



# Sustainability Rubric Summary for Local Educational Agencies

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## Overview

Local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools are critical to any successful education reform effort. To produce transformative, sustainable improvement in student achievement, LEAs and schools, with the support of State education agencies (SEAs), will have to focus on and commit to improving student outcomes in ways that go beyond any particular program or funding stream. Transformative changes resulting in improved student achievement are bigger than any one initiative, program or project.

So how can local-level education leaders make sure the changes they are making work for students and endure in the face of changing conditions? Schools must successfully implement reforms and LEAs must play a leading role to support them, providing direction, offering critical assistance and building capacity, all at a community-wide scale. In the course of this change, the role of the LEA will evolve from one focused largely on monitoring and compliance to one that includes leadership toward community-wide goals for improved student growth, targeted support to schools and performance management of LEA activities.

## What is Sustainable Reform?

Sustainable reforms are durable, adaptive and persistently focused on goals for improved student growth in the face of changing conditions.

A strong strategic plan with a clear theory of action is the foundation of the reform strategy and for sustainability planning. To achieve sustainable systems and/or results, LEAs use evidence from implementation for the purpose of continuous improvement within an evolving context, adapting systems, resources and structures to better achieve student and system outcomes over time.

## What is the Sustainability Rubric?

The Sustainability Rubric for Local Educational Agencies is a tool to help LEAs assess the sustainability of a specific **priority reform**—a body of work that an LEA is undertaking in order to achieve two or more **priority goals** for student outcomes. The rubric consists of 19 **elements** of sustainability, which are summarized in the table below. LEAs can use this tool to anchor their work by choosing one or more priority reforms (for example, implementing educator effectiveness systems), assessing their current sustainability and taking action to improve sustainability across one or more of these indicators. You can also find the full version of the Sustainability Rubric for Local Educational Agencies here: <https://rtt.grads360.org/#communities/sea-capacity-building>

The Reform Support Network, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, supports the Race to the Top grantees as they implement reforms in education policy and practice, learn from each other, and build their capacity to sustain these reforms, while sharing these promising practices and lessons learned with other States attempting to implement similarly bold education reform initiatives.

## Elements

## Guiding Questions

### 1. CONTEXT FOR SUSTAINING REFORM

#### A. Alignment of the Community-Wide System

i. Align the policy agenda and implementation with priority reforms	Are the right policies in place across the LEA—in board policy, local government policy, budgets—to facilitate and enable priority reforms and goals?
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#### B. Public Value

i. Build education stakeholder support for priority goals and reforms	Is there a critical mass of relevant stakeholder groups who understand and support our priority goals and priority reforms?
ii. Build broad public support for priority goals and reforms	Is there strong, self-sustaining public support for priority goals and reforms in our LEA and community?

### 2. SYSTEM CAPACITY

#### A. LEA Capacity

i. Align human capital decisions with priority goals and reforms	Do our staff members understand how their work supports the LEA's priority goals and reforms, and are they held accountable for this?
ii. Build a culture of continuous improvement toward priority goals	Does our LEA have a culture of continuous improvement that is anchored in formative feedback and drives robust professional learning for all staff in the LEA?
iii. Align organizational structure with priority goals and reforms	Does the organizational structure of our LEA facilitate partnership with LEAs to implement priority reforms and achieve priority goals?

#### B. Community Capacity

i. Extend capacity through partnerships	Do the LEA's ongoing relationships with external stakeholder groups give it the necessary capacity to achieve priority goals and implement priority reforms?
ii. Extend capacity in the field	Do we ensure that the field—schools, leaders and educators—is empowered and equipped to deliver on the LEA's priority goals by implementing its priority reforms?

### 3. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

#### A. Clarity of Outcomes and Theory of Action

i. Set student outcome targets to achieve priority goals	Have we articulated student outcome goals that our reforms are supposed to achieve, and have we set specific, measurable, ambitious, realistic and time-bound targets to quantify those goals?
ii. Establish a theory of action and strategies for implementing priority reforms	Do we have specific strategies for implementing each of our interconnected reforms, and do we have a clear theory of action that ties them to our goals?
iii. Develop plan(s) that align strategies with priority goals	Do we have a plan or set of plans that clearly show how we will implement our strategies at the necessary scale to achieve our goals?

#### B. Alignment of Resources (People, Time, Technology, and Money)

i. Direct resources to priority reforms	Are the vast majority of our resources consistently aligned to our strategies to implement priority reforms?
ii. Establish clear leadership of priority goals and reforms	Have we assigned clear and accountable leadership for each of our priority goals and reforms?

#### C. Collection and Use of Data

i. Ensure quality data on performance	Do we, the field and the public all have access to valid, frequent and useful data on performance against our goals?
ii. Ensure quality data on implementation	Do we have feedback loops in place that help us to understand whether our reforms are being carried out faithfully in the field and that our strategies are impacting our goals?
iii. Use data to review progress and make mid-course corrections	Do we hold regular dialogues about performance and implementation quality, using the data that we collect to drive improvements and adjustments to our strategies?

#### D. Accountability for Results

i. Link internal accountability to results	Do the data on performance and implementation quality have real consequences for our LEA and the individuals and teams who work there?
ii. Link external accountability to results	Do the data on performance and implementation quality have real consequences for schools and other partners who are accountable for this work?
iii. Engage stakeholders about results	Do stakeholder groups and the public understand and support the implications of current performance for their work? Do we hold ourselves accountable for receiving and implementing their feedback on performance?

# 1. Context for Sustaining Reform

## Description of Category

LEAs operate in a complex context. They work and collaborate with a wide range of jurisdictions, agencies and organizations that hold different authorities, positions and interests within a K–12 structure that is at once hierarchical and decentralized. The context for reform is complex and dynamic. LEAs do not operate in a political, cultural or economic vacuum. In carrying out their operations, LEA administrators are guided by board policies, the law, the needs of students and the wishes of the citizens in the local community. Therefore, LEAs need to be prepared for the context to change over time. The sustainability of reform requires constant attention to changing circumstances to manage a balance between persistent adherence to attaining goals and responsive adaptation to address the real challenges of implementation. Although context is largely external to LEAs as organizations and something over which they do not have direct control, it should not be beyond their considerations. As they pursue the goals of their reform initiatives, LEAs should take the complex and changing environment into account, reacting to it and actively shaping it and leveraging its strengths.

## Key Variables

When developing the context for sustainable reform, LEAs will want to consider two variables:

### A. Alignment of the Community-Wide System.

Sustainable reform takes place across multiple public jurisdictions and different agencies and organizations that serve a wide range of functions, hold different interests and act independently of one another; this is often done intentionally. Local and municipal governments and school boards all play a role, as do local schools and other community organizations. Further, LEAs are likely influenced by decisions made at the State level. In pursuit of transformative and lasting outcomes for students, LEAs must map this complex environment, identify the policies and practices that can accelerate or impede progress, align local education organizations and others around these policies and practices and, to the extent possible, anticipate changes. Common requirements for transparent reporting, similar performance measures and aligned policy to shared outcomes are all methods for developing a coherence that can support sustainable reforms.

### B. Public Value.

Reform faces many public audiences: the broader community, parents and students and a wide

range of stakeholder groups. The value placed on reform by these audiences—their opinions, attitudes, perceptions and active participation—is a variable affecting sustainability that LEAs can measure and act upon. LEAs can also use communication and other engagement strategies to increase the focus and clarity for reforms over time. Sustainable reforms are adaptive in shifting landscapes.

# 2. System Capacity

## Description of Category

Capacity is the resources, readiness and willingness of a system to achieve its priority goals. Resources include not just money, but also time, people, direction, systems and processes. LEAs can sharpen and define their roles in building capacity as they provide support to schools by leveraging their available resources to better sustain priority reforms.

Sustainable reform, however, is not the sole responsibility of a single organization or jurisdiction; priority reforms will not be sustained if they are treated like a special project, separate from the regular operations of the broader school system. Rather, to be sustainable, reform must permeate the community-wide context and, ideally, be taken up by educators and the public as their own purpose. Therefore, this rubric examines community-wide capacity both as a property inherent to the LEA and as a property of the broader community context—the sum of resources, readiness and willingness throughout the local community to accomplish sustainable reform. Although LEAs do not have direct control over the extended capacity of the entire community, part of the work of developing sustainable reform is to leverage this broader capacity so that it is aligned with shared expectations for successful implementation.

## Key Variables

In order to develop the capacity for sustainable reform on a community-wide basis, LEAs should consider two variables:

### A. LEA Capacity.

LEA capacity is the resources, readiness and willingness dedicated to reach priority goals through the implementation of priority reforms. LEAs are multipurpose organizations, and therefore do not commit 100 percent of their capacity to reform-related activities. Nevertheless, the position of reform related activities within the LEA organization and the allocation of resources, especially the development and management of valuable and limited human capital and the organizational culture surrounding it,

are critical strategic considerations for LEAs as they organize their reform effort. The data, processes and systems LEAs use to conduct ongoing performance management of reform activities lead to strategic and tactical adjustments of LEA capacity. Although the distinction between the two categories of sustainable reform is somewhat artificial, this rubric understands capacity to be the static, present allocation of resources and the organizational structure that supports them, and it understands performance management as the dynamic action of using data to consider how to reallocate them over time.

- B. **Community Capacity.** LEAs are relatively small organizations with many limitations, and therefore are not the sole driving force to accomplish priority goals. The true capacity to create sustainable reform includes resources, readiness and willingness dedicated community-wide, throughout the complex system of jurisdictions, agencies and support organizations at the local level. To develop sustainable reform, LEAs should extend their capacity through multiple means, including, but not limited to local partnerships, support to schools and regional or cross-LEA collaborations (where appropriate), to encourage the commitment of resources and support reform implementation throughout the community.

### 3. Performance Management

#### Description of Category

LEAs are taking on complex priority reforms such as implementing new, more rigorous standards; new educator evaluation and support systems; and turning around low-performing schools. These reforms require more comprehensive oversight, planning and problem-solving than LEAs may be used to. While many factors will contribute to the short- and long-term success of reform, one powerful influence is the performance management system that LEAs establish to ensure that implementation of priority reforms is on track to meet priority goals.

#### Key Variables

Performance management is a systemic approach to assure quality and progress toward priority goals—and the priority reforms that lead to them—by setting clear expectations, monitoring progress against them and

using this information for continuous improvement. A performance management system aligns organizational planning, processes and routines to establish and reinforce this focus on results. Performance management includes the following variables:

- A. **Clarity of Outcomes and Theory of Action.** Establishing and widely communicating targets for achieving priority goals, strategies for implementing priority reforms and a clear theory of action that links them.
- B. **Alignment of Resources.** Directing or redirecting resources (time, money, people) to priority reforms that produce results and establishing clear leadership for every aspect of the work.
- C. **Collection and Use of Data.** Establishing and implementing routines and processes for collecting, analyzing and monitoring data, including data on performance and on implementation, to provide feedback and make mid-course corrections.
- D. **Accountability for Results.** Making decisions to continue, improve or end practices based on data; implementing incentives tied to performance inside and outside the central office; and closing the loop with stakeholder groups by engaging them about results.

Project management, which is used primarily to track tasks and deadlines of projects across the system, is an essential component of performance management. But it is different: Whereas project management focuses on the **inputs** (activities, tasks, etcetera) that lead to results, performance management focuses on the **outputs** they produce (for example, evidence of quality implementation) and the resulting **outcomes**.

Performance management consists of structures, processes and routines developed, implemented and managed by the LEA with the intent of improving progress to goals. Examples include easily understood data tracking mechanisms, consistent routines such as weekly or biweekly meetings focused entirely on examining outcomes or transparent and ongoing ways that the LEA gets feedback on implementation challenges from school leaders and teachers.

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