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How state guidance causes confusion and what SEAs can do to fix it

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Executive summary

State education agencies (SEAs) play a leadership role in setting, implementing, and monitoring the requirements that schools and school systems in their jurisdiction follow. This role puts SEAs in a powerful position to improve student learning. However, because SEAs are charged with advancing many different priorities—from improving reading proficiency to promoting positive school climate—it also puts them at risk of sending mixed messages. Over the last five years, we worked with many state agencies to understand state-level instructional coherence and support them in strengthening their guidance, support, and accountability measures for schools and school systems.

Through analysis of hundreds of state-issued guidance documents that outline suggested or required actions, we identified six distinct approaches to instructional improvement:

1. Tier I instruction, directed by high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) and aligned professional learning (PL)
2. Standards-based data-driven instruction
3. Skills-based intervention systems
4. Pedagogical strategies
5. Improvement processes
6. Whole child supports

Though some of these approaches can be implemented harmoniously, some, when paired together, prove discordant. At each of the five SEAs with which we worked most closely, we found up-to-date state-issued guidance and requirements advancing all six of these approaches. The effects of so many concurrent and, at times, incompatible, theories of action include educators feeling 1) unclear about how to prioritize actions that improve learning for students, 2) pulled in multiple directions, unable to dedicate focus to any set of actions, and 3) confused about what's expected of them and frustrated by that lack of clarity. Moreover, when it comes to actually improving student learning, the potential impact of any one of the approaches is diluted by pursuing all of them simultaneously.

SEAs can improve instructional coherence by clarifying a core theory of action and ensuring their guidance, support, and accountability measures are aligned. Though this work often requires significant, sustained effort, we've seen it happen.

In a shifting federal education landscape, where SEAs are poised to assume even more responsibility, working toward a coherent strategy for instructional improvement is more important than ever. State leaders looking to engage their teams in deep prioritization work may find insights in this paper that can help them consider the coherence of the instructional guidance and support they offer to schools and school systems, take steps to provide clarity for teachers and leaders, and improve learning for students.

Our coherence work with states

Instruction Partners is a nonprofit dedicated to strengthening instructional leadership. We work with schools, school systems, and states across the country. In nearly ten years, we've witnessed time and again the way that a litany of requirements can pull school and system leaders in different directions and the impact this can have on teachers and students. Leaders cite many factors that contribute to the breadth of requirements they shoulder, chief among them "the state told us this is what we need to do." Whether it's always true in policy or intention, the perception that state guidance equates to a requirement is clear and strong.

After seeing districts across states face this issue, we began working with state education agencies (SEAs) to take stock of and strengthen coherence across their instructional guidance, support, and accountability measures.

This work followed six general steps:

1. Auditing SEA-published guidance documents, identifying the theory of action advanced by each, calls to action for schools or school systems, definitions of key terms, and required teams and processes.
2. Interviewing school system leaders to understand the impact of the SEA's guidance, support, and accountability measures on educators in schools and school system offices.
3. Interviewing SEA staff to understand work norms and perceptions of coherence.
4. Sharing trends and findings from the data gathered.
5. Working alongside SEA staff to develop a shared framework for improving instruction.
6. Aligning the work of the agency—including guidance, support, and accountability measures—to that shared framework.

In each of the five states where we've done this deep work, SEA leaders knew there were coherence issues but did not realize the extent of the problem. Reviewing planning documents, needs assessments, data reports, etc., and hearing from educators across the state painted a much clearer picture of both 1) the weight educators feel from the sheer volume of state requirements and 2) the mixed messages educators receive from the different philosophical approaches embedded in those requirements.

In the spring of 2025, we synthesized the major patterns that we found across states. On the pages that follow, we've attempted to offer a succinct replication of Step 4 of the process we conducted with SEAs: Sharing trends and findings from the data gathered. We hope that by sharing what we found across SEAs, other state leaders will see their context reflected and can use this paper as an entry point to engage their teams in rigorous prioritization work.

What we found

We found that SEAs send many guidance documents and requirements to school systems—and a significant proportion of those documents advance inconsistent messages about what to do to improve instruction.

The volume of guidance and requirements adds up. In one state, we reviewed 74 guidance documents. They described:

1. 21 required school- and system-level teams (e.g., school improvement team, MTSS [multi-tiered system of support] leadership team)
2. 11 site visits per year (e.g., monitoring visits for special education, Title I, and Title III)
3. 16 needs assessments (e.g., Title I, MTSS, school improvement)
4. 19 initiatives that provide coaching and technical assistance to leaders
5. 3 sets of state coaches

Such requirements often included redundancies (e.g., submitting the same data for multiple monitoring visits). Moreover, they no doubt had a significant impact on leaders' time, scattering their attention rather than enabling them to focus deeply on the most important priorities.

We identified six distinct approaches to improving instruction. As we reviewed state-issued guidance documents from across the country, six distinct approaches to improving instruction emerged, each with its own implicit theory of action.

Instructional Improvement Approach	Theory of Action[1]	Common Calls to Action
Tier I instruction, directed by high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) and aligned professional learning (PL)	If school systems select high-quality instructional materials that are aligned to standards and provide effective professional learning and ongoing support for teachers to prepare lessons using the materials, then students will receive effective grade-level instruction that supports learning and mastery of standards.	• Adopt HQIM • Provide teachers and leaders with ongoing PL based on the specific materials adopted • Use teacher PLC (professional learning community) time to internalize units, prepare lessons, and analyze student work • Use curriculum-embedded assessments to monitor student learning • Purposefully plan student supports and scaffolds from within the materials

[1]As written, the theories of action for each approach are top-line descriptions, based on patterning across hundreds of guidance documents, written to illustrate how these documents typically reflect the approach. These descriptions do not encapsulate the complexity of the approaches.

Instructional Improvement Approach	Theory of Action	Common Calls to Action
Standards-based data-driven instruction	If school systems select interim assessments that anchor teacher understanding of what students need to learn and help teachers unpack standards, then teachers will target instruction to those standards (selecting materials that meet their needs) and use data to drive decisions about 1) how to group students and 2) which standards require reteaching.	• Select an interim assessment • Set up time for data meetings • Provide teachers with PL focused on unpacking standards, developing learning targets, and selecting or creating materials aligned with learning targets • Use data to group students and reteach standards
Skills-based intervention systems	If schools and school systems select screeners and diagnostic assessments that help identify student skill deficits and use intervention programs that are proven to target those skill deficits, then students will receive instruction that plugs gaps in their prior knowledge and skills that are preventing them from engaging with grade-level instruction.	• Select screeners and diagnostics • Administer assessments to students • Select intervention program(s) • Set up time for progress monitoring meetings • Target instruction to students based on identified gaps
Pedagogical strategies	If teachers receive professional development and feedback on instructional strategies—pedagogical best practices (e.g., student grouping, questioning) or practices known to make a difference to specific student groups (e.g., explicit instruction of academic vocabulary for multilingual students)—then teachers will incorporate those strategies into their practice and students will learn more.	• Provide teachers with PL on pedagogical strategies • Train administrators on observation and feedback of those strategies • Provide teachers with regular feedback on use of the strategies

Instructional Improvement Approach	Theory of Action	Common Calls to Action
Improvement processes	If school leaders manage dynamic, team-based cycles of improvement (e.g., PLCs as a process, MTSS as a process, improvement science processes), then the teams will be able to identify the core barriers to better outcomes and address those barriers in ways that drive stronger student learning.	• Convene teams for each improvement process • Gather data for analysis • Create action plans aligned to focus • Gather data on the effectiveness of action • Update action plans
Whole child supports	If schools provide wraparound support such as nutrition, health, and mental health services, social-emotional learning, and a welcoming school and classroom culture, then students will have their core needs met, including being fed and feeling safe, which will allow them to engage in and be more successful with learning.	• Provide teachers and leaders with PL on social-emotional learning • Create school culture plans • Administer student and family surveys • Set up data meetings to review survey data • Provide teachers with PL on classroom culture • Ensure schools have health, mental health, and nutrition services

Some of these instructional approaches can work harmoniously. For example, whole child supports can be implemented alongside Tier I instruction, directed by HQIM and aligned PL. Leaders and teachers would need thoughtful guidance to illustrate how to implement both approaches, what to prioritize when, how to distribute time and resources between them, and how to ensure staff focus on both, understanding how they intersect—but these approaches are in no way mutually exclusive. Additionally, improvement processes can be paired with any of the other approaches. It can serve as an effective mechanism to continuously improve implementation of another approach.

However, some of these instructional approaches dictate discordant and—at times—contradictory educator actions. Some combinations of these approaches suggest divergent priorities for the selection of materials, use of data, focus of teacher and leader development, structure and focus of teacher PLC time, and expectations for teacher planning.

For example, Tier I instruction, directed by HQIM and aligned PL, standards-based data-driven instruction, and skills-based intervention systems each drive different, incompatible approaches to teacher planning.

If you were working with **Tier I instruction, directed by HQIM and aligned PL** as your fundamental instructional approach, the implications for teacher planning would probably look something like:

1. The school system selects standards-aligned curriculum.
2. Teachers prepare to teach by understanding each lesson's big idea or concept and how that reflects grade-level standards.
3. To prepare for student engagement in the lesson, teachers complete the core tasks, develop or refine criteria for success, anticipate student misunderstandings, and prepare to meet their specific students' needs.

However, if **standards-based data-driven instruction** was your fundamental approach, the implications for teacher planning would probably look something like:

1. The school system selects or creates interim assessments and provides a pacing guide aligned to the assessments.
2. Teachers unpack standards into discrete knowledge and skills to create daily learning targets.
3. Teachers select or create materials to match learning targets.

Finally, if **skills-based intervention systems** was your fundamental approach, implications for teacher planning time might look like:

1. The school system selects a screener and diagnostic assessments.
2. Students complete the screener and, as needed, diagnostics; teachers identify needed skills based on the results.
3. Teachers select an intervention program or develop instructional plans to target student skill deficits.

Though these are simplified examples, it's easy to see how each of these three approaches requires teachers to engage differently in lesson planning and preparation. The first emphasizes internalizing pre-selected, grade-level materials; the second suggests teachers find or create materials in alignment with a pacing guide; and the third focuses entirely on knowledge and skills that are prerequisite to grade-level standards. Reconciling all three approaches would be impossible and would leave teachers frustrated and confused.

Trying to implement all six instructional approaches at the same time is highly unlikely to yield effective implementation of any of them. Research suggests that the success of each instructional improvement approach is subject to the quality of implementation.[2] Most of these approaches, implemented well, could yield stronger outcomes, but any implemented poorly would be unlikely to move the needle. In our work with SEAs, we've seen, unequivocally, that trying to implement all of them at the same time is likely to result in poor implementation across the board. Pursuing all or even most of these strategies concurrently leads to incoherent school- and system-level academic strategies, confusion and frustration for teachers and leaders, and an inconsistent instructional experience for students. Most states and school systems seem to attempt all six.

Though there are connections between all of these improvement approaches and research that informs each, not all of the approaches have equal evidence of impact. For example, a review of research on the impact of data analysis on student outcomes shows that teachers looking at data together, a foundational practice of standards-based data-driven instruction, does not consistently make a difference in student learning, despite widespread perception that it's

[2]Noam Angrist and Rachael Meager, *Implementation Matters: Generalizing Treatment Effects in Education*, EdWorkingPaper No. 23–802 (Annenberg Institute at Brown University, September 2023), https://doi.org/10.26300/ysyd-t435.

[3]Heather C. Hill, "Does Studying Student Data Really Raise Test Scores?," *Education Week*, February 7, 2020, https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-does-studying-student-data-really-raise-test-scores/2020/02.

fundamental.[3] In some cases, the evidence of impact can vary by subject. For example, data-driven instruction applied to reading often leads to over-remediation of comprehension skills and inattention to other potential causes of incorrect answers, such as text-based factors including knowledge demands, structure, and language.[4] Understanding the evidence base—including the various strengths and challenges of each approach—is central to identifying the best-fit approach to anchor the work.

The theories of action not only live in guidance documents but in deeply held beliefs about what it takes to improve student learning—and often in educators' personal values. In interviews and our experience working in hundreds of school systems across states, we found that educators relate deeply to the instructional improvement approach(es) to which they subscribe. Within teams at the state, school system, and school levels, individuals bring different theories of action, often implicitly, to debates about what to do and where to focus, making it challenging to align around a common approach. In practice, what often winds up happening is leaders—particularly those overseeing multiple functions at the state or school system levels—try to navigate those strongly held beliefs by implementing bits and pieces of all of the approaches, which inevitably dilutes the potential efficacy of any of them.

Analysis of one state's guidance

To understand how the six instructional improvement approaches were implemented in a single state, we analyzed 22 guidance documents published by different divisions of one state agency and coded them by the approach each advanced.

Instructional improvement approach	Number of documents
Tier I instruction, directed by HQIM and aligned PL	3
Standards-based data-driven instruction	1
Skills-based intervention systems	2
Pedagogical strategies	7
Improvement processes	7
Whole child supports	2

This state's guidance spans all six improvement approaches, but it's clear that a disproportionate amount of guidance was released in reference to pedagogical strategies and improvement processes. What we found interesting is that, in conversation, state leaders shared that their biggest lever for improvement wasn't either of these approaches; it was Tier 1 instruction, directed by HQIM and aligned PL. However, this priority was reflected in only a small percentage of their published guidance. This difference in stated focus and available resources was also reflected in the coaching and technical assistance provided by the agency staff. Several documents even advocated for actions that directly conflict with this priority, such as planning lessons around discrete skills identified as "not mastered" on an interim assessment. The conflicting messages sent by the SEA no doubt caused tension for school and system educators.

[4]Timothy Shanahan, "My Principal Wants to Improve Test Scores... Is He Right?," *Shanahan on Literacy* (blog), December 8, 2018, https://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/my-principal-wants-to-improve-test-scores-is-he-right.

The compounding effect

When state agencies do not align around a clear, manageable approach to improving instruction, the impact is felt at every level of the education system.

SEA staff usually work in silos, focused on implementation of a narrow set of initiatives, often each advancing different instructional improvement approaches. As large organizations with high volumes of work, most staff in state agencies operate primarily within their own divisions. These silos are reinforced by state and federal funding streams, which target specific, legislated priorities, fund FTE positions, and flow through state offices to school systems. Though it is possible to overcome silos by blending and braiding funding in support of crosscutting priorities, doing so requires intentionally and creatively attending to structure and process.

Given prevalent siloing, staff who provide coaching or technical assistance (e.g., state reading coaches, school improvement coaches) are often unaware of the ways in which other state teams work with schools—and advocate for different actions. When multiple state-level teams prescribe different actions, school system staff, school leaders, and teachers receive mixed and often conflicting messages not only about how to improve student learning but what their mandated priorities are. One SEA staff member summed it up neatly: "Our issue is we need to be on the same page about what the prescription is to make meaningful instructional decisions to improve student outcomes."

School and system leaders report feeling pulled in multiple directions by state guidance, leaving them understandably unclear about where to prioritize time and effort. One school system leader shared, "[Initiatives] are disconnected. When you go to an MTSS meeting, no one talks about HQIM or how the implementation would be a school improvement plan. When you stop and think, you can make connections. However, the connections are not made explicit, so districts end up with shelves of implementation plans for disjointed initiatives, rather than a cohesive plan for improvement."

Even at the level of commonly used words and terms, we found that teams across state agencies used different definitions. For example, "data-driven instruction" can refer to using interim assessment data to identify specific skills to reteach to groups of students, a practice aligned with standards-based data-driven instruction. However, in the context of Tier I instruction, directed by HQIM and aligned PL, "data-driven instruction" more likely refers to using data from curriculum-based assessments to adjust lesson preparation and delivery to ensure all students are engaged and learning the lessons' content.

Different terms are also sometimes used for the same or related practices. For example, in some documents, "curriculum" and "high-quality instructional materials" are used interchangeably to mean the materials used for instruction; in other documents, "curriculum" is used more broadly to mean what is taught, regardless of the materials. Imprecise definitions and use of terms can lead to not only general confusion but fundamental misunderstandings about what the SEA recommends or requires.

Competing approaches ultimately have the greatest impact on teachers and students. To illustrate how all of these initiatives play out disjointedly in practice, let's look at an example of a school we worked with.

> In accordance with a statewide emphasis on Tier I instruction, directed by HQIM and aligned PL, School ABC was in the first year of implementing new HQIM for ELA. Back-to-school PL and weekly teacher PLCs focused on lesson preparation for these materials.
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> Every six weeks, the school gave MAP Growth interim assessments—which were required by the state for all schools in improvement status, like School ABC. As part of this standards-based data-driven approach, teachers then participated in data meetings focused on identifying standards that need remediation in core instruction. After the first interim cycle, teachers reported the standards-based remediation was disrupting the progression of their new materials, and they didn't know where to fit in the additional lessons.
>
> Additionally, twice per year, teachers were formally observed by the principal using the Marzano Rubric, which was required by the state's teacher evaluation system with the goal of improving teachers' pedagogical strategies. After the first round of observations, ELA teachers received feedback that some of the instructional practices required by their new materials did not reflect the indicators in the evaluation rubric. Teachers were getting one set of guidance on instructional practices from the new materials and their PLCs and an entirely different set from their required evaluations.
>
> In practice, the potential impact on teacher practice and student learning of any one of these approaches was undermined by simultaneously trying to implement all three.

State guidance drove each of these approaches, but it did not make clear how to navigate the contradictory actions they promoted. If the state had aligned around a coherent instructional improvement approach, such as Tier I instruction, directed by HQIM and aligned PL, their guidance might have looked something like this:

Prioritize quality implementation of HQIM.

Provide teachers and leaders with PL that is specific to the materials, such as supporting unit internalization and lesson preparation.

Use data from curriculum-based assessments to adjust preparation and delivery of lessons and provide just-in-time support for students who have gaps in knowledge and skills that prevent them from accessing grade-level content; teachers do not need to remediate all missing skills and knowledge.

For teacher evaluation and formative feedback, use a state-provided list of look-fors that clearly describe what each rubric indicator looks like in the context of adopted HQIM.

Aligning guidance and requirements to a single approach or coherent set of approaches, doesn't necessarily mean that other initiatives get tossed aside. As shown in the above example, centering their approach on HQIM doesn't mean the state needed to stop doing teacher evaluation; it just means the state would benefit from taking the time to develop additional guidance about what effective teacher evaluation looks like in the context of the chosen instructional approach. When states spend time doing this rigorous alignment work, teachers and leaders benefit from greater clarity on how to improve student learning and students have a more coherent instructional experience—a necessary precursor to a quality instructional experience.

How SEAs can improve coherence

State agencies operate in a context of complex federal and state requirements, which often subscribe to different improvement approaches, reflect discrete funding streams, and layer on top of each other over time. Strengthening instructional coherence in this context isn't easy.

Though it is challenging for any large, bureaucratic institution that sits at the intersection of so many requirements, we have seen state agencies successfully make priorities clearer for schools and systems. In fact, because of the significant authority the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives SEAs to drive instructional strategy, they may be the only structure in the American education system capable of improving coherence across school systems.

To start, SEA leaders can:

Explicitly decide on an approach(es) to instructional improvement.

State teams benefit from clarity on how they think schools can best improve instruction either for all schools or for the schools in which they are required to intervene (i.e., schools in improvement status). Solicit input from stakeholders and get an independent view of the instructional approaches advanced in current guidance, support, and accountability measures. To get a sense of how many approaches are being advanced, it may be helpful for teams to read guidance documents that are foundational to their own work as well as the work of other divisions, mapping each to the improvement approaches to understand the impact on schools and systems.

Establish a process by which the SEA will select a primary improvement approach(es), including clarity about who will make and inform decisions, opportunities for staff to understand the different approaches, and how the evidence base for each will be reviewed. Once a primary improvement approach(es) has been selected, mark the decision, including what is no longer up for debate, clearly.

Commit to aligning guidance, support, and accountability measures to the approach(es).

Most, if not all state agencies have guidance documents, requirements, and support structures that reflect all of these different instructional improvement approaches. Commit to ensuring that all ideas you publicly communicate align with your central approach(es)—this may mean eliminating some guidance that is incompatible with that approach(es) or making explicit how guidance on each priority should be implemented in alignment with the core approach(es). Be diligent about reviewing and making appropriate updates throughout all of your communications, including guidance documents, funding applications, required or recommended plans and needs assessments, accountability requirements and reporting, and school visit and coaching protocols. The goal is not simply aligned documents; the goal is meaningful, aligned support across the board. However, we've found that beginning the alignment process with guidance documents is an excellent first step toward aligning all support coming from the state agency.

Set SEA staff up for success in the alignment process.

Agency staff, especially those providing coaching or technical assistance to schools, may need training on the selected improvement approach(es) and ongoing opportunities to align around it. Given that the six instructional improvement approaches are often implicitly rather than explicitly embedded in communications, the history of how the national education landscape has embraced and moved away from each over time, and individuals' varied experiences teaching and leading, expect that most staff will not have a shared understanding of any of the six approaches.

Shared experiences can be an effective tool to norm. For example, a cross-agency team could engage in a shared unit study to understand what improving Tier I instruction, directed by HQIM and aligned PL looks like. Additionally, a cross-agency team could visit classrooms to see how improvement strategies are playing out in instruction and affecting students' experiences. Spend time allowing team members to process their own experiences and perspectives and to discuss their thoughts fully as a group, making the implicit explicit by connecting these experiences back to the theories of change. Shortchanging this time tends to lead to misaligned actions down the road.

Sustain the work over time.

Implementing coherent support requires ongoing learning and cross-agency collaboration; it is not a fully achievable, discrete product. Many factors contribute to coherence challenges at the state level, including federal guidance and regulation, legislative priorities, changes in leadership, philosophical differences, and research and innovation. To continue strengthening coherence, put in place regular routines to make the work sustainable over time, even as state context shifts. For example, a quarterly review of guidance to be released can help ensure all new publications align with the instructional improvement approach(es) and bring awareness of the priorities, guidance, and requirements being issued to schools and systems by divisions across the SEA. Additionally, states require a range of school and system plans, many of which are tied to funding applications. An annual process to update these plans and applications can help ensure what you're asking of schools and systems reflects prioritized actions and can also be an opportunity to streamline requirements. Hosting quarterly cross-agency school visits and other shared learning experiences can continue to break down silos and work toward practical, not just rhetorical, alignment.

Closing

We've seen states make tremendous progress in providing clarity for schools and school systems by choosing a central approach(es) to instructional improvement and aligning guidance, support, and accountability measures to that approach(es) to the extent possible. Though it's no small task, dedicated alignment work can help SEAs provide a north star not only for educators across their state but for their own work as well.

As the federal government's role changes and states are empowered in new ways, SEAs may soon find themselves charting the course for schools and systems more directly than ever. Now is a prime moment to take stock of state-mandated requirements and begin identifying and eliminating incoherence to ensure that SEAs are ready to communicate and implement a clear, unified strategy that improves instruction and student learning.

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excellent instruction

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