

OFFICE OF SCHOOL PERFORMANCE
Summary of State Board of Education Agenda Items
May 15-16, 2014

OFFICE OF SCHOOL RECOVERY

05. Report on the Mass Insight State Development Network School Turnaround Diagnostic review process

No Action: Discussion only

Back-up material attached

Mass Insight State Development Network School Turnaround Diagnostic: Mississippi

Purpose: The purpose of this brief report is to provide an overview of the findings from Mass Insight Education's State Development Network (SDN) diagnostic review of the Mississippi Department of Education's (MDE's) work on school turnaround. The diagnostic process is driven by the SDN framework for school turnaround; it is designed to explore and gauge the state's effectiveness and ability to drive and support turnaround efforts statewide through the seven core components of a comprehensive state-level strategy, structure, and process. The accompanying chart provides a summary of findings based on the SDN framework components and identifies potential high leverage areas for action. The SDN will serve as a professional learning community for the state as it identifies its priorities and develops an action plan to enhance work on school turnaround.

Diagnostic Process: The evidence for this analysis was collected from a series of stakeholder interviews conducted by Mass Insight Education on a state site visit on April 1 and 2, 2014. Interviewees included representatives from the Mississippi Department of Education and school and district leadership. In addition to the interviews, Mass Insight Education collected relevant data and documents to inform the diagnostic process.

How to Read this Report: The chart below organizes the diagnostic findings across each of the seven components of the SDN framework for school turnaround. The summary analysis for each component provides additional detail on specific sub-elements of each component. The chart also displays qualitative ratings of the state's current status in addressing the elements of each component. Component elements can receive a rating of *Needs Improvement (NI)*, *Developing (D)*, or *Proficient (P)* based on the preponderance of evidence. Overall component ratings are also provided at the end of each section. The findings are not meant to suggest that the state must address each of these areas immediately, but rather provide an overall framework and assist in identifying priorities and high leverage areas that may be appropriate to address first. The final section of the report describes four areas that could, with some attention, positively impact MDE's work with chronically low-performing schools and districts.

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1. Policy: Cultivate a policy environment, governance structure, and operational and staffing flexibility necessary for dramatic school turnaround.		
Guiding Questions	Evidence & Analysis	Summary
a. Does state law and SEA policy, regulations, and practice provide LEAs with the school-level operational and staffing flexibility required for turnaround?	Mississippi state law and MDE policy and regulations provide schools and districts with the operational and staffing flexibility necessary for turnaround. Of the districts interviewed in this diagnostic, both had success in removing inadequate teachers and extending learning time. Both districts were also able to use financial incentives and differentiated compensation to attract educators to hard-to-staff schools.	P
b. Do SEA and other state-level leaders provide public support and political cover for dramatic school turnaround?	While there is no consistent process or procedure for providing public support from the Department, we heard two instances in which the Department's actions provided political cover for dramatic school turnaround: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In one district where there was Board resistance to making progress toward a successful turnaround, MDE turnaround leaders attended Board and community meetings, speaking in favor of the decisions that district and school leadership needed to make. The district superintendent reported that the Department's involvement made a substantial difference. In the other district, school and district leadership reported using the need for compliance with the state's MS SOARS indicators as a justification for taking specific actions that were not popular with some stakeholders. 	P
c. Does the SEA have the authority and resources to take responsibility for turning around low-performing schools, authorize charter schools and control the allocation of innovation funds to build capacity in chronically low-performing schools where district efforts have failed?	MDE has the authority and resources to appoint conservators to take over districts with chronically low-performing schools. The Department regularly uses conservatorship, and districts take the threat very seriously. The State Board policy states that the district may lose accreditation through this process. <p>In addition, for districts with a single failing school that is either failing to improve and/or failing to implement the improvement plan with fidelity, the State Board recently began to allow MDE to enter into a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with the district that reduces student access to extracurricular activities and allows students to transfer to another school without district permission. Both actions provide MDE with substantial leverage over the school and district.</p> <p>Recent legislation created a state-wide charter authorizer. At some point in the future, the new authorizer could place charters in failed turnaround schools.</p>	P
OVERALL RATING	Mississippi state law and policy, as well as MDE regulations, provide schools and districts with the operational and staffing flexibility required for school turnaround. In the districts we visited, where districts needed political support for turnaround from the Department, they were provided timely and helpful assistance. Finally, MDE regularly uses its authority to take over schools or districts that fail to improve.	P

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2. Strategy: Commit to a comprehensive, cohesive, agency-wide vision, mission, and set of aligned activities to turn around the state's lowest performing schools.		
Guiding Questions	Evidence & Analysis	Summary
a. Does the SEA have a clear school turnaround theory of action , i.e., description of the elements of a turnaround and the expected short- and long-term outcomes?	<p>The MDE turnaround theory of action calls for the Department to set expectations for performance and implementation, regularly monitor progress, and hold districts accountable for making progress. As a result, MDE expects Priority Schools to improve to at least the C performance level. For schools with SIG grants, MDE requires the use of one or more external partners. MDE also encourages cross-school learning through a state-sponsored meeting of all SIG schools focused on sharing best practices and lessons learned among turnaround schools.</p> <p>MDE's work with Priority Schools relies on the MS SOARS measures which signal what's most important. MDE implementation specialists help schools track their progress using the measures.</p>	P
b. Is there an SEA-wide commitment to and coordination of a comprehensive, cohesive set of SEA activities to support turnaround?	<p>The two schools and districts in our review both reported using the implementation specialists and the School Recovery Office staff as "brokers" for getting access to other MDE resources and serving as a "switchboard" helping Priority Schools and their districts to get the attention and information they needed in a timely manner.</p>	P
c. How do the actions of the SEA lead to changes in instructional practice in turnaround schools? What is the system for moving change from SEA [to region] to district to school to classroom?	<p>The Department relies on schools to use MS SOARS to align their improvement efforts with the greatest need and implementation specialists help schools monitor progress and identify needs. For schools with SIG grants, external partners provide additional expertise and professional development to address identified instructional challenges. MDE does not mandate a particular approach to instructional practice but instead identifies places where improvements are necessary, documents the needs in the MS SOARS system, and then tracks the school's and district's progress in addressing the needs.</p>	D
d. How does the SEA determine root causes of school under-performance and match appropriate state and/or external supports?	<p>MDE does not work directly with schools to identify root causes of low performance; however schools are required to conduct a self-analysis. MDE does not require the use of a particular diagnostic system or service. Staff in the schools we visited reported that the MS SOARS data provided useful data to inform their improvement efforts.</p>	D
e. What is the nature of the school improvement plan ?	<p>There is no MDE prescribed school improvement planning process. Instead, schools are expected to reach "full implementation" level on MS SOARS by successfully completing the 48 indicators of proven best practice.</p>	P

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f. How is the SEA learning from both school turnaround successes and failures?	MDE staff reported that regular visits to schools by implementation specialists and data from MS SOARS provides rich information about what's working and what's not.	P
OVERALL RATING	MDE has a clear theory of action for school turnaround. The Department requires Priority Schools to use the MS SOARS program to identify needs and track progress and monitors school progress with regular visits by MDE implementation specialists. The state does not prescribe specific diagnostic or planning processes. For schools with SIG grants, MDE requires the use of external consultants to help with implementation of improvement plans. MDE uses the data collected in MS SOARS and from implementation specialist visits to learn what's working and to facilitate sharing of lessons learned across schools and districts.	P
3. Organizational Structure: Design a structure that empowers a unit of state government with the capacity to turn around schools.		
Guiding Questions	Evidence & Analysis	Summary
a. Are respective SEA and district roles and responsibilities for school turnaround clearly understood within the SEA and in school districts?	The respective roles of MDE and school and district staff are clearly understood. The school and district staff we spoke with understood that MDE provides both accountability and support primarily through MS SOARS and the work of the implementation specialists.	P
b. Does the SEA provide resources and incentives for the development of turnaround partners, both external Lead Partners and internal district turnaround offices, to support districts and schools with expertise and capacity?	MDE mandates the use of external partners in all SIG schools. The roles of the partners vary but they generally do not meet the Mass Insight definition of a Lead Partner (on-site with responsibility for school performance). However in the schools we visited the principals reported that the consultants provide valuable services. MDE does not screen or pre-approve partners, but instead relies on the schools and districts to put out an RFP and evaluate partners on their own. MDE staff reported that most of the partners are retired local educators. The state relies entirely on the districts to identify, screen, and evaluate the quality and service of the partners.	D
OVERALL RATING	MDE staff and school and district leaders understand the roles and responsibilities of the state versus the school. Mississippi requires the use of external partners in schools with SIG grants, but does not define their role in turnaround. Schools and districts are responsible for identifying and evaluating their external partners. The quality of the partners being used in turnaround schools is unclear.	D/P

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4. Communications: Design a coherent agency- wide turnaround message and communicate it consistently.		
Guiding Questions	Evidence & Analysis	Summary
a. Do school and district leaders understand the SEA turnaround strategy?	School and district leaders understand and are able to explain MDE's turnaround strategy.	P
b. Has the SEA effectively communicated with and engaged parents and community stakeholders about school turnaround?	While MDE does not communicate directly with school communities, parent and community communication is a MS SOARS indicator which means that schools need to include it in their turnaround activities. In addition, in cases where community stakeholders have been resistant to key elements of a turnaround plan, MDE representatives have provided support at community and Board meetings. MDE's explicit threat of conservatorship to a local school Board has helped create the sense of urgency in the community needed to make the tough decisions required for turnaround.	P
c. Does the SEA have an effective system for sharing turnaround lessons learned across schools and districts? Does the SEA support cross-district professional learning communities to build the capacity of educators in turnaround schools?	MDE sponsors a summer SIG conference which brings together the SIG schools and highlights problems of practice and showcases success stories from various schools. The MDE team has also facilitated school visits across the state, and makes connections to encourage cross-school learning.	P
OVERALL RATING	There is a shared understanding at the school- and district-level of MDE's turnaround strategy. One indicator in the MS SOARS system requires communication with parents and the local community. MDE effectively facilitates cross-district sharing and makes useful connections among schools across the state.	P
5. Resources: Focus time, energy, and funds where they are most needed and will have the greatest impact.		
Guiding Questions	Evidence & Analysis	Summary
a. Does the SEA allocate turnaround resources based on district and school commitment and capacity to reach ambitious performance goals?	MDE allocated SIG funding based on the proposed grant plans, however the amount of funding was relatively consistent across schools regardless of school size. Additional funding through enhancement funds allowed MDE to allocate grants based on per-pupil funding to balance out SIG funding based on data such as enrollment and availability of leftover funding from previous grants. In the next round of grants, MDE plans to make smaller grants. Schools that have failed to implement their plans have their grants terminated.	D

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<p>b. Does the SEA provide LEAs and schools with useful technical assistance to support turnaround?</p>	<p>MDE provides Priority and SIG schools with implementation specialists, who provide both monitoring and technical assistance. SIG schools are required to contract with external partners for technical assistance.</p> <p>Other than the implementation specialists, MDE does not provide any consistent assistance across all turnaround schools. The school and district leaders we interviewed reported that anytime they ask the Office of School Recovery for specific agency expertise or resources, they get what they need.</p>	<p>D</p>
<p>c. Does every turnaround school establish and regularly report to stakeholders on a limited number of performance targets that include measures of both fidelity of implementation and student outcomes?</p>	<p>MDE does not require SIG schools to regularly report to stakeholders on performance targets. One MS SOARS indicator requires communication on progress to parents and the community, but is not explicit around the content of this communication. One school reported a partnership with the local newspaper to keep the public abreast of progress, including data.</p>	<p>D</p>
<p>d. Does the SEA provide incentives to encourage turnaround in community-based clusters of schools?</p>	<p>Most of the districts that have a school in turnaround are single high school districts, so MDE has not explored incentives to encourage community-based clusters of turnaround. Only one district involved in turnaround has more than one high school.</p>	<p>N/A</p>
<p>OVERALL RATING</p>	<p>MDE allocates SIG funding based on district capacity and commitment to the school improvement plan, and has removed SIG funding for failure to implement the school plan. MDE does not provide subject matter technical assistance to turnaround schools but does provide support with improvement plan implementation through the implementation specialists. MDE does not require SIG schools to report specifically on performance measures to the community, although it does require regular communication about turnaround with the community.</p>	<p>D</p>
<p>6. Accountability: Develop an accountability system that sets clear standards and performance targets for schools, LEAs and the SEA, monitors and reports on progress, and incentivizes dramatic reform.</p>		
<p>Guiding Questions</p>	<p>Evidence & Analysis</p>	<p>Summary</p>
<p>a. Does the SEA have a clear and transparent process and criteria for identifying schools in need of turnaround?</p>	<p>Schools are rated on the QDI (quality of distribution index) numerical scale, which in the past maxed out at 300 and now extends to 700 for schools without a 12th grade, and 1,000 for schools with a 12th grade. The new accountability system assigns a letter grade (A-F) to the schools.</p> <p>The school and district leaders we interviewed said that they understood the accountability system.</p>	<p>P</p>

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<p>b. Does the SEA have an accountability system that sets clear expectations, monitors progress, and provides incentives for turnaround?</p>	<p>Schools are assigned a letter grade based on performance. Improvement plan implementation is monitored through the MS SOARS system, with support from the implementation specialists at both SIG and non-SIG Priority Schools. MDE's authority to withdraw accreditation or appoint a conservator serves as a powerful incentive for turnaround.</p>	<p>P</p>
<p>c. Are there substantial consequences for both failure to implement improvement plans with fidelity and failure to improve student outcomes?</p>	<p>The consequences for failure to improve student outcomes or to implement improvement plans with fidelity are that a failure to improve results at a single school can permit MDE to place an entire district into conservatorship, which removes the superintendent and local Board and bars them from working in the district in the future. MDE can also withdraw accreditation from a district, which has implications for student participation in extracurricular activities and provides students with the right to transfer to other districts.</p>	<p>P</p>
<p>OVERALL RATING</p>	<p>MDE has a clear and transparent process and set of criteria for identifying schools in need of turnaround. MDE sets expectations for Priority Schools through MS SOARS and monitors progress using implementation specialists. The consequences for failure to improve or implement a plan with fidelity include loss of accreditation for a district or appointment of a conservator for a district.</p>	<p>P</p>
<p>7. Human Capital: Invest in highly effective teachers and leaders to drive turnaround at the district and school levels.</p>		
<p>Guiding Questions</p>	<p>Evidence & Analysis</p>	<p>Summary</p>
<p>a. Do state certification and licensing policies support efforts to place highly effective teachers and school leaders in turnaround schools?</p>	<p>There is no evidence that state educator certification and licensing policies interfere with schools' ability to place highly effective teachers and school leaders in turnaround schools. However, recruiting and retaining strong teachers for turnaround schools is a challenge. While the state provides incentives to encourage teachers to work in high-need schools, we did not hear of any efforts directly aimed at improving the quality of the pool of teachers in low-performing schools.</p>	<p>D</p>
<p>b. Does the SEA have effective partnerships with external organizations to provide high quality teachers and school leaders for turnaround schools?</p>	<p>The state has an effective partnership with Teach For America that is limited mainly to the Delta region of the state. School and district leaders in Hollandale reported that the TFA teachers there are making a substantial difference in the school. There are no other state-sponsored partnerships to strengthen the talent pool for high need schools. The University of Mississippi has a school leadership program but it does not focus on turnaround.</p>	<p>D</p>

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<p>c. Are evaluation systems being used to ensure that students in turnaround schools have the best educators available?</p>	<p>While some Priority Schools are piloting the new state MSTAR evaluation system, it is not yet having an impact on personnel decisions.</p>	<p>D</p>
<p>d. Does the SEA encourage and support the use of differentiated compensation to encourage effective educators to work in turnaround schools?</p>	<p>Although there is a statewide teacher salary schedule, districts are able to supplement the state-provided salary with local funds. Since there is no collective bargaining, districts can unilaterally decide to differentiate compensation to encourage strong teachers to work in high need schools. In spite of this flexibility, we did not hear about any successful efforts to bring strong teachers to turnaround schools.</p>	<p>D/P</p>
<p>e. Does the SEA have a strategy to recruit and develop district- and school-level turnaround leadership?</p>	<p>There is no strategy to recruit or develop district- and school-level turnaround leadership.</p>	<p>NI</p>
<p>OVERALL RATING</p>	<p>State licensing and certification policies do not stand in the way of schools' efforts to hire and place effective teachers in turnaround schools. However, there is a lack of a pool or clear statewide strategy for recruiting and developing said teachers, principals, or superintendents, though the partnership with Teach For America in the Delta is effective. Districts are able to differentiate compensation and provide incentives to encourage highly effective educators to work in or lead turnaround schools, but there is no evidence that it's being done successfully.</p>	<p>D</p>

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Recommendations

The SDN will work to support Mississippi as it identifies priorities and develops an action plan that will guide its work over the coming months. These action areas are presented only as suggestions for consideration, as the state must determine how to proceed.

1. **Uniform processes for external partners.** The current system for external partners relies on the districts to recruit, evaluate, and partner with external organizations. There is likely a great deal of inconsistency in the process used by districts and school leadership in choosing partners. MDE should consider providing districts with additional help selecting external partners. The help could include pre-qualifying a pool of partners, facilitating cross-district sharing of data on partner performance, or providing technical assistance in RFP development and evaluation to schools.
2. **Additional support to Priority Schools without SIG grants.** MDE should consider providing non-SIG Priority Schools with the same level of support from implementation specialists as provided to Priority Schools with SIG grants. Based on the effectiveness of the routines and systems in place for Priority SIG schools, it would likely prove helpful to provide equal support to the Priority non-SIG schools. For a relatively small cost, the state could realize substantial benefits.
3. **Teacher and school leader development, recruitment, and retention.** Based on location and relatively low salary levels, Mississippi districts have a difficult time staffing Priority Schools with effective turnaround teachers and leaders. The lack of collective bargaining provides Mississippi districts with unusual flexibility regarding compensation. Although MDE and districts have programs that may make a marginal difference in teacher choice, we heard of no programs robust enough to attract great teachers to high need schools. MDE should consider developing model incentive programs that districts can adopt and test. MDE could also work with the state's universities and external partners to build on TFA's success in the Delta to create or tailor an existing program focused on turnaround school instruction and leadership.
4. **Raise the bar for student success to include college readiness and success.** While the schools interviewed in this diagnostic process had seen great gains, the number of students from those districts enrolling in college is very low. MDE should consider including measures of college readiness and college success in its accountability system and in goals for Focus and Priority Schools. By including college success in the state's performance measures, MDE would provide support for school and district efforts to emphasize the importance of college readiness with students and parents.