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On Recovery School Districts and Stronger State Education Agencies: Lessons from Louisiana

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CRPE's work is based on two premises: that public schools should be measured against the goal of educating all children well, and that current institutions too often fail to achieve this goal. Our research uses evidence from the field and lessons learned from other sectors to understand complicated problems and to design innovative and practical solutions for policymakers, elected officials, parents, educators, and community leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

For two days in May 2011, state education agency representatives from New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Tennessee attended a series of intense workshops and briefings organized by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE). These sessions described the changes that have taken place in Louisiana over the past six years, including the creation of the Recovery School District (RSD) that redeveloped unproductive schools in New Orleans and elsewhere, the restructuring of the LDOE, and efforts to create a new performance-based organizational culture in state and local education agencies.

Presenters included LDOE staff, RSD administrators, academic observers, LDOE's nonprofit service partners (e.g., teacher training programs, charter school operators), and education stakeholders in New Orleans. What emerged was a candid discussion of the LDOE's overall school improvement goals, the steps taken to achieve those objectives, and in some cases the missteps made in the effort to dramatically turn around a large number of schools in a relatively short time and to prompt improvements in all schools across the state.

Officials from other states requested these sessions, hoping to extract lessons from the Louisiana experience that could be adapted for use elsewhere. This paper documents the results, so that others who were not present but interested in making similar changes in their own states can learn and benefit.

We summarize "takeaway points" under five headings:

1. Preconditions to progress;
2. Lessons on school closing and transformation;
3. The importance of a state entity like Louisiana's RSD;
4. Limitations of the Louisiana RSD as an example for others; and
5. Needed changes in the state education agency.

State officials attending the meeting felt that they had learned a great deal from the materials and ideas presented in Louisiana, but they had more questions that could be answered only via additional analyses and case studies. This paper concludes with a "wish list" of further resources that state leaders thought would help them in efforts to improve schools, districts, and their state education agencies (SEAs).

PRECONDITIONS TO PROGRESS

Everything depends on a longitudinal student data system that allows consistent comparison and rating of schools. A data system should include individual student records over time, and combine student demographic data, test scores, credits gained, and school and teacher attributes. Such a system can provide measures of both student achievement levels and annual gains; it is vastly better than one that gives only performance levels.

The data system must be linked to a statewide accountability system that allows for action in the case of persistently unproductive schools. If a state has more than one accountability system that differently identifies low performance, it must rationalize or consolidate these so that competing lists do not confuse districts, school leaders, and voters.

The accountability system must leave room for the state to consider factors in addition to hard achievement scores in determining what action to take or require of a particular school. In making decisions about whether to sustain, help, transform, or close and replace a given school, officials should be free but not required to consider trends or recent changes in student demographics, staffing, and leadership.

States need to make themselves magnets for talent. The best teachers want to know they will work in schools where teachers and leaders have chosen to work together, and that leaders are chosen on the basis of readiness and performance, not degrees and seniority. In addition, setting the right conditions impacts a state's ability to secure outside talent and excellent school providers. For example, school rating systems should take into account student growth, not just absolute performance, so new schools can be judged on improvement; financial incentives should be offered for whole school turnarounds over grade-by-grade turnarounds to accelerate changes; turnarounds in high schools should receive additional support given their level of complexity.

LESSONS ON SCHOOL CLOSING AND TRANSFORMATION

Speed is tempting, but it can kill. Though Louisiana had no alternative but to close existing schools and create new ones very quickly, other states might need to move at a more measured pace. State leaders need to be clear in advance about the criteria for school closure or transformation, and act when the case is clear and a better alternative is available. Though it is tempting to accomplish as much as possible before a "political window" closes, more important is the need to first demonstrate that the actions are warranted and necessary. The criteria for judging schools, evidence on performance, and notice of the state's intent toward a particular school should be public as soon as possible. Parents in affected schools should be given notice months ahead, so they can make their own enrollment decisions.

Opposition to school transformation and replacement is inevitable. State leaders cannot expect to fully satisfy unions and all parents and teachers involved in a particular school. Opposition can also come from elected officials at both the state and local level. However, state leaders must be prepared to convince neutral parties that the actions are warranted.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN RSD

The state must have the authority either to seize control of, transform, or charter out an unproductive school, or require a district to do so. State superintendents would be able to act more effectively if they also had the power to de-certify, break up, reorganize, or merge recalcitrant school districts.

Louisiana's Recovery School District (RSD) is a vital asset to the state. It is a state agency empowered to assume control of unproductive schools. Other states might avoid some of the inevitable controversy associated with Louisiana's RSD by giving their own similar entity a different name.

An RSD-like state agency operating in a major metropolitan area can be a training ground for the talent necessary to transform schools elsewhere in the state and to rebuild the SEA. Again, a degree of patience is necessary. In Louisiana, building this talent pool took 3-5 years. Had the LDOE "raided" the talent prematurely, progress in transforming the New Orleans schools might have slowed or even gone backwards.

RSD LIMITATIONS

RSD actions are more credible and politically sustainable when focused on a large metropolitan area with large numbers of low-performing schools. This critical mass helps the state attract talented people to run the RSD and the schools, build independent organizations to run charter schools, recruit teachers and principals, and encourage development of a nonprofit support infrastructure for new schools.

Taking over small numbers of schools in rural or small urban areas is difficult and risky unless highly talented people can be attracted to those areas. Compared to prominent metropolitan areas, more isolated localities do not offer the personnel networks or support infrastructures that can sustain and provide political cover for reformers. Acting in many areas of the state at once compounds the political risks, since opponents find it easier to form coalitions in the legislature.

*The goal of an RSD-like organization is **not** to simply pick up where the district left off.* There is no reason to think that the new entity will be any better at directly running schools than was the school district. Instead, a new state organization should take a “steering not rowing” approach to school transformation, doing it through third parties and using the charter school law whenever possible. In Louisiana, the RSD direct-run schools have not been productive, particularly relative to those that have been chartered. Compared to charter schools, the RSD direct-run schools are more bureaucratic, less flexible, less performance-focused, and unattractive to talented educators.

Louisiana’s RSD has emerged as something of a schizophrenic organization—with one set of responsibilities associated with managing a portfolio of chartered schools while at the same time saddled with the functions of a traditional central office. The parts of the RSD central office that were created to support the direct-run schools are poorly matched to the current all-charters strategy. For this reason the current RSD central office role is not a model to be emulated elsewhere.

In every way possible, administration and support functions in the RSD and state agency should be contracted out to independent third parties. In metropolitan areas, services like data assembly and analysis, professional development, charter management, principal training, national talent recruitment, business and insurance services, and facilities should be contracted out. Such organizations are scarce because traditional school districts monopolize service provision; however, they will emerge if the RSD makes a market and seeks philanthropic start-up support for them.

CHANGES IN STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES

Existing state education departments are not built to function as RSDs, or for that matter to analyze and judge school performance information and decide what actions should be taken. SEAs are organized and staffed around compliance functions, and many existing staff members often do not possess the skill set necessary for taking on a different role. State leaders who want to transform a large district or influence districts throughout the state need to create new structures and find new people if they hope to build new capacities.

To take on a new role in school improvement, the SEA will need to change both its structure and culture. In Louisiana, a smaller, core group of staff members retained responsibility for compliance and reporting functions. The State Superintendent, however, built his leadership team by combining the most flexible and imaginative current staffers with personnel from outside the agency. Many of these team members were recruited from the New Orleans office of the RSD and understood what it takes to judge schools; attract school providers and outside talent; oversee autonomous schools, including charters on a performance basis; and foster development of a support infrastructure for such schools. There is potential for some federal money for state administration to be repurposed for the new state functions.

Some states are considering creating new offices totally apart from the state department of education, or contracting out new functions like those listed above. In the long run the goal should be to provide for necessary compliance functions but enable the state—either through the SEA or some other new entity—to emphasize performance management and foster continuous improvement in districts and schools.

An effective state capacity should be organized around data and analysis, accountability, talent, provider recruitment, options development/R&D, public notice and transparency, and portfolio management. The latter is a fusion function, where information about current school performance, needs, demographic changes, availability of facilities, and availability of school leaders and charter providers come together in decisions about what schools to close or open in a given year.

It is vital to build a “bench” of people who understand the state’s new role and how an RSD must operate. These are not developed in schools of education, or for that matter in the Broad Residencies. Increasing the number of RSDs and building state agencies on the same model requires continual talent development. This means continuing to recruit and develop highly capable people from education, business, and public affairs (e.g., White House Fellows), and deliberately rotating them among key jobs.

The public communications function at the SEA level is potentially its most important asset, but often the weakest. Building this up is essential to building support, changing internal (SEA) and external expectations and holding the entire system—including SEA leaders—accountable for results.

Once reconfigured, SEAs can offer useful supports to struggling schools and districts, such as non-punitive data analyses, comparable examples that may be relevant to particular schools/districts, pre-screened talent pipeline for schools/districts with limited talent pools or HR capacity, etc.

CONCLUSION: STATE LEADERS’ WISH LIST

There is clearly a great deal to learn from the Louisiana experience, but the sessions reported here only whetted state leaders’ appetites for more specific guidance and a greater variety of examples. State, local, and foundation leaders present at the meeting asked for further analysis of promising approaches to performance management in Louisiana and elsewhere. Requests included:

- What are the structures and resources necessary to organize an SEA around the goal of school improvement?
- What should a state data system built to support performance management contain?
- What factors other than test-score levels and gains should be considered in assessing school performance? How should these factors be weighted?
- What are the elements of a model state law establishing an RSD-like entity?
- Once created, how should an RSD-like entity operate? Specifically, how should it be staffed and organized? And most importantly, how do you keep it from morphing into a conventional school district central office?
- Is there a “best way” to close a school? What data and criteria should be used? What does the timeline look like? When and how to you inform the public? What assurances need to be provided to parents? How do you select the right provider to transform or take over a school? Or, if none are available, how do you create an alternative provider?
- At what point does the SEA consider taking on the added challenge of closing and replacing schools in remote towns or rural areas?
- How do you attract and develop a supply of quality school operators?
- How can you make a state or locality a magnet for the most talented people available in the country and keep them involved with K-12 education?

A new Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) project funded by the Broad Foundation is addressing the first question and will add to our understanding of the second. Another CRPE project is focused on school closing. But to answer the remaining questions, additional research and documentation on states’ needs and capacity-building efforts is needed.

About the Authors

Paul T. Hill is the John and Marguerite Corbally Professor at the University of Washington Bothell and Director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education. His current work on public education reform focuses on portfolio strategies for school district management, school choice, finance, and accountability. Dr. Hill works closely with city and state leaders facing the need to transform their urban public school systems, and convenes a growing national network of urban district leaders adopting or considering a portfolio strategy of education reform. He is the author and editor of numerous books and reports, including *Learning as We Go: Why School Choice Is Worth the Wait* (Hoover Press, 2010). Hill chairs the National Charter School Research Project and leads its Charter School Achievement Consensus Panel. He also chaired the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education. Dr. Hill is a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings and Hoover Institutions. He holds a Ph.D. and M.A. from Ohio State University and a B.A. from Seattle University, all in political science.

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