facilitator resigned a few weeks into the school year, in another instance the support provider left, and then returned to the school after a hiatus. Later, he noted, "From a policy perspective, I shouldn't have been allowed to do that… you need consistency of players."

Moreover, new support providers arrived with different slants, coaching styles, and expertise, raising issues for the support's fit and coherence. Personnel changes could also pose a threat to mechanisms that a school may have established to cope with weaknesses in their support because such mechanisms were typically born out of interactions among specific individuals at the local level and may be lost when those individuals leave the school. For instance, one principal related how he would try to foster coherence and collaboration among the multiple support providers working in his school, but his efforts suffered as individual support providers left and were replaced by new people.

Timeliness

Tasked with generating rapid growth in student outcomes to meet annual performance targets, school staff underscored the need for external support to arrive in a timely manner to maintain the progress of their reform efforts and to allow

time for thoughtful improvement planning. Many schools leaders commented on the heavy time demands associated with school-wide change processes, and several emphasized how delays on the part of the state and its support providers (e.g., in providing school needs assessment data or reports, approving school improvement plans, or dispersing funds) could stall schools' improvement work, encourage stakeholders to make hasty decisions, or require schools to implement reform strategies at awkward times during the school year. For instance, one principal explained how her school improvement funds arrived several months late, forcing the resource-strapped school to hurriedly spend the funding during the remaining weeks of the school year rather than using it to support more carefully planned, long-term improvement strategies. School leaders also reported difficulties when improvement activities coincided with other time-intensive tasks such as hiring teachers or test preparation, suggesting that support providers should be cognizant of scheduling their work at opportune times during the school year.

In addition to critiquing the timing of support, schools stakeholders discussed the chronology of their support within their state's overall school improvement cycle. Several of the states in our sample (as well as others across the country) established tiered support systems in which school improvement support and consequences increase in intensity or severity based on the number of years a school misses its annual improvement targets. As a result, staff from schools in the later stages of their state's improvement cycle felt that after years of receiving very little external assistance, they suddenly became inundated with support and attention. One teacher remarked, "We've been 'needing assistance' for four years now, but now that they are going to swoop in, we are bombarded every day…But, we didn't get into corrective action yesterday…Why are we getting all of this now?" Some educators suggested that receiving support earlier on in the improvement cycle could allow them to stagger or phase-in improve-

ment strategies, potentially creating a more coherent approach. "Giving schools all recommendations at one time is tough," one principal concluded. "It may be too much for some schools at one time…You might want to limit suggestions." Other school stakeholders emphasized the need for support earlier in their school improvement cycle to afford the school time to develop and implement a sustainable improvement plan before encountering the state's stiffest accountability sanctions. One administrator explained, "Schools need this kind of support when they go into School Improvement. I'm very happy with what [our support provider] is doing here, but what I'm saying is why didn't we get this earlier? It's too little too late."

Conclusion

When asked to comment on the school improvement support they received from their state, school stakeholders reported strengths and weaknesses related to each of the six support quality indicators put forth in this brief. Of the six quality indicators, fit and responsiveness appeared to be particularly salient among school stakeholders, who tended to comment most about the expertise, dedication, interpersonal skills, and accessibility of their support providers. The prevalence of these issues suggests that individual support providers and their interactions with the local dynamics within a school play a large role in determining how schools stakeholders perceive the quality of the assistance provided to them. Because contextual factors related to individual schools, districts, and/or support providers can heavily influence how schools perceive and engage with the support they receive, state officials should consider these issues when contemplating both the design and actual delivery of school improvement assistance.

A significant theme that emerged from our analysis of these six quality support indicators was that the dimensions of quality they represent seemed to act collectively to shape stakeholders' perceptions of support's utility. At times, quality indica-

tors could work together to improve schools' opinion of the support's effectiveness. For example, a support provider who was highly responsive to schools' requests for assistance was often perceived as more engaged in the process and thus a better fit for the school. In other cases, there appeared to be tensions and tradeoffs among the indicators such that the support's quality along one dimension was sacrificed to promote quality along another dimension. States' provision of multiple support providers, for instance, could increase the intensity of a school's support but could also present challenges for the support's overall coherence. These relationships suggest that the interplay among support quality indicators—in addition to the individual indicators themselves—constitutes an important consideration in promoting the overall quality of external school improvement support. Accordingly, as state policymakers make decisions regarding the provision of support, it is important to reflect upon the potential impact of these decisions across multiple dimensions of quality. They should avoid looking at indicators in isolation because efforts to alter quality in terms of one indicator likely have implications for others. Rather than trying to design support in a way that promotes one or two quality indicators, states' goal should be to establish an appropriate balance among multiple dimensions of support.

Another emergent theme from our data was the extent to which local stakeholders were able to develop "coping mechanisms" to manage limitations they perceived in their external support. In some instances, particularly in schools with shrewd, proactive leaders, support recipients were able to discern or anticipate complications in the support that was provided to them and then take steps to mitigate potentially harmful effects of those complications, often in cooperation with the support providers themselves. Such occurrences may suggest that schools can tolerate some deficiencies in quality, yet still benefit from support. It is significant to note, however, that because such coping mechanisms occur at the local level and often rely upon particularly resourceful individuals

(e.g., a school principal, support provider, or district administrator), they may be neither systematic nor sustainable. Moreover, highly challenged schools, which might be likely candidates for receiving external improvement support, may lack the internal capacity to handle weaknesses in their external support, and deficient support may indeed create additional hardships for such schools. Thus, while some schools may be successful in overcoming perceived problems or inadequacies in their state support, states should seek to minimize any complications that their school improvement support may cause at the local level.

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