

# How Eight State Education Agencies in the Northeast and Islands Region Identify and Support Low-Performing Schools and Districts

## Rhode Island



*Support two-way relationships with districts and provide opportunities for reflection, professional development, and use of data, so that district capacity can shape school capacity that improves instruction.*

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

### CONTEXT

Rhode Island is a highly urban, densely populated state, with a very strong union influence. Education is and has been a prominent issue in the state, with a legislature consisting of a large number of current and former teachers. Education policy in Rhode Island is established by the General Assembly, the Board of Regents, and the Commissioner of Education.

In 1996, the Comprehensive Education Strategy (CES) was developed to provide a K–12 blueprint for education in Rhode Island that (a) set high standards and clear expectations, (b) developed information systems that measure progress towards those standards, and (c) ensured effective implementation of proven strategies to improve learning and accountability for results (Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [RIDE], n.d.). In 1997, these ideas were made actionable as the Student Investment Initiative, also known as Article 31, which provides, among other things, funding for school improvement. The School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) school visitation and review process was developed through this policy and serves as a cornerstone for reflection, dialogue, and feedback. The SALT school visitation and review process applies to all public schools in the state, providing peer review and a report to all schools approximately every 5 years. Schools in need of improvement are reviewed more frequently. SALT begins with the formation of a school improvement team that conducts a self-assessment and develops a plan for improving student performance. This plan is shared with all members of the school and its community. The school hosts a 4- to 5-day SALT visit by an outside team that includes teacher and administrator peers. A negative SALT visit report has triggered progressive support and intervention, when interventions were focused on schools. Revised in 2003 to align with changing assessments and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements, Article 31 continues to be a central mechanism for financing and supporting districts in Rhode Island.

Another policy influencing interventions is the Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements (PBGR), established by the Board of Regents in 2003. It extends the graduation requirements beyond completion of Carnegie units and mastery of the state's New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) examination to demonstrated proficiency using an authentic measure. Schools must offer at least two of the following: portfolios, extended capstone projects, public exhibitions, a Certificate of Initial Mastery,

or departmental end-of-course exams, which may include industry-certification exams (RIDE, 2004a). This policy includes, but goes beyond, NCLB assessment requirements.

## Selection Criteria

Rhode Island’s state accountability plan outlining how the state holds schools and districts accountable was updated with the U.S. Department of Education in July 2006. Table RI-1 outlines the ways in which the state’s plan addresses the 10 principles required by NCLB.

**Table RI-1. Rhode Island AYP Measures**

NCLB AYP Determination Requirement	Rhode Island’s Approach
<b>Assessment</b>	NECAP
<b>Proficiency Target</b>	Percent Proficient
<b>Starting Point</b>	20th Percentile
<b>Participation</b>	95%
<b>Additional Measure</b>	Attendance/Graduation Rate
<b>Additional Provisions</b>	No
<b>Minimum Number for Subgroups</b>	
Accountability/Performance	45
Participation	45
<b>Confidence Intervals</b>	95%
<b>Other</b>	-

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

Rhode Island utilizes multiple methods to identify schools and districts that are underperforming. The largest and most significant determinant is failure to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP). In July 2007, RIDE was discussing additional processes that could trigger low-performing status. These included identification of a disproportionately high number of students in special education, a school’s failure to have its plan to meet graduation requirements approved by June 2008, and low performance of English language learner (ELL) students on the ACCESS\* assessment. This set of multiple indicators goes beyond federal requirements so that it reflects the broader range of indicators that are important to the state. The indicators also act as an early identification system for districts that may in the future be identified as low

\* Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State

performing, according to the department’s Director of Progressive Support and Intervention (interview, July 26, 2007).

Table RI-2 outlines the number and percentage of low-performing schools—those identified as in need of improvement (INI)—in Rhode Island, as well as the number of years they have been designated as such.

**Table RI-2. Rhode Island 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
319	43 (13%)	16	11	-	9	3	5	-	-	n/a

**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:** Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007b; Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007b; Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007c; Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007d.

Additional factors exist for districts, including 40% or more of its schools not making AYP, at least two grade levels not making AYP, and scores of subgroups aggregated at the district level not making AYP. Table RI-3 outlines the number and percentage of low-performing districts in Rhode Island, as well as the number of years they have been designated as such.

**Table RI-3. Rhode Island 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
36	10 (28%)	5	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0

**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:** Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007.

Note: The following sections of this state education agency (SEA) profile are grounded in data gathered from 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 supplement the interviews and focus groups.

## Interventions with Low-Performing Districts

**Table RI-4. Rhode Island Interventions with Low-Performing Districts**

<b>Policies</b>	Rhode Island’s Comprehensive Education Strategy (CES) of 1997.
<b>Primary Focus of Intervention</b>	The RIDE focuses its intervention on six districts: four in corrective action due to subgroup performance (Providence, Central Falls, Woonsocket, and Pawtucket), West Warwick (which has two low-performing schools—one high school and one elementary school), and South Kingston (triggered by aggregate scores at the district level). This is a shift from the state’s earlier policy of working with schools, a change prompted by limited state capacity and the need for greater district engagement in and support of interventions.
<b>Services</b>	
Site-Specific	A District Negotiated Agreement articulates intervention strategies for districts and specifies the amount and use of funds to those ends. The agreement includes specific plans for technical assistance and expenditure of funding. A department liaison is assigned to each district to facilitate communication and coherence of the district strategy.
Planning Assistance	Varies by district.
Work with Data	There is a statewide commitment to employing data-informed decision making to understand strengths and needs of districts and schools, inform instruction and capacity building, and identify progress. Graduation requirements include mastery of an authentic assessment. Other data-related work varies by district.
Professional Development	Varies by district. Districts identify the areas where they need professional development, and the department seeks to support the district choices rather than impose different topics or supports. All districts have selected English language arts as a focus area; some are also working in mathematics. The department has chosen to support district fidelity to existing, effective professional development rather than having all districts adopt a new program for the sake of consistency.
Convening Schools/Districts	The department offers a monthly Title I clinic for schools and districts to learn about NCLB requirements and how to manage them. Title I staff also help schools implement requirements as part of regular Title I professional development. A statewide Superintendents’ Network meets regularly for professional development and sharing of practice; superintendents with low-performing schools are required to attend and some topics focus on their specific situations and concerns.
<b>Sanctions</b>	The reallocation of local, state, and federal funds to focus on the interventions and the publication of low-performing schools’ names in the newspapers are considered preliminary sanctions.

## Rationale for Intervention

RIDE's Office of Progressive Support and Intervention (PS&I) is primarily responsible for the state's intervention. PS&I focuses on building the capacity of individual districts so that they can support schools to improve instruction in every classroom. This focus on capacity is an extension of the department's functionality framework (Abbott, 2008), which defines functionality as "capacity + performance." One grounding assumption identified by the Deputy Commissioner of Education is that the "education system really only exists at the classroom level. You have the higher levels (education support systems that should be aligned), but the only educator in the equation is the teacher. Everyone else should be lined up to help that teacher. . . . We try to have that focus drive everything that we do" (interview, September 13, 2007).

As a result, the earlier years of state intervention focused at the school level in order to bring intervention as close to the classroom as possible. This was done without district-specific input; the Deputy Commissioner of Education acknowledged that this policy has its shortcomings: "We realized [that] if we're not on the same page with the district, our good efforts could be completely wiped out. We needed to rethink our role and include the district. Now we discuss all intervention and improvement efforts with the district and align all resources and activities to provide assistance as the district requests. We are more adaptive and willing to give the district a say," (interview, September 13, 2007).

## Preconditions

There are no preconditions for Rhode Island's intervention. As one person interviewed put it, state staff "tend not to think about readiness, but [about] where people are" (interview, July 26, 2007). The existing school climate, practices, and infrastructure become the starting point for the design of the intervention.

## Strategies

With a focus on building district capacity, the intervention approach is one of inquiry and facilitation. There is a primary focus on building trusting and collaborative relationships with districts (when the focus was on working with schools, the same principles applied), and, in some cases, deliberately building district readiness to embark on capacity building. So, although there are no preconditions, neither are there assumptions that schools or districts are ready to embark on serious reforms. Trust and collaboration are built over time by learning the culture and context, focusing on students and learning, developing professional learning communities, and customizing interventions based on specific context and needs. RIDE seeks a two-way relationship between the state and the district, where the district drives the reform: One administrator elaborates, "We want the least intrusive intervention and don't want to take over" (interview, July 26, 2007). As a result, while interventions are customized, all include building capacity in one of the following areas:

- Knowledge development (e.g., on NCLB, teaching and learning, the roles of administrators)
- Analysis of data
- Plan development and implementation
- Systems monitoring of teaching and learning
- Observation and feedback mechanisms that improve instruction

In addition, throughout the intervention, there is a pattern of hiring outside coaches, mentors, and/or facilitators to help districts and schools clarify their thinking, articulate and shape plans, and develop communications and leadership capacities.

Several vehicles are used that seek to facilitate the development of district capacity and collaboration between the district and the state:

*District Negotiated Agreement.* This agreement spells out the specific strengths and weaknesses of a district and what the district and state will each do to build district capacity: “We didn’t give them an analysis of what they need to do. They need to know their schools well enough to know what supports their schools need, and that needs to go into their district plan. . . . We are asking districts to write school-specific plans,” reported one member of the department team (interview, July 26, 2007).

*Face-to-Face.* Face-to-Face meetings include the district superintendent and his or her team, a school committee member, union membership, the Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner assigned to that district, and a team of RIDE administrators. Face-to-Face meetings first took place in Rhode Island in 2002 in order to explain and discuss the realities of NCLB and the classification of schools and districts as low performing. In these gatherings, leaders discuss progress and challenges related to their district-negotiated agreement, district plans, or other issues that arise. The state/district group draws upon the data to collectively reflect and problem solve and to give and receive feedback. Frequency of the meetings depends on the performance status of the district. The meetings act as a central vehicle for collaboration and a two-way partnership, as well as the regular reporting mechanism on the progress of low-performing schools.

*Commissioner’s Visit.* Adopted in 2006, the Commissioner’s Visit is a 2-day site visit conducted in schools that are in corrective action or school improvement restructuring. The visitation team includes peers from other PS&I districts and RIDE staff, who focus on implementation of the school’s corrective action or restructuring plan and the related changes that have been made over the course of the year. One department official noted, “It is tailored to each district and provides data for what still needs to take place for the school to move forward” (interview, July 26, 2007). This visit was modeled generally on the SALT protocol.

*Other.* Internally, the PS&I leadership team meets with the Commissioners and all department directors to disseminate information about the districts and make integrated, cohesive decisions at the state level. Increasing alignment of efforts within the state and responsiveness to districts are current focuses.

Part of the RIDE rationale is a focused strategy of building external support for the interventions: “It’s deliberate that there’s publicity about this. Very deliberate. We expect that the public will know what’s happening over time,” said one RIDE administrator (interview, July 26, 2007). Another put it this way, “[We] exert lots of energy on political climate. . .[and] have dialogue with the school committee chair, the city council, mayor, etc.” (interview, July 26, 2007). The department considers this external support necessary to build momentum internally as well as externally.

### Intended Outcomes

The successful building of district capacity is seen as the central intended outcome. Related outcomes include:

- Leadership development of both principals and district- and school-based leadership teams
- Professional development and implementation monitoring related to content, curriculum, and pedagogy
- Parental involvement as it relates to children’s learning and how to support it

These capacities were first identified when state intervention focused on schools, and they continued to be considered important as the RIDE shifted responsibility for school capacity-building to districts. The Director of the Office of PS&I stated the desired outcomes this way: “The school would say that ‘the district knows what they’re doing, and knows what we need and are supporting us.’ Teachers are saying that the leadership team and principal are supporting us in our efforts to improve instruction to better support kids. . . .My theory is that test scores will follow. To me, it’s about learning and school engagement. If kids love learning, and teachers love teaching, there in fact will be change in test scores” (interview, July 26, 2007).

### Lead SEA Contact(s)

Lead SEA Contact at Time of Data Collection:

Mary Canole, Director of Office of Progressive Support and Intervention, Rhode Island Department of Education.

Current Lead SEA Contacts:

Roy Seitsinger, Director of High School Reform, Rhode Island Department of Education

Mary Beth Fafard, Rhode Island Department of Education

### Challenges and Future Plans

RIDE staff and consultants identified the following challenges: (a) limited state capacity to manage the intervention, (b) the paucity of strong candidates preparing to become school and district administrators, (c) the continued transition from focusing on school intervention to district intervention, and (d) advocacy with teachers unions.

Department administrators spoke frankly about the need to better align their staff with district needs and to better organize their department in order to achieve that end. The Deputy Commissioner is clear on the work ahead: “Change the nature of every [RIDE] person’s interaction with PS&I districts. We need a common approach with clear, measurable outcomes” (interview, July 26, 2007). The next level of work is to create more aligned department services that better respond to district needs. “We often see something start in one district, which is then used elsewhere as a prototype. Tools and tactics are emerging this way,” offered another administrator (interview, July 26, 2007).

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