

Introduction:

The SEA of the Future: Building Agency Capacity for Evidence-Based Policymaking

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November 2015

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State education agencies (SEAs) are increasingly under the gun to boost their effectiveness and advance student outcomes. This means chiefs and their deputies have to make the most of their resources and better understand how well existing programs and policies are (or are not) working in the field.

To do just that, many state leaders are looking to grow their agency's capacity for generating, evaluating, and using evidence. In the fifth volume of *The SEA of the Future*, we explore *how* state education agencies can bolster their ability to use research and data to drive key spending, policy, and program decisions. We draw on the experiences of agency staff from Massachusetts, Michigan, and Tennessee, as well as the work of the Regional Comprehensive Centers.

Carrie Conaway (Massachusetts Department of Education) describes why evidence-building is important, what types of research activities SEAs might focus on, and how to maximize research impact. As the head of the Office of Planning and Research in Massachusetts, Conaway offers SEA leaders concrete examples of how research can guide agency work in key areas like teacher evaluation and expanded learning time.

Nathaniel Schwartz (Tennessee Department of Education) describes how to build a research team within the SEA and details the strategies his agency uses to make findings user friendly (and therefore, more likely to actually be used). Dr. Schwartz cites specific examples of his agency's work to describe how evidence plays different roles in policymaking, from informing policy design to implementation and evaluation.

Venessa Keesler (Michigan Department of Education) discusses how states can strategically leverage external research partnerships to supplement the SEAs' own capacity to conduct research and advance evidence-based policy. Keesler draws on her experience working with external researchers in Michigan to describe how SEAs can make the most of partnerships.

Finally, in an audio essay with three Regional Comprehensive Center leaders, we discuss how states can use RCC resources to better connect research and policy. Readers can see a transcript of that conversation at the end of this volume or listen to the discussion in a podcast.

This volume includes practical tools SEAs can deploy around research and data. Ms. Conaway's essay features a sample policy analyst job description and a research office organizational chart. Dr. Keesler's essay includes a case study of a research partnership—the Michigan Consortium for Educational Research. Finally, our conversation with RCC leaders surfaced a blueprint for states looking to create a research office (based on Nebraska's work with the North Central Comprehensive Center).

Through these essays, the accompanying tools, and the more comprehensive supports the BSCP Center provides, we aim to give SEAs a solid foundation on which to build capacity for evidence-based policymaking.