

State Playbook

The State Leader's Guide to Improving
Instruction through Shoulder-to-Shoulder
Work with Districts

What now?

Educators across the country have done herculean work over the last several years with a spirit of flexibility, compassion, and dedication.

Even so, study after study shows that student learning lags behind pre-pandemic gains, especially for historically marginalized populations. Our students deserve to acquire the knowledge and skills to pursue opportunities for successful futures. To access the grade-level instruction they need, many need accelerated learning opportunities alongside additional support for any unfinished learning.

SEAs have played a significant role in supporting teachers and leaders through this unimaginable time, providing professional learning opportunities through communities of practice, webinars, and institutes. As a result, many educators have adopted a mindset of equitable instruction, acceleration, and just-in-time support. However, when educators return to their buildings and classrooms, they are often left on their own to figure out the difficult details of bringing their learnings to life for their students.

SEA leaders are working to help educators navigate these details, but the questions are:

- 1. What does it look like to effectively support ongoing and content-specific teacher professional learning in the context of an actual school or system?**
- 2. How can SEAs, regional service providers, and district leaders work shoulder to shoulder with schools to support grade-level learning and continuous improvement?**

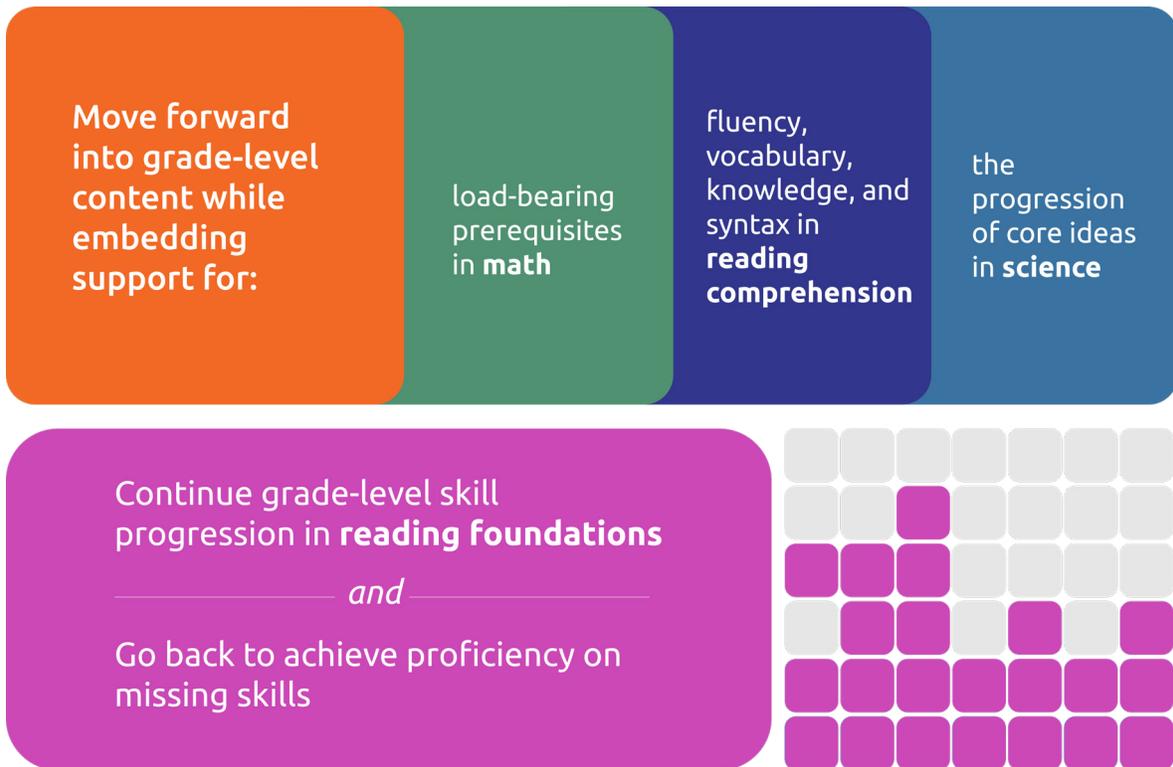
This playbook is designed to help answer these “what now” questions.

What do educators need from SEA leaders right now?

Guidance on grade-level learning

Tier 1 instruction—the whole-class instruction students receive—is the primary lever for accelerating learning outcomes. The most influential decisions in teaching and learning live in the thousands of real-time decisions teachers make every day. Teachers need extra planning support to make Tier 1 instruction as strong as possible in the core academic subjects, and this support must be contextualized within their subject, grade level, and even curriculum. Content specialists and their teams are working hard to provide professional learning, tools, and resources for educators to best teach grade-level state standards.

For resources related to accelerating learning outcomes through Tier 1 instruction, review our [Addressing Unfinished Learning toolkit](#).



Content-specific supports

Effectively improving instruction requires a nuanced understanding of academic standards and priority content, as well as how children learn that particular content. Educators must understand the prerequisite skills and knowledge students need to be able to access grade-level content in their high-quality instructional materials as well as what skills and knowledge can be taught through, or alongside, grade-level content. Shoulder-to-shoulder learning for teachers and leaders should be led by a content expert.

Effective professional learning opportunities

Professional learning options now need to move beyond one-size-fits-all, centrally delivered workshops or webinars. Leaders need to create plans that incorporate most or all of the features of effective professional development:

- Content and high-quality instructional materials-focused, active learning
- Collaborative models of effective practice
- Coaching and expert support
- Feedback and reflection
- Sustained duration

We have found shoulder-to-shoulder work with educators to be the most effective professional learning model for schools looking to support great teaching and accelerate student learning. Whether you're helping implement a new curriculum, building coaches' content knowledge, working directly with teachers to improve learning, or adding leadership capacity, professional learning should be customized and local. ¹ In addition to hosting professional learning, releasing guidance with resources, or creating online modules, here are some suggested activities that states can consider:

1. Sponsor on-site, shoulder-to-shoulder professional learning with LEAs to build leadership systems and teacher capacity to support content specific improvement.
2. Host LEA sharing sessions to inform SEA policies, practices, and future needs.
3. Partner with regional centers to co-create and scale a content-specific model for continuous improvement

¹ Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

How can state leaders be most effective?

To effectively support educators across an entire state—where there are vastly different needs between regions, LEAs, schools, and even classrooms—state leaders need to be ready to adapt quickly to support regional centers and educators in addressing their situational needs. In turn, state leaders need resources to support their ability to meet these diverse and ever-changing needs: they need a model with effective tools and strategies that they can use and share in order to assess the situation on the ground, meet educators in the moment, and codesign improvement plans with local leaders.

SEA specialists, regional center consultants, and LEA leaders can be trained to implement a replicable continuous improvement model. Training leaders at the SEA or regional centers to implement such a model will reinforce the foundation necessary for educators of all levels to scale and sustain this work.

This section introduces strategies and resources we have found to be effective in our own work with LEAs and their schools.

Start on the right foot

The first step in a meaningful partnership with an LEA is an effective “launch” process. The focus of the launch is student learning, particularly from Tier I instruction. The launch is a conversation (or series of conversations) where you get to know important local context, start the process of designing a collective vision for your work with the LEA, and begin building the relationships that will form the foundation for successful changes. Topics to consider covering in a **launch meeting** include:

- School goals (implementation of a new curriculum, support for content instruction, increased student engagement, etc.)
- Curriculum and usage expectations (who should be using the curriculum and when, modifications allowed, adaptations for students, etc.)
- Teams and people (administrators over their subject area, instructional coaches, lead teachers, etc.)
- Teacher support systems (PLCs, coaching and observation systems, and professional learning structures)

Understand instructional needs

Use the right tools

Anchoring discussions about instructional improvements in common language is vital to ensuring key stakeholders are on the same page. We have found that using a shared, high-quality tool to direct these conversations is not only an effective way to ground discussion but also to measure growth over time. Instruction Partners developed non-evaluative classroom observation tools based on Student Achievement Partners' math and ELA Instructional Practice Guides (IPGs). The tools describe standards-aligned content, teacher actions, and student engagement indicative of excellent teaching and learning:

- [Early literacy](#)
- [ELA](#)
- [Math](#)
- [Science](#)

Additionally, before using any tool, we highly suggest calibrating use with all users. When we're calibrating IPG use, we typically gather all scorers in a room, view multiple video clips of a classroom, compare our individual scoring, and finally norm as a whole group on scoring the instruction we observed and discussing as needed. Calibration is an ongoing professional learning process to hone diagnosis, identify potentially useful resources, and plan effective actions.

Observe classrooms in action

After holding a launch meeting and norming on the tools you'll be using, it's time to assess the current state of instruction in a building and identify places for focus to plan, act, and continuously improve. There's no better way to do that than to walk through a building and observe teachers and students in action.

These short observations (each observation lasts around 15 minutes) not only provide the opportunity to use your tools to gather real-time data, but they also create the space for the observation teams to discuss what they observed immediately after observing it—that immediacy is invaluable for deepening the group's collective understanding of instructional strengths and needs. We call these discussions **hallway debriefs**—quick, 10-minute conversations that enable us to continue norming on IPG scores and discuss observations. (We also encourage longer, end-of-day debriefs to discuss trends between observed classrooms and overall opportunities for improvement—see a sample deck used to facilitate one of these longer debriefs here).

Each debrief should focus on a few topics that surfaced and that are anchored in your observation and scoring tool—for example:

- Are students being given access to grade-level tasks and content?
- Is access being offered equitably?
- Are lessons aligned to standards?

At the end of the day, after many walkthroughs and hallway debriefs, the data is analyzed to help identify school and LEA trends, priorities for improvement, and an individualized theory of action for each school's/LEA's action plan.

Talk to teachers and students

Talking to teachers and students about their experiences is critical. Classroom observations are important, but you'll never fully capture the complexity of teaching and student engagement in a single observation.

1. Teacher focus groups

A teacher focus group is a non-evaluative space where teachers can discuss their experiences with the curriculum as well as the structures and supports that may or may not exist for curriculum implementation.

Consider pulling together a teacher focus group and asking questions like:

- How do you as a school define a great math/ELA lesson?
- What feedback do you receive from your leader or coach about planning? How often?
- What do you think is the rationale for why your school is using this curriculum?

2. Student focus groups

A student focus group is a window into the student learning experience. Their voices are critical to lift to leaders and teachers in order to improve instruction and their learning.

Consider pulling together a student focus group and asking questions like²:

- If your teacher were to make sure to keep doing one thing about their teaching, what should they keep doing?
- What is one thing that your teacher does that makes you try particularly hard in class?
- What is one thing that your teacher does that makes you feel like they understand you?

This qualitative data is an integral facet of planning for short-cycle improvement.

² Questions directly quoted and adapted from: Panorama Education. User Guide: Panorama Student Survey. <https://www.panoramaed.com/panorama-student-survey>

How do we use that information?

Using the IPG data from the walkthroughs, information gained from the launch meeting, and teacher interviews, and any insights from student work analysis, system and school leaders should make a practical plan for improvement, develop teacher and leader capacity to carry out the plan, and support follow-through. All of these elements are contained in a comprehensive **action plan** (see a sample action plan for ELA [here](#)).

Envision where you want to be in a year

The action plan itself should be based on a coherent, logical annual **theory of action** that aligns with the school's stated priorities and goals and is shared with all members of the school community. We define theories of action as a hypothesis that describes how a strategy(s) will lead to a desired goal over the course of the year.

Theories of action are most helpful when they connect a defined problem with the potential solution/change and its expected outcome. We like to use an “if, then, so that” formula. It looks something like this: IF [change in the instructional practices of leaders and teachers], THEN [clear connections to expected outcome on instruction] SO THAT [resulting change to student outcomes and experiences]. For example:

*If we facilitate purposeful planning experiences in one-to-one meetings, **then** teachers will understand how the activities/tasks in the lesson connect with the learning targets of the lesson and the focusing question. Teachers will then plan questions accordingly **so that** students are drawing conclusions based on discourse in the classroom.*

Take that year six weeks at a time

The annual theory of action sets the direction for the plan, but is often too high-level to direct meaningful changes for leaders and teachers. Breaking the theory into more manageable chunks is essential to developing concrete actions steps, quickly testing out what works, and adjusting future actions accordingly. We call smaller blocks of time **short cycles of continuous improvement**. Short cycles are processes to help educators implement and study small changes that support the larger theory of action, with the aim of making lasting improvement.

When developing both annual and short-term theories of action and goals, it is important to ensure they are feasible within the relevant time constraints. Additionally, identifying a variety of indicators to assess improvement at progress-monitoring checkpoints helps capture an accurate picture of the impact of actions outlined in the short cycle and annual plans.

Build the support educators need into your plan

Once the action plan is created, hope is not a strategy. Capacity building should be embedded throughout every action plan, because building leader and teacher capacity is the best way to impact Elmore’s instructional core, where “the teacher and students are in the presence of content.”³

Additionally, the support within a single LEA should be coherent and cohesive. Teachers, leaders, and regional consultants need content-specific strategies that meet the needs identified in the launch meeting, walkthroughs, and ongoing conversations. Modeling and coaching, along with support from external specialists, will help sustain future practice.

While needs will vary depending on the LEA and school you are working with, below are some common examples of necessary supports:

Regional provider or DE consultants

- Coaching to lead LEA support (launch, walkthrough, action-planning, and educator development)
- Training on IPG

Leaders

- Building capacity for instructional support through the IPG and walkthroughs, action planning, and analysis of student work
- Facilitating and supporting the creation and communication of a vision of instruction
- Strategic coaching around curriculum selection, launch, and implementation

Teachers

- Providing content and/or curriculum specific unit lesson internalization
- Modeling lessons and pedagogical strategies

³ “The Instructional Core.” Curriculum Management Solutions, inc. September 15, 2020. <https://curriculumsolutions.net/blog/2020/09/15/the-instructional-core/>

How do we continue moving the work forward?

Learn in the field

When working and learning alongside their LEAs, state education agencies can more effectively reflect the needs of educators and students in policy and practice (tweaks to rules/requirements, new professional learning opportunities, building a common language between bureaus or divisions, etc.). Here are some examples of how we've seen this play out with partners:

- LEA examples: Instruction Partners supported a medium-sized Ohio LEA in the adoption of high-quality mathematics instructional materials. With Instruction Partners' support, during the course of the partnership, the LEA 1) collaborated on defining the LEA's instructional vision; 2) created and trained a curriculum selection team; 3) constructed communication plans; and 4) prepared the administration to support their teachers during implementation. Through a series of webinars, individualized coaching, and resources, this LEA is prepared to fully support their launch of HQIM. This example has been used by the Ohio Department of Education and their regional partners in ESCs to learn from and lift as an example of curriculum selection and implementation.
- Integrated model: To scale statewide, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) partnered with their ESUs to support their LEAs in continuous improvement in K–8 math HQIM implementation through their Math Acceleration Project. Instruction Partners is working shoulder-to-shoulder with regional ESU leads to improve instruction by 1) ensuring there is a vision for math instruction, 2) building capacity with teachers to internalize units and lessons, and 3) aligning systems of feedback and coaching. Through a gradual release model of individualized direct support for ESU leads, they will be able to support all of their LEAs in adopting and implementing high-quality instructional materials in the future. The examples in these ESUs and LEAs are informing the policies, guidance, practices, and support that NDE provides in future years.

Scale and sustain

No matter if your SEA has consultants, regional providers, LEA leaders, or all three, there are always partners who can help provide the support LEAs need. SEA often have content-focused consultants who may be able to coach collaborators at the regional and LEA level to lead LEA support for instructional improvement in their area of expertise (ELA, math, science, etc.). Many states also have regional service providers like ESCs, ESDs, ESUs, AEAs, CESAs, and BOCES who are perfectly positioned to lead this work, perhaps by adding a new service line to their LEA support.

What now?

Improving instruction in ELA, math, and science and strengthening learning opportunities for all students—especially those who have been historically marginalized—are important goals for SEAs to lift and work toward. Working shoulder to shoulder with leaders and teachers in schools and classrooms can move the needle. These coveted results of accountability systems, ESSA plans, and ESSER funding initiatives are possible to achieve, scale, and sustain.

If you're looking to build or add capacity to support LEAs in your state, Instruction Partners will work with you to design a plan to move work forward on behalf of all students. We are a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving instruction for all students. We focus on diagnosing instruction, helping all collaborators in a LEA get on the same page about a plan, practically supporting the implementation of that plan (making hard work actionable), and developing leaders in the context of their content and curriculum.