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A Middle Way for States in the ESSA Era:
Lessons from Texas

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Introduction

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gave states more flexibility to design school improvement strategies. States are no longer subject to the Adequate Yearly Progress and Highly Qualified Teachers requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the previous federal school accountability law. And states are no longer bound to a specific menu of interventions for struggling schools. Under ESSA, states have an opportunity to rethink how they assess student learning, rate school performance, and support school improvement.

The NCLB era showed heavy-handed action could inflame tensions between states and the local school systems they oversee. But as the pendulum swings the other way, an anything-goes approach is just as untenable. Under ESSA, states must look for new ways to drive meaningful improvement in schools, while avoiding the top-down excesses of the previous era.

In Texas, state education leaders are developing an innovative approach to achieving that balance. In 2017 the Texas Education Agency (TEA) launched the Systems of Great Schools (SGS) initiative. With a combination of incentives and capacity building, SGS attempts to transform how school districts approach school improvement. It calls on districts to manage school performance in new ways, expand access to school choice options, and take a dynamic approach to managing their supply of schools. As one of TEA's partners said, SGS is "basically changing the operating system of the district."

But if state education agencies want to change the district operating system, they must change their own, too. Texas' initiative suggests several important lessons for other state leaders interested in adopting "middle-way" programs in other state agencies, including:

- New programs don't necessarily require large new departments, but benefit from creative reorganization and realignment of existing programs and resources toward new strategic goals.

- While it's important to attend to the organizational and human side of change inside the state agency by finding ways to align with existing work and strategies, it's also crucial to secure political support from the top and outside to make and protect organizational and resource changes.

- Successful change efforts require clear communication about the shifts the state expects districts to make, what success looks like, and how they will support districts to get there.

While sustained improvement in participating districts is not guaranteed with SGS, this account of TEA's early experience reimagining state-led change can inform efforts in other states in the post-NCLB era.

Texas' System of Great Schools: A Middle Way

The long tradition of local control in the United States means states often lack the authority and political support they need to change how districts operate. States have dealt with this problem with mixed results. Historically, states have swung back and forth between being too strong and too weak. Asserting strong state authority can trigger pushback that makes changes hard to initiate, scale, and—importantly— sustain. Alternatively, a hands-off approach can reinforce the status quo or, at best, bring incremental and haphazard change.

SGS attempts to avoid these problems by encouraging local districts to be bolder than they might be absent state intervention while avoiding mandates that limit local discretion and authority. SGS does this by using a combination of policy tools: capacity support that focuses on fundamentally changing how districts oversee schools (rather than on improving what districts are currently doing), and incentives that encourage districts to adopt these changes voluntarily. SGS may be attempting to change the district operating system, but as a state official said, "The state isn't forcing anybody to do these things. We're saying if you want to do them, we'll help you do them."

About This Project

To date, most efforts to re-mission school districts have emerged organically through a combination of system leadership and outside philanthropic support and pressure. Texas is changing that with its System of Great Schools initiative. Building off prior CRPE work on re-missioning state education agencies, this two-year project examines what SGS demands of the state agency and how the local efforts that state education leaders envision are playing out in districts' central offices. This report—the first of two—is not an evaluation of the SGS program, but an examination of TEA's strategy, as well as a review of lessons learned in implementing the initiative within the state agency. Our conclusions are based on interviews with state officials and program advisors, as well as document and policy reviews between fall 2018 and spring 2019. We hope the report provides useful guidance to leaders of other state-led improvement efforts. The second report, forthcoming in summer 2020, will examine how SGS is playing out in local central offices.

The authors are grateful for the state administrators and partners who took time to share their perspectives and documentation about SGS with us during the 2018–2019 school year.

A New District Operating System

SGS begins by fundamentally reimagining how districts approach school improvement. It calls on districts to move away from managing improvement directly (for example, with managed instruction or other centralized approaches) and toward empowering schools to own their improvement and results. As schools get more autonomy and families get more freedom to choose schools, the role of the district under SGS shifts to focus on oversight and performance management.

SGS helps districts translate these high-level ideas into more practical terms by identifying four levers to promote change and improvement:

Managing school performance. SGS starts from the premise that local school districts are ill-positioned to improve schools directly. Instead, it encourages districts to hold schools accountable for results via a locally-crafted school performance framework (for example, an A-F rating system). This performance framework is meant to clarify what success looks like and communicate results to community members. Districts are expected to use their performance framework to evaluate schools each year, and to use those evaluations to guide strategic actions to increase the number of top-rated schools.

Increasing the number of high-quality schools. SGS districts aim to expand the number of quality schools by incubating, replicating, and restarting schools. Districts are expected to administer an annual "Call for Quality Schools" based on the performance of current schools, so the lowest-performing schools come under new leadership and the highest-performing schools expand to

serve more students, either by replicating or opening up more spots. SGS is officially a sector-neutral strategy. Districts are encouraged to embrace high-quality schools whether they are operated by district staff or a nonprofit.[1]

Improving access to options. SGS districts are expected to level the playing field for families so that everyone has the same information about their public school options and can easily enroll in a high-quality school of choice. Supporting choice is especially important in districts that leverage independent charter schools, whose independent admissions processes can be difficult for families to navigate.

Creating new organizational structures. Finally, SGS districts are expected to reorganize their central offices to support the reform. SGS asks districts to create an Office of Innovation to lead the effort by revamping the district's staffing, authorizing, and financial policies.

With these levers, the district focuses on overseeing and managing the system's overall performance. The central office uses cycles of performance management that mirror the continuous improvement cycle of similar reforms (like CRPE's portfolio strategy). Figure 1 shows how the cycle moves from analyzing performance and community needs to evaluating options, executing a range of school actions (for example, partnering to open a new school), and then back to analyzing performance.

FIGURE 1. The Logic of SGS Follows a Cycle of Continuous Improvement
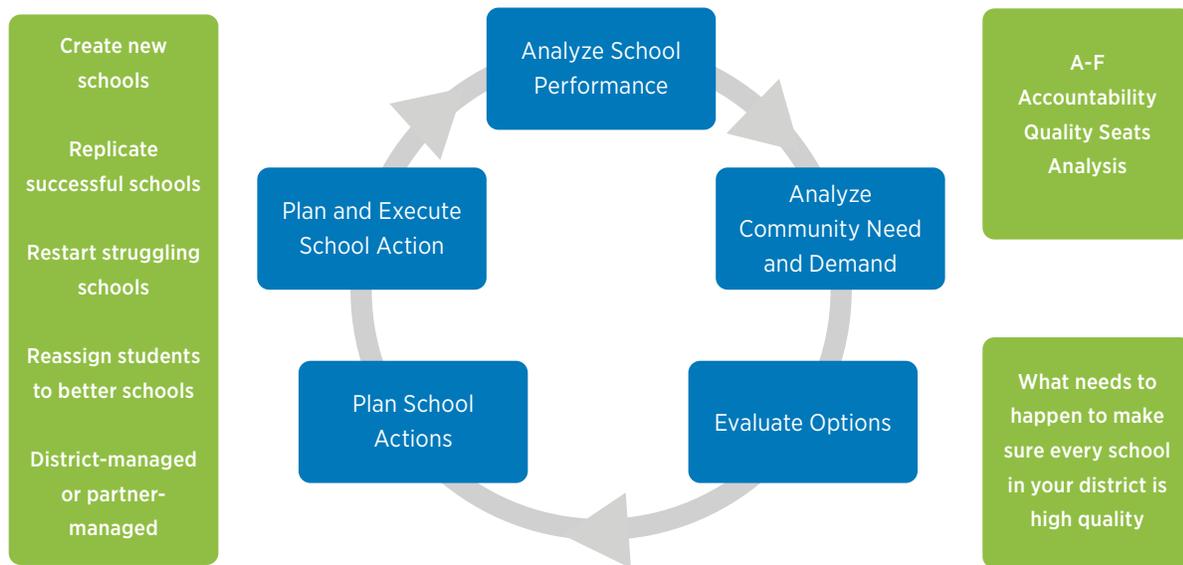
Source: Based on a diagram from TEA SGS Summit 2019

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1. As noted later in this report, some of the SGS policy tools, such as SB 1882, incentivize the use of charter schools.

A Mix of State Policy Tools: Carrots, Sticks, Supports, and Freedoms

As figure 1 shows, SGS offers districts a framework for making strategic decisions, rather than instructions for what teachers or schools should do. To encourage districts to adopt and use the framework, SGS includes a range of complementary policy tools. These tools include capacity supports (SGS network, Lone Star Governance, School Action Fund), accountability and resource incentives (SB 1882 and HB 1842), and local flexibility (HB 22) (see table 1).

TABLE 1. New Programs Encourage and Support Districts to Implement SGS

Program/Policy	Description
System of Great Schools network	Supports districts' implementation of SGS by pairing participating districts with an experienced executive advisor who helps the district plan and execute on their SGS strategy. Also offers districts access to a pool of technical assistance partners who provide expertise around more specific issues, such as school performance frameworks, and access to model policies and other resources related to SGS implementation. Participating districts meet once a year to facilitate network-based learning and peer support.
Texas Partnerships (SB 1882)	Incentivizes districts to partner with charter schools and other nonprofit entities to create new schools and turn around low-performing schools. Partner campuses may receive additional state funding, and schools identified as "Improvement Required" are eligible to receive a two-year exemption from accountability interventions.
School Action Fund	Provides resources to support districts to take one of four "school actions": (1) create a new school, (2) replicate a successful school, (3) restart a struggling school, and (4) reassign students.
Public School Accountability (HB 1842)	Empowers TEA to sanction school districts overseeing low-performing schools. TEA may either close or restart the school or appoint new members to the local school board. Districts participating in SGS receive a two-year waiver from this provision.
Local Accountability Systems (HB 22)	Allows school districts and charter schools to develop plans to locally evaluate their schools. Once a plan receives approval, districts and charter schools may use locally developed domains and indicators together with the three state-mandated domains to assign overall A-F ratings for each school.
Lone Star Governance	Provides training to "governing teams" (boards in collaboration with their superintendents). Participants are supported to focus their role on improving student outcomes through a five point framework.

As table 1 shows, SGS provides districts access to training, technical assistance, and strategic advising in the SGS network. All of these supports are aimed at capacity building. At the same time, the Texas Partnerships program (SB 1882) and Public School Accountability legislation (HB 1842) provide carrots and sticks for districts to pursue actions associated with the SGS Framework. HB 1842, among other things, imposes strict consequences—including school closure or state takeover—for districts with persistently low-performing schools. On the other hand, SB 1882 provides incentive for creating school partnerships via potential for increased per-pupil funding and a "pause" on accountability interventions. Finally, Texas' Local Accountability Systems legislation (HB 22) allows districts to develop local plans to evaluate schools as they take a more strategic approach to oversight.

Together, these policies create conditions that encourage districts to reimagine their role from centrally managing schools to constantly searching for and supporting what SGS calls "high-quality best-fit school options" for its students.

The SGS initiative itself strengthens those incentives. Senior school district leaders responsible for making changes in participating districts gain access to professional development and strategic support from "executive advisors" and other technical assistance providers. Districts participating in SGS also gain priority access to other state grant programs and receive waivers from key provisions of the state's accountability framework, including the avoidance of sanctions for low performance.

But this policy framework is not the only state-level change helping Texas reinvent the district operating system. The SGS initiative also required TEA leaders to remake parts of their own agency.

Changing the State Operating System

To deliver on its ambitious plans for districts, TEA had to break free from past routines at the state level that were built to, as one official said, "tell schools exactly what to do."

Historically designed to administer programs and monitor compliance, states can struggle to adopt an innovative or problem-solving orientation. In Texas, state leaders tried to manage this problem by hiring new leaders who bought into the vision, aligning organizational and financial resources to support the work, and providing political support inside and outside the agency. These factors helped the initiative's leaders as they tried to overcome turf battles, skeptical agency staff, and traditional ways of allocating resources.

So far, 13 school districts have joined the SGS initiative in two cohorts. The effort must coexist with the state's ongoing efforts to improve schools in its remaining districts. Establishing an initiative like SGS within a state agency is as much an exercise in culture building and internal diplomacy as it is in technocratic reform.

A Start-Up Inside the Agency

SGS began with a small team of three people, all of who came from outside of the agency. Its members were from nontraditional backgrounds: business, philanthropy, the charter sector, and elsewhere. The entire team was committed to a vision that fundamentally reimagined the role of school districts and the state.

As one leader said, "I think being aligned around . . . that central vision is probably our greatest strength at this point. We have a pretty dynamic team who is willing to do anything. There's no task too big or too small in order to move this work forward." Inside of the agency, this small team approached its work with the nimbleness, problem-solving orientation, and commitment emblematic of a start-up organization. The team's entrepreneurial attitude helped insulate the project from the rest of the agency culture, even as staff members partnered with other divisions to execute the work.

For example, to support SGS's competitive grant process that funds school actions taken by SGS districts, the SGS team worked with the grants and contracts department to revise the state's vetting processes, to allow more freedom in districts' use of funds, and to reorganize timelines to be responsive to district calendars. The SGS team was able to persuade grants and contracts to create a rapid-response program for technical assistance for SGS grant applications.

Departments in the agency reportedly supported these types of changes, in part because they could see the level of commitment and oversight the SGS team was providing to the districts in their program. One SGS official said, "The flexibility that I experienced increased significantly over time. And I think that was a result of other administrators in the agency really seeing that, okay [the SGS team] is not just letting districts go do whatever they want."

Aligning Resources

One of the highest-leverage actions state leaders took in Texas was to align financial resources to support SGS. Early on, SGS staff worked with the TEA finance and legal teams to identify resources that were underspent and could be used to support SGS. SGS staff also leveraged the state's ESSA plan to align federal school improvement dollars with the SGS strategy and enable districts to use these funds to take school actions.

ESSA Section 1003 requires that states set aside at least 7 percent of their Title I, Part A funds for school improvement efforts. These funds must go to local education agencies (LEA) with schools identified for comprehensive or targeted support and improvement, but funds can be awarded on a formula or competitive basis. LEAs can use these funds for a wide variety of activities, as long as they meet the Department of Education's standards as an evidence-based intervention.

Texas chose to structure a portion of its 1003 funds as a "competitive grant" program (the remaining funds are distributed via formula), and took the opportunity to target these funds toward SGS-aligned school actions by specifying the types of interventions that LEAs could apply to use funds to implement, including:

- Restarting the school in partnership with a school operator.
- Redesigning the school, including replacing staff and implementing a new instructional model.
- Replicating an existing effective school, including a charter school.
- Closing the school and reassigning students to a higher-performing school.
- Creating new school options, district or charter, and prioritizing students attending identified low-performing schools in admissions.

As a result, TEA was able to use the ESSA planning process to target resources toward the SGS strategy. In all, the SGS team managed to align a significant amount of funding for school actions, central office reorganization, district coaching, increased per-pupil funding for SB 1882 partnership schools, and more. This can amount to up to $2 million per campus for redesign actions, and between $300,000 and $800,000 for planning grants and school replications or start-ups, as well as capacity-building and coaching supports.[2] TEA's approach offers an interesting lesson about making these changes. Efforts to align resources and build processes associated with SGS were not driven by a large, preexisting division in the agency. Instead, the small internal start-up team was empowered to drive them.

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2. Financial estimates from internal SGS presentation, June 2019.

Finding Common Ground

As the small SGS team worked to build out the initiative, it had to find ways to articulate how it fit into other, more long-standing work that was happening inside TEA. After being incubated under TEA's Governance division, the SGS team moved to the Educator Support division. Structurally, this move put SGS at the heart of TEA's efforts to support improvement. It also raised questions about how its approach fit in with other improvement efforts.

For example, TEA's traditional school improvement program has generally focused on strategies that can reach large numbers of schools and achieve incremental improvement over time. Compared to SGS, these types of improvement efforts tend to focus more on building educators' capacity rather than remaking districts. The SGS team and leaders of the improvement work needed to find a way to understand both projects as complementary, rather than in competition with each other.

After a period of debate and negotiation, the leaders settled on a way to frame the new and old work in compatible (but distinct) terms. Traditional and ongoing improvement approaches came to be known as "school improvement." Meanwhile, the newer strategies associated with SGS (for example, restarting a school with a new operator) were known as "school actions."

A second strategy the leaders used to connect SGS to the broader agency was to identify a shared understanding of the desired outcomes for schools, rather than a commitment to a single process to get there. By agreeing on the outcomes, SGS and Educator Support gave staff members language to bridge the two approaches. More specifically, the SGS team and Educator Support teams use a common "Effective School Framework" when they talk about school quality. A TEA staff member said,

> "Even if you're going to pursue a school action [under SGS], you want to make sure that the new school, or the replicated school, or the restarted school, is addressing the elements of the Effective School Framework. Similarly, on [more traditional] school improvement, the whole school improvement apparatus is built around helping schools with [the framework]. While it doesn't completely solve the problem [of differences in approaches], it basically has garnered enough buy-in to get to the idea that, even if we have districts launching new schools or having partners run schools, that they're ensuring that some of the fundamental things that we believe make for an effective school are being addressed."

While SGS staff members have clarified that this "Effective Schools Framework" is compatible with SGS strategy, it's less clear how use of this framework is operationalized within the SGS's four levers. To be sure, differences in perspective still exist inside TEA. But intentional communication and locating SGS in the Educator Support division has helped SGS fit into TEA. It also helped that the SGS team had strong political support from the very top.

Political Support

Political cover from TEA's commissioner, Mike Morath, smoothed the path for the SGS team to work inside the agency. A former Dallas school board member, Morath had championed educator autonomy and school choice in the Dallas Independent School District before he came to work for the state. As commissioner, he has prioritized the SGS initiative as a signature project of his administration that is aligned with one of his four strategic priorities (improve low-performing schools). The SGS team was able to take bold moves and act with wider latitude, in part because of Morath's backing and support. "[We've seen] . . . relatively minor bureaucratic hurdles . . . because the commissioner has bought into what we're trying to do," said one TEA official.

More broadly, SGS benefited from indirect but crucial political support from the state legislature and governor. Over the past few years Texas passed several key policies to incentivize district reform (see table 1): SB 1882, which creates extra funding for "Texas Partnership" schools, or in-district charter schools; HB22, which incentivizes districts to create stronger local accountability plans; and SB 1842, which gives Texas the authority to take over persistently low-performing schools. Each of these policies have been cited by TEA staff and executive advisors as important supports and motivators for districts in the program.

While SGS is still in its early stages, TEA leaders note that there has been relatively little public pushback to the program and related policies, despite the emphasis on accountability and charter schools. Staff members hypothesize that the combination of political backing and the voluntary nature of the program have helped it avoid major conflict so far.

Clear Communication of Program Expectations

As the previous sections suggest, the designers of SGS were careful to craft a strategy that wasn't vulnerable to the challenges faced by prior iterations of school reform and worked to make that strategy a reality in a state agency that was not designed for innovation. But in trying to build a path between requiring districts to follow a roadmap for implementation and allowing for a customized approach, SGS highlights the challenges of communicating what this middle-way approach means for everyone.

Early on, SGS leaders learned that they needed to simplify the way they described the program in order to make it understandable to participants. Over and over, state officials emphasized the importance of simplifying the strategy and prioritizing district implementation. One state leader said:

> "If you roll something out that is too complicated, it is not going to survive first contact. That's been one of our biggest lessons: simplify and communicate effectively. You can't assume because it makes sense to you that it makes sense to anyone else."

Initially, SGS leaders talked about SGS in terms of six reform "levers":

- Establish and administer a portfolio review process.
- Develop and expand great schooling options.
- Help families understand and navigate their school and program choices.
- Build an ecosystem of effective school support and talent providers.
- Reimagine central services to support school-based decision making.
- Align civic partners and engage the community.

Over the following three years the SGS team revised the levers three times, moving from six levers to four, and then from four levers to three, and then back to four. All of these revisions were an attempt to distill the strategy to its core components. In addition to reducing the number of levers, the SGS team simplified the language used to describe each action. As of June 2019 they were using the following language and four levers:

- Manage school performance
- Expand great options
- Increase access to options
- Create organizational structures

While the first three were revisions of prior levers, the last one was a new addition. "Create organizational structures" asks districts to create an Office of Innovation that will oversee the strategy, including charter school authorizing and new financial policies.

As they refined the framework, SGS leaders also had to clarify what, more specifically, they expected participating districts to actually do. How much variation should the state allow among participating districts? What should they expect everyone to have in common? Where is the middle in the middle way?

Defining expectations was complicated by the voluntary nature of the program. At the beginning, TEA cast a wider net for district participants interested in trying the SGS strategy. But as one state leader said, "With the wider net [volunteer] strategy, we were not very explicit or clear about what we want from these districts, which can create a lot of confusion and frustration and then it looks like we're making slow progress."

To clarify expectations, SGS developed a Year 1 roadmap that provides a guide to participation in the program. The roadmap includes quarterly milestones, such as launching a transformation team and completing a quality seats analysis, holding a listen and learn press conference, rolling out student-based budgeting, and holding a school board vote on a call for quality schools. A planning template, the roadmap provides shared language and expectations for districts, their partners, and the state. Districts may have interpreted SGS as a set of underlying mindsets and frameworks when the program launched. But with the roadmap, SGS leaders have more clearly identified the practices and timelines the program expects.

Within the roadmap, districts are still expected to put their own stamp on what SGS looks like in their local context. For example, even though the initiative promotes the idea that school districts should focus on oversight and partner with other organizations to operate schools, it allows for a wide range of partner organizations. Under SB 1882, districts might partner with an in-state charter school operator, an out-of-state charter school operator, an experienced nonprofit that becomes a school operator, a higher education institution that becomes a school operator, an existing district school that becomes a nonprofit, a multi-district innovation zone overseen by a nonprofit, or another governmental entity.

Even as SGS tries to balance standardization (e.g., the roadmap) with customization (e.g., various flavors of SB 1882), tensions can arise about what "progress" looks like and which elements of SGS districts should embrace to be considered successful. For example, while SGS is explicitly sector-agnostic and encourages districts to consider replicating effective district and charter schools, much of the money and support related to the program prioritizes investments in the charter sector. As one official put it, "The role of charters creates some internal tension."

According to some external support providers, some participating districts have found the evolving definitions and expectations challenging, especially for districts from the first cohort that chose to participate based on looser guidelines. Even today, the consequences for districts that are not adhering closely to the framework are unclear, aside from perhaps not receiving as much grant funding.

Conclusion: Supporting District-Level Change Requires State-Level Change

The Texas Education Agency describes SGS as an "optional technical support program"—a description that, while accurate, downplays its ambitions. The state agency has set out to convince a coalition of willing school districts to fundamentally change the way they operate. The goal is for districts to get out of the business of managing instruction in schools, to leave that work to educators and nonprofit

organizations, and to refocus their efforts on managing school performance, supporting families in the process of choosing schools, and ensuring the mix of school options available in their community continuously improves.

Unlike other recent improvement efforts, SGS has set out not to change individual schools, but entire systems. The promise of this approach rests on the hope that districts, in turn, will reinvent themselves in ways that enable them to eliminate low-performing schools and foster higher-performing schools to take their place.

The policy environment in Texas has created conditions that may help realize those hopes. The combination of reprieve from potent state accountability, incentives to partner with external organizations to improve low-performing schools, additional capacity support and grant opportunities, and a strong but flexible framework for locally designed accountability systems help make SGS more appealing, and more feasible, for districts. These policy tools are not new, but the coordinated use of them to create meaningful incentives for districts to voluntarily make system-level changes should be of interest to state leaders elsewhere.

But creation and alignment of these policy tools are not the only consideration for states that want to try a new approach to district improvement. Texas' early experience in adopting the SGS program underscores several organizational considerations:

- Attend to the organizational and human side of change inside the state agency by finding ways to align with the strategy and operation of existing departments and programs.
- Secure political support from the top, outside, and across the agency to protect changes and new initiatives from pushback.
- Communicate clearly about the shifts the state expects districts to make, what success looks like, and how they will support districts to get there.

Despite its promise, Texas' middle way offers no guarantee of success. The SGS initiative has reimagined the role of a state education agency in driving school improvement. But the initiative has made progress because of its ability to coexist with, rather than replace, the state's other, more traditional school improvement efforts.

And even if Texas succeeds in rethinking the state's role in school improvement, TEA's approach with SGS is inherently risky because it relies on voluntary district action.

SGS's incentives and capacity tools can help districts see a path forward, but are they enough to help district leaders deal with shortages in talent and other resources (in the central office and schools)? Can they help district leaders overcome the conflict and pushback that even locally led systemic reforms can create? And are they robust enough to ensure districts make the changes to their operating systems that state leaders envision—much less sustain those changes through inevitable shifts in political winds or district leadership turnover?

As one executive director said, "The central office doesn't know how to behave like this. How do you make sure autonomous schools . . . are properly supported and resourced to be able to utilize their autonomy?"

Texas has provided incentives, capacity building, and a framework for strategic action. The question is whether, and under what conditions, these ingredients can drive bold district change that amounts to more than a passing fascination among local leaders—enticed by grant funding, training opportunities, and an accountability reprieve—and produce lasting transformation that meaningfully improves results. Our next report will tackle this question by looking at how SGS has been playing out in local districts.