Southwest School Improvement Research Partnership (SWSI)

Partnership goals

Texas is prioritizing increased state capacity to evaluate and continuously improve school and district practices, with the long-term goal of increasing the number of students attending high-performing schools. REL Southwest is working with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and other partners, such as the superintendent from Manor Independent School District (ISD) and the chief innovation officer from San Antonio ISD, to support the following goals:

▸ Examine the quality and fidelity with which districts and schools in Texas implement improvement initiatives.

▸ Examine the degree to which those initiatives improve district, school, and student outcomes.

Projects

In partnership with REL Southwest, members engage in a learning cycle that includes training, coaching, technical support, applied research, and engagement activities to support the goals of the SWSI partnership. This work reinforces member capacity to use research in solving high-leverage education issues. To learn more about our current projects, please visit https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southwest/partnerships/swsi.aspx.

Over the course of the partnership, REL Southwest staff and partnership members will support continuous improvement and refinement of the Texas System of Great Schools initiative, which is intended to improve low-performing schools and increase the number of students attending high-performing schools. Through partnership-driven research and technical support, REL Southwest will help determine how quality implementation of the System of Great Schools should be measured. REL Southwest will work with partners to outline the theory and assumptions underlying the System of Great Schools and will link outcomes with program processes and activities. REL Southwest will provide training on best practices for program implementation, review data to examine program implementation quality, and conduct research to examine school and student program outcomes.

Engaging our region

Engaging stakeholders is crucial to the REL mission of translating research into practice. Sharing research, learnings from training and coaching sessions, and insights from partnership members with stakeholders in the region is critical to Texas's goal of examining the quality and fidelity with which low-performing districts and schools implement improvement initiatives. For example, SWSI's engagement efforts include a blog series that provides both researcher and practitioner perspectives on school improvement.

Visit the REL Southwest website and follow us on Twitter to learn more about our work. You can also sign up for the REL Southwest Spotlight newsletter for regular updates and browse our upcoming events.

The Texas System of Great Schools (SGS): A framework for school improvement

Education leaders are looking to make district-level change by developing a system of effective, autonomous public schools. This is called a portfolio strategy, and it puts educators directly in charge of each school's direction, gives parents the power of choice, and helps district leaders focus on school-level success—all of which potentially can result in dramatically improved education outcomes.[1,2]

A consistent finding in school improvement studies is that stronger school leaders are needed. Principals with a strong vision can lead schools to dramatic improvement, but there aren't enough of these great leaders for every struggling school.[3]

The system within which a school operates matters. Any school improvement can be accelerated, hindered, or even completely stalled based on the efficacy of the system within which it operates.[4]

However, it's important that the parts of the system—schools, districts, and state—work together. State education agencies are shifting their role from compliance and monitoring to active involvement and support for school improvement. With feedback from local practitioners, research, and external partners such as REL Southwest, state education agencies have helped build capacity, knowledge, and skills while holding schools and districts accountable for the results.[5,6]

The need for alignment among states, districts, and schools highlights the complexity of school improvement. Different educational systems need to align efforts while also leaving room for individual school autonomy.

Having a clear vision and support from their state education agencies can help districts create the conditions necessary to improve schools and increase the percentage of students who attend top-rated schools.

References

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[3] Klute, M., Chersaro, T., & Apthorp, H. (2016). *Summary of research on the association between state interventions in chronically low-performing schools and student achievement* (REL 2016-138). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Central. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED565613

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[6] Klute, M. M., Welp, L. C., Yanoski, D. C., Mason, K. M., & Reale, M. L. (2016). *State policies for intervening in chronically low-performing schools: A 50-state scan* (REL 2016-131). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Central. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED566905