



Connecticut

Align a rigorous external evaluation and accountability system with an approved menu of professional development resources and other supports, and targeted districts will be able to improve their organization systems that most improve instruction.

N.B. Data collection for this SEA took place between July 2007 and April 2008.

CONTEXT

Connecticut is a diverse state, small in size, with small historic towns and urban centers. Its population of approximately 3.5 million people includes some of the richest and poorest people in the country, which represents a challenge for the state education system. The second largest of the New England states, Connecticut serves 575,000 students, of whom 67% are White, 15% Hispanic, and nearly 14% Black. Although it has been recognized for having high academic achievement scores and a strong education system, Connecticut also has “one of the largest achievement gaps in the nation,” according to state education officials (Rotunno, 2007). Resolving this problem is a major priority for the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE).

The year 2007 brought many changes to Connecticut’s education system. A new commissioner was appointed in May 2007, and school reform legislation was passed in June 2007 (CSDE, 2007a). At the time of this project, Connecticut was in the midst of major changes in the organization of the CSDE and its relationship to school districts and schools. The Bureau of School and District Improvement and the Bureau of Accountability, Compliance, and Monitoring were created to be jointly responsible for delivering “systematic and systemic” support to improve schools and districts. These bureaus work with all districts (with priority given to 12 targeted districts that are in corrective action) to provide data on student and district outcomes, processes to analyze data, methods of developing improvement activities, and training through the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI) (CSDE, 2007b).

The Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) is administered annually to all public school students in Grades 3–8 to assess mathematics, reading, and writing skills (CSDE, n.d.a). The Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) is given to 10th-graders and is a natural extension of the CMT (CSDE, n.d.b). The CAPT assesses and reports on student performance in four areas: mathematics, reading across the disciplines, writing across the disciplines, and science. Although traditional assessments typically measure what students know, the CAPT in particular also aims to measure whether students can apply what they know, for example, through performance tasks.

An Act Implementing the Provisions of the Budget Concerning Education, effective July 2007, gives the CSDE more authority over and accountability for low-performing schools and districts. When a school or district is identified as requiring corrective action (after 4 years of missing AYP), it “shall be designated and listed as a low-achieving school or school district and shall be subject to intensified supervision and direction by the State Board of Education” (CSDE, 2007b, Sec. 32. Section 10-223e).

Selection Criteria

Connecticut’s state accountability plan outlining how the state holds schools and districts accountable was filed with the U.S. Department of Education in June 2006 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a). Table CT-1 outlines the ways in which the state’s plan addresses the 10 principles required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). To determine whether schools have made AYP, the state uses reading and mathematics scores and a 95% participation rate. Connecticut also uses writing test results as an additional academic indicator for elementary and middle schools. Schools are expected to have 70% of elementary/middle school students scoring Basic or above. At the high school level, the state has established a criterion of a graduation rate of 70% or improvement over the previous year.

Table CT-1. Connecticut AYP Measures

NCLB AYP Determination Requirement	Connecticut’s Approach
Assessment	CMT/CAPT
Proficiency Target	Percent Proficient
Starting Point	20th Percentile
Participation	95%
Additional Measure	Writing/Graduation Rate
Additional Provisions	
Minimum Number for Subgroups	
Accountability/Performance	20
Participation	40
Confidence Intervals	75%
Other	No

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2007.

Schools either make or do not make AYP according to the requirements above. In accordance with NCLB, schools that do not make AYP for 2 consecutive years are designated as in need of improvement (INI). Table CT-2 outlines the number and percentage of low-performing schools in Connecticut, as well as the number of years they have been designated as such.

Table CT-2. Connecticut Low-Performing Schools, Academic Year 2007–2008

No. of Schools in State	No. (%) of Schools Designated as Low-Performing	Number of Years Designated								
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Exiting
1,111	247 (22%)	83	37	31	85	3	2	6	-	7

Note: Years Designated corresponds to previously noted NCLB designations accordingly: Year 1 = INI (year 1), Year 2 = INI (year 2), Year 3 = Corrective Action, Year 4 = Restructuring (year 1), Year 5 = Restructuring (year 2), Year 6 = Restructuring (year 3), Year 7 = Restructuring (year 4), Year 8 = Restructuring (year 5).

Source: Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007

Connecticut identifies a district as INI when it misses making AYP in the same subject and in all grade spans for 2 consecutive years. Table CT-3 outlines the number and percentage of low-performing districts in Connecticut, as well as the number of years they have been designated as such.

Table CT-3. Connecticut Low-Performing Districts, Academic Year 2007–2008

No. of Districts in State	No. (%) of Districts Designated as Low-Performing	Number of Years Designated								
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Exiting
171	29 (17%)	2	0	9	18	-	-	-	-	1

Note: Years Designated corresponds to previously noted NCLB designations accordingly: Year 1 = INI (year 1), Year 2 = INI (year 2), Year 3 = Corrective Action, Year 4 = Restructuring (year 1), Year 5 = Restructuring (year 2), Year 6 = Restructuring (year 3), Year 7 = Restructuring (year 4), Year 8 = Restructuring (year 5).

Source: Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007c

Note: The following sections of this profile are grounded in data gathered from state education agency (SEA) interviews and a focus group, conducted between July and November 2007. The SEA website, official SEA policies and administrative policies,

legislation, court cases, and other official documents supplemented the interviews and focus groups.

Interventions with Low-Performing Schools and Districts

Table CT-4. Connecticut Interventions with Low-Performing Districts

Policies	An Act Implementing the Provisions of the Budget Concerning Education, effective July 2007, gives the CSDE more authority and accountability over low-performing schools and districts.
Primary Focus of Intervention	CSDE works through districts to support schools. Twelve targeted districts have not made AYP in the aggregate for 3 or more years in a row at the whole district level.
Services	
Site-Specific	An outside district/school assessment is required. A CSDE team provides bimonthly or more frequent assistance, which includes the services listed below (e.g., plan development and monitoring, coordinating professional development, phone and on-site consultation). External advisors assist superintendents.
Planning Assistance	A CSDE team helps develop, revise, and monitor district improvement plans for the 12 districts.
Work with Data	Training in Common Formative Assessment, Data-Driven Decision-Making, and Making Standards Work
Professional Development	A Professional Development Menu is provided, from which districts can request offerings; requests are negotiated with state team. In addition to the above data workshops, the menu includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • executive coaching for principals and leadership teams • effective teaching strategies • standards-based curriculum
Convening Schools/Districts	CSDE can require districts and schools to do certain things (e.g., specific kinds of professional development) and has the authority to move staff.
Sanctions	Being designated INI is considered a sanction by local educators. State legislation gives additional authority to the CSDE to direct the work of low-performing districts.
Monitoring	CSDE teams meet regularly with district teams to monitor implementation of the district improvement plan.
Other	Schools with high performance or significant improvement can be designated Vanguard Schools and given additional funding to share evidence-based practices.

Rationale for Intervention

The Director of the then newly organized Bureau of School and District Improvement noted, “The new commissioner is focused on accountability and school improvement . . . and on building an accountability model with the new state legislation for schools and districts” (interview, September 10, 2007). Her partner, the Director of the Bureau of Accountability, Compliance, and Monitoring, added, “Our concern is that the public sees this as an intervention for low-performing schools. We want to establish an accountability model that touches all districts and schools, with tiers of intervention and support” (interview, September 10, 2007). The two bureau directors have worked closely to connect accountability with support.

Preconditions

Connecticut focuses on the school district as the agent responsible for its schools. The CSDE has an explicit “theory of action,” developed collaboratively by the two lead bureau chiefs with staff/consultant input. It states, “If we assist a school district in strengthening and aligning its organizational systems over time, particularly those closest to the instructional core at the school level, then student learning will incrementally and notably improve, with reasonable probability that such improvement will be sustained” (CSDE, n.d.c).

When a district enters corrective action status, the district must develop and submit a district improvement plan, and the state is committed to provide supports for its implementation. If a district and its schools do not improve, the Connecticut legislature has given CSDE the authority to provide “intensive assistance” to low-performing schools and districts and can require the district to do certain things. A cross-department team, with school improvement and accountability staff, serves as a liaison with each of the 12 lowest performing districts. Jointly, two lead liaisons act as gatekeepers and monitors for their districts during the course of the year, meeting at least monthly with a district team to make sure districts are held accountable to their district improvement plans and use services and resources that are available to them.

Strategies

The CSDE intervention begins with a 5-day outside assessment of the district’s capacity to support schools in supporting student learning. The assessment uses the Cambridge Education process (developed in London, England) and consultants to lead a district visitation team that includes department staff. The team assesses the district’s support of instruction, fiscal responsibility (how funds are used to support improvement), and district improvement plan, as well as the central office’s organizational structure as a vehicle for implementing its school improvement plans. The department wants an objective assessment of the capacity and needs of a district, independent from the state and the district, that is more detailed than compliance monitoring. The focus is on the question, “What supports are in the central office to provide assistance to schools?” The assessment is intended to influence the development of a district improvement plan that is

more aligned with actual needs. State staff explained, “Before, districts developed their plans according to what they wanted to do, were interested in doing, and/or had the resources to do. We want the detailed assessment to identify priorities and needs,” (interview, September 10, 2007).

The following professional development services are offered to districts and schools:

- Executive coaching for principals and superintendents (focus on leadership development)
- Training on data-driven decision-making, standards-based curriculum, and common formative assessments (focus on teaching and learning)
- Workshops related to subgroups (focus on special education students and English language learners or ELLs, two subgroups typically most in need)

Districts can make requests from among a menu of identified services, which are provided by either the CSDE or designated outside partners, such as regional centers or organizations (e.g., Cambridge Education, The Leadership and Learning Center). These services are available free to the 12 targeted districts and to 18 districts that are next in line for corrective action. Requests from the 12 districts are negotiated with the department team, giving districts some say in the kinds of services they receive and the SEA influence to ensure that resources allocated are aligned with data-identified needs. Other districts are permitted to participate, but they must pay for the services.

Intended Outcomes

- District organization systems most aligned with the instructional core are strengthened.
- School systems and student learning are incrementally and notably improved.
- School improvement is sustained.

Lead SEA Contact(s)

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Challenges and Future Plans

At the time of the interviews, September 2007, CSDE staff were just being trained in the assessment process and organizing into teams assigned to districts. Staff expressed anxiety about their new role and responsibility and how it would fit with their other work, because most were not full time on this effort (interview, September 10, 2007). Any new organization and set of responsibilities takes time and adjustment and presents a

challenge to those involved. The new district assistance teams will take some time to sort out their role and coordinate it with others involved to best serve the districts to which they are assigned.

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