

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

Vermont



Provide early and continued school support that's grounded in use of multiple sources of data.

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

CONTEXT

Vermont has an estimated population of 624,000, more than 95% of whom are White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The lowest performing subgroup of students in the state is those students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). In the 1990s, Vermont was one of the first states to begin systemic work on local assessments that are used to understand and improve student performance. This history grounds and gives form to the state's intervention with low-performing schools.

Enacted in 1997, Act 60, the Equal Education Opportunity Act, "requires the Commissioner to make biennial determinations of whether schools are meeting the state's school quality standards. These standards address a school's physical, social, and academic climate," (Heartland Institute, 1997; Vermont Department of Education [VT DOE], 2008). This law also requires the state Commissioner of Education to determine whether schools are making insufficient progress in improving student performance. The Legislature drafted the law in response to the Supreme Court decision in *Brigham v. State of Vermont* (1997), which said that Vermont's existing education funding system was unconstitutional and that the state must provide "substantially equal access" to education for all Vermont students, regardless of where they reside. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) added a layer of expectations and interventions to the existing system.

The school quality standards were revised on February 9, 2006, (Vermont Department of Education, 2006b, 2007c) to include specifications for the development of the Comprehensive Local Assessment System (CLAS), with the belief that ongoing diagnostic information about students and schools will guide teaching and learning. The state, however, has limited capacity to support implementation and hold schools accountable.

Selection Criteria

Vermont's state accountability plan outlining how the state holds schools and districts accountable was most recently filed with the U.S. Department of Education in July 2006 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Table VT-1 outlines the ways in which the state's plan addresses the 10 principles required by NCLB to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP). On the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) Reading Assessment, the number of students scoring in the lowest achievement level should be less than 15% of the total number of students that participated in the assessment.

Table VT-1. Vermont AYP Measures

NCLB AYP Determination Requirement	Vermont's Approach
Assessment	NECAP
Proficiency Target	Index
Starting Point	20th Percentile
Participation	95%
Additional Measure	Reading/Graduation Rate
Additional Provisions	No
Minimum Number for Subgroups	
Accountability/Performance	40
Participation	40
Confidence Intervals	99%
Other	NECAP Reading: Percentage of students scoring in the lowest level must be less than 15% of the total number of students that participated in the assessment.

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

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

Table VT-2. Vermont 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
363	41 (11%)	21	7	13	-	-	-	-	-	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: Vermont Department of Education, 2007d.

A district enters improvement if, in the aggregate or for any subgroup, it does not make AYP in the same content area for 2 consecutive years, or if it does not meet the 95% participation rate for 2 consecutive years (VT DOE, 2006, VT DOE, 2007). Table VT-3 outlines the number and percentage of low-performing districts in Vermont, as well as the number of years they have been designated as such.

Table VT-3. Vermont 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
363	31 (8%)	23	2	6	0	0	0	0	0	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: Vermont Department of Education, 2007d.

Note: The following sections of this profile are grounded in data gathered from interviews and a focus group conducted between July and November 2007. The state education agency (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 Schools and Districts

Vermont’s method of intervention has changed substantially over time, shifting from a focus on individualizing interventions based on school needs to a focus on becoming more codified, with systemic requirements across schools “that make insufficient progress.” Table VT-4 details Vermont’s interventions with low-performing schools.

Table VT-4. Vermont Interventions With Low-Performing Schools

Policies	1997's Act 60, the Equal Education Opportunity Act, 16 Vermont State Law 165(b) set a policy for identifying low-performing schools (both Title I and non-Title I schools) and Commissioner's Required Actions to support school improvement. Commissioner's Required Actions in 2007 codified common requirements for all low-performing schools.
Primary Focus of Intervention	The primary intervention is with the school. In most instances in Vermont, the school serves as the local educational agency (LEA) for accountability purposes, based on state definitions.
Services	
Specific Services	Three VT DOE school support coordinators are assigned to identified schools. They work with the schools, provide grants, broker services, and leverage use of funding to focus on priority areas. Each school has a school support coordinator and is visited with progress monitoring.
Data Analysis Support	In 2007–08, the department intensified its focus on data. Schools receive assistance in identifying measures to track student progress, with particular focus on the groups and content areas for which the school is identified, and in reflecting on their use of data to inform instruction.
Planning Assistance	Schools receive support in planning by phone, e-mail, and in person on an as-needed basis. School support coordinators provide feedback on school improvement plans.
Convening Schools/Districts	In 2006, the department sponsored a series of meetings for “first checkmark” schools, i.e., those not making AYP for the first time. They focused on the conditions necessary to make improvements in math and literacy. The department will continue this approach in years when there is a significant number of new, first checkmark schools. In 2007–2008, all principals of newly identified schools participated monthly in a Principals Learning Community (PLC). Some principals of previously identified schools elected to participate. The PLC requirement will be evaluated to determine how it might continue or expand.
Additional Professional Development	The department makes a variety of professional development tools available, based on the needs of the identified schools. Offerings include a formative assessment initiative, a Response to Intervention initiative, and a middle school initiative. The regional Vermont professional development network provides professional development in math, literacy, and science to teachers on a regional basis, utilizing teacher leaders who collaborate with department staff.
Sanctions	None.
Monitoring	Starting in 2007–08, schools are required to report student data and information on the development and implementation of their progress monitoring system twice a year to the department of education and their local school board. There is also monitoring to ensure alignment of funding allocation with identified needs.

Rationale for Intervention

The VT DOE believes that schools should shape their own improvements and that the department has a responsibility to develop leadership and support schools in developing local assessment systems, so that educators will reflect on and improve instruction and continuously improve how they serve all students. According to state officials, Vermont's tradition is to assume that school leaders know what they need to do to improve student achievement; the SEA role is to expand knowledge and provide resources.

One significant shift, according to Vermont officials, can be seen in the Commissioner's required actions. Initially, Commissioner's required actions for low-performing schools (both Title I and non-Title I) were customized, with a school support coordinator working out an agreement with each school depending on its individual needs. Reporting and monitoring were managed in a similar way. Patterns regarding school needs began to surface, which led to the state's first Commissioner's required actions, identifying common requirements for all schools. These reflect specific beliefs about what schools need to do to improve achievement: "We are asking schools to meet the required actions as well as they can. They also have school action plans that are their improvement plans. We are expecting them to look at those other actions, and we are giving them funding to support that work," said the Division Director for Standards and Assessment, VT DOE (focus group, September 28, 2007).

Preconditions

Because the Vermont rationale for intervention relies on the self-awareness and initiative of school communities, department officials identify two preconditions necessary to the rationale's effectiveness:

- Someone at a school leadership level understands what needs to be done and will hold people on track and hold them accountable.
- Local educators take advantage of professional development, since only participation in a PLC is required and only for a subset of principals at this time.

Strategies

Until the 2007–2008 academic year, interventions with schools identified for improvement were determined on a school-by-school basis in negotiation with VT DOE staff. For the academic year 2007–2008, there was a uniform set of required actions for identified schools that underscored the key beliefs of Vermont's rationale. All schools identified as INI for the first time in 2007–2008 must:

- identify measures to track student progress, with particular focus on the groups and content areas for which the school is identified;
- develop a continuum of supports for struggling students;

- report on progress to the state mid-year and at the end of the academic year; and
- have principals participate in PLCs.

The centrality of data is evident in these Commissioner’s Required Actions and speaks to the state’s history of emphasizing assessment. The Division Director for Standards and Assessment quoted Commissioner Richard Cate as he spoke to school leaders, “I want to know how you know how your kids are doing,” (interview, September 28, 2007). Low-performing schools first identify key data and information about student performance, especially about groups and subject areas that need improvement according to test scores. The Division Director for Standards and Assessment explained: “We start where the staff in a school community is, and we ask, ‘What data do you have? What does it tell you? Where do you go next?’” (interview, September 28, 2007). The department uses the school support for data use as a way to find out about how schools are collecting, organizing, and using data. Schools may report that they don’t have the data they need to adequately reflect on student achievement. Data work is extended through progress monitoring, where schools are responsible for tracking progress of individual students and the supports they are receiving, and then reporting twice annually about progress and revisions of student supports. This reporting is key to school monitoring.

At the same time as the Commissioner’s Required Actions have evolved to focus on progress monitoring, the principles and planning guide for the CLAS has focused on shared expectations for all students and data-based decision making in collaborative structures. Although state legislation requires all LEAs to develop a local assessment system, the state has not had the capacity to support this effort. But the SEA is leveraging the implementation of the state policy by requiring the development of CLAS in low-performing schools.

The state’s emphasis on school self-awareness and initiative necessarily requires capable school leadership. According to the Division Director for Standards and Assessment, “In Vermont we work with leadership, we seek to support new leaders” (interview, September 28, 2007). This is the reasoning behind creating the PLCs, where principals come together to share strategies and build skills in relation to leading change and managing interventions.

Beyond the PLCs, the SEA in general offers a range of optional professional development on relevant topics, including formative assessment and Response to Intervention. The VT DOE tries to give low-performing schools preference or additional consideration when opportunities are open to schools across the state. Vermont also works with schools that do not make AYP for the first time. These first checkmark schools are invited to participate in a series of meetings that focus on the conditions necessary for improvement in student performance in math and literacy.

Three department school support coordinators are assigned to identified schools. These coordinators give feedback on improvement plans, provide grants, broker services, and leverage the use of funding to focus on priority areas. In their school improvement plans,

schools may focus on instructional strategies, assessment, professional development, or curriculum, as long as their actions focus on the areas that caused the school to be identified.

The SEA has also focused on its own capacity issues; staff members seek to align and leverage their efforts on behalf of individual schools. A reduction in staff working with identified schools has prompted deeper collaboration with other divisions within the VT DOE. “We work across the department with other teams and other resources to provide as much focus on these schools as we can,” said the Division Director for Standards and Assessment. “Thursday Morning Meetings” occur twice monthly; in these “a person from each of the other divisions of the department is invited to meet with us and do a review of the identified schools. We find out what they might do to be of support,” (interview, September 28, 2007). School support coordinators collaborate with the consolidated federal programs team to discuss the ways in which schools are utilizing their federal title funds to address the areas in need of improvement. SEA staff have also engaged their colleagues across the department in professional development offerings in order to build capacity. For example, staff from multiple departments participated in the formative assessment professional development; some were trained subsequently as facilitators and then co-led an institute the following summer.

Intended Outcomes

The long-term outcome goal is that schools will have assessment systems that help teachers continuously review student performance data, reflect on and improve their instruction to better meet the needs of students, and develop additional supports for the students. The desired outcome of participation in PLCs is that school leaders will develop greater capacity and initial work on data will contribute to the outcome of having a local assessment system.

Lead SEA Contact(s)

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Challenges and Future Plans

Shrinking capacity and availability of resources at the VT DOE make it difficult to provide intensive support to individual schools and may present a challenge as a small number of schools become persistently low-performing. The department also faces a philosophical challenge. “We are not looking to close schools down or take schools over. If schools are taking appropriate actions, that should not be necessary,” said the Division Director for Standards and Assessment. The 2007-08 school year marked the first year that Vermont had a Title I school in Restructuring status, and staff are thinking ahead about how to increase accountability “in an appropriate way” (interview, September 28, 2007).

Because the focus of the state's rationale for intervention relies on supporting the good will of schools to change, the few schools that resist change and forego opportunities to participate in professional development offer a challenge. One SEA staff person said, "It is hard when you don't have someone (at the school level) ready to work with you, to hold people accountable," although this does not happen frequently (interview, September 28, 2007).

The rural nature of the state offers another challenge. One SEA staff person reported, "It's a challenge within Vermont to . . . find the professional development and support that people need" (interview, September 28, 2007).

During 2007-08, the department studied the issue of school transformation and what that requires for all schools, including low-performing schools. A series of community forums helped shape this idea and the resulting recommendations. This has stepped up the conversation about what system of supports can do to create a transformation to ensure that students will thrive.

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Interview with the Division Director for Standards and Assessment, Vermont Department of Education, September 28, 2007.

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