

Evaluation of the California Statewide
System of School Support (S4):
Final Report

D. E. (Sunny) Becker, Lisa E. Koger, Andrea L. Sinclair, and Arthur A. Thacker

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EVALUATION OF THE CALIFORNIA STATEWIDE SYSTEM OF SCHOOL SUPPORT (S4)

Executive Summary

The Federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation requires each state to establish a statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement for local education agencies (LEAs) and schools classified as being in Program Improvement (PI) based on student achievement results (Section 1117). The mission of California's Statewide System of School Support (S4) is to build school districts' capacity to support improvements in low-performing schools, with the ultimate goal of creating a system in which districts and schools have access to effective, efficient regional resources to raise student achievement levels.

The California Department of Education (CDE) contracted with the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) to conduct an independent evaluation of the S4 system. The CDE specified that six evaluation questions be answered:

1. How effectively are the CDE, the California Comprehensive Center (CA CC) at WestEd, and the Regional System of District and School Support (RSDSS) working as S4 partners to build statewide capacity to meet the diverse needs of LEAs and their Title I schools throughout the state?
2. How effectively is the RSDSS working in conjunction with other regionally based and county office of education (COE)-based programs and services to meet the diverse needs of LEAs and their Title I schools throughout the state?
3. What kinds of technical assistance, services, and support are being offered, provided, and brokered by the RSDSS to LEAs with Title I schools, with particular emphasis on helping schools in PI?
4. How effectively do the RSDSS technical assistance, services, and support address S4 priorities and goals, as defined by the CDE in accordance with NCLB?
5. To what extent do the RSDSS technical assistance, services, and support increase the capacity of LEAs to better support improvements in teaching and learning in their priority Title I schools?
6. To what extent do policy, resource, and contextual factors impact the effectiveness of the RSDSS technical assistance, services, and support?

The evaluation began in May 2008. In addition to reviewing extant documents, HumRRO devised a four-step data collection process, including 3 focus groups with staff from CDE, the California Comprehensive Center (CA CC), and with RSDSS directors; 100 interviews including representatives of the CDE, CA CC, RSDSS directors and staff, COE staff, and LEAs that either received or declined RSDSS services; online questionnaires to a sample of 200 LEAs and 400 schools; and site visits to 10 LEAs and 20 schools. The study was designed so that each data collection phase would inform the next phase. Actual response rates were: 3 of 3 focus groups; 88 of 100 interviews (11 RSDSS Directors, 12 RSDSS staff, 11 Lead COEs, 8 nonlead COEs, 32 LEAs using RSDSS services, 6 LEAs not using RSDSS services, 6 CDE, 1 CA CC, and

1 representative of the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA); 91 of 200 LEA surveys; 123 of 400 school surveys; 6 of 10 LEA site visits; and 15 of 20 school site visits.

Data collection efforts were successful, with two limitations: response rates to questionnaires were low despite multiple attempts to maximize them (46% LEA and 31% school), and schedule delays constrained the breadth and effectiveness of site visits. The low questionnaire response rates mandated that we base our findings more on qualitative information gathered in focus groups and interviews and less on the generalization of quantitative information than originally planned.

Findings and Conclusions

The results of our investigation of how effectively the CDE, the CA CC, and the RSDSS work as S4 partners (EQ1¹) were mixed. Positive comments pointed out that the partnership successfully meets diverse needs across the state; the partners are working well together; and the partners provide regular updates. However, we found specific concerns about lack of CDE staff experience with “boots on the ground,” concerns about a perceived conflict of interest between the CA CC and WestEd’s fee-for-service providers, and mixed impressions as to whether the role of RSDSS was ensuring compliance or providing support across a wide variety of educational environments.

We looked at how effectively RSDSS is working in conjunction with other regionally and COE-based programs (EQ2). We found a philosophical tension here between the desire to provide seamless support to COEs, LEAs, and schools versus the need to distinguish the impact of RSDSS services and support. Clearly there is role confusion between RSDSS, District Assistance and Intervention Team (DAIT) and other COE-provided services. We also found some concerns regarding conflicts or competition between RSDSS and other COE efforts. However, the overall ratings and comments regarding the effectiveness of these collaborations were largely positive. A large majority of respondents indicated RSDSS staff are knowledgeable about PI-related services and partners (90%) and RSDSS staff maintain effective relations with their COE (83%). When asked to describe the effectiveness of the collaboration, 21 interviewees provided comments that were positive, 1 was mixed, and 1 one was negative.

We examined the kinds of technical assistance, services, and support being offered, provided, and brokered by the RSDSS to LEAs with Title I schools (EQ3). These services are defined regionally and each RSDSS office provides summary reports of services offered and provided. We found that these reports varied in level of detail and recommend that the CDE enforce more consistency across regions, either by clarifying initial instructions or providing feedback to initial reports to require clarification as necessary.

¹ “EQ1” denotes Evaluation Question 1.

Regarding currently available services, we found that what LEAs and schools most value is (a) help to get the schools and LEAs out of PI and (b) training or professional development in data-informed decision making. LEAs and schools said the most important thing for improving school performance was the quality of professional development provided for principals and teachers. As for areas of improvement, LEAs highlighted the need to provide more tailored/customized services based on the needs of the LEA while schools emphasized the alignment of services and NCLB/state requirements. Both LEA and school leadership suggested regular meetings with other schools in PI; improved funding to support additional staff such as assistant principals, counselors, and reading coaches; and time for intervention programs.

We scrutinized how effectively RSDSS activities address S4 priorities and goals (EQ4). Although the S4 program has clearly identified priorities, we identified some variability in how regional offices present their priorities. We found some evidence that services may not be provided strictly in compliance with the S4 priorities, but weaknesses in documentation and RSDSS brand recognition cast some doubt on this finding. The Regional Grant Applications (RGA) identify three RSDSS goals, comprising four questions. First, we found strong support that RSDSS is effective in helping LEAs with Title I PI schools determine revisions to the LEA plan (Goal 1). We found broad consensus that RSDSS staff is knowledgeable about research-based strategies and resources (Goal 3a) and effectively brokers strategies and resources (Goal 3b). However, our assessment of whether RSDSS is effective in helping LEAs build capacity to implement Corrective Action or Restructuring/Alternative Governance (Goal 2) was weaker. While some stakeholders were very positive in their comments and most who provided a rating indicated the RSDSS is effective, a majority indicated they could not assess this.

We probed the extent to which RSDSS activities increase the capacity of LEAs to better support teaching and learning in their priority Title I schools (EQ5). On the positive side, most LEAs and schools indicated RSDSS has provided “some” of the improvement in teaching and learning. In particular, RSDSS has helped develop (a) the ability to identify students needing support, (b) the ability to assess student learning, and (c) a reduction in numbers of students at the lowest achievement levels.

We explored the extent to which policies, resources, and contextual factors impact the effectiveness of RSDSS (EQ6). Stakeholders indicated that at both LEA and school levels, knowledge of RSDSS and what services it offers is clearly lacking. Other factors hindering its effectiveness are inconsistencies between local policies and state/federal requirements, lack of authority to compel LEAs to avail themselves of services or implement recommendations, and money and staffing issues that are worsened by the increasing workload associated with rising AYP targets.

On the whole, we found evidence throughout the state that S4 is contributing positively to LEA and school needs. However, the contribution of S4 through the regional RSDSS entities is tightly intertwined with other services and has weak brand recognition so its effects cannot be distinctly measured. We offer the following recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the S4.

Recommendations

The S4 provides many services that COEs, LEAs, and schools find useful and there is evidence that API scores have increased in schools receiving RSDSS services. However, we encountered widespread confusion about available services and identified the following opportunities to formalize the existing system to improve its effectiveness. We offer the following rationales leading to four recommendations.

Rationale 1. Throughout the evaluation we encountered confusion over the roles of S4 partners, the identity of RSDSS as distinct from COE, and a lack of knowledge of services available to LEAs and schools. Various findings related to evaluation questions 1, 2, and 6, as well as additional findings provide specific examples. Some respondents indicated that they learned of RSDSS services through the questionnaire administered as part of this evaluation. Our first recommendation is intended to improve the branding of RSDSS and enlighten potential recipients on various available services.

Recommendation 1. Clarify available services including those provided by RSDSS, DAIT, and other county-based service providers.

For example, CDE could review and expand information provided to COEs, LEAs, and schools about available services through an informational brochure, Web listing, and/or a binder/handbook. A consolidated list of available services would help LEAs and schools find the services they seek; identify services they might not think of on their own; facilitate effective transitions to new school and LEA leadership, and ease transitions of LEAs into and out of DAIT status when their service providers would shift.

Rationale 2. As a regionally based system, RSDSS services and terminology vary across the state. In order to maximize clarity we mined extant regional reports to tailor our interview, questionnaire, and site visit questions for each region. We also used regional reports to identify LEAs that did and did not receive RSDSS services to inform our sampling. Having been warned at the outset that LEA and school staff might not be familiar with RSDSS by name, we also provided names of staff supported by RSDSS funds as a means of identifying the specific services we were studying.

We found that regional RSDSS reports are inconsistent in level of detail, the accuracy of the regional matrices of services is in question, and we encountered difficulties in determining which COE staff are funded by S4 dollars. A new Online Management System (OMS) is currently being populated with specific tangible information such as number of contact hours; while this is a step in the right direction, stakeholders report that definitions and data rules are currently vague.

RSDSS reports from all 11 regions should address a minimal level of detail, including services offered and provided, along with identities of LEAs participating. The CDE needs accurate and detailed information to know what services and activities are in place. This leads to our second recommendation:

Recommendation 2. Strengthen the system for documenting services offered and provided to provide accurate and consistent information.

Rationale 3. Our evaluation revealed that some regions have modified the original list of S4 priorities and services may not be provided strictly according to stated S4 priorities---both signs that the system may not be implemented as intended. We also found that LEAs reported a variety of methods they use to measure the effectiveness of RSDSS assistance and had several suggestions to improve the effectiveness of RSDSS brokering activities. On the other hand the majority of interviewees could not assess whether RSDSS is effective in helping LEAs build capacity.

After a mechanism for ensuring the details of services being offered and provided are reliably captured (see Recommendation 2), this same information could be used to improve the system. A standard mechanism for collecting feedback from LEAs and schools—on the quality and usefulness of provided services as well as identification of unmet needs—would help raise the quality and fit of services over time. Finally, annual analyses of the impact of services provided on API and AYP scores and on PI status, itself, are central to continuing improvement of RSDSS effectiveness. Impact information will also help LEAs and schools identify services that may best meet their individual needs. Our third recommendation is:

Recommendation 3. Implement an ongoing evaluation of the statewide system of support for the purpose of strengthening the system's effectiveness through feedback and analysis of service impact.

Rationale 4. The number of schools and LEAs in PI has risen over time, resulting in a growing need for services. We learned that regions, counties, and LEAs must customize services due to demographic variation within their area, shifting demographics, and the needs of student subgroups. Achievement results for English language learners and students with disabilities is of particular concern, and are among the most common reasons that LEAs and schools have trouble exiting PI. This specific issue, coupled with our respondents' concerns with money, staffing, and the increasing workload associated with rising AYP targets, highlights the tension between limited resources and increased need. Focusing more heavily on the areas of greatest need would yield the greatest impact. This leads to our fourth recommendation.

Recommendation 4. Expand and strengthen support services through alignment, coordination and focus on services targeted to English learners and students with disabilities.

One approach would be for RSDSS to coordinate with other county-based providers whose priority is to serve districts with large proportions of English Learners and students with disabilities in alignment with the Closing the Achievement Gap initiative for the State of California.