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How State Takeover School Districts Shake Up Teacher Professional Development

By Kaitlin Pennington   June 5, 2014

Over the past few decades, many state departments of education have taken over low-performing schools or districts as a school turnaround strategy. But recently, that strategy has shifted to creating new districts—managed by the state—that include schools and parts of districts that face challenges in performance. The governance structure brings schools together based on similar needs, rather than on geographic proximity. This new state takeover strategy varies in terms of the level of state control and local influence, and its success has been mixed or cannot yet be fully measured.[1] Nonetheless, it has sparked new thinking and innovation in states and districts throughout the United States.

Schools or districts taken over by state departments of education operate under a governance structure that grants them freedom from some of the restrictions placed on typical U.S. school districts. This freedom has allowed school and district leaders in state takeover districts to experiment with everything from school staffing, to the school calendar, to curriculum and lesson planning. Another area of innovation for state takeover schools and districts is teacher professional development, the focus of this issue brief.

As a growing body of evidence points to the overriding importance of teachers in promoting student achievement, professional development that supports teachers in meaningful ways has also become a hot topic in policymaking circles at the district, state, and federal levels.[2] Yet ensuring that teachers receive effective professional development with the resources available is a challenge all districts face. And there is a long history of states and districts using funds ineffectively in this area.[3] Because state takeover districts are given the opportunity to rethink district policies and practices, often with new leadership in place, this brief takes a closer look at how several state takeover districts govern teacher professional development.

A close look at state takeover districts in Louisiana, Michigan, and Tennessee reveals the following trends in the governance of teacher professional development:

- **Complete autonomy for charter schools.** Charter schools are given autonomy to run professional development according to their own standards. The states hold the charter school networks accountable for student performance at the end of each academic year, with consequences connected to low performance.

- **Partnerships with outside service providers.** Some state takeover districts use part of their allocated federal funds to contract with an outside service provider to enhance teacher professional development.

- **Connecting teacher evaluation and professional development.** Leaders in the state takeover districts are strategically thinking about how to connect teacher professional development to the new teacher-evaluation systems.

Lessons learned from the innovation in these districts could influence professional-development spending and practices in districts throughout the United States. While it is too soon to tell if the professional-development governance systems in state takeover districts are effective, they are worth noting—if for no other reason than that they break the mold.

What are state takeover school districts?

A state takeover of school districts or individual schools within different districts is a prevalent school turnaround effort in many states. This school turnaround strategy has become more popular in the past decade after leaders in Louisiana created the Recovery School District, or RSD. In this model, the state identifies its low-performing schools and creates a school district according to school performance rather than geography. Not all state takeover districts use this model, but the districts discussed in this brief do follow it.

State takeover school districts that resemble the RSD use a portfolio governance strategy—meaning that there are a number of governing entities, including charter schools, for-profit operators, and traditional public schools, within the district.[4] Under the portfolio governance strategy, the state can operate the schools in various ways. A recent study of these current districts' operating models found that they tend to use one or more of the following systems:

- Issuing charters or charter-like contracts to external schools

- Operating schools directly by hiring a school leader and teacher teams and granting them charter-like autonomy

- Operating schools directly using a new school model created or managed by the district[5]

These different operating models allow states to govern schools without the restraints that are typically placed on schools and districts that use a traditional district governance model. In addition, because the schools are identified by performance, some might argue that the needs of the students and teachers in the schools are more targeted than in a district with various performance levels from school to school. This allows the district to implement intentional reforms that address the direct needs of schools facing similar challenges.

How federal funds support professional development

Districts and schools use a mix of local, state, and federal funds for teacher professional development. The federal money given to states for this purpose mostly comes through Title II, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provides funds to prepare, train, and recruit high-quality teachers and principals.[6] The language around how states can use Title II, Part A is intentionally nonspecific in order to allow states and local districts to make spending decisions based on local conditions and needs. However, the reporting structure districts use to detail how they spend the money is also vague. This has led to a dearth of information about how the funds from Title II, Part A support high-quality teaching through professional-development activities.

What little is known about Title II, Part A spending is not promising. Findings from an annual survey of school districts regarding their Title II, Part A spending show that three-quarters of the funds support class-size reduction and professional development, with 44 percent of these funds going to professional development.[7] Yet there is no real evidence showing that the current way schools and districts use federal funds for teacher professional development improves teacher instruction or student learning.[8]

Given the organization of schools in state takeover school districts—with their shared needs, the lessened emphasis on geographic proximity, and the high profile of their mission—a closer look at the ways in which these districts spend their Title II, Part A funds may help inform better spending of this money in all districts.

Teacher professional development in state takeover school districts

In many state takeover districts, leaders have the opportunity to take a step back to assess specific challenges and to address them in purposeful ways without some of the restrictions placed on typical school districts. Specific challenges often include school staffing decisions or length of the school day. In this way, state takeover districts have the luxury of rethinking or tinkering with the way they govern teacher professional development, if they choose to do so. The following is an analysis of how teacher professional development is governed in state takeover districts in Louisiana, Michigan, and Tennessee. These districts were chosen because there are both similarities and distinct differences in the ways leaders are innovating in the area of professional development,

providing an opportunity for other districts to learn from their strategies. It appears that leaders in these districts are thinking strategically about teacher professional development and how they use federal funds to support effective professional-development activities that benefit teacher practice and student learning.

Louisiana: Complete autonomy with end-of-year accountability

The creation of the Recovery School District in Louisiana was set in motion in 2003 but was not fully implemented until 2005, when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Orleans Parish School District, or OPSD, in New Orleans. After Katrina, the Louisiana legislature passed Act No. 35, which allowed the RSD to take control of more than 100 schools, leaving only 17 schools under the authority of the OPSD.[9]

The RSD permanently closed its last five traditional public schools in May.[10] With the start of the 2014-15 school year, the RSD will be the first in the country completely made up of public charter schools.[11] According to Adam Hawf, assistant superintendent for the Louisiana Department of Education, the RSD itself is more tightly integrating into the Louisiana Department of Education in order to be a part of the overall school transformation strategy.[12] The current vision is for the RSD to have systems-level oversight—but no role—in the direct operation of any of the schools.

The RSD's unique governance structure treats each school as its own local education agency; essentially, each school is its own district, which has major implications for professional-development governance. Title II, Part A money is allocated directly to the schools, which can use it however they choose. This structure allows for much more autonomy at the school level. In many other districts across the country, most professional-development funds and activities are directed at the state or district level.

Schools in the RSD are required to follow federal law for the use of Title II funds, but the state does not put additional parameters on how schools should use the funds for professional development. "Our basic theory of action is that people who are closest to the problems are in the best position to propose solutions," Hawf said.[13]

While RSD schools are given autonomy on how to use Title II funds for professional development, the state holds them accountable for student achievement at the end of the year. Should a school not produce satisfactory student-achievement results, the state has the authority to take action—which could mean replacing leadership, closing the school, or taking other measures the state deems appropriate. "The idea is to allow for innovation, knowing that while it might not work out, you're confident you're going to know whether it works out, and you're not going to tolerate failure," Hawf said.[14]

Louisiana's RSD has operated much longer than any other state takeover district, and many education reform observers attribute its success to student-achievement gains made by RSD schools. For example, the share of students performing at grade level on state assessments has more than doubled since 2007, and in New Orleans, the RSD's School Performance Scores increased 10 percent from 2008 to 2010.[15] More than 57 percent of RSD students tested proficient on the state assessment in the 2012-13 school year, an increase of 6 percentage points from the 2011-12 school year.[16] While the proficiency rate of students in the RSD is still below the state average, the growth scores of students in the RSD surpass those of the state as a whole.[17] Leaving it up to the schools—with backend accountability from the RSD—to decide how to manage and fund professional development is worthy of more study to determine its effect on student achievement.

Michigan: Personalized online professional learning

In June 2011, Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder (R) announced the creation of the Education Achievement Authority, or EAA, a statewide school system that would assume operation of the state's lowest-performing 5 percent of schools.[18] The model began in September 2012 with 15 Detroit schools and is expected to expand to low-performing schools statewide in the coming years.[19] Of the 15 schools in the EAA, there are three charter schools. The other 12 schools are operated using an EAA-created, student-centered blended-learning model. Rather than working within an aged-based grade level, students in EAA-run schools begin at their instructional level and advance with the help of the teacher and personalized technology.[20]

Due to the unique instructional design for student learning in the EAA, teacher professional development is at the forefront of EAA leaders' minds, so that teachers are able to meet students' needs in this atypical learning environment. "Because our [student-learning] model is so different, we need to make sure teachers are getting the kind of professional development to hone their skills to teach in a student-centered model," commented John Covington, the EAA's chancellor, in an interview with Michigan public radio.[21]

Mirroring the personalized online learning for students, teacher professional development in the EAA is also heavily focused on technology. In addition to complementing student learning in the EAA, this governance structure allows for standardization across schools that could soon be located throughout the state, not just in Detroit.[22] "All of the systems we put in place are not geographically based. That is why you're seeing that we're using a lot of blended professional development," said Mary Esselman, deputy chancellor for instructional support and educational accountability for the EAA.[23] Approximately one-third of the EAA's Title II money is spent on a contract with the School Improvement Network, an online professional-development and teacher-training company.[24]

The partnership between the EAA and the School Improvement Network connects teachers in the EAA through online professional-development platforms and virtual communities. Through these online portals, EAA teachers can share best practices and resources with those teaching similar content. Leaders in the EAA have focused on embedding professional development into teachers' schedules by connecting professional-development offerings to the teacher-evaluation system. As part of their evaluation, EAA teachers keep a portfolio and set goals for their professional growth and then choose professional-development activities that will help them meet those individual goals.

To demonstrate their skills and develop a pool of resources to draw from, teachers in the EAA are required to film themselves teaching at least two times and to add those videos to the online portal. "We've built a blended course and embedded videos of different teachers and other documents crafted by teachers for teachers," Esselman explained. "We have our teachers go through the mastery cycle of providing reflection on what they're learning, a practice piece to show their understanding, and an apply piece to show how they'll apply it in the classroom."[25]

Principals in the EAA are also part of the professional-development system. Each principal is required to conduct five informal classroom observations per week. They then track the observations via an online system in order to provide teachers with real-time feedback on their instructional practice. In that feedback, principals can assign teachers to watch particular videos in the online portal that they feel will be helpful in showing a best practice.

There is no shortage of skeptics of the EAA. The state takeover district was politically controversial from the start, as it became the subject of disputes between state lawmakers about governance, educational models, and equity in Detroit.[26] Student achievement on the state assessment—the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, which is administered each October—from the first two years of the EAA's implementation shows mixed results, but overall scores improved from the 2012-13 school year to the 2013-14 school year in 10 of the 18 categories tested for third to ninth grade.[27] EAA officials also point to student progress on the nationally normed, adaptive assessment from Scantron.[28] The expansion of the EAA to schools throughout the state is still being debated in the state legislature, and student-learning gains will likely be a prevalent topic of discussion when considering the EAA's growth.[29]

Tennessee: Induction and professional learning embedded into teacher evaluation

The Tennessee state legislature passed a bill in January 2010 creating the Achievement School District, or ASD, which was formed in 2011 and rolled out during the 2012-13 school year.[30] In the ASD, failing schools—defined as schools in the bottom 5 percent of all Title I schools or as Title I high schools with graduation rates of less than 60

percent—are removed from their local districts and placed under the authority of the Tennessee Department of Education.[31] The first six schools reopened in 2012, and 11 more reopened in 2013; all of these schools are located in Memphis or Nashville. The ASD plans to operate or charter 35 schools by the start of the 2014-15 school year.

Similar to the EAA in Michigan, there are two different types of schools in the ASD: direct-run schools, which the ASD refers to as "Achievement Schools,"[32] and charters. In the 2012-13 school year, there were three Achievement Schools, and there are six this year. The distinction between Achievement Schools and charter schools is important for teacher professional development. Similar to the Louisiana RSD, charter schools in the Tennessee ASD are able to conduct teacher professional development however they see fit and are held accountable for results by the ASD at the end of the school year. Teachers in Achievement Schools, by contrast, receive professional development through the ASD.

The professional development for teachers in ASD direct-run schools is influenced in part by the Texas charter school network, YES Prep,[33] which was founded by ASD's superintendent, Chris Barbic, and formerly employed several members of the ASD central staff. "A lot of our [professional-development] decisions were informed by past experience in high-achieving schools by team members," said Cristina Munoz, then-director of instructional support for the ASD. "So YES Prep's model informed a lot of our decision-making, along with KIPP [Knowledge Is Power Program] and a couple other high-achieving schools."[34]

Based on what Munoz and other ASD team members learned from past experiences, they determined a robust summer induction was important for teacher professional development. In the 2012-13 school year—the most recent year for which data are available—the ASD had $50,000 in federal Title II funding and allocated all of the money to induction for Achievement Schools, according to the ASD's chief financial officer, Isabella Wilson.[35] While the ASD cannot mandate that charter school teachers attend the ASD professional development, all charter school teachers were invited to attend.

In addition to induction, the Achievement Schools have several other professional-development systems in place for teachers. Students in Achievement Schools have an early release each Wednesday so that teachers can use the rest of the school day to focus on professional development. In addition, there are four full days throughout the school year called collaborative planning days, in which all of the Achievement Schools meet in course- or grade-level teams to walk through upcoming unit plans, work on best practices, and share lesson planning.[36]

The Achievement Schools use the online teacher-evaluation system BloomBoard, which is set up to align with the ASD's observation rubric.[37] "The professional development is driven by teacher-evaluation observation, formal and informal," Munoz explained. "As a principal, I can walk into a classroom, open up BloomBoard, and as I'm observing, I can input ratings straight into the system, and also leave notes or action steps. It then aggregates the data for us so it's easier to spot trends for professional development."[38]

Therefore, the structure of professional development each Wednesday is set based on trends spotted in teacher-observation data. According to Munoz, teachers seem to be receptive to the professional development offered by the ASD: "They feel like they're listened to and that we work to address their needs and give them time to plan, instead of making them sit there for eight hours straight. Now people expect more, which is great."[39]

Since the 2012-13 school year was the first academic year for students in the ASD, there is only one year of state student-achievement data available. State assessment data showed student growth in math and science but a drop in reading scores.[40] The statewide proficiency growth numbers showed a 3.5 percent gain in math proficiency, slightly more than the ASD's 3.3 percent gain.[41] Students in the ASD, however, greatly outperformed students statewide in science proficiency, with a 7.7 percent gain compared to a 2.1 percent statewide gain. Reading proficiency improved 0.4 percent statewide but declined 4.5 percent in the ASD.[42] Given the student-achievement results, the ASD will presumably focus at least part of teacher professional development on literacy techniques. As many states and districts throughout the United States roll out new teacher-evaluation systems, it will be worth watching if others follow the ASD's model of connecting teacher professional development to the new evaluation systems, which include student-achievement results.

Conclusion

The state takeover of districts as a school turnaround strategy is meant to breathe new ideas into districts and schools that, according to student performance, are not serving students well. Teacher professional development is just one area that leaders in state takeover districts are challenged to innovate, but it is a worthy cause because teacher quality is one of the best predictors of student achievement.

Leaders in the state takeover districts in Louisiana, Michigan, and Tennessee are thinking strategically about ways to approach teacher professional development given the specific challenges presented in their districts. While each district is approaching professional development in its own unique way, there are several trends in these three districts:

- **Complete autonomy for charter schools.** In the Louisiana Recovery School District, charter schools are treated as if they are their own district, which frees them to run teacher professional development however they see fit. Similarly, in the state takeover districts in Michigan and Tennessee, charter schools are not required to partake in the district-offered teacher professional development. Instead, charter schools in these two states are given autonomy to run professional development according to their own standards. In all of these districts, the state holds the charter school networks accountable for student performance at the end of each academic year, with consequences connected to low performance. A potential drawback of this approach is that the state may have little knowledge of how schools are approaching and using funds for teacher professional development.

- **Partnerships with outside service providers.** The state takeover districts in Michigan and Tennessee have both used part of the funds allocated through Title II, Part A to contract with an outside service provider to enhance teacher professional development. In Michigan, leaders have partnered with the School Improvement Network to establish online professional-development communities. Leaders in Tennessee use BloomBoard to help connect teacher evaluation and professional-development activities for individual teachers.

- **Connecting teacher evaluation and professional development.** Leaders in the state takeover districts in Michigan and Tennessee are strategically thinking about how to connect teacher professional development to the new teacher-evaluation systems in both states. As mentioned above, leaders in Tennessee use the online system BloomBoard to track teachers' needs as seen through observation data and connect them to professional-development activities. As part of teachers' evaluation in Michigan, they keep a portfolio and set goals for their professional growth and then choose professional-development activities that will help them meet those individual goals.

With simultaneous reform efforts taking place, from teacher evaluation to the Common Core State Standards, teachers across the country are facing changes that directly affect their teaching, and they need professional development that helps them identify their strengths and improve their weaknesses. While this brief examined professional development in relation to governance in three recovery and achievement school districts, there are others that also deserve a closer look. Of note are the Commissioner's Network in Connecticut, the Office of District and State Turnaround in Massachusetts, and Virginia's Opportunity Education Institution.[43]

The three districts covered in this brief are showing promising preliminary student growth. Tracking student-achievement gains back to teacher professional development is still a challenge that has yet to be met, but innovative approaches to professional development—as demonstrated in these three state takeover districts—can start a conversation about how to measure the contribution of effective teacher professional development.

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