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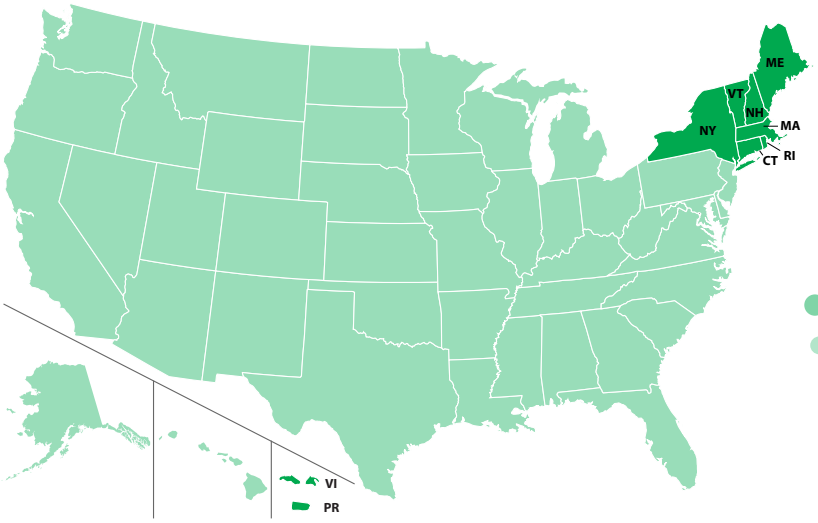

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Summary

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How eight state education agencies in the Northeast and Islands Region identify and support low-performing schools and districts

This report describes and analyzes how eight state education agencies in the Northeast and Islands Region—those of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, and Vermont—identify and support low-performing schools and districts under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Focusing on direct state supports and interventions, the report finds that the eight agencies have created supports and rationales to put federally defined accountability principles into practice in response to their specific contexts, local needs, and capacities.

This report responds to a request from four jurisdictions in the Northeast and Islands Region (Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island). Focusing on direct supports and interventions, it describes and analyzes supports by state education agencies to low-performing schools and districts in eight of the region's jurisdictions: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 state education agencies must:

- Set student achievement standards.
- Build an accountability system for tracking student progress.
- Clearly define proficiency targets in reading and mathematics, spurring schools to show adequate yearly progress toward the goal of academic proficiency for all students by 2014.

Each state must provide a system of intensive, sustained support for Title I schools and districts that have failed to make adequate yearly progress for two or more successive years.

The NCLB Act suggests a range of supports to low-performing schools and districts, including school support teams, school reform support organizations, and distinguished educators with demonstrated success improving academic achievement. Yet the law gives states flexibility in tailoring interventions, requiring only that all supports be "systematic, intensive, and able to be sustained" (NCLB 2002).

Data collection for this report began in July 2007 and was completed in April 2008. A research team interviewed senior state education agency officials responsible for state

interventions, conducted focus groups with staff and consultants who work directly with schools and districts, and examined materials and documents made public by the state education agencies. The team's work was guided by three research questions:

1. What criteria do state education agencies use to identify schools and districts as low-performing, and how many schools and districts are placed in each category under the NCLB Act?

2. What services—and other supports and interventions—do state education agencies use with low-performing schools and districts?

3. What rationales do state education agency staff give for their approaches to school and district improvement?

The report finds that state education agencies in the Northeast and Islands Region have different ways to put the federally defined accountability principles into practice. One jurisdiction's adequate yearly progress might not be another's. Assessments and subsequent definitions of proficiency differ by state education agency, except in the three states—New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont—that use the New England Common Assessment Program.

The proportions of schools that were identified as low-performing for 2007/08 ranged considerably across the eight state education agencies, from 11 percent in Vermont to more than 50 percent in Puerto Rico. Similarly, districts identified as low-performing for 2007/08 ranged from 0 percent in Maine to 28 percent in Rhode Island. However, one statistic was consistent across the eight state education agencies: each agency had more schools newly identified as low-performing for 2007/08 than losing that designation.

State education agencies have set different paces for schools and districts to progress toward the NCLB Act's main goal, academic proficiency for all students by 2014. Some agencies set lower starting points and smaller improvement targets for the earlier years, then set larger targets for later years. Others set targets for performance that grow more steadily, in more consistent increments.

The minimum number of students that constitutes a subgroup for adequate yearly progress determinations ranges widely, from 11 in New Hampshire to 45 in Rhode Island. And state education agencies have different ways to aggregate grade spans when determining adequate yearly progress at the district level: some aggregate in two spans (elementary plus middle; high), and some in three (elementary; middle; high). Furthermore, each state education agency sets its own requirements, declaring how many grade spans must meet adequate yearly progress for a whole district to show adequate yearly progress.

Within the parameters set by the NCLB Act, state education agencies have the flexibility to identify schools and districts for support and to decide on interventions. They must also decide how to focus direct assistance—whether at the school or the district level, whether for schools under corrective action (failed to make adequate yearly progress for four successive years) or for schools in another category.

Maine, Puerto Rico, and Vermont directly support low-performing schools. But Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island focus state support on the low-performing districts with the greatest need. Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont have intervened with schools before the corrective action stage. New Hampshire and New York directly support both low-performing schools and low-performing districts.

Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Vermont have supported both Title I and non–Title I schools that are low-performing—even though the NCLB Act does not require direct state interventions with non–Title I schools, and no federal funds are specifically designated for this purpose. Schools and districts in Massachusetts, New York, Puerto Rico, and Rhode Island have also been identified for intervention through state education agency accountability systems that predate the act.

From July through November 2007—the months when the researchers interviewed state education agency staff—all eight agencies studied in the Northeast and Islands Region had intervention systems for schools or districts. This report is a snapshot of interventions during those months. Interventions are constantly being revised as contexts change, as thinking changes, and as numbers of schools and districts change. However, the report finds that during that time each state education agency provided services including:

- Tools, templates, and consultation on an initial school or district assessment and on developing improvement plans.

- Consultation after initial planning—anything from telephoning local administrators to assigning weekly on-site service providers for each school or district.

- Professional development—for example, in-school workshops and cross-school institutes on leadership, data work, and instructional strategies in literacy or mathematics.

In the interviews state education agency staff were asked to offer rationales for various approaches to school improvement, including goals. Four agencies—Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island—had prepared documents that accounted for their intervention strategies. The depth and breadth of such documentation varied by state.

Connecticut and Massachusetts had each developed a one-page "theory of action." The Connecticut theory of action asserts that state support of district-level systems—especially systems to strengthen instruction—should bring sustained improvement in instruction and learning. It also asserts that the state must provide strong guidance, with clear accountability to help districts decide what systems need improvement and how they should work. Districts must develop and sustain stronger systems and leaders.

The Massachusetts theory of action begins with the premise that districts are responsible for monitoring and supporting low-performing schools—the state's role being to provide resources and targeted assistance and to monitor performance. The state's approach has evolved to include collaborating with districts to improve district capacity and infrastructure.

New York has documents explaining its NCLB interventions in relation to its preexisting school accountability system, with specific protocols for regional partner engagement with schools. New York's intervention approach is based on the premise that customized supports requested by school and district leaders, when accompanied by monitoring, should close achievement gaps among student subgroups. Protocols for when and how to engage with schools are given to Regional School Support Centers, which work with a range of partners and service providers to tailor supports. For schools and districts that fail to improve, the quantity and intensity of supports and monitoring increase over time.

Rhode Island has a functionality framework describing how to implement and sustain change. Rhode Island's intervention approach begins with the premise that, to make low-performing schools improve, the state education agency and the local education agencies (districts) must build partnerships and reciprocal accountability. Districts must develop and implement supports to help schools build capacity, including leadership development, effective professional development, and greater emphasis on involving families. The state must do the same for districts.

This report presents the voices and perspectives of state education agency administrators. Officials in the eight agencies studied take different approaches to the common goal of ensuring that all students achieve. Yet they share common concerns about balancing the tension between state and local decisionmaking, managing limited financial and human capacity for intervention, and ensuring coherence among various interventions.

The state education agency officials' voices and perspectives point to the need for continued learning about building school and district capacity to improve student achievement, and about the role of state education agencies in supporting that goal.

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