



# School District Takeovers, State-District Relationships, and the Evolving Role of the State Education Agency in the United States

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School District Takeovers, State-District Relationships, and the Evolving Role of the State  
Education Agency in the United States

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A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty  
of the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University  
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## **Dedication**

To the children of Lawrence, Holyoke, Southbridge, Breathitt County, and Menifee County, and all those who love and support them. And to my nieces Addison and Elise, the most marvelous children I know.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Paper 1: Can state takeover increase community participation in school district governance? .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Background.....	13
Local control and democratic representation in American public school governance .....	13
The troubling politics of state takeover.....	14
Building political support and community participation in takeover .....	16
The state’s role in civic mobilization during takeover.....	18
Studying political leadership in Massachusetts and Kentucky takeovers.....	20
Methods.....	22
Data sources .....	24
Analytic method .....	26
Findings.....	32
State staff motivations for and beliefs about takeover work .....	33
District conditions warranting state intervention .....	35
Using takeover’s authorities to disrupt dysfunction and shield political work.....	49
Identifying potential members of a coalition for change.....	53
Building trust and civic mobilization through a relational, time-intensive approach .....	56
Other evidence of increased opportunities for community participation .....	63
Discussion and Conclusion.....	65
<b>Paper 2: Managing takeover: Antecedent state-level conditions for district reforms... 70</b>	<b>70</b>
Background.....	72
The efficacy of takeover remains an open question .....	72
Identifying the antecedent factors that influence reform outcomes .....	75
Using an implementation framework to analyze takeover.....	77
Takeover implementation in centralized education leader states.....	83
Methods.....	84
Case selection.....	84
Data .....	88
Analysis .....	90

Findings.....	97
Transformation model: Disrupt, innovate, and transform districts in Massachusetts .....	98
Kentucky’s Reset model: Reset, stabilize, and quickly exit.....	104
Considerations of district size in both Massachusetts and Kentucky .....	108
Discussion and Conclusion.....	112
<b>Paper 3: State agencies as learning organizations: What school district takeovers demonstrate about the evolving nature of American public governance and administration .....</b>	<b>117</b>
Background.....	121
Shifts in U.S. public administration.....	121
Competing demands for state education agencies.....	123
Monitoring for compliance vs. monitoring for improvement .....	126
Takeovers are ideal for studying government agencies’ learning capabilities .....	127
Leveraging the unique conditions of takeover to explore ambidexterity .....	129
Methods.....	132
Case selection.....	132
Data and analytic method.....	137
Findings.....	141
‘Regulatory Entrepreneurship’ as internal source of leverage for internal restructuring and innovative strategies .....	142
New agency resources and tools.....	145
Takeovers demonstrate the value of monitoring as a tool for improvement beyond compliance .....	147
Agency goals and vision informed by experiences in receivership districts.....	150
Discussion and Conclusion.....	152
<b>References .....</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>Appendix A .....</b>	<b>167</b>
Interview protocol for all papers .....	167
List of Values (included with Interview Protocol, papers 1-3).....	169
<b>Appendix B.....</b>	<b>170</b>
Full list of consulted publications for Papers 1 and 2 .....	170



## Abstract

School district takeovers – when a state education agency (SEA) assumes control of a low-performing district – are the most aggressive accountability intervention available to SEAs. Much of the scholarship on takeovers has been skeptical on both normative and pragmatic grounds, but these analyses don't wrestle with what else to do when students' rights are violated. In cases warranting drastic measures, how can SEAs mitigate the significant risks and make the best use of their expanded authority to address urgent local needs?

Decades after takeover began, we still know relatively little about how the policy works or why results have varied so widely. Every state defines takeover differently, limiting our ability to systematically compare efforts, and despite the likelihood that state factors influence what happens during takeover, researchers have primarily targeted the district, not the state, as their unit of analysis. More information is needed about how SEAs implement these initiatives and what affects their ability to achieve the desired results.

Consequently, this dissertation investigates the political, capacity, and strategic leadership considerations of takeover through case studies of Massachusetts and Kentucky, two states known for centralized education policy. Paper 1 analyzes the decision to intervene and the circumstances in which takeover can be politically viable. It argues that an SEA can enhance rather than undermine community participation in local school governance through a time-intensive, relational approach. In Paper 2, I ask what is required for an SEA to support such an approach materially and strategically. Findings detail how staff set goals, create tasks and structures, and allocate resources

and personnel to implement takeover, highlighting factors that enable and constrain their work. Finally, Paper 3 considers the impact of this substantial organizational investment on the SEA, including how they balance new responsibilities with competing agency priorities. I show how Massachusetts used takeover as a professional learning opportunity, and how takeover activities altered agency practices and influenced the state's general education governance approach. Together, the papers raise implications about the affordances and limits of takeover as a policy tool, as well as the role of the state education agency in the American education system.

## Introduction

School district takeovers – when a state education agency (SEAs) assumes control of a low-performing district – are the most aggressive accountability intervention available to SEAs and epitomize a decades-long trend of education policy centralization. Much of the scholarship on takeovers has been skeptical on both normative and pragmatic grounds, but these analyses don't wrestle with the question of what else SEAs should do when students' rights are violated. If legislatures and governors continue to charge SEAs with takeover of the lowest-performing schools, there are unanswered questions.

- How should SEAs make the determination to take over a district, and what are the conditions under which takeover may enhance rather than undermine a functional system of local control/community participation in school governance?
- What does it take for an SEA to manage takeover implementation? That is, what resources and activities are required from state staff? How should SEAs design the goals and strategies used in the reforms? What factors moderate their effects?
- Takeover represents a significant departure from SEAs' previous regulatory and monitoring responsibilities and requires them to act as direct school managers. Does the SEA as an organization change and grow to support these new activities, and if so, what is required to support this organizational learning? How might the unique policy opportunities and affordances of takeover, and the accompanying changes in SEA practice, affect state education governance generally?

This dissertation investigates the strategic considerations of takeover for SEAs by examining takeover practices in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE). These two states and their SEAs are known as leaders of state-driven education policy. In doing so, I uncover implications about the affordances and limits of takeover as a tool, as well as the role of the state education agency in the American education system.

In the first paper, I concentrate on the political dynamics of takeover and investigate the tension between the American commitment to locally controlled schools and the state's responsibility to intervene when student civil rights are at stake. By examining political dynamics across four district takeover cases, I see themes that point to a more general theoretical model for how SEAs manage takeover. The districts selected share several characteristics beyond alarmingly poor academic performance. First, the system had reached a level of dysfunction not just in one area, but across all aspects of district operations, preventing large swathes of the community from accessing information about their schools or participating in decision-making. Dire financial straits contributed to the urgency and need for external supports, flexibility, and resources only available to takeover districts, making it difficult for them to secure the resources needed to lead their own process of disruption.

In Massachusetts and Kentucky, SEAs prioritized a time-intensive relational approach, characterizing the goals of their work as upholding children's constitutional rights to an education by rebuilding trust and shoring up local capacity to sustain a school system that reflected all its students and families. They cited strong moral obligations and a sense of personal responsibility for the students that was reinforced by

their new formal responsibilities as district managers and their regular interactions with local stakeholders. They conducted substantial analysis of the district context to assess the likelihood that their political, material, and human capacity could provide the needed leverage to make change there.

During takeover, state teams relied on their expanded statutory authority to overcome dysfunctional patterns of behavior between powerful stakeholder groups and shield initial work that was necessary to stabilize reforms while buying time for slower cultural and relationship-building work. Although most analyses of takeover categorize the state manager or receiver with the rest of the SEA, SEA staff in these states constructed a more nuanced relationship that framed the appointed leader as a local advocate with unusually high access to the resources and responsive service of powerful state allies. Once installed full time in the district, appointed staff added value by making leadership decisions more accessible and transparent through continuous and active engagement with local stakeholders across the community. They provided a rallying point for civic mobilization by communicating a clear vision, emphasized signs of progress, and provided tools to combat the challenges that had produced harmful patterns of belief and behavior. Lastly, they sought to ratify any state-imposed changes through traditional formal processes to cement local ownership of the reforms and restore public trust in the institution of education.

Taken together, the cases of Massachusetts and Kentucky suggest that, under certain political conditions, takeover's unique affordances can support rather than undermine community participation, if state-appointed leaders and their teams employ a thoughtful, time- and resource-intensive relational approach. These conditions include

a low level of community political participation prior to takeover, a toxic governance and political leadership configuration barring access to the school system, and state teams motivated to empower locals using strategies designed to unite disparate stakeholders around common interests. Progress came from the application of three key leadership skills: disruption of dysfunctional governance arrangements, shielding to protect the new reforms, and the mobilization of dormant civic capacity. In other words, takeover can work in favor of the local community if receivers use the expanded toolset available during takeover to buy the time to build the relationships and facilitate the cultural changes required to sustain a school system that is responsive to local needs.

The question naturally follows: how do SEAs materially and strategically support these resource-heavy initiatives? Paper 2 takes up this question by applying an established policy model implementation framework to takeovers in Massachusetts and Kentucky. By synthesizing the lessons learned by SEA staff in these two leader states, I provide a structured antecedent comparison to contextualize takeover outcomes, in which I link agency capacity and strategic planning decisions to the goals of takeover and the surrounding state policy context. Researchers are still in the early stages of learning about takeovers, with puzzling outcomes, so it bears tracking these variables across states as lawmakers and state agencies continue to debate and refine the use of this policy tool. More information on implementation would also help policymakers refine criteria for exit – to know how long different approaches take, to estimate how much it costs to fund this type of initiative, and to surface promising strategies.

Not much is known about what is needed at the state agency to lead a takeover. An interview study of ten state chiefs and takeover superintendents offers some general

principles: states need capacity, local political support, and to recognize and plan for sustainable exit given the limitations of the tool (Jochim & Hill, 2019). Paper 2 takes a deeper look at how SEAs organized themselves to support takeovers with the above goals, offering insight into the practical implementation of these reforms. I suggest that Massachusetts and Kentucky represent two different strategic models for takeover, with certain commonalities that suggest a shared underlying mechanism. Using literature on policy implementation and state-led education policy to guide my review of each system, I show how each state's implementation of this mechanism is influenced by the authority and flexibility of takeover-enabling statute, the level of cohesion and support in their authorizing environment, their philosophy for district reform and the agency's material and human capacity. The resulting structured cases facilitate comparison and highlight shared decision points and challenges that states face in takeover, while providing practical operational insight into how states handled them. In both states, takeovers hinged upon a significant infusion of their own staff and a systems-based approach to restoring all aspects of district function. They also provided a "concierge service" in which a single office or individual kept in constant communication with the districts' appointed leaders and facilitated priority access to resources both in and out of the state agency. However, the way they implemented these strategies depended on their statutory authority, organizational capacity, and the political environment.

Kentucky, with comparatively lower levels of funding, political cohesion, and policy instrument flexibility, pursues a *reset* model, intended to stabilize the system and quickly return it to local control. The SEA does not formalize structures specific to takeover but maintains a centralized school turnaround model and a flexible resource of

school-level coaching staff that work in both takeover and non-takeover districts. The approach requires deep ongoing professional learning from staff. Massachusetts, with its unprecedented statutory authority and flexibility, a supportive policy environment, and dedicated resources, instead pursues a *transformation* model that sets higher standards for exit and means districts are likely to remain under state control for longer. SEA staff have the latitude to adopt a philosophy of regulatory entrepreneurship and innovation, and they quickly formalize changes in their own organizational structure and tasks to respond to the needs of takeover districts. Taken together, these two states offer models for how a state agency supports and manages a district undergoing systemic reform.

Paper 2 demonstrates two ways that SEAs allocate resources and personnel and take on new tasks during takeover; in both states, a takeover represents a substantial organizational investment. However, these agencies remain responsible for all their other tasks, including monitoring and regulatory oversight that has traditionally been their purview, and various other policy initiatives. How do states learn to take on these new responsibilities while balancing competing demands, and how, if at all, do changes made during takeover impact the rest of the agency's work? Paper 3 takes up these questions by examining what the state agency in Massachusetts learned while implementing takeover.

Once they began to take over districts, DESE used the relatively broad authority inherent to the policy to pilot and refine strategies which they subsequently incorporated into other aspects of the state accountability landscape. As a direct result of supporting takeover, DESE changed as an organization. They restructured the agency to support flexibility and cross-teaming, and they developed strategies to use their



monitoring and regulatory responsibilities to reduce district burden and make the monitoring process itself more useful instead of a compliance exercise. They developed resources whose use later extended beyond just takeover districts. Receivership districts offered state staff an unprecedented level of regular “on the ground” contact with students and schools, which amplified state staff feelings of personal responsibility for district success, provided the agency with insight into issues that affected the whole region, and ultimately influenced agency priorities and philosophy of leadership.

MA does have a dedicated fund to support districts in takeover, but the majority of these funds went directly to the districts in the form of targeted grants. The agency’s internal changes were the result of leaders’ decisions to restructure and reallocate within the existing general budget. The case demonstrates how, with effective leadership and sufficient capacity and political support, a government agency can use its unique status within the sector to reframe its relationship to districts and to improve its own practice of governance.

Taken together, these three papers provide a comprehensive depiction of state takeover strategy and implementation from the perspective of the managing agency: the SEA. These details provide needed information to contextualize puzzles we have seen from reform outcomes. *Table 1* summarizes the key findings related to strategic decision-making and the likely antecedents of takeover reform. Together, they suggest a model for the mechanism of state takeover and suggest a set of strategic considerations for planning intervention, as well as possible effects of these considerations on the SEA.

Before deciding to take over a district that has been identified as severely low performing, there are questions about whether the extremity of takeover is *justified*. Are

students' civil rights to an education at stake? Are families and students represented in the system? Are the problems systemic and entrenched, such that external disruption is required? Second, there are questions about whether takeover is *feasible* compared to another intervention strategy. From a capacity perspective, does the SEA have the *right* people and resources to make a difference? Do they have *enough* people and resources to make a difference? Do they have the *statutory authority and flexibility* to make a difference? Lastly, from a political perspective, are the dynamics of the local district conducive to takeover? Do leaders at the SEA and the staff they hire have the skills to lead politically, and does the agency have (or have a plan to develop) sufficient political capital in this context to make the difference?

**Table 1.** Summary of findings describing antecedents of takeover reforms in Massachusetts and Kentucky

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Kentucky</b>	<b>Massachusetts</b>
<b>Policy instrument</b>	Medium	High
<b>Capacity</b>		
<i>Dedicated state funding</i>	Low	High
<i>Expertise</i>	High	High
<b>District conditions before takeover</b>		
<i>Size</i>	Small districts Small total load for SEA	Small districts Small total load for SEA
<i>Lack of community participation</i>	Yes	Yes
<i>Absence of systems</i>	Yes	Yes
<b>Environmental Pressures</b>		
<i>Political stability &amp; cohesion in state</i>	Low	High
<i>Commissioner support and dedicated allocation</i>	High - informal "If [key staffer] says she needs it, we need to find a way to get it for her"	High - formal Commissioner philosophy of "state as partner"

	Oversight and support, but minimal decision making	Regular interaction with districts
<b>Goal</b>	<p>Reset</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exit immediately upon setting patterns</li> <li>- No takeover-specific structures; reallocate the core technical support resource</li> <li>- Insulated from political fluctuation because it isn't tied to state funding</li> <li>- But also more tenuous, reliant on a particular leader at the agency, and under-funded</li> <li>- Centralized turnaround model</li> </ul>	<p>Transform</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Higher standards for exit</li> <li>- Remain in state control longer</li> <li>- Formalize unique structures for working with individual districts</li> <li>- Develop targeted new resources</li> <li>- All hands on deck - we have the authority</li> </ul>
<b>Management/Leadership Strategies</b>		
Political leadership on the ground designed to disrupt dysfunctional governance and build trust	Selecting a politically savvy receiver, selecting an appropriate district, coach/support mentality, justice orientation, demonstrating wins, relational approach	
Separation between SEA and state-appointed team with routine channels of communication	Lead senior staffer always on call	Multiple regular meetings between state team and various staff (1x/month with Commissioner, 2x/week with cross-agency team, etc.)
Infuse staff for intensive short-term capacity boost	Education Resource Staff	Interregnum team/Office of District Support
Providing resources	Concierge service, priority access, and cross-teaming	
Retain the local school board	Corrupt members ousted on formal charges; intensive training for the others.	The offenders were not practicing good governance but had not broken laws; however their dysfunction and neglect of children in

	Building the capacity to keep the system running - "I saw it as a professional development opportunity"	pursuit of political interests was so severe that it violated rights, with racial tensions. The state shielded against these non-representative political networks and went to families. "That's not the mechanism for communicating with the town."
Targeting internal professional development and tasks/work priorities to support districts	Continuous learning	Regulatory entrepreneurship

This work in this dissertation also reconfirms and builds on the finding by Schueler (2019) that the formulation of the takeover law is central to the SEA's ability to progress. Statute played a key role in the mechanism identified in Paper 1 to support politically viable takeover: disrupt toxic governance patterns, shield to protect initial reforms, and use the space gained through these tactics to take a relational approach. Statute also influenced which implementation strategies were available to each SEA, and, in Massachusetts, not only formed the basis of their takeover approach but also supported them to engage in their own organizational learning during receivership. Nationwide, there have been multiple instances of takeover being litigated through the courts. Policymakers should be aware that the way they formulate takeover laws, as well as the amount of material and political support they provide to SEAs, is a major determinant in what will be possible for the SEA to achieve. This work is time-intensive and costly, but the cases presented here suggest that the investment is necessary if states continue to use takeover to address situations where students are in crisis.

**Paper 1: Can state takeover increase community participation in school district governance?**

When a system is broken at the highest level of leadership – whether because of corruption, a profound lack of capacity, or both – it can be difficult for local reformers to make headway. Such is the problem state takeover is intended to solve. Many schools and districts struggle with academic performance, but only a handful will ever enter state control. Takeover’s proponents describe it as a last resort when local governance fails, implemented to protect all children’s constitutional right to education (e.g. Adcox, 2017; MA BESE, 2015). With expanded legal authority, the state education agency (SEA) can ideally disrupt dysfunctional governance schemes and bring additional resources and capacity to rebuild the system.

However, school governance has long been a means by which individuals from minoritized or oppressed communities have attained political empowerment and influence; serving on the local school board provides a platform for politicians to attain more prestigious or powerful positions (Morel, 2018). So, state intervention into public schools – intentionally or not – risks undermining forms of empowerment for otherwise socially and economically disenfranchised communities. Indeed, political scientist Domingo Morel (2018) argues that in majority-Black urban centers, takeovers are fundamentally conservative interventions that do more to further White political interests than to genuinely improve education in those cities. Morel demonstrates that regardless of socioeconomic class, majority-Black communities are more likely to be taken over in the first place compared to majority-Latino and White communities and to lose political power during the takeover in the form of having the locally elected board

replaced. In short, SEAs pose a significant risk of harm to the local community whenever they intervene as outsiders in an already complex system.

Taken together with the spotty success record of takeover (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2021) and the sheer difficulty of the endeavor, the danger of depriving a community of local democratic representation leads many to question takeover's viability as a school improvement policy (Burns, 2010; Hunter & Swann, 1999; Morel, 2018; Sen, 2016; Welsh, Williams, et al., 2019a; Wright et al., 2020). However, eliminating takeovers leaves us with the question of what states should do in situations where incompetent or even corrupt governance and leadership have deprived students of their rights. In short, takeover exemplifies the tension between the American commitment to locally controlled schools and the state's constitutional responsibility for education. The conflict is inherently political and therefore requires states to develop political solutions.

Rather than asking whether takeovers should or should not exist, a more apropos question would be whether and how state takeovers could potentially enhance political empowerment, especially for disenfranchised communities. Specifically, I ask three research questions:

1. What opportunities existed for community members to participate in school governance and reform prior to takeover?
2. What local political activities do the state-appointed leader<sup>1</sup> and other SEA staff engage in during takeover?

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<sup>1</sup> In Kentucky, this is called the "state manager" and may either replace the superintendent or oversee the existing superintendent. In Massachusetts, the term is "receiver;" the receiver replaces the superintendent.

3. Under what conditions can takeovers result in expanded opportunities for community participation in school governance?

I address these questions through a comparative case study of Massachusetts and Kentucky, two states whose takeovers offer examples of districts whose prior governance structures were tightly controlled by a powerful minority that persistently deprived students of quality education. In all four studied districts – Holyoke, MA; Southbridge, MA; Breathitt County, KY; and Menifee County, KY – officials uncovered dysfunctional governance arrangements, school board members misusing their powers, and violated student rights during management audits preceding takeover. Since these rare cases warranted drastic intervention, they offer the opportunity to examine how states can use takeover's disruption to restore functional local governance and support the development of civic and other forms of local capacity.

### **Background**

#### **Local control and democratic representation in American public school governance**

Schools in the U.S. began as independent community-based organizations with minimal oversight, and although the system has become considerably more centralized over time, America remains devoted to the ideal of locally controlled schools (Scribner, 2016). This powerful collective belief, rooted in American democratic norms and appealing to a broad base of political ideologies, holds that schools should represent and respond most directly to the families they serve. Consequently, a strong argument against takeover is that by stripping power and authority from the local board and their chosen superintendent, states threaten local democracy.

Although democracy is a critical value in American education, its implementation is not straightforward, and as Mintrom (2009) argues, strictly democratic practices are not always inherently good for citizen participation and engagement in decision making. For one thing, since power is not distributed equally within communities, strictly representative democracy can marginalize and oppress less powerful groups. Political scientists find evidence that municipal elections conducted at-large suppress minority representation in local government (Abott & Magazinnik, 2020). School boards illustrate this issue: they are elected through a democratic process, but board elections tend to have “discouragingly low” turnout (Cai, 2020, p. 2). Members chosen this way may not reflect the genuine input of constituents or be equipped to lead. Indeed, research uncovers a systematic racial and socioeconomic demographic gap between voters who participate in school board elections and the students served by those schools (Kogan et al., 2021). In such cases, democratic processes do not produce democratic representation, and “an enlightened government elite” may need to make leadership decisions that produce a more informed citizenry in order to ultimately “revitalize local democracy” (Mintrom, 2009, p. 793-4). When the incompetence or misconduct of elected officials leads to children being systematically deprived of their rights to education, the responsibility lies with the state to intervene.

### **The troubling politics of state takeover**

State takeover is a rare and drastic strategy that must be reserved for extreme cases where children are undeniably suffering. However, just because intervention is warranted doesn't mean the SEA will be able to bring about the desired change. Unfortunately, most takeovers have not improved academic performance or political



dynamics. Evaluations show null or negative impacts on academic performance in districts in Philadelphia, PA; Tennessee's turnaround district, and a rural county in South Carolina (Bishop, 2009; Gill et al., 2007; Pham et al., 2018). Indeed, a recent national analysis finds little evidence that takeovers make a statistically significant difference in educational outcomes compared to peer districts that retain local control (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2021). A growing body of political science research argues that some school and municipal takeovers erode local power or perpetuate harmful discourse in already-marginalized communities of color, such as in Newark, NJ; Georgia's turnaround district, and Detroit, MI (Morel, 2018; Welsh, Williams, et al., 2019b; Wright et al., 2020). Critics of takeover have ample reason for concern.

Even when policymakers seem to genuinely intend to foster equity by expanding state authority, many fall short because managing school reform is complex work for which SEAs have limited capacity (McDermott, 2007). State education agencies were not designed for direct school management. They began as hierarchical bureaucracies to serve monitoring and compliance functions, insulated from political fluctuations because they are appointed bodies (Brown et al., 2011). Even though SEAs have since grown substantially in scope, developing expertise in accountability and school improvement, takeovers fundamentally alter their responsibilities and therefore present a significant challenge. After all, supporting turnaround is only one of SEAs' many charges (Brown et al., 2011; Elmore, 2009; McDermott, 2009), and only a few districts are even considered for takeover. It stands to reason that SEAs would not necessarily excel at direct school management, especially since few receive additional funding to cope with the new demands.

Even if SEAs develop school improvement expertise, they are unlikely to make genuine progress unless they can lead politically as well. States have significant formal authority, but formal authority is a limited tool. Without a local base of support, SEAs cannot hope to catalyze sustainable change (Jochim & Hill, 2019). Initial fear, uncertainty, and resistance is inherent in any systemic reform, and all leaders naturally must employ political strategies to overcome these challenges (Evans, 1996). The political barriers are greater because the SEA is an outsider in the district and its very presence during takeover can easily symbolize failure and stigma within a community (Fried, 2020). All told, despite their formal authority, SEAs face an uphill battle when intervening in school districts. At the same time, if they do their political work, they have the potential to build support for their interventions.

### **Building political support and community participation in takeover**

Happily, the research literature documents two exceptions to the political controversy that typically surrounds takeover: Central Falls, RI, and Lawrence, MA. Morel (2018), studying Central Falls, shows us how a takeover can prove an avenue for political empowerment under certain circumstances. He finds evidence that takeover produced wider political participation in Central Falls, attributing the success to the state's decision to abolish the elected board and appoint Latino board members for the first time in a majority-Latino district. The community-building work of appointed leaders led to more productive, collaborative relationships between the school board, the community, and local elected officials. Over time, they created pathways for Latino representation in the city council and mayor's office. Central Falls eventually became a stronghold for the Rhode Island Democratic Party, showing that takeover can create

opportunities for marginalized groups to participate in governance and gain political power.

Morel (2018) also offers a comparison case: Newark, NJ. Unlike in Central Falls, where the Latino population majority had no political representation, in Newark the Black community had already amassed political capital through traditional local governance. He finds that under takeover, Newark's Black community lost political representation and power. From this, Morel concludes that the extent to which takeover is politically successful depends upon the pre-intervention level of local political empowerment in the district. That is, in Central Falls, where an elite White minority had marginalized a Latino majority, the state's disruption was helpful. In cities where minority communities have preexisting political capital, such as Newark, NJ, Morel contends that takeover more likely causes harm.

Notably, Morel is a political scientist; he did not track in-district strategies or measure academic outcomes, even though improved performance, not civic engagement, is the policy's goal. Only one study of a takeover has demonstrated positive political and academic results: Lawrence, MA (Schueler, 2019; Schueler et al., 2017). Schueler (2019) attributes the relative lack of controversy in Lawrence to the state receivership team's "third way orientation": a public commitment to minimize conflict by "reconciling and transcending polarized conflicts" (p. 120). The receiver sought out diverse perspectives across multiple stakeholders and gained a reputation for engaging with anyone from any ideological stance whose suggestions could produce improvement. In total, Schueler identifies several supportive factors to explain the relative lack of political controversy in Lawrence:

- Small to medium district size, allowing the state team to feasibly visit all schools
- Increasing student enrollment preventing the need for budget cuts
- Racial mismatch between teachers and students
- Historically poor teacher-district relations
- Community perceptions of “widespread dysfunction” among school and city officials
- High statutory authority for the SEA, including the suspension of contract bargaining requirements
- A “carrot and stick” approach, showing strategic restraint in not using the full extent of their legal powers
- Appealing to families and educators through whole child emphasis, strategic staffing decisions, prioritizing and publicizing early wins, and narrowing the strategic focus to manageable goals
- Portfolio district approach: Flexible, lean central office; differentiated school autonomy based on performance, and diversified management to include charter operators.

These examples give us reason to believe that leadership and strategy can mitigate political contention during takeover. Despite the risks, there *are* contexts in which takeover may be an appropriate tool.

### **The state’s role in civic mobilization during takeover**

The Central Falls and Lawrence cases both evoke the concept of *civic capacity*, a theory for understanding the role and function of community engagement in education reform. In a seminal volume, Stone (2001) defines civic capacity as “the ability of a

community to come together to address its problems” (p. 75). From this perspective, education reform requires *civic mobilization* to build civic capacity across the diverse set of stakeholders that affect schools: students, teachers, families, administrators, education unions, businesses, other local political agencies and social services, nonprofit organizations, universities, and so on. The major barrier to change, in this view, is that different stakeholder groups have distinct interests that impede collaborative problem solving. The solution is to develop productive relationships across disparate well-intentioned groups and locate common interests that can form the foundation for change. Coordinating groups and their resources around a common vision for schooling should mitigate political tension and ensure that reforms can be locally sustained by a system that is responsive to and grounded in genuinely representative community feedback.

Stone (2001) notes that elected politicians and government officials are the most likely to be able to convene this reform coalition, describing them as “best suited to generate a collective sense of purpose when one is missing, to coordinate or coerce action when interests remain disparate, and to provide a vehicle for democratic control” (p. 156). In Central Falls, RI, it seems that the state-appointed school board led this civic mobilization; in Lawrence, it was the state receiver and his team who built relationships and catalyzed civic capacity across constituencies. Glazer and Egan (2018), studying whether takeover in Tennessee could obtain community support, argue that this potential may exist in more circumstances than we have previously supposed.

Tennessee’s takeover model resembles Louisiana’s: rather than removing district leaders, the SEA transfers low-performing schools from their home district to a state-run

Achievement School District (ASD) comprised of the state's lowest-performing schools. Glazer and Egan (2018) examine how Memphis stakeholder groups reacted to the ASD and find, as expected, considerable controversy between those who viewed takeover as an innovative, flexible tool to resolve intractable problems in the traditional public-school model, and those who saw it as racist, paternalistic, and profit motivated.

Surprisingly, the authors also find that this vivid public controversy "masked areas of common ground that could form the basis of a broad coalition of local support and state stakeholders" (p. 930). Referring to this hypothetical coalition as the hidden narrative of takeover, they found ample evidence across stakeholder groups of individuals who resisted takeover in principle and were suspicious of government overreach, especially in minoritized communities, but who also criticized the status quo and desired help.

Unfortunately, the ASD has not been found particularly successful at improving academic performance (Pham et al., 2018; Zimmer et al., 2015), and the reform coalition in Tennessee remains hypothetical. Glazer and Egan find no evidence of actual civic mobilization – they call the ASD "a poor environment for the generation of civic capacity" – but they raise the important implication that visible controversy may not reflect the nuanced feelings of the broader citizenry or their willingness to participate in reform (p. 960).

### **Studying political leadership in Massachusetts and Kentucky takeovers**

Given takeover's turbulent track record, SEAs contemplating such a strategy likely know that they face political challenges if they intervene. An interview study of ten state chiefs and takeover superintendents emphasizes the importance of recognizing the limitations of takeover's formal authority and building a local political base during

takeover. The authors caution, “State appointees must be political animals, not rulers by decree... Takeover strategies cannot be limited to actions that no one opposes, but they should be able to focus on actions that make it possible to build some support” (Jochim & Hill, 2019, p. 8). How do SEAs select a context in which they will be able to accomplish this task?

Morel (2018) and Schueler (2019) offer detailed district cases that show how leaders pursued these goals, but questions remain about whether and how these patterns will apply across districts with different conditions. For example, in Lawrence, leaders including the mayor invited DESE to institute receivership, which improved their political reception and rarely occurs in other districts. Could similar techniques still work elsewhere? In Central Falls, racial tensions and suppression of Latino majority interests fueled the district’s dysfunction and were resolved by appointing new board members who addressed the needs of the entire community. Yet Morel also argues that in most cases, removing the elected board is detrimental to local democracy. Could the state have achieved political success without replacing the board? How might these dynamics differ if the community’s primary divisions concerned class, not race? What about in a rural community, where the form and function of civic capacity likely differ from the urban districts that have been the focus of most research in this area (Stone, 2001)?

Therefore, I test Schueler’s grounded theory of politically viable takeovers, adding Morel’s criteria for political empowerment, across four takeover districts. I seek to extrapolate a more general mechanism for how, and under what conditions, an SEA can use the tool of takeover to facilitate rebuilding a school system that reflects and

responds to the needs and interests of its community. As reflected above, there are few documented cases in which an SEA has been able to directly support civic mobilization in local districts. This is not something the state has typically been expected or required to do. A better understanding of what a state agency with limited capacity can do to support civic mobilization, and what district conditions facilitate this, will assist state leaders in determining whether and how to use takeover in the future.

### **Methods**

This study emerges from a larger research effort examining state agencies' capacity and strategic decision-making when intervening in low-performing school districts. Massachusetts and Kentucky were chosen as focal states based on a multi-stage selection process that identified them as *extreme cases*, or those with an unusual value on a key dimension of interest – which in this instance is their investment in directly managing school district turnaround (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Extreme cases are useful in exploratory studies for identifying possible causes of outcomes of interest, such as school district improvement outcomes under takeover. Of the states actively implementing takeover at the time of case selection, Massachusetts and Kentucky shared a history as leaders in comprehensive state-driven accountability policy, dating back to landmark state legislation in the early 1990s and being two of only three states to formally allocate capacity to support takeover initiatives. This makes them uniquely useful for studying promising conditions and strategies for all aspects of takeover, including the political, compared to states that invest less. See Paper 2 for more details on focal state selection.



Despite their similarities, their takeovers systematically differed with respect to district demographics, political and governance context, and strategies used, which permits me to empirically test Morel’s and Schueler’s theories of politically viable takeover. Case studies like those of Central Falls and Lawrence are useful for generating theory. They provide a foundation for structured, focused comparisons like this one: systematically collecting data on the same variables across multiple units, thereby converting real-world phenomena into classes with multiple cases and associated variables or parameters (King et al., 1994). In this study, I sought to establish whether the patterns laid out by Morel and Schueler would hold across additional districts and/or produce further information useful for classifying the political viability of takeover. *Table 2* compares studied districts.

**Table 2.** Comparing selected cases to significant district context factors noted in Schueler (2019) and Morel (2018)

Context Factors	Holyoke, MA	Southbridge, MA	Menifee, KY	Breathitt, KY
Urban, formerly industrial district	Urban, formerly industrial	Suburban, formerly industrial	Rural	Rural
Small to medium size, allowing state team to feasibly visit all schools	Small (5,241 students)	Small (2,004 students)	Small (1,135 students)	Small (2,284 students)
Increasing student enrollment prevented need for budget cuts	No	No	No	No
Majority Latino/White	Latino and White	Latino and White	White (94.4%)	White (95.4%)
Racial mismatch between teachers and students (Schueler)	Yes	Yes	No	No
Historically poor teacher-district relations (Schueler)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Perceptions of “widespread	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

dysfunction” among school and city officials (Schueler)				
No contract bargaining requirements under takeover (Schueler)	Yes	Yes	No	No
High authority in statute (Schueler)	Yes	Yes	Somewhat	Somewhat

### Data sources

For the current study, looking across four takeover districts, I concentrated on the activities of the appointed leader and SEA staff. I wanted to know how they approached their new direct management role and how they related to the local community. How did they think about their responsibilities with respect to local control? What political activities did they take on in as part of their efforts, and how did they interact with local stakeholders?

Interviews were an important data source for determining how SEA staff approached these dynamics. Not many people are assigned to takeover in any given SEA, so I strove to interview all SEA staff in Kentucky and Massachusetts who have worked with takeover LEA(s). In total, I conducted twelve in-depth semi-structured interviews with the staff described in *Table 3*. During the interviews, I asked staff to describe their activities in takeover districts as well as their perceptions of the climate and attitudes of the community, such as whether and to what extent they placed personal and political interests ahead of student needs. These questions served the dual purpose of describing conditions and implementation activities during takeover as well as illuminating how staff thought about and treated local stakeholders. I also asked about barriers to improvement, which often elicited descriptions of municipal

governance and political dynamics. Lastly, interviews included open-ended questions about how staff viewed the work of district turnaround, which demonstrated whether and to what extent they considered broader political and social community dynamics in their strategies. For the full interview protocol, see Appendix A.

**Table 3.** *Interview participants by staff position*

<b>Staff position</b>	<b>Kentucky</b>	<b>Massachusetts</b>
State Commissioner		1
Senior Associate Commissioner	1	1
State receiver/state manager	1	2
Division director	1	2
School improvement coach	2	1

To complement interviews, I collected supporting documents related to takeover planning and implementation and to the interactions between state, district, and community stakeholders. These included the financial and management audits produced by state departments and evaluators, state education board meeting minutes and associated exhibits (e.g., memos, slide decks, progress reports) for presentations by SEA staff or a receiver or manager, turnaround plans and progress reports for takeover districts, the content of school district and state agency websites, and case law for lawsuits involving the schools. I also sought data related to the history and local political and educational context for each district, including county-level voting results for state and gubernatorial elections, demographic data including race, education, and poverty statistics, and accountability and performance data. In Holyoke's case I also included data from an earlier research portrait (Fried, 2020): transcripts from eleven open-ended interviews with school, district, and state staff, and observational data from one

community meeting and the state board hearing for public comments on receivership. These data sources provided perspective on the events discussed in interviews as well as additional context not raised during interviews.

Third, I drew on a database of news and media articles for each takeover district. As part of a separate investigation, Beth E. Schueler and I compiled a database for the Massachusetts receivership districts, casting an intentionally broad net with the search term of the district name (e.g. "Holyoke Public Schools") during the years of state intervention. For this study, I conducted similar searches for the Kentucky districts. News articles came from a combination of national search databases Nexis Uni and Google News, as well as searching directly in the archives of regional and local media such as the *Boston Globe*, *Commonwealth Eagle*, and the *Lexington Herald-Leader* to ensure comprehensive coverage (see Appendix B). Media coverage provided a sense of the public narrative surrounding takeover as well as links between the takeover and other local and state issues.

### **Analytic method**

As previously mentioned, this study is one piece of a larger research effort seeking to characterize the state-level "takeover system" present in Massachusetts and Kentucky. That study applies an implementation theory lens to systematically analyze these two states in terms of the major antecedent factors in any reform effort: 1) the policy instrument, or enabling law and resources; 2) the capacity of leading actors, such as the SEA in a takeover; 3) the external environment, such as local historical context, political pressures, key authorizers, or available funding; and 4) the decisions and activities that make up the daily work of implementation. As I studied these systems, I

used prior literature on takeovers to generate sub-questions for each major antecedent. For example, to describe the policy instrument, I looked at 1) the objectives and methods specified in each takeover statute; 2) what legal authorities SEAs had; and 3) how much freedom and flexibility SEAs had to make changes.

The current study (Paper 1) emerges from the analysis done to characterize the influence of external pressures, such as state and local political dynamics, and critical actors, such as SEA and district stakeholders. I was particularly concerned about the potential harm to children and families during the disruption and grief of takeover, especially when the strategy is so risky. Since a primary aim of my scholarship is to deeply understand takeover's holistic effects on students and communities, I paid especial attention to the political considerations of takeover: questions about power, responsibility, influence, authority, trust, and representation. The analysis presented in this paper represents my attempt to characterize the antecedent effects of state and district political dynamics, and state political leadership strategy, on the takeover systems in MA and KY. For more information on how this factored into the broader implementation study, see Paper 2.

Here, I coded the interview transcripts and aforementioned documents in multiple iterative stages to address each research question, using the aforementioned frameworks for conditions of politically viable takeover. To identify SEA political activities within the district, I relied on content analysis of the interviews and documents described above to create a comprehensive policy timeline of the major issues and activities. I kept track of activities and decisions chronologically to build a linear policy timeline of state activities, including significant external events such as local or state

elections, across takeover districts. The interview protocol was primarily designed to elicit this information with detailed questions about respondents' tasks during takeover. I then sought to triangulate interview data with media reports, progress reports, board meeting minutes, and other documentation that added context and perspective on what the state team did in each district.

To assess opportunities for community participation prior to and during takeover, I used state staff interviews to build an initial picture of community-school interactions. I coded interviews, tracking descriptions of how the community interacted with the schools prior to takeover, how SEA staff perceived the local stakeholders, references to building trust and lack of trust, specific strategies the state used to create opportunities for local participation in the reforms. Using state audits, turnaround plans, public websites, and progress reports, I tracked the districts' channels of communication and outreach to families to determine whether community opportunities to learn about and contribute to school initiatives were greater during/after takeover than before. I read transcripts of public comments made at state and local board meetings, town council meetings, state-facilitated community conversations, and public hearings as a measure of the public narrative surrounding state reforms. I also used media articles to identify issues salient in the public narrative. Lastly, media articles, interviews, and progress reports alerted me to community members' actions towards the state, such as lawsuits filed, local elections, local policy decisions, and reports by local stakeholder groups. As I read, I recorded instances of community complaints or support of the prior local administration and/or the takeover team, and participation in political activity.

For example, as I tested hypotheses about the relationship between local and state politics, I considered Domingo Morel (2018)'s theory that takeover is more likely to empower local communities when the voters are constituents of the state representatives. In this view, when a Republican governor sanctions the SEA takeover of a majority Democratic city, they are more likely doing so for their own political gains, rather than for the benefit of districts. I traced voter registration records and local, state, and national election results for Menifee, Breathitt, Southbridge, and Holyoke, comparing the percentage of voters registered to each party in each district, the county/city's reported election results, and election results and political party of the governor and the incumbent president, from 2000-2020. I also conducted a media search for election coverage and statements to the press about voter opinions in these communities. Kentucky's political party changed with each term, though the state's voters leaned Republican. Breathitt tended to vote with the state, whereas Menifee was one of the minority of Kentucky counties that voted blue in the 2016 presidential election. Neither county had high voter participation rates. Based on the available information, I saw no obvious indicators of a relationship between state-local cohesion and political viability of takeover, so I did not include it in my model. On the other hand, when considering political dynamics warranting takeover, I saw ample evidence to support Burch's (2008) claim that the Turner family's political stronghold over the school district created generational deprivation for many residents of Breathitt, including in demographic poverty, welfare, and unemployment data; property tax rates, and interview quotes describing this dynamic, such as the following:

It goes back into the '50s, leaders that were not only involved with school board races but were actually involved with county official elections and even national

elections. I mean, in Breathitt County there's an elementary school - I don't think the district had to pay any money for it. I think it came straight from the national level, because the superintendent had a connection with Lady Bird Johnson. The best I can figure is that the superintendent made a phone call and the next thing you know, LBJ Elementary was built.

### *Limitations and internal case validity*

One major limitation of this approach is the absence of first-hand accounts from district stakeholders, who likely differ systematically from SEA staff in how they perceive takeover. As a result, I take care not to generalize about the feelings or beliefs of local stakeholders and to keep a deliberately low threshold for evidence of community participation. That is, I seek only to establish changes in the opportunity for the community to increase their participation in the school system. Knowing that communities are not monolithic, I looked for divergence of opinion, always asking who was participating, what power they held in the school system and community, and any indication of their motivations or vested interests with respect to schools. Given the paucity of local interviewees, I had to pay close attention to triangulating data sources and attempting to contextualize what state staff told me to ensure internal validity - that my understanding of what occurred in these four districts and at the state agencies was as accurate as possible.

One important indicator of internal validity was how SEA staff themselves thought about and characterized the issues and problems. How well did they seem to know the districts? Where did they get their information and how had they arrived at their opinions and strategies? In both states, thorough audits had been conducted prior to takeover and regularly thereafter. These audits followed principles of good research, including demonstrating the data sources reviewed, number of district interviewees,



and generally demonstrating the evidence guiding their conclusions. For instance, one section of KDE's 2014 Menifee County management audit reads:

Of 29 interviewees, 27 spoke to the clear divide in perception of the staff, teachers, assistant principals, and community between those who supported the recent superintendent and those who support actions of two specific members of the Menifee County Board of Education... palpable fear that jobs are on the line, everyday [sic], based upon which side of the divide an employee is perceived to fall... Some people (5-7) did not want to be interviewed at the district office for fear of retribution. Others indicated they feared they would not have a job if the interim superintendent or the two board members found out what they had shared.

Interviewed SEA staff displayed empathy and respect for the community and spoke candidly about the cultural changes they perceived during their time in the district, providing detailed examples of how they were received by the community and in their assessments of the district's progress and evolving capabilities. They acknowledged that others might feel differently. For example, one receiver said:

I like to believe I'm teacher friendly. Because I think that doesn't mean that's true. I do care deeply what educators have to say. I value that. Now whether they feel that - I think they do. I think they feel like, maybe more than past administrations, they feel like I try to understand the challenges of being in a classroom... And I think some of the teachers ... see the turnaround plan as a real threat to the institutions of the teaching profession, and the stripping away of rights and voice. I get that. I understand that. So, I think people would also say that at least the engagement has been respectful. Again, that's what I perceive. You can talk to them and they may say otherwise.

Another said:

It's been a very positive relationship - and the way that's been built is that I have been providing them things, and I don't just mean money or people, but, like, I've been an advocate for them. They know that if there's something, that they can call me and I'm gonna follow through. Even just a question, I make sure they get an answer to that. That goes back to that relationship piece. We very much have a partnership with those districts, and if you called any of them, their board members, their leadership, they would say that as well.

In my coding, I strove to do the same as these interviewees: accurately portray the state's political activities in takeover while seeking disconfirming evidence for how these activities were received in media reports, meeting minutes, and transcripts of public hearings.

Lastly, even without firsthand accounts, there are some simple indicators of whether takeover has at least created better channels for the community to participate, and better safeguards to protect the community's interests in their schools. In districts that were unequivocally dysfunctional, being able to easily access information on district operations and soliciting feedback are in and of themselves an improvement. I also looked for markers of local opinion that do not rely on individual reports, such as election results, public surveys administered by the districts, lawsuits filed against state or district officials, or statements made to the media. Nevertheless, future research should examine LEA perceptions of the reforms to triangulate the findings I present here.

### **Findings**

In this study I sought to determine how staff at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) use the expanded authorities available during takeover to attempt to serve the community rather than undermine it. First, I review how state staff characterized the purpose of the intervention and the principles and beliefs guiding their strategy. I then review district conditions prior to takeover and identify shared characteristics. Finally, I detail the state's political activities in each setting, extrapolating

from all four cases to present a generalized model of the leadership strategy that led to improved community access to and participation in school governance.

### **State staff motivations for and beliefs about takeover work**

SEA staff who participated in takeover felt strongly that their work was about restoring local capacity and upholding children's constitutional rights to an education. This was founded in two shared beliefs: first, that excellent school districts are self-governed by an actively engaged community, and second, that a drastic intervention was necessary to protect the interests of children in systems that made little space for community participation. As one interviewee put it, discussing his experience of multiple takeover sites, "These schools are just not built right now to help kids get what they need, and so we've got to act out of this commitment to a just society, saying, there has to be a more equitable way of us doing our work than what we're doing right now." Staff cited moral obligations and a sense of personal responsibility for the students that was reinforced by new formal duties as district managers and their regular interactions with local stakeholders. Another explained, "The reason that I – and I know some of my colleagues – do this work is the personal and moral conviction that we feel about what education can do to change the course of a child's life."

All interviewees said they and their colleagues felt personally responsible for the students in takeover districts, and they had given considerable thought to their responsibilities to families. They were remarkably consistent in these views and spoke at length about the role of community in a high-quality district. One explained, "The highest performing [districts] have a system to ensure that all stakeholders are participating in the decision making and in the growth of the district. Community,

families, faculty and staff, administrators, and students.” Another said, “Leadership isn’t the sole purview of administrators. Teachers are empowered. Parent involvement in leadership, the engagement of families in the decision-making around schools... Schools belong to the community. We want the community engaged in the improvement process, and we need to make sure the schools are responsive to the aspirations and needs of the community.”

All participants also stated that low performing school districts “lacked systems,” and described those systems in detail, from rigorous curriculum, community engagement, and educator recruitment, development, and retention to governance, budgeting, and transportation. Most also characterized takeover districts prior to intervention as “adult focused and not student focused,” and when probed, gave detailed examples of decisions made to prioritize adult interests over student needs, such as providing jobs to unqualified family members without a formal search process, or frequently suspending students of color in the absence of any evidence-based disciplinary policy, simply to ease the teacher’s load. These beliefs formed the foundation for SEAs’ approach to community engagement during takeover.

Because their goal was to repair the systems and build local capacity for districts to return to self-governance, and because the collaboration of local stakeholders is imperative for any reform to succeed, SEA staff also took on what they generally referred to as “shifting the culture and climate” about what to expect from schools and students. Town leaders were not under the purview of state-appointed superintendents, yet their cooperation was essential to the success of reforms, which often required staff to spend considerable time cultivating relationships with those outside the school

system. Moreover, change imposed from the top-down without the active collaboration of participants rarely results in genuine, sustainable reform. This “culture work” involved slow, relational trust building that would allow those reforms to take root and lead to genuine, lasting change. Deliberate work to shift mindsets across various stakeholder groups proved an important component of the work to restore community participation in all four takeover districts after years of dysfunction.

### **District conditions warranting state intervention**

KDE and DESE conducted substantial analysis of each district’s context to assess the likelihood that their political, material, and human capacity could provide the needed leverage to make change there. The districts they chose to take over share several characteristics. First, the system had reached a level of dysfunction not just in one area, but across all aspects of operations, resulting in an inability to meet students’ academic needs and preventing swathes of the community from accessing information about their schools or participating in decision-making. Dire financial straits made it difficult for them to secure the resources needed to lead their own process of disruption, which contributed to the urgency and need for external supports, flexibility, and resources only available to takeover districts. Despite commonalities across districts, some political challenges were also unique to local race, class, and leadership dynamics in each setting.

### ***Systemic racism in Holyoke and Southbridge excluded Latino families***

Holyoke and Southbridge share demographic similarities with Central Falls and Lawrence that produced strikingly similar dynamics in their public school systems: historically white working class communities that prospered during the industrial age as

factories swelled. Where Lawrence and Central Falls produced textiles, Holyoke was a center of paper milling, and for a time, Southbridge housed the world's largest manufacturer of ophthalmic products. However, manufacturing waned over subsequent decades, meaning fewer jobs and higher poverty. Meanwhile, each city saw an influx of Dominican immigrants and migrants from Puerto Rico. As non-White populations expanded, school districts struggled to keep up with changing student needs, such as higher rates of English Language Learners and rising poverty. Increasingly, White families in each city began to send their children to private or charter schools, driving district enrollment (and therefore its funding) further down.

In Southbridge, the community had lost trust in the public schools after a complete breakdown of district leadership. The town's socioeconomic demographics had shifted rapidly; the proportion of enrolled students from low-income families grew from 37.2% to 76.3% in just fifteen years (DESE, 2015). The district struggled to accommodate these changes and by 2015, it was not structured to support staff or students and had few channels for engaging the community. Students scored well below state averages on standardized tests, while dropout and disciplinary referral rates were double and triple their counterparts in the rest of the state. Administrator evaluations did not include student or staff feedback as is required by law. When DESE conducted its management audit, they found that staff did not have the capacity or established procedures for communicating with Spanish-speaking families or translating important documents like special education plans, creating a barrier to parent participation.

Joint meetings between the school board and town council ended in shouting matches and the town council voted no confidence in the board. The school board had

not held a formal superintendent search since 2010, despite appointing seven individuals to the role over five years. When DESE auditors investigated, parent representatives and administrators “agreed that hiring is often based more on political influence than merit,” and expressed concerns about a lack of transparency in the stream of superintendents (p. 21). Meanwhile, the board had misappropriated funds and neglected their duties to the district.

Dysfunction was not limited to the school committee; town leadership did not appear to welcome the population changes. One Hispanic interviewee told me, “I’m pretty conservative and look like a regular old white guy in people’s eyes, and I have heard the most horrific things said about Hispanics. Because people come [*whispers*] to trust you, think it’s okay. So I personally know what some of these kids are dealing with, and they’ve been screwed.” Another SEA staff member interviewee agreed, saying:

We met with the town leaders, and they said the problem with the school district is that the ‘best kids’ have left through charters and choice. That means the white kids who look like the town leaders, who are related to or even the children of the town leaders. There’s some truth that charter and choice has not been good for Southbridge, I don’t argue that point. But I think the best kids are the kids who Southbridge has the privilege to serve, any kid that walks through the door. If that’s the belief system of the town leaders, that’s pernicious and hard to change.

Despite urgent needs within the district, one interviewee told me that members of the town council did not prioritize increases in education spending and “publicly advocate” for the “bare minimum.” Meanwhile, in addition to meeting with town councilors, DESE held community conversations in neighborhoods selected because they were home to “a

large group of parents who do not typically attend school-based meetings.”<sup>2</sup> Attendees told state staff that schools were neither welcoming nor responsive, that “intimidating” administrators actively prevented teachers from talking to parents, and that leaders “speak badly about Southbridge,” leading to a negative reputation for the entire town.

In Holyoke, too, there was evidence of a troubling, systematic deficit mindset throughout the city, and student performance diverged sharply along racial lines (Fried, 2020). When MA Commissioner Chester proposed receivership for the district, a flood of White community members attended the formal public hearing to protest the recommendation, primarily on the grounds that the high rates of poverty, trauma, and complex learning needs made the state’s expectations for its students unreasonably high. Although 81% of HPS students were Hispanic, 85% of the commenters were White. Meanwhile, during bilingual community meetings held in primarily Hispanic neighborhoods, SEA staff heard stories of systematic issues with teachers and schools. Like in Southbridge, HPS lacked bilingual teachers, administrators, ELL expertise, and general bilingual capacity necessary to address the needs of their large ELL population and to communicate with their families. The state board cited these facts as evidence of a pattern of low expectations and outcomes for poor students of color that required state intervention to resolve.

In addition to the concerns about racism in the town, the school district was locked in internal disputes between administrators and the teachers’ union regarding educator evaluation. The previous evaluation system lacked legally required

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2 March 2016 Community Conversations



components like student feedback or rigorous performance expectations, but the Holyoke Teachers' Association (HTA) repeatedly rejected the district's terms. Meanwhile, teachers reported that school leaders did not address their concerns or invite genuine collaboration regarding professional development; administrators admitted to state staff that they had created a top-down, directive culture but insisted it was "transitional." Negotiations had devolved to the extent that neither the Joint Labor-Management Committee in charge of collective bargaining, nor the steering committee for professional development, were working together anymore. During the state management audit, staff concluded that "progress in advancing district initiatives is being slowed by an absence of meaningful teacher involvement and constructive participation by the Holyoke Teachers' Association" (7). Under takeover, the state could suspend the collective bargaining process and perhaps mitigate some of these tensions.

Although both districts had exhibited other troubling behaviors, such as political squabbling over the district's resources, DESE staff felt that the racial tensions and lack of Latino representation in the district were at the heart of the issues. Overall, the political dynamics in the Massachusetts districts presented a twofold challenge: rebuild Latino family trust in the school system while negotiating with municipal leaders to advocate for higher expectations and new practices that could meet the needs of all students.

*District's economic and political value eclipses its educational role in Breathitt and Menifee*

In Breathitt County and Menifee County, KY, both racially homogeneous, the primary community divisions concerned class, and the school district's resources were

used as a political bargaining chip among leaders. Here, the districts' struggles were less about providing equitable service to all children and more about restoring the district's educational function to a higher priority than its value as a source of money, political power, and jobs. In both counties, severe financial hardship and rural isolation set the stage for the school district to become the center of political infighting, to the detriment of students.

Breathitt County, KY exemplifies the interplay between control of local financial and governance systems and school district conditions. Comprising seven small rural towns in the coal- and timber-rich mountains of Eastern Kentucky, the county has been nationally associated with internal violence and dynastic political power-grabbing since its incorporation in 1839. As historian T.R.C. Hutton (2013) writes in the introduction to his volume *Bloody Breathitt*:

Breathitt County is a place that earned a singular reputation for killing between the Civil War and World War I... the first--and the last--Kentucky county associated with prolonged, reciprocal, vengeance-based personal or familial conflicts. (p. 1)

Hutton demonstrates that decades of torture, murder, and guerilla war tactics among Breathitt residents were rooted in political issues: land rights, secession, the preservation of white supremacy and economic inequality, economic development, the structure of the Kentucky county court system, and state elections. Violent crimes occurred in conjunction with election tampering, embezzling, cronyism, and other offenses.

The Breathitt County Public Schools (BCPS) have long been central to the region's political machine. Indeed, historian John Burch (2008) argues that controlling the school system was the mechanism by which the prominent Turner family cemented their power over the county in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1913 through the 1960s, every

Breathitt superintendent was a Turner. By the 1960s, the Turner family encompassed not just the school superintendent, but also a circuit judge, the head of the county Democratic party, and the presidents of the local radio station, newspaper, and bank. A Turner also served as state senator, and the family's political allies (including Kentucky Representative Carl Perkins and Lady Bird Johnson, the First Lady) shielded them from repercussions while they used federal and state funding for their own purposes with minimal oversight. Burch concludes, "The Turner political dynasty managed to maintain its control of Breathitt County through its consistent ability to secure state and federal funding for their community, and by controlling access to most of the jobs" (p. 100).

Decades later, the superintendent of Breathitt County Public Schools (BCPS) was still a Turner – Arch Turner, who had been an elementary principal and county magistrate when he was first jailed by a judge for refusing to approve a 1% payroll tax increase that would close the county's \$400,000 deficit (CNN, 1992). As superintendent, Turner presided over the district's three elementary schools and one high school in Jackson, KY, which at a population of 3,236 is the county seat and its largest town. The condition of the school district shows how Breathitt's children continued to be the victims of cronyism and illicit actions by a concentrated, powerful few in the years leading up to state takeover.

Breathitt, like its neighboring counties, had long struggled with poverty, crime, opioids, and other systemic challenges due to the aforementioned extralegal maneuvering as well as commercial exploitation from external parties interested in its coal and timber (Burch, 2008). By the 2000s, as the coal industry waned, Breathitt had almost no tax base with which to fund its public schools (Cheves, 2015). Property was

systematically undervalued – between 2008 and 2012, residences were assessed at about 89% of fair market value, business properties around 75%, and farmland just 61%, meaning owners paid proportionally less in taxes. Property owners could appeal assessments before the county Board of Assessment, which regularly overruled the already-low valuations, leading to further tax reduction. On top of that, lack of local jobs meant 61% of the county's income came from public assistance payments. Thousands of Breathitt residents draw federal disability benefits and their accompanying tax breaks, which exempted 28% of residential property from taxation in 2015. As Cheves (2015) put it, "Breathitt County's anemic property tax structure bleeds hundreds of thousands of dollars every year from the city and county schools, local government, the library, the health department, and other public services" (para. 11).

To make matters worse, as state authorities looked into the district's finances, they uncovered a broad array of mismanagement tied to Superintendent Arch Turner and the school board. The Kentucky Board of Education removed a Breathitt board member in 2010 for charges including forgery of school documents and unauthorized use of a state motor vehicle (Hopkins, 2010). In 2011, a parent launched a federal lawsuit against Turner and other administrators for failing to protect her daughter from a teacher's sexual abuse (Estep, 2011). A state financial audit found that Turner had no employment contract and received regular annual raises (Edelen, 2012). The superintendent awarded jobs to unqualified individuals, falsifying their credentials, and paid employees for days they had not worked without board oversight or approval. According to the audit, the board rarely even looked at the district's finances and reimbursed its own members as well as Turner for trips unrelated to school matters. The

circuit court judge, James E. Turner II, ran a basketball tournament at the high school from which he earned personal profits (Cheves, 2014a).

The extent of local corruption became glaringly apparent in 2012, when an FBI investigation resulted in federal indictments for nine individuals, including Superintendent Turner, school board member George Strong, school employee Paula J. Noble, and sheriff John Turner, for participating in a vote-buying scheme. The accused were eventually convicted and imprisoned, though Arch Turner remained superintendent until he resigned from jail. Once again, the Breathitt County Public Schools found themselves at the center of a political machine whose goals had little to do with educating children. One state staff member who had worked in both Breathitt and Menifee commented:

A lot of times in small rural districts – and when you look at Menifee and Breathitt County, both districts, the main employer within the district is the school board. So a lot of people see that as an opportunity for jobs, and there's where the political connections come in. Both systems were very embedded within politics. It goes back into the '50s and '60s, of having leaders that were not only involved with school board races, but were actually involved with county official elections and even national elections.

While the political situation unraveled in Breathitt, the Kentucky Department of Education began an audit to evaluate whether they would recommend state management for the district. Eleven KDE staff conducted 78 interviews and reviewed a slew of documents which painted a picture of a district in disarray, with few if any processes for budgeting, purchasing, and financial decisions; hiring, staffing, and

training; communication between schools, district, board and community; curriculum, instruction, or content standards; educator professional development and evaluation; or district goals and expectations. Turner and the board “routinely” overrode administrator decisions to suit their own interests. Not only did administrators not meet to discuss their work, but Turner had prohibited them from doing so. Schools were in disrepair, many staff on extended sick leave, and a lack of special education and intervention processes meant that multiple students with disabilities, as well as dropouts, had been illegally relabeled as “home school” and excluded from school with no monitoring. When Commissioner Terry Holliday presented these findings to the state board, they voted to place Breathitt under state management on December 5, 2012.

Unlike Breathitt County, Menifee County has no especial reputation for local political machinations; however, the school district still represented power and resources that adults came to prioritize over educational goals. The sixth-smallest of Kentucky’s 120 counties, Menifee lacks the natural resources like coal that historically funded elite families in Breathitt. Historically, the area mostly consisted of tobacco farms, which later converted to cattle. Like Breathitt, though, Menifee’s people have suffered from poverty, lack of jobs, crime, and an opioid crisis; the school district is its primary employer and therefore politically powerful. Tragically, in 2012, the already-high poverty area was hit by a devastating tornado that injured 109 of Menifee’s roughly 6,000 residents, killed three, and caused more than \$4M in damages (Kenning, 2013). By 2013, 45% of adults were unemployed, and about a third of households brought in less than \$25,000 in annual income (ACS, 2013). Following the tornado, the school board volunteered to serve as a charitable organization to collect disaster relief aid donations,

but they never formed a separate, legal nonprofit or established proper internal controls (Edelen, 2013). After receiving complaints about donation misuse, the Kentucky state auditor reviewed the district's financial operations and found enough issues to "jeopardize the public's trust that donated funds were used as intended" (p. 11). The concerning audit triggered KDE to conduct a management audit in the district; they found that MCPS had no functional finance officer, relying on a neighboring county to provide basic financial services, and their budget and financial history were full of errors and gaps (KDE, 2014).

Menifee County Public Schools had several years of leadership stability beginning when Charles Mitchell became superintendent in 1999, but eventual turnover on the five-member board resulted in factionalism so deep and politicized that it impeded all aspects of district function. According to one interviewee, Superintendent Mitchell removed school principal Benny Patrick from his position. Patrick responded by organizing community supporters against Mitchell, who expanded their representation on the school board through the next two elections. Two members of the original board had been replaced by 2011, and the remaining three were elected in 2013. The new board voted not to extend Mitchell's contract, hired Patrick, and, controversially, filed a lawsuit to invalidate annual contract extensions approved for Mitchell by the prior board since 2008 (*Mitchell (Charles) vs. Board of Education of Menifee County, Kentucky*, 2016). The director of the Kentucky state administrators' union compared the suit to "buyer's remorse," telling reporters, "The board is in conflict with itself" (Lawson, 2014).

The battle over the superintendent's position was not the only issue; like in Breathitt, the school district was a source of power that leaders coopted. "Local politics, that has also been a barrier," said one state staff member, who had worked in both districts. "Things have happened for years and years and years in the district, and they've just always happened that way so [they] keep doing it that way. Or 'the reason we're broke is because we totally had too many employees on staff, because I'm a local school board member and I made sure everyone in my family has a job.' You know, Menifee doesn't even have a McDonalds, or a hospital. The school system is its number one." Another explained, "Climate and culture was a big barrier in Menifee County. The school district was the number one employment agency there, so it was jobs for a lot of families. That contributed to some of the financial difficulties." Meanwhile, three of Menifee's four school buildings were listed as among the state's worst 500 for poor physical condition, and communication between the board, district leadership, and school staff had essentially ground to a halt (KDE, 2014).

The fractured board carved a rift throughout the system and caused "the lowest staff morale ever seen" (KDE, 2014, p. 32). When eight KDE staff visited the district in September 2014 to conduct the management audit, 27 of their 29 interviewees brought up pressure between the opposing parties and the "palpable fear" of recrimination permeating the district (p. 2). Videotaped board meetings showed the board chair denying staff and community members opportunities to speak and evicting open meeting attendees including "the former superintendent, finance officer, student group sponsor, family resource coordinator, and a parent" (p. 24). The interim superintendent, appointed by the board after ousting Mitchell, stood accused of favoritism and



retaliation for hiring unqualified relatives with arbitrary pay rates and no job descriptions, without notifying administrators beforehand. Seventeen staff mentioned their fear of retribution, so much so that several asked to be interviewed outside of district offices. An email to the audit chair referenced “a very disturbing picture of what is going on in our county” (p. 18). One elementary school principal expected to be fired for political reasons; by the time the state returned for a follow-up review in 2015, that principal had “proved to be prescient, and was demoted on May 6” (KDE, 2015). Citing “broken trust and lack of belief that anything will get better without intervention,” Commissioner Holliday recommended state management to the state board, who voted in favor at their July 2015 meeting (KDE, 2015).

What happens when the school district’s function as a source of local political and economic power outstrips its value to the community as an educational institution? In Breathitt County, formal education had not necessarily proven its value. With few available jobs, school was arguably less relevant to many Breathitt residents in terms of career preparation. School staff noted a pattern of families who had “no expectation” for students to attend schools (Cheves, 2014a), and indeed, some who kept students home for fear that attendance would jeopardize their disability benefits (Cheves, 2015). It created something of a vicious cycle confronting those who sought to reform the schools: decades of internal corruption and environmental challenges facing all of Appalachia meant one might understandably resist investing already-scarce resources in the broken school system. Others might abandon political participation entirely because the corrupt machine had dominated for so long.

At the same time, the county was unlikely to see improved job prospects or retain young people to boost its declining population without a functional education or municipal governance system. Menifee County did not have the same level of corruption nor as long a history of leadership turmoil, but there too, the bitter disputes between adults to distribute the school district's scarce resources had destroyed public trust in their leaders. As the state manager in Menifee explained:

It's just the expectations. You know, this is a very small rural community. It's a great community, and they really want what's best. But trying to instill the importance of a quality education within the community, that has been a big barrier for us. It's my hope that every parent would establish high expectations that their kid either go on to college, or a career pathway. But historically, you know, there's not a lot in this community. You'll have to drive 30 or 40 miles to find a job that parents can support their families on. So, it's establishing that culture and allowing the schools to provide a rigorous curriculum and grading practices that will make sure that their kids are meeting the standards and are ready for that transition into the adult world.

In sum, the primary political challenge in Kentucky was building a functional alternative to protect resources. To break the cycle of corrupt governance, KDE staff valued transparency, expertise, honesty, and reliability and sought to restore the function of governance and return its control to those who prioritized children above the political and economic interests of adults. Their primary cultural challenge was to raise expectations, not about children's ability to succeed, but about the value of the school system for the community. Corruption and misuse of formal governance structures and funding in already high-poverty areas meant that state staff had to persuade the community that any further investments would result in genuine improvements. Accomplishing these improvements in both districts would require political work to rebuild trust and restore representation for students and families.

**Using takeover's authorities to disrupt dysfunction and shield political work**

The dynamics described above had led all four districts to a point of dysfunction that state leaders felt could not be solved without the external disruption and expanded formal authority of takeover. In all cases, the dysfunction produced unacceptable conditions for students and impeded channels of communication, preventing families from access. Because these powerful stakeholders held formal authority, there were few avenues for recourse under traditional governance arrangements. Those who held power in the prior system stood to lose the most from reforms, and they also knew how to use formal structures to oppose the state's efforts. Therefore, the disruptive powers of takeover were necessary to make headway. State teams continued to draw on their statutory authority to shield the initial work during the instability of intervention. The law bought the state time to do the slower and more difficult work of building local relationships and trust with the community. It takes time to gather traction for reforms that will ultimately be necessary to sustain the changes and return the district to local control.

In Southbridge, the formal authority of takeover allowed the receiver to sidestep the interference of the school board, which had lost the support of the town council and the community. The board's micromanaging and neglect of their duties had led the district to cycle through seven interim superintendents in five years. The receiver explained: "If I worked for this local school committee, there absolutely would have been an end run and I would have been out... I'm not here to worry about my next contract with my school committee or to pay political favor. I am here with the single focus of improving the school district." Instead of spending time on intractable disputes

with the town council, the receiver could concentrate on rebuilding relationships with educators, families, and the town as well as his reform priorities. As he put it, "I don't attend school board meetings because they are just railing against receivership most of the time. You know, no meeting last year had more than 100 views [on YouTube]. There's 20,000 people living in this town. That's not the mechanism to communicate with them. I just send a report out to the community."

Formal authority also acted as a shield for the state manager to focus on children's best interests in Breathitt County, where the threats to quality schooling came through misuse of formal governance and judiciary structures. Those for whom takeover represented a loss of power expressed opposition through the courts. The interim superintendent replacing Turner – who ten years prior had been banned from district employment and was herself the subject of two lawsuits claiming she and the board had created a hostile and retaliatory district environment -- sued KDE in federal district court for not providing her with "due process." Local school board members fought state management first at a nine-hour state board hearing and, later, by suing KDE in circuit court (Been, 2012; Warren, 2013a). The opposition seemed much more about retaining personal power than about improving the quality of education: when the state asked the Breathitt board chair what she and her colleagues would do if the state left, she responded, "I think we need to – OK, as I said, I think we need a plan. We do not have a plan" (Cheves, 2014b).

Since the district's dire financial circumstances were a barrier to improvement, the state manager focused on the tax base, despite pushback from residents who resisted tax raises primarily on principle. A property tax increase of 4%, the highest rate

allowable under the law without voter approval, would raise only \$76,938 in a district with \$28 million's worth of needed repairs. Still, when the state manager approved it, thirty plaintiffs sued KDE for disenfranchisement. "We realize we're not talking about that much money," one plaintiff said. "But it's really the principle. We're getting taxed without representation... somebody has to stand up for the rule of law" (Cheves, 2014c). Indeed, the majority of the plaintiffs were suing purely on principle, since several paid no property taxes due to old age and disability exemptions, and sixteen did not own property at all (Cheves, 2015).

Since Kentucky law explicitly permits state managers to impose the 4% tax, the suit was unsuccessful. The board members' suit to regain control of the district also failed, though the circuit judge ordered the state manager and KDE to "consult the Breathitt school board in major decision making... in good faith" (Warren, 2013b). Still, no amount of formal authority could make the Breathitt board members more disposed to collaborate with the state team, and the 4% tax was not enough to resolve the district's financial troubles. To progress, the state manager and KDE would need to use other strategies.

In Menifee, where there was significant in-fighting but less outright corruption than in Breathitt, the state manager used his formal authority to suspend the school board and build capacity with extensive board training, without risking progress in other areas of reform. He described a similar strategy to what Schueler (2019) reports about Lawrence: by exercising restraint and not using the full extent of his authority, he built rapport with the board:

I let them vote on issues as a measuring stick to see their growth, to see if they could make hard decisions. I could have walked in, presented an agenda, and

said, 'This is going to occur.' But I wanted to make sure that the school board was involved, even though they had zero power. And you know, it was pretty much a five-oh vote all the time... We have a school board now that is focused on kids. They understand policies and procedures... and the democracy of a good school board meeting. (*Appointed leader*)

During this suspended period, KDE also paid for a state board association to deliver intensive training on the role and responsibilities of school board members. Over time, some school board members who had contributed to the previous polarization left their positions; others were voted out in the following election cycle. The ability to suspend and train the board allowed the state team the time to grow their capacity and the community's support for the new direction.

In Holyoke, takeover laws provided a lever with respect to the stalemate between administration and the teachers' union, which had caused a breakdown of collaborative relationships and an educator evaluation system that did not include student feedback or rigorous expectations for teachers. DESE was able to use its unique legal authority to suspend the collective bargaining process and swiftly impose a new set of conditions that complied with state laws, while working on a strategy to improve administrator-teacher relationships overall.

Across districts, formal authority alone was not sufficient to make sustainable change. It disrupted harmful practices and created a space to impose reforms, like the board training in Menifee, new educator evaluation framework in Holyoke, or the tax hike in Breathitt County. However, it was up to the state to use the leeway created by takeover authority to engage teachers and families through the slower, more relational trust building that would allow those reforms to take root and lead to genuine, lasting change.

**Identifying potential members of a coalition for change**

Although members of each community resisted takeover as described above, the state also had evidence from the audits to suggest that by providing strong leadership alongside the formal disruption, they could restore the schools to a community-led enterprise. Just as Glazer and Egan found in Tennessee, these communities showed care for their children and schools, recognized challenges in their systems, and were willing to work towards improvements. For example, in Holyoke, there was already evidence of civic capacity. They had multiple citywide partnerships; the early literacy initiative encompassed 24 community-based organizations. And even the most outspoken opponents of receivership acknowledged that the district had problems. Their most recent superintendent, Dr. Sergio Paez, whose selection was approved by DESE, spoke openly about the district's harmful practices and "forced" the community to come to terms with their history of neglect (Fried, 2020).

In Southbridge neighborhood meetings, parents described concerns about receivership, but far more issues with the schools: substandard curriculum, inability to monitor progress, lack of support for teachers, poor communication, losing enrollment due to other districts "targeting" Southbridge students, the feuding between town leaders and the school board, and the effects of hunger, poverty, and trauma on students' wellbeing (DESE, 2016). They assured DESE staff that the community wanted to help the schools but needed leadership and support. The Southbridge Local Stakeholders Group, a committee of representatives from the central office, teachers' union, administrators, school committee, parents, and local social service agencies, came to similar conclusions in their formal recommendations to the state, writing:

The lack of consistent leadership in the district has resulted in a patchwork of disparate approaches to attempt to meet students' needs. Our students deserve better than that. Teachers and staff can, and will, deliver a comprehensive education so long as there is a shared vision and common goals between educators and district leaders... This work will require a significant increase in collaboration with all parents, community members, town officials, and all the organizations, non-profit agencies, and businesses that serve the citizens of Southbridge. (Southbridge LSG, 2016, p. 1)

In Kentucky, the state audit team characterized Menifee County staff as "passionate" in their love for the schools and students and "unusually open and willing to share;" their support for the school system was "positively evident" (KDE, 2014). Several asked the state team for help. Teachers shared concerns about conflicting messages and low expectations for students; they described a district lacking communication structures, overarching goals and expectations, financial transparency, and hiring and staffing protocols - in short, an absence of leadership. In Breathitt County, too, there was a base of support with school staff. During KDE's 78 management audit interviews, Breathitt stakeholders conveyed "sincere eagerness to have assistance from KDE"; in fact, the report noted that "all interviewees" asked the state to provide help (KDE, 2012). While the school board members demanded the return of local control, the high school principal commented to reporters, "[If] the state left tomorrow, would we go back to the same practices that we were seeing before? I'm afraid that we would" (Cheves, 2014a).

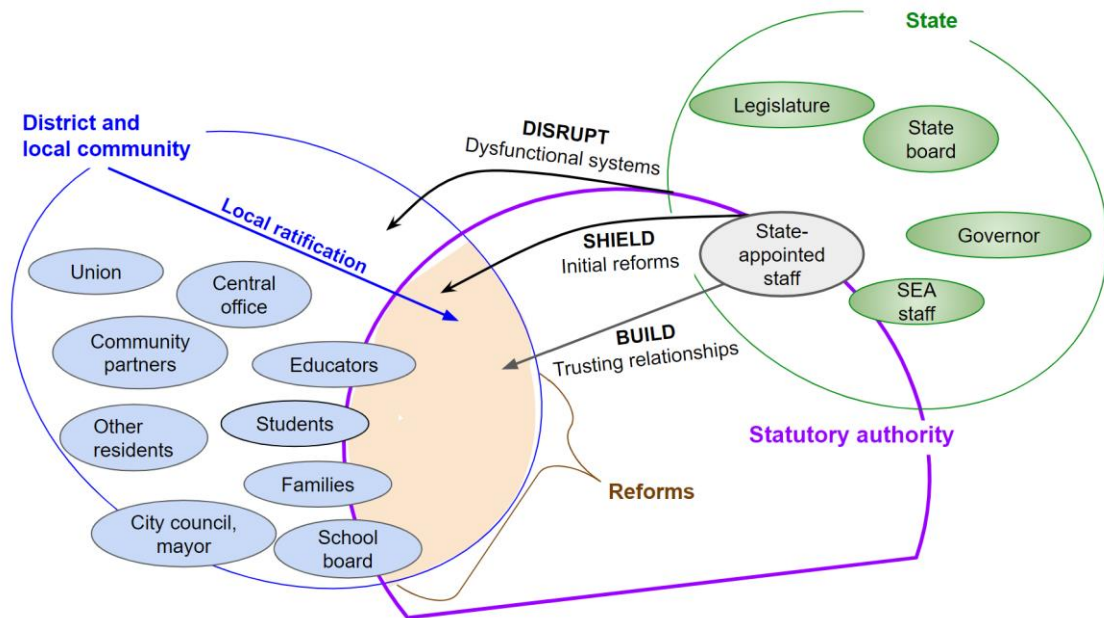
These assurances provided state teams with a foundation to build on; that said, the communities were guarded and skeptical because they had no initial reason to trust the state team's intentions. One interviewee told me, "There's just a lack of trust very often with the school department and the elected leaders as well when things have gone



on as poorly as they have for so long. And so there's a particular need in these communities to work on trust." Receivers, state managers, and improvement coaches needed to build trusting relationships with stakeholders in order to become a rallying point for civic mobilization.

Figure 1 illustrates the model described in the paper thus far, showing how SEA staff use their formal statutory authority to create a semi-permeable shield around early strategic decisions. Over time, as they continue to protect growing reforms from dysfunction, they must also invite local collaborators into that shielded space to draw on local assets, be accountable to local stakeholders' needs, and promote civic mobilization. In the next section, I discuss the strategies by which state appointed staff built the local base of support that helped them progress.

**Figure 1.** Model of political leadership during state intervention



**Building trust and civic mobilization through a relational, time-intensive approach**

State teams had to move swiftly in some areas, but also take the time for communication, outreach, and engagement. They sought to provide vision, direction, and supports that were only available under takeover, to fill the void that had been created in the absence of competent leadership. I discuss four primary political strategies that characterized both teams' approaches in Holyoke, Southbridge, Breathitt, and Menifee: 1) careful construction of the relationship between staff embedded in the district and those at the agency; 2) making leadership decisions accessible and transparent with active stakeholder outreach; 3) providing a rallying point for civic mobilization around a clear, student-focused vision and early wins, and 4) ratifying state-imposed changes through traditional processes over time.

***Relationship between the appointed leader and the SEA***

Although most analyses of takeover categorize the state-appointed leader with the rest of the SEA, staff in Massachusetts and Kentucky constructed a more nuanced relationship that framed the state manager or receiver as a local advocate with unusually high access to the resources and responsive service of powerful state allies. The SEA helped to set the appointed leaders up for success and trust-building in the way they constructed these relationships. First, they selected receivers and managers who were experienced educators and former superintendents. In Kentucky, both managers were local to the region; in Massachusetts, both the Holyoke and Southbridge receivers had spent their lives in New England; they were also Latino and bilingual in Spanish and English. These experiences gave them initial points of connection with the communities they served.

Second, SEA leaders worked with the state managers and receivers to create a clear division of their roles and responsibilities designed to ensure separation between the district and the state as oversight and support. One interviewee at the SEA explained,

There's a fair amount of being skeptical of the state, big government, and outsiders, right? They don't know us personally. The state becomes this sort of faceless entity... I want the receiver to be trusted. I don't worry about as much whether we're trusted. I work at it, for sure, but I'm much more concerned about the role of the receiver and making that connection. My job is to make sure I'm engaging the receiver and pushing the receiver towards those community connections more than me.

State staff at the agency showed respect for their appointed leader's authority and autonomy to make decisions in the district, which in turn allowed appointed leaders to choose whether to draw on the state's formal authority to push through a change, use the soft power of the pulpit to gain political leverage, or request and receive priority access to SEA resources.

To achieve this, state staff described themselves as coaches and co-planners. Especially once takeover moved past the initial stages, KDE and DESE staff ensured that communications with the district went through the receiver/manager as much as possible. While they kept regular contact and approved key decisions, they deferred to the person they had appointed as district leader. That individual raised concerns, identified needs, and asked for input or resources, and state staff saw their role as doing their best to provide support.

### *Transparent, regular communication*

For their part, staff added value by making leadership decisions more accessible and transparent through continuous and active engagement with local stakeholders

across the community. Receivers and managers placed great importance on “getting over the hump of the state taking over” and establishing affiliation with the district compared to the state. They knew that the onus was on them to overcome the mistrust generated from the stigma and loss of control during takeover. As one put it, “You can’t erase the way it happened... It’s just like Big Brother came down, told you that you weren’t good enough, and bang, you got somebody who was appointed to run your school system.” Throughout their tenure, these administrators sought to “underscore my allegiance to the community” and prove that “my first commitment was to the families and the children of the city.”

They also noted that the state’s commitment to serving as a partner and resource facilitated this. Receivers and managers displayed ownership of their decisions and told me the SEA rarely if ever imposed anything on them that they disagreed with. One described how he saw himself as the district’s personal advocate with the SEA, commenting, “I think from the agency’s perspective, it’s ‘hey, I give you a lot of resources, you’re not the only district we’re dealing with.’ *\*laughs\** But my job is to push and pretend I am the only one that exists and let them figure out how to handle it.” They shared this message with district stakeholders as well. One said, “I often hear, oh, the state is doing this to us. And I’ve often said no, I’m making the decisions here. It’s not the state. If you don’t like the decision, you’ve gotta come to me.” The next step was making sure that they followed through on the positive rhetoric.

### *Sharing vision, tools to reach it, and signs of progress*

Equally important for building strong relationships was demonstrating trustworthy behavior over time. Appointed staff created a rallying point for civic

mobilization by communicating a clear vision, emphasizing signs of progress, and providing tools to combat the challenges that had produced harmful patterns of belief and behavior. To prove their dedication to the district, receivers and managers adopted a similar approach, which one referred to as “visibility, presence, and engagement.” These strategies built trust with the community and identified a potential coalition of local collaborators who also believed in the vision and plan.

Appointed leaders held community meetings, assembled local advisory groups, and planned open houses and reading nights at school. One described opening family resource centers and hiring staff to work on family engagement. They offered community members a standing invitation to tour the schools. They created newsletters and social media platforms, gave out their cell phone numbers and followed through on promises to meet with parents about any issue with the schools – a marked contrast from how past leaders had behaved. One described how a skeptical parent had attended a board meeting with questions and couldn’t believe it when he was able to schedule a meeting for the next day. That parent is now a member of the local school board. Another strategy was creating part time “small money” positions for cafeteria supervisors to bring more parents into the schools and “to create talking points. These people can see what’s happening in schools and go home and talk about it. Because they don’t trust me. They trust their own eyes and they trust people they like. It’s slow, purposeful outreach and accessibility” (*Appointed leader*).

To combat harmful belief patterns, receivers and managers coupled their outreach with tools and alternatives to help stakeholders overcome the challenges that had given rise to the original beliefs. In Kentucky, the state wanted to change the

community's low expectations for the school system and its benefits to their children. One state appointed staff member said, "They needed to know that there was going to be consistency in what you said and did. That what you said and did aligned with what you set for your vision, mission, and purpose for being there." Through the continued outreach, they sought to demonstrate that schools could improve students' lives and futures.

In Massachusetts, the primary barriers were rooted in racist beliefs, what one interviewee called the "blaming mentality of why kids are in this predicament." They felt that these beliefs were due at least in part to the fact that the town wanted to do better by its students but did not know how to cope with the complex environmental challenges. "I don't think anybody has ill intent, but how can you become an exemplar if you don't have an exemplar that you're looking at?" said one state staff member. Receivers in Massachusetts asked DESE to design targeted professional development on school climate, trauma-informed instruction, and culturally responsive teaching. They contracted with external experts in positive behavioral intervention, offering the teachers tools to cope with what seemed like overwhelming environmental pressures and complex student needs they were not prepared for. They went out of their way to "honor and respect traditions and pockets of success and excellence that existed in the school system," and they narrowed their strategic focus, setting reasonable goals so that teachers could see growth and early wins firsthand. As one said:

I do not ever talk to the faculty or principals about our test scores. I think it's a great test, it's important for policy and telling us how we're doing as a district, but I never talk about it. I want you to solve instructional problems. Focus on quality curriculum. What formative assessments are you creating to help you know where kids are? I want those to get better. But we're in the fifth percentile.

It's going to be years before the state test scores move. Years. It will move, by the way. But you've got to do these other things first. Kids and families need to feel safe in school, emotionally and physically, so I have great data to measure climate improvement... It's finding a tool that's granular enough to show people that your work is making a difference. It's motivation for them. For all of us.  
*(State-appointed staff)*

In Kentucky, where money meant for schools had been consistently misappropriated and towns faced widespread poverty, repairing hazardous school buildings could serve as a visible indicator of improvement. State managers campaigned to supplement the budget with what is known as a "nickel tax." Unique to the state of Kentucky, the nickel tax allows communities to vote for an additional tax of five cents per dollar of assessed property value and use the funds for school facilities maintenance. The state would also double and match funds raised locally by the nickel tax. Managers in both districts devoted a lot of time to explaining to constituents exactly how the money would be used "for Construction or Renovation of facilities for your kids/grandkids... to provide safer facilities in which to learn."<sup>3</sup>

Through demonstrating early wins, making the logic behind their strategies and decisions transparent, and listening to and addressing the community's concerns, state teams strove to persuade educators and families that their presence could produce positive changes for children and the community. They also emphasized the importance of approaching their daily work with humility, displaying a problem-solving orientation and genuine care. Receivers, managers, and state liaisons placed in districts said the key to earning trust was to begin by listening to local staff, looking for positive signs,

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3 Nickel Q&A flyer

behaving as a partner rather than an evaluator, and demonstrating their value to staff.

One said:

Help lighten the load and make things easier. With teachers, maybe they're running late to get something copied in time to pick up their kids. Okay, I'll finish this and drop it off to you, or let me take your kids to lunch while you run to the bathroom... Get in a classroom and work with students and they can see that you do have some instructional skills, you do know what it's like to teach in a classroom every day. You had to go in with some knowledge about what you were doing for anyone to take you seriously and want to listen to you. And they needed to know that there was consistency in what you said and did, that it aligned with your purpose for being there.

Another added:

I would go into classrooms empty-handed because I didn't want teachers to think, 'Oh, what's she writing down back there?' And I always look for the positive things happening in the classroom. I started attending PLCs so I could get to know them better. I had one on one conversations on my very first few days there. 'What do you think's going on in your building? What would you like to see change?' Then in your conversations, the way you model things, they start to see, oh, she does know instruction. She does care about our kids and about us... You've got to be patient and understand when you walk in there that you are kind of the enemy. You have to establish I'm not here to get you or to catch you doing something wrong, I am here to make you better. Once you establish that, it starts rolling.

As the community came to trust their intentions and professional abilities, it became easier to hold "honest conversations" about challenges in the schools without raising defensiveness that could cause someone to shut down. And by getting on board, the community was better able to support the state team in making changes that would not be possible without their participation.

### *Formally ratifying changes to cement local ownership of reform*

State teams looked for opportunities to use traditional formal processes to reinforce and ratify the changes they had imposed. They took these as a sign of



increased local ownership of the reforms and renewed public trust in the institution of education. For example, in Massachusetts, even though teachers were initially resistant to the imposition of new working conditions, “We’ve been able to negotiate successor contracts with each of the unions in all three receivership districts. So now the provisions [we imposed] are actually ratified into a new collective bargaining agreement for each group, even if receivership goes away. We think that is a big win, because the union votes on it.”

Kentucky also saw signs of local ratification. Upon exiting state management, Menifee hired the state manager to continue as their chosen superintendent. Despite active campaigns against the nickel tax from former board members, both Kentucky districts ultimately voted for it, which allowed the districts to undertake major construction projects. “I would think the community would not vote a nickel tax in unless they trusted what was going on,” reflected one state staff member. “That took a big commitment in an already high-poverty area for those individuals to vote in a property tax increase.” Former school board members who had contributed to the dysfunctional governance arrangements were voted out in future elections. The community stood behind the board even when they made the difficult decision to consolidate two elementary schools.

### **Other evidence of increased opportunities for community participation**

When discussing the mission to build trust within the community, one district leader told me a story about presenting to the local Lions Club shortly after his appointment. During the meeting, one resident publicly bet the club \$500 that the leader would not last a year in the district. “There’s a persistent expectation that I too will

leave, because all leaders leave this place,” the interviewee told me. “There’s not a lot of history of why they should trust. But now he owes them a check. I’m going to their luncheon next month.”

As receivers and state managers continued to use takeover’s expanded authority as a shield and a lever, while also engaging in culture work to set a vision and build trusting relationships and local capacity, all four districts saw increased opportunities to participate in schools and at least some signs of civic mobilization, including the formally ratified reforms discussed above. Every district had made strides in transparency about decision-making, with established structures for communication with each stakeholder group so that people knew how to learn more and participate. School board meetings in the Kentucky districts used to be as short as ten minutes and often not publicized; now they posted agendas and minutes online. Where the Menifee school committee did not even review financial information prior to state management, they now dedicated time in every meeting to an update on the financial status and decisions, along with the instructional agenda.

Districts also instituted procedures for collecting and incorporating feedback. Previously, community members had not even been able to find out what was happening; now, they had opportunities to communicate directly with leaders as described above. The Massachusetts districts began conducting school climate surveys of local stakeholders and sharing the results. One state staff member said, “Before receivership there was no way of knowing, what’s the experience of students, what’s the experience of families? If teachers think one way, do families agree? That’s been very illuminating, very eye-opening to get annual feedback from families.” Relationships also

began to slowly improve. In Menifee, there were signs that families were beginning to trust that schools could serve their students, such as increased attendance rates, more students applying for college scholarships, and “more kids on pathways that will lead to employment.” In Holyoke, the receiver told me, “The relationship with the union is much better than it used to be. I don’t hear a lot of anti-department of education rhetoric as much. I still hear it, but not to the extent, anywhere near where it was when I first arrived.”

Although all districts still had progress to make and remaining challenges, SEA staff uniformly agreed that most teachers and district staff now placed the needs of students above adult interests, that educators were willing and eager to try new strategies, and that the communities now had a sense of purpose and vision about the direction of its schools.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The issues leading to takeovers in Massachusetts and Kentucky are far from fully resolved. As one interviewee put it:

If there was a silver bullet of solutions we’d totally be doing them, but the dynamics are always shifting and we’re trying to figure it out with folks... It’s so rewarding to see conditions changing for kids, but sometimes it’s really slow. Sometimes we do things that we think are right that don’t pan out the way that we had hoped or wanted. So, it’s complex. (*SEA staff member*)

Although states have significant formal authority during takeover that boosts their reforms, their capacity is still limited, and their ability to make change depends on slow, difficult culture work. The very act of takeover creates a barrier to collaboration because of the shame and stigmatization that it imposes on communities (Fried, 2020). Many desired improvements depend on cooperation from town and city leaders over whom

they have no formal authority. The Massachusetts districts remain in receivership, and although both Kentucky districts exited state management, they remain in state assistance. Interviewees frankly described persistent challenges and slow pace of building the culture and civic capacity that they hoped to see, not to mention improvements in district performance. However, if undertaken carefully in the appropriate circumstances, takeover can be a tool for increasing community participation in their school system.

Not all districts are suited to this intervention. SEAs need to conduct political mapping to evaluate whether their formal authority and their capacity to devote personnel and resources offer sufficient leverage to influence political dynamics in the community. Supportive conditions include a low level of community political participation prior to takeover, a toxic governance and political leadership configuration barring access to the school system, and state teams with both the motivation and capacity to empower locals using strategies designed to unite disparate stakeholders around common interests. Progress came from the application of three key leadership skills: disruption of dysfunctional governance arrangements, shielding to insulate the new reforms, and slowly mobilizing dormant civic capacity by building trust among community members. In places with strong unions or powerful local networks, these interventions may not be as successful. And the bigger the district, the harder it will be to staff and support that relational approach. SEAs must also have the capacity to devote sufficient personnel time to district management at the *agency*, and the receiver must be a skilled political leader.

When the state chooses to enter such a situation, they should do so with the motivation to restore community participation and governance to a system that has stripped it from them. They should have an intimate knowledge of the district's dynamics and a problem framing that considers all stakeholder perspectives on what the community needs. State teams in Massachusetts and Kentucky felt personally responsible for student success and expressed commitment to behaving as partners in the district work. Upon entry, state staff added value by making leadership decisions more accessible through continuous engagement across the community. They prioritized trusting relationships with educators and families and used their formal authorities to shield themselves from counterproductive, time-consuming political disputes. They provided a rallying point for civic mobilization by communicating a clear vision, highlighting early signs of progress, and providing resources to combat the challenges that had produced harmful patterns of belief and behavior.

Despite initial skepticism and fear of receivership, once communities began to see how they could improve and ultimately benefit their children, they showed willingness to collaborate on reform, lending credence to Glazer and Egan's (2018) theory that there may be more potential for building coalitions in takeover districts than is immediately apparent. After all, those most invested in a system typically have the greatest opposition to change, as well as the biggest platform with which to express it. Therefore, an opposing minority may be more public and vocal, as well as able to use formal channels like litigation and media to resist interventions that a silent majority might be open to under the correct circumstances. Every takeover – even those in Lawrence, where much of the community supported the state's presence – faces vocal

opposition and widespread public attention, due to its inherently controversial nature, but with time, and by consistently demonstrating trustworthy leadership, state-appointed staff were able to gain support for major reforms like the nickel tax or a renegotiated collective bargaining agreement.

One final implication for researchers concerns how we frame the actors involved in these complex multi-organizational efforts. Analyses of takeover typically group the state-appointed receiver or manager with the rest of the state agency. In truth, although they are hired by the state, the relationship is more nuanced and its positioning is critical to building trust within the community. State-appointed leaders had to be able to distance themselves from the SEA and behave instead as local advocates. Scholars of policy should therefore consider separating this individual and any other staff working directly in the district (such as school improvement coaches) from the rest of the state in future analyses.

Even when takeover is warranted, the goal must be to create a stable, functional system that supports all its students and can continue to improve after state exit. Doing so requires shifts in municipal political dynamics, not just within schools, and requires political as well as educational leadership from the state. Before proposing takeover, state leaders would ideally have deep knowledge of local political conditions, both to justify the intervention and to evaluate whether the SEA – an outside authority with limited resources – can feasibly catalyze improvement there. Though success is not guaranteed, the work of KDE and DESE demonstrates that takeovers can benefit the local community if appointed leaders use their expanded toolset to build the

relationships and facilitate the necessary cultural changes to sustain a system that responds to local needs.

**Paper 2: Managing takeover: Antecedent state-level conditions for district reforms**

State takeovers of school districts are one of the most drastic examples of expanded state intervention into school district management over the past three decades. They are fraught initiatives: highly visible in the media, politically and socially controversial, and above all, they concern children in dire need. The urgency surrounding takeovers has naturally motivated research into whether they improve district performance. However, a recent national analysis finds that state takeovers of school districts produce heterogeneous results not only across states, but within them as well (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2021). Schueler and Bleiberg point to a puzzle: current research cannot systematically explain this variation in outcomes or predict why some takeovers succeed and others do not.

One reason we cannot explain mixed results is that the definition of “takeover,” its conception and execution, varies widely across states. Another is a lack of information on the antecedents and mechanisms of the reforms. State takeover has been characterized as a “black box” whose inner workings we don’t fully understand, and research is limited in its ability to describe and systematically compare features of these initiatives in order to link them to outcomes (Barnum, 2021). Most existing takeover research takes the form of single-district evaluations (e.g. Gill et al., 2007; Harris & Larsen, 2016; Pham et al., 2018; Schueler et al., 2017). While state agents feature in these accounts, research has generally described their effects on the district without exploring the forces that drive, enable, and constrain state actions. Little is known about what determines SEAs’ ability to improve districts through takeover, despite the high probability that state-level factors influence takeover approaches and the subsequent outcomes.



To determine which factors most likely impact takeover results, I turn to literature on policy implementation that describes the process by which a policy moves from targeted goals to realized outcomes. In this view, implementation of a reform is an iterative process that is neither top-down nor bottom-up (Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991; Matland, 1995; Nilsen et al., 2013; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984a; Ryan, 1995; Schofield, 2001b). The outcomes of any given reform depend on several antecedents, including characteristics of the lead implementing organization(s) such as how they interpret the goals and strictures of the formal policy, the strategies they select, external political and economic pressures, and, perhaps most importantly, their capacity to carry out the intended reforms. Indeed, a recent national interview study of ten state education chiefs and state-appointed superintendents cautions that takeover is a limited tool that relies on the SEA's ability to navigate a general lack of capacity for the work (Jochim & Hill, 2019). However, research does not offer a detailed account of how state agencies address these challenges during implementation either in terms of strategy or capacity allocations.

To this end, I frame the state rather than the district as my unit of analysis, to illustrate how state actors "do" this work. I explore how state education agencies (SEAs) in Kentucky and Massachusetts – both of which have unusually high investments in state-led school improvement policy – organize themselves to manage school districts directly. The resulting comparative case study offers insight into the mechanism and practical implementation of these reforms. Using literature on policy implementation to guide my analysis, I show how takeover strategy in each state is influenced by the authority and flexibility of the enabling statute, the level of cohesion and support in their

authorizing environment, their philosophy for district reform and the agency's material and human capacity. Specifically, I address the following research questions:

1. How do two states that have been leaders in state-driven education reform define the purpose and goals of takeover?
2. What structures and strategies have been used to manage takeover implementation in these two states?
3. How do features of the state policy environment surrounding takeover influence these patterns?

The resulting cases highlight shared decision points and challenges that state agencies face in takeover, while providing practical operational insight into how two leader states handle them. They also raise implications for the conditions and resources a state agency requires to take over a school district and the risks and merits of different strategic approaches. In short, by linking agency capacity and strategic planning decisions to the goals of takeover and the surrounding policy environment, we can begin to contextualize puzzling outcomes. Moreover, as researchers, practitioners, and lawmakers continue to debate and refine the use of this policy tool, further knowledge of these dynamics – including promising strategies and how much time, funding, legal authority, and other professional resources are required to achieve them – will help state leaders plan future interventions for struggling districts.

## **Background**

### **The efficacy of takeover remains an open question**

The research surrounding takeovers' ability to improve district performance offers little consensus. A landmark study of takeovers between 1992 and 2000 found that, on average, while they were likely to improve financial management, they did not

improve student performance (Wong & Shen, 2003). There are a few exceptions: in the takeover of Lawrence, Massachusetts, researchers found significant test score improvements, largely attributable to intensive small-group instruction conducted over school vacations (Schueler et al., 2017). Another recent study of the New Orleans recovery school district, in which the state removed almost all public schools from district control, documents positive cumulative effects over the past decade (Harris & Larsen, 2016). But other studies offer a bleak picture of takeovers' academic outcomes. For example, Pennsylvania's takeover of Philadelphia schools and Tennessee's state-run district show no impact on student performance (Gill et al., 2007; Pham et al., 2018; Zimmer et al., 2015). Most recently, a national study of takeover not only found little to no positive effects of takeover on average, but also a puzzling heterogeneity of effects overall (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2021).

Current research cannot systematically explain this variation in outcomes or predict why some takeovers succeed and others do not. One reason for this gap in our predictive knowledge is that there is no such thing as a standard model of takeover; the scope and intensity of intervention varies widely as states define the process differently. Because they are so drastic, they are rare; moreover, each one is a complex, multi-organizational initiative influenced by a unique local and state context, making them challenging to compare. The term "takeover" has been used to describe strategies as disparate as implementing a choice-based portfolio in a large urban context to appointing one manager to oversee traditional leadership of one small rural district. They may be initiated for financial, academic, or governance reasons, or a combination thereof, and are guided by extremely different state laws (Fried, forthcoming). More broadly, VanGronigen and Meyers (2017) show that SEAs differ widely in school

improvement strategies (regardless of takeover status). SEAs have different procedures for recruiting and evaluating external partners. Some redistribute funding, assign coaches, or reconstitute schools, and they allow LEAs different levels of input. In short, there is diversity in the improvement approaches that SEAs design, and such variations likely contribute to disparate takeover outcomes. Lumping them together conceptually as a single strategy compromises our ability to disentangle the factors driving their results.

Existing takeover research offers little systematic comparison of the factors that likely comprise the mechanism driving reform outcomes. There are a few exceptions. Moe's (2019) volume offers a detailed examination of takeover implementation in New Orleans, but his argument hinges on the claim that success was enabled there only by the unpredictable and certainly irreplicable destruction of their entire political infrastructure during Hurricane Katrina. Mason and Reckhow (2017) provide a comparative case study of takeovers in Tennessee and Michigan that takes an institutional view of state-level factors, but these states both employed the "achievement district" model and therefore results may not apply to situations where the state takes control and leaves original district structures intact.

Additionally, a body of political science work investigates important dynamics of governance, local democratic representation, discourse and narratives of takeover, and effects on the community, in takeovers in Newark, NJ, Central Falls, RI, the state of Georgia, and Memphis, TN, but does not concentrate on academic outcomes that takeover targets (e.g., Glazer & Egan, 2018; Morel, 2018; Oluwole & Green, III, 2009; Welsh, Williams, et al., 2019a; Wright et al., 2020). The evaluations that form the basis of our knowledge about outcomes do, of course, identify strategies the state uses – such as

hiring and staffing decisions, school schedules like the “vacation academies” in Lawrence, and changing school management configurations like the Innovation Zones in Tennessee – and links them to outcomes like standardized test scores (Gill et al., 2007; Harris & Larsen, 2016; Pham et al., 2018; Schueler et al., 2017). These causal analyses do not focus on details of implementation that can make the difference between success and failure in any policy effort. Lastly, one recent national interview study of ten state education chiefs and takeover superintendents cautions that takeover requires SEAs to make the most of limited capacity, build political goodwill across local and state-level stakeholders, and plan for the challenges of sustaining improvement after exit (Jochim & Hill, 2019). However, research does not offer a detailed account of how SEAs address these challenges either in terms of their strategy or capacity allocations.

### **Identifying the antecedent factors that influence reform outcomes**

Takeovers can be viewed as an example of what political scientists Hasenfeld and Brock (1991) term a *policy instrument*: the formal specification of state control as a method by which to pursue a set of objectives such as higher test scores or a balanced budget. From this perspective, takeover is a tool that may be used differently, and to different ends, depending on the state’s policy and the strategic and management decisions of those implementing it. Since Pressman and Wildavsky's seminal study of a federal jobs creation program in 1984, implementation theorists have sought to understand the complex chains of interactions that are generally referred to as *policy implementation*, or “the ability to achieve the predicted consequences” contained in a policy instrument (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984, p. xxii).

For a multi-organizational effort such as takeover – which necessarily includes the SEA, LEA, state legislature, and other actors – implementation is best characterized

as neither top-down nor bottom-up, but iterative and interdependent (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984a). Policies specify objectives and methods of achieving them, which structure the ensuing implementation, but are adapted throughout depending on how actors respond to economic, political, and other contextual or environmental forces that influence their decisions (Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991; Matland, 1995; Nilsen et al., 2013; Ryan, 1995; Schofield, 2001b). High-quality implementation also includes *evaluation*, or incorporating initial results and feedback to improve both the policy and its implementation (see Browne & Wildavsky, 1984b; Elmore, 1979, 1985). Analyzing policy through an implementation lens allows researchers to “transcend the distinction between politics and administration” (Schofield, 2001, p. 24). This is a useful affordance for studying takeover, which is politicized but also involves technical objectives.

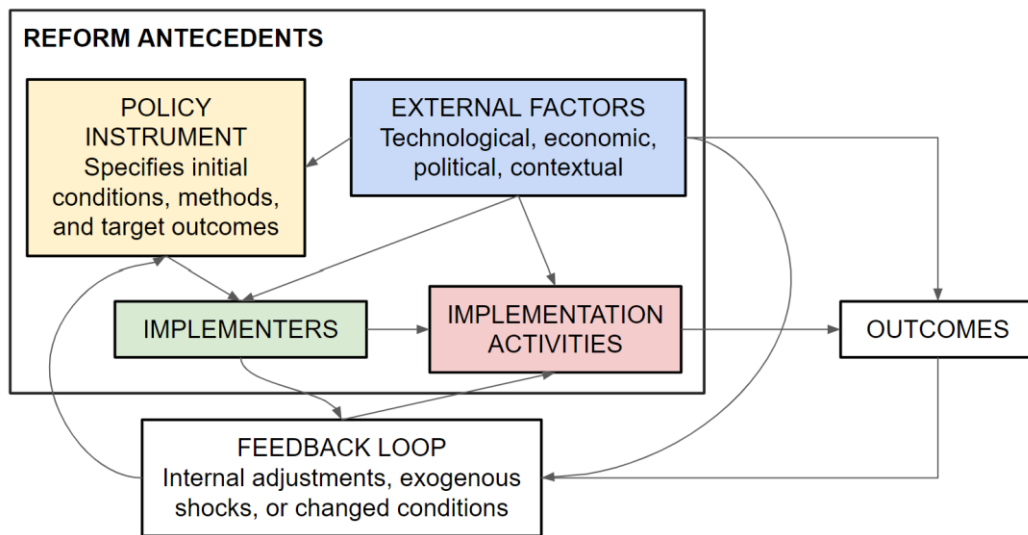
This literature suggests that district performance will likely depend on the SEA’s ability to manage the takeover given its own constraints, resources, and enabling conditions, as well as the goals set by the legislature. Implementation theory offers a framework for analyzing reform efforts. To investigate the SEA’s role in producing varied takeover results, I employ an adapted version of Hasenfeld and Brock’s (1991) political economy model (see Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> Focusing on the implementation process will

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4 The original model by Hasenfeld & Brock (1991) is slightly broader and includes policy-making, the stage during which policy-makers negotiate the problem framing and choose between alternatives. In this study, I begin with the policy instruments as written. I also identify four factors as reform antecedents; the authors make no such distinction. Where I list *implementers* due to my specific interest in the role of the state agency, Hasenfeld and Brock use *critical actors* to acknowledge both implementers and the local stakeholders whose participation is necessary to enact the policy. Since I do not analyze district stakeholder implementation decisions and actions, I restrict this category from critical actors to simply implementers and move stakeholder actions to the category of external factors, which in the authors’ original language is *environmental forces*. I use the term *implementation activities*, finding it more specific and accessible than Hasenfeld and Brock’s “program”.

allow me to begin to disentangle critical factors that influence takeover outcomes, yielding implications for how state legislatures and SEAs might fine-tune future takeovers. These include features of the policy instrument, characteristics of key implementers (including capacity, expertise, and the ability to incorporate feedback), external pressures, and the implementation activities selected for reform.

Figure 2. General theoretical model of policy implementation (adapted from Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991)



**Using an implementation framework to analyze takeover**

Based on the above policy implementation scholarship and on empirical studies of state-led reform, I identify five likely influential antecedents of takeover outcomes, summarized in Table 4: features of the policy instrument, district characteristics, the authorizing environment, SEA capacity, and SEA implementation activities.

**Table 4.** Antecedents of takeover outcomes

Antecedent	Defining features
Policy instrument	Specified objectives and methods Legal authority afforded by statute

	Flexibility/autonomy afforded by statute
Implementer capacity	Available funding and resources Staff expertise Existing infrastructure
External factor: District characteristics	District size/scale of reform Reasons for takeover Local sociopolitical dynamics
External factor: Authorizing environment	Legislature Board of education State and local government Informal power sources External contingencies
Implementation activities (Lusi, 1997)	Build and maintain external connections Changes to substantive work Build organizational capacity Facilitate local capacity development Change organizational structure

### *Policy instrument*

Two prior studies have identified law formulation as a factor in takeover implementation. Schueler (2019) finds that the formulation of state takeover law, and the broad autonomy it afforded the receivership team, greatly impacted implementation in Lawrence, Massachusetts. There, the state-appointed receiver and his team leveraged the law's most aggressive provisions as a political shield within the district, by framing their approach as restrained and responsible compared to what they were authorized to do. Studying Michigan's PA4 law<sup>5</sup>, under which the state appointed emergency managers for financially troubled school districts, Arsen and Mason (2013) find that the provisions in PA4 led emergency managers to prioritize finances over academics and to rely on the law as "the club" with which they exerted authority (p. 266). In these cases,

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<sup>5</sup> The PA4 law has since been repealed.



the policy instrument specified the SEA's authority, autonomy, objectives, and certain requirements, which shaped but did not determine SEA activities.

### *Implementer capacity*

A well-established principle of reform is that there must be sufficient capacity to manage the change (Elmore, 2009), but, as critics of takeover and policy scholars have cautioned, most SEAs lack the capacity and expertise to improve schools directly (McDermott, 2007; Tanenbaum et al., 2015). Although SEAs have an ethical and legal obligation to ensure all children are educated, they tend to be large bureaucratic agencies that have historically functioned in a monitoring and compliance capacity while districts operate schools. Their ability to support reform with funding, professional resources like frameworks and tools, internal expertise, and/or staff availability should make a difference to takeover outcomes. Organizational infrastructure, particularly the degree of fragmentation or differentiation, is another type of capacity in that it affects the internal power diffusion needed to implement a policy (Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991).

### *District characteristics*

For the purposes of this paper, I treat district characteristics as context for the SEA's reform strategy. The SEA's strategy for takeover will likely differ depending on the district's size and composition, which affects the scale of the required reform. It will also likely depend on the reasons given for the takeover, since SEA staff will choose strategies based on the problems they are trying to solve. Since Massachusetts and Kentucky establish the need for takeover based on an extensive audit of all systems within the district, the reasons given and issues diagnosed for the takeover can encompass finances, mismanagement, school culture, local politics, community

dynamics, and anything else the state will likely take into consideration when formulating their takeover strategy.

Framing the district as external simplifies its role in takeover. Of course, district stakeholders are more than simply influences on the state's decisions; they are strategic decision-makers and critical implementers in their own right. Their active participation in school reform is paramount, and any changes in the district will depend on their actions, not just how SEAs react to those actions. However, my focus here is on exactly that – how SEAs plan for and support districts, considering their complex and changing dynamics. To resolve this dilemma, I impose an artificially static view of districts as an external force by beginning my analysis *after* the decision to take over has been made.

The choice to take over a district as opposed to selecting a different intervention is the first strategic decision that state leaders must make. But it is also during the period of fact-finding and evaluation *before* takeover when these elements of district context are most salient for strategic consideration. In weighing the various accountability sanctions, DESE and KDE do extensive analysis and look for indicators that takeover is the appropriate strategy. They should make the decision based in part on evidence-based perceptions of its political and technical viability and their own capacity and leverage within the community as well as local strengths and assets (see Paper 1). Choosing takeover rather than another intervention sets the conditions the state will have to work within through the entirety of the reform. In terms of strategic planning, states can only assess these things up until the point of intervention.

Once implementation begins, SEAs can expect resistance and instability; these are inherent in any major system reforms, but especially in takeover, which is a particularly sensitive endeavor (Evans, 1996; Fried, 2020). It is therefore incumbent on

SEAs to plan for the capacity to do the complex adaptive work that will surely follow. Once state staff have entered the district, yes, they will need to adjust strategy based on local feedback, political fluctuations, formative assessments, and external shocks including various district stakeholders' activities. Those decisions will continue to depend on the state's capacity, theory of action, the relationships they build, and whether they behave in a trustworthy and respectful way. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, I account for districts in the following ways: 1) as an external force to which state staff must react, and 2) as part of SEA's capacity for political leadership.

Elsewhere, I have argued that while other analyses of takeover treat the SEA as a monolith, this elides an important nuance (see Paper 1). That is, in practice, state staff distinguish between "agency staff" and staff who work in the district directly, including the state-appointed superintendent as well as any embedded coaches or liaisons. This arrangement also alters how we might think about reform antecedents and implementation. Namely, in the interest of identifying antecedents, I focus less on the content of specific reforms (such as changes to curriculum or schedule) and more on the SEA's activities in managing the work in the district. I treat state-appointed staff with the "district," as part of the local team, even though in reality these individuals straddle a dual state/district role. By locating them with the district, I concentrate on my primary interests: what needs to happen *at the state agency* to support work on the ground? How local stakeholders – including appointed leaders and coaches as well as diverse groups of educators, families, and community members – negotiate the content and direction of specific reforms is beyond the scope of this analysis.

*State authorizing environment*

Although SEAs have considerable authority during takeover, their actions can still be limited or enabled by external actors who have power over them, or *authorizers*. Lusi (1997) notes that the state legislature and the state board of education are significant authorizers for SEAs. Because of the political and governance elements of takeover, state and local political players likely also serve as formal and informal authorizers: the governor, local government such as the mayor or city council, and local groups such as the teachers' union and parents' association. Lastly, the authorizing environment includes technological, economic, political, and other contextual forces that exert pressures on implementers. Moe (2019), analyzing the oft-praised takeover in New Orleans, demonstrates how the rapid pace and scale of those reforms was only possible because Hurricane Katrina had demolished the preexisting system of vested interests and power distribution, allowing problem-solvers free rein to, as he puts it, "lead a revolution" (p. 93). Absent a crisis on this scale, the SEA's formal and informal authorizers will likely influence takeover.

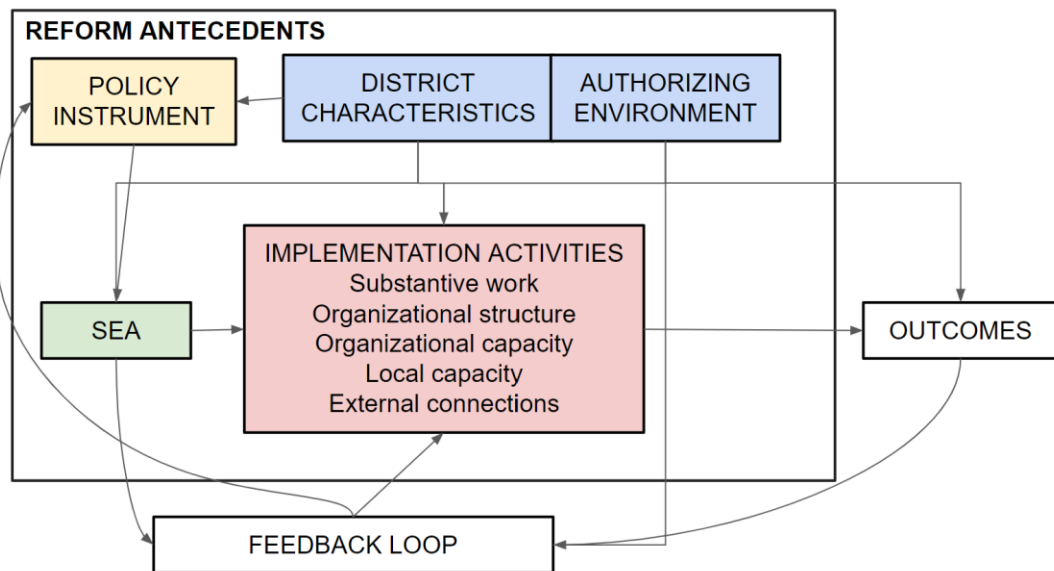
### *Implementation activities*

The role of the above factors is moderated by how the SEA responds to them – that is, their decisions and actions during implementation. Lusi (1997), studying earlier state-led education reform efforts, suggests that SEAs implement complex reform via five primary types of activity: 1) changing the substance of their work, such as developing new resources or offering different types of assistance, 2) their internal professional capacity to support reform through hiring or professional development, 3) organizational structures, such as internal communications or task distribution; 4) building local capacity, or how SEAs construct district participation in their own reform plans, and 5) managing external relationships, such as to legislators, policy makers,

other government agencies, and the sprawling constellation of nonprofits, academic institutions, consultants, community based organizations, and others that participate in American public school reform. These implementation activities form the basis of the SEA’s management approach and influence what happens in local schools and districts.

In sum, the model that guides this inquiry allows me to isolate and define the role of the lead implementing agency, the SEA, in producing state takeover outcomes (see *Figure 3*). Because state staff decisions and activities are likely to make a difference in facilitating or impeding progress in the districts they take over, analyzing these antecedents may ultimately be necessary to explain why some takeovers succeed and others do not.

**Figure 3.** *Takeover policy implementation model for state education agencies (SEAs)*



**Takeover implementation in centralized education leader states**

To study SEA takeover implementation decisions and actions, I investigate two states with unusually high investments in state-led school improvement: Kentucky and Massachusetts. Scholars and policy makers have treated both as national education

reform leaders since landmark legislation in the early 1990s that completely restructured policies concerning standards, assessment, accountability, school improvement, and education finance. The decades following the Kentucky Education Reform Act (1990) and the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (1993) built the foundation for their respective approaches to contemporary takeover. Broadly, each has developed a model of education governance that vests considerable authority at the state level, distributed across multiple institutions to check state power (Zeehandelaar & Griffith, 2015). The states' history of relatively high intervention in systemic school reform makes them interesting cases to examine for a study on takeovers, which are a fundamentally centralizing policy instrument.

Both the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) have made takeover a formal part of the agency's accountability system. During case selection (which I describe in more detail below), I spoke with seventeen officials in twelve states with ongoing takeovers, and KY and MA were two of only three states in which representatives indicated being able to devote resources and multiple staff to the efforts. Their heavily vested approach means that their actions are more likely to influence the initiatives' outcomes, compared to less hands-on states. Although few states meet these conditions, leader states are a good source for examining what we might aim for, what is essential for success and what can be modified or reduced. To guide future exploration of the mechanisms driving takeover outcomes, it is useful to examine how Kentucky and Massachusetts have wielded this policy tool and what facilitated their implementation.

## **Methods**

### **Case selection**

Kentucky and Massachusetts share a uniquely long history of comprehensive state-driven accountability policy, with takeover as a strategy for managing low performance. This makes them *extreme cases*, or those with an unusual value on a key dimension of interest – which in this instance is their capacity to manage school district turnaround (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Extreme cases are appropriate for an exploratory study seeking to identify significant antecedents when their relationship to the outcomes of interest is unknown. Because of their organizational similarities as well as clear differences in their external environments, they are a useful pair with which to conduct a focused comparison of the relationship between their environment, capacity, and activities (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999; King et al., 1994; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009) to disentangle critical factors that influence takeover outcomes.

KDE and DESE have conducted nine district takeovers in total; five were ongoing in 2018 when this study began. The other four took place in the early 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Not only was this a different policy context, but it also precludes me from interviewing relevant state-level staff of the time. Even if it were possible to interview the primary state actors, the quality and accuracy of interviewee recollections would be compromised three decades after implementation. Therefore, I focus here on state staff decisions and actions during five recent takeovers: Lawrence Public Schools, Holyoke Public Schools, and Southbridge Public Schools in Massachusetts, and Breathitt County Schools and Menifee County Schools in Kentucky. Lawrence and Breathitt were both taken over in 2012, Holyoke and Menifee in 2015, and Southbridge in 2016.

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<sup>6</sup> Chelsea, MA, and Pike County, Letcher County, and Floyd County, KY. After KDE and DESE exited these districts, they have remained out of the states' lowest performing 5%.

To identify focal states, I began with a list of 34 states whose legislation enables district takeover, which I compiled for a related project through a comprehensive review of all state education statutory codes (Fried, forthcoming).<sup>7</sup> I excluded four states that remove individual low-performing schools from LEA control and place them in a separate state-operated district.<sup>8</sup> While these SEAs must still make management decisions, their method focuses on individual schools rather than an attempt to reform an existing district, making this arguably a different policy altogether.

Next, I identified which states had active takeovers. If the work is ongoing, it increases the likelihood that most staff involved still work for the agency and can provide accurate and detailed recollections. In Nexis Uni, a database of news sources, and Google News, a news aggregator service, I searched each state name in conjunction with terms such as “school district takeover,” “emergency manage\*,” “receivership,” “turnaround district,” and other synonyms for SEA intervention identified in my prior review of statutes. As I identified takeovers, I ran tailored follow-up Internet searches to ensure I captured the main publicly available facts, ending with a list of 36 active takeovers across fifteen states.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia, and Wisconsin

8 Louisiana, Nevada, Tennessee, and Wisconsin

9 Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas



Lastly, I contacted each SEA, using public websites to identify the relevant offices and contact information, with the goal of identifying states where the investment of funding, personnel, and other resources was substantive enough to provide a useful case. I surveyed seventeen officials from twelve SEAs, who graciously clarified the districts' status, described the basic process of takeover in their state, and estimated the resources available for takeover districts. Most said that their agency allocates personnel as needed from departments such as curriculum, special education, finance, or facilities. At most SEAs, there was only one person or less than one full time equivalent (FTE) assigned to takeover districts, and only three could confirm that they dedicated any funding to takeovers: Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Ohio.

Ohio clearly had not settled on a strategic approach to takeover policy: the districts had made no progress, and debates among lawmakers were so contentious that the legislature passed a 2019 stopgap measure forbidding further takeovers until disagreements were resolved (Candisky, 2019). Kentucky and Massachusetts, by contrast, showed indications of progress. Massachusetts is frequently termed a "successful" takeover state because Lawrence and Holyoke have demonstrated academic gains (Schueler et al., 2017; Schueler & Bleiberg, 2021). Kentucky's district takeovers have not been independently evaluated, but all three districts taken over in the 1990s regained local control by 2005 and are no longer among the state's lowest performing. Moreover, SEA staff I spoke to cited perceptions of improvement in both Breathitt and Menifee, which were later confirmed as both districts exited management, leaving Kentucky with no active takeovers. Given their relatively heavy investment in the takeover process, the state departments in Kentucky and Massachusetts offer useful models for creating the state-level conditions to support takeover.

## Data

To learn about the strategy, management, and enabling conditions of takeover, I interviewed SEA staff carrying out the work. Not many people are assigned to takeover in any given SEA, so my goal was to interview all SEA staff who have worked with takeover LEA(s). I used snowball sampling, beginning with my first interview in each state department, then asking them to name all other state staff they knew who had worked with or in takeover districts. In total, I conducted twelve in-depth interviews with state staff across Kentucky and Massachusetts (see *Table 5*). The interview protocol involves both structured and semi-structured portions and asks respondents to identify factors that influence their work decisions and to compare between factors (see Appendix A). The semi-structured portion allows respondents to contextualize their responses to the structured questions, providing me a better understanding of the nuanced interactions between factors that drive staff decisions. It also allowed me to bring up information from other data sources discussed below, such as an audit report or turnaround plan, to confirm my emerging understanding of the SEA's approach.

**Table 5.** *Interview participants by staff position*

<b>Staff position</b>	<b>Kentucky</b>	<b>Massachusetts</b>
State Commissioner		1
Senior Associate Commissioner	1	1
State receiver/state manager	1	2
Division director	1	2
School improvement coach	2	1

To further contextualize information from participant states, I use a combination of a previously conducted national review of state laws governing takeover (Fried,

forthcoming) and the aforementioned telephone survey of seventeen senior officials across twelve SEAs with active takeovers. Four additional senior staff from non-focal states participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews like those described above. These twenty-one conversations offer useful points of national comparison to the information from KDE and DESE staff.

Lastly, I collected documents relevant to participant states' context and implementation activities in each takeover district. My aim was to construct a comprehensive timeline of reform-related activities that the SEAs initiated or contributed to during takeover and to describe the legal, political, and capacity influences in their respective environments. In selecting documents, I cast an intentionally wide net to capture any information with which to triangulate the findings emerging from my interview data. Ultimately, I collected documents describing the legal authority, funding and professional capacity, strategic planning, monitoring, or evaluation of takeover from public website pages for the SEAs, takeover districts, state boards, and state laws concerning takeover as well as media articles (see Table 6).

**Table 6.** *Documents reviewed*

Policy instrument	State statutes and regulations governing takeover
External forces	State board meeting minutes and associated exhibits (memos, slide decks, progress reports) for presentations by SEA staff or a receiver/manager
District characteristics	Audits of takeover districts produced by state departments and evaluators School district data including demographics, test scores, and other indicators included in the state accountability system. Media articles concerning individual takeovers
Capacity	The annual state budgets for MA and KY from FY12 to FY21 Records of grants made from the state to school districts with both state and federal funds

Activities	Turnaround plans for all receivership and state-managed districts Progress reports and memos provided to the SEA and board Publicly available resources on SEA websites such as explanations of the accountability process, guidance and communications to districts, press releases Communications from receivers to districts (e.g. newsletters, memos)
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**Analysis**

Through qualitative analysis of interviews and policy documents, this study seeks to comprehensively depict how DESE and KDE manage takeover implementation, including their purpose, goals, strategies, and the considerations that drove their decisions and actions. In my data collection and analysis, I sought to determine what takeover *is* in these states, to begin to characterize agency strategy and its influences, which have not been examined before. That is, my goal was to look across the entire agency to determine what the SEA wanted to achieve in the district, who was involved, what work they did, how much time and resources that work consumed and how it contrasted with their work outside of takeover, what resources and communications flowed between the state and the district, what other assets the state provided to the district, what other actors outside of the SEA were involved, and what factors state staff drew upon when making these decisions and actions. To ensure that I surfaced a full range of the potential resources, strategies, and barriers, I drew on the above-described research into policy implementation to guide my interview questions and analysis.

Since prior research shows us that these are the primary external factors that influence policy outcomes, I sought data on each factor, which I compiled into an overall characterization of each agency’s approach, showing not just what strategies were used, but also the thinking and preparation, and contextualize them appropriately. This allows me to move beyond a “black box” description of the reforms’ content as if the

state had no constraints or enabling facets. Rather, attending systematically to details that literature has established as important yields a fuller depiction of state strategy from the perspective of those who wonder, not what specific district reform strategies were selected, but how these states managed an ongoing implementation effort within their own context.

I coded the interview transcripts and documents in multiple, iterative stages. In stage one, guided by the scholarship on the factors influencing policy implementation described above, I applied five first order codes: **policy instrument**, **external forces**, **district conditions**, **SEA capacity**, and **SEA actions and decisions**. I created inductive and deductive subcodes for each first-order code based on additional literature about that antecedent factor (summarized in Table 4 above). For example, within the larger code of “SEA actions and decisions,” I created subcodes based on Lusi's (1997) framework for assessing SEA policy implementation, which details the five types of activity we expect to see from SEAs managing systemic reform: 1) Changes to substantive work, 2) Organizational capacity; 3) Organizational structure; 4) Supporting local capacity; and 5) Managing external connections. Because the policy implementation framework I selected was general, I added these supplemental codes specific to SEAs to guide my review of activities and ensure I attended to the full complement of activities that might have been involved in implementation of takeover. Below I present more detail on each code.

**Policy instrument.** I coded any references to the law or legal authority in interviews and strategic documents, attending to the requirements and rights afforded to the SEA through enabling legislation as well as how SEA staff interpreted it for implementation. For example, one interviewee stated, “We believe that our statute

around receivership trumps a lot of the other statutes that would govern school districts. We look to the receivership statute first and then we see how we can make changes or what flexibility we have.” Another said, “Our state statute around management is not just about performance... We do a lot of work in that area. But there a difference between what we do with low performing schools and state management. Those districts are typically broken districts. They have financial issues, they have facility issues. They’re typically also low-performing, not strong leadership. It’s more of a holistic look rather than just looking at student performance.” Both excerpts were coded as evidence of how SEAs interpret and interact with their policy instrument.

**External forces: Authorizers and district conditions.** I applied this code to references to the state and district context surrounding SEAs during takeover. This includes the stated reasons for takeover and the supporting evidence drawn from audit reports, interview questions, and news articles, state and local political dynamics, features of the municipal or state economy, historical context of state accountability and the local district, and comparisons to other state agencies or to other reforms. For example, one interviewee stated, “That funding pot of money changes with every legislature. So I would say, at the time, yes [we had funding], but it can change with the wind, depending on politicians.”

Another interviewee, speaking of district conditions, noted: “The city council has been a barrier to the work. I underestimated the amount of time and energy that they would require, because we don’t have authority over them or over decisions that are made that have an impact on the schools. So yeah, the city council, the city leadership, the police, and other agencies - procurement is probably one you’ll hear a lot. Those are all things that I think add stress and complexity and can all be barriers to kids getting

what they need in classrooms. It sounds far away but it really does have an impact on how people's time is spent."

Because of my interest in how takeovers can serve local communities well, and because the risks are high, I developed a separate line of inquiry to characterize the relationship between district political dynamics and SEA strategy, then drew on those results to inform the current study. I used literature on politically viable intervention, effective leadership, and civic capacity to assess the basis of KDE's and DESE's justification for takeover and whether it increased opportunities for community participation in school. See Paper 1 for more details on the coding and analytical process for the "district characteristics" antecedent.

**Capacity.** Using grant award notifications, state and local budgets, publicly available documentation from DESE and KDE on their accountability system, and interviews, I compiled a list of assets available to takeover districts, defining this broadly to include funding, personnel time, resources such as frameworks and materials, and any other supports they might not have received without takeover. One interviewee said, "Our school improvement model is based around having a three-man team in every [low-performing] school... Unfortunately, I have 51 CSI schools, and I have 65 field staff. I would need about 90 more to have that three-man team in every building, and we just don't have the capacity for that." Also in this category were mentions of grants, the frequency and nature of communication, professional learning, where and how receivers sought help, and the funding source behind each of these.

**State action or decision.** Eliciting these details was the primary purpose of the interviews. Respondents described the agency's activities and the tasks they personally undertook with respect to takeovers. I used these accounts, plus strategic planning

documents and progress reports to the state board, to summarize the state's actions and decisions. I kept an intentionally broad definition of "actions or decisions" to ensure I accurately captured the full extent of SEA staff involvement in managing the takeover. Lusi's framework, specifying types of activities we would expect to see, guided my coding (see Table 7). As I coded, I kept track of activities and decisions chronologically to build a linear policy timeline of state activities, including significant events such as local or state elections, across takeover districts.

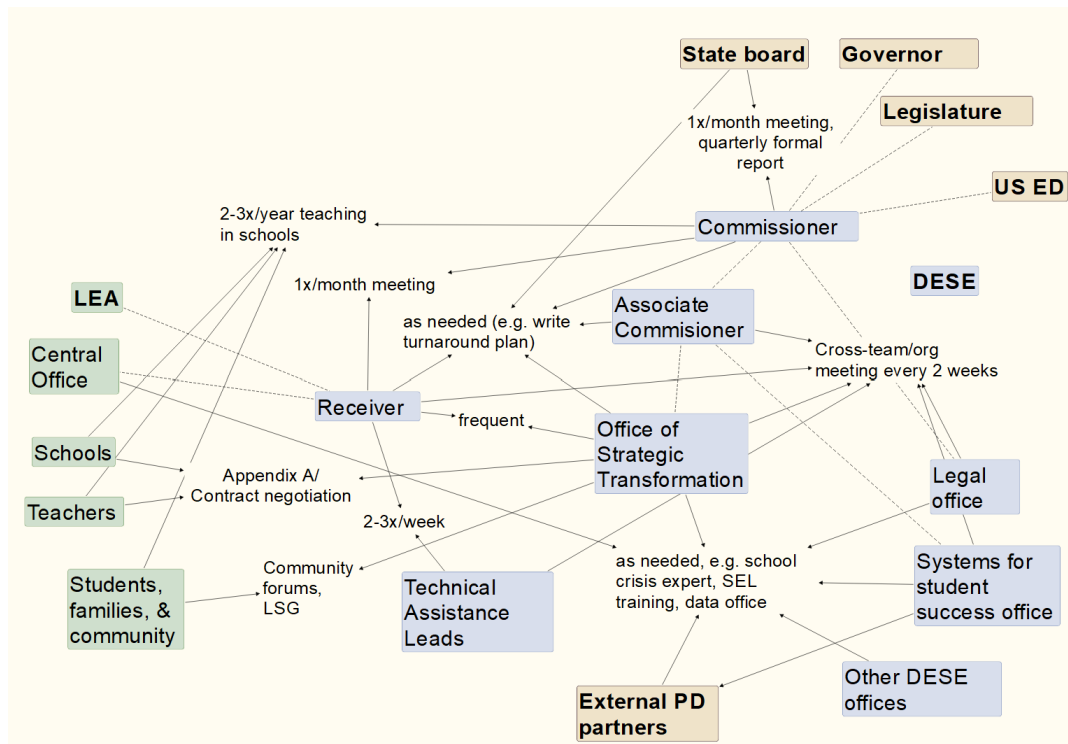


**Table 7. Codebook and data excerpts for activities in SEAs implementing reform (adapted from Lusi, 1997)**

Code	Sub-code	Sample coded data
Changes to substantive work	<u>Providing assistance and training</u>	“We were hemorrhaging leadership staff, and I was using [SEA staff member] to plug in wherever there was a hole, just to keep the district afloat. And she, to her credit, performed whatever we asked her to do in different departments” (Receiver interview).
	<u>Modify tasks and adapt to new information</u> Develop assessments, frameworks, and other products	
Organizational capacity	<u>Ongoing professional learning</u>	“We did the Shipley training systems, and – I won’t remember half of it. We did a lot of training on strategies for improving the climate and culture. We did the [Institute for Performance Improvement in Education] - certified school improvement specialist was the certification we got.” (SEA staff interview)
	Hire or train staff	
	Building infrastructure and professional SEA knowledge base	
Organizational structure	<u>Flattening organizational hierarchy</u>	“You can’t always stay at 30,000 feet. There are things that come up, and this is such a high priority for this agency that you just have to get directly involved. We have to be ready to be nimble and responsive... the work that needs to be done can’t be seen as completely hierarchical. If it needs to get done, we need to do it” (SEA staff interview)
	<u>Permeable organizational boundaries</u>	
	Vision/mission-driven work vs. rules/oversight	
	Staff autonomy and flexibility for decision making	
	Norms and culture that support learning	
Local capacity	Attentions to outcomes vs. methods	SEA used general budget to pay to develop training for the local board, attendance for local school teams to attend the statewide summit on continuous improvement and for school leaders to enroll in the National Institute of School Leadership
	<u>Bringing knowledge, expertise, and assistance to local sites</u> Create flexible products, like frameworks and assessments	
	Degree of practitioner involvement	
External connections	Responding to legislature, state board, and other policy players	“For the partners, yeah, we recruit, vet them, and we network them. For the Academies, you know we sort of design the academy, then we recruit, vet, and select an organization or organizations to run it. A lot of times we participate in the academies, we’re working with them on like some of the strategic design.” (SEA staff interview)
	<u>Increasing capacity for providing information and training through third parties</u> Build SEA capacity through relationships with outsiders	

As I read repeatedly through my data sources, I mapped each state’s takeover system in terms of communication and assistance, political pressures, and capacity, to understand how the state was managing its role from a multi-organizational perspective. That is, I created an organizational diagram of parties involved in takeover, and then overlaid where resources originated and where they went, the nature and frequency of interactions between key individuals or groups, and enabling authority or political dynamics affecting these interactions. In doing so, I visually illustrated and could observe the relationships between different elements of the broader state and local context and generate theories about how they might shape the state’s approach. Figure 4 represents communication channels in Massachusetts between various SEA offices, the district, and external parties; other maps showed funding and material resources and political/community dynamics.

**Figure 4.** Sample implementation system analytic map: Massachusetts communication channels



Using the coded data, the system maps, and the policy timelines, I wrote a series of structured memos in which I described the conditions and elements of state context that emerged as likely to impact takeover progress. During analysis, I continually checked my emerging interpretations with the data, triangulating across sources when possible. For example, if something was mentioned in an interview as a strategy implemented in the district, I looked for references to it in progress reports before the board or district website communications to parents. When an interview described a barrier to reform or a dynamic in the district, I checked data from audit reports, state board meeting minutes, and news articles to deepen my understanding of the issue. I compared SEA staff descriptions of the same events to look for coherence and to check for the points of disagreement that prompted me to challenge my interpretation. I also compared across participant states and to staff elsewhere, looking for similarities and differences that might indicate antecedent patterns for takeovers as a policy.

### **Findings**

Through this comprehensive analysis of reform antecedents in two states, I identify models for how a state agency supports and manages a district undergoing systemic reform. In both Massachusetts and Kentucky, takeovers hinged upon a substantial infusion of their own staff and a systems-based approach to restoring all aspects of district function. They also provided a “concierge service” in which a single office or individual kept in constant communication with the districts’ appointed leaders and facilitated priority access to resources both in and out of the state agency. However, the way they implemented these strategies, and the criteria they set for exit, depended on their statutory authority, organizational capacity, and the political environment.

Kentucky, with comparatively lower levels of funding, political cohesion, and policy instrument flexibility, pursued a *reset* model, intended to stabilize the system and quickly return it to local control. They do not formalize structures specific to takeover but maintain a centralized school turnaround model and a flexible resource of school-level coaching staff that work in both takeover and non-takeover districts. Their approach requires deep ongoing professional learning from staff.

Massachusetts, with its unprecedented levels of statutory authority and flexibility, a supportive policy environment, and dedicated resources, instead pursued a *transformation* model that set higher standards for exit and means districts would likely remain under state control for longer. They were able to adopt a philosophy of regulatory entrepreneurship and innovation, and quickly formalized changes in their own infrastructure and tasks to respond specifically to the needs of takeover districts.

**Transformation model: Disrupt, innovate, and transform districts in Massachusetts**

Because DESE has high authority, flexibility, and supportive state politics, they manage takeover with corresponding changes to their organizational structure and substantive work, modifying their own work tasks to respond to local needs. To manage takeover, the agency created a formal autonomous unit that facilitated cross-teaming structures and could serve as a bridge and buffer both within the department and externally to other sources of capacity and expertise. Almost all those interviewed felt that MA had, or had access to, sufficient capacity and expertise to do this work in the small districts they had selected for receivership.

*Regulatory entrepreneurship born from supportive authorizers and policy instrument*

Among the state laws that authorize takeover in this country, Massachusetts' *ALM GL Chapter 69 § 1K & 1J* is one of the longest and most detailed; it also provides extraordinary measures not available to all state agencies (Fried, forthcoming). In addition to removing the superintendent and assuming the power of the local school committee, DESE can suspend or modify any collective bargaining agreement in the district and hire or fire administrators, teachers, and staff at will. They may petition the commissioner of revenue to compel the local government to compensate for funding deficiencies, expand the school day or year, and otherwise modify the district through the turnaround plan. The final line of subsection *ch 69 § 1K* states that "the provisions of this subsection shall supersede those in subsections (a) to (j), inclusive" – in other words, takeover laws explicitly outrank the rest of the Massachusetts education code.

Schueler (2019), investigating why Massachusetts' receivership of Lawrence, MA was relatively politically stable compared to takeovers elsewhere, identifies the high authority and flexibility of its policy instrument as one factor. DESE refrained from using the law's most drastic provisions, persuading local stakeholders to compromise and cooperate more readily because they knew the commissioner and receiver could still decide to exercise these powers. Looking across all three takeovers in Massachusetts, strategic use of the legal authority and flexibility provided by the policy instrument was a theme in the rest of the SEA's activities.

The policy instrument is indicative of Massachusetts' strong authorizer support more generally. Simply by crafting such a detailed law, the legislature exerts force on the direction of the reforms, such as setting thirteen specific indicators DESE must measure annually, requiring that the state define exit criteria and regularly reevaluate progress,

or mandating a local stakeholder group comprised of representatives from the central office, teachers' union, administrators, school committee, parents, local social service agencies, and community members and incorporate their recommendations into the turnaround plan. The state board takes a close interest as well, monitoring progress quarterly and providing the Office of District Support (the DESE division responsible for managing takeover) with input on the turnaround plan. The governor's budget includes a line item entitled "Targeted Assistance to Schools and Districts" that is reserved for its lowest-performing schools and districts. The appropriation has grown from \$6,740,746 in the 2012 fiscal year (the first year of the Lawrence receivership) to \$14,077,049 in the FY2021 budget. DESE distributes these funds through targeted district-level grants ranging from \$125,000 for Lawrence in 2019, several years into their takeover, to nearly \$2M for Southbridge in FY2021. According to SEA leaders in states with active takeovers, Massachusetts is the only state with this type of funding source (personal communications, November 2018). Federal funds, which most SEAs rely on for school improvement, are targeted at individual schools and cannot be given directly to districts. This limits their flexibility when district dysfunction is prohibitively severe.

Consistent support in their authorizing environment, broad statutory authority, and reserved funding allowed DESE to adopt a stance of what multiple interviewees referred to as "regulatory entrepreneurship," an attitude of leaning heavily on their statutory authority to devise innovative strategies within the district as well as their own organization. As one interviewee described it,

That's our main philosophy around receivership. It's an opportunity to do school differently, and our laws provide us with the authority to think outside of the box from traditional practices and regulations and systems. (DESE staff member)

Another explained,

You've got to be willing to think in a non-bureaucratic way and to be more entrepreneurial. I think we've pushed ourselves a lot. We need to be as nimble as the receivers are. Because state government can often move at kind of a glacial pace. How can we act nimbly as a state education agency in ways that we are not necessarily accustomed to in order to be in step with the type of rapid academic improvement that we're expecting with receivers? (DESE staff member)

DESE staff philosophy of taking an entrepreneurial approach produced patterns of activity and structural changes designed to relieve the districts of monitoring obligations and accelerate the pace of change.

*Authority and regulatory entrepreneurship produce formal structure changes*

DESE staff exercised their authority to create flexibility for their reforms in a few different ways. First, the Office of District Support acted as a kind of inter-departmental buffer, asking other offices to notify them of any obligations or requests made to receivership districts. When possible, they persuaded colleagues to create alternative processes or waivers for "their" districts. A receiver commented, "[DESE] is completely set up for compliance. Now, I can comply and I can have someone develop documents and send them up to you and never change the behavior of adults in my district which then changes outcomes for kids... So, the Office of District Support in some ways runs interference for us on my behalf with the other departments." The Office of District Support, with statutory precedence and responsibility only to receivership schools and districts, became an autonomous unit that shielded them from time-consuming tasks.

Second, DESE forms cross-department teams and substantively shifts their work to address takeovers. This, too, is enabled by the policy instrument. The law states that all authority transfers to the Commissioner the instant that the state board approves receivership, but DESE cannot reasonably identify and hire a receiver without knowing

if the intervention will happen. Therefore, each takeover begins with a transition period in which DESE directly manages the district, with the Office of District Support (ODS) functioning as the central office. Four to five staff work full-time on site during this period, and staff from throughout the agency participate as needed. Two attorneys as well as senior representatives of other divisions take part in daily team calls and manage projects as the team works to recruit and hire a receiver, manage the ongoing operation of the district, set up communication channels with families and staff about receivership, convene the legally required Local Stakeholder Group to make formal recommendations for the turnaround plan, and conduct forums across the community to solicit families' feedback on the future of the district.

Once the receiver takes the helm and can hire supporting staff, this transition team withdraws gradually from the district and allows the receiver to direct more of the interactions, but they continue to have structured communication. The Commissioner and Senior Associate Commissioner both hold regular phone calls with each receiver. A Targeted Assistance Manager from ODS visits districts 2-3 times per week, and the core takeover team, including members outside the Office of District Support, meet twice a week with the receiver for updates and collective problem solving. Their tasks in the meantime continue to be somewhat flexible in response to district needs, ranging from recruiting and hiring district staff, designing professional development, leading collective bargaining, or brainstorming with the receiver. Staff described this as the default orientation towards receivership districts, which not only increases their ability to provide support to the receivers, but helps foster trust as well:

If a project needs to be done, we do that project. Whenever I onboard a new staff member, I'm like, "You will sometimes feel like you work for the district and you



don't work for DESE, because that's how we want the assistance teams to be embedded... If you're not willing to get your hands dirty, or take on a complete project, even though it may require you to be in the district every single day leading something, it's probably not going to be a good fit. So because of that, we have a really good relationship, because receivers then come to rely and trust in us. I also think they can confide in us about issues that they're having without us raising, like sounding all the alarms.

Perhaps the most drastic example of this flexible orientation is that when Southbridge's first receiver departed the district after a year, DESE senior associate commissioner and former superintendent Russell Johnston stepped in as the interim receiver for several months. Since Johnston ordinarily oversees accountability, school assistance, and special education statewide, placing him in this role was a significant commitment.

Another primary activity of ODS is to serve as a bridge to resources throughout the department and its external network, where they typically receive priority responses. A receiver I spoke with recalled a time when his research analyst got a line straight to the relevant data expert without having to spend time finding and contacting the appropriate person. I heard similar stories about special education, legal advice, and other departments. Although these are small examples, swift responsiveness is useful when personnel time is at a premium and reforms are urgent. ODS also directs the receiver or central office staff to resources in other division within DESE, such as external partners or targeted professional development from other divisions within DESE. One senior staff member from another division explained that even though she wasn't part of the takeover office, her team prioritized takeover districts as they designed their professional development offerings:

We try to be as responsive as we can to any high needs district, but when a district is put into receivership, it's all hands on deck. We try to cater anything that we're offering. If they have specific needs, we've tried to re-orchestrate what

those supports look like to better meet their needs. I've been on call. And I don't even do nearly as much with them as a number of other people at the agency [in ODS].”

Lastly, DESE steers receivership districts towards external sources of capacity.

Districts have obtained state, federal, and external grants with state support, such as System for Student Success, teacher diversification, culturally responsive teaching, preschool expansion, early college, workforce development, and socio-emotional learning. DESE also contributes money towards a talent development and recruitment nonprofit based in the western part of the state, connects districts to external partners, and has put out procurements for experts in other high-needs areas like English Language Learners, resource allocation, and special education.

### **Kentucky's Reset model: Reset, stabilize, and quickly exit**

Because they have no discrete budget for takeover, fewer prescribed guidelines, and a more turbulent policy environment, Kentucky's takeover strategies primarily work within the agency's general budget and existing infrastructure. Guided by senior staff with expertise in school reform, KDE developed deep internal knowledge of continuous improvement models, invested in professional learning, and hired practitioners who can then train other sites during temporary full-time placements in schools. The approach hinges on federal school improvement funding that pays for this flexible team, as well as the leadership of one associate commissioner.<sup>10</sup> They make no permanent changes to KDE's internal structure or primary tasks, but infuse a lot of

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<sup>10</sup> Associate commissioners at KDE are roughly equivalent in rank to senior associate commissioners at DESE.

human capacity, relatively briefly, to reset systems through simultaneous district- and school-level changes that are focused on building local capacity for self-governance and continuous improvement.

*State political turnover and policy instrument lead to focus on deepening professional knowledge within existing structures*

With respect to state politics, Kentucky has experienced turbulence and discontinuity during the years of takeover (2012-present). In 2015, Kentucky elected a Republican governor, Matt Bevin, to replace the Democratic Steve Beshear. Beshear's son, Andy Beshear, also a Democrat, was elected attorney general that year, and the Kentucky Department of Education got a new commissioner, Stephen Pruitt. A. Beshear sued Bevin repeatedly over health care and pension reforms. The state board, the Kentucky Education Authority (KEA), also became embroiled in the pension disputes, which concerned the state university system. In 2018, Governor Bevin made a power play and replaced seven of twelve KEA members, whereupon Pruitt resigned. While the ousted KEA representatives launched another lawsuit against Bevin, Pruitt's replacement Wayne Lewis announced his intent to take over the Jefferson County Public Schools, the state's largest district, only two weeks into his tenure as interim commissioner, and was subsequently forced out by the board. Andy Beshear was elected to replace Bevin as governor in 2019. The state went through two more interim commissioners, and Jason Glass became the new education commissioner in September of 2020. All of this provided an unstable foundation for KDE's work.

The frequent turnover and political disputes meant Kentucky did not have as strong of an authorizing environment for takeover. They received no additional state

funding for school improvement, and while their statute includes the authority to remove the local superintendent and override the local board, it is far less detailed or flexible than Massachusetts'. In other words, KY's takeover laws essentially replace the local superintendent, but do not exempt that appointed leader or the district from requirements made of other Kentucky districts.

Therefore, in Kentucky, school-level support for state managed districts takes essentially the same form as the rest of their federally-funded school improvement work, which a recent diagnostic review called "a national model of turnaround practice" (Mass Insight, 2016). Experienced staff at the state department hire and train expert practitioners in a whole systems-based continuous improvement model. These practitioners, called Education Recovery (ER) staff, are then placed in school buildings to lead the local adaptation. Once assigned to a school, they work in relative autonomy from KDE, supporting the principal to address individual school needs. In each state-managed district, KDE supplies one full-time ER staff member per building and one at the central office: a considerable investment, especially in districts where the central office may only be a handful of employees. They do not have statutory authority like the state manager, but report to KDE and therefore have the SEA's backing.

ER staff serve multiple functions in state-managed districts. Because both Breathitt and Menifee are small districts, ER staff can work closely with the state manager to coordinate reforms districtwide. They communicate regularly, even daily, with central office. "Once we got those folks in place, the state managers were able to focus on getting a lot of the policies and procedures in place," said one state staffer. ER staff therefore address educator development and instructional quality, while the state

manager builds districtwide structures and environmental conditions that support teaching and learning. As full-time embedded staff, they also serve a monitoring function by providing information to senior officials at KDE.

*Coaching/mentoring and priority access to resources*

KDE staff did not adopt an attitude of regulatory entrepreneurship and innovation. Instead, they focused on one strong model and set of resources to support it, and they helped state-managed districts by providing priority access. While they did not mention flexibility or alternatives to requirements, though, they showed a similar sense of the need to prioritize these districts. Unlike in DESE, where a team was dedicated in the agency to manage these districts, Kentucky's state-managed districts were primarily the responsibility of one associate commissioner, who provided similar networking/problem solving assistance as DESE's Office of District Support. She explained:

The state managers report to me directly. I am basically overseeing the work that is going on in those districts and talking with the state managers to make sure that they have the resources that they need. State government's slow, or it is in Kentucky. If someone just sent an email up here to say hey, we've got an issue, unfortunately, it might sit for a day or two. So if they have an issue with finance, then I can get on the phone with our finance department. If they've got an issue with special education then I contact our special ed contact here. I'm very much a believer that we are responsible for those school districts, I'm the go-to person, and if they have a bus wreck or a water line breaks, I'm the first one they call.

State managers spoke with this commissioner near-daily, and the frequent communication meant that they were able to make use of the SEA's existing resources. KDE sought funds from the general budget to pay the state manager's salary. They contracted with the KY Association of School Boards to develop training for state managed boards; paid for principals and teachers to attend the statewide continuous

improvement summit and enroll in the National Institute of School Leadership professional development program. KDE also arranged for teachers to observe “hub schools,” former low-performing schools that have shown tremendous growth, which KDE supports to systematically collect data on their own practices and strengthen professional learning relationships with other schools in their region.

### **Considerations of district size in both Massachusetts and Kentucky**

If nothing else, the varied outcomes seen across takeovers nationwide suggest that the intervention is not appropriate for all districts. As previously mentioned, although I have primarily restricted my analysis to the decisions states make upon initiating a takeover, choosing when to use this policy tool is the first strategic decision the education commissioner makes. In both states, the legislature sets criteria for district eligibility, but in Massachusetts, the only legal requirement is that districts fall into the lowest performing 10% and that the recommendation must be based on an audit. DESE has the freedom to set regulations specifying additional criteria for takeover. In Kentucky, the legal criterion for takeover is “a critical lack of efficiency or effectiveness in the governance or administration,” which must be demonstrated through an audit and administrative hearing. This gives the SEA latitude in when to use the strategy.

Thus far, takeover districts in these states have all been small to medium size, as shown in Table 8. The state managed districts in Kentucky have a combined total of just 3,419 students, whereas Massachusetts’ receivership districts vary. Southbridge, MA resembles the Kentucky districts in size, while Holyoke is about 2-3 times as large. Lawrence is a mid-sized district; though it is the seventh largest in the state, it is still

only about a quarter of the size of Boston. All five serve primarily children from low-income backgrounds, who constitute between 63-79% of the student population.

**Table 8.** *Student demographic composition of state takeover districts*

	<b>Southbridge</b>	<b>Lawrence</b>	<b>Holyoke</b>	<b>Meniffee</b>	<b>Breathitt</b>
# of schools	6	26	12	3	6
Total # students	2,004	13,658	5,241	1,135	2,284
% African American	2.0	1.3	3.1	2.0	2.4
% Asian	1.4	1.2	0.8	0.1	0.1
% Hispanic	57.3	93.4	81.0	2.0	1.4
% Native American	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.1
% White	37.3	3.7	13.8	94.4	95.4
% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0
% Multi-race	1.7	0.0	1.2	1.3	0.6
% English Language Learners	24.3	35.9	22.4	0.0	0.0
% Students with disabilities	21.2	19.2	24.8	19.7	23.0
% Economically disadvantaged	69.7	63.3	77.8	78.7	77.4

District size is important in two ways: 1) whether the SEA can balance of all its districts under takeover, given the total scale of their needs, and 2) whether the SEA has enough capacity to make a difference within each individual district. The question of size as it pertains to total SEA workload may be one potential answer to the puzzle Schueler and Bleiberg (2021) raise: why do takeovers have different outcomes within the same state? Another reason to examine takeovers from the state perspective, rather than on a district-by-district basis, is that same-state takeovers don't operate in isolation – they are all managed by the same agency, after all, and typically by the same department or even single individual within the SEA. Balancing multiple takeovers

alongside the rest of the state's districts likely affect the SEA's ability to execute the desired reforms.

As for the size of each individual district, neither SEA would likely have the capacity to implement these models in a larger system. Multiple interviewees told me that the most valuable resource was dedicated expert personnel. I asked each whether they thought their SEA had sufficient capacity to implement takeover, and all responded that they did, for the most part. However, some offered the caveat that while they had enough capacity for the current slate of takeovers, they would struggle to find the personnel to manage it in a larger district. In Kentucky, the model hinges on one Education Recovery staff member per school, and the associate commissioner told me that these valuable personnel are already overstretched, with no funding to hire more. The core team in Massachusetts is also lean; while they could supply multiple staff during the brief interregnum period, they could only do it for one district at a time and provide one district liaison on an ongoing basis. This liaison had to split her time between two districts and DESE was at a hiring freeze at the time of interviews.

Politically, too, size likely matters: Schueler (2019) identified Lawrence's relatively small size as a significant factor in the receiver's ability to establish relationships with the local community and minimize political resistance. As I show in Paper 2, the same pattern is borne out in Holyoke, Southbridge, Breathitt, and Menifee. Local political dynamics become considerably more complex in a larger system, and the number of relevant stakeholders with potentially competing interests increases. While my interviewees did not explicitly mention size as a consideration in the decision to take



over – nor did I interview the leaders who made this decision – it is instructive to compare the strategies each SEA used with two larger school systems.

In 2017, after years of low performance and increasing state oversight in Springfield, Massachusetts, Commissioner Mitchell Chester announced his intent to take over despite resistance from the district and community. At 25,000 students, 81% of whom are classified as economically disadvantaged, Springfield is the state's third largest district and one of its poorest. DESE ultimately decided to delay takeover while the district radically restructured schooling guided by a new turnaround plan. The ensuing Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SZEP) is more of a portfolio approach: a public-private hybrid with charter operators and an appointed board of local leaders plus four members chosen by the state (ERS, 2019; Schnurer, 2017). The renegotiated teacher contract extends work hours but raises overall pay and adds performance-based incentives. Principals have free rein over personnel, finance, curriculum, and scheduling. A small central office team oversees the experiment, connects schools to resources, and intervenes if performance drops. DESE staff still refer to Springfield as one of "our" districts; the Office of District Support monitors it closely along with receivership schools and districts, and it receives targeted turnaround funding. However, it retains local governance.

Likewise, in 2018 KDE announced a takeover of its largest district, the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), which serves 96,000 students. The two reached a settlement that delayed the decision until 2020 (JCBE & KDE, 2018). Because one pressing motivation for takeover was that the district had concealed multiple instances of physical mistreatment and student injuries in restraint and seclusion practices, JCPS

agreed to create an independent office to investigate complaints, hire a district director of special education, and restructure its student assignment plan, as well as develop a turnaround plan to address funding, facilities and transportation, instructional quality, racial disparities in student outcomes, and other concerns raised in the audit (KDE, 2018; McLaren, 2018; Tatman, 2018). However, they retained local control, and by the follow-up hearing, the district had improved enough that the Commissioner declared he would not intervene further (KDE, 2020).

Both approaches had elements in common with the takeovers. SEAs were able to use their unique authority and governance structure to remove impediments to change and to reorganize resources to get them to sites efficiently. However, it is likely that the SEAs chose not to intervene in these circumstances in part because they lacked the capacity to see takeover through. Not only were the individual districts likely too large for the SEA to affect, but adding to their overall load could also compromise their services to the other districts in takeover.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

At a November 2011 meeting of the Massachusetts state board of education, DESE Commissioner Mitchell Chester addressed the topic of takeover, as he had done several times that year. The board and the agency were intrigued by the expanded flexibility and authority, but concerned about capacity, uncertainty, and how to ensure that schools would improve. Commissioner Chester posed two possible goals the state could have for takeover: “(1) the return of governance to the community as quickly as possible after stabilizing things; or (2) the transformation of the district where excellent education is the rule rather than the exception.” Chester’s articulation of these options

proves a useful framework for understanding the strategic models that emerged in Kentucky and Massachusetts over the subsequent decade.

These two state education agencies had similar approaches to takeover that hinged upon a significant infusion of their own staff and a systems-based approach to restoring all aspects of district function. They also provided a type of concierge service in which a single office or individual kept in constant communication with the districts' appointed leaders and facilitated priority access to resources both in and out of the state agency. However, the levels of capacity and political cohesion in their authorizing environments caused these state agencies to diverge in their implementation of these strategies. Kentucky resembled the first model, the "reset," whereas Massachusetts chose the second approach, striving for full transformation.

I suggest that when a state agency has the cohesive and stable support of its authorizers, including a strong policy instrument and dedicated capacity, it can pursue the goal of total transformation. Staff can afford to take risks, aiming for innovative new strategies and differentiation based on the receiver's individual approach and the unique context of each district, and to create formal structures that mirror and support the work. One result is that districts in Massachusetts spend longer in receivership, which could lead to a unique semi-permanent hybridization of state and district. One extreme example of this is New Jersey, where state takeover efforts lasted for decades.

When the state agency exists within a fluctuating and unstable political environment and lacks dedicated capacity, they instead employ a reset approach, aiming to restart broken systems, stabilize the district, and then depart. Instead of exploring individualized strategies, they develop deep expertise in facilitating a reliable

standardized model of continuous improvement that each district may tailor to their own needs. Consequently, they preserve a greater separation between state and district and more traditional governance arrangements. They also benefit as an agency by creating the Education Recovery Staff, a statewide resource that, because they are federally funded, can withstand state political shifts and serve other districts in future.

One critical lesson emerging from these cases is that there is no substitute for human capacity and, no matter their goal, SEAs need the resources to pay for expert personnel and plenty of time. I selected DESE and KDE for this study because out of all states with active takeover, they had allocated the most funding and personnel to takeover. These SEAs have managed to do a great deal with determination and Commissioners who prioritize takeover in their general budget. Staff acknowledge that the important thing is not just funds, but funds used smartly. Still, even one or two additional staff can make a big difference, especially in a small district.

Massachusetts has a budget line item to support the districts, but the agency itself is at a hiring freeze, meaning that they cannot afford to place any full-time staff in the districts at length. Because of their supportive political environment and dedication to flexibility, they can reassign personnel in short-term bursts to cover the transition into receivership; however, their long-term Targeted Assistance Managers are the only staff assigned on the ground for the duration of receivership and there are not enough of them to work full-time in any one district. Kentucky has built up a good deal of internal expertise, but the fluctuations in their political climate mean that their funding for these staff positions is perpetually in jeopardy.

Teacher professional development is an urgent need. In districts where there are no "pockets of success," paying for daily modeling and coaching of expert practices is critical. Apart from Lawrence, districts were relatively geographically isolated, making teacher recruitment and retention one of their greatest challenges. Massachusetts districts, with their infusion of extra grant funding, were able to contract out some amount of this technical assistance, but the money was not enough for full time, daily work. Both receivers found this prohibitive. Kentucky, by embedding people directly in schools, addressed both the operational and instructional elements simultaneously, which lightened the receiver burden. This is not to suggest that Massachusetts districts would have exited receivership as swiftly as Kentucky's with school-level coaches, necessarily, due to the differences in exit goals. However, it is a promising practice.

Many analyses of takeover thus far have concentrated on the specific reforms implemented in the schools: the curricular focus, staffing decisions, scheduling, and so on. Surely these are important to consider. We know that many different models of schooling can be successful, high-quality learning options. But for any of them to succeed, they must be led well. I have shown that also relevant is the way in which the state department organizes itself to support whatever reforms the local receiver decides to implement. The cases of Massachusetts and Kentucky show how SEAs' implementation of takeover is influenced by the levels of capacity, political stability, and reform logics in their authorizing environment and that this makes a difference as to what the receiver is able to accomplish in terms of whole system reform. As we strive to understand the varying outcomes of takeover, scholars should consider the capacity of the state agency – to reset or to transform.

Lawmakers and leaders seeking reform solutions can see from this analysis how state-level conditions, particularly in the authority and resources provided in statute, influence SEA activities. The cases provide policymakers with insight into SEA operations, which can be remarkably difficult to access. State agency staff will benefit from a detailed heuristic to plan, support, and manage accountability interventions for struggling school districts. Moreover, the heuristic may prove valuable not only for district takeovers, but for other forms of state-led policy reform as agencies look to hybridize and connect in new ways. We are now a networked society with intersecting policy challenges operating across multiple spheres. As government agencies look increasingly to lead reforms in collaboration with other organization, and to pursue more flexible and systemic approaches, takeovers offer valuable evidence of what a state agency can and cannot accomplish given its regulatory and political environment.

**Paper 3: State agencies as learning organizations: What school district takeovers demonstrate about the evolving nature of American public governance and administration**

The nature of American public administration has shifted dramatically since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and state education agencies (SEAs) have changed and expanded the scope of their responsibilities over school districts. Early state departments, including state education agencies (SEAs), were hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations primarily responsible for monitoring compliance and enforcing regulations for local agencies (Meier & Hill, 2007). Over time, SEAs faced criticisms for their inefficiency and faced pressures to become more flexible, efficient, service-oriented, and focused on performance rather than on process (Lynn, 2007; S. P. Osborne & Brown, 2005; Pyper, 2015). Expectations for public administration grew to include private sector principles - competitive market ideologies, innovation, and coordinating across a diverse landscape of stakeholders which grew increasingly complex and diffuse with technological developments (Hood, 1991; D. Osborne & Gaebler, 1993).

Meanwhile, as policymakers set higher expectations for what schools should be able to achieve, SEAs' legally mandated responsibilities grew to include setting curricular and assessment standards, building assessment and accountability systems, creating professional resources, and providing technical assistance (Brown et al., 2011; Lusi, 1997; McDermott, 2009). Yet SEAs have typically not received increases in capacity to help them cope with these added demands or learn the skills required to execute them. Moreover, even as they seek to take on new capabilities, SEAs cannot abandon the responsibilities that originally led them to become bureaucratic (Bilney & Pillay, 2015).

Efficiency goals can directly conflict with the mission to provide a public good; process-based monitoring is important to ensure the public's tax dollars are well spent.

All these factors lead some to conclude that SEAs should return to their organizational roots in monitoring and oversight while delegating their newer functions of support and intervention (Smarick & Squire, 2014). Yet doing so would not resolve core problems for school districts in need of improvement. If the SEA scaled back these functions, district leaders would still need to find replacements in the increasingly diffuse, complex, and fragmented landscape of modern education – not necessarily more efficient than interfacing with a bureaucratic SEA. Moreover, if we continue to expect SEAs to set performance standards and hold school districts accountable, they should also be responsible for helping districts improve. Research into policy implementation shows that reform is most successful when monitoring, capacity, and assessments are strategically aligned and mutually reinforcing, which allows data from monitoring to inform future strategies and practices (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Elmore, 2009; Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984a).

This, in short, is the dilemma facing the modern state agency. Their goods and services are public, their funds are tied to rigid restrictions that incentivize bureaucracy, and their hiring and procurement must adhere to cumbersome protocols; yet the results they wish to catalyze in schools and districts require a degree of innovation, flexibility, and support. Research demonstrates that good monitoring is much more tightly linked to strategy, implementation, and support than some might imagine, but limited capacity precludes SEAs from being fully adaptive, embedded monitors for all their charges. What can states do to balance these competing, at times mutually exclusive demands?



What challenges constrain their ability to accomplish those goals? What conditions and resources support them?

School district takeovers epitomize both the opportunities of increased state autonomy, flexibility, and authority over school improvement as well as the complex demands of modern public administration. Due to the urgency and complexity of student needs in these rare situations, takeover laws imbue SEAs with unusually high authority and latitude to make rapid, sweeping changes and circumvent typical restrictions. At the same time, takeover represents a significant departure from SEAs' traditional responsibilities (Brown et al., 2011; Lusi, 1997). Managing schools requires competencies that SEAs were not designed for. Because their urgency and visibility allow states to transcend some of their bureaucratic roots, and because they fundamentally alter the traditional scope of work for SEAs, takeovers provide a prime opportunity to investigate how state agencies can develop new competencies.

Takeovers are a rare exception warranted only when students are in crisis; they will never be the SEA's core purpose, nor should they be. The SEA will employ strategies in takeover that cannot be used for the majority of their work, whether due to lack of authorization to intervene, competing demands at the agency, limited capacity, or some combination. Nevertheless, takeovers offer the potential for the SEA to undergo organizational learning that affects more than just the handful of districts and state staff involved. They create the opportunity for what scholars of organizational learning call *ambidexterity*, or an organization's ability to simultaneously build on its core capabilities while experimenting with new ideas and techniques (March, 1991; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004). The experimental work takes place under deliberately different conditions that

facilitate more innovation and risk-taking, but if the new efforts show promise, they can be adapted for the broader organization.

Takeovers represent the upper boundary of the state's accountability system – the most extreme cases – and staff who work on takeover typically also have responsibilities to other districts, creating a natural bridge for learning to carry over to other parts of accountability policy. They are urgent, highly visible, and closely monitored by state leaders and authorizers, so people will likely pay more attention to what occurs. Lastly, because SEA capacity is limited, investment in takeover may mean paring back other agency functions, forcing shifts in practice. For all these reasons, it is likely that any organizational change resulting from takeover will influence the rest of the SEA. In other words, takeovers also allow us to ask, when state agencies change in one area to accommodate new responsibilities, how, if at all, does that affect their practice of education governance generally?

I take up these questions by examining the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)'s takeover of three districts: Lawrence, Holyoke, and Southbridge, MA. DESE has an unusually large investment in state-led accountability policy which makes them an ideal candidate for examining organizational learning. Because they had the support and political authorization to invest heavily in developing an office and practice of district turnaround, any deliberate changes DESE made to accommodate new demands were likely to be visible, simply because they could bring a larger base of support and staffing to bear compared to other state agencies conducting takeover. They were best poised to take advantage of the potential of takeover and their case was most likely to yield a fuller picture of the

strategy's affordances and limits. Therefore, they are well suited for an investigation of how a state education agency (SEA) can change and learn to take on new tasks, and whether these adaptations have a broader effect. Specifically, I ask:

- 1) Does DESE act as a learning organization while implementing accountability policy?
- 2) If so, how do they incorporate new competencies and knowledge? If not, what barriers prevent organizational learning?

## **Background**

### **Shifts in U.S. public administration**

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the landscape of public policy, governance, and administration has shifted considerably across the Western world. Early public administration systems tended to take the form of Weberian bureaucracies (Weber, 1968), characterized by rigid hierarchies with strict role orientations, formalized procedures, and a priority on compliance with laws and regulations (Meier & Hill, 2007). In the U.S., public agencies expanded rapidly during the progressive reforms of the 1920s and '30s. A national "reverence" for the separation of powers, along with the concept of scientific management pioneered by Frederick Taylor and others in the business sector, gave rise to our tendency to view public administration as apolitical, providing stability and continuity in comparison to the turnover of elected officials in the legislative and judicial branches (Lynn, 2007; Valkama et al., 2013). Through the 1960s, the growing field of public administration continued to be characterized by rationalist perspectives: managerialism, behaviorism, and ways to streamline systems and processes within existing bureaucratic systems (Lynn, 2007; Pyper, 2015).

By the 1970s, economic crises and rapid social change produced criticisms of the waste, inflexibility, and inefficiency of bureaucracies (Lynn, 2007; Pyper, 2015). Public agencies faced increasing pressure to incorporate private sector management principles as a means to improve efficiency, financial accountability, and effectiveness (S. P. Osborne & Brown, 2005). The dominant model of public administration in the 1980s, known as New Public Management (NPM), emphasized managerial autonomy and flexibility, focusing on targeted outcomes rather than inputs and protocols, devising innovative and cost-effective methods to achieve those outcomes, competitive market ideologies, contracting out services to third-party providers, and incorporating performance management principles such as goal-setting and performance-based incentives (Hood, 1991).

Meanwhile, policy scholars had begun to analyze public agencies not as apolitical but as both products of and influences on their sociopolitical context, and technological developments sped up the pace of life and connected us across geographic and political divisions (Lynn, 2007; Pyper, 2015). The boundaries between governmental and non-governmental organizations grew diffuse and fragmented. By the 1990s, analysts generally viewed public agencies as situated within networks: the private sector, nonprofit organizations, outside lobbyists and interest groups, and the array of stakeholders involved in increasingly complex social and governmental challenges (Pyper, 2015). Contemporary government agencies are tasked with coordinating this diverse constellation of stakeholders: decentralize service delivery, foster competition across service providers and hold them accountable, and shift their conception of service users from citizens to customers (D. Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Pyper, 2015).

Despite decades of pressure to adopt private sector practices and expand the role of nongovernmental organizations in public administration, government agencies continue to exhibit bureaucratic tendencies. One reason is that the goals and mission of public organizations remains fundamentally different from those of private sector firms (Bilney & Pillay, 2015). As Bilney and Pillay point out, corporations typically measure success by their profits, but goals for public agencies are often more ambiguous and can involve competing demands between political, economic, and public needs. For instance, mandates to provide equitable services to citizens regardless of their circumstances can directly conflict with cost efficiency. While private firms are assessed on profit and accountable to their investors, public agencies are accountable to codified regulations, which creates risk aversion and discourages staff from deviating from standard rule-bound practice. Thus, rather than replacing the logics of bureaucracy with the logics of NPM, the two sets of logics are layered on top of each other (Seo & Creed, 2002). Public agencies are subsequently caught in what Bilney and Pillay (2015) refer to as a *double bind*: “the invidious position of having to satisfy the incompatible and often mutually exclusive demands of bureaucracy and efficiency” (p. 4). This is a tall order.

### **Competing demands for state education agencies**

Education is no exception to these trends. The American system of education was built in a piecemeal fashion as communities independently created local schools for their own children. The legacy of local control in schooling persists to this day. However, as schools proliferated across the country and became more formalized, so too did state education agencies (SEAs) designed to disburse federal funding and monitor local district compliance with the regulations governing its use. Over the past few decades,

ambitious legislative reforms and federal accountability pressures broadened SEAs' authority and the scope of their involvement in schools, along with both public and authorizer expectations for what schools should be able to accomplish. SEAs were no longer just monitoring compliance, but also engaging in performance management activities like setting standards and supporting schools and districts to meet them, building accountability and assessment systems, developing resources and supports, and intervention (McDermott, 2009).

Like other public sectors, the education landscape became increasingly fragmented, complex, and privatized during this period. Among education scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, a logic of systemic reform emerged in the 1990s (Smith & O'Day, 1990) which over subsequent decades became characterized by four distinct sub-logics influenced by the private sector: 1) standards and accountability, 2) research and evidence, 3) autonomy and professionalism, and 4) markets and choice (Peurach et al., 2019). The proliferation of logics created turbulence and incoherence, flooding the institutional environment with third parties: charter management organizations, external service providers, nonprofits, researchers, consultants, lobbyists and advocacy groups, and more. Between navigating this complex constellation, coordinating reform efforts with local stakeholders, work with the legislature, state board, and other policy players, and their continued bureaucratic responsibilities in monitoring compliance, today's SEAs have a lot on their plates.

To meet these competing demands, SEAs sought to become more flexible, less hierarchical, more transparent and adaptive "agents of change" who were capable of facilitating school improvement (Brown et al., 2011; Lusi, 1997). Most of the time, they

have not received significant capacity increases from state legislatures or the federal government to help them cope with these additional mandates. Efforts to evolve rely mostly on strategic decision-making and internal changes to practice and structures, reallocating existing resources. SEAs are also hampered by federal regulations that limit how funds may be used, and restrictive hiring and procurement processes and salary schedules that make it more difficult to recruit and retain high-quality staff (Hanna, 2014; Murphy & Jochim, 2013). Some analysts have argued that due to the intractable nature of these competing demands, we would do better to pare back the school improvement functions of the agency and return to focus solely on channeling dollars and monitoring their use; setting and monitoring standards, assessments, and accountability targets; and creating and maintaining data systems (D. Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Smarick & Squire, 2014). To counteract remaining bureaucratic tendencies, Smarick & Squire (2014) envision SEAs as portfolio managers with more of a market orientation, overseeing and coordinating a “nonprofit support ecosystem” (27).

Yet trimming down SEAs would not resolve all the dilemmas discussed above. As Smarick and Squire (2014) note, stripping them of the prominence and power that have accompanied their expansion could result in a more stabilized distributed authority across the many third parties coordinated by the state, and/or the reemergence of the “education governor” as a key policy leader. However, relying on governors to lead policy would leave states even more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of political turnover than they already are, and would likely only increase the jaded, “this too shall pass” attitude of many school, district, and state staff towards education reform initiatives. Moreover, this model seems unlikely to reduce the silo effect; it merely

externalizes it. Separating reform tasks out across a network of third parties would probably not reduce the burden to districts, instead requiring them to interface with different organizations rather than different SEA departments. Lastly, separating monitoring and evaluation functions from support goes against what we know about organizational improvement and effective policy implementation and constrains SEAs' ability to make monitoring and resource allocation useful for all parties, not just an exercise in regulatory compliance.

### **Monitoring for compliance vs. monitoring for improvement**

According to scholars of policy implementation and organizational improvement, monitoring works best when it is strategically incorporated into an initiative: aligned with and informing goals, implementation activities, and resource allocation. As Elmore (2009) puts it, organizations should provide a unit of capacity for every unit of performance they demand. If SEAs monitor, assess, and sanction districts, they should also be responsible for helping them meet the standards. Simply setting requirements is not enough to induce improvements without accompanying support. Second, assessments and accountability systems are most useful when they are designed and implemented alongside the reforms (Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984a). Knowledge of the context and goals allows evaluators to design useful policies and assessments that not only fulfill monitoring requirements, but also provide districts and schools with meaningful data they can incorporate into improvement efforts, refining their own practice at the same time. Distancing the support further from the evaluation and accountability functions could create more



fragmentation, decoupling the means from the ends and providing another chance for these mutually reinforcing activities to slip out of alignment (Bromley & Powell, 2012).

Undeniably, SEAs will never be able to completely align their support functions with district practices or become fully flexible instructional leaders given the capacity and mandates that they have and are likely to have in future and given Americans' dedication to local control. Nor should they; the monitoring and accountability functions that make them bureaucratic are critical. Even if they were to get more capacity, they will not be able to create equitable statewide access to excellent instruction as a single agency, or even in collaboration with LEAs. The systemic problems that they are now trying to solve require multi-stakeholder, community efforts at the local level and coordination in the institutional environment. Yet only by retaining a certain amount of embeddedness can they pursue their own organizational learning, designing better policies and accountability systems that minimize compliance burdens for districts and schools. What might this process of organizational learning look like?

### **Takeovers are ideal for studying government agencies' learning capabilities**

State takeover policy provides a unique opportunity to study organizational learning in government agencies because they epitomize the decades-long trend of increased state autonomy, flexibility, and authority over school improvement. Some states, including Massachusetts, had already begun to expand their powers over school districts. Following the reform work happening to set standards and expand accountability in leading states, NCLB (2001) mandated for the first time that all SEAs build accountability systems to catalyze large-scale school improvement (Sunderman &

Orfield, 2007). The law included takeover as one of five options for sanctioning low-performing schools and districts, leading to a rise in takeovers (Steiner, 2005).

NCLB shifted national expectations for data transparency and holding schools accountable for performance, but overall failed to provide sufficient flexibility or resources for SEAs to reach the desired outcomes (Tanenbaum et al., 2015; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). Subsequent federal initiatives continued to infuse states with authority, capacity, and flexibility, offering flexibility waivers from certain NCLB requirements, funding from the *American Reinvestment and Recovery Act* (2009), the competitive grant program known as *Race to the Top*, and the push to adopt Common Core standards. During these years, SEAs developed their expertise in accountability, evidence use, assessment, and school improvement, and tested new ideas for policy design and implementation (CEP, 2019).

The passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) in 2015 marked the first time in decades that the federal government reduced its influence and gave SEAs more latitude over how they would satisfy federal performance targets. States were required to submit extensive applications in which they were free to design their own accountability systems. They could set their own assessments, standards, and measures of performance and choose their own strategies to support and/or sanction low-performing schools and districts (ASCD, 2015). The law also gave states more latitude over educator preparation, development, and evaluation, and created flexibility in the use of certain federal funds by collapsing them into block grants.

The federal administration turned over following the 2016 presidential election, just as states were finalizing their ESSA applications. State agencies described “political

upheaval between the department of ED, the Administration, and within the department of ED between career staff and political staff” that made it difficult for them to obtain support or clear guidance (CEP, 2019, p. 11). In the absence of concerted federal authority, states cemented their role as the contemporary leaders of macro education policy. They had a longer history of wrestling with accountability policy implementation along with the requirement to build a new system under ESSA, and were therefore poised to take advantage of this elevated autonomy and continue growing the work they had begun under the previous law (Jochim & Gross, 2016). If SEAs hoped to pursue exploration, the conditions under ESSA provided the best opportunity in recent history.

Among all of these policy changes, takeovers are often cited as exemplars of the trends described above that push states away from static bureaucracy: state centralization, increased accountability, the opportunity for innovation and, in some cases, logics of markets and choice (e.g. (Peurach et al., 2019; Zeehandelaar & Griffith, 2015). They are the most aggressive and direct intervention strategy available to SEAs. Unique regulatory conditions allow for strategies that SEAs cannot use in ordinary circumstances; they vary depending on the laws of each state, but can include suspending or replacing the superintendent or school board, circumventing teacher and administrator collective bargaining agreements, closing or reconstituting schools, and making sweeping changes to curriculum, instructional practice, budget, calendar, and other aspects of district management (Fried, forthcoming) As such, they represent the upper limit of what SEAs may and may not be able to accomplish in the realm of school improvement, and they create an opportunity for SEAs to push those boundaries.

**Leveraging the unique conditions of takeover to explore ambidexterity**

Takeovers also highlight the competing demands of SEAs because while the urgency of student needs in takeover districts warrant unusual levels of state authority, performance management, and flexibility, they are so rare, drastic, and resource-intensive that they can never become “the new norm” of how SEAs work with districts. However, when viewed as an example of what some scholars term *organizational ambidexterity*, takeovers present a new way of thinking about how SEAs can learn.

In a seminal paper, James G. March (1991) lays the groundwork for the theory of ambidexterity by articulating two types of organizational learning, which he terms “the exploration of new possibilities and the exploitation of old certainties” (71). Exploitation involves building on prior successes and further developing, refining, or otherwise improving core competencies; it is a more predictable, routine type of learning required to sustain the company. Exploration refers to innovation and adaptation for a perpetually shifting environment; it is uncertain, riskier, and requires staff to look outside of standard practice, but it is imperative for future success. According to March, organizations often struggle to allocate their resources between these two equally important types of work. Michael Tushman and Charles O’Reilly were the first to apply the term “ambidextrous” to organizations that balanced these competing priorities, likening it to using both hands simultaneously for different tasks (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2004; Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996).

Ambidexterity should be incorporated into strategy, structure, leadership, and culture; its principles apply both at the organizational and individual levels (Maier, 2015; O’Reilly & Tushman, 2004). Most firms already have strategies, structures, and leaders focused on exploitation, so becoming ambidextrous usually refers to developing

exploratory capabilities. When strategizing for exploration, firms look ahead and beyond the scope of their own sector, looking for connections to other industries, developing a broad network of professional relationships, and identifying opportunities for innovation and emergent needs that do not yet have established solutions.

Ambidextrous organizations have robust structures to support exploration, such as a dedicated task force, offering all staff the option to participate part-time in new projects, or setting aside time for intensive workshops and retreats to pursue and plan for exploration opportunities. Without formalizing exploration in structures, processes, and resource allocation, organizations are unlikely to take full advantage of ambidexterity.

Because takeover is subject to its own set of legal affordances, different from all other districts and with a much higher level of flexibility and authority for the SEA, it is one such formal space in which SEAs can engage in exploratory work. Takeover also meets other conditions for organizational ambidexterity. Whatever happens during takeover will likely not remain isolated; it has the potential to influence future direction of the agency by setting the scope and bounds of the entire accountability system. States typically maintain no more than a few takeovers at any one time, but some research suggests that educators in non-takeover districts shift their practices simply because they know that takeovers are an option (Welsh, Graham, et al., 2019). Moreover, takeover must be initiated by top leaders such as the state chief and board, which means it has the high-level sponsorship needed to facilitate exploration (Maier, 2015). Staff involved in takeover typically do so part-time along with work on school improvement in other districts, making them the bridge between different facets of accountability policy and ensuring they balance their roles in exploitation and exploration. Lastly,

because it is so controversial and impacts students in dire need, takeover is highly visible. It represents the state's most significant investments – whether material, strategic, human – in direct management of instruction. This provides a sense of urgency and pressure, which are necessary preconditions for exploration (Maier, 2015).

In a recent article, Bingham and Burch (2019) urge education researchers to consider the utility of ambidexterity as a lens for studying schools. It facilitates analysis that prioritizes complexity and competing demands, rather than trying to simplify or integrate them. Focusing on school-level reform as their unit of analysis, the authors suggest that we reframe our view of modern policy implementation as “less of a problem of 'managing chaos' and more of a challenge of leveraging complexity” (p. 406). Framing takeovers in this light prompts the question: As an alternative to resolving the competing demands I have described, might SEAs use this opportunity to *leverage* the complexity that is often seen as a constraint – and gain new organizational competencies by exploring in one area while fulfilling their core mission?

## **Methods**

### **Case selection**

To investigate these questions, I study the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) takeover of three districts: Lawrence, Holyoke, and Southbridge. This paper emerged from a comparative case study seeking to understand the role, capacity, and strategic decision-making of SEAs implementing takeover. That investigation sought to identify the factors that influence state actions and decisions during takeover, including the external factors that constrain and enable those choices, to describe the antecedent conditions that influence district outcomes. I

selected Kentucky and Massachusetts as focal states due to their history as leaders of state-driven accountability policy and because they invest heavily in takeovers compared to other states. See Paper 2 for more information on case selection.

In this paper, I focus on Massachusetts for a few reasons. Prior analyses rightly caution that SEAs lack the capacity to manage a district directly, and that remains a serious concern. But states are making deliberate efforts to work with their limited funds to become more flexible, deepen their professional expertise, and build closer, more supportive relationships with districts (CCSSO, 2019). It can be reasonably argued that DESE does have the capacity to catalyze district improvement, given certain conditions. Lawrence was one of the first districts to show promising political and academic results (Schueler, 2019; Schueler et al., 2017). In addition, Paper 2 finds that DESE was able to make more rapid and drastic internal policy changes to accompany their accountability work during receivership (the term used for takeover in Massachusetts). Staff repeatedly cited a commitment to innovation, effectiveness, and responsiveness to district stakeholder preferences, and each receiver used different strategies grounded in local needs. As they developed services and supports, DESE institutionalized elements of their approach, making formal structural changes within the organization to reflect the evolving accountability work. Importantly, Massachusetts also stands out as having the most capacity for takeover through its authorizing statute, supportive policy environment, and dedicated state funding. Because Massachusetts made a commitment to innovation, had more resources to bring to that effort, and made more visible and formalized organizational changes during receivership, I selected them as likely to yield

insights from a detailed examination of how their activities in this subset of priority districts were implicated in broader accountability policy and organizational learning.

Indeed, Massachusetts has a long history on the leading edge of systemic state-driven policy, having expanded and grown its approach near-continuously since gaining national attention in 1993 with the passage of the *Massachusetts Education Reform Act* (MERA). This groundbreaking law, one of the first of its kind, greatly expanded the state's role in various domains of schooling (Churchill et al., 2003). It ramped up state activities related to governance, teacher quality, school choice and charters, and early childhood education. MERA doubled funds for K-12 schools and introduced a foundation budget, which set a baseline for the funding necessary to provide adequate education and weighted state funding allocations more heavily for low-income communities whose local contribution could not reach that baseline. The law mandated curriculum frameworks, standards, and corresponding assessments, which led to DESE developing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System of standardized tests. Finally, MERA required DESE to build a system of district and school accountability for student performance and develop supports for those performing poorly.

MERA predated the federal government's first push to create statewide accountability systems in 2001, and state leaders felt that the strictures of NCLB, rather than inducing DESE to hold schools and districts accountable, impeded their more sophisticated process. Under NCLB's inflexible Adequate Yearly Progress measure, nearly 90% of districts were labeled failing, including many that were improving. Meanwhile, in January 2010, Massachusetts had passed another landmark state accountability law, *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, which created the conditions



for several new reform strategies. Included in the law was a detailed set of authorities and responsibilities for the state to take over schools and districts deemed chronically underperforming. State leaders first exercised their takeover authority in November 2011, when the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) voted to approve Commissioner Chester's recommendation that the Lawrence Public Schools district enter receivership. In 2013, they approved receivership for four low-performing schools, including one in Holyoke. Holyoke Public Schools was the next district to enter receivership in 2015, followed by Southbridge Public Schools in 2016.

During this time, Massachusetts continued to take part in initiatives that prioritized standards and accountability alongside innovation and flexibility. In 2011 it was one of twelve states to receive a Race to the Top competitive grant, which provided \$250M to fuel aggressive reforms in teacher evaluation and professional development, college and career readiness, Common Core standards, and school turnaround, with an emphasis on building statewide systems.<sup>11</sup> That same year Massachusetts was one of the first eleven states to apply for and receive an ESEA flexibility waiver that allowed it to replace the federal AYP definition with its own five-level accountability system, which then-Commissioner of Education Mitchell Chester called "much more nuanced in identifying levels of concern, progress, and attainment."<sup>12</sup> At board meetings, state leaders discussed a "more customized use of federal funds," including growth measures alongside proficiency to assess performance more accurately, and how they might infuse

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11 <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2011/2010-09/item2.html>

12 Board meeting, October 2011

the accountability system with more power and flexibility. Lastly, Massachusetts became one of the leading states in the PARCC assessment consortium, a national attempt to design, pilot, and implement standardized tests aligned to the Common Core.

Massachusetts continued to receive flexibility waiver extensions from ED until the passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). The state's 2017 ESSA proposal included a redesigned assessment and accountability system aligned to their recently revised academic standards.<sup>13</sup> In addition to a focus on elementary literacy, middle grade math, and multiple pathways to college and career, the plan emphasized social and emotional learning, well-rounded curricular offerings, and making a wider array of school and district data accessible to families. Under the new system, schools and districts would continue to be evaluated based on performance, growth, graduation rates, and narrowing achievement gaps, but the state added three indicators to broaden the definition of success: student engagement as measured by absenteeism, ninth grade course completion, and advanced course completion. Lastly, in November 2019, the legislature and governor passed the *Student Opportunity Act*, which provided an additional \$1.5 billion in public school funding and reconfigured the state's foundation budget formula to direct proportionally more funds to districts with more low-income and English Language Learner students (Dwyer, 2019).<sup>14</sup>

Mehta (2013) has shown that policy advancements in leader states can produce a paradigm shift that changes the direction of federal policy. Massachusetts has

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13 <https://www.doe.mass.edu/federalgrants/essa/stateplan/>

14 <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2019/Chapter132>

anticipated accountability trends and piloted strategies before they became the direction of national policy on multiple occasions, and it has an unusually high level of capacity and authorization to innovate during receivership. It is therefore likely that their discoveries will continue to be of broad interest and influential for the field.

### **Data and analytic method**

For the aforementioned comparative case study, I compiled comprehensive descriptions of state strategies and actions in each receivership district based on in-depth interviews with state staff involved in takeover and a wide range of supplemental documentation (see Paper 2). In Massachusetts, I interviewed the state commissioner, one senior associate commissioner, two division directors, two school district receivers, and one school improvement specialist employed by the state and collected a broad array of documentation. Using literature on policy implementation to guide my review of interviews and supporting documents, I kept track of every state decision and action mentioned in an interview, listed in a strategic plan, presented at a board meeting, reported by the media, published on the district or state website, or any other form of documentation. When possible, I verified these actions or decisions in future interviews, repeatedly probing for a description of the strategy or decision, the funding source that enabled it, the parties involved, and the extent to which this represented a divergence from prior practice. I sought to uncover every interaction between the state and district: funds exchanged, informal mentoring, meeting type and frequency, professional development, networking with external partners, any person from DESE who had any reason to communicate or otherwise interact with the initiative, so that I could establish a comprehensive picture of what it took for DESE as an agency to manage receivership.

It was during the interviews that I became aware of the extent to which activities in takeover might have ramifications for the SEA outside of the three receivership districts. I not only asked respondents to describe their activities and decisions, but also probed them to discuss how they developed these strategies and the factors influencing their decision-making, as well as how tasks related to receivership fit into their overall work for the agency. In doing so, they frequently reflected on whether and how these activities diverged from prior practices. For example, take this statement by one DESE staff member:

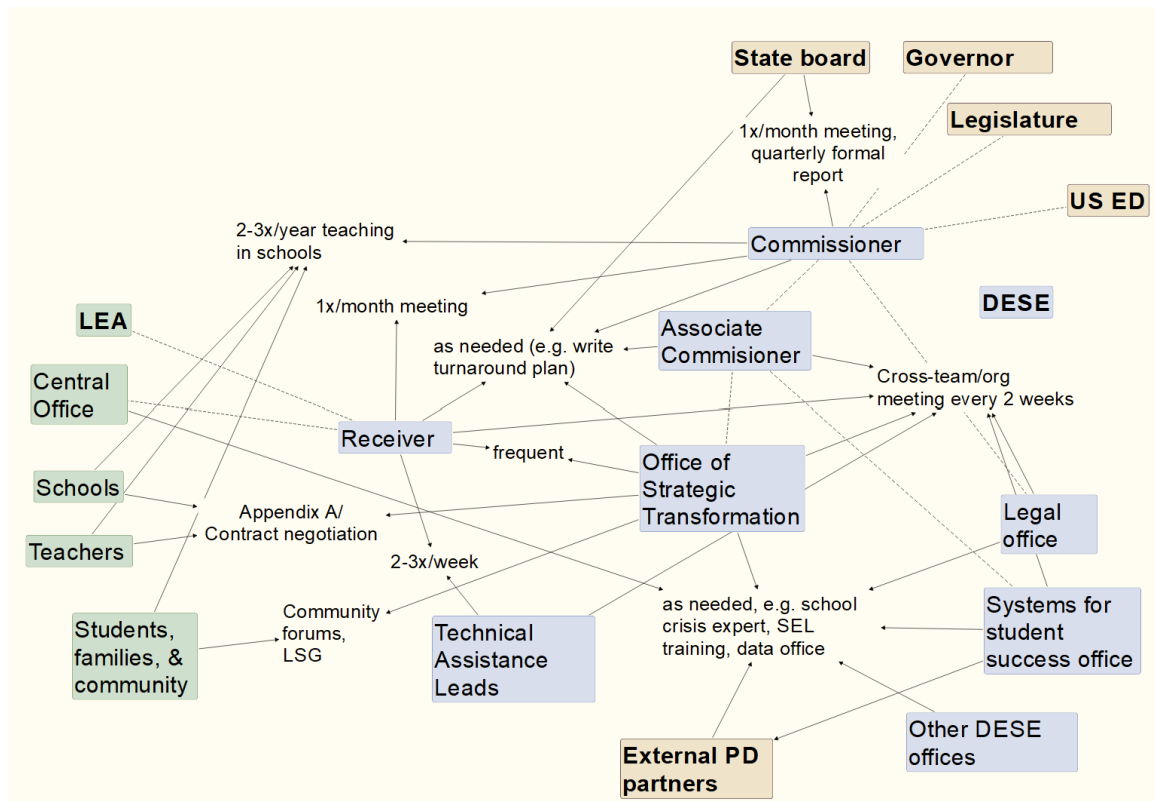
“I wasn't here when they did it, but they created it first in Lawrence. The philosophy behind the system, and basically the template of what we use for length of the calendar year, length of the school day, and then compensation, and we've used that as a template in all the other districts. So you'll see that repeated.”

In another example, one interviewee explained, “When Lawrence went into receivership, I was in a very different role. I don't know that there was really the equivalent of my role at that time. And there wasn't an Office of Strategic Transformation at that time.” Both comments alerted me to changes that had been initiated for receivership but suggested that they had permeated DESE's practice to a greater extent.

As I tracked the allocated resources and communications between departments, I made maps representing communication channels; funding and material resources; and political/community dynamics. Figure 5 is an example of one such map, representing communications in Massachusetts between various SEA offices, the district, and external parties. Examining these maps, I saw clear patterns of interactions, capacity reallocations, and chains of authorization emerge that would not have existed without

the unique affordances of takeover. Notably, I began to see how the core receivership team – roughly four individuals – was interacting with the broader SEA, and even beyond the boundaries of the SEA, to support the district.

Figure 5. Sample implementation system analytic map: Massachusetts communication channels



To investigate the extent to which these maps represented organizational learning for DESE as a whole – not just those individuals involved in receivership – I coded supplemental documents for evidence that practices developed for receivership had shifted anything beyond the boundaries of that specific district. The list compiled for the case study in Paper 2 served as my codebook for this analysis. That is, I took the list of unique strategies developed for/during receivership and applied it to state

documents not specific to takeover but addressing accountability policy or DESE's strategic planning or structures more broadly. These included state board meeting minutes, progress reports, presentation decks, letters to districts and parents, and other documents DESE used to communicate about policy or strategy changes. In these, SEA leaders detail the changes that they are making to stakeholders whose work will be impacted by this information. For instance, all new amendments return to the state board repeatedly, as DESE staff typically present an issue for board discussion, draft and present regulations, take public comments, review and discuss the amended text, then return for a final discussion and vote. During each meeting the board asks detailed questions about the new guidelines and the strategy behind them.

I coded not just documents containing discussion of receivership, but the full content, looking for mentions of strategies, feedback, or observations from receivership being extrapolated or applied in other settings. For example, by reviewing all resources on DESE's website, I was able to determine the extent to which strategies developed for receivership districts were publicly accessible to other districts. Another example: the finding that Commissioner Riley had incorporated strategies from his time in Lawrence into his overall goals and priorities for an upcoming academic year came from the board minutes on the commissioner evaluation process. Across multiple iterations of the organizational chart over time, I could track DESE's internal restructuring and contextualize it with staff explanations to the Board of the reasons driving the changes - which often concerned capacity reallocations and revisions to accountability policy. Or, by looking at DESE's general budget, list of grant allocations, and partner procurement notices, I could confirm my interviewees' perceptions that the agency was directing

general capacity based at least in part on the needs of receivership districts. Because I examined activities over time and throughout the agency, I was able to trace policies that first surfaced in receivership districts when they reappeared elsewhere as a measure of how the organization incorporated its learning. See paper 2 for more description of my coding procedure for constructing the timeline.

### **Findings**

In this paper, I analyze organizational learning at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), which has been at the forefront of state-led education policy reform since passing systemic reform laws in the early 1990s. Since that time, state leaders both in the SEA as well as in the legislative and executive branches have prioritized education reform and building an accountability system has been a consistent focus. Its current approach to takeover bears this out. The law that authorizes receivership in Massachusetts is the country's most detailed, flexible, and well-resourced across all states where this strategy is legal (Fried, forthcoming). During takeover, SEAs in Massachusetts uses the relatively broad authority inherent to the policy to adjust their own tasks and infrastructure, pilot and refine strategies, and subsequently incorporate them into other aspects of the state accountability landscape.

Overall, DESE's approach to supporting receivership districts is characterized by flexibility and innovation as well as facilitating priority access to existing services and resources both in and outside the department. When asked to rank the values that guide their professional decision-making, innovativeness was one of the top four selected by Massachusetts interviewees along with effectiveness, social justice, and responsiveness to stakeholder preferences. As one said:

“Effectiveness is, we’ve just got to have results. Too often, for too long, kids have not experienced success. And that affects their lives. Like, we’re closing the door on kids’ lives if we can’t help them achieve the desired results while they’re in school... And then innovativeness - one of the beautiful things about receivership is that we’re not hemmed in by conventional thinking about public education, we can do things differently. And it’s not for the sake of innovation, it’s for the sake of effectiveness. So this comes full circle to say let’s rethink how we’re doing this, and be bold.”

As a result of the work in receivership districts, DESE changed in several ways. They built new internal structures supporting flexible collaboration across the agency and created an agency-wide norm of prioritizing receivership districts. They revised the district audit/monitoring process to improve its utility for districts’ own improvement efforts, and developed new resources and materials whose use later extended beyond receivership districts. They adopted a philosophy of regulatory entrepreneurship, or looking across the agency’s entire body of regulations to help streamline functions and push through more efficient strategies. Lastly, receivership districts offered state staff an unprecedented level of regular “on the ground” contact with students and schools, which amplified state staff feelings of personal responsibility for district success, provided the agency with insight into issues that affected the whole region, and ultimately influenced agency priorities and philosophy of leadership.

**‘Regulatory Entrepreneurship’ as internal source of leverage for internal restructuring and innovative strategies**

Staff explained that a chief asset in receivership was the flexibility and authority provided by the enabling statute to make rapid, sweeping change in all areas of district operations, with the leadership of a commissioner dedicated to this strategy. They used this statutory authority and the urgency of the needs to justify experimental strategies within districts, but also when interacting with colleagues throughout DESE. These staff



reflect a unique perspective on being an agency that specializes in regulation. Rather than working in the traditional way, with each funding source tied to its own staff and infrastructure, staff involved in takeover think about the agency as a whole and its role in monitoring and regulation across all aspects of schooling. They minimize duplicative and bureaucratic burdens for receivership districts by negotiating with other departments to alter reporting or other requirements, something a receiver described as “running interference for us.” The Office of District Support also streamlines agency interaction with receivership districts by serving as a funnel for communication. The director regularly meets with staff in other departments and requests that they copy her team on all emails so she knows the sum of all requests going to the districts from any part of the agency. She explained:

“There are a million other offices that interact with our districts every single day, so we try to break down silos and collaborate internally. Because our statute around receivership trumps a lot of the statutes that govern school districts, we look to the receivership statute first and then we see what flexibility we have... We enforce all the other regulations, so we try to think creatively and be regulatory entrepreneurs. Knowing that the receivership districts and schools are a top priority for the department, how can we be flexible with things other offices are trying to do without compromising their process? It’s a lot of relationship-building.”

This philosophy towards receivership led to structural changes at DESE that enhance its flexibility and service orientation. Receivers have regular calls with the Commissioner and Senior Associate Commissioner, and the targeted assistance managers who work on the ground report regularly to the Office of District Support. Further, a cross-departmental team of key personnel from different departments meets twice a week to solve problems raised by receivers. This might involve developing alternatives to reporting requirements as described above, identifying a need for support

from another DESE unit with expertise in special education, data analysis, or finance, or seeking a new external partner. As one interviewee put it, "If we get a question, it's our job to find the answer to it wherever it is in the department."

It took DESE time to devise and solidify this model for working with receivership districts. When they first took over Lawrence in 2012, the internal structure of the SEA looked quite different from the model described above, and many of the strategies had not been previously tested. There were no documented examples of definitively successful state takeover, and the body of knowledge about whole district turnaround was small. As one receiver told me when I asked about whether he had access to the professional resources he needed, "I'm not sure there was enough expertise about receivership. I think that is shifting; there is a very talented group of support. But I don't think any of us had the level of expertise needed. We were all learning on the job together." Staff within DESE echoed this sentiment along with an attitude of continued learning about challenges that persist in receivership districts. One remarked, "My understanding of, for example, talent development strategies, or of the levers that will change the culture of expectations within a building, would help me guide the work better. My own learning and development needs to continue to grow."

Because of this uncertainty, and with the urgency, statutory, and political support required for exploratory work, staff were emboldened to try new things. One staff member explained, "That's our main philosophy around receivership. It's an opportunity to do school differently, and our laws provide us with the authority to think outside of the box from traditional practices and regulations and systems. It takes a whole team to generate ideas around what we could do in different situations that come

up.” With this mindset, DESE staff supported receiver decisions that deviated sharply from past practices, such as the shift to a quasi-portfolio management model in Lawrence or the complete high school redesign to create theme-based college and career academies and alternative pathways to graduation in Holyoke.

### **New agency resources and tools**

Over time, as staff tested strategies and attended to the results, they created tools and resources for use not just in other receiverships, but also in the larger group of turnaround schools and districts. One staff member reflected,

[Our model is] now way more defined than it was when Lawrence was put into receivership. And in the same way that a school or district in receivership is under a three-year turnaround plan, schools that are in underperforming status have a three-year turnaround plan as well. It's just that the turnaround plan is guided by the local superintendent or school committee and because it's our obligation as the state agency to collect those plans, we provide assistance to individual school leaders and district superintendents on strategies, using the knowledge that we have from the years we have of working with underperforming schools... It's now a very robust process, but it's because of the years of learning that team's been able to do.”

Similarly, the educator working conditions and evaluation framework originally developed in Lawrence have become a template for use in other situations, including Holyoke and Southbridge.

In addition, DESE underwent its own restructuring as receivership work evolved. Prior to receivership, of course, there was no dedicated office for it; DESE created the Office of District Support which then behaved as an autonomous, agency-crossing unit in the ways described above. The agency also restructured internally in 2018 to create a regionalized Statewide System of Support so that districts could interact with just one office depending on their location. Alongside the three regional offices,

DESE built a Student Success Office as a cross-departmental structure out of the general budget, not tied to any funding stream, scope of work, or statutory requirement. The director of this office told me, “When Lawrence went into receivership, I was in a very different role. I don’t know that there was really the equivalent of my role at that time.” In her current role, she and her colleagues monitor professional development and technical assistance needs arising from all three regional offices and, as she put it, “try to create stuff to help people at a greater scale,” such as templates for drafting a turnaround plan, or guidance for building a local stakeholder group and community engagement plan. The Student Success office has developed targeted professional development in response to receiver requests, particularly about social and emotional learning and culturally responsive teaching. These workshops are also available to other districts. This is one example of how DESE uses their monitoring capabilities to develop new services and supports grounded in district needs.

The Student Success Office also recruits, vets, and selects high quality external partners to refer to districts, coordinating across these third parties and the three regional offices to create more coherent and sustained professional development offerings. For example, the University of Connecticut partners closely with Southbridge for their work on school climate and positive behavioral interventions, a contract that consumes most of Southbridge’s grant funding from the state. The Student Success Office coordinates this relationship and also works with the university to design trainings on these topics for other districts. Moreover, DESE built a monitoring and evaluation team which contributes to DESE’s organizational learning and conducting and disseminating robust research on their programs. In collaboration with the

American Institute for Research, DESE has published impact evaluations and guides for practitioners working on school turnaround.<sup>15</sup> Together with the Office of District Support, these offices create formal channels for capturing organizational learning.

### **Takeovers demonstrate the value of monitoring as a tool for improvement beyond compliance**

When DESE first began conducting district reviews, well before receivership, they were compliance oriented. However, state staff sought to make the process more useful for performance management. In 2013, state secretary of education Matt Malone praised DESE at a state board meeting for revising the process “from identifying compliance matters to providing technical assistance” (p. 2).<sup>16</sup> The law requires DESE to conduct a comprehensive district review before recommending receivership and continue with quarterly monitoring; non-receivership districts are audited every few years. Massachusetts contracts out the district reviews to a third party to minimize bias and to ensure reviewers are educators who have been in the field more recently than those at DESE. The audits fulfill an accountability function in that they are a major determinant in whether the district enters receivership. However, they also illustrate how monitoring can be a formative tool and a source of professional development.

DESE designed the audit template to reflect its comprehensive model of the six systems that make up a high-quality district and as a result, reports provide a rich analytical map of the district context. The findings form the basis of the turnaround

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<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.doe.mass.edu/turnaround/howitworks/reports.html>.

<sup>16</sup> June 2013 BESE meeting

plan, thus aligning DESE's monitoring responsibilities with the school or district's strategic planning. A DESE staff member explained how they leverage the statutory requirement for regular monitoring to serve as a resource for non-receivership schools, as well as for their own strategic planning:

"We've been able to also work with each school receiver to include additional schools in their district who are not necessarily required to get the monitoring through our statute, but we encourage it. So, we have ongoing reviews where we're doing individual school improvement and performance management based on the data... [Then we ask], what will our assistance look like across our full region based on the trends in the data from this third-party monitor?"<sup>17</sup>

The audits point to another way that takeover can shift behaviors within the SEA: receivership provides state staff with a uniquely in-depth opportunity to learn about conditions on the ground. The process of receivership creates stronger alignment between DESE and the districts, and leads staff involved in takeover to behave as an autonomous unit of district advocates within their own organization. Although all members of the turnaround team are former educators and many have also been administrators, their regular contact with receivership districts keeps that perspective strong and cultivates empathy along with a more nuanced understanding of the district.

Staff who work with receivership point to heightened feelings of personal responsibility for the students in these districts. One said, "Because of how often we're

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17 Although not the focus of this study, Kentucky's approach to audits is similar and perhaps underscores the relationship even further. In Kentucky, SEA staff conduct the audits personally, which represents a significant investment. For example, the 2018 audit of Menifee County Public Schools – a district with just over a thousand students – was performed by a team of twenty-three KDE employees, including senior staff, who conducted 158 interviews along with extensive document reviews. As in Massachusetts, the results of this audit give KDE staff helpful insight into the context and offers a rich base for the turnaround plan once the district enters management.

in the schools and districts, they're not just anonymous faces. We see students on a regular basis. I think lot of people in this agency don't get to see kids on a regular basis, but because of that proximity, we feel ownership. We feel really responsible." Another commented, "I don't know that the rest of agency feels the same way. I think there are individuals that do. But my perception is that sometimes people really don't kind of grasp that these are our districts. We are on the line for what's happening in those districts. For people that aren't within the statewide system of support, I think that concept often feels a lot more distant." This feeling of personal responsibility motivates staff to provide exceptional responsiveness.

In addition, the close connection formed with receivership districts gives DESE staff a window into initiatives and approaches that could be useful in other parts of their work statewide. Therefore, receivership districts sometimes serve as a strategic bellwether for DESE, influencing how they allocate time and resources to planning various services and how they understand the needs and direction of the state. For example, both Holyoke and Southbridge have struggled to find teachers, especially teachers of color, and DESE staff have accordingly worked on strategies to recruit, hire, and retain educators and administrators in these districts. Some of these activities benefit the receivership districts alone, such as conducting a targeted hiring process on the receiver's behalf to fill a specific central office role. However, the problem is sufficiently concerning that DESE staff are also prioritizing the statewide educator pipeline. They partner with an organization called Teach Western Mass, supplying funds to assist with their goal of expanding and diversifying the teacher force. DESE's work with receivership districts also made them aware of gaps in internal expertise

about special education, resource allocation, and English Language Learners, so the department put out procurement notices for external partners to shore up their capacity in these areas. Although they became priorities primarily to benefit receivership districts, these strategic efforts will likely affect other districts facing similar challenges.

### **Agency goals and vision informed by experiences in receivership districts**

Mitchell Chester, who was appointed commissioner of elementary and secondary education in 2008, was a driving force behind much of DESE's centralizing agenda. It was he who recommended all three districts and four schools for receivership. Before taking over any schools or districts, DESE staff already knew that receivership would involve uncertainty and risk and require them to develop new strategies and capacity. At a state board meeting in November 2011, Commissioner Chester described receivership as "a stretch" and "a risk," but said that "we have extraordinary tools from the Achievement Gap Act, and the challenge and urgency of the matter justifies our taking on this risk" (p. 4). Throughout the implementation of receivership, the board and SEA focused on their own learning. In January 2016, for example, Board Chair Paul Sagan commented at a meeting "that he hopes the Department is developing the organization and capacity to capture what we are learning from our work with these Level 5 schools." Indeed, DESE soon had the opportunity to formally demonstrate lessons from receivership as they began designing their ESSA state plan later that year, which included a revamped accountability system and restructuring the corresponding DESE departments as described above.

Commissioner Chester led the department until his unexpected death in 2017. As his successor, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) selected Jeffrey



Riley. A Massachusetts native, Riley had served as the state receiver of the Lawrence Public Schools since the state took it over in 2012. He was a former teacher and turnaround principal who had earned accolades as an innovative, thoughtful receiver who minimized political conflict, engaged and united the community, and led the district to make great strides towards an enriching, rigorous experience for all students (Larkin, 2018). As Commissioner, Riley draws on his experiences as receiver in Lawrence; his appointment and subsequent leadership agenda symbolize the extent to which the work in high-profile receivership districts continue to inform the state's overall education policy direction.

“The fact is that we are now in charge of some of these schools and districts. We can't just operate like they need to comply too. We have to put our money where our mouth is and be more supportive to make sure that our receivership districts are able to succeed at high levels. That may sound like wordplay, but that's actually a fairly significant change in how we do business... it's really a mindset shift up here.”

In keeping with this philosophy, Commissioner Riley made one of his six goals for 2019 to assess “DESE effectiveness as a partner to schools,” writing to the board, “I will conduct an operational audit of the agency to assess strengths and weaknesses and propose a plan for improvement with an emphasis on providing flexibilities and support to schools and districts” (memo, 09/20/2019). Under his direction, DESE has continued the trend of streamlining the SEA's infrastructure, formalizing hybrid relationships between DESE and receivership districts, increasing regionalization strategies, and differentiating levels of autonomy and resource allocations based on the urgency of local needs. The most recent iteration of DESE's organizational chart includes all three receivership districts plus the Springfield Empowerment Zone, a visible symbol

of the extent to which this work has permeated the agency. Massachusetts' approach leads to more interaction between the state and the district and innovative hybrid forms of governance that sees the state as more of a portfolio manager, piloting a variety of educational options across districts. For example, the new Kaleidoscope Collective for Learning follows this exploratory pilot model, with a working group of schools and districts designing and piloting performance tasks aligned to the curriculum standards, creating a database and online platform to track deeper learning, and developing rigorous performance assessments.

Lastly, the experiences in receivership districts have strengthened relationships between state and local staff and a nuanced, empathetic perspective among SEA staff about the complex and adaptive work of whole-system reform. As one staffer told me: "We try to come at it with humility... Even though we have plenty of people on staff who have worked in schools and districts before, really understanding this level of need and this political context, it's given us an even greater appreciation for people doing this type of work every day."

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Prior research into state takeovers has quite rightly focused on the targeted outcomes of reforms – effects of the SEA's strategies on the district's operations, performance, or culture. After all, the reason we initiate reforms is to improve school systems. However, one side effect of expanding the SEA's powers is that the agency's work itself changes and grows to support these new activities. This analysis is the first to consider the effects of this drastic policy on the *implementing* organization – the SEA – rather than the site of targeted outcomes. It is also the first to demonstrate how the

competing demands of modern public administration can be leveraged, by proposing that SEAs embrace their potential to act ambidextrously. DESE's case demonstrates how, with sufficient capacity and political support, a government agency can leverage its unique status within the sector and reframe its relationship to districts and to improve its own practice of governance.

Organizational ambidexterity has gained recent prominence in the business literature for understanding how organizations meet competing demands, but is not often applied in the public sector. Bingham and Burch (2019) point out that the theory may be equally useful in studying school reform efforts because it facilitates analysis that prioritizes complexity and competing demands, rather than trying to simplify or integrate them. Indeed, I suggest that Massachusetts DESE does act ambidextrously in its implementation of school district takeover, and that doing so has produced a unique approach to leaning into the complexity of their competing demands. They exhibited innovative capability and demonstrated flexibility as they worked to address some of their most complex and urgent school reform challenges. Although they could never maintain such flexibility for all districts due to limited capacity, a lack of authorization, and the need to maintain some elements of their original bureaucratic purposes, viewing takeover activities as exploratory has allowed DESE to engage in organizational learning. By considering themselves "regulatory entrepreneurs" and keeping an eye on the full set of laws they enforce, DESE has developed the ability to creatively differentiate their practices for districts with different levels of need. By pushing to take advantage of the uniquely exploratory affordances of takeover and building internal

evaluation into their own policy planning, they have been able to make changes to their overall practice and act ambidextrously.

Exploration, of course, is not the only way that organizations can learn. Kentucky is deeply invested in continuous improvement through the mechanisms of intensive SEA staff professional development and iterating on a proven model of school improvement (see Paper 2). In doing so they have developed significant in-house expertise that they can deploy flexibly, using only federal school improvement funds to weather instability in their state political climate. During takeover, they embed former practitioners as turnaround experts in each school building. This cadre of experts not only boosts local capacity as a form of technical assistance, but they serve a monitoring function as well, meeting regularly with KDE staff and with their colleagues in other schools to share progress updates and learn from each other. These staff are then redeployed to other schools as needed. It is a resource-intensive but powerful intervention for relatively rapid turnaround.

That said, DESE's exploratory approach likely accelerates the pace of innovation and ability to devise, evaluate, and incorporate novel strategies. One example is the way DESE approaches the tension between monitoring for regulatory compliance on one hand and striving to provide more flexible and adaptive, performance management support on the other. Monitoring has historically been associated with bulky, compliance-based bureaucracy, and indeed, ensuring compliance is an important part of state government's role. However, the science of evaluation suggests that monitoring also serves an important role in improvement. DESE does not resolve this tension, but reframes the state's role as monitoring for compliance and monitoring as a tool for

improvement, showing how it can serve a dual purpose as a tool as well as a source of accountability. First, monitoring imposed on districts can be more useful to those districts, integrated with strategic planning and support and providing data and analysis that can help districts refine their practices to better meet their own goals. Second, state agencies can think strategically about their own organizational learning competencies, look for opportunities to explore new work while continuing to exploit past practice, and tailor their own guidance and services based on the results they see with those districts. State agencies responsible for similar monitoring in other fields might be able to do the same.

A major caveat is that exploratory work is not possible without statutory authority. DESE relied heavily on their statutory authority under takeover to catalyze many of these changes. However, no other state law comes close to Massachusetts' in the level of detail, flexibility, authority, and capacity provided to the state under takeover (Fried, forthcoming). Lawmakers should know that if they want states to take over districts, this work has the potential to affect the entire agency in ways not anticipated by the original policy. They must also know that for SEAs to shift from compliance to assistance, they need conditions that allow them more latitude to experiment with *how* this can be accomplished. Though not an intent of the original policy, takeover is one such opportunity for SEAs, and DESE's experience demonstrates that it is possible to innovate within a clearly delineated exploratory space where conditions differ from the norm and learn from the results. This suggests that policymakers and SEAs might embrace ambidexterity in deliberately creating such spaces for SEAs to innovate – much like how states have provided certain high-

performing districts with more latitude for innovation. Doing so would mean the SEA does not need a wholesale change in its mission, purpose, or structure that would compromise its public administration role. Rather, they need to be able to build in exploratory opportunities when unique conditions support a change in the nature of the working relationship between the district and state.

For example, the constellation of state agencies in themselves is a somewhat siloed and bureaucratic structure at the state level. Might we not also start to think about state agencies as interdependent so that they could find common points of interest and align their resources? Takeover demonstrates the interconnectedness of municipal and state systems. For in takeover cities, as in most cities no doubt, the school system and its goals for children and families overlap with the goals of the health and housing departments, town officials, local employers, and so on. Most promising solutions involve these stakeholders and their leaders are working with one state agency or another. State agencies are working within a network of intermediaries and external third parties as well. How might coordination activities continue to extend in these directions? How might we continue to reformulate state and federal policy to incentivize this collaboration and encourage and empower state agencies to thoughtfully combine resources toward mutual goals?

Coordinating across these agencies presents new challenges, but there are foundations to build on. Each year, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education holds meetings with the boards of higher education and with early education to coordinate care. Across the country there have been many examples of cities and states trying to make more comprehensive regionalized efforts to improve

whole systems – too numerous to review comprehensively here. Many states are working towards becoming more flexible and service-oriented with cross-agency collaboration (CCSSO, 2019; Murphy, 2014). By taking advantage of opportunities that, like receivership, offer unique conditions for exploration, state agencies may be able to grow their knowledge and capacity in new directions as they help their constituent districts to do the same.

State policymakers also must take away that this kind of work is not possible without investing in it. Many of DESE's internal changes were the result of leaders' decisions to restructure and reallocate within the existing general budget, but these changes would not have been possible without the political support of authorizers and allocated capacity from state leaders. Much of the learning DESE accomplished was because they were authorized to dramatically shift the nature of their own work and spend considerable time embedded directly in districts, doing relational work, and becoming responsible for advocating for local agencies as they would for their own. Only through this work did they develop the nuanced relationships and empathy for district experiences that allowed them to plan broader state strategies. Intensive relational work is required to provide genuine assistance in these districts, and it is inherently costly. It will never be the primary way that SEAs relate to districts, but creating mechanisms for this type of interaction could strengthen the relationship between the agency and the field and stimulate novel ideas for adaptations to improve their service to all districts.

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## Appendix A

### Interview protocol for all papers

1. Review IRB consent form with respondent and answer questions
2. **Educational values**
  - a. I'd like to start by getting your perspective on school districts generally. How would you describe a high-quality school district?
  - b. When a school or district is low-performing, what are usually some of the main issues?
3. **Takeover context**
  - a. My understanding is that the following districts are under takeover. Is that correct?
  - b. How would you describe the issues that resulted in the state taking over these [LEA]?
    - i. Same/different across?
  - c. What are the main assets that the state brings to an [LEA]?
    - i. Same/different across?
  - d. What are the major barriers to improvement in an [LEA]?
    - i. Same/different across?
  - e. Are there any services, interventions, strategies, or actions in [LEA] that you would like [SEA] to provide that it does not?
    - i. [IF YES]: What are the major barriers to these?
4. **Work with districts**
  - a. Please describe your involvement or role in an [LEA] takeover. What work do you do or have you done since the takeover?
  - b. How did you get involved with that work/come to be in that role?
    - i. Example: Part of job description, asked to help by colleague, requested by LEA/receiver
  - c. What were the central considerations in taking these actions in [LEA]?
  - d. How did you prepare for your work with [LEA]?
  - e. Who did you primarily work with, including from the SEA, LEA, and/or third parties?
  - f. Currently, what tasks do you do now in your work with [TAKEOVER LEAS]?
  - g. About how much of your time would you say you spend/spent on [TASKS]?
    - i. PROBE: Half? Quarter? Hours per week?
  - h. How do you get information about what is happening in [LEA]? In other words, how do you monitor how things are going?
  - i. Have you ever recommended a service or intervention to for [LEA] that was not implemented, or was not implemented to your satisfaction?
    - i. [IF YES] What were the reasons for that?
5. **Structured questions: SEA context**

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about the things that influence your work with districts. I'd like you to please think specifically about [TAKEOVER LEA] as you answer. I'll make a statement and ask you to indicate whether it is true almost always, often, about half the time, rarely, or almost never.

  - a. [SEA] has the necessary funding to successfully reform [LEA].
  - b. [SEA] has, or has access to, the necessary expertise to reform [LEA].

- c. I have access to the necessary resources for my work with [LEA].
  - i. If never/sometimes, probe: What else is needed?
- d. I have, or have access to, the necessary expertise for my work with [LEA].
  - i. If never/sometimes, probe: What else is needed?
- e. [SEA] staff feel responsible when [LEA] students do not succeed.

#### **6. Structured questions: LEA context**

The next questions have to do with [LEA] administrators, teachers, and other staff. Although not all staff are alike, please give your general impression. I'll make a statement and ask whether it's almost always, often, about half the time, rarely, or almost never true.

- a. [LEA] principals and teachers know what is best for their students.
  - i. Remind: Almost always, usually, sometimes, not usually, or almost never true.
- b. [LEA] teachers and principals place the needs of children ahead of personal, political, or other interests.
  - i. If never/sometimes: Can you describe the other interests that LEA staff prioritize?
- c. [LEA] central office staff place the needs of children ahead of personal, political, or other interests.
  - i. If never/sometimes: Can you describe the other interests that LEA staff prioritize?
- d. [LEA] teachers and principals have a "can-do" attitude.
- e. [LEA] teachers and principals are willing to take risks to make schools better.
- f. [LEA] teachers and principals are eager to try new ideas.
- g. [SEA] and [LEA] staff work closely to meet students' needs.
- h. I trust [LEA] staff to do their jobs well.
- i. I feel trusted by [LEA] staff to do my job well.

#### **7. Decision-making**

Here is a list of things that you might consider when you are working with [LEA] (see below). Please rank the top five that *you* personally prioritize when making a decision about how to do your work with [LEA].

#### **8. Closing**

- a. We're almost at the end of our time. Would you like to share anything else about your work on the takeover, or the takeover in general?

Thank you for your time and effort! Once the interview is transcribed I will send you a copy to verify its accuracy.

### List of Values (included with Interview Protocol, papers 1-3)

Interview participants will be provided with a paper copy of these values for each ranking question. Items have been taken from Andersen et al. (2013), Jørgensen & Bozeman (2007), and van der Wal (2008). Some wording was modified to fit the education context, such as specifying stakeholders.

Consideration	Rank (1-5)
Accountability to district: Acting to justify/explain actions to district stakeholders	
Accountability to others: Acting to justify/explain actions to those outside the district	
Balancing interests: Acting in line with political loyalty, interpreting the political climate, networking	
Collegiality: Acting loyally and showing solidarity towards colleagues	
Effectiveness: Acting to achieve the desired results	
Efficiency: Acting to achieve results with minimal means <sup>[17]</sup> <sub>SEP</sub>	
Expertise: Acting with competence, skill and knowledge; demonstrating best practices	
Honesty: Acting truthfully and complying with promises	
Impartiality: Acting without prejudice or bias toward specific group interests	
Innovativeness: Acting with initiative and creativity (to invent or introduce new policies or initiatives)	
Lawfulness: Acting in accordance with existing laws and rules	
Obedience: Acting in compliance with the instructions and policies (of superiors and the state education agency as an organization)	
Reliability: Acting in a trustworthy and consistent way toward relevant stakeholders	
Responsiveness: Acting in accordance with the preferences of citizens and district stakeholders	
Serviceability: Acting helpfully and offering quality service towards citizens and district stakeholders	
Social justice: Acting out of commitment to a just society	
Transparency: Acting openly and visibly, communicating decisions to district, schools, and community	
User focus: Satisfying district and school staff needs, user democracy, good relations to district as motive	

## Appendix B

### Full list of consulted publications for Papers 1 and 2

- Mountain Top Media
- Lexington Herald-Leader
- Breathitt County Advocate
- Menifee News Outlook
- Jackson Times Voice
- WEKU-FM Lexington/Richmond/Frankfort
- Commonwealth Magazine
- Boston Magazine
- WGBH
- Valley Advocate
- Boston Globe
- Berkshire Eagle
- Edweek
- Inthesetimes.com
- Businesswest.com
- *El Mundo Boston*
- WBUR
- Wwlp.com
- Masslive.com
- WNPR News
- WesternMassNews.com
- WAMC public radio
- Wakefield Observer