

The SEA of the Future: Leveraging Performance Management to Support School Improvement

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SEAs grew in response to new demands to administer federal programs (Timar, 1997) and, until relatively recently, had few resources to support school improvement (Murphy and Oujidani, 2011). As a testament to this evolution, federal dollars still fund nearly half of the positions in the SEA. In the 1990s SEAs began to take a more direct role in the school improvement process. Through standards-based reforms, including the use of data, incentives, and other supports, SEAs bolstered the will and capacity of districts and schools to improve student achievement. (See for example, J.L. David's (1994) work on transforming SEAs.) Today, SEAs across the country are poised to take these reforms to the next level with deeper and more sweeping changes.

State education agencies (SEAs) are at an historic crossroads. Federal reform efforts, including the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top grant initiative (U.S. Department of Education, 2013) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act's flexibility program (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), have shifted attention toward the nation's lowest-performing schools and districts. At the same time, state legislatures, governors, advocacy groups, and citizens are calling on SEAs to more forcefully advance the mission of school improvement. In order to meet these new demands, SEAs will need to restructure their work along several fronts, including providing direct support to schools and districts, raising standards and expectations, addressing weaknesses in the teacher and principal labor market, and strengthening connections between early childhood education, K-12, higher education, and careers. They will need to do these things at a time of constrained resources.

In this inaugural essay of The SEA of the Future publication series, from the Building State Capacity and Productivity Center, we describe how the tools of performance management can take SEAs from where they are today to where they need to be. The basic structure of a performance management system is simple:

- Set high performance standards and goals.
- Systematically assess performance and evaluate progress.
- Improve or adapt.

Putting these processes into practice will not be easy. SEAs will have to not just assess performance and incentivize improvement, but also know when their own actions are impeding progress and require evaluation. They will have to assume a more active role in searching for and fostering new ideas, tools, and organizations that can deliver improved performance, value, or both, as well as abandon those approaches or providers that outlived their usefulness. SEAs will no doubt continue to monitor compliance with regulations, as they have traditionally done, but they will need to ensure that actions in the name of compliance work for, not against, performance objectives.

Reimagining the SEA

Performance management is a strategic approach to improvement in which the entire organization shares the same set of objectives. However, the organization assumes that these objectives can be met by a variety of approaches. The performance manager's role is to constantly evaluate the program mix and efficacy

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of various approaches scaling up the most effective, mobilizing existing support systems or brokering new supports to help the most promising, and phasing out weak, unsuccessful approaches.¹ An organization using performance management considers unique circumstances and evidence of improvement, as well as absolute performance levels. But in dealing with lower performers it is always driven by the question, “is a different approach likely to lead to better results?” In order to leverage the tools of performance management to support school improvement, SEAs will need to reconceive their diverse and sometimes diffuse activities as a collective enterprise in service of shared strategic objectives. Doing so is likely to require SEAs to draw upon new people, expertise, and organizational capacities. Translating performance management into the context of the SEA will result in:

- Goal-oriented program administration that aligns compliance and school improvement objectives.
- Standards, assessment, and accountability systems that link achievement and financial outcomes.
- Strategies to bolster district capacity to improve weak schools and programs.
- Capacity and will to terminate ineffective programs and intervene directly in persistently low-achieving schools.
- System that facilitates the development, evaluation, and dissemination of new tools and models to support innovation in educational practice.

These areas of work are not new to SEAs, but they often lack the integration that enables the component parts to work together toward similar ends. Organizational silos, a compliance orientation, and routines that emphasize enforcing rules over improving outcomes limit SEAs’ effectiveness and reduce their ability to improve learning outcomes for students.

The key changes that need to take place across programmatic areas as SEAs shift toward performance management are shown in Table 1. Traditionally, SEAs focused on federal program administration and compliance monitoring. Financial assessments of programs (services, districts, schools) beyond basic audits were rarely completed. Standardization, via rules and mandates, was deemed the most effective approach toward improving student outcomes. While this work was well-intentioned, it often led to conflicts between stated goals and strategies, as well as an inefficient allocation of resources.²

¹ For a review of how performance management strategies have evolved in public sector organizations, see Heinrich (2003).

² See Murphy and Oujidani (2011) for an accounting of SEA expenditures. For a consideration of how state policies shape opportunities for improvement, see Center for American Progress, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and Hess, F.M. (2009).

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Table 1. Reimagining the SEA's Work

Function	The Old SEA	The New SEA
Program administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manages programs to ensure state and district spending complies with state and federal regulations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manages programs to align compliance and improvement mandates and ensure state and district spending has maximal impact
Standards, assessment, accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops performance benchmarks Establishes high-quality longitudinal data systems for federal reporting Reports results to parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops cost and performance benchmarks Establishes high-quality longitudinal data systems and measurement tools for cost-effectiveness analysis Compares results across programs, districts, and schools
School and district support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relies on districts for school turnaround Helps districts and schools with federal reporting requirements Provides uniform systems of support that lack customization Is accountable to governors, legislators, and voters for program implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brokers support for school and district staff according to need Helps districts and schools leverage federal, state, and private resources Increases flexibility to pursue differentiated approaches to school improvement Is accountable to districts for support and state for productive use of resources
Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers support in cases of persistent performance failures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phases out programs and schools that persistently fail to achieve performance targets and intervenes to provide better programs and options for families
Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduces district innovation by imposing one-size-fits-all requirements for schools Leaves it to districts to support local innovation in curriculum, teaching, and educational delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fosters district innovation by providing regulatory and financial flexibility to develop new programs and school models Incentivizes, evaluates, and disseminates local innovation in curriculum, teaching, and educational delivery

Integrating the tools of performance management changes the nature of an SEA's work. The new SEA assesses productivity—the balance between performance and cost—of services, schools, and districts and uses these assessments to determine which will continue, which will be phased out, and which need improvement. The new SEA brokers differentiated support for districts and schools and minimizes the regulatory burden, so school and district leaders can implement the most promising changes. The new SEA has a clear and transparent process for stepping in with a more direct hand in cases of persistent failure by identifying

new, more effective service providers and providing options for families attending persistently low performing schools. And, the new SEA actively cultivates an environment of discovery and innovation, crafting policies that allow for the development, evaluation, and dissemination of new and more effective tools and practices.

Why Performance Management?

A performance management system can help the SEA become more intentional about what it does and does not do, how work is done, and when to change course. Performance management does not define goals or identify specific strategies, but it puts in place systems that enable learning and adaptation to drive improvement and the achievement of goals (Garvin, 1999). In organizations working toward multiple objectives, as is the case with SEAs, performance management supports the alignment of work so as to better advance strategic goals.

Performance management is often equated with assessment and reporting. But the continuous improvement promised by performance management can only be achieved if performance data are used to diagnose problems (and opportunities), as well as to make hard choices about whether existing investments are worth continuing, expanding, or terminating altogether.³

Performance management systems are built with the understanding that the people closest to a problem are best positioned to solve it and that they need flexibility to seek alternative solutions.⁴ The biggest potential gains in productivity and performance will sometimes require disruptive changes, and everyone in the system must be able to explore and share innovation.⁵

Importantly, performance management is not the same as accountability, though holding agents responsible for outcomes is one component of a performance management system. Performance management is not simply about devolution, though autonomy enables learning and adaptation.

Starting the Conversation: The Essays and Authors of The SEA of the Future

Given the SEA's pivotal position and existing capacities, The SEA of the Future series asks how it can more effectively and efficiently achieve its objectives and advance the mission of school improvement. We will address this question in a variety of ways over the course of the next 10 issues of this semi-annual publication, such as:

³ See Duck (1993).

⁴ This conforms with the notion of “steer, not row” advanced in Osborne & Gaebler (1992). More generally, managerial discretion is often highlighted as a key principle of making performance management work toward organizational objectives (Moynihan, 2006)

⁵ For a business analogue see Kim & Mauborgne (2005)

- Exploring productivity—what it is and how to measure it.
- Use of federal resources—including how to make the most of them.
- Strategies to support school improvement—especially how best to utilize internal capacity while leveraging external partners.

These, and many other important topics, will be addressed. The specific topics we consider will be driven in part from what states say they are struggling with, as well as what states at the leading edge of this work are already doing.

This inaugural edition of the series examines how SEAs can better manage their relationships with districts and schools, identifies strategies for aligning resources with goals, and considers how outsiders—governors, legislators, philanthropies and reform advocates—can support the transition. This examination will be done in three essays.

Building a Better System of Support

In this essay, Sam Redding, Ed.D., Director of the Academic Development Institute, considers how SEAs can better align and manage components of their state system of support for schools and districts by strategically mobilizing different tools for different types of problems, including school districts in the process of school improvement, and regularly assessing their own systems to ensure that they are effective.

Doing More with Less: Three Strategies to Improve Resource Alignment

In this essay, Patrick Murphy, Ph.D., and Ashley Jochim, Ph.D., of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, consider the challenges of taking on new tasks in the current resource-constrained environment. They offer three strategies for improving resource alignment in the SEA: 1) increasing resource transparency, 2) searching for flexibility within existing resource allocations, and 3) developing a talent strategy to better utilize existing staff positions.

Where to Start? What Governors, Legislators, and Others Can Do

In this essay, Paul Hill, Ph.D., of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, considers how other state actors can support an SEA's transition toward performance management. He suggests how governors and legislators can advance reform agendas that support the SEA's new work and the role of advocacy groups and philanthropies in expanding their work from the more traditional boundaries of districts to working more directly with SEAs in new areas.

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