

**Review of a Plan
to
Reorganize
The Louisiana State Department of Education**

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Overview

Before commenting on the substance of the plan, it is only fair that I expose my biases about state education agencies (SEAs). In short, I believe that their mission is to improve teaching and learning in local schools. Any function or activity performed by a SEA that can not be justified by its impact on teaching and learning, probably should be performed by another agency. I believe that SEAs have a responsibility to lead on-going efforts to improve educational programs. I believe they should exploit their unique comparative advantages of prestige, authority and economies of scale to support and enhance local education programs. Such leadership relies first on example, collaboration, and persuasion and only as a last resort on enforcement.

The proposed reorganization, if implemented as planned, holds great promise for enhancing the effectiveness of the Department by further shifting it toward the kind of leadership that will move local education programs forward. The planning to date reflects a sophisticated understanding of organizations generally and the unique features of a state education agency specifically. Successful implementation of the proposed organization should serve as a model for other states. I found much to admire about both the plan and the planning process; but I will highlight only the most prominent features that are likely to enhance the probability that the reorganization substantially will accomplish the goals of its architects.

Shift From Enforcement to Assistance

The most critical element of the plan, and one that seems to hold great promise for enhancing the effectiveness of the Department is its shift in emphasis from enforcement to assistance. Enforcement of laws and regulations will ensure only a minimal level of compliance, which at best will prevent malfeasance and abuses. It can not, however, force school districts which lack the capacity to implement a high quality educational program to produce the kind of student outcomes Louisiana desires for all its children. Some level of enforcement is necessary, but it should not make a disproportionate claim on the Department's scarce resources.

Organizing Around Functions

Organizing around important functions will telegraph to employees and clients what the Department values. The current organization that emphasizes categorical programs gives the impression that funding sources and all of the related administrative processes are more important than teaching and learning. As federal categorical programs proliferated and as the SEAs looked to Washington for half or more of their operating budgets, there has been a natural tendency to replace content with process and educational leadership with bureaucratic enforcement of rules and regulations. This plan appears to reaffirm the commitment of the State Board, the Superintendent and the Department to

the first principles of educational programs. It positions the Department to take advantage of the federal government's growing tendency to provide states with more flexibility in the administration of federal programs.

Improved Staffing Plan

Third, the plan proposes to rationalize the organization by standardizing span of control and staffing ratios. The benefits of this action will accrue primarily in terms of increased efficiency and a more rational deployment of staff. While one can easily predict short term resistance, especially from employees who perceive a loss of status, the apparent equity of the arrangement should lead to improved employee morale over time.

Planning Process

Finally, I found impressive the thoroughness for planning the implementation process. Clearly, there is much more to changing an organization than drawing lines on a chart. Ultimate success depends not only on obtaining the formal approval of the State Board, Legislature and other agencies of government. The cooperation and support of managers and employees will be essential. Based on conversations with the Superintendent and his staff, it is apparent that the perceptions and needs of all concerned are foremost in their minds and planning for equitably and sensitively addressing them are key elements of their efforts.

Implementation

I turn now to observations and comments about specifics of the plan and suggestions about implementation. As difficult and time consuming as moving from the existing organization will be, that is the easy part. Even gaining acceptance of employees and managers is relatively easy. The hard part is to change the behavior of all concerned so that it reflects the philosophy and intent of the new organization. There is a natural tendency for people to simply rename old behaviors and even believe that they have changed. I know of no formula to ensure that employees and managers will learn and consistently apply new ways of doing business. I can offer a few tips based on observations of the experiences of other organizations.

Vision

The Superintendent and State Board must should set the tone. Their first and most important task is to articulate a clear vision. In terms that are as clear and concrete as possible, and as consistently and as often as possible, it is essential to communicate a vision of schools and schooling. Managers, beginning with the Superintendent, need to turn that vision into operational activities and procedures. The Superintendent and his managers should think of

themselves as teachers who are responsible for teaching subordinates new ways to operate. They must teach both by example and by systematic professional development of all employees. The goal should be for the Superintendent to become confident that any employee, when faced with a unique problem, will be likely to independently make a decision consistent with the vision.

Institutionalizing the desired changes comes about not so much by the big decisions, such as reorganization, but by the dozens and hundreds of smaller decisions made day by day. The Superintendent's formal and informal communications can constantly refine and reinforce the vision. Inconsistent or infrequent communications encourage confusion and ambiguity. How budgets are allocated and which work plans are approved all inform employees of what is expected of them. Who gets recognized and for what behaviors sends a message about what is valued. Simply subjecting every proposed activity to the test of how it affects teaching and learning will provide consistent direction in most situations.

Professional Development

Regular, systematic opportunities for Departmental employees to improve their professional knowledge and skills is absolutely essential. The proposed changes will require individuals to operate in ways very different from their training and experience. It is incumbent upon the Department to make certain that every employee has the tools to perform as expected and this will not happen if there is not a conscious plan to make it happen. Also, it will not be successful if it is not done well. The considerable research that describes effective professional development should be consulted for more detailed advice on the nature of this activity. No amount of professional development, regardless of its quality can compensate for an ambiguous vision, however.

What follows are reactions or comments on specific elements of the plan. Here as elsewhere, I offer additional perspectives for you to consider; but ultimately the plan has to fit the Louisiana context and the personalities and preferences of the individuals who will implement it.

Capacity Building

More important than the changes in organization structure is the change in philosophy from enforcement to assistance. For that reason, careful thought should be given to what this means in practice. One version of assistance would be demand driven, where the Department merely reacts to the requests of local districts. This approach may hold some surface appeal, but it would not encourage advancement of the Superintendent's and Board's vision and would in short order swamp the Department's scarce resources by servicing too many low priority requests. Perhaps a more useful way to think about assistance is building the capacity of local school districts to improve teaching and learning. In that context the Department's activities would be more purposeful and consequently more effective.

Content

A related issue is the nature of the content of assistance or capacity building. A frequent mistake is to overlook content in favor of process. This has become quite prevalent as SEAs have substituted generalists for experts in the various disciplines. Lacking expertise in mathematics, history and reading, SEAs have attempted to improve schools through complex planning procedures, generic teaching techniques and a myriad of content free interventions. Few if any of these have succeeded because teachers teach reading, mathematics, etc. to students at a specific developmental level. No amount of planning will help a teacher who lacks the training or experience to produce the high level of student achievement that the students of Louisiana deserve and that their parents expect. She is best assisted when provided the opportunity to improve her craft knowledge in the discipline or disciplines she teaches. Thus I strongly encourage the Department to consider increasing its capacity to provide leadership in reading, mathematics, and the rest of the disciplines taught in elementary and secondary schools.

Removing Impediments

Another form of assistance that should not be over looked is removing state imposed impediments to local school district improvement. Over time the various restrictions and demands the state imposes on local districts accumulate and persist long after their original purpose has been forgotten. Subjecting all state mandates and requests to the tests of how does this impact a school district, a school or classroom and how does it improve teaching and learning may reveal some number of opportunities to assist by elimination.

Leveraging Resources

The Department is unlikely to ever acquire sufficient resources to provide much direct assistance to local districts. It does enjoy certain advantages that uniquely positions it to play a prominent role in building local capacity. It dispenses discretionary resources. It can convene, organize and motivate. Also it enjoys economies of scale that can benefit schools state-wide. Existing and proposed activities should be considered in the light of these advantages. To the extent permissible, discretionary funds should be expended in ways calculated to produce the greatest pay off to the largest number. For example, the benefits of grants spent in a single classroom or a single school tend to yield no state-wide benefits and accrue only to a small group of students and one or a few teachers at most.

Structure

With regard to the structure of the proposed organization, the recommended span of control of 1:6 seems quite generous for highly educated professionals. You might consider increasing it by one or two over time. The support to professional ratio of 1:6 also seems workable, especially if all staff

enjoy adequate access to technology. An area where you may want to give some additional thought is the number of levels between the Superintendent and program managers. The trend in high performance organizations is toward making them as flat as possible. Every layer of management adds cost and attenuates effective communication.

Composition of Offices

My final comments relate to the composition of the five offices. It is not possible to place all related functions in the same office; however, Secondary Vocational Education seems more similar to Student Advocacy than Partnerships.

Choices have to be made and every time a box is drawn, communication suffers. It is important to be conscious of this dilemma and be alert to opportunities to encourage collaboration. Cross functional teams and task forces formed to produce specific products often are ways that effective organizations employ to improve productivity. Close collaboration between The Office of Student Advocacy and The Office of Quality Educators will be critical and it is here that such forms of collaboration seem indicated.

In summary, the planned reorganization appears quite feasible and likely to improve the effectiveness of the Department. My comments on several details should in no way be construed as criticism of the general thrust of the plan and are offered as potential opportunities to improve at the margin.