

Overview

For States to produce transformative, sustainable improvement in student achievement, State education agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) 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 State-level education leaders make sure the changes they are making work for students, and are durable in the face of changing conditions? LEAs must successfully implement reforms at the district and classroom level, and SEAs must play a leading role to support them, providing direction, offering limited but critical assistance and building capacity, all at a statewide scale. In the course of this change, the role of the SEA will evolve from one focused largely on monitoring and compliance to one that includes leadership toward statewide goals for improved student growth, targeted support to LEAs and performance management of SEA 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, SEAs and LEAs use evidence from implementation for the purpose of continuous improvement within an evolving state context, adapting systems, resources and structures to better achieve student and system outcomes over time.

What is the Sustainability Rubric?

The Sustainability Rubric is a tool to help SEAs assess the sustainability of a specific **priority reform**—a body of work that an SEA 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. States 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 here: <https://rtt.grads360.org/#communities/sea-capacity-building>

Elements

Guiding Questions

1. CONTEXT FOR SUSTAINING REFORM

A. Alignment of the Statewide System

i. Align the policy agenda with priority reforms	Are the right policies in place across the State—in legislation, in budgets, across P-20 and locally—to facilitate and enable priority reforms and goals?
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B. Public Value

i. Build 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 State?

2. SYSTEM CAPACITY

A. SEA Capacity

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

B. State Capacity

i. Extend capacity through partnerships	Do the SEA'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—regional delivery systems, LEAs, schools and leaders and educators in them—is empowered and equipped to deliver on the State'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 SEA 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 LEAs 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

SEAs 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 K12 structure that is at once hierarchical and decentralized. The context for reform is not only complex, it is dynamic. SEAs do not operate in a political, cultural or economic vacuum. Therefore, SEAs need to be prepared for the context to change over time. The sustainability of reform requires constant attention to changing circumstances in order 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 SEAs as organizations and something over which they do not have direct control, they need not treat it as beyond their consideration. As they pursue the goals of their reform initiatives, SEAs should take their complex and changing environment into account, not only reacting to it, but actively shaping it and leveraging its strengths.

Key Variables

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

- A. **Alignment of the Statewide 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 independent of one another, often intentionally so. State, local and municipal governments, and State and local boards of education all play a role, as do regional delivery systems (such as Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, or BOCES) and local school districts. In pursuit of transformative and lasting outcomes for students, SEAs must map this complex environment, identify what policies and practices can accelerate or impede progress, align State 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 State and local stakeholder groups. The value

placed on reform by these audiences—their opinions, attitudes, perceptions and active participation—is a variable affecting sustainability that SEAs can measure and act upon. SEAs can also use communication and other engagement strategies in order to increase the focus and clarity of 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. SEAs can sharpen and define their roles in building capacity as they move from compliance to support, leveraging their available resources to better sustain priority reforms.

Sustainable reform, however, is not the sole responsibility of a single agency or jurisdiction, and 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 State context and, ideally, be taken up by educators and the public as their own purpose. Therefore, this rubric examines system capacity both as a property inherent to the SEA and as a property of the broader State context—the sum of resources, readiness and willingness throughout the State to accomplish sustainable reform. Although SEAs do not have direct control over the extended capacity of the entire State, 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 statewide basis, SEAs should consider two variables:

- A. **SEA Capacity.** SEA capacity is the resources, readiness and willingness dedicated to reach priority goals through the implementation of priority reforms. SEAs are multipurpose organizations, and therefore do not commit 100% of their capacity to reform-related activities. Nevertheless, the position of reform related activities within the SEA 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 SEAs as they organize their reform effort. The data, processes and

systems SEAs use to conduct ongoing performance management of reform activities lead to strategic and tactical adjustments of SEA 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. **State Capacity.** SEAs 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 statewide, throughout the complex system of jurisdictions, agencies and support organizations at the State and local level. To develop sustainable reform, SEAs should extend their capacity through multiple means, including, but not limited to local partnerships, regional delivery systems and cross-State collaborations, to encourage the commitment of resources and support reform implementation throughout the State.

3. Performance Management

Description of Category

State agencies are taking on complex priority reforms such as new, more rigorous standards, equitable access to effective educators, and turning around low-performing schools. These reforms require more comprehensive oversight, planning and problem-solving than SEAs and LEAs might be used to. While many factors will contribute to short- and long-term success of reform, one powerful influence is the performance management system that SEAs and LEAs establish to ensure that the 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 SEA; 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 SEA or 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 SEA gets feedback on implementation challenges from LEAs.

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