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How State Education Agencies Are Administering School Turnaround Efforts: 15 Years After No Child Left Behind

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Abstract

School turnaround—the rapid improvement of student achievement in low-performing schools—is increasingly a major topic of interest in K-12 public education. Federal legislation has left varying degrees of school improvement–related responsibilities up to states, and policy makers have divergent views about how to realize turnaround. We investigate and describe how each state education agency (SEA) is administering school turnaround efforts in federally designated priority schools. To accomplish this, we examined a variety of publicly available documents from SEA websites and summarized the data into three overarching categories. We discuss how this finding has significant implications for policy makers and SEAs, especially as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is implemented.

Keywords

educational policy, models of implementation, policy formation, school turnaround, state policies

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School turnaround is increasingly a major topic of interest in K-12 public education (e.g., Peck & Reitzug, 2014; Trujillo & Renée, 2015), yet little peer-reviewed research exists that examines how states administer school turnaround efforts. When the United States Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (NCLB, 2002), it made two implicit assumptions about state education agencies (SEAs): (a) they were a proper entity to charge with turning around their state's lowest performing schools, and (b) they were ready and able to support the schools that now required their assistance to meet NCLB requirements. When the law went into effect in 2002, however, SEAs did not have the necessary capacity to take on their new caseloads (C. G. Brown, Hess, Lautzenheiser, & Owen, 2011; Manna, 2010; Minnici & Hill, 2007; Tannenbaum et al., 2015), so schools, and thus districts, were responsible for turning themselves around. The recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 revised several key NCLB provisions, most notably devolving some of the federal government's oversight of school improvement efforts back to states. This places even greater responsibility on SEAs to turn around their lowest performing schools, and recent research has established just how significant a challenge this has been for many SEAs (e.g., Tannenbaum et al., 2015).

Within education, chronic underperformers are often referred to as persistently lowest achieving schools, low-performing schools, or, to use recent federal education policy parlance, "priority schools." Priority schools are classified as the bottom 5% of schools within a state, and are frequently beset by myriad factors outside their control, which we elaborate upon later in this article. NCLB charged priority schools with meeting the same adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements as their higher achieving peers. In doing so, Congress made the assumption that all public schools, regardless of context, could make 100% of their students proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014 (Hoxby, 2005).

To help priority schools accomplish the tall order of attaining complete student proficiency, NCLB established the School Improvement Grants (SIGs) program. Congress funded the program in 2007 and, with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA; 2009), allocated an additional US$3.5 billion to the SIG program. Between 2007 and 2015, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) spent nearly US$8 billion on SIG schools (Emma, 2015), and the program became a very significant source of funding for school turnaround efforts. Indeed, it lessened SEAs' financial burden considerably. Although ESSA eliminated the SIG program and its associated appropriations, an approximately equivalent increase in Title I dollars resulted in SEAs having about the same amount of financial resources for school turnaround work in priority schools. How SEAs will elect to spend those dollars is unclear, however, as they now have more flexibility.

Moreover, a lack of consensus exists among researchers, SEA officials, policy makers, and other stakeholders about how to realize turnaround. As of 2015, 34 states continued to contract with external providers, including school improvement vendors and charter management organizations that likely differ in quality and experience (Tannenbaum et al., 2015). A 2012 government survey indicated that many SIG-funded schools failed to meet their annual objectives (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012). Some studies (e.g., Birman, Aladjem, & Orland, 2010; Stuit, 2010) note the low success rates of school turnaround initiatives and argue that efforts are rarely sustained, whereas others (e.g., de la Torre et al., 2013) discuss how strategies in certain contexts lead to success—lending credence to the idea that schools can be turned around given the right resources and context.

A recent evaluation brief published by the Institute for Education Sciences reported that as of 2013, more than 80% of responding SEAs reported turnaround as a high priority but at least half found it difficult to actually do so. Not surprisingly, 80% also reported significant gaps in expertise to support turnaround (Tannenbaum et al., 2015). The authors of a recent Regional Educational Laboratory Central report (Klute, Cherasaro, & Apthorp, 2016) examined the associations between SEA interventions in chronically low-performing schools and student achievement, but the number of studies they reviewed were few and methodologically limited, resulting in little added clarity about what SEAs have been doing to achieve turnaround in their schools.

In our study, we begin to add clarity to a convoluted policy area by reviewing publicly available documents to identify and classify the overarching administration models SEAs have devised to help turn around their low-performing schools. Specifically, the purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate and describe how each SEA is administering school turnaround efforts in federally designated priority schools. To accomplish this, we examined a variety of publicly available documents from SEA websites and summarized the data into three overarching categories.

In this article, we first review characteristics of priority schools and the implementation of NCLB by SEAs with specific focus on school turnaround efforts. Second, we explicate the methods we used to gather data on how SEAs are operationalizing school turnaround efforts. Third, we report the results of our document reviews and subsequent coding. Finally, we discuss current SEA strategies to turn around low-performing schools, which we place along a continuum.

Priority Schools and Their Characteristics

There is both a social and a moral imperative for studying school turnaround. For the 2013-2014 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES; 2014) counted 98,271 operating public schools in the United States. As priority schools are the bottom 5% of schools within a state, taking 5% of the total number of public schools gives an estimate of approximately 4,900 priority schools nationwide. Within the same data set, NCES (2014) also calculated that the average American public school enrolls 509 students. Multiplying 4,900 by 509 yields a total of 2,494,100—a figure that is slightly higher than the entire population of New Mexico (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Using these rough estimates, nearly 2.5 million American students are enrolled in priority schools within a given school year.

Many low-performing schools share similar characteristics, too. They are often located in urban core or rural areas, serve predominantly minority and/or high-poverty populations, have lower daily attendance rates and fewer engaged parents, face higher faculty and staff turnover, and are less connected to and present within their surrounding communities (Berliner, 2006; Duke, 2015; Stuit, 2010; Trujillo & Renée, 2015). These factors present substantial challenges to many constituencies, especially SEAs. After all, they were charged by NCLB and more so now by ESSA to improve priority schools' performance (Executive Office of the President, 2015).

NCLB-Era SEA Capacity and Defining AYP

In 2002, many SEAs did not have the capacity to offer substantial assistance to, much less take over, low-performing schools (Manna, 2010; Minnici & Hill, 2007; Murphy & Hill, 2011). Although Lusi (1997) argues that SEAs play an essential role in the creation and implementation of state-level school improvement initiatives, Massell (1998b) establishes that, in the mid-1990s, SEAs' "capacity-building strategies for reform were highly decentralized" (p. 9) and many SEAs often turned to external providers for assistance, especially for "low performing, low capacity schools" (Massell, 1998a, p. v). This aligns with Murphy and Hill's (2011) notion that, at the time of NCLB's passage, SEAs were accustomed to playing the passive role of compliance monitor. NCLB, however, upended this traditional arrangement, forcing SEAs to take a much more active role in improving their schools, even if they were unprepared to do so (Minnici & Hill, 2007). Indeed, by 2008, 6 years after NCLB went into effect, only 25 states had "any structure" to improve capacity to support school turnaround, 11 had "SEA staff designated to support school turnaround but no state-level turnaround office," and 10 had a "designated state-level school turnaround office" (Tannenbaum et al., 2015, p. 10).

As few states had structures to aid priority schools in meeting new federal demands, many SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs), as Massell (1998a) found, contracted with external providers for assistance.

The literature on external provider use in school improvement and school turnaround initiatives, although scant, uses a host of names, such as external education management providers (Kowal & Arkin, 2005), lead turnaround partners (Corbett, 2011), external partners (Southeast Comprehensive Center, 2015), intermediary organizations (Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2011), nonsystem actors (Russell, Meredith, Childs, Stein, & Prine, 2015), education management organizations (Troppe et al., 2015), and charter management organizations (David, 2010). Some firms are nonprofit while others are for-profit; still, others only do business in one geographic area while others extend services nationwide (Corbett, 2011).

Several studies have investigated the role of intermediary organizations in school improvement efforts. In their work examining one intermediary's partnership with three California LEAs, Trujillo and Woulfin (2014) and Trujillo (2014) determine that one of the intermediary's main responsibilities consisted of "broker[ing] change between schools and districts" (p. 209). Neither study, however, mentioned the California Department of Education's (DOE) potential role in the process. Other work has looked at how intermediaries are involved in shaping education policy in state and federal politics. Lubienski et al. (2011) and Scott, Lubienski, DeBray, and Jabbar (2014) discuss how some intermediaries have become key players in the policy-making process by aggregating and presenting to policy makers research evidence on particular school improvement efforts, oftentimes selecting information that best fits their agendas. Despite this work, though, we still know little about how SEAs, in particular, are forming and evaluating partnerships with intermediaries.

Before NCLB, as Kowal and Arkin (2005) note, external providers often assisted schools and districts on fiscal matters, but the new, post-NCLB "school improvement industry" (Rowan, 2002, p. 283) had a more diverse set of tasks that needed accomplishing, most central of which was aiding SEAs and LEAs in turning around the nation's lowest performing schools to meet federal demands. In response, many SEAs created support networks that involve scores of "nonsystem actors" (Russell et al., 2015, p. 94), such as regional education service agencies, professional associations, and institutions of higher education (IHEs). In their study examining 12 states' Race to the Top (RttT) funded reform networks, Russell et al. (2015) conclude that SEAs centralized school improvement work around themselves, further increasing the importance of SEAs having not only the capacity to improve schools but also the capacity to coordinate a network of diverse actors. SEAs with lower initial capacity, they found, often formed "larger and more diverse networks" (p. 94), and the authors then openly questioned whether or not those SEAs had the wherewithal to manage such a large network in the first place.

Not only did NCLB require SEAs to improve their lowest performing schools, the law, by design, also gave SEAs substantial discretion (Manna, 2010; Trujillo & Renée, 2015) to define AYP—a key indicator that could be used to force a school to implement turnaround efforts. Many SEAs chose to measure AYP using student performance scores on standardized tests (Stuit, 2010). The higher the percentage of students scoring at or above proficient in language arts and mathematics, the more likely a school would make AYP (Kowal & Arkin, 2005). NCLB also charged SEAs with defining proficiency, devising the criteria used to classify what constituted a priority school, and designing their own standardized tests or contracting with testing companies to create the tests (Kowal & Arkin, 2005).

Each state uniquely interpreted NCLB's directives, which created a policy environment with 51 (50 states plus the District of Columbia) potentially different systems, each with varying strategies on how to implement the law's requirements. For example, one SEA lowered proficiency standards to ensure a greater number of schools met AYP (Clark, 2004). Some SEAs already had staff they could send to schools. Still other SEAs, lacking capacity, sought out private sector external providers to aid low-performing schools until the agency could hire more staff members to expand its capacity (Stuit, 2010).

Implementing School Turnaround Efforts

It is important to note that in nearly all the studies and reports published on recent turnaround efforts within the last 10 years (some exceptions discussed in Trujillo & Renée, 2015), SEAs have measured success by student performance on standardized tests. Kowal and Arkin (2005) suggest that although easier, focusing on this narrow objective may not take other factors of student learning into consideration, such as noncognitive factors. For studies that did examine other student learning factors, nearly all were within the school—leaving out the significant influence of out-of-school factors, such as geography, socioeconomic status, and local economic conditions, and how they relate to variability in student achievement in priority schools (Berliner, 2013). If a priority school is located in a high-crime, low-income, underresourced urban area, how much can we reasonably expect an SEA to do? Lowering crime and raising incomes often require a high degree of cooperation among an array of diverse government and nongovernmental organizations; rebuilding the communities surrounding priority schools takes time and is something infeasible for an SEA to accomplish on its own.

Instead of hiring more staff to aid low-performing schools, some contend that low-performing schools should just be closed. Finn and Winkler (2000) and Smarick (2010) argue that too many weak schools survive because SEAs

have failed to close them. However, what are schools to tell the 500 students who may have no other place to go or who, after attendance area rezoning, are relegated to attending yet another low-performing school? Both Johnson (2013) and Trujillo and Renée (2015) contend that school turnaround efforts and the range of methods used by SEAs have disproportionately set back the very students and areas that need high-performing schools the most.

Rather than close schools outright, some SEAs permit schools to reconstitute, meaning a school is closed and then reopened—sometimes, depending on resources, in the same building with the same faculty. David (2010) notes the possibility of greater difficulty when taking over an existing school rather than creating an entirely new school. Literature on reconstitution discusses how the policy can accelerate the decline of a school's "collegiality, trust, professional relations, and community ties—necessary conditions for improving student performance" (Trujillo, 2015, p. 16), along with negatively influencing the school's climate and reducing its long-term stability (Malen, Croninger, Muncey, & Jones, 2002). These influencing factors have challenged SEAs and LEAs regarding the way forward with priority schools. The present models of managing school turnaround are a patchwork that warrants deeper examination.

The Way Forward

NCLB and ARRA put immense pressure on SEAs and LEAs to improve student achievement, but recent policy revisions have started to loosen some requirements. In February 2015, the USDE amended SIG requirements: Grant timelines were extended from 3 years to 5 years to promote sustainment of change efforts, rural schools had more flexibility in how they could spend their grants, and schools could choose from three new intervention models (Redding, Dunn, & McCauley, 2015)—an SEA-developed alternative model, a whole-school evidence-based reform strategy, or an early learning model focused specifically on elementary schools. These revisions presented an opportunity "for SEAs and LEAs to revisit how [SIGs are] implemented across all levels of the system" (Redding et al., 2015, p. 23).

In December 2015, less than a year after loosening restrictions, Congress passed ESSA, which abolished the SIG program, rolled SIG funds into USDE's larger Title I program, and relaxed the more rigid stipulations of NCLB and ARRA. ESSA grants states the autonomy to create and implement their own models to turn around low-performing schools. This significant latitude makes research in this area even more necessary because the specific models and theories of action SEAs create, the empirical evidence underlying those models and theories of action, and the determinations of who is

responsible for implementing and monitoring interventions within priority schools deserve scrutiny.

There is little doubt that within the last 5 years, SEAs have progressed considerably in their abilities to administer turnaround efforts and aid priority schools, but gaps still exist. As of 2013, 46 states had some administrative or organizational structure for school improvement initiatives whereas 32 had a state-designated turnaround office and only 21 had staff assigned to support school turnaround (Tannenbaum et al., 2015). Given that fewer than 50% of SEAs have specific staff to monitor and lead turnaround efforts in their neediest schools, this study addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How are SEAs operationalizing school turnaround efforts?
Research Question 2: How many SEAs are administering turnaround entirely with internal resources, entirely with external resources, or using a combination of both internal and external resources?
Research Question 3: What are the potential varying operationalizations among SEAs using a combination of both internal and external resources?

We consider SEA "resources" to be twofold: (a) the administrative or organizational structure(s) of an SEA charged with aiding low-performing schools and (b) the knowledge and skills of the staff who work directly for the SEA to aid low-performing schools.

Method

Data Sources and Data Collection

This study used a theoretical sampling model (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which the research questions and purpose statements drove the data sources consulted. Prior (2008) notes how Glaser and Strauss (1967) view documents as a source of information comparable with informants in an anthropological study or interviewees in a sociological study. This study considers all SEAs as separate participants ($N = 51$) with webpages and downloadable documents (e.g., Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA] flexibility waivers, school improvement guides, lists of priority schools, school improvement grant applications) serving as the primary data sources.

We collected data from September 2015 to January 2016 by visiting the main page of each SEA website and, after navigating to the search box, used four general search terms (*school turnaround*, *school improvement*, *priority school*, and/or *school improvement grant*) to identify webpages and

downloadable documents related to school turnaround efforts. If few to no relevant documents came up in the search results, we navigated through the SEA website's menus to identify a school improvement unit's main webpage to then manually search for documents. We reviewed a total of 243 documents and the number of documents identified varied by state, ranging from one to eight with an average of five. We first ascertained which SEA bureau/division/office/unit administered school turnaround efforts. Some were housed within a district accountability bureau or school improvement division whereas others were located within a federal programs office or school support services unit. Webpages and/or downloadable documents mentioning "school turnaround" and/or "priority schools" were saved for analysis, with webpages and/or downloadable documents that described how the SEA administered school turnaround efforts with priority schools being prioritized over the manual review of an LEA's application for a SIG.

After conducting searches for six states, we found that a combination of three recurring document types often provided the necessary and relevant information that permitted us to determine an SEA's administration model. First, a state's ESEA flexibility waiver, if available, usually provided a succinct, analyzable summary of how the SEA supported priority schools. Many SEA websites posted the various versions of proposed, approved, or rejected waivers, often dating back to when USDE first permitted their submission, on a single webpage. Second, a few states had applicable state statutes, either in whole or in part, that mandated an SEA's particular actions for supporting priority schools. Third, several states posted their specific theories of action for school improvement and accountability efforts. These particular webpages and downloadable documents provided useful summaries of how SEAs supported priority schools.

Data Analysis and Coding Scheme

Initially, we started with just the first research question, but added the second and third research questions based on initial findings. To answer the first research question, we used an inductive content analysis approach (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), which uses data analysis techniques akin to grounded theory's open coding scheme (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These qualitative research methods endeavor to build a conceptual understanding of a phenomenon without using a priori hypotheses. One of us started preliminary coding of documents from 25 states and three preliminary codes emerged from the data. Characteristic of an open coding scheme, emerging themes from initial coding informed and drove subsequent rounds of data analyses. Both of us

Table 1. Operationalization of Criteria for Models of How States Administer Turnaround Efforts.

Criteria	Operationalization
Internal	SEA administers all facets of turnaround efforts and LEAs do not contract out with external providers.
Hybrid	
Lead	Assigned SEA school turnaround staff leads efforts, but LEAs contract with external providers for supplementary strategy creation and implementation.
Assist	Assigned SEA school turnaround staff assists efforts, but LEAs contract with external providers for primary strategy creation and implementation.
Coordinate	Assigned SEA school turnaround staff coordinates efforts among various constituencies, such as nonprofits, other SEA offices, and external providers, but LEAs contract with external providers for primary strategy creation and implementation.
External	SEA may have some role in reviewing or assessing planning and grant applications, but LEAs contract out with external providers to administer all facets of turnaround efforts.

Note. SEA = state education agency; LEA = local education agency.

then reviewed the three preliminary codes and together formalized the final coding scheme by devising a set of decision rules. The three codes, which stemmed the creation and inclusion of the second and third research questions, were then used as a priori codes for the remaining 26 states. Each of us then coded all 51 states separately using the three a priori codes and convened to review. Initial interrater reliability was 80% (41 of 51 states). We discussed differences in the coding for the other 10 states until agreement was reached. The operationalization criteria that informed the coding process are provided in Table 1.

Internal. States coded "internal" had an SEA that administered all school turnaround efforts and did not contract with external providers or permit LEAs to contract with external providers. For example, Hawaii, which organizes all its schools into a single LEA, requires priority schools to join a "zone of school innovation" (ZSI), and school turnaround efforts within the ZSI are administered entirely by the Hawaii DOE (2015).

Hybrid. States coded "hybrid" had an SEA that administered one or more facets of school turnaround efforts and also contracted with external providers for

the remaining facet(s). This code started to resemble a continuum, as opposed to the more concrete criteria of the other two codes, because SEA and external provider involvement varied significantly. In some states, the SEA led school turnaround efforts and external providers provided supplementary strategy creation and implementation; in other states, the SEA had staff assigned to school turnaround efforts, but LEAs were permitted to contract entirely with external providers. Given this diversity, we developed three subcodes—"hybrid-assist," "hybrid-coordinate," and "hybrid-lead"—to take into account increased nuance.

We used the following metaphor to guide our coding of the divergent administration models present within this category. Consider a motorcycle with a sidecar. For "hybrid-assist" states, an external provider is driving the motorcycle and the SEA is riding in the sidecar. The sidecar may give, in the moment, route guidance and/or feedback on how the driver is driving, but the sidecar is not in control and while the driver may listen to the sidecar, the driver may not follow the sidecar's suggestions. For "hybrid-coordinate" states, an external provider is still driving the motorcycle with the SEA in the sidecar. However, before driving, the sidecar prepares an outline with potential routes for the driver to take along with recommendations for stops along the way that may enhance the overall driving experience, perhaps based on prior and intimate knowledge of the surrounding area; but, again, the driver may or may not listen to the sidecar. For "hybrid-lead" states, the SEA is driving the motorcycle and an external provider is in the sidecar. The SEA is leading, but an external provider may be consulted for route guidance and/or feedback on driving. The SEA's and external provider's roles invert from "hybrid-assist/hybrid-coordinate" to "hybrid-lead" models.

Hybrid-lead. States coded "hybrid-lead" had SEA staff assigned to lead school turnaround efforts, and LEAs contracted with external providers for supplementary strategy creation and implementation. For example, the Georgia DOE's (2015) Division of School and District Effectiveness, through its own "school effectiveness specialists" and regional education service agencies, leads all school turnaround efforts for priority schools, but LEAs are permitted to contract with external providers for supplementary assistance under certain circumstances.

Hybrid-assist. States coded "hybrid-assist" had SEA staff assigned to assist school turnaround efforts, but LEAs contracted with external providers for primary strategy creation and implementation within the priority school. For example, the Mississippi DOE's Office of School Improvement employs "implementation specialists" who make monthly consultation visits to

priority schools, but LEAs contract with external providers for the primary efforts related to school turnaround. The LEA is required to submit a narrative of its external provider procurement process to the SEA along with a formal evaluation, but the bulk of efforts rest with the external provider, not the SEA (Mississippi DOE, 2011).

Hybrid-coordinate. States coded "hybrid-coordinate" had SEA staff assigned to coordinate school turnaround efforts among various constituencies—such as other SEA offices, local nonprofit organizations, and local IHEs—and LEAs contracted with external providers for primary strategy creation and implementation. For example, the Arizona DOE's Support and Innovation Unit hires "support and innovation specialists" to provide priority schools with on-site support, but they cannot be in the schools for more than 50 calendar days during a given year. This specialist helps the school and the LEA coordinate and submit budgets and continuous improvement plans (Arizona DOE, 2015). Yet, LEAs contract with external providers for turnaround efforts and, similar to Mississippi, submit to the SEA a narrative outlining its external provider procurement process. Although the SEA has staff members who appear to consult with schools, external providers seem to lead the efforts.

External. States coded "external" had an SEA that did not administer any school turnaround efforts and contracted with external providers for all efforts or only processed and evaluated SIG applications. Federal legislation empowered SEAs to determine which LEAs would and would not receive SIG funds, and, technically, this task can be considered an example of an SEA administering a school turnaround-related effort. However, we opted to exclude this task for two reasons. First, the SEA was fulfilling a role mandated by the federal grant process. Second, no state human and/or financial resources were allocated to and/or expended on the LEA that applied for the SIG outside of clerical work for processing the SIG application. These two reasons demonstrated that the substantive efforts of turning around priority schools rested solely with external providers and not the SEA. For example, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) requires priority schools to hire an SEA-approved external provider to coordinate all school turnaround efforts and/or implement state-directed school improvement efforts. The SEA does provide grants for eligible LEAs to help mitigate the costs of contracting with an external provider, but the SEA does not have any direct involvement in administering turnaround efforts within the schools (Wisconsin DPI, 2015).

Results

SEA Coding Results

Coding results, as mentioned in the previous section, yielded five categories: internal, external, hybrid-lead, hybrid-assist, and hybrid-coordinate. Although we will not reiterate each category's definition here, we note that two larger criteria differentiated the states' administration models: the role of the SEAs and the role of external providers. Each criterion can be viewed along a continuum. Criterion 1 ranges from no SEA involvement in administering school turnaround efforts (save for reviewing and processing school improvement plans and/or school improvement grant applications) to complete SEA involvement. Criterion 2 ranges from no involvement of external providers in administering school turnaround efforts to complete involvement of external providers. The reasoning behind this approach is the complexity of the "hybrid" category. Initially, we did not delineate within the hybrid category. But given that a majority of states (38) were coded as "hybrid" and clear distinctions in SEA approaches within the category were noted, we believed it necessary to further differentiate into subgroups.

Overall classification results are listed in Table 2. Five states were classified as having "internal" models, 19 states with "hybrid-lead" models, 12 states with "hybrid-assist" models, seven states with "hybrid-coordinate" models, and eight states with "external" models. Note that Louisiana and Tennessee are in two categories—hybrid-coordinate and hybrid-lead—because LEAs in those states have the option of choosing either the SEA or an external provider to lead turnaround efforts. Next, we provide two examples from each of the five categories to highlight the range of administration models and illustrate within-category variation.

Administration Models

Internal. SEAs using internal models administer all school turnaround efforts without including external providers. The Maine DOE's Learning Systems Team, for example, appoints a "Department of Education specialist," who can be classified as a coach, to provide technical assistance to a priority school. The specialist is selected by the SEA and assigned to aid turnaround efforts within a school, and the SEA does not maintain a listing of external providers for LEAs to select from and hire (Maine DOE, 2015).

In Montana, internal administration is much more complex. The Montana Office of Public Instruction's Educational Opportunity and Equity Division has several support structures in place for priority (and SIG-eligible) schools,

Table 2. States by Coded Administration Model.

	Hybrid (38)			
Internal (5)	Lead (19/21)	Assist (12)	Coordinate (5/7)	External (8)
Hawaii	Alabama	Arkansas	Arizona	Alaska
Iowa	District of Columbia	California	Connecticut	Nebraska
Maine	Florida	Colorado	Louisiana	Nevada
Montana	Georgia	Delaware	New Hampshire	North Dakota
South Dakota	Indiana	Idaho	New York	Oklahoma
	Louisiana	Illinois	Tennessee	Utah
	Maryland	Kansas	Texas	Wisconsin
	Massachusetts	Kentucky		Wyoming
	Michigan	Mississippi		
	Minnesota	Missouri		
	New Jersey	New Mexico		
	North Carolina	Oregon		
	Ohio			
	Pennsylvania			
	Rhode Island			
	South Carolina			
	Tennessee			
	Vermont			
	Virginia			
	Washington			
	West Virginia			

Note. Louisiana and Tennessee are in two categories—hybrid-lead and hybrid-coordinate—because LEAs in those states have the option of choosing either the SEA or an external provider to lead turnaround efforts. LEA = local education agency; SEA = state education agency.

including SEA-hired "school coaches," "a network of reform specialists," "a transformation leader" who provides technical assistance to individual principals, and a state "wraparound facilitator" who coordinates the efforts of a four-coach team consisting of a community liaison, an instructional leader, a school board coach, and a transitional leader. These varying roles and levels of support stem from Montana's 2009 "Schools of Promise—SIGs Initiative," which saw the SEA hire 22 additional staff to aid the state's lowest performing schools (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2013). Moreover, LEAs that applied for SIGs were required to consent to the SEA's administration model if they wanted to be considered for a SIG award.

Hybrid-lead. SEAs using hybrid-lead models direct primary strategy creation and implementation for school turnaround efforts, but LEAs contract out with external providers for supplementary strategy creation and implementation. The New Jersey DOE uses a combination of SEA officials and external providers to support priority schools. The SEA created seven regional service centers, each headed by an executive director; a region's executive director is responsible for the progress of all priority schools within a region; she or he also heads the region's executive team, which works with each priority school principal to develop specific plans and interventions. However, if a priority school working with a regional achievement center does not improve after 5 years, the state commissioner of education may appoint an external provider to lead turnaround efforts (New Jersey DOE, 2015). This highlights the complexity of New Jersey's policies and how the SEA takes the lead on school improvement efforts, but only for a period of up to 5 years.

Massachusetts has a similarly elaborate system of support for turnaround efforts in priority schools. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has six regional service centers, each headed by a regional assistance director, who is a recently retired superintendent. In addition, the state commissioner of education appoints a "receiver," which can either be a nonprofit organization or an individual, to consult with an array of constituencies, such as parents, teachers, and local community members, to develop a turnaround plan for a priority school. Under state statute, the receiver is vested with superintendent-level powers and can change LEA and/or school policies to ensure the facets of an individual priority school's turnaround plan are more likely to be realized (Massachusetts DOE, 2015). In both examples, SEAs have created service centers to offer primary and supplementary resources to a particular region's low-performing schools and SEA-appointed officials lead the creation, implementation, and assessment of turnaround efforts.

Hybrid-assist. SEAs using hybrid-assist models assign staff members to assist priority schools with some school turnaround efforts, but primary strategy creation and implementation remain with external providers. For example, the Arkansas DOE created "co-op areas," which are geographic subdivisions with "school improvement specialists" to assist priority schools. However, Arkansas also permits LEAs to contract with approved external providers; some external providers are approved by the state education commissioner whereas others are approved by the SEA (Arkansas DOE, 2015). This illustrates how priority schools can contract with an external provider and still consult with the school improvement specialists in their co-op area.

The Idaho DOE offers several different types of assistance. The SEA's Statewide System of Support, for example, includes a number of resources for priority schools, such as the application-based Idaho Principals Network—a program that strives to promote collaboration among the state's principals, especially those of low-performing schools. Another state resource is the Idaho Building Capacity Project (IBCP), a partnership between the SEAs and in-state public IHEs. Indeed, the SEA considers IHEs with "a track record of providing high-quality services in every region of Idaho" (Idaho DOE, 2012a) as approved external providers for the state's priority schools. The project also hires retired school administrators as "capacity builders" (Idaho DOE, 2012b) to provide individualized support to an LEA and/or priority school. Yet, despite all these supports, LEAs are still permitted to contract with external providers, and the SEA does not maintain a listing of approved external providers outside of noting, as mentioned before, those in-state public IHEs with good track records. In both this example and Arkansas, the locus of administration rests with the external provider and not the SEA.

Hybrid-coordinate. SEAs using hybrid-coordinate models coordinate school turnaround efforts among a variety of constituencies, such as nonprofits, other SEA offices, and external providers, but primary strategy creation and implementation still lies with external providers. The New York State Education Department's School Turnaround Office, for example, is responsible for creating the guidelines priority schools use to evaluate and select potential external providers along with connecting those schools with people and organizations that will help facilitate turnaround efforts. Instead of placing the burden of finding an external provider on the priority school, the SEA provides a listing of external providers and helps coach schools through the contracting and procurement processes. Moreover, the SEA provides examples of model practices and procedures for schools to adopt. The work within the schools, however, is conducted by the staff members of the school and the selected external provider (New York State Education Department, 2013).

The Texas Education Agency's Division of School Improvement and Support mandates that all priority schools select an external provider from an approved listing. Each school is assigned a "campus intervention team" by the SEA, which may be comprised of both an external provider and an LEA official charged with working with the external provider to lead local efforts. These officials work with the SEA and other operating units, such as the Texas Center for District and School Support, the Professional Service Provider Network, and SEA-run regional service centers, to devise an overarching strategy to improve the school (Texas Education Agency, 2015). As with New York, though, the locus of control over strategy creation and implementation

lies with the LEA and the external provider, while the SEA fulfills the role of coordinating all the structures in place to aid priority schools.

External. SEAs using external models do not administer any school turnaround efforts except for clerical tasks, such as reviewing applications and awarding SIGs and/or simply reviewing priority schools' school improvement plans. In Alaska, for example, the Alaska DOE and Early Development's Division of Teaching and Learning Support require priority schools to submit a school improvement plan, which includes a needs assessment, for review by an SEA official who provides feedback on the plan. Past that point, the SEA has no role and LEAs contract with external providers for all school turnaround efforts. The SEA does not maintain a listing of external providers for LEAs to select from and hire—it only requires that LEAs use a rigorous review process to evaluate whom to hire (Alaska DOE & Early Development, 2015).

In contrast, Utah statute requires priority schools to select a "school turnaround expert" from an approved listing maintained by the Utah State Office of Education. However, another Utah statute permits the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to exempt a priority school from this stipulation if the school is already under contract with a nonapproved school turnaround expert. In addition, "School Support Team" consultants, who appear to be hired by the LEA and not the SEA, aid priority schools in developing appraisals and improvement plans for implementation (Utah State Board of Education, 2015). As mentioned above, the SEA does maintain a listing of approved external providers for LEAs to select from and hire.

In this section, we devised five overall categories to sort states' administration models and highlighted two states per category to shed light on the variation within categories along with exhibiting the complicated nature of this policy issue. At one end of the administration continuum, an "external" state permits LEAs to hire external providers to lead all turnaround efforts with little to no SEA oversight while a "hybrid-lead" state may appoint an official to head a committee who works with stakeholders to devise an improvement plan for an individual priority school. The differences between state models result in a host of interesting questions and points of discussion, which we elaborate upon in the next section.

Discussion

Our results capture the complexity of recent SEA initiatives to administer school turnaround efforts. As ESSA grants states extensive, but not unlimited, operational authority to design their own models and theories of action,

this study provides a foundation with which future research can build upon to explore how model types and prevalence change over time and what factors may be associated with and/or driving those changes. Our continuum of state administration models, too, illuminates the diversity of how states have interpreted federal policies and the divergent structures SEAs have put into place to try to realize their goals, which aligns with previous findings that explicate the varied ways states have interpreted and implemented federal school improvement mandates (Manna, 2010; Russell et al., 2015).

In this section, we discuss the varying levels of SEA capacity to administer turnaround efforts. Some states use robust models with empirically grounded theories of action; others appear to lean heavily on external providers. We then raise questions about the processes SEAs and LEAs use to recruit, vet, and monitor external providers involved in school turnaround efforts, especially given the large sums of taxpayer funds used to pay these providers. We close by discussing our experiences with navigating SEA websites along with a point on the nomenclature used to describe the SEA unit responsible for overseeing school turnaround efforts.

SEA Capacity and Model Selection and Implementation

Our results suggest that SEA capacity to lead school turnaround efforts varies. Some states, three of which we highlighted in our "Method" and "Results" sections, lead all turnaround efforts. One state with considerable capacity is Massachusetts, which has developed a rather robust model that shows promise. Indeed, the SEA's theory of action for school improvement undergirds a very complex system in place to aid priority schools. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is quite active in determining how turnaround strategies are created, executed, and monitored. The statewide system of support includes a dense network (Russell et al., 2015) of both system and nonsystem actors, which also suggests high levels of cross-actor communication. This reinforces prior work by Goertz, Barnes, Massell, Fink, and Francis (2013) that some SEAs are becoming less siloed and more collaborative. Moreover, recent evidence (LiCalsi, Citkowicz, Friedman, & Brown, 2015) has shown how Massachusetts' model was successful in creating conditions that fostered positive results in priority schools, but progress took time.

Yet, some states do not have such capacity and need an alternative way forward. This study extends work by Minnici and Hill (2007) and Russell et al. (2015) regarding the need for SEAs to solicit assistance from nonsystem actors to form support networks to enhance capacity and meet federal demands. Our results show 27 states use an "external," "hybrid-assist," or

"hybrid-coordinate" model, suggesting a slight majority of SEAs seem to be either unable or unwilling to administer all turnaround efforts internally. One method adopted by these SEAs, in particular, is permitting LEAs to contract out with external providers. This is not the only way, but it is one of the most common, corroborating Tannenbaum et al.'s (2015) survey results. Several SEAs go so far as to publish a listing of recommended or approved external providers that LEAs can hire to lead turnaround efforts. This model, contrary to the SEA-led efforts in Massachusetts, empowers LEAs to make their own decisions and could be an approach SEAs can use to hold LEAs more accountable. The research base on external provider-led turnaround efforts is slim, at best, and there is little evidence to support the notion that external provider-led efforts rather than SEA-led efforts produce greater change and sustainability.

Similarly, not every SEA has the ability to create a structure similar to and as robust as Massachusetts. In Nebraska, for example, a single federal program officer processes all SIG applications, and LEAs within the state contract with external providers for all turnaround efforts (Nebraska DOE, 2015). The state has not allocated the requisite funds to operate an extensively staffed SEA unit focused on school turnaround. On the contrary, the Illinois's Center for School Improvement (ICSI; 2015) counts approximately 300 people as employees and more than a few job positions and titles appear to be dedicated to supporting priority schools. However, Nebraska and Illinois are two different contexts—Illinois has more than 4,200 public schools whereas Nebraska has just more than 1,100 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). We do not seek to directly compare these two states but instead note the disparities in SEA capacity, as prior work has (e.g., C. G. Brown et al., 2011; Massell, 1998a). What can federal policy makers in Congress and USDE reasonably expect of SEAs? Can the federal grants officer in Nebraska truly offer the same degree of guidance and support as a school improvement collaborative staffed by hundreds of researchers and program evaluators? The larger point here is that the recently signed ESSA shifted much oversight of and authority over school improvement initiatives back to SEAs, raising further concerns about whether or not many of today's SEAs are well-positioned to support an increasing caseload of low-performing schools.

The Recruiting, Vetting, and Monitoring of External Providers

As we mentioned earlier, extant research on school turnaround efforts has its shortcomings, complicating a clear understanding of how priority schools can be turned around. We highlighted Massachusetts's model because of its recent success, but then offered the disclaimer that a given state may not have

the resources to fashion a similar structure. Consequently, and now to expand on an earlier point, we found that many SEAs allow LEAs to contract with external providers; this occurs in two ways: de jure, meaning that an SEA has created a recommended or approved listing of external providers using some set of criteria, or de facto, meaning that the LEA is left to its own devices to recruit, vet, and monitor an external provider's efforts.

This arrangement between SEAs and external providers raises three important questions: (a) Who are these external providers? (b) What evidence is there that these providers increase student achievement on standardized tests in school turnaround contexts? and (c) Is it wise to allow private interests to drive public school improvement? These lines of inquiry seek to build upon previous work that indicated only 15 states had recommended or approved listings of external providers (McMurrer, Dietz, & Rentner, 2011). A 2010 *New York Times* article discusses how scores of companies with little to no experience in school turnaround efforts were either opening up shop or submitting applications to SEAs and/or LEAs in hopes of receiving grants (Dillon, 2010), especially as Congress appropriated and USDE invested billions more into helping low-performing schools. There were profits to be made, Dillon (2010) argues, and it was off the backs of the students, schools, and LEAs who needed the most help.

SEAs and LEAs are the entities hiring external providers. Yet, we know very little about the processes an SEA uses to determine which external providers it either recommends or requires LEAs to use. Our research indicates that some SEAs borrow procurement policies from other state agencies while others simply ask an external provider to submit its name to a state database. In states without a recommended or approved listing of external providers, LEAs are faced with the task of identifying, evaluating, and monitoring an appropriate external provider. LEAs may not have drawn up contracting and procurement procedures specific to school turnaround external providers. Similar to SEAs, some LEAs may just modify existing procedures, such as those used to hire a busing company, which may not assess the proper factors needing examination. Operating a fleet of busses may be a far cry from the intense day-to-day work needed to turn around a low-performing school. Or, perhaps, an LEA official hires an external provider because it has a connection to the superintendent rather than having an effective theory of action that matches the LEA's specific needs.

In some cases, a priority school's principal is responsible for leading the process to select and then supervise an external provider aiding his or her school. Managing an external provider could add to existing role stress faced by principals of low-performing schools (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009), and little existing research in educational leadership specifically investigates

whether principals are trained in how to select, manage, and assess external providers. Urban LEAs and school principals, too, may have deeper contact networks developed from prior projects and collaborations with other organizations in their cities. Suburban and rural priority school principals, on the other hand, may not have such a deep network to pull from, which could complicate their efforts in many ways.

Moreover, an external provider may not have a deep track record of success, as Dillon (2010) suggests, giving LEAs and priority school principals little to work with before having to make a decision on whom to hire. This shortcoming of the external provider market, coupled with the possible lack of LEA and/or priority school principal knowhow about contracting and procurement processes related to school turnaround efforts, may lead to the selection of an incompatible or ineffective external provider, further exacerbating the situation and wasting public funds. Even new evidence standards required by ESSA will place strain on SEAs and LEAs to understand the shifting landscape of external provider demonstrations of evidence (Herman, Gates, Chavez-Herrerias, & Harris, 2016).

This brings up another noteworthy point: the substantial amount of money spent on school turnaround efforts as a result of the SIG program, some of which went to pay external providers. All priority schools were eligible to apply for SIGs between 2002 and 2015 but not all applied and not all who did apply for a SIG received one. SIG appropriations did not occur until 2007, and since then, USDE has expended nearly US$8 billion on the program, seeing varied results depending on the source consulted and context of interest (Emma, 2015). We feel comfortable concluding that a potentially sizable portion of the dollars spent on the SIG program paid for LEA contracts with external providers (J. Brown, 2012). Yet, the evidence base on external provider success is thin; we know little about how they were and are being selected; in traditional preparation programs, principals are not necessarily trained on how to oversee a school turnaround external provider. Nevertheless, USDE continued to pour billions of dollars into a program that produced few positive results, especially results that were sustained past 1 year (Le Floch et al., 2016).

As a potential response to this mixed record of success, USDE changed SIG stipulations in April 2015, but before a new grant cycle could occur, Congress via ESSA effectively shuttered the SIG program by rolling its appropriation into a larger pool of Title I grant appropriations. Although the actual effects of this policy change will not be known straightaway, an immediate concern is that SEAs will have to determine how best to leverage new policies and changing funding streams to aid low-performing schools. It is imperative that SEAs ensure that whichever model they do adopt is grounded

in empirical research, aligned with their goals and theoretical model in support of those goals, and funded robustly to ensure appropriate investment in what works. The public, justifiably so, expects their tax dollars to be spent wisely, a notion that lends further support to rigorous selection and monitoring of external providers.

The Organization and Updating of SEA Websites

During data collection, we visited and navigated through each SEA's website as any member of the public could do. The quality of SEA websites varied considerably. Some had search engines that did not function properly or could not accommodate Boolean searches while many others had webpages with dead links, out-of-date information, and/or missing versions or revisions of downloadable documents, such as SIG applications. For some SEAs, we found it very difficult to understand, in simple terms, how they intended to support priority schools. Some websites, such as those for Idaho, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Utah, explained in clear text and visuals their systems of support for low-performing schools. Other states, such as Iowa and New York, did not indicate explicitly what systems of support were in place, leaving us initially unsure how to code the state. This raises the issue of overall website quality and what the public and LEA and school officials should be able to access and understand by visiting any state government website. The dynamic nature of the education policy environment should only further motivate SEAs to consistently update their websites and provide information that can be digested easily by the public and the LEAs and schools the SEA serves.

We cannot predict that more members of the public or LEA and school officials will visit the consistently updated SEA websites, but providing more understandable information has the potential to create more informed citizens who, in turn, may be better positioned to advocate for certain education policies to be passed or repealed. In addition, a greater amount of up-to-date information on an SEA website can make the SEA more accountable to its LEAs and schools, the very organizations it is charged to lead and support. We will not belabor the point about the benefits of a more educated and informed citizenry, but our experiences with 51 SEA websites demonstrate that many SEAs have much to do to make their work more comprehensible and transparent to those they serve.

Regarding limitations with this approach, we recognize that we only looked at a specific slice in time, and this study does not and cannot account for ongoing policy debates within SEAs and/or state legislatures. Yet, the study's purpose was to identify, describe, and summarize a complex topic using only publicly available information at the time of data collection.

Although this is a typical shortcoming of studying dynamic policy areas, there is scholarly merit in policy analyses examining how organizations explicate publicly how they administer a program or initiative.

SEA Nomenclature for School Turnaround Efforts

An additional curious product of our data collection efforts came in the form of the names of the units responsible for administering school turnaround efforts within a given state. The names vary extensively. Whether or not these differences connote ostensibly different goals and functions remains to be determined. For example, based on its name, North Carolina's District and School Transformation Division aspires to transform schools while Montana's Educational Opportunity and Equity Division appears to stress equity in school improvement initiatives. Tennessee's unit name, Finance and Monitoring, can conjure up a very different mental image when compared with, say, Kentucky's Office of Next Generation Schools and Districts, which by its name seems to promote more forward thinking and planning than monitoring. Perhaps the mixed success of school turnarounds found in recent literature is incentivizing SEAs to consider different terminology.

But, what is in a name? Are unit name changes similar to the rebranding efforts of many products and companies who either desire to shed a former image for a given reason? Are SEAs putting a façade over current efforts to allay fears of serious fractures in the metaphorical foundation? We speculate about the motives underlying these efforts because some SEAs may be changing their managing unit's name to portray greater capacity than they may have in actuality. Changing a unit's name does not alter the unit's underlying responsibilities and goals: working tirelessly to improve the quality of its lowest performing schools. It could, however, determine whose perspectives within an SEA take precedence in improving low-performing schools. Without a unit specifically tasked with turnaround, we wonder whether other units are best prepared to lead the work.

In this section, we noted how a slight majority of states use an administration model that allows external providers to lead turnaround efforts. We do not know, however, whether this is the strongest model for effecting and sustaining positive change. The large number of states with "internal" and "hybrid-lead" models demonstrates that many states appear to be building internal structures to administer turnaround on their own. We highlighted recent successes in Massachusetts, but is its model transferable to other SEAs? Should it be? We then discussed the selection, use, and monitoring of external providers by both SEAs and LEAs and issued a call for future research to examine these processes in more detail. Given the large amount

of federal money spent on school turnaround, it is doubly imperative that SEAs' models are grounded in empirical research and not created out of convenience. Finally, we brought up our experiences navigating SEA websites and raised a point about the names of the SEA units that administer school turnaround efforts. Perhaps there is a trend away from using the word "turnaround," but an answer to that hypothesis requires systematic investigation.

Conclusion

With little doubt, states have diverged in their responses to turning around low-performing schools. Recent changes resulting from the passage of ESSA grant more autonomy to and place greater responsibility upon states to aid priority schools. Because of this, it is imperative for SEAs to self-assess their current capacity for aiding low-performing schools and determine what they want their capacity to be in the near and longer term futures. This may include thoughtfully adopting an SEA-led administration model ("internal" or "hybrid-lead") or an external provider-led administration model ("external," "hybrid-assist," or "hybrid-coordinate") depending on current capacity. Concerns have been raised about the adoption of one state's administration model by another state (McGuire, Dunn, Shaw, & Schott, 2016), so it is vital that SEAs invest energies into an intentional process to settle on a model and accompanying theory of action. In many situations, devising a model and theory of action will require SEAs to work very closely with their state legislatures on crafting and passing legislation conducive to developing and operating the most context-appropriate model.

ESSA also phases out the SIG program, placing more strain on SEA resources to support priority schools. For states that have become totally or semireliant on using federal grants for turnaround initiatives, this is rather unwelcome news. Although SEAs will have more latitude with Title I funds under ESSA, the absence of special federal grants for school improvement only amplifies the calls for SEAs to adopt models that sustain long-term change. Any model's end goal, we assert, should be to build capacity within LEAs and schools to ensure successes do not fade, especially after the first year as some studies have found (e.g., Birman et al., 2010; Stuit, 2010). Indeed, we reiterate our earlier call for future research on external providers in general along with greater detail on their individual efforts, successes, and failures.

Although we have seen the negative influences of federal legislation like NCLB and ARRA, perhaps these policies forced the examination of topics we did not feel necessary to dig into before, such as measurement, accountability, and stated expectations for schools serving certain populations. As

ESSA devolves some control back to states, we see an opportunity for policy makers and SEAs to seize by maintaining topical momentum and applying lessons learned to better coordinate the billions of dollars spent annually on this issue. In that vein, policy makers and SEAs have an opportunity to work collaboratively with and learn from LEA and school leaders who have led successful turnaround efforts to help forge a way forward based on local, contextualized successes. With little doubt, turning around chronically underperforming organizations is time- and resource-intensive work that requires intention, collaboration, and patience, but it is work that needs to happen. After all, millions of students are enrolled in priority schools—and they deserve a good education just as much as everyone else.

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