

“Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick”: Why Chiefs Should Do Both to Improve Schools and Districts

Paul T. Hill and Ashley Jochim
Center on Reinventing Public Education

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With enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), responsibility for improving student outcomes is back where some say it has always belonged—under state purview. While the law’s regulations and U.S. Department of Education interpretation will likely continue the federal government’s tendency to circumscribe what states can do, on the whole, states will gain much more freedom in how they identify, support, and turn around low-performing schools.

Much of this work will fall upon state superintendents (“chiefs”). Happily, many chiefs are better prepared than ever to foster change on behalf of at-risk students. The build-up of chiefs’ leadership capacity started well before it became clear that ESSA would grant states substantial flexibility: over the past decade, two developments have broadened states’ options for effective action.

Development #1: Chiefs now possess an expanded tool set for improving local schools and districts. These tools give chiefs new “hard powers”—formal authority to direct school and district transformation, from providing formalized supports to struggling local systems to assuming management via state-run districts, receiverships, chartering, or wholesale district takeovers. Chiefs are using combinations of local school and district capacity, external support providers, and nonprofit school operators to develop more effective and politically sustainable improvement strategies.

Development #2: Chiefs have established a pattern of activism, evident in many if not all states, that leverages their “soft powers,” or more informal means of influence. These powers include persuading others to do things on their own initiative, whether or not the chief has the power to compel the action. Chiefs are using their bully pulpit (buttressed by their expanded hard powers) to build coalitions to solve neglected problems in key localities, support local leaders who take initiative, and help those leaders take advantage of all the freedoms state law permits.

While some may consider chiefs’ hard and soft powers as alternatives, in reality they are mutually reinforcing. Together, they can help chiefs influence far more localities and find more effective ways to help disadvantaged students than either strategy used alone.

Key Takeaways

- More chiefs are gaining “hard powers” to intervene and support local school improvement—with growing examples of effectiveness.
- Interventions leading to state control carry strict practical and political limits.
- Chiefs can use “soft powers” to define issues, support local reformers, and support well-founded local requests for regulatory and spending flexibility.
- Hard and soft powers are mutually reinforcing: to maximize their effectiveness on behalf of school improvement, chiefs need to use both.

FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY PUSHED AND PULLED CHIEFS IN NEW DIRECTIONS

States are constitutionally responsible for public education, but have long delegated their educational responsibilities to local school boards. Until the 1970s, funding and provision of public schools was mostly a local enterprise, and state education agencies (SEAs) had little direct control or administrative capacity.

Changes in state and federal policy have led SEAs and their leaders to assume new responsibilities. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 made SEAs into administrators of new federal programs like Title I. Chiefs used the flow of federal resources to staff their agencies and ensure that districts complied with federal program rules. Later, in the 1980s, state legislatures, governors, and the courts sought to improve local public school quality by bringing more coherence and uniformity to K–12 public education. SEA leaders became responsible for improving the quality of schooling inputs (e.g., time, money, and staff), usually by structuring state law and policy around teacher preparation, curriculum, and funding. Most recently, federal law has required states to establish goals for student achievement and to track local progress.

These reforms reshaped the role of state chief. Chiefs were now expected to be effective administrators who efficiently managed compliance responsibilities, expert educators capable of identifying effective practices for instruction and school organization, and public accountability officials charged with tracking and reporting on school performance.

Federal initiatives after the Great Recession of the late 2000s further expanded chiefs’ leadership capacity, particularly in states that competed for Race to the Top grants. To compete, chiefs had to become advocates for state legislative and policy changes on testing, accountability, charter schools, and educator evaluation. In the winning states, chiefs and state boards of education were responsible for delivering on promises made to get the federal money. This forced many chiefs to proactively work with their legislatures and, in turn, put new pressures on SEA staff, districts, schools, and teachers. The Obama administration’s offer of state waivers from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements further strengthened chiefs’ role in brokering state policy changes and ensuring that the state and its localities kept their pledges. These interactions with the federal government and among state and local policymakers gave many chiefs standing to press for reforms in ways that previously would have been considered beyond their powers.¹

As a result of these successive waves of reform, an increasing number of chiefs have broken out of their traditional roles and taken a more activist position in K–12 education. In doing so, they have relied on both “hard power”—formal authority to intervene and direct local improvement efforts—and “soft power”—more informal means of persuasion where a chief may not have the authority to force action. Below, we describe how these powers have evolved and how chiefs have used them in tandem, rather than as either-or options, to support local improvement efforts.

CHIEFS GAIN “HARD POWER” THROUGH NEW AUTHORITIES

Since the 1970s, chiefs have gained new authority to shape what educators do and how schools operate by adopting curriculum, standards, and assessment; regulating teacher certification; and ensuring compliance with federal program rules. But none of these powers enabled chiefs (or their delegates) to directly improve school administration or instruction.

The emergence of state-initiated school turnaround as a reform strategy, however, has greatly enhanced chiefs’ power. State-initiated turnaround is among the strongest hard power tools chiefs can wield to influence local improvement. By definition, state-initiated turnarounds involve an element of coercion: they force changes that a locality may have been unwilling or unable to embrace on its own. Unlike efforts to improve local public schools via regulations, state-initiated turnarounds aim to directly change administrative and instructional practices.

The tradition of local control in public education means that state intrusion in local school administration is often a political, conflict-ridden enterprise. But local school boards sometimes fail to deliver on the promise of a quality education for all. They can become embroiled in conflict, neglect groups of children, or spend the district into bankruptcy. When these things happen, state chiefs need the authority to force a new start.

New Jersey was the first state to take over a district, in 1989 in Jersey City. Many states followed suit. By 2016, a total of 35 states had laws that enabled them to take over management of schools and/or districts. NCLB reinforced the turnaround trend by requiring states to oversee and support school improvement efforts.

While the federal law established a floor for state oversight of low-performing schools and districts, it is *state* policy that more precisely determines the latitude or constraint on a chief’s action in the face of chronic performance problems.

On one end of the state-initiated turnaround spectrum, some states require SEAs to provide struggling local schools and districts with support, either directly or through a partner. For example, California, until recently, required schools to work with a school assistance intervention team for three years or enter into a joint intervention agreement with the state. Other states, like Minnesota, delegate support functions to regional entities. These support models rely on state-local cooperation and assume that local education leaders have the will, authority, and capacity to change practices.

On the other end of the state-initiated turnaround spectrum, some states authorize chiefs to assume management of low-performing schools or districts via state-run districts, receiverships, chartering, or wholesale district takeovers. These models can let states directly address gaps in local capacity and facilitate execution of a turnaround plan by insulating the resulting school changes from local politics. Such models also can test the limits of SEAs’ capacity and chiefs’ political skills.

Recent innovations in turnaround policy have better equipped states to support local improvement efforts by mitigating a wide range of state and local operational and political constraints. For instance, state-managed districts, like the Louisiana Recovery School District, are independent statewide entities that direct turnarounds in individual schools, not whole districts. This lets states focus on fewer struggling schools within one or more districts. The state can expand learning time, change personnel, and contract with school operators without having to negotiate with district staff, unions, and the local board.

Some chiefs also leverage the state agency’s charter school authorizing powers to reconstitute low-performing schools as charter schools, which are independent from the local district and free to construct novel approaches to school improvement in exchange for being held accountable for student results. Executed well, these strategies let chiefs tackle performance gaps through partnerships with proven nonprofit school operators and scale turnaround efforts slowly as new school talent is identified (principals and charter operators skilled in turnaround are in short supply). But precisely because these approaches sidestep the local district and local political process, they can be contentious and test chiefs’ fortitude.

Some states have sought to build stronger roles for localities in state-initiated turnarounds through state-authorized turnaround zones, which typically include a subset of a local district’s schools. Through law or regulation, states can create a new policy framework for turnaround zone schools, giving those principals more autonomy and funding and waiving key provisions of collective bargaining agreements or district policy. Memphis Public Schools’ iZone and the Springfield Empowerment Zone in Massachusetts are two such examples.

All these turnaround options vary in how much power they provide chiefs to change local schools. While state-initiated turnaround mechanisms have diversified and states have gained increased authority to direct local public schools’ operations through full-fledged takeovers, none of the current approaches outlined here offer chiefs a sure win. Evidence on the effectiveness of state-initiated turnarounds of all types is mixed. And many interventions have never been evaluated to assess their impacts.²

These mixed results may be partly explained by the substantial variation in *how* state interventions change the operation of local public schools, including factors like whether the state is able to get talent into the schools, marshal additional resources to support the turnaround, and get local administrators and parents to embrace the effort. State interventions that fail to address local gaps in capacity, improve operating conditions for teachers and principals, or build broad support are less likely to be successful. States are not equally well positioned to address these challenges. And many chiefs are hamstrung by inadequate staffing and weak political support.

While state interventions are often seen as a measure of last resort, chiefs have significant freedom to choose whether or when to use their hard power to intervene—and whether or when to use the threat of intervention to motivate negotiation and consensus building around school improvement in local communities. The latter is an important lever that can affect far more localities than state chiefs could directly intervene in.

CHIEFS GAIN “SOFT POWER” THROUGH INFORMAL MEANS OF INFLUENCE

Unlike the more direct control embedded in hard power, when chiefs wield soft power they influence, persuade, and incentivize others to act on behalf of school improvement. In its crudest form, soft power depends on hard power—like when chiefs threaten state or court intervention to motivate local actors to address neglected problems in their schools. But soft power includes much more than that. Chiefs can use their bully pulpit, making speeches and issuing reports that draw public attention to a local problem. Chiefs can lend their support and prestige to others by convening task forces, bestowing awards, and publicly praising local officials who take initiative to improve their schools. And chiefs can link local officials with other state-level help, including the governor, the legislature, or state agencies (this strategy can bolster chiefs’ political capital in the process). All these actions can make state and local officials into collaborators, not just compliers.

Chiefs’ use of soft power can embolden local officials who have long wanted to act but could not assemble enough support. When chiefs shine a spotlight on local performance gaps and opportunities to improve, they can spur local problem solving. And as chiefs across the country have moved beyond their compliance responsibilities, they have capitalized on new openings to influence others on the sidelines (e.g., mayors and civic leaders who previously paid little attention to K–12 issues).

Clearly, soft power alone is not always enough for chiefs hoping to improve districts and schools. But it can help chiefs extend their reach much farther than relying on hard power alone. For example, when chiefs exercise soft power in one community, it can have a domino effect on others, influencing actors in places where chiefs have not focused their efforts. In Louisiana, for example, the state’s work in New Orleans through the Recovery School District helped to catalyze improvement efforts in Jefferson Parish even though the district had not (yet) been a target of state-initiated turnaround.

The exercise of soft power focuses a chief’s attention on moves that local actors can make. Chiefs needn’t develop the local improvement plans themselves, but they do need to draw the right players into the conversation and ensure they are motivated—both by a full understanding of the locality’s problems and by the prospect of state intervention if nothing is done to resolve them—to seek strong remedies. Chiefs can also facilitate implementation of local plans, brokering necessary waivers of state regulatory and funding limits.

This form of soft power activism is new for chiefs in two ways. First, it focuses on improving particular localities and schools, rather than on setting school-improvement policy for the state as a whole. Second, it makes the chief a power broker, coalition builder, and resource seeker, not just an official performing legally prescribed duties. Examples of chiefs wielding soft power to influence local actors include:

- Visiting communities to get diverse coalitions of government and private-sector actors to recognize a problem and develop a collaborative strategy to solve it.
- Urging local boards and superintendents to consider actions previously thought outside their powers and contrary to state policy, and ensuring that the SEA construes their actions as permissible.
- Mediating local disputes like those between a superintendent and school board members, the board and the teachers union, or a state representative and the district.
- Helping local board members identify new district leadership pipelines, including assisting in searches for superintendents who will implement a strong improvement strategy.
- Convening superintendents or board members across communities to tackle common problems and committing state support for promising lines of action.
- Offering local (and potential) superintendents training on building coalitions to break political logjams and using data to garner support for bold actions.
- Ensuring that promising local initiatives are validly evaluated, program design and implementation plans are thoughtfully drawn, and results are broadly shared.³

A chief can exercise soft power even with no state takeover law on the books. Chiefs interviewed for our study reported running interference for local boards and superintendents with the SEA bureaucracy and seeking technical amendments to state laws that had unintended consequences for particular districts. By doing this, chiefs encouraged local initiative and quelled local school systems' common fear that any outside-the-box action will spell trouble with the state.

While chiefs have taken similar steps in the past, they are increasingly common today. Moreover, a growing number of state chiefs now see such soft power actions as critical tools for bringing about the greatest change.

A BALANCING ACT FOR CHIEFS TO JUGGLE SOFT AND HARD POWERS

As a practical matter, no agency can act in every situation where its powers apply. Agencies are compelled to act sparingly, focusing on egregious cases where their hand is forced or on other select situations that can generate broad impact by example. The entities overseen, whether banks or school districts, need only believe that the agency *might* act, not that it certainly will.

Given these realities, chiefs have the best shot at maximizing their impact on school and district improvement when they exercise their hard and soft powers in tandem.

A credible threat of state intervention may push local superintendents to undertake their own improvement efforts and strengthen their hand in bargaining over improvement plans with school board members, unions, and others. Chiefs can use soft powers—like identifying pressing local problems and convening local leaders—to then support local actions meant to preempt the state’s use of hard power.

While some states grant chiefs few explicit hard powers, and in some states common state levers like certification denial to nonperforming districts have never been pulled, chiefs determined to act on behalf of students stranded in ineffective schools or negligent districts can still wield soft powers like their bully pulpit. Publicly stating that local action has put a given group of students at risk and that these students need better options is itself a powerful intervention, even if the chief cannot impose particular remedies.

Chiefs must carefully judge when to use hard and soft power. Chiefs who pledge to never use their hard powers may undermine their chances to influence localities informally with soft powers. A chief wanting to maximize soft power would never say, as observed in one city, “No matter what happens, I won’t take over the schools here.”⁴ Premature withdrawal is likely to take pressure off of the local superintendent and denies political cover to local leaders who want to argue for bold action.

Do chiefs need to use each of their hard powers at least once to make them credible? There is not yet enough evidence to answer. It seems likely that one exercise of a hard power—say, intervening in a handful of low-performing schools—would be enough to establish the implied threat of using other powers, at least for a while.

On the flip side, chiefs can undermine all their powers, hard and soft, by overusing their intervention authority. Chiefs can only take on so much before exhausting both their focus and the supply of quality school providers and leaders. Once it is clear that a chief is bogged down in a few localities, opportunities to use soft

power elsewhere will likely disappear. Similarly, chiefs who use hard power in many localities can draw significant political backlash and give enemies in the legislature or on the state board cause to unite against them.

CONCLUSION: LOOKING AHEAD, CHIEFS’ TRAINING AND SKILLS ARE KEY

Thirty-five states have laws allowing some form of school or district takeover. But all state chiefs have inherent power and prestige that allow them to build coalitions and press for action. Chiefs’ strategic use of hard and soft power can boost their role in school-improvement efforts statewide, and a growing number of chiefs are drawing upon both sources of power to maximize their impact.

Will more chiefs come to use their hard and soft powers as they mine ESSA’s new opportunities for state leadership on school improvement? Much will depend on states’ political climates and how willing governors and other senior state officeholders are to prioritize school improvement and back up an activist chief. It will also depend on whether increased turnover of chiefs undermines their ability to wield their hard and soft powers, whose effectiveness depends on carefully nurtured relationships between chiefs, local officials, and state policymakers. With chiefs’ average tenure lasting just a few years, most chiefs will leave office before building the necessary relationships and capacity to be effective in their position.

Ultimately, it comes down to the chiefs themselves: do they have the political skill to navigate state policymaking circles, build coalitions, and gain local superintendents’ and other officials’ respect and attention?

None of the above is a given. While chiefs are better positioned today than ever before to take effective action, many step into the job with little experience in the varied roles the job demands. And while district superintendents typically build their skills while rising through the local school system ranks, the standard pipeline for state superintendents generally fails to prepare them to take on the complex leadership functions involved in driving school improvement.

But new and aspiring chiefs can be better trained to use their powers for school and district improvement. Today, while lawyers, business school graduates, and union leaders are trained in negotiating and coalition building, chiefs typically are not. Training and job-shadowing programs, some of which are being developed by the two national chiefs’ associations, are promising. Aspiring chiefs might also consider taking negotiation courses from business schools or innovative education leadership programs, like Rice University’s Education Entrepreneurship Program. To fully exploit ESSA’s expanded possibilities for state leadership on school and district improvement, chiefs need a wide range of skills for effectively wielding their hard and soft powers on behalf of students.

ENDNOTES

1. These Obama administration programs also fueled the political fire underlying chiefs’ work on issues like Common Core and teacher evaluation and may be partly responsible for the last decade’s increased turnover among state chiefs.
2. For a comprehensive review of alternative strategies to state-initiated turnaround and their effects, see Ashley Jochim, *Measures of Last Resort: Assessing Strategies for State-Initiated Turnaround* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).
3. Paul Hill, *Chiefs Can Be Powerful* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, forthcoming).
4. Former state superintendent, personal communication, January 2016.