The Shifting Role of State Education Agencies: Lessons Learned From Strategic Planning With the Delaware Department of Education

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The Shifting Role of State Education Agencies:
Lessons Learned from Strategic Planning with the Delaware Department of Education

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.)
Capstone

Submitted by
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Abstract

Through this capstone, I explore the unique dynamics I encountered in the Delaware Department of Education during the department’s final year as a federal Race to the Top grant recipient. This document describes my intended work for the department, culminating in a two-year strategic plan. The goal of my theory of action was to ensure that the resources of the department were aligned to a focused set of priorities, reflecting a balance of accountability and support. Through the following sections I explore the rationale for my work, results achieved, and attempt an explanation of the results themselves. I close with implications for my own leadership, the site itself, and the sector as a whole.

In the Review of Knowledge for Action, I explore the role of State Education Agencies (SEA) as both a support body and a monitoring and accountability agency, and develop a personal theory of action that guided my work within the department. The role of the SEA in the sector is a complex one where opportunity and tension exist simultaneously in the pursuit of creating conditions for improved academic outcomes for students. As I discuss, both the literature and the day-to-day operations of the department demonstrate challenges in this work.

The Results and Analysis components of the capstone explain in greater detail the goals and outcomes of my strategic project, and expand on the complexities of the Delaware Department of Education leadership team. Through the use of the Note for Analyzing Workgroups (Harvard Business School, 1998) I explore both structures and embedded culture within the state and the department, and discuss how these impacted
the strategic plan. In the Implications component I illuminate both tensions and opportunities for the department in light of the local and national turbulence around the balance of accountability and support.

This capstone aims provide insights into the complex role of State Education Agencies as they seek to both fulfill their core function and take on an increasingly dynamic role influencing and impacting academic outcomes for students in their state.
Introduction

The state of Delaware is the second smallest state in the Union, with a population of 935,000 and 135,000 students served in the public schools. Statewide, there is a strong sense of pride in being a native Delawarean, (Blowman, Personal Interview, 2014) and people who were born in the state often stay to work and raise families. The state’s size and relatively small population create a tight-knit community, and there is a perception that there are often less than six degrees of separation between any two Delawareans. This closeness is particularly true in the education sector, where the Delaware Department of Education often takes on roles, such as monitoring student attendance and statewide assessment, that would traditionally be held in a larger district but due to size and economies of scale are situated centrally. Serving 19 districts and 20 charter schools across the state, the Department of Education plays a critical role in performing both a regulatory and fiscal function for the districts, as well as technical support and statewide policy design.

Delaware has long been a pioneer state with regard to education innovations. In 1995, the state passed a charter law and Delaware’s first charter school opened. In 1996, the state passed a law allowing for statewide school choice. The state funds for public education are among the top 12 nationwide. In 2013 the state was recognized nationally as an innovator by the organization Education Commission of the States (ECS), “‘Delaware is a great example for the rest of the country to see how innovative approaches can improve education, even in today’s political climate,’ ECS President
Jeremy Anderson said in a news release” (Albright, National group lauds education innovations in Delaware, 2013).

In 2010, the federal Department of Education launched a competitive grant application called Race to the Top, inviting states to apply for a deep infusion of funds aligned to four key areas of educational reform. Under the leadership of Governor Jack Markell (D), the state applied for and was awarded one of two grants from the first round of applications, securing almost $120 M for the state over a four-year period. The statewide collaboration in preparation for the grant application was remarkable, bringing together all 19 Delaware superintendents as co-signatories and the support of the Delaware State Education Association (DSEA). The grant application benefitted from the deep relationships and interconnections across the state, (Ruszkowski, 2014) and the award was celebrated statewide. “Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said the two states [Delaware and Tennessee] had won because they had written new laws to support their policies and had marshaled overwhelming statewide support from teachers, school districts and business leaders for comprehensive school improvement plans. ‘We got 100 percent sign-on,’ said Gov. Jack Markell of Delaware, a Democrat” (Dillon, March 29, 2010).

The Race to the Top grant was designed to fund and promote reforms in four key areas: statewide standards, data systems, teacher effectiveness, and turnaround schools. The Delaware Department of Education responded with initiatives and plans in each arena. Major streams of work included the development of the School Turnaround Unit, a deepening the department’s role in supporting access to higher education, and the development of statewide technology and data systems. Through the creation of a new
team called the Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Unit, the department launched critical reforms in teacher effectiveness, evaluation, retention and compensation.

In addition to a series of initiatives within the department, school districts across the state were awarded funds aligned to the grant’s key areas. Each district statewide was asked to provide a plan for allocating the grant dollars, and annual district awards were to be spent on both personnel and programs in alignment with the goals of Race to the Top. By the end of the grant period, in 2015, the Delaware Department of Education had provided over $59 M directly to districts and spent another $30 M in support for professional development, trainings, and networks of support across the state.

During the first year of the grant, 2010-11, despite the initial enthusiasm and fanfare that heralded the grant award, the work faltered. There were challenges with implementation, local districts did not always comply with the terms of their award, there was slow but growing resistance to the department’s accountability measures, and a perception of little corresponding support (Ruszkowski, 2014).

The Governor appointed a new Secretary of Education, Mark Murphy, in 2012, following Dr. Lillian Lowery who left Delaware to lead Maryland’s Department of Education. Murphy came to the role from the Vision Network, having led a network of schools across the state. He recognized the opportunity in the Race to the Top funding to drive towards system-wide change and began his tenure as secretary aiming to create systems and structures to improve student academic achievement statewide.

Over the course of Murphy’s leadership and the last three years of the Race to the Top grant, some student outcomes improved. Graduation rates soared and the dropout rate is at a 30 year low. Student outcomes as measured by the National Assessment of
Educational Progress (NAEP) are among the top in the country (Appendix A). In 2011, the state was awarded a second Race to the Top grant, this time for early learners. The federal Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, visited Delaware in February of 2015 and lauded the progress made over time. Despite these gains and markers of achievement, there are palpable tensions in the education landscape across the state. The turnaround work, supporting the state’s lowest performing schools, has been attacked in the press and become a divisive point of contention between the department and leaders of Wilmington area schools, the state’s most urban and lowest-achieving area. Teacher evaluation work, the heart of the Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Unit, yielded little change in outcome through their evaluation results in the 2013-14 year (Albright, Virtually no Del. teachers receive poor evaluations, 2014). District participation the state’s Common Ground for Common Core initiative, designed to prepare schools and teachers for full implementation of the Common Core State Standards, has been erratic and fallen short of serving all districts in the state. The Delaware teacher’s union publically decried participation in the department’s plan to compensate and retain high performing teachers in hard-to-serve schools (Albright, Big bonuses draw few teachers, 2014). The same relationships that allowed this small state to become the recipient of the Race to the Top grant have deteriorated, and deep divisions exist within the education community.

As I entered the Department of Education in the summer of 2014, the department was preparing for the final extension year of Race to the Top dollars, and anticipating a leadership change in the governor’s office in 2017. Across the country, the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) was being hotly debated, and there was a
nascent but growing opt-out movement, as parents and educators alike struggled against the accompanying rigorous standards and new assessments (Albright, 2015). My role as a resident was to lead a strategic planning process for the Delaware Department of Education years 2015-2017, designed to see the department through the transitions ahead. The intent of the strategic plan was to clearly articulate the department’s priority reforms as well as to ensure that these reforms were appropriately resourced with state funds following the final year of Race to the Top-funded initiatives. Since the Secretary of Education is a gubernatorial appointee, there is a widely-held belief that when Governor Markell leaves office the senior leadership of the Delaware Department of Education will be replaced. The secretary believed that developing a clear strategic plan would be one way to ensure that key reforms were maintained beyond the current administration’s tenure.

I undertake to explore the unique dynamics I encountered in Delaware during the course of my residency through the pages that follow. Through the Review of Knowledge for Action, I explore the role of accountability and support as they pertain to the role of State Education Agencies (SEAs). I pay specific attention to the dual function the agency plays as both a support body and a monitoring and accountability agency. Susan Lusi, in her research on the role of state education agencies, sums up tensions SEAs encounter in their dual role: “If state departments of education choose leniency by providing too little pressure for change, they may find practitioners being so complacent that change never occurs. If state departments of education choose stringency, however, change may never occur due to system overload. If the work cannot realistically be
accomplished according to state-mandated time lines, then practitioners may burn out/revolt” (Lusi, 1997, p. 160).

In the Analysis section I explain in greater detail the dynamic of the leadership team of the Department of Education and the ways in which the structures and embedded culture within the state and the department impacted my work. As the work of my strategic project unfolded, I encountered significant challenges to my work and the development of the strategic plan. In the Analysis component of this capstone I use the Framework for Workgroups (Harvard Business School, 1998) to explore reasons why, through this project I was able to generate results, and explore factors contributing to the limited effectiveness of the project.

As the Implications for both Site and Sector illuminate there was significant turbulence around the role of accountability, the role of state education agencies in the education space, and the legacy of Race to the Top grant. In subtle yet unmistakable ways, the political theatre that was playing out on the national stage had an impact on the educational climate in Delaware, and the challenges and opportunities that the state faced as it continued to address academic achievement of all of its students were in many ways mirrored in states across the country.
Review of Knowledge for Action

This Review of Knowledge for Action is grounded in two key areas: the evolution of the SEA and the evolution of the accountability movement. I focus here on domestic research on state education departments and responses to accountability and support functions for schools and districts. I end the Review of Knowledge for Action with my theory of action, designed to guide my work with the Delaware Department of Education during the course of my residency.

The Evolution of State Education Agency

The role of the SEAs emerges clearly in my examination of the public education landscape, as I sought to understand systemic levers for change and ways to impact academic outcomes for students in the public sector. Across the 50 states, SEAs are exploring both the opportunities and limits of their role and adjusting to the impact of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policies interpreted through multiple administrations (A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind, 2015). In light of Delaware’s Race to the Top award in 2010 and subsequent shifts in role and position national landscape regarding SEAs, I queried existing data sources looking for research, analysis, or promising practices related to the changing role of the SEA. I was specifically interested in evidence or assumptions of state influences of the work happening in districts, (often referred to as Local Education Agencies or LEAs) and schools. Generally, research related to the changing role of the SEA is rapidly changing due to the recent adoption of Common Core State Standards. Notably, the SEA’s role as a provider of technical and strategic support has not been widely studied or discussed,
though in terms of both people and dollars a significant amount of resources are
dedicated to this area.

The goal of complex school reform is specifically to improve instruction, and
thereby student achievement. Bringing about this type of reform is long-term
work requiring additional capacity at both the state and local level. It is also work
that no one to date has had much success with, particularly at a stateside scale.
No one knows exactly how to bring complex reform about. (Lusi, 1997, p. 170)

The limited research that does exist focuses mostly on areas of a low functioning
bureaucracy or, in recent years, as an accountability-based organization.

Historically, State Education Agencies have held a low status position in the
public education hierarchy (Murphy, 2014). Designed initially as compliance-driven
organizations with little room for reform efforts, SEAs are now in a role with
unprecedented opportunities for impact. NCLB, with its heavy emphasis on test-based
accountability aligned to statewide learning standards and assessments, has reinforced the
expansion of state power (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2013; Manna, 2012). Still,
SEAs are plagued with federal mandates and regulations from decades ago, which require
much of their attention and operational capacity. What was once a low-profile job of
managing federal aid, providing curricular guidance, and ensuring compliance with
various legal obligations is now a far more visible and politically fraught task (Brown,
2011).

Transforming the work of the SEA is made even more complicated by capacity
issues that traditionally exist with departments of education, namely funding, human
capital and legislative constraints (Data Quality Campaign, November 2011). Often,
SEAs are the targets of budget cuts and short-term federal financial incentives. In
addition, low salaries and ineffective hiring practices make it difficult to find and retain
high performing staff. Lastly, many states have very strong local control rules written into their constitutions and legislative guidelines, providing autonomy to districts and limiting the role of the SEA (Center of Education Policy, 2011; Murphy, 2011).

Mass Insight characterized the primary mechanism that the SEA has in supporting and intervening with outcomes in the field:

“Over the past decade, the federal government has increased the state education agency’s role in identifying and intervening in persistently low-achieving schools:

- In 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required states to identify schools in improvement, corrective action, and restructuring;
- The American Recovery and Reinvestment act (ARRA) of 2009 required states to “provide intensive support and effective interventions for the lowest-performing schools” as one of four assurances in exchange for state fiscal stabilization dollars;
- The revised and expanded School Improvement Grant (SIG) program required state grantees to identify their bottom 5 percent of schools and competitively allocate funds to only the boldest school turnaround, transformation, restart, and closure plans;
- Race to the Top (RttT) of 2009 required grantees to “turn around our lowest-performing schools” (whitehouse.gov, 2015) as one of four reform priorities; and most recently, the NCLB waiver application required states to establish turnaround strategies for the bottom 15 percent of Title I schools (a combination of ‘priority’ and ‘focus’ schools), in place of NCLB’s original step-by-step sanction process.” (Mass Insight, 2010)

The shifting demands on and opportunities for SEAs has had a direct impact on their relationships with LEAs. As state education agencies move from a compliance oriented bureaucracy to one of increased accountability and increased supports, the intensity, speed, and high stakes nature of this shift has affected the work on a variety of levels, both internally within SEAs and at the critical intersection of the field work with LEAs. In order to best exercise its core functions and increase focus on improved academic
outcomes in the field, it is imperative that the SEA understand the levers it is exercising to impact the work in LEAs (Murphy, 2014).

As stated above, research and practice literature regarding SEAs is limited. What exists is largely circumstantial and based on a limited number of examples from the field. The literature also often foregrounds a set of core beliefs that emanate from reform-minded think-tanks and policy analysts. Proof points are limited and there are few to no examples of replication of an effective SEA led practice, nor impact at scale (Lusi, 1997). Individual actors in the field have been lauded as being agents of change, but demonstrated impact at scale remains elusive and as yet, largely undocumented. Pundits and practitioners alike have observed highly visible, reform oriented State Chiefs Gist of Rhode Island, Cerf of New Jersey, White of Louisiana, Huffman of Tennessee, and Bennett of Florida, looking to analyze results of their reform efforts (Brown, 2011). As a sign of the times, however, only one of these chiefs is still in office as of April, 2015.

The themes that come up in the research describing possibilities for achieving replicable change with districts and schools are as follows: competitive grant incentives, political cover for forward-looking LEAs, effective data systems, creating conditions for collaboration, and incentivizing voluntary compliance with new regulations (Mass Insight, 2010).

Further analysis of the potential for SEA work comes in reference to the implementation of the CCSS, as described by Ross Wiener, the Vice President & Executive Director of the Aspen Institute’s Education and Society Program. “States should not waste their limited time on money developing new tools,” he argues. “Instead they should curate, adapt, and strategically deploy tools that already exist to help school
districts make good choices among them” (Weiner, March 2013). Weiner identified the need for states to take a leadership role in the roll-out of CCSS, described the historical reasons why states may struggle to fulfill this role, and provided concrete suggestions for moving towards successful integration of CCSS at this critical juncture. He identified critical levers based on proof points around the country and in this, shared advice that can potentially be applied to more than the implementation of the standards.

Other frameworks for rethinking the relationship between the states and districts come from research conducted in districts themselves (Bryk, 2011), or from international examples, e.g. the London Challenge (Ofsted, 2010). Still more perspectives on the role of the SEA come from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in coordination with the Aspen Institute highlight Common Core and teacher effectiveness intersections (Weiner, March 2013) as a critical juncture for opportunity. The Center for American Progress asserts the critical role of the SEA in teacher evaluation reform efforts (McGuinn, 2012). Each voice gives a nuanced take on the role of the SEA.

Additionally, the literature around the role of the SEA points to a clear role that the departments can play in the effective management and dissemination of achievement data. Research suggests that the state agency must move from a compliance-oriented role to one that operates more like a partnership, a co-collaborator to ensuring that districts can effectively manage and use data systems (Data Quality Campaign, November 2011). This shift in role, moving from adherence to regulatory guidelines towards a role aligned to supports for schools and districts, requires significant internal reorganization and a performance based approach to improvement (Murphy, 2011).
In the recent past, many SEAs are advancing reform agendas and efforts despite the challenging conditions of moribund regulations and restrictive staffing constraints. A handful of state chiefs and commissioners are designing workarounds that are creating the conditions for change. The successful changes include efforts to:

- Increase flexibility to hire and staff
- Maximize recent federal programming, use it for political cover
- Partner with philanthropic organizations and foundations to maximize impact
- Restructure the organization of departments within the agency to align with strategic priorities
- Link organization structures to student learning, explicitly the CCSS
- Create urgency around the persistent achievement gap

(Mass Insight, 2010)

According to the Center for Reinventing Public Education, “Successful states are likely to be those that identify the critical points of leverage, repurpose their limited resources, and secure the authority needed to drive change down to the school level. It is far from clear, however, what these SEAs of the future will look like” (Murphy, 2014).

**The Accountability Evolution**

In the early 2000s, as public education was coming to understand the implications of and opportunities in the NCLB environment, a culture of accountability gained prominence in the field (O'Day, 2002). Coined “new accountability” by education researchers at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), this approach to accountability foregrounded, “… The emphasis on student outcomes as the measure of adult and system performance, a focus on the school as the basic unit of accountability, public reporting of student achievement, and the attachment of consequences to performance levels” (Abelman, 1999).
An examination of the complexities of the types of accountability at play in the public education system, as well as their impact and limitations, is critical to understanding the current environment. Researchers and practitioners alike have taken the stance that moving closer to the student-teacher intersection point is imperative if accountability structures are to yield greater gains (Mintrop, 2004). The current system sets in place a structure in which the accountability demands emanate from the SEA and cascade down into districts, schools and classrooms. However, evidence from last decade suggests that this paradigm will not yield significant results over time without a corresponding shift in the accountability structures in schools and individual classrooms, which are closest to the student (Elmore, 2001).

Even as this shift towards new accountability has become a hallmark of NCLB and has in many ways shifted both the content and tone of state education agencies as they relate to districts, early increases in performance have plateaued and the efficacy of the movement have stalled (Figlio, 2011). Importantly, much of the conversation surrounding the consequences of K–12 accountability has focused less on support than on negative consequences for schools that fail to perform (Regensten, 2014). The Education Alliance at Brown University hosted a conversation between practitioners and researchers at all levels, citing lackluster school performance and unmet expectations of the accountability movement as a reason to realign strategies and perspectives on the work. As they talked through the issues and possible solutions, themes of both increased coherence and capacity building ran through the discourse (The Education Alliance, Brown University, 2008).
The current cascading system of accountability metrics, from the federal Department of Education to the SEAs to the LEAs to the schools and teachers, is weighted heavily towards external accountability. There is a prevailing notion that through exposure of practices and results, combined with the threat of consequences, districts, schools and teachers will focus their attention on the most critical lever for change, and be galvanized to move from complacency to action (Elmore, 2002). The underlying assumption is that at their best, external accountability measures have the potential to illuminate the performance of schools, be explicit about what outcomes are most important, and provide incentives to succeed and disincentives for poor performance. However, these assumptions overlook key research about the limitations of accountability as well as the ways that this lever can be used to improve performance (Honig, 2012). The unstated premise behind new accountability is that the educators know what to do but are too lazy or incompetent to achieve it (Tucker, 2014).

Research and practice has shown that both internal (not emanating from a formal authority, but rather from peers and through a collective sense of ownership) and external (from a formal authority structure, often with rewards and sanctions attached) accountability is germane to the conversation around school improvement and the role that the SEA plays in terms of driving towards changes in performance (O'Day, 2002). The SEA can focus on setting the criteria and consequences for LEAs, and often put in place a variety of external accountability mechanisms. These include but are not limited to publication of test scores, financial sanctions, increased bureaucratic and compliance monitoring and public shaming (Figlio, 2011). These tactics have been useful in achieving a set of early accomplishments but have not seen sustained gains over time.
The research shows that accountability systems alone are insufficient in the face of the gaps that our public education system is facing, and a deeper look at the premise and outcomes of an accountability system is needed (The Education Trust, 2011).

One of the current limitations in the push towards external accountability as a lever to improve student performance is the limited capacity to support this at a local level, on the part of the school or districts. The premise that with increased attention and disincentives for poor performance a school or district will improve its performance is predicated on the notions that practitioners believe that the outcomes can change, and that there is a culture within the school or LEA that will allow practices to change. According to a CPRE report analyzing the context necessary for accountability to be successful, the authors discuss at length the conditions required for behavior change (Fuhrman, 2003). “Schools will vary in their response to external accountability systems depending on the type and level of solutions they have in place to the problems of responsibility, expectations, and internal accountability” (Abelman, 1999, p. 4). A closer look at ways in which districts have responded to reforms confirms this, citing the element of professional culture among teachers as a specific component of change (McLaughlin, 2003).

Richard Elmore and Susan Fuhrman, in their exploration of accountability, support this notion as they posit that internal accountability must precede external accountability and suggest that a system or school’s ability to respond to external measures is based on both culture and capacity (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001). Here, “school culture” is defined as the attitudes and beliefs of persons both inside the school and in the external environment, the cultural norms of the school, and the relationships
between persons in the school (Southwest Education Development Labs, 2015). Research conducted over the last decade and the accompanying increase in accountability measures indicates that in schools with weak cultures and low relational trust (Schneider, 2003) no amount of accountability measures will be able to substantially impact performance (Mintrop, 2004; O'Day, 2002).

Early analysis of the new formal accountability structures from SEAs did yield returns and showed increases in academic achievement. After a decade, however, the limitations of this approach are abundantly clear. Says Mintrop, “…Designers at the state overestimated the power of incentives, underestimated systemic performance barriers and local inequalities in learning conditions, and failed to recognize the need, or lacked the capacity, for designing a tight intervention structure that could deliver support of high quality and intensity” (Mintrop, 2004).

There are a few areas for increased attention as the field considers barriers and opportunities to student achievement while maintaining a focus on external accountability measures. First, the need to attend to the capacity of practitioners at all levels cannot be underestimated. A focus on internal accountability structures, as discussed by Elmore and Fuhrman (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001), are critical to the uses of these measures. Yet another element of successful capacity building must be seated at the central office level of LEAs. As much as the discussion over the last decade has focused on the individual teacher as the unit of change, there is a growing body of research that has implicated central office behaviors in this work, as well. Central offices of LEAs, like SEAs, have long been in technical and bureaucratic roles, with little opportunity to cultivate deep
instructional supports. Says Honig, “The work practices and capacity of central office staff are ill-suited for supporting better student outcomes” (Honig, 2013, p.13).

As the expectations for SEAs have ratcheted up through changes at the federal level, there has been a marked increase in the bureaucratic oversight and control that SEAs have exerted over LEAs. Indeed, as student performance has failed to meet expectations built into the accountability measures, the response from some state education agencies has been increased scrutiny and tighter monitoring through fiduciary and regulatory channels (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2013). Challenging this paradigm requires a look at high-functioning international systems, which have been characterized by less monitoring, not more. As the previous citations regarding internal accountability and capacity building suggest, the lessons from the international community reinforce the idea that trust and capacity are keys to increases in achievement. Says Canadian researcher Ben Levin, “…Higher performing education systems tended to have less regulation and to rely more on strategies that involved not simply trust of individuals but building professional cultures that supported intelligent behavior directed towards organizational goals” (Levin, 2012, p. 74). Education economist Mark Tucker provides concrete suggestions that the state could follow given the opportunities and constraints that exist in the current educational context, including: less frequent, higher quality statewide assessments, a transparent public reporting system for school performance with corresponding actions for measures for change, and developing improved systems for regulating teacher quality and accountability (Tucker, 2014). While the international examples that Tucker builds on do not have all the solutions, his
understanding of the unique American context and the application of international lessons learned are useful for SEAs to consider.

**Theory of Action for My Strategic Project at DDOE**

I believe that in light of the changing role of state education agencies, a close look at the balance of accountability and support is critical. This should align tightly to the department's priority areas. Therefore, based on the review above, I derive the following theory of action to guide my work with the Delaware Department of Education:

If I develop systems and structures for the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) leadership team to (1) articulate a department wide theory of action, (2) evaluate the department's balance of accountability and support, (3) identify areas for prioritization and deprioritization, and (4) align resources accordingly, then the resources of the department will be aligned to a focused set of priorities that reflect a balance of accountability and support.

**The Strategic Project: Context and Description**

Governor Jack Markell appointed the Delaware Secretary of Education, Mark Murphy, in 2012. Secretary Murphy began his tenure with the Delaware Department of Education three years into the administration of the Race to the Top grant funds with an ambitious reform agenda (Murphy, 2014) and began driving the department in new directions while hoping to overcome challenges the state faced in the early years of implementation. The department stated to the US Department of Education (DOE), in their 2012 year three Race to the Top implementation report, “Significant turnover among senior DDOE leadership and staff was a challenge during Year 3, after the
Governor appointed a new State Secretary of Education in spring 2012” (US Department of Education, 2014). As the secretary entered the department he engaged in both an internal restructure and key hires. Under the auspices of the ambitious vision laid out in the Race to the Top plan, “Every single student in our system will graduate college and career ready, with the freedom to choose his or her life’s course,” and guided by a visual developed for Race to the Top implementation, internally referred to as the pillars, the secretary led the department in implementing a series of reforms, initiatives, and regulatory changes that had an immediate impact on the work within schools and districts and ultimately changed the relationship between the department and the schools and districts across the state.

At the time my residency began, the department had five branches (Appendix B), and reporting responsibilities were divided into a two pronged structure. Reporting directly to Secretary Murphy were the leaders of the Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Unit (TLEU), Teaching and Learning (T&L), and the Assessment, Accountability and Performance Team (AAPE). Under these leaders were critical work streams of the department, including but not limited to Common Core implementation, assessment (including the roll out of the new Smarter Balanced assessment), all teacher and leader evaluation work, interactions with colleges and universities statewide, the new statewide accountability framework, and management of the state’s turnaround schools. Reporting
to the deputy secretary were the heads of Finance and Human Resources, Student Supports (which included Adult Education as well as Prison Education), the legal team, and the charter office.

Based on this structure, the majority of the work around accountability, curriculum, assessment, and school leadership from within the department was directly supervised by the secretary, and the operations and regulatory work were concentrated under the deputy. The head of the TLEU had been with the department since the Race to the Top grant was awarded and under Secretary Murphy’s leadership had been given broad authority to articulate and realize ambitious goals through the parameters of the grant. The head of T&L had been with the department for over 18 months, and during that time had infused energy, changes in staffing, and a host of new initiatives into the field. The head of the AAPE began with the department in the summer of 2014 and was charged with pulling together a new team and leading work in areas of accountability, data, and turnaround. These three department leaders would have a considerable impact on how the work of the next 10 months unfolded.

As the department was engaged in reforms across the state, a group of national experts on state education agencies came together in July of 2014 to consult with the secretary as the department readied itself for what was largely anticipated to be the current administration’s final two years. The group discussed issues of tone and culture across the state, the capacity to implement key reforms, the tenor of the reform movement nationwide, and the anticipated impact on the department if the work continued at its current pace, given the contextual issues locally and pushback on the work nationally.
Following the meeting with these national experts, and despite their recommendations, the department continued to embrace a comprehensive reform effort that touched virtually all aspects of education across the state. From a charter school accountability structure to an initiative to push all students in Delaware to apply to college, the team leading the work was busy setting up structures, tools, incentives and disincentives for reforms in almost every possible arena. Each branch leader was deeply convinced of the need for the initiatives emerging from their respective departments, and the secretary had a role in fashioning the initiatives and weighing in on crucial components as they were designed.

The TLEU was focused on transforming the teaching practices statewide through a multi-pronged approach that concurrently tackled recruitment, pre-service, professional development and evaluation. This team was also moving forward with principal evaluation and certification and modeling innovations in compensation for hard-to-serve and hard-to-retain areas. There were further plans in the works, designed to address both principal and superintendent credentialing as well.

The T&L branch of the department was similarly involved in reforms, working statewide on initiatives which included ways to deepen practitioner knowledge, strengthen implementation of the CCSS, better meet the needs of their Special Education and English Language Learner populations and incentivize a college or career pathway for students. At the behest of the governor they were also supporting dual language instruction across the state (Delaware.gov, 2014).

It is important to note that while other states had moved forward with a rating system for districts by way of report cards or other ways to communicate progress
towards goals, Delaware had not yet developed a comprehensive public-facing formal accountability framework for schools and districts. In its absence, the department had deliberately put into place a variety of pressures and accountability measures within each initiative—designed to hold practitioners accountable to the work in despite a precisely defined tool for measurement. The development of a statewide accountability framework was the impetus for a new stream of work from within the department, designed to reflect a broad range of constituent feedback and aligned with the state’s Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESEA) waiver. As the department explored ways to hold districts accountable to reforms, a concurrent discussion transpired, ultimately determining that the greatest lever for accountability within the department’s purview were the guidelines and disbursement of state and federal funds, aligned to the new framework. The district consolidated grant application process had evolved over time to include significant input from both the TLEU and T&L, and their members’ contributions were essential for the district’s grant application approval process.

The statewide conditions surrounding the department were fraught with challenges. The department was being sued by the City of Wilmington, the American Civil Liberties Association (ACLU), and two charter schools slated for closure. The mayor of Wilmington was quoted in the Delaware News Journal, alleging, “…the state has been running the school districts here since 1975” (Barrish, 2014). Even district superintendents who were supportive of the department’s orientation towards reform struggled with the volume and tenor of the changes (Ewald, 2014). There were multiple examples of the department being criticized in the public sphere, with specific attention directed to both the turnaround (known as Priority Schools) initiative (Delaware News
Journal, 2014) and the closure of low performing charters (Albright, Moyer to close at end of school year, 2014). These representations of the Delaware Department of Education, far from being celebrated for holding the bar high for public education and carrying the flag for those who are often disenfranchised and outside of the dominant process, undermined the department’s ability to move forward with reforms.

Against this backdrop, I prepared to lead the strategic planning work for the department. As I looked at the current status of a vision for public education in Delaware at the time of my arrival it became apparent that there were multiple agendas for public education statewide. There were several blueprints circulating within the state—some from within the department, such as the Race to the Top grant, there was the Board of Education strategic plan, ED25 (a state-wide education initiative led by the Rodel Foundation), and the governor’s plan for education. These seemed to exist as stand-alones: no single plan was explicitly connected to another. Compounding this lack of coherence was the fact that aggregated student outcomes in the state were flat for the past three years (Appendix A), and there was no clear department plan to address student outcomes moving forward past the term of the Race to the Top grant.

As a round one winner of Race to the Top, the governor expressed high hopes for Delaware’s future accomplishment (Delaware One of Two States Selected for Race-to-the-Top Education Award, 2010). Despite this, the first year of the grant saw the department cite broad implementation obstacles, including securing highly qualified staff, lack of alignment around needs and capacity of statewide LEAs, and challenges in developing and implementing teacher and leader evaluation systems (US Department of Education, 2014). The sense of urgency was high, especially in light of the fact that
student academic gains had plateaued after the dramatic rise during the first year of the
grant administration. This was partly why the group of SEA experts had been brought in
during the summer of 2014—the secretary recognized the opportunity to focus, based on
the end of the grant period and the anticipated change in executive branch leadership.
The need to have articulated priorities and aligned resources was clear and these needed
to be developed with attention to the local and national reform climate.

**Strategic Project**

I designed my strategic project based on the premise that the department would
examine the balance of accountability and support provided to the field, in light of the
literature on SEAs and the limited effectiveness of formal accountability structures.
Complimenting this goal came a project objective directly from Secretary Murphy, who
recognized the need for increased through-lines through the work of the department and
articulated a need to name department goals post-Race to the Top.

This work took on heightened importance in October following a meeting
between three constituencies (district superintendents, principals and teachers) and the
governor, prompted by recent department initiatives to change principal credentialing,
assign rankings to Common Core monitoring visits, and increase scrutiny on district
spending. This coalition of the department’s critics was allegedly prepared with a letter
of no confidence if they did not see changes in both tone and execution of various
department-led initiatives. The outcome of this meeting both reinforced the need for a
strategic plan and increased pressure on the department to modify its approach to the
field, specifically in the areas of accountability, initiatives, tone, and monitoring routines.
In alignment with my theory of action, I developed a plan to articulate department-wide outcomes with accompanying resources. For this work to be successful, there were four essential stages to the process: articulating a theory of action for the department, evaluating the balance of accountability and support, identifying areas for prioritization and deprioritization, and aligning resources to these priorities. A clear outcome of this work was a two-year strategic plan for the department. On the surface, these read as discrete components that could be achieved through a technical process. However, the execution of these steps was much more complicated than I had anticipated and had implications that went to the heart of what the individual members of the leadership team believed to be true about their work, the levers required to move the field further, and, in many ways, what the department leaders believed to be true about themselves. I explore these complexities in the Analysis section of the capstone.

First was the articulation of the department’s theory of action. I led an iterative process designed to get at the heart of the relationship between accountability, support, and innovation. I followed that with a set of processes designed to surface the department’s philosophy regarding the department-wide role of accountability and support. This was impacted by the concurrent development of the accountability framework as well as an internal evaluation to identify the ways through which the department exercised its authority over the disbursement of state and federal funds.

The second part of the process was to examine the balance of accountability and support within the department. As discussed in the Results section of the capstone, this work never transpired.
Part three of the process was to identify areas that were prioritized and those that were deprioritized. The process that I led with the leadership team was designed to achieve two things: to get leadership team input (in order to ensure there was nothing about a particular initiative that would have a mitigating impact on a final decision by the secretary), and to flag to the team that both initiatives and their work could be changing, and for some, changing significantly.

Once the priorities were named, the next step in the process was to identify resources for both the department and individual branches. Many of the initiatives underway already existed as streams of work for the department (e.g. implementation of the Common Core State Standards), but the work had not been organized into priorities nor specifically aligned to the department-wide college-ready outcomes. My goal was for each branch to engage in a reduced set of initiatives, all with aligned personnel and resources. The resource allocation process was designed to complement the prioritization work.

Factors in the statewide and national context impacted the development and execution of the strategic plan. As the strategic project unfolded, the context for my work continued to change, responding in part to the national reform environment and in part due to the shifting internal dynamics of the department. As I entered the department in the summer of 2014, I encountered a Secretary of Education who described himself as passionate about the work of ensuring high quality education for all students across the state (Delaware.gov, 2012). This commitment, and his conviction that students are the most important constituents of the SEA, was the impetus for a myriad of initiatives across the department. At the same time as this was unfolding in Delaware, state education
agencies nationwide were undergoing a shift, as described in the preceding Review of Knowledge for Action. The changing national context combined with the internal dynamics created an unstable environment for public education. Across the nation and within the state of Delaware, there was evidence of competing commitments, some to a dynamic reform agenda, some to a local education agenda and some to a sense of self-preservation that included a reduction in aggressive accountability levers. As these tensions played out during my residency, they impacted both the results of the strategic project and the ultimate effectiveness of the work itself.

Results

In the following section, I review results for each phase of work that led to an internal plan articulating the department’s priorities, and the intersection of this work with the balance of support and accountability provided by the department. It is important to note that the planned work for the strategic project was not to develop new directions for the Delaware Department of Education or to make dramatic changes to existing work streams. Rather, it was to clarify and hone the direction the department was taking under Secretary Murphy’s leadership, as it aimed to become the best SEA in the country (Murphy, 2014).

My theory of action was based on four key sets of actions, designed to lead to a department-wide set of priorities articulated coherently and with aligned resources. In light of the pressures placed on the governor and the department in the fall of 2014 from the field, the planned analysis of accountability and support felt both timely and relevant.
In what follows, I discuss each component of the theory of action in turn, along with the corresponding results.

Part I: Develop systems and structures to articulate a department-wide theory of action
Part II: Develop systems and structures to evaluate the department's balance of accountability and support
Part III: Develop systems and structures designed to identify areas for prioritization and deprioritization
Part IV: Develop systems and structures designed to align resources to the prioritized areas

Part I: Articulate a department-wide theory of action

To begin the work, I led a five step process of articulating the department’s theory of action. This served as a litmus test, in some ways, for the way the department’s orientation towards the field. To begin, I interviewed each member of the leadership team and all the directors (the second tier of the department’s leaders) about the theory of action. I analyzed the resulting interviews for trends, patterns, and implications. As the process evolved, there were notable changes in the theory of action itself as well as trends in the language used around accountability, pressure, and support. A few examples below illustrate what I heard through the 1:1 interviews (Appendix C):

“…By making people accountable to the data that is out there, that will drive the change and the paradigm shift that is happening at the LEAs.”

“Accountability is a priority. Accountability should drive results. Despite that I haven’t see the department driving on specific action that would lead to the results. We are focused on the outcomes without being focused on what inputs to get them there.”

“If we don’t put immense pressure on the system in certain areas, we won’t be able to affect change in the time that we have. The goals is to provide a balance of pressure and support, but we are not there yet.”
“I would categorize the organization as disruptive, hoping to create change in a positive way. If I create pressure I will see change in a positive way.”

Based on data from these interviews I drafted a preliminary theory of action for the department, leading with the three areas of supports, pressures, and innovations (Appendix D).

Next, I facilitated a meeting with the leadership team and the secretary to get feedback on the theory of action. I then led a meeting with all of the directors across the department where I described the process-to-date, walked them through the draft and solicited feedback (Appendix E). At or around this point in the process, the secretary made the decision to remove the word “pressure” from the draft. By version eight (Appendix F) of the document the three-part theory read as support, system, and innovation.

I led the next round of feedback for the theory of action following another significant shift, based on a feedback session with the School Support branch of the department. The order shifted to expectations, supports, and innovation.

The final draft of the department’s theory of action reflected the input of over 70 members of the department and 15 versions of the document. The evolution of the document reflects, in many ways, the orientation of the department’s leadership team as the year unfolded and the team navigated politically tense waters and challenges to the role the department was playing within the state. The order of the three prongs is significant, as well as the semantics themselves. The final version of the theory of action reads as follows:
If the department…

**Creates a system of fair and transparent expectations by**…
- Establishing and communicating high, common standards
- Reporting data about school and district progress
- Aligning accountability to student improvement goals

**Provides supports by**…
- Helping districts, schools and teachers implement high-quality educational programs
- Differentiating assistance for districts and schools
- Partnering with school communities and stakeholders to address the academic and non-academic needs of students

**Seeds innovation by**…
- Identifying and sharing effective, replicable implementation practices
- Creating incentives for districts and schools to develop and adopt emerging best practices
- Incubating and attracting partners and resources

**Then**…
- The state, districts and schools will have the capacity needed to improve student achievement

**And then**…
- Every single Delaware public school student will graduate college and career ready, with the freedom to choose his or her life’s course.

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**Part II: Evaluate the department’s balance of accountability and support**

Based on the responses I heard while conducting my 1:1 interviews on the department’s theory of action, the research base as reflected in the preceding Review of Knowledge for Action, and the message from the governor regarding tone and perceptions of pressure from the field, I saw a clear need to conduct a diagnostic of the initiatives in the department in order to illuminate both the volume and nature of the work with the field. This felt especially timely in light of the ongoing work developing the statewide accountability framework, led by the Assessment and Accountability branch of the department. I facilitated the first phase of this evaluation during a leadership team retreat in August of 2014. During this meeting, the leadership team engaged in a deep conversation about the assumptions held around performance in the field and discussed key factors in generating change. This conversation led the leadership team to uncover a
host of assumptions held by each member (Appendix G), and resulted in many questions that were left to be answered, including the following:

- Does the theory of action work for all districts – in the same way?
- What can we accomplish in two years to institutionalize change? Does this change our strategy?
- Are we applying the right pressure?
- What is the appropriate dosage/balance between pressure, support and innovation?
- Is it a prerequisite that people like us/see us as credible for our theory of action to work?

These questions were intersecting with the core issues that had been raised throughout the theory of action iterations, namely the role of pressure, and how that interacts with the role of support. They also clearly relate to key themes illuminated through the Review of Knowledge for Action, namely the role of the state education agency and the viability of pressures (informal and formal accountability) to create change. During the retreat, the secretary named the issue as one of accountability and articulated the tension between “big A” and “little a” accountability: specifically, the tension between the department’s formal and informal accountability roles. Given what the research in the Review of Knowledge for Action demonstrates, this was a timely topic for discussion as state education agencies across the country grappled with their role in shaping conditions for change.

I planned a series of follow-ups to this leadership team retreat designed to answer those critical questions cited above and to allow for the deep conversations around accountability, pressure and support to surface. These planned meetings did not happen.

The first set of meetings was disrupted by the governor’s urgent concerns regarding tone and initiatives coming from the department. The scheduled meetings to
continue this exploration were immediately cancelled as the secretary requested that I fast-track the prioritization process. Subsequent meetings with the leadership team accelerated the process of articulating the department’s priority initiatives, but they did not allow time to address planned agenda items. The work of naming the priorities and aligning resources took precedence over delving into the philosophy motivating the department’s stance on work with the field.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the underlying issues of philosophy and orientation to the field continued to surface through the year. While a work group within the Accountability and Assessment branch pursued the viability of instituting accountability measures through alignment to state and federal funding, and another team was working with a broad array of stakeholders on the statewide school accountability framework, these issues continued to arise. Decisions were ultimately made on a one-off basis, while the underlying philosophy around the role of formal and informal accountability and support remained unexamined at the leadership team level.

**Part III: Identify Areas for Prioritization and Deprioritization**

In order to get clear on the department’s key initiatives that the secretary and the leadership team were committed to sustaining, I facilitated a process designed to name initiatives in four broad areas: (1) prioritize, (2) stay the course, (3) deprioritize, and (4) stop doing. This process took place over a series of meetings with the secretary and the leadership team, and ultimately segued into the resource allocation process, which I discuss below. To begin, I facilitated a leadership team meeting in which the top initiatives of the department were identified, seen in the text box.
Following the four part categorization of initiatives, I solicited input on top initiatives, requesting a rationale for why each initiative should be a priority or why it should be de-prioritized. Based on this feedback session, the secretary presented the leadership team with a draft document with all the work aligned into one of the four categories. I structured individual follow-up meetings with the secretary and each leadership team member to talk about the list, identify pain points, and calculate risks and mitigations if the department was to proceed with these prioritized initiatives. These 1:1s were also the secretary’s opportunity to talk through the identified first and second tier priorities and process each team member’s individual understanding, questions, and buy-in.

The priorities were named as (1) Common Core, (2) Accountability System and Data Management, (3) Effective School Leaders, (4) Support for Struggling Schools, (5) Career and Technical Education and (6) Internal and External Communication. This list was shared at a leadership team meeting, where there were a series of questions about initiatives that were not named on the list. The consistent response from Secretary Murphy regarding these: not a priority. The reaction to the final list was a mix of affirmation (we are doing too much and this is the right thing to do), incredulity (this
can’t possibly be right), and a sense of cynicism (we have seen resistance from the field before, and this is just the pendulum swinging in response to that).

While the priorities list was generated and work streams changed in response to this, there were outstanding questions around the rest of the work of the department—what did it mean for something to be deprioritized? How was this list to be interpreted in light of the department’s legal and regulatory roles? Those questions and more were to be addressed through the corresponding resource allocation process.

**Part IV: Align resources to prioritized areas**

I planned a five-session process of aligning staffing and financial resources to the priority areas. This process was designed to develop a comprehensive picture of where resources were currently allocated and shift resources, both in terms of personnel (FTEs) and dollars, into priority areas and away from deprioritized areas. The work of the department was organized into three tiers (Appendix H): (priority areas, flexible areas, and regulatory areas), with the intent that resources would shift from non-essential areas (Tier II) into priority areas (Tier I).

Each of the five sessions had a specific outcome to be achieved per session:

1. Establish a department-wide understanding and agreement on priority aligned resource allocations
2. Examine Tier III areas (regulatory work) to establish potential sources of resource flexibility
3. Examine Tier II (non-regulatory work) for potential modification or elimination
4. Decision making for Tier II, and if necessary Tier III, to ensure that Priority areas (see session 1) are adequately resourced and
5. Determine any corresponding personnel decisions.

I designed these meetings to be led by the deputy secretary and director of finance and almost immediately ran into roadblocks. The leadership team initially identified
what was most malleable about their work, separating out what is required in the federal and state regulatory work and where, within that, there was room for interpretation. This intersection point, the middle column was the basis for two subsequent work streams: identifying non-priority work streams that could be amplified or de-escalated, directly feeding into the second work stream of resource allocation. This process became complex quickly challenging. Two leadership team members could not proceed with the resource allocation requests until they had a series of additional meetings within the department identifying areas of intersection. To accommodate this, I scheduled two additional whole-group meetings to identify intersection points. Once the additional sessions had been conducted, the five-part series got underway and again hit barriers to execution. Following session one, some branch leaders changed the designation of “Tier” of various initiatives. Travel schedules impacted the timing and attendance of sessions two and three. Each meeting was designed to produce a clear decision at the end, however, the deputy secretary preferred to leave some amount of open-endedness so a clear decision was never made, not even at the first session.

The resource allocation data demonstrated that branches were requesting both dollars and FTEs in all tiers. The biggest request for resources was coming from Tier III areas, the department’s regulatory work, not the priority areas (Tier I).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Request: $</th>
<th>Total Request: FTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tier I</td>
<td>$4,310,000</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier II</td>
<td>$1,465,000</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier III</td>
<td>$5,108,000</td>
<td>19.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: total department FTEs: 220; approximate annual budget for the department: $50 M (Source: Delaware Department of Education)

Final decisions made were based on the following rationale from the deputy secretary:
(a) Over the last 10 months, our own thinking and work led us all to the conclusion we were attempting to do too many things at the same time. This both stretched limited internal resources and confused the field.

(b) We had been shifting resources for 18 months (into Leadership, Charter, ELA, policy, LEA routines and away from Health, Phys Ed, Science Warehouse, Library Science, and assessment) as opportunities presented themselves.

(c) We needed to significantly narrow our focus around key priorities agreed upon in October. This involved combined approach involving resource allocation, metrics, strategic planning and communications.

(d) The Resource Allocation Process was designed to be deliberate, inclusive, comprehensive and collaborative. (Blowman, personal interview, 2015)

Ultimately the decisions for the leadership team were as follows: changes for eight key personnel members between branches, consolidation of two branches into one, a ranked list for the order in which vacancies would be filled, and a prioritized ask to the Legislative Joint Finance Committee based on departmental priorities. These decisions were shared at a March 3, 2015 leadership team retreat after which no collaborative discussions were held. By the end of the process the majority of the resource requests remained unaddressed.

The resource allocation meetings were the best vehicle I had to uncover issues of multiple initiatives competing for attention in the field and varying types of accountability. The challenges and delays that the resource allocation meetings faced not only impacted some branch leaders from being able to effectively execute on the priority areas, but they also deferred and delayed the process of reducing and/or eliminating department-led initiatives. To paraphrase Professor Jim Honan, “If you want to know where an organization’s priorities are, take a look at the budget” (Honan, 2014). The initial meeting for this process was designed to allow key work to surface, as well as to allow cross-department intersections to be articulated. At the conclusion of the process,
very few resources had been reallocated towards the priorities and no work streams had been dismantled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intended</th>
<th>Achieved</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balance of accountability and support</td>
<td>Coherent theory of action</td>
<td>Reorientation towards work with the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in initiatives</td>
<td>Top six priorities identified</td>
<td>Few initiatives deprioritized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater allocation of resources towards priorities</td>
<td>Nominal resource shifts</td>
<td>Resources remain divided across multiple initiatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My theory of action demonstrated the shaping role I anticipated I would play through the strategic planning process. Though the strategic project would ultimately yield an articulated list of priorities and resources, much of the deep work of interrogating assumptions and reframing the Delaware Department of Education’s positioning towards support and accountability did not occur through this process. Beginning with the failure to address root philosophies of accountability and support, coupled with an inherent reluctance to truly reduce the volume of initiatives within the department and reinforced through a shallow resource allocation process, the results of my strategic project did not result in the planned outcome.

I had hoped the project would yield the following outcome, “the resources of the department will be aligned to a focused set of priorities that reflect a balance of accountability and support”. Had I been more successful in meeting my objectives I
would have expected to see changes on several levels. First, I expected there would be an immediate change in both tone and type of initiatives between the department and the field, as a result of the rearticulated theory of action. Secondly, I expected a change to the type and volume of initiatives coming from the department, which I predicted would have included an immediate cessation to some work and a phased decrease or modification of others. Finally, I expected that resources (both dollars and people) would have been shifted to work streams in alignment with the top six priorities identified by the secretary and leadership team. Overall, I hoped changes in these areas may have served to both decrease areas of tension with the field and serve as visible indicators (both within and outside of the department) of the department’s commitment to respond to the needs of the field while maintaining a transparent focus on student achievement.

Analysis

As I embarked on my strategic project with the Delaware Department of Education, I designed a strategic project with a corresponding theory of action. In this section, I consider the results of my strategic project through the workgroups framework (Harvard Business School, 1998) in order to better understand both the work and the complex environment that impacted it.

My theory of action was as follows: If I develop systems and structures for the Delaware Department of Education leadership team to articulate a department-wide theory of action, evaluate the department's balance of accountability and support, identify areas for prioritization and deprioritization and align resources accordingly, then the
resources of the department will be aligned to a focused set of priorities that reflect a balance of accountability and support.

The central actions named in the theory of action—articulating a theory of action for the department, evaluating the balance of accountability and support, and identifying priorities with aligned resources—were impacted by the urgency that stemmed from tensions within the field, coupled with pressure from the governor. In order to analyze the complex dynamics that unfolded during my tenure with the department, I utilize the Harvard Business Schools’ Note for Analyzing Workgroups (Harvard Business School, 1998). This tool is a useful analytic frame that allows me to discuss not only how I approached the work but the internal structure of the team as well as the variable context playing out in Delaware at the time of my residency.

I approach this analysis by examining each section of the workgroups framework the following order: Effectiveness, Group Culture, Group Composition, Task Design, Formal Organization, and Context. I attempt to describe the organizational structure, the department’s position in the statewide context, and internal organizational dynamics. As described in the Note itself, “This diagnostic tool helps provide insight into the factors most profoundly shaping the development, dynamics, and effectiveness of task-performing groups and, in particular, group culture, its antecedents, and consequences” (Harvard Business School, 1998, p. 1).
My approach to the work was predominantly through a technical, project management design. As a result of the succeeding analysis I believe the composition of the group, the context of the work, and the group culture of the department were all mitigating factors that made executing on various aspects of my theory of action challenging to realize.

Section I: Effectiveness

Effectiveness in the case of the strategic project is more nuanced than the naming of the outputs as described in the previous Results section. The final strategic plan outlining the priorities for the department has been written, and some new resources allocated. However, a deeper look at how the results were achieved and how they will be used leads to a question about the effectiveness of my strategic project in Delaware (Hackman, 1998).

The workgroups frame includes three components in this section:

• Performance
• Member Well-Being and Development:
• Shared Capacity to Adapt and Learn

On the basis of the project objectives described in my theory of action, including specific outcomes that would be achieved as a result of the strategic project, the work was largely successful. There now exists a coherent theory of action for the department and the department’s top priorities have been named and shared within the entire department as well as the State Board of Education and the governor (Appendix I). Individual branches have named initiatives designed to achieve the department’s priorities and some resources were reallocated to these areas. However, the effectiveness of the project was
far less easy to evaluate. My entry point into the work, as described in the task design component of this analysis, was a largely technical approach through which I had most opportunity to facilitate both process and outcome. There were other components of the work group structure (notably context and group culture) that were beyond my sphere of influence, predated my arrival, and will exist far past my tenure. I take this opportunity to examine various facets of effectiveness in order to illuminate both questions and challenges to the work.

The strategic plan for the department named key initiatives as well as top line metrics that align to both district performance routines (Appendix J) and department goals for student achievement. However, I am not confident that this process enhanced the group’s ability to work together, which is a component of effectiveness. As described in the Review of Knowledge for Action, drawing clear lines of accountability from initiative at a state education agency to outcomes for students is a challenge—policies and initiatives from a state education agency are bunt tools with which to impact student outcomes at a school or district level (Lusi, 1997). A look at the student outcome data for the past three years also tells a story of flat student performance and a persistent achievement gap, despite gains in college readiness and graduation rates (Appendix K). This data presents a challenge to the department’s narrative regarding successful department-led initiatives, and in some ways undermines perceptions of effectiveness of the strategic project, as well.
Group Culture

Significant facets of the department’s leadership team group culture impacted participation in the work I led, as well as the corresponding outcome. Group culture is comprised of the following components, some of which I explore here:

- Emergent activities
- Emergent interactions
- Shared values
- Norms
- Roles and status
- Subgroups
- Rituals, myths, and shared language
- Shared conventions

The group culture was deeply influenced by Secretary Murphy, as he set the tone for interactions with the field and worked 1:1 with key branch leaders as they identified key initiatives and guided both regulation and legislation. The existing culture at the leadership team level was dominated by three elements: an entrepreneurial approach to the work of department, low relational trust between some members of the team, and a perception that the leaders of the department were those best suited to orchestrate changes in practice statewide. Language within biweekly leadership team meetings was frequently peppered with terms that were indicative of these elements including, “driving” a change, a “play” in a specific area, or even the more overt “hammering” of the LEAs. Much of this culture was influenced by the secretary and leads of two of the five branches, and had a direct impact on the tone and type major initiatives in human capital and instructional interventions.

During the initial stages of the prioritization work, there was a consistent degree of nominal compliance with the process, in part because I was facilitating the process and
initially benefitted from outsider status. As my time with the department continued and the process encountered roadblocks, it was clear that those who did not participate in the whole group forum were not without strong opinions about both the work and the process but chose to share them outside of the proscribed structures, either to me individually or with their respective teams. As the sense of urgency communicated through the governor’s office and the field abated, the compliance I observed in the initial phase of the process began to erode and resistance to following the process became more and more apparent. Evidence low trust lay in how members communicated or worked together. The leadership team was operating in an increasingly bifurcated manner and lines of difference fell in alignment with both reporting responsibilities (further described in group composition) and in terms of the orientation towards the work of the department. These trends were noticeable in the ways the group interacted in-person (for example, who shared their opinion in the meetings and who did not); how the group communicated outside of collective time; and how individual members either participated in or avoided the work itself. Specific examples of this include the request to reclassify branch initiatives as Tier III (regulatory) from Tier II (malleable) lines of work once the resource allocation conversations had begun, and the types of cross-branch initiatives suggested by some branches, which were deliberately targeting lines of work that the secretary has identified as non-priority into areas that were into priority aligned Tier I (e.g. continued work with colleges and universities was named as a critical component of Common Core implementation despite having been deprioritized).

Though the leadership team experienced changes in composition in June of 2014, there remained a distinct pattern in the way the team operated. Certain members would
joke, but only with each other. Other members would stay conspicuously silent, sometimes for an entire meeting. Some would raise a challenge to a work stream, but only to one specific colleague. Another would consistently share only deltas in debrief sessions. The pervasive culture of low trust (as evidenced by the tone and type of conversations both in leadership team meetings and off-line) was exacerbated by the sense of ‘department knows best’ and further served to divide the team. The secretary, due in part to his commitment to support the branch leaders and not insert himself directly into the work, rarely intervened in whole group conversations, thus further allowing the patterns of the team to become entrenched.

Through my work I attempted to address this culture in two ways: through the work itself and through process. I thought that if the leadership team authentically engaged in both the articulation of the theory of action (identifying what they truly believed to be true about the work of the department and coming to agreement on how that should be made manifest) that some of the underlying tensions and lack of alignment could be named and overcome. I also thought that through a technically proficient process which included clear outcomes for work sessions, accompanied by norms and protocols (lots of share outs, turn and talks, plus deltas, etc.), I would be able to get full leadership team participation and overcome some of the trends of few voices being heard and tacit agreement for an approach to the work that was not indicative of a shared philosophy. As discussed in the Results section I ran into challenges even as I tried to schedule meetings and set agendas. The following description of group culture helps to explain, in part, why my approach was unsuccessful.

Once in place, a group’s culture has a “life of its own”; moreover, it is not always evident and requires some detective work to decipher. And even if the culture
becomes quite dysfunctional, it is difficult to change unless something fairly remarkable occurs to force the group to revisit the culture explicitly (e.g., the group reaches a milestone, encounters a novel situation, or receives an intervention).

This is further reinforced by Kotter’s research on group culture, “Culture change occurs after you have successfully altered people’s actions and their new behavior has produced success, which can be traced back to the new actions and behaviors” (Kotter).

In the case of the Delaware Department of Education, tensions on the leadership team were illuminated through work on the strategic plan and the accompanying resource allocation implications.

Over the course of the fall and spring of my residency year there were two threats to group culture, and these served to further erode trust on the team: one based on my work, since the collective design of initiative identification and resource reallocation process would potentially threaten work streams within branches; and the other due to the accountability framework, since a formal accountability structure would disrupt the use of accountability measures from each branch.

Once the priorities were confirmed by the secretary, accompanied by the expectation that resources would shift towards these initiatives and away from others, there was a perceived threat to existing work streams within branches. The heads of the T&L, TLEU, and AAPE, who were all accustomed to operating with a high degree of autonomy, were suddenly faced with the prospect of making reductions to programs or changes to an operation that they believed benefitted the field. The de facto impact of this dynamic was to further fracture relationships on the team, made manifest through actions such as unreturned emails, delays in data exchange, phone calls and
text messages ignored and personal attacks through subordinate personnel members. As time passed and the work slowed, particularly during resource allocation, fidelity to the priorities diminished.

At the same time as the work on the strategic plan was devolving the leadership team was discussing the statewide accountability framework. As members of the AAPE developed the statewide accountability framework, the leadership team could see this leading to a change in the status quo, interrupting the historical trend of allowing individuals to design their own accountability for initiatives. This tool would impact both formal accountability structures and the dissemination of state funds. Traditionally, the leads of each branch had license to build in ‘teeth’ into components of their work in order to incentivize compliance. As the AAPE team built the accountability framework (involving broad stakeholder support and a team of national experts in use of state and federal funds) it became apparent that the leadership team members would no longer have the same amount of autonomy or flexibility in designing accountability measures. This resulted in both active and passive resistance to this new structure.

Overall both lack of trust on the leadership team and resistance to change had a profound impact on the process, development, and outcome of the strategic plan.

**Group Composition**

A critical component in understanding workgroup dynamics is through understanding the group members themselves. Areas necessary to consider in this arena include:

- Demographics
- Competencies
• Interests
• Working Styles
• Values
(Harvard Business School, 1998, p. 5)

I came on board the leadership team at the same time as the new branch leader for AAPE, and simultaneously there were four other leadership team members who left the department or stepped down from the team within one month of my arrival. The formal reporting structure, split largely between the secretary and the deputy secretary, served to exacerbate tensions around both the distribution of power and influence and in communication patterns. I was named as a leadership team member, and though I initially benefitted from being new to the team, as the year went on my lack of positional authority made it challenging to lead work. Additionally, I was reporting to the deputy secretary, who, as described earlier, was largely responsible for the operations side of the organization. This complicated my work, as my authority to lead the strategic plan came from the secretary, though the reporting structure kept me operating from a work stream that was based in operations and resources, not externally facing initiatives.

As mentioned earlier, the leadership team was not aligned philosophically around how work within the field should be executed. This lack of coherence affected both the articulation of priorities and how they would be staffed and resourced. In the case of the Delaware Department of Education, the individual actors at the leadership team level of the organization had an outsized impact on the execution of the strategic plan, especially since the development of the plan was largely based at the leadership team level and included few other stakeholder inputs. The leadership team was comprised of a mix of members who joined the organization from a variety of backgrounds—some had experience in traditional districts, some had experience at other statewide organizations
like the Office of Management and Budget, and still others had operated partly in the charter and sector reform space. There were significant differences in team members’ approaches to the best way to engage the field—some saw the department’s role as primarily to support the field, some saw the role of the department as a critical change agent, and still others believed the department should set standards and accountability, with the market itself driving the needs for support. These differences in opinion were compounded by the fact that they were not discussed in open dialogue, and rather than creating the forum for a rich discussion and a shared philosophy around the what of the department leading into the how, ended up driving deep wedges of division between branches. This served to impact the work in terms of the efficacy of cross-branch collaboration, what tier work was aligned into, and how the resource allocation conversation evolved.

The initial responses to the pushback from the field ranged broadly (yes, we need to reduce; this too shall pass; now is the exact wrong time to release pressure) and were still very much at play on the leadership team as the work of identifying priorities and resource allocation unfolded. The tumultuous statewide environment continued to create stress within the department, all while the AAPE was developing the statewide accountability framework. To further complicate matters, the leadership team had not yet agreed on the department’s balance of accountability and support, nor the ways that accountability would be made manifest—through formal measures, informal measures, or both.

The research on accountability, as described earlier in the Review of Knowledge for Action, discuss proximity to the unit of change as a key factor in successfully
achieving behavior change (Elmore, 2002). Through Race to the Top dollars much of the capacity that was added to the department was infused into the TLEU. Under the leadership of that branch, there were significant structural and regulatory reforms that were directed towards all districts across the state. One impact of this work was that the gap between the department’s expectations and the districts’ performance widened. As the perception of demands on the districts increased, resistance to the reforms also increased. For some members of the leadership team, the dominant narrative around the opposition was really one about resistance to accountability and a pervasive culture of low expectations for both students and staff, reinforced in Tucker’s analysis of the results of accountability measures (Tucker, 2014). This perception was one factor in the department’s orientation towards informal accountability measures (The Education Alliance, Brown University, 2008). Through the process of naming the department’s theory of action, the back and forth around the use of the words “pressure”, “accountability”, and “standards” was one manifestation of the secretary’s attempt to send a non-inflammatory external message while internally still keeping the department focused on a variety of accountability measures. Even initiatives that were designed to increased local capacity, such as Common Ground for Common Core, contained stringent accountability measures, and at least one district was asked not to participate in the initiative as a result of non-compliance with some of those requirements. Said one member of the T&L branch, “If we don’t put immense pressure on the system in certain areas, we won’t be able to affect change in the time that we have. The goals is to provide a balance of pressure and support, but we are not there yet” (Rouser, 2014).
State education agencies have often been described as siloed organizations (Manna, 2012) and in this case, the Delaware Department of Education proved to be no exception. Off-line conversations were prevalent and often conducted during 1:1s and in meetings where the full group was not present. It was not uncommon to hear, following a leadership team meeting where a certain direction had been set, that a branch was deviating away from what had been stated with the approval from the secretary. I often heard the phase, “This resonates with Mark [Murphy],” referring to a certain project or direction that had previously been labeled deprioritized or was not aligned to the priorities of the department. This tacit permission, given to members of the leadership team outside of the structures of the group meetings, served to further erode trust between members of the team, including relationships with both the deputy secretary and myself.

**Task Design**

The third major design factor influencing a group’s development and effectiveness is the actual content of the tasks the team is required to perform. Task design components include:

- Required activities
- Required interactions
- Interdependencies
- Variety and scope (activity and time)
- Significance
- Autonomy

(Harvard Business School, 1998, p. 6)

As I approached the strategic planning work for the department, my process was sequenced to identify core philosophies and then address issues of work and priority alignment once those philosophies had been discussed in a transparent fashion. Early on in my tenure I had organized a session with the leadership team designed to illuminate
both perception and initiatives that were impacting formal and informal accountability measures of the department. The evening before that session, however, Secretary Murphy and I designed a new protocol with the leadership team as a result of the governor’s meeting with stakeholders. From that point forward, the process I led for the department was highly technical in nature and did not address or disrupt work style, organizational culture, or belief systems within the leadership team. Many core elements I believed to be essential for the department to consider, including an assessment of current accountability practices, were set aside due to the urgency communicated through outside political pressures. The process of naming the department’s priorities left methods of implementation up to the branch leads, in part because of the secretary’s commitment to allow autonomy within the branches. Ultimately the urgency to diffuse the tensions with the field served to disrupt both the timeline and process I had planned, and the deeply rooted group culture of the leadership team itself further served to impede my ability to facilitate and lead as I had intended. The more nuanced texture of the intersection point between the department and the districts was not explicitly explored in the initial phases neither of the strategic planning work nor through the rest of my work with the leadership team.

Through the design of the strategic project I included a series of steps that I hoped would lead to a clear set of decisions, as well as a culture shift in terms of tone and orientation towards the field. At the onset of my strategic project I had developed structures to allow for wrestling with and then coming to agreement around the philosophical approach to the work, beginning with the department’s theory of action. As the challenges to execution continued to arise it became evident that the design I had
in mind for the work, which involved interrogating assumptions and a reallocation of initiatives and resources in alignment with a reframed philosophy, was not achievable.

My approach, a linear, technical process that relied on both participation and a willingness to engage, was insufficient in the face of both the overall context and the deeply entrenched group culture of the department.

**Formal Organization**

A discussion of the formal organizational policies and procedures under which the group was operating is also necessary to understanding why the work unfolded as it did.

The three essential components named below had an indisputable impact on how the processes evolved.

- Structure (e.g., division of labor, reporting relationships, centralization/decentralization)
- Systems (e.g., measurement, rewards/compensation, and information systems)
- Staffing (e.g., selection, recruitment, promotion)


The leadership team is formally divided into two branches for reporting responsibilities. Leads of AAPE, T&L, TLEU and the Chief of Staff report to the secretary, and the leads of Finance, HR and Tech, as well as the lead for Student Supports report to the deputy secretary. The conversations about metrics development were led by the AAPE (in a lateral role, without positional authority) and the resource allocation work was led by the deputy secretary, who was not present when the initiatives had been discussed in closed door conversations. It was not uncommon for a team member to cite a 1:1 conversation with the secretary as a rationale as to why a particular work stream could not be modified or eliminated, again reinforcing the tension embedded in the
organizational structure and the orientation of the secretary himself towards the work with the field.

The department had been working for years to develop an internal accountability structure through the AAPE referred to as stock-takes. At the onset of the strategic planning, the TLEU was transitioning into a stock-take process that was aligned to the rest of the department as they began to shift accountability to an internal structure from one that had been directed to the federal Department of Education in alignment with the Race to the Top funds. The strategic plan was designed to be an umbrella structure under which each individual branch would have aligned work streams.

Over the course of the year, inconsistencies in how each branch designed and measured their work streams became apparent. Alignment with the AAPE was essential to create clean through lines of work and accountability, but this was a shift in how the department had historically operated and this alignment did not occur during my tenure. The AAPE team conducted a series of meeting with each branch designed to line up all initiatives with outputs that would feed into state level outcomes, but these meetings did not yield the desired results. The final version of the strategic plan identifies “top line” metrics for each priority area (Appendix I), but the specific outputs and outcomes for branches were ultimately left up to the branch leaders themselves, similar to the way the resourcing of the priority areas was left to branch leaders.

Context

The following examination of the role of the secretary and the department is designed to illuminate the context that the secretary and the department were operating
under at the time of my strategic project. The work embedded in the execution of the strategic project occurred in the wildly complex environment of the Delaware Department of Education at that particular moment in time, which was in many ways reflective of the wider reform context. Using the work groups analytic frame, a closer look at the following facets of context is useful in further understanding how the work unfolded.

- Organization's Strategy
- Organization History
- Physical Setting
- Customers, Suppliers and Competitors
- Labor Market
- Financial Markets
- Political, Legal and Cultural systems


There are three primary groups of individuals who are key to understanding the work of the Department of Education under the leadership of Secretary Murphy: the governor, state legislators, and district superintendents.

Governor Markell had a strong education agenda (State of Delaware, 2009), including a legacy of being one of two governors to lead the work of the Common Core State Standards through the National Governor’s Association (National Governors Association, 2010). As Markell interviewed and appointed Mark Murphy it was with a clear understanding of Murphy’s reform agenda and both an eagerness and a commitment to creating dramatic change in the environment (State of the State Address 2012 – Delaware’s Time to Lead, 2012). Delaware is a Democratic leaning state, and there was little resistance to Murphy’s appointment as he went through the nomination process with state legislators (Murphy, 2014).
In a meeting with the superintendents in November of 2014, Governor Markell provided political cover for Murphy, stating clearly that Murphy’s agenda was created at Markell’s behest. The confidence that the governor had in the secretary was apparent throughout the prioritization process, and specifically in his understanding of the way that the department took steps to respond to complaints from the field.

The secretary’s relationship with state legislators was more fraught than his relationship with the governor. Delaware’s small size creates opportunities for complex personal and political intersections, and the state is in some ways very insular. Throughout the nomination process for the position of Secretary of Education, Murphy had to be careful to distance himself from prominent state reform entities, as there had been significant political pushback over an education reform agenda supported by the Rodel Foundation. Though there were a few crucial allies for the department within the legislature, at the time of writing there were serious camps of resistance to the department’s reform agenda. These were exacerbated by pushback around teacher evaluation, including the move to link teacher evaluation to student outcomes as measured by Smarter Balanced Accountability Consortium (Albright, A longer reprieve on Delaware teacher evaluations?, 2015) and the department’s school turnaround initiative, which mobilized several vocal senators to speak in opposition to the department’s policies. Said State Representative John Kowalko at a Christina School Board Meeting on November 18, 2014, “There is an ugly threatening atmosphere that seems to be the modus operandi of this Administration and DOE” (Kowalko, 2014). Said another vocal legislator, Bryan Townsend, via social media, “All Delaware schoolchildren deserve better than the disheartening rift between the Delaware
Department of Education (DDOE) and many educators/stakeholders. DDOE decisions often seem disconnected from what is happening in classrooms” (Townsend, 2014).

According to the former DDOE Chief of Staff, “[Murphy] doesn’t have any tolerance for people who aren’t educators (e.g. legislators). This plays out … in the perception of external stakeholders that the secretary is not willing to engage … which affects perception and the ability to get things done” (McGlaughlin, 2014). The support that the secretary holds as a gubernatorial appointee does not extend to the individual legislators, and this had a de facto effect of compromising some of the department’s effectiveness (Blowman, Personal Interview, 2014).

The third key constituency that comprised the department is the group of district superintendents, locally referred to as the chiefs. There are 19 LEAs in the state of Delaware, and the secretary has a monthly meeting with all chiefs designed to communicate and clarify department initiatives. The relationship between the secretary and the chiefs is particularly complex. As Murphy has employed a strategy of pressures and supports, with an emphasis on informal accountability, the chiefs have become increasingly resistant to both the initiatives stemming from the department and the climate that has emerged between them. The secretary, in personal conversations, often cited a culture of mediocrity and complacency in the field (Murphy, 2014). Because of or as a result of this perception, there was serious lack of trust between the department and the chiefs. Though the department has regulatory authority over the LEAs, the personal relationships needed to execute initiatives with fidelity, particularly in an environment like Delaware, are critical (Honan, 2014). As the department increased the
informal and formal pressures on the field, the pushback from the chiefs became impossible to ignore.

There are other constituencies active in the education space—the Delaware State Education Association, the principal’s association, the state board of education, the business community, and parents and students within the public system. The three entities described above, however, had the most critical impact on the work of the department during the time of my strategic project.

Summary

As we consider my entry into the department, tasked with leading a strategic planning process, the impact of context cannot be understated. Over the past two years, Murphy had deliberately engaged in tactics of disequilibrium and used pressures to promote and incentivize change within the districts across the state (Murphy, 2014). It was clear, in light of the political tensions that surfaced in October of 2014, that the influence and supports needed to successfully maintain and deepen the bold reform initiatives from within the department were compromised. In 2014, the national and statewide context was rapidly changing, and the role of formal accountability structures was being called into question from practitioners and pundits alike. The Delaware Department of Education’s leadership team was simultaneously experiencing palpable tension between the department and the field, internal changes in team composition, and was anticipating a change in leadership at the department at the end of the governor’s term in 2017.

As I designed my strategic project, I intended to use the strategic plan itself as a vehicle to address not only the specific priorities of the department (and ensuring there
were accompanying resources), but also to facilitate a change in orientation of work with the field. These goals were shaped by my learnings from the Review of Knowledge for Action, my perceptions of tension within the department, and dissonance between the department and the field.

As described above, my approach to this work was through the avenue of task design. Through my role as a resident (and therefore short-term with the department), and influenced by the fact that I was a direct report to the deputy secretary (whose jurisdiction was largely with operations), I designed a series of meetings and outcomes that were intended to both illuminate and address issues of culture and tone, not simply arrive at a set of priorities and ensure they were resourced appropriately. At the conclusion of my residency I recognize my intended outcomes required a different approach than what I provided, and my entre into the work via a linear and technical process did not match the needs or the ingrained culture of the department’s leadership team. As I encountered resistance to the work, I made repeated attempts to re-engage technically through process, without impacting or addressing context or group culture. As the literature around work groups indicates, the context and the design factors should be aligned (Harvard Business School, 1998, p. 5). Had I understood this more deeply I might have been able to introduce a process that was better suited to the context, and therefore to achieve my intended results.

**Implications for Self**

My residency experience with the Delaware Department of Education deepened my understanding of the work of state education agencies, expanded my experience in
project management, and provided a venue for me to explore leading work without positional authority. I learned an immense amount, both about my own strengths and areas of continuous growth. This was truly a unique time to learn from within an SEA, and I am debt to the department for the opportunity to learn from them. As I reflect on this residency as well as the results of my strategic project, implications for self fall into three broad categories.

1. Develop lateral leadership
2. Increase attention to context
3. Cultivate ability to adapt leadership approach

**Leadership Development**

At the onset of my residency in Delaware, I understood that the unique role as resident in the department would afford me opportunity to explore and exercise lateral leadership. The secretary expected me to lead the strategic planning process and to drive forward on both strategy and outcomes. Working on the leadership team placed me in a position of managing up (to the deputy secretary and the secretary) and across (with other members of the leadership team) and provided a rich opportunity to utilize influencing techniques. At the close of the residency, I recognize that this remains an opportunity for development. The relationships on the leadership team were strained throughout the duration of my tenure with the department, and this meant that a personal approach (phone calls, casual meetings, volunteering for work events) might have yielded a different outcome than one based on project management. I believe that relationships amongst the leadership team were challenged due to threats to work streams (especially in the face of limited resources), and ways of exercising accountability with the field, and
these threats had an impact on both process and outcome. As the challenges to execution mounted, my reliance on process increased, and both my desire and capacity to influence were compromised.

In retrospect, I see that this project contained challenges in both leadership and management. I was tasked with leading a strategic planning process, but as I had never led this type of work in the past, this skill was outside of my ‘wheelhouse’. As the strategic project got underway I engaged external colleagues and investigated processes to help me understand, design, and lead an effective process, and to help compensate for my own dearth of experience in this arena. As the work in the department unfolded I recognized that I was navigating unfamiliar waters, and under those conditions I tend to rely heavily on plan development and plan execution. As I encountered challenges to implementation of the project, I increased my reliance on the dates and stated outcomes cited in the project management plan. I have always recognized that I thrive with a certain amount of structure and a plan. For many roles in my career, such as my work as a principal, a teacher, or the Director of Denver Teacher Residency, this characteristic has served me well. In this case, however, this became a management challenge, and I struggled, at times, to successfully manage the project itself.

Additionally, I recognize I faced a leadership challenge. I entered the department with the intent to utilize influencing and lateral leadership techniques. As described above, however, I had limited experience with this skill. As a resident, therefore, I was ‘trying on’ a new and somewhat foreign way of being present on the team, and in this, did not demonstrate the confidence or the competence that might have allowed me to lead the work in a different way.
This combination of both management and leadership challenges had a two-fold impact on the work: first, it impacted my ability to achieve my theory of action as I had designed, as the level of time, trust, and relationships necessary to delve into the philosophical elements of accountability and support exceeded the bounds of the technical process I constructed. Secondly, it drove the work through an increasingly technical approach, made manifest in using task design as my entry point for much of the work, increasingly without making accommodations to context.

Attention to Context

Over the course of the residency I was reminded of the critical role of context. I will explore this further in the Implications for Sector section, but for purposes of reflecting on my own leadership, I discuss here how the composition of the leadership team, the proclivities of the members, and the interpersonal dynamics all came together to impact how the strategic plan evolved.

The Secretary of Education in Delaware’s leadership style was fairly consistent. He would lay out a vision or an expectation and expect that the lead actor for that work would execute it accordingly, while keeping him apprised of the progress. He stated on more than one occasion that the senior leadership of the department was very entrepreneurial, and he managed branch leaders as a thought partner and through ensuring that the work aligned to his vision. He rarely was involved with the day-to-day management neither of teams nor in how a branch was executing the vision.

The plan I laid out for my strategic project was one that made certain assumptions about the leadership team’s ability and desire to engage in collective decision making, shared commitment to a goal, and a transparent process to articulate department-wide
objectives and priorities. The process was one that required a high degree of collaboration, communication, trust, and interdependencies. As the political events unfolded over the course of the year, both within the team and across the state, it became harder and harder to meet the timelines set out in the plan, and the work itself began to change. Instead of adapting the process, timeline and goals to the structure and personalities in the department, however, I adhered to the idea of a plan and continued to drive towards a centralized process for decision-making. My attempt to address issues of tone, culture and relationships through a technical process fell short of my intended results and was ultimately ill-suited to meet the complexities of the department’s context.

In hindsight, once I understood Secretary Murphy’s leadership style (he preferred to make a recommendation or decision and leave the execution up to the individual) a different process might have served the team better and allowed for an outcome that was arrived at faster and more easily. Being able to adapt my own style to the context and group culture is a clear opportunity for me as I continue to develop as a leader.

**Adapt Leadership Approach**

Within weeks of my arrival to the Delaware Department of Education, I felt and heard a deep and palpable rift between the department and the districts across the state. The department was pouring money into resource and programs, yet the districts were articulating tensions with the department’s myriad expectations. The tone of the department’s end of year reviews was often adversarial. In some cases superintendents did not attend, and the body language in the meetings was often decidedly disrespectful toward members of the department. Some districts brought a bus full of teachers to sit in the back of the room, wearing red shirts in solidarity with their district leader. This
perception was confirmed during the consultation with the SEA experts who came to meet with the secretary in July. Tone and relationships with the field was a major topic of conversation, and addressing this was included in their feedback following the meeting.

These factors were part of what steered me to name the examination of the balance of accountability and support in my theory of action. I believed that if the philosophy around formal and informal accountability were named and discussed, and if there was a collective decision on the part of the leadership team regarding the ways and measures that it interacted with the field in terms of pressures and supports, that this would lead to improvements in both the tone and type of interactions with the field.

As I reflect on the approach that I used throughout my work with the department, somewhat ironically, I recognize some parallels in the approach I was taking with the leadership team and the way the department itself was approaching the work with the field. The very thing that I was hoping that the department would examine (the balance of accountability and support) I neglected through my own process. I tried to utilize deadlines and structures to achieve change, and in some ways did not give credence to the literature around accountability and support and the ways that these can be used in tandem to yield changes in behavior. At the same time as I was advocating for a more measured approach to interactions externally, I was leading a process that became increasingly rigid. My ability to be flexible in my own leadership style, and adapt to the environment, will be critical as I continue to grow as a leader.
Implications for Site

As I consider the results of my strategic project for the Delaware Department of Education I believe both the Review of Knowledge for Action and my residency work yield the following site implications:

1. Examine the department’s balance of accountability and support
2. Improve internal relational trust
3. Scale back initiatives

Balance of accountability and support

As described in the Results section, analyzing the department’s balance of accountability and support with the leadership team was planned work that I did not execute during my tenure with the department. I have reflected deeply on why I did not complete this work, as discussed above in the Implications for Self. The fact remains, however, that I believe that this is essential work for the department’s leadership team. Each member of the leadership team is fiercely committed to positive educational outcomes for students across the state. They are not aligned on how to get there, nor is there common agreement regarding the role of the department in the state, despite a revised theory of action.

The department’s externally facing work are largely manifestations of both formal and informal accountability structures. I suggest that the department evaluate, for each stream of work across its entirety, all formal and informal accountability mechanisms. This analysis could be cross-referenced against both the monitoring calendar for the department, as well as with the accountability mechanisms that are built into the nascent statewide accountability framework. While it’s uncertain if the department will make
any changes in execution or initiative structure based on this analysis, my work with the
department over the last ten months has revealed both internal inconsistencies and
external tensions that could potentially be addressed through this inventory and critical self-examination. I believe that once there exists a clear portrait, internally, of this work, combined with the pressures to change both tone and execution, there will be a reorientation to the work that could provide for greater supports and ultimately yield improved relationships within the state.

**Increase Relational Trust**

In the Results section of this capstone I described a multi-step process designed to transparently and collaboratively arrive at resources that are aligned to priorities. This process did not proceed as planned, and ultimately, the deputy secretary made unilateral personnel decisions in lieu of the collective process that was outlined. I suspect that the divided reporting structure, the secretary’s management style, and the lack of clear philosophy around the role of the SEA in the public education space (exacerbated by the aforementioned lack of alignment on the balance of accountability and support) contributed significantly to low internal trust amongst the leadership team. The unintended consequence of this triangulation led to further divisions between departments and inefficiencies in work product and process.

In the interest of improved health of the organization, I suggest that the department’s leadership team engage in a process to improve trust at the leadership level and throughout the organization as a whole. This could take a two-fold path, one that is focused on the mechanisms of teaming and the other more naturally centered through
deepen understandings of work and developing a sense of shared accountability for outcomes.

**Reduce Department Led Initiatives**

When I joined the department there was a clear recognition on the part of the secretary that the Delaware Department of Education was “driving” on a number of initiatives. As he began planning for the next two years of his tenure, the secretary openly considered a reduction in initiatives as evidenced by the meeting with the external SEA experts who visited in July of 2014.

I described a process through which initiatives across the department named as deprioritized were to be decreased or eliminated altogether. This was aligned to the resource allocation work and ultimately yielded very little in the way of initiative reduction across the department. The end of this progression yielded some shifts of resources within branches, as branch leaders claimed that the priority initiatives were appropriately resourced with dollars and FTEs (contradicting earlier request for additional dollars and staffing), while at the same time protecting other existing work streams.

I recommend that an evaluation of initiatives is included in a process that compliments the examination of accountability and support. Research on improvements in the public education sector tell us that if everything is a priority then nothing is a priority, and schools and districts alike struggle to know what to focus on (Data Quality Campaign, November 2011). This evaluation of initiatives should be accompanied by a guarantee that the department commit to strategic initiative reduction. The pressures from the field, made manifest in complaints to the governor and further exacerbated by a
vote of “no confidence” in Secretary Murphy by the DSEA in March of 2015, are still creating internal and external instability within the state and within the department itself, and the combination of initiative reduction and strategic exercising of the department’s accountability function could alleviate these salient tensions (Albright, Delaware teachers union: no confidence in top education leader, 2015).

I name these implications for the Delaware Department of Education with the self-awareness that these could, and perhaps should have, occurred as a result of the strategic planning process. As discussed previously, however, both the organizational culture and the context in which I was operating made deeper investigations of both process and practice challenging. Nevertheless, I believe this is essential work for the department.

Implications for Sector

As the Race to the Top grant winds down, the Obama administration enters its final years, and ESEA faces a reauthorization attempt led by Lamar Alexander (R-TN), the opportunity for growth, increased autonomy and influence for SEAs beyond their regulatory function is an open question.

The challenges that Delaware Department of Education faces in terms of identifying the balance of support and accountability are not unique to the state. SEAs that have taken on the opportunity presented through ESEA waivers and those awarded Race to the Top grants are all facing serious challenges to the accountability initiatives that formed the backbone of many administrations. In recent years, many reform-minded state commissioners and secretaries have changed the way that SEAs operate, and many
of these same entrepreneurial chiefs have left their positions in the last 10 months. Andy Smarick, a senior fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative policy group that has supported the Common Core, describes reformist state commissioners across the country being replaced with consensus candidates — often superintendents who were well known and well-liked by the various interest groups in the state.

Increasingly, it appears that today's governors won't be hiring a new wave of prominent national reform figures to serve as state chiefs," Smarick adds. "I'm concerned we're entering a period of reform retrenchment: The battles over Common Core, new tests, tenure reform, and more may have left today's governors with little appetite for a new round of K-12 fights. (Taylor, 2014)

In light of the challenges that the reform movement has faced since the advent of No Child Left Behind and the yet to be understood legacy of Race to the Top, the role of the State Education Agency must be reevaluated. The agency clearly sits at pivotal point in the education ecosystem, but the spate of reforms that have emanated from reform minded agencies over the past five years have proven to be potentially both volatile and unsustainable. At this juncture, in light of the country’s unique history of education and fervent commitment to local control and after a candid reflection on the accountability movement and the role of the SEAs within it, I believe the most salient implication I can make for the sector is to develop deep ownership of the work at the local level, building on the Carnegie’s research around networked improvement communities (NICs). The advantages seem promising, “…A network organizational approach can surface and test new insights and enable more fluid exchanges across contexts and traditional institutional boundaries—thus holding potential to enhance designing for scale” (Bryk, 2011, p.7).
NICs have the potential to deliver results that SEAs strive for, but ultimately the locus of control sits within the community itself and does not rely on structures of formal accountability to achievable change. Says Bryk, “NIC is organized around fast iterative cycles of design, engineering and development. The idea is to test fast, fail fast and early, learn and improve” (Bryk, 2011, p. 29). This structure not only allows for improvement close to the unit of change (in the district, school or classroom), but also allows for significant growth in the area of capacity building. One of the persistent struggles SEAs face is providing supports that are meaningful, differentiated, and appropriate (McGuinn, 2012). SEAs can play a critical role in providing structures for the NICs, and then allow the networks to drive towards what is needed themselves or to select service providers that are closely aligned to their needs as evidenced by their data (Smarick, 2014). A variation on the NIC model can be found in the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) model seen in New York and Colorado, where in both states there exists a strong relationship between the SEA and the BOCES as the BOCES provide technical supports to LEAs.

As described in the Review of Knowledge for Action, formal accountability structures have had limited impacts on long-term improvements to student academic achievement gains (Mintrop, 2004). As Elmore and Fuhrman discovered (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001), accountability that is closer to the school and classroom is more sustainable and more likely to lead to improvements over time. This research base, taken in light of the turbulent climate of education reform, continues to reaffirm for me the notion that networked improvement communities are a viable route to explore while pursuing deep and sustainable change. Susan Lusi’s analysis of state education agencies
bolsters my hope, as she states, “Nearly all state education policies should be designed with an eye towards building local capacity for change…ideally, even monitoring should work to create further local capacity” (Lusi, 1997, p. 172).

Further implications for the sector must include an examination of the ways in which reforms have been sustained and the ways in which reforms have been polarizing. In some localities across the country, there has been significant backlash against any number of reforms, including the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, teacher evaluation tied to student achievement results, and state takeover of turnaround schools. This complex legacy has left many states floundering and with deep divisions across the education community regarding how to achieve the educational changes needed for students to be college and career ready.

While I am not naïve enough to think that self-examination, accompanied by networked improvement communities will be enough to solve the challenges facing state education agencies across the country, I do believe the tools for successful change already exist within the system. We tinker with harbormasters and ecosystems, local and decentralized loci of control, and where to provide support and when to impose accountability. What remains is to find a balanced approach to public education that is both responsive to the community being served and builds on a deep and unwavering commitment to success for all, not for some. This work is possible.
Conclusion

Over the course of this capstone, I have engaged in an analysis of my own leadership and the role of State Education Agencies as they navigate the balance between accountability and support in the public education sector. Across the country and indeed across the globe, policy makers and practitioners alike are seeking to unlock the black box of increasing student achievement. Everything under the sun is under the microscope: compensation, preparation, technical assistance, accountability, testing, tenure…the list goes on.

As my strategic project unfolded the statewide context continued to change, in part responding to the national reform environment and in part due to the shifting internal dynamics of the department. The identity of the Delaware Department of Education was undergoing a shift, one that was plagued by varying senses of awareness, and perceptions of urgency. State Education Agencies, as described in the preceding Review of Knowledge for Action, were also evolving along different lines nationally as their relationship to the federal Department of Education changed. The shifting national context, combined with the internal dynamics, created an unstable environment with competing commitments: some to a dynamic reform agenda, some to a local education agenda and some to resistance to change that manifested in aggressive attacks on accountability levers. As these tensions played out over the time period of my residency
with the department, they impacted both the work I was leading, the results of the strategic project, and the ultimate effectiveness of the work itself.

As I examine the results of the strategic planning process it is clear that the technical work of task design was necessary but not sufficient to make the deeper work of impacting the balance of accountability and support viable. Over the course of this process there were immediate adjustments to work from the department designed to modify initiatives that could potentially further inflame the field: principal credentialing, led by the TLEU, was put on hold for the academic year. This was a particularly contentious issue with the field. Because the state’s teacher evaluation process, Delaware Performance Appraisal System II (DPAS II), had not yielded a highly differentiated portrait of teacher quality across the state (Albright, Virtually no Del. teachers receive poor evaluations, 2014), principal credentialing was being reevaluated. The idea behind the principal credentialing was to train and assess principals on their ability to accurately apply the DPAS II evaluation components in order to have an updated credential. Should principals not pass the assessment, they would lose their credential and potentially be unable to fulfill their evaluation responsibilities at their respective school. The principal’s association was up in arms and the department changed course and timelines for this work not because of a shift in orientation to the work, but in response to the political pressures at play.

The entire state teacher evaluation system was also under scrutiny at this time, following the previous year’s analysis showing a rating of 98% effective across the state. The TLEU had a plan to put the evaluation model through what was referred to as the
“wash cycle” and engaged in a course change, committing to have representation from the statewide teachers union, DSEA, join in the effort.

The department was also committed to deepening the implementation of the Common Core and had initiated various efforts over the last two academic years to prepare principals and teachers for the standards and the accompanying assessments. Leads from the T&L team were planning on monitoring visits aligned with the state’s monitoring role and providing districts with a ranked score based on their ability to implement the standards. After a series of conversations internally and with the group of statewide superintendents, the decision was made to drop the ranking portion of the visit and to concentrate on proving actionable feedback to the district, resulting in a process that was described as much more of a support than a pressure.

These examples serve to reinforce the idea that SEAs engaged in complex reforms are faced with implementing a reform whose success depends on multifaceted layers of change. I entered the residency with a deep and abiding belief in the potential of SEAs to be a critical component in creating conditions for excellent education for all. I leave further convinced of this opportunity. Change needs to occur in the external policy environment, the department itself, schools and districts, and the community at large (Lusi, 1997, p. 160). I depart Delaware with the hope that the department takes a critical eye towards internal climate, initiatives, and philosophy. I deeply believe in the power and potential of state education agencies to improve learning outcomes broadly, be it through networked improvement communities or some other mechanism. We have a clear need. Perhaps Delaware, the First State, can be the first to truly find a way to serve all of its students.
References


Data Quality Campaign. (2011). From Compliance to Service: Evolving the State Role To Support District Data Efforts To Improve Student Achievement.


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https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/k-12/race-to-the-top
Appendix

Appendix A

DCAS Trends: Proficiency
Percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced
(DCAS 2011-2014)

Delaware students are maintaining 2011 gains. In 2014, approximately seven out of 10 of students scored proficient or advanced on the Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System (DCAS) exam, as compared to six out of 10 students in 2011.

Note: Percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced calculated by dividing the total number of students scoring proficient or advanced by the total number of exams administered. A change of two percentage points or less is not considered statistically significant. Grades 3-10 tested.
Source: Delaware Department of Education, DCAS data (2011-2014)
DCAS Trends: Performance Levels
Percentage of students performing at different levels (2011-2014 DCAS)

Delaware students maintained 2011 and 2012 gains in achieving higher-level proficiency in English language arts and math.

Note: Percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced calculated by dividing the total number of students proficient or advanced by performance level by the total number of exams administered. A change of two percentage points or less is not considered statistically significant. Grades 3-10 tested.
Source: Delaware Department of Education, DCAS data (2011-2014)
NAEP Assessment Scores: Trends in Proficiency

Percentage students scoring proficient or advanced (2003-2013)

Delaware students’ proficiency in math reading on the NAEP has increased over the past 10 years.

Note: Prior to 2003, 4th grade and 8th grade math and reading subject tests were not administered on a consistent bi-annual basis. Not all NAEP assessments administered before 2003 permitted accommodations for students with disabilities.

Appendix C

Anonymous Responses from Interviews

If we get the right teachers and leaders, college and career curriculum, along with the right technical tools, and are able to hold districts accountable: those are the pieces that will lead to students being ready for careers and life.

To do whatever we need to do to make sure that every child in DE is college and career ready. MM’s vision: by making people accountable to the data that is out there, that will drive the change and the paradigm shift that is happening at the LEAs.

Accountability is a priority. Accountability should drive results. Despite that I haven’t see the department driving on specific action that would lead to the results. We are focused on the outcomes without being focused on what inputs to get them there.

If we are doing a good a job with the districts and support their work, then we would expect good outcomes in academics and in academic areas.

If we don’t’ put immense pressure on the system in certain areas, we won’t be able to affect change in the time that we have. The goals is to provide a balance of pressure and support, but we are not there yet.

We view ourselves as a support function for .... schools and charters. I am not sure how things are being operationalized. I am not sure we have the best reputation out in the field.

It’s my understanding: providing resources, and holding the districts accountable. Rather than stepping in and doing the work for them. We will try and answer the call, and then we want you to go be innovative.

At the same time we will hold you accountable for what you will do.

I would categorize the organization as disruptive, hoping to create change in a positive way. If I create pressure I will see change in a positive way.

Everything is student focused. While we are at the policy level we have to think about how our decisions affect studies. Data, what comes on and off the plate- what is best for kids. Sometime this might be politically tough, not always what is best for us personally or for adults.
Do whatever they have to do to make kids college and career ready. Keep your eye on the ball. The ball is are kids college and career ready.

We are trying to enhance the system so that all students have the skills to support themselves and their families and reskill themselves as the work changes in the future.

Every child must be college AND career ready.

Our work always has to be about pressure to some degree. Our districts should feel they are being stretched to the next level. The supports have to be strategic.

LEAs are transitioning into the idea that they will have to do for themselves. We mean business but we are still nice people.

Final thoughts:
We run the risk of initiative overload. We also need to stop doing certain things.

Districts need different types of support. We haven’t been good at organizing prioritization. Districts are overwhelmed and have initiative overload. In the past, I don’t’ know how delivery unit is organized. I always thought: identify top 3 priorities for districts, and allocate priorities in alignment with that. And then other people back off. Everyone will still have a place because they will be needed somewhere else.

I think that it important to note that the department has made phenomenal progress in one year. And positioned to make more progress.

I would love to be more innovative, but bringing the districts on this the people, since they will have to do the lifting.
Appendix D

DE Theory of Action (DRAFT)

OVERALL

If the Delaware Department of Education...

▪ Provides supports focused on the priority reforms by...
  – Building district capacity to support implementation of priority reforms at the school level, sometimes by leading and then transitioning leadership to districts and schools
  – Differentiating supports to districts with limited capacity, based on data
  – Establishing communities of practice focused on implementation of the priority reforms
  – Providing technical support to districts
  – Creating an ecosystem of partners in the state who can best support districts and schools (the state may not always be best positioned to support)

▪ Creates a system of fair and transparent pressures by...
  – Recognizing district and school excellence and performance rigorously and consistently
  – Focusing districts and schools on deep implementation of priority reforms most impactful on student achievement
  – Publicly reporting district and school performance data that allows for comparison
  – Periodically in performance routines between the state and district throughout the school year (differentiation)
  – Establishing, communicating, and monitoring adherence to guidelines, requirements, and interim measures of implementation of priority reforms

▪ Seeds innovation around priority reforms by...
  – Providing autonomy and choice to districts and schools to personalize initiatives to fit the culture and needs of their students
  – Incentivizing districts and schools to be early adopters and champions of priority reforms, establishing proof points and early wins
  – Incubating and attracting partners and resources to innovate within and outside of the existing system

Then...

▪ Districts and schools will have the capacity to implement priority reforms
  ▪ Districts will be driven to improve practices by focusing on the areas they are most challenged or will have the most impact on students
  ▪ Districts are leading, learning, informing, and championing revisions to state policy and implementation

And then...

▪ Every single student in the state...CCR
Addendum/Notes

**THEORY OF ACTION MUST BE TESTABLE...** *(NEXT STEP OPTIONS AFTER LT REVIEW)*
- Consider evidence examples/statements for each part of the theory of action
- Rubric to help with the reflection/definition

**LIFE CYCLE OF STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION**
- Lead, transition, support, monitor (cleave) – e.g. PLCs

**ASSUMPTIONS**

**PRESSURES**
- LEAs will respond to pressures
- Pressure leads to change; change creates investment/success; that sustains the change
- The field will not change performance unless compelled to by external pressure
- Supports must be tied to consequences
- Pressure will vary by LEA
- Pressure⇒ Real change and not just marginal compliance
- “Without struggle, there is no progress”

**SUPPORTS**
- Some districts & charters do not have capacity to deliver on new initiatives
- The SEA is equipped to provide “support”
- We have to support but not enable
- LEAs will request support

**INNOVATION**
- Education is SLOW to innovate
- Innovation will not naturally occur
- The SEA should drive innovation
- There is funding available for “innovation”
- Innovation will move the system forward

**OVERARCHING ASSUMPTIONS**
- The same people can drive supports/pressures and innovation
- 2 years is enough to institutionalize change
- The SEA should take on work outside of “historical function”
- Our consumers are rational
- Parents respond to DATA
- There is buy-in about “college and career ready”
- People will change their beliefs in the aspiration if they see it happen
- There is will within the department beyond LT
Appendix E

DE Theory of Action (Draft)

What resonates with you?
- Emphasis on date
- Recognition of high performing schools
- Best practices
- Training and professional development
- Incentives
- System changes
- The final “and then”
- Transparent expectations (should add “clear”)
- Combination of supports/pressures
- Accountability and Innovation have to be the parents of the work
- The supports, standards, and innovations framework resonates
- Expectations versus pressure
- Key words performance – clear communication/expectations
- This really seems to focus on a specific set of works but leaves a significant number of areas out
- Good that it’s limited to 3
- Ecosystem – all processes should support goal
- Focus on supports and fair/transparent expectations
- Differentiating assistance based on need
- This is good, you did a nice job
- Agree with the 3 categories

What questions do you have?
- How do we (through this theory) emphasize the importance of non-educational supports (for example by providing breakfast in the classroom and having nurse access in all schools) to the LEAs and how these can help increase/improve student performance? It is such an important piece.
- A proof point?
- What do you mean by “stocktake”?
- How is this message/theory communicated to facilitate actual action towards fulfillment of the vision?
- Are we again developing a plan and trying to communicate why it’s a good plan - Versus – starting with the vision as the why we do what we do?
- How do we execute?
- Are we, as an SEA clearly defining all of the terms? Are we all on the same page internally with what we are asking of our LEAS?
- What if? What if the LEAs do not meet the expectations? What are the consequences?
- Message delivery – how to deliver this message to LEAs. Currently the DOE’s messages are messy, you must have the right people in the room at the same time. 1) School Board President 2) Superintendent 3) Local Union President 4) CFO.
- How do the things listed differ from what the department has been doing for decades?
- Do we need to specify how the department will do these things?
- How does talent (at the department, districts, schools) factor in to this TOA?
- How does this theory of action include the talent necessary to execute?
- How do charters fit into this? They are 12% of the public school population and growing
- Is there room for schools to innovate within Delaware’s rigid legal frameworks? Even charters don’t have flexibility to do innovative or even different things. How could a district? Does the DOE need to push for a change to the laws?
- Implementation
- Concreate actionable steps to guide work
- Message delivery
- What are we doing differently?
- Where does accountability come into play?
- What does differentiating assistance really mean?
- Targeted training and professional learning opportunities – how is this going to be done? State? LEA? What are the consequences?
- What is meant by innovation? Most innovation grants I’ve seen awarded in the past aren’t innovative. How are you going to ensure real innovation rather than “I want money to implement a project”? and the project is nothing special. How can you ensure scaling and continuation for seed funded projects?
- Does the logic really hold – if we get the first level done are we guaranteed the final outcome?
- Where does FR and RM fit into the stocktakes?
- Interaction with state’s plan eco-development
- Data – definitions’ differentiation
- Accountability needs to speak to action
- Seems like the comments under ______ section are similar to the supports
- What are ______ of context based solutions under innovation?
- What happens if this work occurs then little ______happens?
- Unclear how the supports are differentiated from the expectations. The language under both are very similar to each other
- Should there be a way to show how accountability ____________/define supports and innovations
- What are our expectations for LEAs? It isn’t clear here.

**Does this make sense for you and your work?**

- The work in my workgroup is 100% geared towards the non-educational supports for our students. I do not see how this is reflected in the theory or the “if” statements. For example, nutrition, homeless supports, school health, discipline, etc.
- It does but we need a What if?
- The charter accountability theory of action contradicts a lot of this
- Need to use to drive day to day work. Need to support across DOE down to work group level.
- Need another bullet under supports – to articulate DOE role to “support”, e.g. finances, nutrition, transportation, liaison to other agencies.
- This doesn’t seem to address the many supportive, administrative type functions that occur between DOE and LEAs.
- Guiding behaviors – is this internal?
- Theory of Actions – seems external
- Foundation work of the department
- Yes – this relates to my work and workgroup

**School Support Group Responses**
What resonates with you?

- This appears to be a method of self-evaluation tied to an old fashion lesson plan
- Types of assistance for schools
- Building district capacity
- How do we get it done?
- Targeted funding and resources to area of greatest need but is my reward for doing well is unequal resource
- The need for clear guidance documents and better communication
- ESEA routines and performance evaluations with all districts is proving to be a good communication to show the Department’s goal of holding the districts/schools accountable.
- I think that differentiating assistance for schools based on performance data is an integral first step
- That if everyone participates in these plans and steps the results should be positive
- Clean data around student performance
- Assistance for schools and districts based ON PERFORMANCE DATA
- Reporting school data – accountability and all venues
- I have been here 12+ years and we have been talking about building district capacity. So far I think there has been little progress on that front. Even RTTT did very little in that area. I think it is the right goal but we have never focused on the “how”. Until we find a way to do that better, I think we will continue to struggle. My recommendation is to find the best practices for states helping to build district capacity and put a lot of our energy there.
- Providing clear guidance and support
- Attracting partners and resources
- Many people in the districts/charters have multiple hats they wear. We need to provide a more thoughtful, streamlined process/supports to better provide supports to meet their needs.
- I think the DDOE is a diverse group of professionals that provide unique contribution and services to the students in DE. Instead of forcing all DDOE staff to understand and participate in these action plans, allow each staff member to work under their strengths instead of aligning every DDOE employee to fit in the same box.
- This seems as a repeat of what the Dept and Secretary Murphy has been speaking about regarding the Guiding Behaviors.
- Differentiating assistance
- Building LEA capacity
- Probability reporting
- Where is community nutrition
- It is clear – balanced supports and accountability
- Differentiating assistance for schools
- Building district capacity
- Publicly reporting district and school data
- Incentive by districts/schools to adopt best practice

What questions do you have?

- Who decides what goals are to be measured? And how?
- How is the Federal nutrition programs reflected in these action plans?
- What are choice options? What are referencing?
- Who sets goals?
- Success requires student, parent and school involvement....need to get parents more involved.
  How?
- Who determines what is a best practice?
- Is that top down or can schools identify and implement local best practices?
- How are we holding the LEA accountable?
- Seeds section unclear
- I am not sure what “cultivating choice options within the state” means. Choice for whom? In what areas?
- I feel the same way about the “proof points”
- You might want to change the word “incubating”
- Thalia made a comment in reference to too much jargon as that’s what happens when you have a graduate student. Her response was insulting as many of us have advanced degrees including doctorates. As I state below if we are requesting clarification it is because we know those who we support and they too will have/need clarification. If this is released externally, will parents and community members be able to understand it? Word choice.
- How is this relevant to the work I do as a field agent for school nutrition programs?
- Where does community nutrition fit in the plan?
- “Supports” is a broad term – many in the Dept do not know what Susan’s branch consists of and the various programs that are considered “support services”. Our programs do provide clear guidance and strong communication but a few of our LEA partners choose to ignore this guidance.
- Where are parents represented? How do you measure
- Developing proof points that can be scaled for greatest impact....what is that?
- Need to clarify “choice” statement

**Does this make sense for you and your work?**

- Very marginally....we are outside the scope of most of this.
- In school nutrition we have many schools now providing breakfast which is very important for children to be ready for the school day ahead of them. We also have health and discipline programs within our workgroup that also provides a way for students to be successful in school.
- More supports and evidence of importance as part of plan of the whole child
- Sets the foundation and creates the environment for learning – leads to success
- I think is largely fine. I honestly don’t think it significantly different than things that have been said in my 12 years here. Again, we have struggled with the how not the what.
- One final comment. I think that what happens will be driven more by the presidential change than the change at the governor level. The last two federal administrations have determined the countries action. We need to be transparent about theory of action. Once it is complete, it should be public.
- No....Thalia had our Branch name incorrect which made me believe she didn’t know her audience. Our Branch provides a variety of services and if it doesn’t make sense to us then it won’t make sense out in the field. It needs to be presented as relatable to our work. Always focusing on data alone misses great opportunities for those support areas outside the data box but still affects student/teacher performance.
- The work that I do has little/nothing to do with this action plan. School nutrition has measurable goals through our administrative review process. We communicate clearly with our SEAs they understand expectations and in almost all SEAs, they are compliant.
- I work my community nutrition (clientele) outside districts and schools, so I'm trying to see where we (CN) fit into the DE Theory of Action.
- Not at this time
- Yes — in particular, providing supports and seed innovation.

11/18/14
Appendix F

DE Theory of Action (DRAFT)

OVERALL

If the Delaware Department of Education...

Provides supports by...
- Setting and communicating clear guidance and standards
- Providing clear and actionable data around student performance
- Differentiating assistance for schools and districts based on performance data
- Building district capacity through funding and targeted training and professional development

Creates a fair and transparent system by...
- Establishing guidelines, requirements, and interim measures of progress
- Publicly reporting district and school performance data
- Recognizing high performance of schools and districts
- Cultivating choice options within the state

Seeds innovation by...
- Incubating and attracting partners and resources to transform existing systems
- Providing options for districts and schools to create context based solutions
- Incentivizing districts and schools to adopt emerging best practices
- Developing proof points that can be scaled for greatest impact

Then...
- Districts and schools will have increased capacity to identify and address student performance
- Delaware educators, communities and stakeholders will be focused on progress towards increasing student performance
- The state’s educational ecosystem will support excellence, high performance, and innovation

And then...
- Every single student in our system will graduate college and career ready, with the freedom to choose his or her life’s course.
Appendix G

Assumptions

Pressure

- Supports must be tied to consequences
- Adults will not make “hard” decisions for kids without pressure; the field will not change performance unless compelled to by external pressure
- LEAs will respond to pressures; people do respond to consequences
- We are applying the right pressures
- Pressure will vary by LEA
- Pressure→real change and not just marginal compliance
- Pressure leads to change; change creates investment/success; that sustains the change
- “Without struggle, there is no progress”

Support

- Some districts & charters do not have capacity to deliver on new initiatives
- The SEA is equipped to provide “support”
- We have to support but not enable
- LEAs will request support
- Support needs will vary by district/LEA

Innovation

- Education is SLOW to innovate
  - Innovation will not naturally occur
- The SEA should drive innovation
- There is funding available for “innovation”
- Innovation will move the system forward

Overarching

- DDOE has been typical entity to roll out new requirements (i.e., provide guidance on state/fed legislation)
- If not DOE then “who”
- Shared understanding of what/how pressure, supports and innovation
- The same people can drive supports/pressures and innovation
- 2 years is enough to institutionalize change
- The SEA should take on work outside of “historical function”
- Our consumers are rational
- Parents respond to DATA
- There is buy-in about “college and career ready”
- People will change their beliefs in the aspiration if they see it happen
- There is will within the department beyond LT
- The SEA has influence; the DDOE is in a powerful/influential position to force change in the field
- People like us/see us as credible
- The SEA can hire/retain top talent to drive this; we have capacity
- We have to calibrate PSI initiative by initiative and context by context
- We do not directly educate kids or run school systems-recognition of our limits
• Business as usual for districts/charters is ok (in most cases)
• DOE has access to national research through national organizations and state
• We have capacity challenges internally and in the field
• There will be short-term benefits to student achievement via PSI

External Factors
• The field does not necessarily share our priorities so proof points are critical
• People agree with or want the outcome and believe that it is possible
• We are not the only entity applying pressure
• The general public is not crying out for change
• Two years
• Teachers union does not equal professionals
• Safety (for parents) still trumps achievement

Questions/Challenges
• “Real” pressure threatens the livelihood of educators (adults)
• Does the theory of action work for all districts – in the same way?
• People to do innovation: where does that belong?
• Does change in behavior lead to increase in student achievement? Proof point
• What can we accomplish in 2 years to institutionalize change? Does this change our strategy?
• Are we applying the right pressure?
• What is the appropriate dosage/balance between PSI?
• Are people truly bought in to/believe in the aspiration?
• Are there other pressures driving toward the same goal?
• Is it a prerequisite that people like us/see us as credible for our TOA to work?
Appendix H

Communications

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier I: Priority Aligned Initiatives</th>
<th>Tier II: Work we are engaged in - somewhat malleable</th>
<th>Tier III: required/regulatory work; not very malleable</th>
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<th>Tier I: Priority Aligned Initiatives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability (system, report card, ladder) and SBAC (to be flushed out via process)</td>
<td>5-year assessment plan</td>
<td>Assessment annual training manuals and guidance</td>
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<td>Priority School (to be flushed out via process)</td>
<td>New Social Studies assessment</td>
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<td>New NGSS Science assessment</td>
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<td>SEA Routines (CCR, AAPE, TLEU, COMM)</td>
<td>SAT, ACT, PSAT, etc.</td>
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**ESIP**

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<td>DESS Advisory - still required</td>
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<td>Title I – Program oversight – USED monitoring, grant processing, review of Consolidated etc.</td>
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<td>School Climate and discipline</td>
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<td>GED/secondary credential - may be able to contract externally</td>
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<td>Task forces – may be a way to handle task forces differently.</td>
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<td>DESS Advisory</td>
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<td>Rural Education federal grant - current Delaware does not have eligible LEAs</td>
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<td>Data collection – EDEN, CSPR, etc</td>
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<td>Support for technology Systems - basic operations</td>
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<td>CCSS (Site Visits, Professional Learning, Cadre)</td>
<td>Systems</td>
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<td>Data and Information systems PS (how this collection feeds into our system)</td>
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<td>Budget/Resources (sustainable funding for next three years)</td>
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<td>Ed Prep (connected to CCSS)</td>
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<td>Professional LEarning opportunities (Common Ground, PLC/Interims, Learn Zillion, subgroup supports, PLCs, etc.)</td>
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<td>Education Prep/Licensure</td>
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<td>Professional Learning for Principals (DPAS II tool connected to CCSS, Principal PLCs, etc)</td>
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<td>Assessment (Alt Assessment, CCSS formatives, CCSS Interims, Component 5 Measure B)</td>
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<td>Delaware Early Childhood Council (ECC)</td>
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<td>Department of Education/Child Development Watch DOE/CDW Liaison Committee</td>
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<td>619 State Coordinators Committee</td>
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<td>WIOA – Workforce Innovation &amp; Opportunity Act</td>
<td>Early Childhood Personnel Center</td>
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<td>Multi-tiered systems of support: PBS, Tier I, Schoolwide, Tier II and III</td>
<td>Expanding Inclusive Early Intervention Opportunities (IEIO)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Behavioral &amp; Social/Emotional IEP Goals: ACCESS/SPDG</td>
<td>Help Me Grow (DE-HMG) Advisory Committee</td>
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**Letter from the Secretary**

Delaware has many good reasons to be proud of its public schools and how they are serving our children from preschool through to adulthood.

- The percentage of young children enrolled in high-quality early learning centers doubled in recent years.
- Ten thousand more students are proficient in English and mathematics today than just a few years ago and more 9th graders are on track to graduate.
- More of our students than ever before are graduating from high school and the dropout rate is at a 50-year low.
- The number of Advanced Placement tests taken and passed by our high school students has risen by nearly a third in the past five years. Consider just one example: The number of Delaware students taking AP biology jumped nearly 40 percent in the past two years and the passage rate jumped by 50 percent.
- The number of high school students who earned college credit through dual enrollment classes tripled between 2012 and 2014 and every college-ready student in the state applied to college in 2015.

All of these gains came even as the number of our children living below the poverty line shot up by 70 percent over the past decade.

That’s a lot of numbers. What’s behind them is countless hours of hard work by our students, parents, educators and leaders, all guided by a singular vision: “Every single student in our system will graduate from high school ready for college or a career, with the freedom to choose his or her life’s course.”

That vision is shaping the culture of Delaware schools, with our educators raising their expectations and our students rising to the challenge. One result? One hundred percent of our graduating seniors who are ready for college applied this year.

All of this didn’t just happen. Five years ago, we came together as a state and decided to embrace rigorous standards designed to get our students ready for success after high school. We committed ourselves to investing in our teachers, and giving them the support and resources they needed to help our students meet these standards. And we vowed to gather—and use—data that would help keep us on course.

The numbers above show those investments are paying huge dividends—for some of our students.

But far too many are still being left out: only 30 percent of our 8th graders meet national standards in reading and math. Not only is this a human tragedy, it poses an urgent threat to our state’s economy and future prosperity. Labor market projections show that more than 60 percent of the jobs over the next decade will require some type of college education, but only 35 percent of the state’s current workforce has college credentials.

Our assignment is clear: We must work more closely than ever before with Delaware’s educators to keep making progress, building on the success we have achieved so far.

The following pages describe the department’s highest priorities for the next two years and set out clear benchmarks against which we will measure our effectiveness.

Ultimately, however, all that matters is whether all of our students succeed.

Signed

Mark Murphy
Delaware Secretary of Education
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1. Executive Summary

Delaware, the second smallest state in the union with a population of about 935,000, has 19 school districts and 24 public charter schools that enroll about 135,000 students. The state has been recognized nationally as an innovative leader committed to serve all of its students, ensuring that they graduate from high school prepared to succeed.

Delaware has made encouraging progress in the past few years. Ten thousand more students are proficient in reading and math. English language arts (ELA) and math scores are up, both on state tests and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Graduation rates are higher, dropout rates are at a 30-year low and more 9th graders are on track to graduate. Participation and success (scores of 3 or higher) in Advanced Placement courses have doubled since 2003, showing that more students are being prepared for college and careers. The number of students earning college credits while still in high school tripled over the past two years.

The state’s strong gains have come even as more children are living in poverty and are learning to speak English. The number of low-income children served by our schools shot up 70 percent over the past decade; the number of English language learners is up by two-thirds.

![Graph showing 4 Year Graduation Rates, by Cohort](image)

![Graph showing Percentage of College-Ready Students Who Enrolled in Higher Education](image)

![Graph showing Percentage of Graduates Scoring Above 1550 on the SAT](image)
But Delaware still has a long way to go. Even in areas where students have made gains, such as graduation rates, 3rd grade reading and 8th grade math, gaps based on income and race persist. Gains on state reading and math tests appear to have plateaued.

Moreover, only about one-third of students meet challenging NAEP standards in these subjects. Sixteen percent of students do not graduate from high school in four years. Even among Delaware graduates who earned a high school diploma, high percentages are not prepared for college-level work or entry-level jobs. Although the number of students taking the SAT has risen, the percentage scoring above 1,550, the benchmark signifying college-readiness, is virtually unchanged.

To accelerate progress, Delaware must make choices. Resources are not unlimited. That is why the Department of Education is intensifying its focus on six priorities that it believes will make the greatest difference for the most students.

**Strengthen implementation of the Common Core State Standards**, by continuing to deepen the skills of educators through training, feedback, promoting teacher leadership opportunities and fostering professional collaborations.

**Strengthen and expand the use of data for improvement**, by presenting data more accurately and consistently, giving teachers timely information and broadening the state’s accountability system to include multiple measures.
II. Goals and Theory of Action

Student Achievement Goals

The goal for Delaware remains the same—to have every single student in its education system graduate college and career ready, with the freedom to choose his or her life’s course. Along with the rest of the country, Delaware has adopted rigorous standards aligned with college and career readiness. Students in grades 3–8 and 11 will take Smarter Assessments aligned with those standards in the spring of 2015. Those results will establish a performance baseline that will be used to set goals for growth in student achievement in subsequent years as reflected in the following target areas.

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Strengthen school leadership, including improved programs to prepare, recruit, evaluate and support great teachers and administrators.

Support the state’s struggling schools, including clearer goals, additional resources and more robust performance management routines that hold everyone accountable for progress.

Expand career and technical education (CTE) partnerships with community colleges and business and industry to provide more students with more high-quality pathways.

Strengthen internal and external communications so that staff and the community are clear on the department’s priorities, programs and progress.

With a focus on these priorities, over the past few months, the department’s leadership has worked closely with staff and stakeholders to develop strategies and action plans for implementation. The following pages describe the department’s plans in more detail.
## II. Goals and Theory of Action

### Student Achievement Goals

The goal for Delaware remains the same—to have every single student in its education system graduate college and career ready, with the freedom to choose his or her life’s course. Along with the rest of the country, Delaware has adopted rigorous standards aligned with college and career readiness. Students in grades 3–8 and 11 will take Smarter Assessments aligned with those standards in the spring of 2015. Those results will establish a performance baseline that will be used to set goals for growth in student achievement in subsequent years as reflected in the following target areas.

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Theory of Action to Achieve Our Goal

If the department...

* Creates a system of fair and transparent expectations by...
  - Establishing and communicating high, common standards
  - Reporting data about school and district progress
  - Aligning accountability to student improvement goals

* Provides supports by...
  - Helping districts, schools and teachers implement high-quality educational programs
  - Differentiating assistance for districts and schools
  - Partnering with school communities and stakeholders to address the academic and non-academic needs of students

* Seeds innovation by...
  - Identifying and sharing effective, replicable implementation practices
  - Creating incentives for districts and schools to develop and adopt emerging best practices
  - Incubating and attracting partners and resources

Then...

- The state, districts and schools will have the capacity needed to improve student achievement

And then...

- Every single Delaware public school student will graduate college and career ready, with the freedom to choose his or her life's course.
III. Priority Strategies

To implement the theory of action effectively and meet the challenging goals, the department will intensify its focus on six key priorities from 2015 through 2017. These are in addition to all the mandated programs for which the department is accountable, from nutrition to transportation.

Priority 1: Deep implementation of the Common Core State Standards

The entire department is committed to strengthening support of the Common Core State Standards, ensuring that they are rigorously and consistently implemented in all classrooms. Key department initiatives deepen the knowledge of educators by providing training, feedback, resources and opportunities for teacher leadership and collaboration.

Key Initiatives

- **Building district and school capacity.** The department is leading efforts to develop the capacity of district staff, principals, teacher leaders and teachers throughout the state to deeply understand and implement the rigorous standards. Through Common Ground for the Common Core, school-based guiding teams of teachers and principals are participating in intensive, ongoing professional learning and sharing best practices and evidence of instructional changes. Other initiatives include content-focused learning communities, principal professional learning communities and teacher-leader networks, including the Literacy Design Collaborative; the State Network Educator team building formative assessment practices; and the Delaware Dream Team, which is designing high quality formative assessments.

- **Assessing implementation.** In coordination with district staff, the department is leading site visits to schools arrive at a shared view of the progress being made toward full implementation of the standards. Teachers are using robust formative and interim assessments that are part of the Smarter Assessment system and other available tools gauge student progress against standards and inform their instructional practices.

Success Metrics

- By 2016-17, 85% of students use Common Core-aligned instructional teaching materials and practices, as evidenced by end-of-year student and teacher surveys on the Smarter Assessment.
Priority 3: Strengthen school leadership

Recognizing the critical importance of strong school leadership, Delaware is committed to developing and supporting school leaders. The department will provide current principals and assistant principals with customized, focused training in high impact areas that include data-based instructional coaching and building-based professional development. The department also will increase and diversify the state’s leader preparation programs, with a focus on ensuring that high-needs schools are led by highly effective leaders. These initiatives will be supported by a differentiated evaluation system for school leaders that includes student achievement as one factor. Other support for school leaders will come from local and national professional networks that will be coordinated by the department and that will provide opportunities for school leaders to share and scale best practices.

Key Initiatives

- **Identifying and investing in high-quality professional learning for existing school leaders.** The department is investing in diverse professional learning opportunities for school leaders to deepen their knowledge of Common Core-aligned instruction, the use of assessment data, how to provide useful feedback and coaching to teachers and how to organize productive professional learning communities. These efforts will be driven by statewide partnership networks that are both local (including communities of practice, principal development coaches led by the Delaware Academy for School Leadership at the University of Delaware) and national (including Relay National Principals’ Academy Fellowship and New Leaders for New Schools).

- **Implementing evaluation systems to support school leaders and identify emerging leaders.** The department is working with a diverse group of practitioners to develop and implement a differentiated evaluation and support system that clearly defines effective practice and provides more customized supports. The new evaluation, feedback and support system will be aligned to an improved credentialing process to ensure calibration and a shared definition of effectiveness. This system will also support a common model of competencies and skills for identifying emerging school leaders.

- **Investing in robust school leadership preparation programs.** The department is working to establish standards and alternative, high quality school leadership preparation pathways for assistant principals, principals and district superintendents. These programs will focus on instructional leadership. As this work is under development, the department will continue to provide technical assistance and tools to help districts recruit and select effective school leaders.

Success Metrics

- By 2017–18, 75% of principals and assistant principals serving the state’s high-needs schools demonstrate “effective” leadership practices and higher than average rates of student achievement growth.

- By 2017-18, 80% of “highly effective” principals are retained or promoted within Delaware districts or public charter schools, as defined by the updated DPAS-II metrics for administrators (aligned to the revised school accountability system performance rating).
Priority 2: Strengthen and expand the use of data-driven accountability systems

The department is creating a uniformly trained, centralized data management group to report and present data accurately and consistently to internal and external stakeholders. To make it easier for teachers to tailor their instruction to the needs of their students, the department is developing tools that give teachers and educators timely, actionable information. The new data systems will give parents and communities an accurate, objective and easy-to-understand picture of the performance of their communities’ schools. The state is revising its accountability system to include important measures that go beyond test scores.

Key Initiatives

- **Centralizing data functions of the department.** The department is consolidating and aligning critical areas of data management and developing a centralized system of business rules for data management and the processing of internal and external data requests. This system will ensure accurate data for districts and schools, faster responses to the department’s data needs, a process for addressing escalated requests and consistent student performance data reporting against department goals.

- **Developing a new Accountability Framework.** The Delaware School Success Framework is a multi-measure accountability system that provides a comprehensive and holistic definition of school and district performance. This tool, developed by a broad-based group of educators and with input from more than 6,500 Delawareans, includes measures such as academic test scores (performance and growth), career and technical education certifications, staff and student surveys, and indicators of social-emotional learning. An annual report and an interactive online system will give parents, teachers, principals and schools districts access to real-time, predictive student data.

Success Metrics

- By 2015–16, 99% of accountability-based data systems and reports provided to stakeholders (internal and external) produce information that is accurate, repeatable and auditable.

- By 2016–17, 70% of stakeholders agree that the accountability system provides an accurate and comprehensive picture of a school’s performance.

- By 2016–17, 75% of representative families agree that they could use the system to help make decisions about their child’s (children’s) education.
Priority 4: Support struggling schools

The department supports the growth of all schools, but some require greater attention and resources to meet the needs of their students. More than 2,000 students are currently enrolled in low-performing schools that have not served their needs for many years. These schools urgently need strong leadership, improved instruction and more guidance. This transformation cannot happen unless the communities these schools serve are fully engaged in and committed to doing what it will take to dramatically increase student achievement. By raising the bar for student learning at these schools, the department will gain valuable knowledge that it will share with all schools serving high-risk student populations in the state.

Key Initiatives

- **Fostering strong school leadership.** The department endorses a rigorous process for selecting excellent school leaders for Delaware’s lowest-performing schools, providing them with tailored professional development and coaching (leadership, feedback and coaching, performance management) and holding them accountable for student growth.

- **Supporting instruction guided by new rigorous standards.** The department funds efforts in these schools to intensify the implementation of Common Core standards and add learning time. The additional time is gained through longer school days or years, increased time in core classes and access to a rigorous curriculum and high-quality materials.

- **Leading performance management routines.** The department leads and models evidence-based performance management routines in its review of schools’ plans for improving student achievement. Over time, schools and districts will adopt and lead performance management processes with limited support and coaching from the state. The state will continue to provide technical support for data use.

Success Metrics

- All identified Priority schools will meet 75% or more of key performance indicators by the end of each school year. (Schools hitting that benchmark three consecutive years exit Priority status.)
Priority 5: Expand access to career and technical education

The department is committed to building a comprehensive, systemic model of career and technical education (CTE) that reflects the needs of the state’s economy. These efforts will focus on aligning high school programs to postsecondary programs and opportunities for students to train and credentials in high-demand fields. The department is providing high-quality programs as well as incentives for districts and schools to implement rigorous CTE programs.

Key Initiatives

- **Aligning secondary and postsecondary pathways to careers.** The department is facilitating the statewide alignment of career pathways across secondary and postsecondary education to ensure that all students can participate in work-based learning experiences and acquire industry-recognized certifications and postsecondary credentials. One key component of this work is the department’s partnership with the Delaware Pathways to Prosperity campaign—a public-private partnership designed to develop career pathways in high-growth, high-demand occupations for all Delawareans.

- **Ensuring access to rigorous programs statewide.** Through transparent data reporting and the expansion of rigorous programs, the department is working with schools and districts to ensure that all students have access to high-quality CTE programs that develop both academic and technical skills. Districts and schools are supported with competitive grants, on-site implementation support and professional learning.

- **Building business and industry partnerships.** The department is focused on cultivating external relationships with the Delaware business community to ensure that more students can participate in career counseling, mentoring, internships and work-based learning experiences.

Success Metrics

- By 2017–18, 85% of local education agencies implementing state-model CTE programs exceed state performance targets for the Perkins Act.

- By 2017–18, 85% of seniors in state-model CTE programs graduate having met the requirements for an industry-recognized certificate.
Priority 6: Strengthen internal and external communications

To achieve these ambitious goals for Delaware students, the department must ensure that policymakers, educators, advocates and parents understand and support the goals as well as the priorities for reaching them. This will require improved internal and external communications as well as intentional strategic engagement efforts. Internally, the department is establishing processes, policies and protocols and providing training so staff understand the agency’s priorities, recognize the importance of communications and have the necessary skills. Its communications will be timely, consistent, strategic and proactive.

Key Initiatives

- **Engaging stakeholders in education priorities.** The department is building greater understanding and support for statewide education priorities by engaging key stakeholders (superintendents, legislators, school leaders, educators, communities, associations) in two-way communications. Approaches include outreach to key constituent groups, the dynamic use of social media to encourage idea and information sharing and streamlined newsletters to share information more effectively. Frequent opportunities for soliciting feedback from all stakeholders will continue to shape and inform implementation of priorities.

- **Developing aligned systems and processes to expand communications expertise.** The department is aligning communications systems and processes to ensure that a coordinated message reaches all members of the community. It also is developing systems to more proactively identify and share evidence of progress in the field. And it is developing processes, protocols and training to ensure that all staff become more effective communicators.

Success Metrics

- By 2015–16, 60% of stakeholders understand the state’s key priorities and their rationale.

- By 2016–17, more stakeholders support the state’s key priorities. (The exact target will be determined based on baseline data collected in SY15–16.)
IV. Monitoring Progress

The department has established performance management routines at the state and district level to understand the progress our schools are making toward the shared objective of all students graduating from high school ready for college and careers. To that end, the department manages and supports monitoring routines related to the priority areas, learns from its findings, helps address problems and offers technical assistance resources and supports.

To monitor its progress, the department conducts semi-annual reviews of the topline metrics included in the strategic plan for each priority area. In between these reviews, branch leads are expected to be closely monitoring progress and troubleshooting implementation. The department leadership will be reviewing progress more frequently on communications, as well as providing support to new and developing pieces of work (e.g., data management team).

The department will continue the district-level progress monitoring routines from Race to the Top, as outlined in the state’s waiver approved by the U.S. Department of Education. These routines will be anchored on the priorities in the strategic plan, driving implementation for the most important work in the state and leading to a shared view of implementation progress at the district and state level. The frequency and focus of routines will continue to be differentiated based on the performance and specific needs of the district. Performance routines were recently expanded to include an analysis and discussion of how funds are being used to support these priorities.
## APPENDIX J:

### [DISTRICT NAME] SY15.16 Implementation/Strategic Plan

- **[onestyle]**
  - 1. Ensure the implementation and implementation plan for common curricula and standards is in place.
  - 2. 4. Prioritize the implementation of the plan.
  - 5. Adopt and implement a plan that includes:
  - 1. Setting new goals and objectives for the school year
  - 2. Identifying key priorities and initiatives
  - 3. Allocating resources and budget
  - 4. Establishing timelines and milestones
  - 5. Monitoring progress and accountability

### Priority Areas: Deep Implementation of Common Core and Success Standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Activity</th>
<th>Action Stage</th>
<th>Activity Owner</th>
<th>Description (number, location)</th>
<th>Deliverables</th>
<th>Funding Amount($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve curriculum and instruction to align with Common Core....</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement a new curriculum model</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement new instructional strategies</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement a new assessment system</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement a new professional development model</td>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Priority Area: CTE/College Access

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Activity</th>
<th>Action Stage</th>
<th>Activity Owner</th>
<th>Description (number, location)</th>
<th>Deliverables</th>
<th>Funding Amount($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of CTE programs that lead to college access</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of CTE programs that lead to college access</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of CTE programs that lead to college access</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Priority Area: School Board

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Activity</th>
<th>Action Stage</th>
<th>Activity Owner</th>
<th>Description (number, location)</th>
<th>Deliverables</th>
<th>Funding Amount($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of board members who are committed to...</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of board members who are committed to...</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of board members who are committed to...</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Priority Area: Struggling Schools (Priority, Focus and Watchlist)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Activity</th>
<th>Action Stage</th>
<th>Activity Owner</th>
<th>Description (number, location)</th>
<th>Deliverables</th>
<th>Funding Amount($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of struggling schools that are making...</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of struggling schools that are making...</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of struggling schools that are making...</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Additional Data**:
- Additional data and information are available in the strategic plan document.
APPENDIX K:

4 YEAR GRADUATION RATES BY COHORT

TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENT DROPOUTS BY YEAR