

## REL Southwest Ask A REL Response

April 2020

### Question:

*What are research-based approaches to building state education agency capacity for data-driven policymaking?*

### Response:

Thank you for the question you submitted to our REL Reference Desk. We have prepared the following memo with research references to help answer your question. For each reference, we provide an abstract, excerpt, or summary written by the study's author or publisher. Following an established Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest research protocol, we conducted a search for research reports as well as descriptive study articles on research-based approaches to building state education agency capacity for data-driven policymaking.

We have not evaluated the quality of references and the resources provided in this response. We offer them only for your reference. Also, we searched the references in the response from the most commonly used resources of research, but they are not comprehensive, and other relevant references and resources may exist. References provided are listed in alphabetical order, not necessarily in order of relevance. We do not include sources that are not freely available to the requestor.

### Research References

Conaway, C., Keesler, V., & Schwartz, N. (2015). What research do state education agencies really need? The promise and limitations of state longitudinal data systems. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(1S), 16S–28S. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1058609>. Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.3102/0162373715576073>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “State longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) have created more opportunities than ever before for rigorous research to influence education policy decisions. As state practitioners who play central roles in building and using our states’ longitudinal data systems, we are excited about their promise for supporting policymaking and research. Yet, we also recognize that the data in SLDSs will not answer many of our most pressing research questions, nor will the presence of these systems create the meaningful collaboration between researchers and practitioners that we feel is needed to inform our states’ policy landscapes. The barriers to the kinds of

research we need are mostly unrelated to the promises of SLDSs. We outline the challenges we have experienced in developing research agendas, building our internal capacity for research, and working with external partners, and we identify the research questions we need to answer that are not easily addressed with SLDS data.”

Gottfried, M. A., Ikemoto, G. S., Orr, N., & Lemke, C. (2011). *What four states are doing to support local data-driven decisionmaking: Policies, practices, and programs* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2012-No. 118). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED526134>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “This report documents how four state education agencies are supporting local data-driven decisionmaking through their policies, practices, and programs for creating data systems, improving data access and use, and building district and school capacity to use data. Specifically, this report, responding to District of Columbia Office of State Superintendent of Education and Pennsylvania Department of Education requests, describes how Arkansas, Florida, Texas, and Virginia are supporting local data-driven decisionmaking. Two questions guide this study: (1) What policies or practices in Arkansas, Florida, Texas, and Virginia support local use of data for education purposes; and (2) How do Arkansas, Florida, Texas, and Virginia support local use of data in selected state education agency-administered programs? This study found that the four states have implemented a range of policies and practices in all three categories of the study's analytical framework: (1) Creating, expanding, and linking data systems. The four states have created and built state repositories and are expanding the types of data collected and warehoused to better equip districts and schools to rigorously assess whether students, schools, and districts are meeting state college readiness requirements and career readiness expectations. (2) Ensuring data access and use. The four states have implemented policies and practices to help local educators and administrators access, understand, and use data effectively. In doing so, they are making data and analyses timely, readily available, and easy to understand for parents, educators, and policymakers. (3) Building district and school capacity to use data. The four states have focused on strengthening local human resource capability, mainly through partnerships and professional development. By building local capacity to access and analyze data stored in state longitudinal data systems, the states intend to help local policymakers and practitioners use data inform key policy questions on performance and improvement. In addition to state policies, the study also identified five state programs supporting district and school use of data (one in Florida, two in Texas, and two in Virginia). Appended are: (1) Summaries of studies with strong findings on state education agency support for local data-driven decisionmaking; and (2) Study methods.”

LaPointe, M. A., Brett, J., Kagle, M., Midouhas, E., Sanchez, M. T., Oh, Y., et al. (2009). *How state education agencies in the Northeast and Islands Region support data-driven decisionmaking in districts and schools* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2009-No. 072). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED505288>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “The report examines the initiatives of state education agencies in the Northeast and Islands Region to support data-driven decisionmaking in districts and schools and describes the service providers hired to support this work. Four components of data-driven decisionmaking initiatives are identified: (1) Centralized data system/warehouse; (2) Tools for data analysis and reporting; (3) Training on data systems/warehouses and tools; and (4) Professional development in using data for decisionmaking. Analysis of the four components across the state education agency initiatives revealed that not all initiatives include all four components, and implementation is affected in part by available funding and capacity. The study outlines considerations for education decisionmakers and researchers on the potential benefits of implementing additional components of a data-driven decisionmaking system, sources of funding, and strategies to enhance their capacity to support teachers and administrators. Ideas are proposed for further research, including examining how state education agencies scale up their data-driven decisionmaking initiatives; exploring how state education agencies, schools, and districts implement data-driven decisionmaking; and analyzing the impacts of data-driven decisionmaking on student and school outcomes. [This report was written with Young Oh and Charlotte North. For summary report, see ED505289.]”

Opalka, A., Jochim, A., & DeArmond, M. (2019). *A middle way for states in the ESSA era: Lessons from Texas*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education.  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED600606>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “In 2017 the Texas Education Agency (TEA) launched the Systems of Great Schools (SGS) initiative. With a combination of incentives and capacity building, SGS attempts to transform how school districts approach school improvement. It calls on districts to manage school performance in new ways, expand access to school choice options, and take a dynamic approach to managing their supply of schools. As one of TEA's partners said, SGS is ‘basically changing the operating system of the district.’ Unlike other recent improvement efforts, SGS has set out not to change individual schools, but entire systems. The promise of this approach rests on the hope that districts, in turn, will reinvent themselves in ways that enable them to eliminate low-performing schools and foster higher-performing schools to take their place. The policy environment in Texas has created conditions that may help realize those hopes. The combination of reprieve from potent state accountability, incentives to partner with external organizations to improve low-performing schools, additional capacity support and grant opportunities, and a strong but flexible framework for locally designed accountability systems help make SGS more appealing, and more feasible, for districts. These policy tools are not new, but the coordinated use of them to create meaningful incentives for districts to voluntarily make system-level changes should be of interest to state leaders elsewhere. Texas’ initiative suggests several important lessons for other state leaders interested in adopting ‘middle-way’ programs in other state agencies, which we list in this report: (1) New programs don't necessarily require large new departments, but benefit from creative reorganization and realignment of existing programs and resources toward new strategic goals; (2) While it’s important to attend to the organizational and human side of change inside the state agency by finding ways to align with existing work and strategies, it’s also crucial to secure political support from the top and outside to

make and protect organizational and resource changes; and (3) Successful change efforts require clear communication about the shifts the state expects to make, what success looks like, and how they will support districts to get there. While sustained improvement in participating districts is not guaranteed with SGS, this account of TEA's early experience reimagining state-led change can inform efforts in other states in the post-No Child Left Behind era."

Tanenbaum, C., Boyle, A., Graczewski, C., James-Burdumy, S., Dragoset, L., & Hallgren, K. (2015). *State capacity to support school turnaround* (NCEE Evaluation Brief, NCEE 2015-4012). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED556118>

*From the ERIC abstract:* "One objective of the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) School Improvement Grants (SIG) and Race to the Top (RTT) program is to help states enhance their capacity to support the turnaround of low-performing schools. This capacity may be important, given how difficult it is to produce substantial and sustained achievement gains in low-performing schools. There is limited existing research on the extent to which states have the capacity to support school turnaround and are pursuing strategies to enhance that capacity. This brief documents states' capacity to support school turnaround as of spring 2012 and spring 2013. It examines capacity issues for all states and for those that reported both prioritizing turnaround and having significant gaps in expertise to support it. Key findings, based on interviews with administrators from 49 states and the District of Columbia, include the following: (1) More than 80 percent of states made turning around low-performing schools a high priority, but at least 50 percent found it very difficult to turn around low-performing schools; (2) 38 states (76 percent) reported significant gaps in expertise for supporting school turnaround in 2012, and that number increased to 40 (80 percent) in 2013; (3) More than 85 percent of states reported using strategies to enhance their capacity to support school turnaround, with the use of intermediaries decreasing over time and the use of organizational or administrative structures increasing over time; and (4) States that reported both prioritizing school turnaround and having significant gaps in expertise to support it were no more likely to report using intermediaries than other states but all 21 of these states reported having at least one organizational or administrative structure compared with 86 percent (25 of 29) of all other states. Appended are: (1) Race to the Top and School Improvement Grant Intervention Models as Described by the U.S. Department of Education SIG Guidance (2012); (2) State Interview Questions Used for Analyses in this Brief; and (3) Analysis of State Capacity to Support School Turnaround by RTT Status."

Weinstock, P., Gulemetova, M., Sanchez, R., Silver, D., & Barach, I. (2019). *National evaluation of the comprehensive centers program final report* (NCEE 2020-001). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED599103>

*From the ERIC abstract:* "Between 2012 and 2018, the U.S. Department of Education invested nearly \$350 million in 22 Comprehensive Technical Assistance (TA) Centers

operating across the nation. These Centers were charged with delivering TA that builds the capacity of state education agencies (SEAs) to support local educational agencies (LEAs) in improving student outcomes. Centers were given broad discretion in interpreting and enacting this mandate. This evaluation sought to address the open questions about how the Centers designed and implemented the TA, what challenges they encountered, and what outcomes they achieved. With thorough documentation of how this process played out, stakeholders will be in a better position to inform future program improvement. Key takeaways from the study include: (1) Overall, Centers and their TA recipients reported that the Centers' TA improved the capacity of SEAs to meet their goals; (2) Centers shared similar approaches to the design and implementation of their TA. Those Center practices perceived to be instrumental to building capacity included: engaging a broad array of stakeholders to provide input on policy; providing products and tools for SEA staff to use as they took greater ownership of policy design and implementation; imparting organizational practices and structures resilient to SEA turnover and policy shifts; and flexibly adapting TA in response to changing priorities and needs. (3) Centers and their TA recipients pointed to a few areas for program improvement, including clarification of the Centers' role and expected outcomes related to their work with LEAs, and further guidance for SEAs about how best to use the Centers. Overall, the evaluation found that Centers shared similarities in their approaches to the design and implementation of their work, and Centers and key TA recipients reported that the work generally helped build SEA capacity. These two projects are not necessarily representative of all Center projects, but were selected to bring the overall findings in this report more to life while also recognizing the unique combinations of needs, strategies, challenges, and outcomes that may make up each project. This evaluation's findings are consistent with the findings of the prior national evaluation of the Centers, published in 2011."

## Additional Organizations to Consult

Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP) – <http://www.bscpcenter.org/>

*From the website:* "The Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP Center) is one of seven national content centers supported under the U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive Centers program. The BSCP Center focuses on providing assistance to the 15 Regional Comprehensive Centers (RCCs) and state education agencies (SEAs) throughout the country to meet the daunting challenge of improving student performance with diminishing financial resources. The BSCP Center provides technical assistance to SEAs that builds their capacity to support local educational agencies (LEAs or districts) and schools, by providing high quality information, tools, and implementation support to help them shift from a 'compliance-based' to a 'performance-oriented' approach. The partners in the BSCP Center are Edvance Research, Inc., the Academic Development Institute, and the Edunomics Lab (Georgetown University)."

Center on Reinventing Public Education – <https://www.crpe.org/>

*From the website:* “The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is one of the nation’s leading sources for transformative, evidence-based ideas to improve education. To ensure all students are prepared for a rapidly changing future, we put forward rigorous research and policy analysis to help educators, policymakers, civic and community leaders, parents, and students themselves reimagine education systems and structures...

We make sense of complex trends and data, communicate new possibilities for system change, and provide guidance and thought leadership to support that change. We pride ourselves on our ability to see around the corner, reach across traditional party and sector lines, and craft solutions to problems few have anticipated.”

*REL Southwest Note:* This website offers several publications on Accountability and State Oversight at <https://www.crpe.org/publication/29>. The following are selected titles and links to publications that may be found useful to this request:

*The SEA of the Future: Maximizing Opportunities Under ESSA –*  
<https://www.crpe.org/publications/sea-future-maximizing-opportunities-under-essa>

*The SEA of the Future: Building Agency Capacity for Evidence-Based Policymaking –*  
<https://www.crpe.org/publications/sea-future-building-agency-capacity-evidence-based-policymaking>

*The SEA of the Future: Building the Productivity Infrastructure –*  
<https://www.crpe.org/publications/sea-future-building-productivity-infrastructure>

*The Capacity Challenge: What It Takes for State Education Agencies to Support School Improvement –*  
<https://www.crpe.org/publications/capacity-challenge-what-it-takes-state-education-agencies-support-school-improvement>

*Modernizing the State Education Agency: Different Paths Toward Performance Management –*  
<https://www.crpe.org/publications/modernizing-state-education-agency-different-paths-toward-performance-managment>

*Limited Capacity at the State Level: A Threat to Future School Improvement –*  
<https://www.crpe.org/publications/limited-capacity-state-level-threat-future-school-improvement>

## Methods

### *Keywords and Search Strings*

The following keywords and search strings were used to search the reference databases and other sources:

- building state education agency capacity
- building SEA capacity
- SEA capacity-building

### *Databases and Resources*

We searched [ERIC](#) for relevant, peer-reviewed research references. ERIC is a free online library of more than 1.8 million citations of education research sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Additionally, we searched the [What Works Clearinghouse](#).

### *Reference Search and Selection Criteria*

When we were searching and reviewing resources, we considered the following criteria:

- *Date of the publication:* References and resources published from 2005 to present, were included in the search and review.
- *Search priorities of reference sources:* Search priority is given to study reports, briefs, and other documents that are published and/or reviewed by IES and other federal or federally funded organizations, academic databases, including ERIC, EBSCO databases, JSTOR database, PsychInfo, PsychArticle, and Google Scholar.
- *Methodology:* The following methodological priorities/considerations were given in the review and selection of the references: (a) study types—randomized control trials, quasi-experiments, correlational studies, descriptive data analyses, literature reviews, mixed methods analyses, and so forth; (b) target population, samples (representativeness of the target population, sample size, volunteered or randomly selected, and so forth), study duration, and so forth; and (c) limitations, generalizability of the findings and conclusions, and so forth.

---

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by stakeholders in the Southwest Region (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest at AIR. This memorandum was prepared by REL Southwest under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-91990018C0002, administered by AIR. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.