Performance Management

Setting Outcomes and Strategies to Improve Student Achievement

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Reform Support Network

Reforms of the size and scale to which Race to the Top States have committed, require unprecedented planning, oversight and problem solving to implement. Although many factors influence the outcomes of these reform efforts, performance management is a key structural element in realizing *sustainable reforms* that are durable and adaptive, and persistently focused on improved student growth in the face of changing conditions.

The Reform Support Network (RSN) has prepared a series of four briefs to examine how Race to the Top States are pursuing performance management of their key education reforms. At the RSN's request, leaders from four States—Delaware, Hawaii, Massachusetts and Tennessee— agreed to describe early, promising work that embodies the basic elements of performance management. This brief—the first in the series—profiles how Tennessee and Massachusetts are using their strategic plans for performance management of their reform efforts.

What is performance management?

Performance management is a systemic approach to ensure quality and progress toward organizational goals by aligning structures, processes and routines through a set of reinforcing activities that enable an agency to methodically and routinely monitor the connection between the work underway and the outcomes sought.

This brief addresses "clarity of outcomes and theory of action," the first of the four elements of performance management described in the *Sustainability Rubric*, created by the RSN to support State education agencies (SEAs) endeavoring to improve their performance management practices.[1] The rubric offers a template through which SEAs can identify key elements of sustainability and assess strengths and weaknesses to address in their sustainability planning.

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[1] The rubric's three categories are system capacity, performance management, and context for sustaining reform. Within the category of performance management are four elements: clarity of outcomes and theory of action, alignment of resources, collection and use of data, and accountability for results.

What is clarity of outcomes and theory of action?
It means to establish and widely communicate priorities, and set ambitious, clear and measurable goals and outcomes with aligned strategies and activities. Using the rubric, SEAs can gauge how well they are answering key questions related to clarifying expected outcomes for student improvement:

- Has the State articulated student outcome goals that its reforms are supposed to achieve, and specific, measurable, ambitious, realistic and time-bound targets to quantify those goals?

- Does the State have specific strategies for implementing each of its interconnected reforms, and does it have a clear theory of action that ties them to the goals?

- Does the State have a plan or set of plans that clearly shows how it will implement the strategies at the necessary scale to achieve the goals?

Best practice in performance management asks SEAs to give early, careful consideration to the outcomes they intend their reforms to achieve and the means they will use to achieve them, and to articulate these goals and plans. This brief describes how Tennessee and Massachusetts are clarifying outcomes and theories of change to realize improved student achievement.

Tennessee Establishes a Strategic Plan for Student Success

As soon as Commissioner Kevin Huffman arrived at the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) in April 2011, he recognized the need to establish clear and measurable outcomes, and a strategic plan to achieve those outcomes, if the education reforms set forth in Tennessee's Race to the Top proposal were to become reality. Although the legislature had approved a law that enacted key aspects of the proposal, they left many details for TDOE to resolve.

> ## What is "clarity of outcomes and theory of action"?
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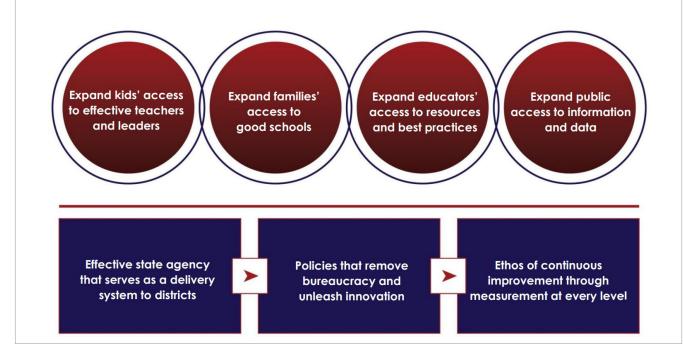
Commissioner Huffman immediately launched an effort to define the outcomes the State should pursue and to create a plan for achieving them. Tennessee began by looking at its data concerning students and learning.

"When you look at the layout of the plan, there was a conscious decision to start with the state of student achievement in Tennessee and to root our work in that," said Hanseul Kang, TDOE's chief of staff. "It was important to start with the reality of our results. At the time, based on the 2011 NAEP results, Tennessee was 46th in the country in 4th grade math and 41st in the country in 4th grade reading results," Kang said. "The achievement gap is a huge problem, but overall achievement is a huge problem as well. Those are equally important in our minds."

Beginning from this starting point, of taking a frank look at student achievement, the State articulated a clear vision: that Tennessee would become the fastest improving State in the nation. From there, the plan described measurable goals for student success in 3rd grade reading proficiency, 7th grade math proficiency, high school graduation and college access.[2] For example, TDOE set as targets an increase from 42 percent to 60 percent in 3rd grade reading proficiency by the 2014–2015 school year, and a 10 percent reduction in the achievement gap every year.

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[2] These were the State's goals in its winning Race to the Top application; this section of the strategic plan was later revised to reflect the goals articulated in its ESEA flexibility waiver.

Expand kids' access to effective teachers and leaders	Expand families' access to good schools	Expand educators' access to resources and best practices	Expand public access to information and data

Effective state agency that serves as a delivery system to districts	➤	Policies that remove bureaucracy and unleash innovation	➤	Ethos of continuous improvement through measurement at every level

The TDOE strategic plan takes these goals as the starting point and then establishes four priorities to support school districts in reaching the goals:

1. Expand kids' access to effective teachers and leaders

2. Expand families' access to good schools

3. Expand educators' access to resources and best practices

4. Expand public access to information and data

The plan continues by translating each priority into a set of key strategies designed to implement that priority. Take, for example, the priority of expanding "kids' access to effective teachers and leaders": the strategies suggested are to create marketplaces and supports for districts to hire effective teachers and principals, strengthen certification criteria and link licensure more clearly to effective teaching, expand effective teacher preparation programs, and expand the reach of effective teachers and leaders to access more students. In this way, the strategic plan links its measurable goals to the four priorities and key

strategies for realizing each, which taken together constitute a "theory of action" for TDOE's reform.

Having an ambitious strategic plan in place set off a series of further actions by TDOE intended to reflect and realize the new goals and theory of action. For example, Commissioner Huffman reorganized the TDOE staff and refocused their roles in order to pursue the priority of expanding student access to effective teachers and principals. He designated a new staff position to lead teacher quality initiatives and repositioned responsibility for licensure and evaluation under the umbrella of teacher quality. Prior to the strategic plan, licensure and evaluation "existed in isolated places," Kang explained. "They weren't on the same team and didn't have the charge to make sure we had the best teachers and leaders available."

With a clear vision of the measurable outcomes to be pursued, TDOE has made important strides toward their accomplishment. Tennessee is now in its third year of implementation of a revamped evaluation system and has made changes each year based on feedback from educators in order to ensure the system supports growth in student achievement and teacher

and leader effectiveness. In addition, this past summer, TDOE unveiled a new teacher licensure system based on effectiveness, to go into effect in 2015.

TDOE continues to update the indicators in the strategic plan "so that we're rooting our conversations in data around student achievement," Kang explained. "We still think about our collective work in the framework of the strategic plan. Each division leader is very aware of the parts of the strategic plan he or she has ownership over. When the commissioner meets with his senior leaders, that's what they are talking about."

For Tennessee, the creation of a strategic plan rooted in clear and measurable outcomes for student achievement has given TDOE and its staff the organizing principles that shape agency structure, staffing and responsibilities. The theory of action embedded in the strategic plan drives their collective work, their conversations about that work, and their continual rethinking and adjustment of the work. There are indications that the State's strategy is yielding results: Tennessee has seen three consecutive years of continued progress on Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) results, and realized its vision of becoming one of the fastest improving States in the nation, as measured by the 2013 NAEP results.

Massachusetts Creates a Strategic Plan and Delivery Unit

Like Tennessee, Massachusetts has presented its statement of outcomes and theory of action in its strategic plan: the 2013 Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) Strategic Plan. The plan states an overarching goal—"ESE aims to prepare all students to succeed in the world that awaits them after high school"—and four additional "core strategies":

• Strengthening curriculum, instruction and assessment

• Improving educator effectiveness

• Turning around the lowest performing districts and schools

• Using technology and data effectively to support student achievement
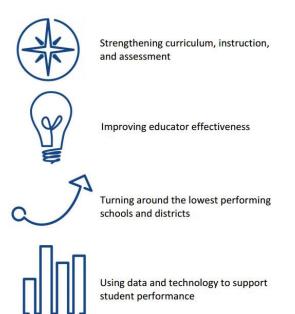
To achieve each of the four core strategies, the ESE strategic plan provides a more detailed course of action. To strengthen curriculum, instruction and assessment, for example, the plan establishes seven actions: to develop and implement a strong, challenging curriculum; create tools and resources to support effective implementation; provide a support system for all learners; strengthen teaching for English language learners; improve standards for educator development and growth; create professional networks for literacy and mathematics; and target ESE grant resources toward the agency's goal and strategies.

For each core strategy, Massachusetts has set student outcomes to be reached by 2014 as the measure of success. For instance, the outcomes for strengthening curriculum and assessment are to improve results in 3rd grade reading and 8th grade mathematics while reducing the number of high-needs students and increasing the number of advanced performers as measured by the statewide composite performance index (CPI) on the Massachusetts Comprehensive

OUR GOAL, AND OUR STRATEGIES TO GET THERE — SUCCESS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

ESE aims to prepare all students to succeed in the world that awaits them after high school by:

Strengthening curriculum, instruction, and assessment

Improving educator effectiveness

Turning around the lowest performing schools and districts

Using data and technology to support student performance

Assessment System. As Matthew Deninger, Policy and Planning Manager for ESE's Delivery Unit, explains, these outcomes and the strategic plan that underpins the outcomes, are intended "to have people asking, 'Am I making an impact'?"

The "Delivery Unit" directed by Deninger reflects a deliberate decision by the ESE to implement performance management. The unit's purpose is to ensure that ESE is *delivering* on the priorities for increasing student achievement set forth in the strategic plan. It adheres to a systematic process, based on continual attention to five questions:

1. What is our agency trying to do?

2. How are we planning to do it?

3. At any given moment, how will we know whether we are on track?

4. If not, what are we going to do about it?

5. How can the delivery unit help?

With measurable outcomes for student achievement and the strategic plan as its guide, the delivery unit tracks progress, pinpoints challenges, resolves problems and keeps the Commissioner and other agency leaders informed.

As Deninger observed, "We're planning backwards, just like a good teacher plans a lesson backwards. What kinds of projects and programs you have, what kinds of things are you doing that will get to those targets—that's what we're talking about now." For example, ESE staff members discovered that the State's graduation rate had improved as a result of MassGrad, an initiative embedded in the ESE strategic plan and supported by a Federal High School Graduation Initiative Grant. As a result, ESE has decided to apply MassGrad best practices to its work with neglected and delinquent youth through Title I funding.

Lastly, the agency has turned to communications to widely publicize its core purpose to the public as well as its own staff and leadership. Visitors to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's website cannot miss the emphasis on supporting students in their pursuit of success after high school. An four-minute video produced by Boston's Public Broadcasting System affiliate features students reflecting on the attributes of their best teachers and confidently explaining their plans for college and work "in the world that awaits them after high school."

Conclusion

This brief, the first in a series of four outlining the elements of performance management, has looked at how Tennessee and Massachusetts are using their strategic plans for performance management. Both States began with a clear sense of what they want their schools to deliver—clear and improved outcomes for student achievement—and they created strategic plans that embody theories of action (priorities and aligned strategies) and define measurements to confirm progress toward the outcomes. These plans then became the drivers for daily work, and resources for leaders and staff members as they reflect on course correction and progress.

Briefs two through four in this series look at the other three elements of performance management—alignment of resources, collection and use of data, and accountability for results—through the experiences of Delaware and Hawaii, as well as Massachusetts and Tennessee.

For Race to the Top States to produce sustainable improvement in student achievement, State education agencies and local educational agencies are making the commitment to improve student outcomes in ways that will live well beyond any single program or

source of funding. In doing so, the education agency's role is evolving from monitoring- and compliance-centric to include leadership in support of statewide goals for improved student outcomes.

Each State's ability to drive change depends on the capacity of its performance management system to guide its work and measure progress. Effective performance management requires commitment to all four elements. In order to accept responsibility and accountability for results, schools, districts and individuals must have clarity about purposes and outcomes and the work needed to accomplish them, must have some autonomy to align resources in support of the work, and must have access to data about their performance and the time and space to analyze the data to make course corrections.