Partnering for Student Success: How States and School Districts Collaborate to Innovate

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Executive Summary

More than ever before, state education agencies across the nation are advancing bold and ambitious reform agendas that aim to ensure that more students graduate high school ready to succeed in college and careers. In this work, state leaders are balancing the need to develop effective strategies to improve reading and math proficiency, close achievement gaps, and help more students succeed after high school, while also working to build a strong infrastructure within their agencies to effectively lead change. These growing demands require that state education agencies (SEAs) embrace innovative ways of working in order to be successful.

System leaders can maximize the impact of their efforts by creating strong, collaborative relationships with school leaders throughout their states. These kinds of relationships may represent new roles for many SEAs, which have traditionally focused their efforts on monitoring and compliance matters. The challenge of building these effective relationships is a substantial one, but one many states are embracing to ensure that their systems experience real, lasting change.

The U.S. Education Delivery Institute (EDI) partners with K-12 and higher education systems as they set and strive to reach ambitious goals for student success. EDI helps SEAs employ a set of proven tools and processes—called delivery—to implement critical elements of their overall improvement strategies. The delivery model ensures that public sector systems will be able to make progress and achieve sustainable results in student outcomes.

Faced with heightened demands for outcomes, many of our partner states have taken innovative approaches to communicating with their school districts and collaborating with them as they collectively work to raise student achievement. This publication provides case studies of promising practices that some of our partner states are using to strengthen these relationships and drive change—from the SEA to the classroom.

These practices include:

**Defining Aspirations for the System and Sharing Them Broadly**

A system’s aspiration sets the vision for what it is seeking to achieve. When shared broadly, an aspiration can become a catalyst for change and a powerful force to effectively drive its reform efforts. This case study highlights how the Kentucky Department of Education used its aspiration for college and career-readiness to build statewide momentum for its student success agenda.
**MAKING THE PLANS FOR CHANGE CLEAR AND ENGAGING SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN MEANINGFUL WAYS**

SEAs often spend great amounts of time focused on developing plans and strategies to improve student outcomes. Systems can take this work to the next level by engaging school and district leaders in their reforms in meaningful ways. Stories drawn from Delaware and Kentucky demonstrate ways that systems can strategically collaborate with school and district leaders to strengthen their planning and implementation efforts.

**CREATING AN INDEPENDENT UNIT TO MONITOR PROGRESS AND DRIVE IMPLEMENTATION**

In order for an organization’s implementation efforts to be successful, there must be a team of individuals that monitors the complex scope of work that is underway. Without this internal capacity, systems often lack the ability to monitor performance to ensure that they are producing sustainable results for students. The Delaware Department of Education’s Delivery Unit provides a strong example of an SEA that has built this important capacity and leverages it to lead change throughout the system.

**IDENTIFYING BARRIERS TO PROGRESS AND DEVELOPING POLICIES, FINANCIAL RESOURCES, AND OTHER SUPPORTS TO ADDRESS THEM**

In building momentum for their reforms, SEA leaders must aim to identify and eliminate any barriers school districts may face in their work to raise student achievement. These barriers could be legal or regulatory in nature, or may involve the need to provide districts additional information or resources to help them implement their reforms effectively. Louisiana and Massachusetts provide two examples of systems that have identified barriers to success and addressed them head on.

**DIFFERENTIATING SCHOOL DISTRICTS BY STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND PROVIDING TIERED SUPPORTS BASED ON THEIR NEEDS**

In today’s economic climate, finding the financial and human resources needed to maintain progress over time can be an uphill battle. In the face of this challenge, SEAs must identify effective ways to target their resources to ensure that their investments will pay off. Massachusetts and Louisiana have embarked on this critical work, and provide two approaches for how states can turn the tide of low performance in their most struggling schools.

Each of the SEAs highlighted in this publication demonstrate a willingness to push past the traditional boundaries of the SEA role and embrace innovation to ensure that state-level reforms lead to real improvement in student outcomes. They prove that true collaboration between state and local education leaders can challenge the status quo and pave a path to successful outcomes for all students.
The Delivery Framework

The innovative practices that are highlighted in this publication reflect key components of the delivery framework. Delivery is a systemic process through which education system leaders can drive progress and produce results. It incorporates proven practices from management disciplines across the public and private sectors to help education system leaders answer four essential questions:

1. What is our system 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 to succeed?
4. If not, what are we going to do about it?

These questions require that a system clearly articulate its goals, its plan to achieve its goals, and how it will sustain improvement over time. Systems that are able to answer these questions consistently have the foundation needed to make a measurable impact in student achievement.

EDI’s support helps systems answer these questions consistently in the following ways:

1) What is our system trying to do? EDI’s work with a system begins with the system identifying its goals and summarizing them into metrics that can be shared widely and monitored over time.

2) How are we planning to do it? Most SEAs and school districts have launched broad and multi-faceted reform agendas and have created plans to implement those reforms. Delivery takes this work one step further, by helping education leaders translate their activities into a coherent strategy—or a delivery plan—that tells a clear and compelling story about how they will carry out the plan’s activities and achieve the desired outcomes.

3) At any given moment, how will we know whether we are on track to succeed? During the planning process, it is important that education systems not only identify measurable goals, but also develop a way of knowing whether they are on track to achieve those goals. This process involves identifying targets for a system’s performance and, based on evidence, projecting the anticipated path of the target metric over a period of time.

4) If not, what are we going to do about it? Routines create opportunities for system stakeholders to review performance on a regular basis to identify and address early warnings or risks. Effective delivery routines typically involve a variety of meetings, formal and informal reports, and focused reviews of specific challenges, all with the goal of ensuring that the organization’s priorities are being met.

In organizing how to answer these questions, EDI has developed a framework of 15 essential elements that enable a system and its leaders to address these issues rigorously. This
framework is our systematic approach for ensuring that a focus on delivery becomes embedded in the way the system does business. Our theory of action is simple: A system that faithfully implements each element of the delivery model will achieve visible and measurable results in student outcomes. The 15 elements of delivery are outlined in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The 15 elements of delivery

To develop this framework, EDI adapted and applied the practices created by the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit (PMDU), founded in 2001 under Prime Minister Tony Blair, and led by Sir Michael Barber. Blair organized the PMDU for a single purpose: to make certain that the promises he was making to the British people about improvements in core government services would be kept. To address this need, the PMDU developed a set of routines and problem-solving techniques which were quickly recognized as a new and radically different approach to delivering results. Taken together, these techniques comprise the delivery framework.

The results of the PMDU’s efforts were clear: By the end of Blair’s second term (2005), approximately 80 percent of the administration’s ambitious goals had been achieved, and performance had improved in almost all of the remaining cases. Blair concluded that the Delivery Unit was the best reform of the government machine he ever made.

Delivery at the state level is most powerful when it helps an SEA drive these practices to districts and schools. Since EDI’s work began, a number of our K-12 partner systems have focused on this aspect of delivery in particular. Their work has resulted in a series of innovative
approaches that state leaders are taking to collaborate with their districts to drive results for students. The systems that have pioneered these approaches are on the leading edge of reform in a critical area of implementation. This publication captures their stories and the lessons they have learned.

Delivery is being implemented in more than a dozen of K-12 and higher education systems across the nation, with strong early outcomes. Ultimately, our goal is for all state education systems to embrace the delivery approach.