

# Roles and Responsibilities of the STATE EDUCATION AGENCY

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR STATE LEADERS

State education agencies (SEAs) are at a crossroads with respect to their role in K-12 public education. States originally designed these agencies to administer state and federal education programs, but over the past few decades, shifts at the state and federal levels have assigned them roles as architects and implementers of key policies.

Nationwide, SEAs are trying to accomplish the same goal: ensuring student learning. However, because SEAs confront this goal within widely varying political and historical contexts, funding levels, and staff capacity, their approaches necessarily differ from state to state. SEAs, in a highly politicized education environment, are taking on many new roles, often without commensurate increases in financial or staff resources. State leaders need to take context and capacity issues into account when considering adding to SEA roles and responsibilities.

Because the approach an SEA takes is a function of its context, each state chief and leadership team will need to use their best judgment to determine appropriate roles and to prioritize and allocate staff and funding against these functions.

This document is designed to help chiefs and their leadership teams identify the most essential roles for their SEAs and provide guidance for determining which optional or additional responsibilities to take on. It is not intended to offer one-size-fits-all recommendations and is not the only tool state leaders should use to help guide their work.

### Using This Guidance

Although the information in this document may be helpful and informative for others, the target audience is SEA leadership teams. Once a team has used it to determine what it will and will not do, it should share that information in a form tailored to each internal and external audience. Local education agency (LEA) leaders, for example, will appreciate clarity on respective responsibilities, when to look to the state for leadership, and when they have flexibility and autonomy. Similarly, legislators and state board members will gain a more clear understanding of the SEA's workload.

This document is intended to support a deliberative process among SEA leaders to clarify roles and responsibilities. It can be used to:

- Support strategic planning and resource allocation, taking into consideration the state- and agency-specific context and capacity.
- Create state-specific “Essential,” “Possible,” and “Unsuitable” lists.
- Communicate with SEA staff and external stakeholders about what the state agency does and does not do, and why.

Before attempting to define or prioritize SEA roles, state leaders should:

- Articulate the SEA's specific goals. What is it trying to accomplish?
- Clarify the SEA's core values. For example, if a culture of service, responsiveness, and transparency is valued, what does that mean for what work the SEA takes on? What other values might drive decisions?
- Understand the agency's statutory responsibilities and areas of discretion. What is the SEA legally responsible for? What is the state board charged with?
- Make an effort to understand what external stakeholders—districts, educators, parents, citizens, and other policymakers—expect from the SEA.
- Once the SEA's role is defined, consider an agency capacity review, such as the [Capacity Review Rubric](#) offered by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Education Delivery Institute (EDI) to decide how best to allocate resources to support those priorities and determine where more capacity is needed.
- Develop and execute a plan for communicating this information to key stakeholders including agency staff, state leaders (board of education, governor's office, and legislators), educators, LEA staff, and the public.



# ESSENTIAL ROLES

State education agencies and their staffs operate under the authority granted by a state's constitution as well as enabling legislation and regulations. Federal law further assigns basic functions to all SEAs. In some states, key duties are shared with a state board of education or professional licensing board, and some responsibilities—though not named in law—make more sense for states, rather than districts or schools, to take on for various reasons (i.e., economy of scale, limited local capacity). Across geography and governance models, however, certain roles are most appropriately managed by state agencies. How individual agencies perform these roles may be governed by context and capacity issues, but the state should not allow limitations in those areas to defer execution of these critical responsibilities. In general, the essential roles of SEAs are:

## Funding and Oversight

- Administer state and federal funds and programs, and align these programs with overall strategy.
- Maintain data systems on inputs and outputs of the education system that support a focus on achievement, equity, and progress; and facilitate data use, including independent, rigorous research.
- Define, with input from a broad array of stakeholders, the state accountability system and intervene consistently according to that system when schools or LEAs are underperforming or when students are not being educated or treated equitably.
- Use teacher preparation program approval to require programs to improve the quality of teacher education and demonstrate how recruitment and teacher placement efforts are informed by the needs of districts. If the SEA does not have program approval, it should engage in partnerships with higher education and the state board to advocate for higher quality and more and better reporting and alignment with K-12.
- Monitor and report on progress of major state education initiatives.

## Policy Leadership

- Articulate a vision, priorities, and goals for K-12 education in the state.
- Specify the SEA role in achieving that vision and those priorities and goals.
- Collaborate with the state board on development of state content standards.
- Select and administer statewide assessments aligned with state standards.
- Craft regulations, rules, and guidance to clarify and enforce policies and provide funding and technical assistance to help districts understand and apply these policies.
- Build ongoing relationships and maintain engagement with key stakeholders, including district leaders, institutions of

higher education, the governor's office, the state board of education, the legislature, school-based educators (e.g., principals and teachers), and parents.

- Lead a learning agenda for the state education system, modeling adult learning, operating as a learning organization, and prioritizing continuous improvement.
- Connect and coordinate with other programs within the public education system including early learning, post-secondary, and workforce and economic development, as well as health care and social service agencies.

## Communications

- Provide all stakeholders with clear information about the SEA's role in achieving the education vision for the state.
- Make information broadly available, including data on educational achievement and attainment by school-level, district-level, and state-level, including data on different groups of students and information regarding financial equity.
- Support LEAs and educators by aggregating resources and tools, highlighting promising practices in new research and in local administration and, when needed, convening stakeholders, including the governor's office, the legislature, and educators, to share ideas and address challenges.
- Participate in leadership coalitions to advance the state's education goals.
- Design and implement venues, such as networks and listservs, for ongoing information sharing and dialogue among practitioners and the public to improve policy and practice.
- Create opportunities for those implementing state policy (e.g., superintendents, teachers) to share ideas, feedback, and recommendations with SEA leaders.
- Facilitate transition from one administration or chief to the next through open exchange of information, strategy, and data; planning support; and proactive outreach to stakeholders.

# POSSIBLE ROLES

Beyond the essentials, the roles SEAs take on are nuanced and variable depending on the state, and no one set of responsibilities is appropriate for every agency in every situation. In some states, SEAs will need to assume many or even all of these roles, while in others, only a few will be appropriate. Decision-making should be driven by context, but state leaders will also need to consider internal capacity issues such as funding, leadership, legal authority, and political support; relationships and trust with LEAs; and staff expertise and experience, among others. Decision makers should avoid assigning state agencies responsibilities that could be adequately performed locally and would divert resources from more critical SEA obligations. On the other hand, capacity challenges should not serve to prevent the SEA from taking on responsibilities that, given the state context, are best served at the state level. Roles and responsibilities that SEAs might assume, depending on the state context, include:

## Funding and Oversight

- Convene experts to rigorously evaluate materials and recommend curriculum frameworks and materials aligned to established standards and strategies.
- Authorize or oversee the authorization of charter schools within a framework aligned to state priorities.
- Recommend, negotiate for, and approve textbooks, technology, virtual schools, and LEA budgets or plans.
- Manage or coordinate regional groups (co-ops, RESAs, etc.) and align them with agency priorities.
- Manage contracts and vendors to align their responsibilities with agency strategy and priorities and monitor performance and intervene when necessary to ensure high-quality performance.
- Lead or manage the process for investigating and adjudicating practitioner misconduct.

## Policy Leadership

- Establish model or default policies for new or complex aspects of LEA administration (e.g., standards implementation, professional learning).
- Oversee implementation of teacher effectiveness policies, regulations, and guidance (including for licensure).
- Advocate for policy change and equitable funding. Serve as a partner to other agencies responsible for proposing and prioritizing the policy agenda, including the governor's office.
- Support innovation (e.g., pilots or grant competitions for LEAs).
- Set requirements and provide incentives for advancing equity in LEAs and schools.

- Establish standards for professional development providers.
- Work with institutions of higher education to improve teacher preparation and education.
- Identify opportunities to extend capacity through partnerships with foundations, other states, and outside groups (e.g., education support organizations, business community).

## Communications

- Provide information to help policymakers develop and evaluate policy proposals.

## Implementation

- Provide or contract to provide technical support and assistance for education implementation efforts, including developing tools and trainings.
- Develop and share model implementation plans for new or complex aspects of LEA administration (e.g., standards, comprehensive assessment systems).
- Calculate state-, LEA-, school-, and classroom-level growth and value-added scores.
- Contract for shared services for multiple LEAs to create economies of scale, including negotiating favorable rates for vetted and proven technical assistance providers.
- Conduct research and/or develop relationships to ensure that a robust research agenda informs evaluation of state policy and implementation.
- Fill capacity gaps, such as by providing data analysis for rural or small districts.

## UNSUITABLE ROLES

Given the demands on SEA resources, state leaders should be strategic in determining what these agencies do *not* do. SEAs often are assigned responsibilities by the legislature or state board, but all parties should recognize that SEAs cannot and should not execute all possible roles. A few states have assigned roles to SEAs on the basis of federal or other grant funding, such as Race to the Top, and these cases are often cited to justify adding responsibilities to state agencies. It is important to remember that in general, adequate resources are scarce, and the success stories, while noteworthy, are isolated. Decision-making about SEA responsibilities should be based on realistic, long-term capacity assessments. This principle also applies to staff expertise. In many instances, even when financial resources are available, the SEA may not be the best-equipped agency to assume certain roles. In general, SEAs should not:

- Displace local authority, including:
  - › Dictating how LEAs spend their money.
  - › Engaging in local personnel decisions.
  - › Setting class-size requirements.
  - › Setting staffing ratios.
  - › Establishing local funding distribution formulas.
  - › Offering or determining professional development trainings for teachers.
- Be the sole messenger to relevant stakeholders on important issues.
- Write curricula or require the use of a specific curriculum.
- Directly operate or run schools or districts long-term, with the exception of when required by statute (e.g., schools for the blind and deaf in some states).
- Provide direct professional development and training to teachers and principals.

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## FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

As SEAs refocus their resources on the most essential, highest leverage functions, they may need to reallocate both staff and funding, which are not decisions to be taken lightly. When considering which roles an SEA should take on, state leaders will need to consider some key issues,<sup>1</sup> including:

### Authority

- To whom are the SEA and chief directly accountable (i.e., voters, governor, state board)?
- Does the SEA have the legal and statutory authority to take on this role?
- How is authority granted to the SEA?
- Is this additional role important enough to seek new authority?
- Does the SEA have a history of having done this? If so, what can be learned from those efforts?
- Do the experiences of other states have any useful lessons to offer?

### Will

- Is the political and public will sufficient to support this?
  - › Do the governor, legislature, public, and business community support the goal and the work?
  - › If key political leaders are not aligned, are they at least not combative?
  - › Is it possible to build support over time, and what would that involve?
- What happens if the SEA does not take on this role? What's the worse-case scenario? Best-case scenario? Most likely scenario?

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<sup>1</sup> [crpe.org/publications/capacity-challenge-what-it-takes-state-education-agencies-support-school-improvement](http://crpe.org/publications/capacity-challenge-what-it-takes-state-education-agencies-support-school-improvement)

- Has a representative group of stakeholders (teachers, principals, unions, LEA leadership, political leaders, voters, parents) been engaged? Is this group representative? How would they react to the SEA taking this on? To the SEA not taking this on?
- Is it in the best interest of all students, particularly the most vulnerable, for the SEA to assume this role?

### Resources

- If the SEA does not do this, who will?
- What can all LEAs do themselves? What can some do? Will districts take these responsibilities on if the SEA does not?
- How many districts are in the state? Can they be convened in one place? Is that necessary?

- Does the SEA staff have the appropriate content expertise? If not, can the agency recruit additional staff?
- If resources are lacking, can the SEA repurpose staff or funds to do the work?
- Can any trusted, respected partner organizations add capacity or support to the SEA?
- How much time is available to take this on, and is it subject to any deadline (statutory or otherwise)?
- What is the budget, and does the SEA have the money and the spending flexibility to use it?

*Note: This document was compiled based on extended conversations with current and former SEA staff and LEA leaders from over 25 states with diverse education systems and contexts. The contributors disagreed significantly on a number of issues and therefore certain recommendations are contrary to the opinions of some participants.*



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