

# Systemic Changes in State Education Systems: Sustainable Changes in Student Outcomes

**The State Implementation & Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center (SISEP)**

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**State Implementation  
&Scaling-up  
of Evidence-based Practices**



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Effective implementation capacity is essential to improving education. The State Implementation & Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center supports education systems in creating implementation capacity for evidence-based practices benefitting students, especially those with disabilities.



A decade ago, the importance of implementation science was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and led to the development of what is now the State Implementation and Scaling up of Evidence-Based Programs (SISEP) Center. The design of SISEP’s work in state education systems is based on the developing field of implementation science. As such, SISEP makes use of the best available evidence in implementation practice, science, and policy. In 2014, the SISEP Center completed Year 6 of its work with states. The purpose of this document is to summarize key findings.

## An Implementation Infrastructure

From the beginning, OSEP and SISEP have envisioned an infrastructure to support the full and effective use of evidence-based practices in schools.

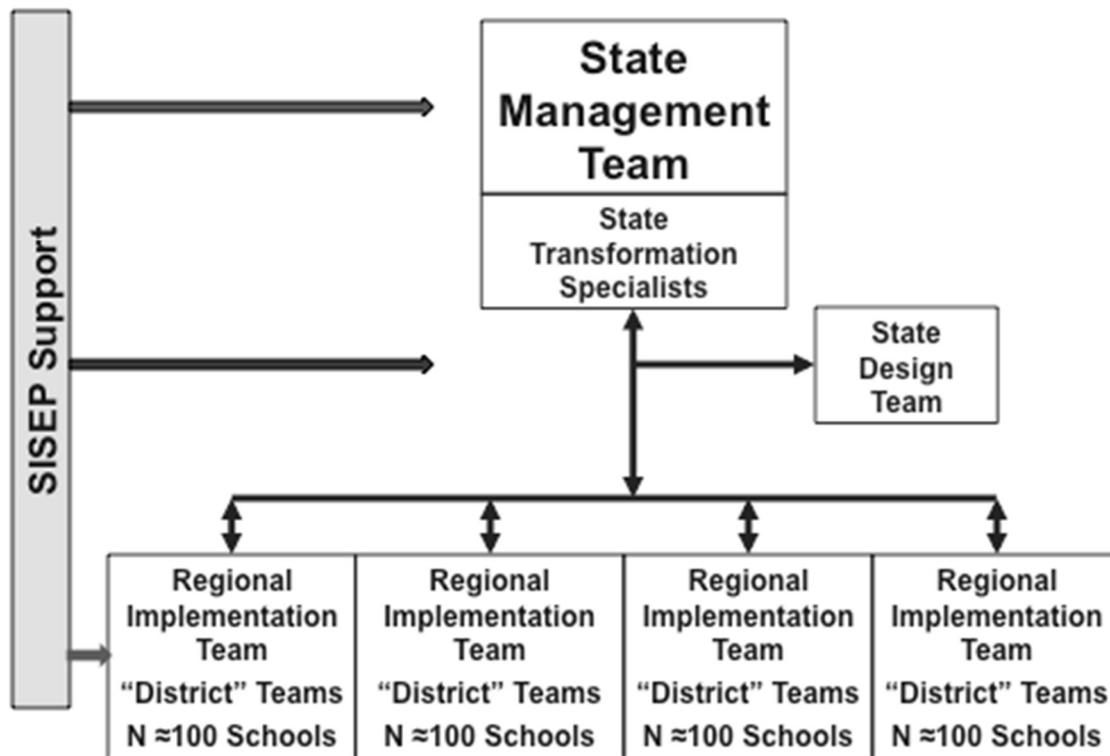


Figure 1. Elements of a state implementation infrastructure.

As shown in Figure 1, with the support of the State Management Team (SMT) and the State Design Team, SISEP and the State Transformation Specialists (STs) develop Regional Implementation Teams (RITs) as an integral part of regional Education Service Agencies (ESAs) within a state system. SISEP, the STs, and the RIT members then work together to develop District Implementation Teams (DITs). DITs then support the development of Building Implementation Teams (BITs) to complete the implementation infrastructure to assure effective implementation supports for teachers and staff in schools.

The exact composition of each Team and the integration of functions within and across Teams depend on local factors such as geography and population density (urban, suburban, rural, frontier) and the size and composition of districts and schools. SISEP and the STs account for and accommodate these variations while developing an implementation infrastructure. The people to fulfill the Implementation Team roles and functions already are employed in state departments of education. What is lacking is the development of implementation knowledge and skills, organization into Implementation Teams, and the purposeful use of implementation expertise to produce intended outcomes consistently (Higgins, Weiner, & Young, 2012; Schofield, 2004). SISEP and the STs help organize Team members help them develop the required expertise.

At the school level, effective implementation supports focus on teacher and staff use of effective education methods (e.g. evidence-based practices; innovations) that produce noticeable and sustainable student gains. Education is an interaction-based profession; important outcomes are the product of teachers and staff interacting with (teaching) students in education settings. If the adults don't teach effectively, the students don't learn at an acceptable rate. Thus, a statewide implementation infrastructure is established in order to enhance teacher and staff competencies, effective leadership, and facilitative organizational supports in every school to benefit all students.

In this design, if students are not learning at an acceptable rate, accountability for student outcomes shifts upward in the infrastructure from the school level to District and Regional Implementation teams, STs, and SMT leadership. Their aligned purpose is to provide effective support to teachers and schools in order to produce noticeable improvements in student outcomes.

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## **Intensive Support for States**

Any effort to improve education outcomes for all students essentially is a system change effort. Systems have multiple layers of moving parts that are connected in many formal and informal ways. While planning is important, there really is no *a priori* way to “analyze a path” to system change (Beyer & Trice, 1982). To paraphrase Beyer and Trice (1982), merely thinking about

system change will not take us very far. However, there is a way to “behave a path” to transformative system change (Ulrich, 2002). In this approach, the salient facilitators and barriers are discerned as the work begins, the system is disrupted, and aspects of the system respond (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Morgan & Ramirez, 1983; Nielsen, 2005).

Once they begin, the activities involved in developing implementation capacity disturb existing relationships in the system. The results of those disturbances reveal apparent and previously unknown connections and lack of connections among system components (Conklin, 2005). Previously unknown proponents and detractors suddenly appear and exert influence. As soon as the reactions are known, real facilitators can be strengthened and real impediments can be resolved (Marzano et al., 2005; Ulrich, 2002). Behaving a path to system change improves focus and improves efficiency and effectiveness of the change process.

The result of intensive SISEP and STS work at multiple levels is defragmentation of current system components and alignment of key system functions. To prompt change and help manage the change processes SISEP work in states is proactive and intensive. As indicators of the intensity of effort invested in each active scaling state, in 2014 SISEP provided the following supports during 30 days in July-August (a slower time for education in general). In addition to two or three days of work on site in each state packed with multi-level knowledge-development and skill-development meetings, SISEP had 123 email exchanges and 11 phone conferences in one state, 56 email exchanges and 4 phone conferences in another state, and 129 email exchanges and 7 phone conferences in a third state.

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## Improvement Cycles

Improvement cycles (trial and learning approaches) are an important part of implementation practice and science (the [Active Implementation Frameworks](#) operationalize usable innovations, implementation drivers, implementation stages, improvement cycles, implementation teams, and systemic change).

Behaving a path to solutions to complex problems is the essence of *usability testing*, one of the improvement cycles in the Active Implementation Frameworks. Usability testing consists of successive Cohorts (each consisting of 3-5 users) that try out increasingly complete versions of a complex process (e.g. implementation infrastructure development in education; a new software program in computer science). The first Cohort uncovers major problems that are nonstarters (e.g. in education, nearly all the schools decided a new math program would not be added to the curriculum; in computer science, the new software would not load onto typically configured computer hardware). The usability testing group fixes those major problems and the improved version is enacted for Cohort 2 (a new group of 3-5 users). Data indicate that by Cohort 4 nearly all the major problems can be identified and resolved and most of the next

layers of more detailed problems can be identified and resolved enough to permit successful use of innovations in typical operating environments (Frick, Elder, Hebb, Wang, & Yoon, 2006). This trial and learning approach can be used to establish the critical elements of an implementation infrastructure for use in the context of each unique state education system.

## Learning from Doing in Cohort 1 States

Over the past six years SISEP has assessed the longer-term effects of strategies used early in the process (i.e. the first cohort). States 1-5 in Table 2 are members of Cohort 1. In 2008, 34 states engaged in Exploration Stage activities where goals, methods, likely problems, resource requirements, and so on were shared. Applications for participation with SISEP were submitted by 16 states, and site visits were made to 8 states. At the end of the Exploration process Cohort 1 States and SISEP mutually agreed to pursue implementation capacity development beginning in June 2008. Over the next few years problems were identified and solutions found.

**Table 1: Key factors that facilitate or hinder state capacity development.**

State #	Engaged Leadership SMT	2 SMT Sponsors	STSs In the SEA	Regional Implementation Team
<b>Cohort 1</b>				
<b>1*</b>	No	No	No	<b>Yes</b>
<b>2*</b>	No	No	No	No
<b>3*</b>	<b>Yes</b>	No	No	No
<b>4</b>	No	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Cohort 2</b>				
<b>6</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Not Yet</b>	<b>Not Yet</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>

\*Mutual termination decision due to lack of progress

**Cohort 1:** State #1 6/2008 – 10/2010; State #2 6/2008 – 5/2010; State #3 6/2008 – 4/2014; State #4 6/2008 – present; State #5 12/2012 – present. **Cohort 2:** State #6 12/2013 – present; State #7 8/2014 – present; Potential State #8 and State #9 are completing Exploration Stage activities and soon will be added to complete Cohort 2.

SMT = State Management Team; STSs = State Transformation Specialists; SEA = State Education Agency

As shown in Table 1, lack of progress led SISEP and the State Management Team (SMT) to end their capacity development efforts in three of the five states in Cohort 1. This occurred after 2 - 5 years of working together. While this outcome is not desirable, it does present an opportunity to compare and contrast the three states where SISEP was unsuccessful with the two states that continue their work. Based on the outcomes highlighted (**bold**) in Table 1, it seems essential to:

- Have engaged leadership by the state Superintendent and his or her cabinet (the State Management Team). The lack of engaged leadership was a major impediment in two of the states where a mutual termination decision was made.
- Have at least two Sponsors at the SMT level to assure prompt communication and problem solving when and where it is needed. Cohort 1 States with 2 or more Sponsors who are members of the SMT continue their engagement with SISEP.
- Have each STS employed by the state department of education and working from the state's central administrative office. Engagement with others in the department, inclusion in informal meetings, and ready access to departmental information and resources appear to be critical to SISEP work. All discontinued states did not have STSs who were employed and located in the main education offices.
- Rapidly develop a Regional Implementation Team (RIT) to begin work at the district and school levels. Rapid development takes advantage of political will to engage in systemic change and begins to uncover systemic impediments to change at state, regional, district, and school levels. The lack of development of a RIT was a major impediment in two of the states where a mutual termination decision was made.

These features were nonstarters in the states where SISEP was unsuccessful. Capacity development was consistently stymied when all or nearly all of those fundamental features were absent and continued to advance when those features were present.

As this learning occurred SISEP tried to put the features in place in Cohort 1. In States #1 and #2 the state leadership declined and the relationship ended. In State #3 there was apparent leadership commitment to include the newly discovered features but changes in leadership of education in the state thwarted efforts to keep those commitments.

## Using the Learning in Cohort 2 States

Based on experiences in Cohort 1, the Exploration Stage information exchange in potential new states now includes the fundamental features and they are part of the mutually informed agreement to proceed with implementation capacity development in a state. The work in Cohort 2 states is being conducted in new ways to assure SMT engagement and Sponsorship and STS employment, and to quickly establish work at the regional level. The end of Year 1 in State #6 has accomplished what has taken SISEP 2 - 4 years to accomplish in States 4 and 5 and what SISEP was unable to accomplish in States 1, 2, and 3. State #7 in Cohort 2 is proceeding down a similar path of rapid development. SISEP is learning by doing, and Cohort 2 states are benefiting from that learning.

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## Leveraging Improvement: Capacity Development and System Change

As outlined in Figure 1, an implementation-informed approach to dramatically improving student outcomes relies on [Implementation Teams](#). In this design, Implementation Teams at each level of the infrastructure have expertise in implementation science and practice. Implementation Teams are skillful and adaptable in their approach to developing implementation capacity in education systems that are highly variable and unique in many ways. In the SISEP – OSEP design, Implementation Teams use the Active Implementation Frameworks to rapidly assess and adapt to unique conditions at state, regional, district, and school levels.

The uniqueness of education units within and across states and classrooms presents a challenge for any efforts to improve student outcomes. In the 50 United States there are over 14,000 school districts, 98,000 schools, 3 million teachers, and 50 million students (<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>). Table 2 below provides the National Averages: there are 280 districts per state, 7 schools per district, 30 teachers per school, and 17 students per teacher.

**Table 2: Leverage for change.**

Structure	N =	National Average	Implementation Ratio
<b>States</b>	50	50	50
<b>Regional Agencies</b>			<b>14 RITs / State</b>
<b>Districts</b>	14,000	<b>280 Districts per State</b>	<b>20 Districts / RIT</b>
<b>Schools</b>	98,000	7 schools / District	15 schools / DIT
<b>Teachers</b>	3,000,000	30 teachers / school	30 teachers / BIT
<b>Students</b>	50,000,000	17 students / teacher	17 students / teacher

The averages are not represented in any given state, district, school, or classroom but do provide information to illustrate the design for implementation capacity development. The information in the *National Average* column in Table 2 points to a significant gap in the way education systems are structured. On average, one state education department is being asked to relate to 280 districts in a meaningful way. The management and organization development literatures do not contain any examples where a 1:280 ratio was effective. A typical recommendation (Joss, 2001) is a management ratio of 1:8 (e.g. one unit or person can effectively manage about 8 other units or people). The national average of 7 schools per district is in this range; the other ratios are not. The ratio of 280 districts per state is the most unmanageable outlier.

Leveraging improvement in education outcomes begins with supporting effective teacher instruction. The district leadership and the District Implementation Team (DIT) members work with school leadership and Building Implementation Team (BIT) members to arrange on-going support for teachers. Notice the multiplier effect (i.e. leverage): one DIT can effectively develop and support implementation capacity (BITs) in about 15 schools (450 teachers; 7,650 students). Thus, the competence of DIT members is critical to the success of a great many teachers and students. Because DIT competence is developed and sustained by RITs, this calls attention to the importance of regional agencies in leveraging improvement in education. Regional agencies are needed to support RITs that develop and sustain DITs. The multiplier effect resulting from effective implementation support for practitioners (e.g. teachers) is confirmed in research (Schoenwald, Sheidow, & Letourneau, 2004).

One statewide group cannot develop 280 DITs and assure their competence. RITs need to be established as a part of the regional Education Service Agency (ESA) supports currently

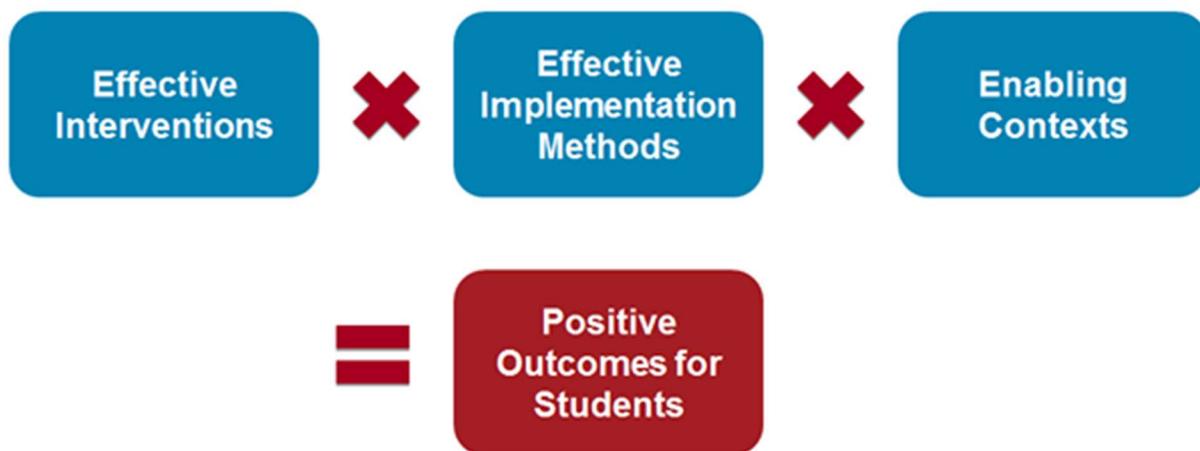
available in many states. Endsley et al. (2014) report there are 620 regional ESAs that serve about 80% of all schools in the US. An adequate number of RITs lodged in existing or newly developed ESAs are essential to purposeful and effective improvements in education outcomes.

With the structure in the *Implementation Ratio* column (Table 2) in mind, the state task is now manageable – develop, support, and sustain 14 RITs (not 280 DITs). The implementation infrastructure shown in the Implementation Ratio column supports the functions that are essential to achieving greatly improved outcomes in education. In this structure, implementation supports are developed, sustained, and improved in service to effective innovations and standard practices in education. The regional structures (i.e. RITs) are a critical component without which islands of excellence have no way to be expanded and improved to benefit all students and society.

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## Implementation Science

The goal of public education is to produce educationally significant outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities. According to implementation science, educationally significant outcomes for students are the product of effective instruction supported by effective implementation conducted within organization and system contexts that enable (not hinder) the use of effective instruction and implementation supports. These factors are summarized in the Formula for Success:



The task of the SISEP Center is to establish these necessary factors in state education systems in order to purposefully produce educationally significant outcomes for all students. The wisdom of OSEP’s lead role in developing implementation capacity in state education systems has been confirmed by recent studies of efforts to reform education (Crosse et al., 2011; Glennan Jr., Bodilly, Galegher, & Kerr, 2004; Manna, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics & implementation, 2013; Vernez, Karam, Mariano, & DeMartini, 2006). These studies clearly

point to implementation as the missing link in efforts to move national and state policy directives into effective action in districts, schools, and classrooms.

The goal of OSEP and SISEP is to establish and strengthen the implementation link in state departments of education. The good news is that the same implementation science resides in each Implementation Team, regardless of geographic location, demographics of students served, etc. Because all Implementation Teams use the integrated and compensatory Active Implementation Frameworks to guide their work, the preparation of Teams and the operations of Teams are more alike than different. It is this duplication of skills without duplication of effort that makes a state implementation infrastructure feasible and powerful.

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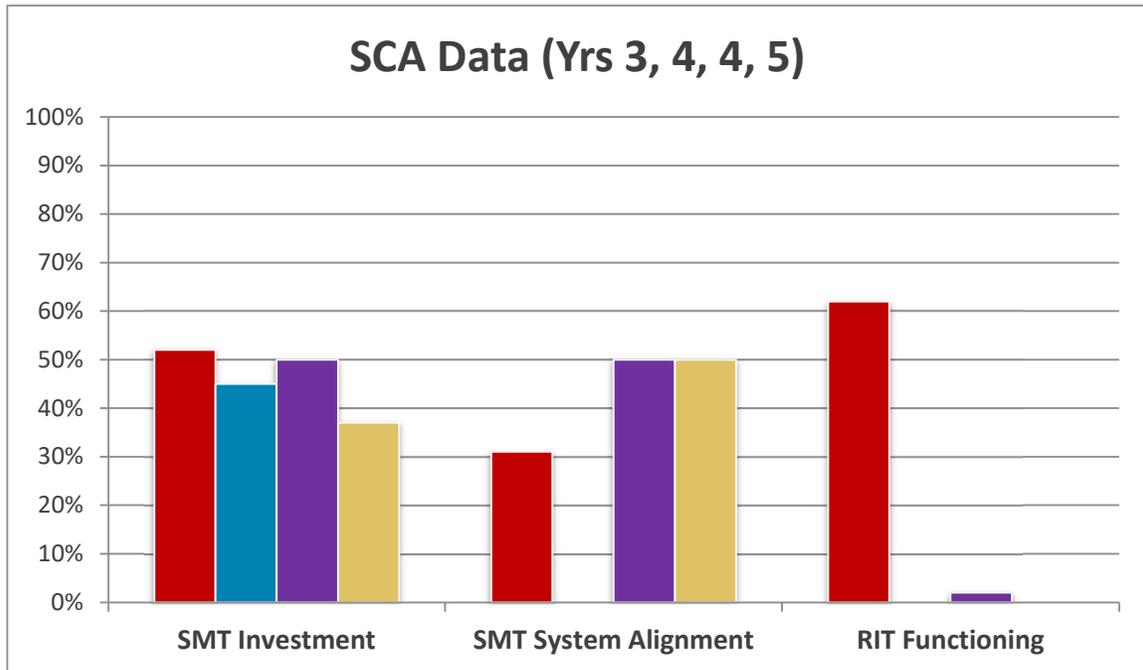
## Assessing Capacity Development

Implementation infrastructure development accounts for each step outlined in the *Implementation Ratio* column in Table 2. To test the presence and strength of each leverage point in the infrastructure, SISEP has developed the State Capacity Assessment (SCA) and the District Capacity Assessment (DCA). The foundation for these assessments is the Implementation Drivers Assessment (Fixsen, Blase, et al., 2015; Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2006). The psychometric properties and predictive validity (correlations with fidelity) of the Implementation Drivers Assessment have been tested (Metz et al., 2014; Ogden et al., 2012) and are well within acceptable ranges.

### State Capacity Assessment

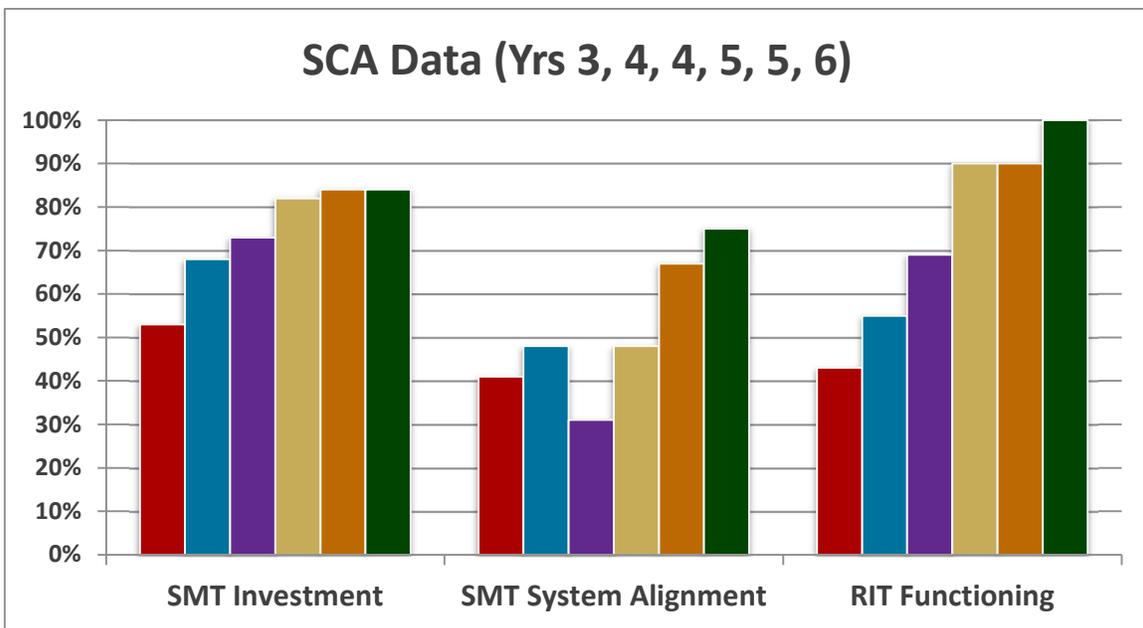
The State Capacity Assessment (SCA; first administered in 2011) is used to assess State Management Team (SMT), State Transformation Specialist (STS), and Regional Implementation Team (RIT) functioning (Fixsen, Ward, Duda, Horner, & Blase, 2015). The SCA provides (for the first time) a way to assess progress on key indicators of implementation capacity development in state education systems. The SCA is administered two times a year in each active scaling state. The data for State 3 (Figure 2) and State 4 (Figure 3) show the results of each administration since 2011. Responses to the 40 items that make up the SCA are used to inform action planning at state and regional levels. Scores in the 60%+ range indicate substantial progress. Scores in the **80%+** range are an indication of competence and consistency.

Figure 2: SCA Results for State 3 in Cohort 1



State #3 did not have all of the fundamental features noted in Table 1 – State Management Team (SMT) Sponsors, State Transformation Specialists (STs) employed and housed in the department, and rapid development of a Regional Implementation Team (RIT). The SCA data in Figure 2 show how State #3 floundered for five years.

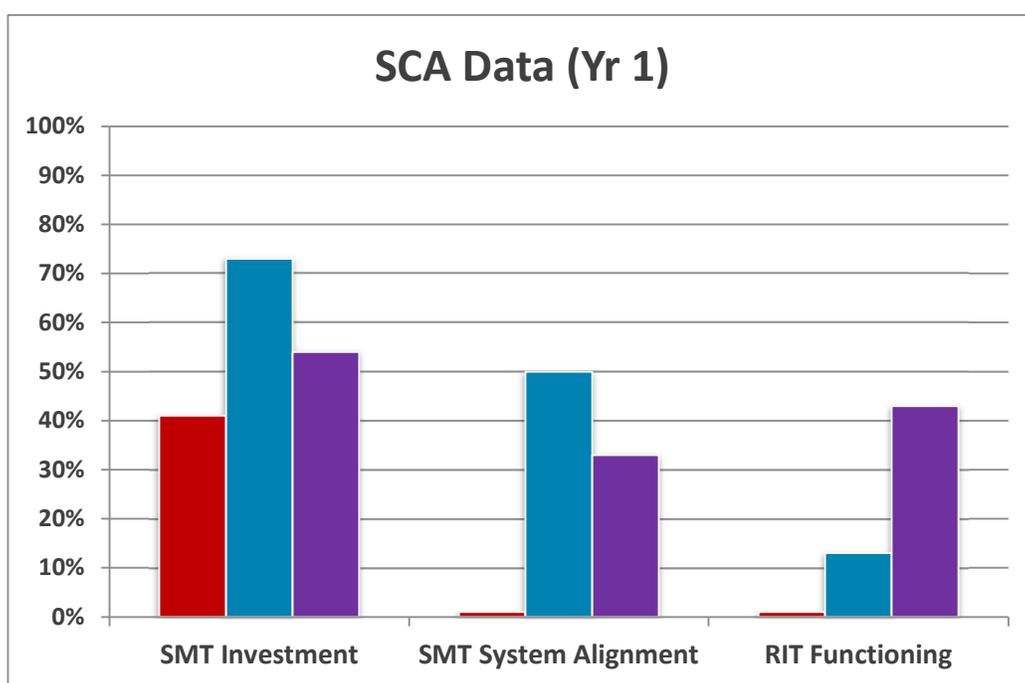
Figure 3: SCA Results for State 4 in Cohort 1



As shown in Table 1, State #4 in Cohort 1 had State Management Team (SMT) Sponsors, State Transformation Specialists (STs) employed and housed in the department, and rapid development of a Regional Implementation Team (RIT). As shown in Figure 3, steady progress toward scores in the 80%+ range occurred across six years. The accountability for SCA scores resides with SISEP. Thus, it took SISEP that long to figure out how to do state capacity development work effectively.

Cohort 2 states are the beneficiaries of the lessons learned from working with Cohort 1. As shown in Figure 4, State #6 baseline SCA scores were low as expected for a typical state system.

**Figure 4: SCA Results for State 6 in Cohort 2**



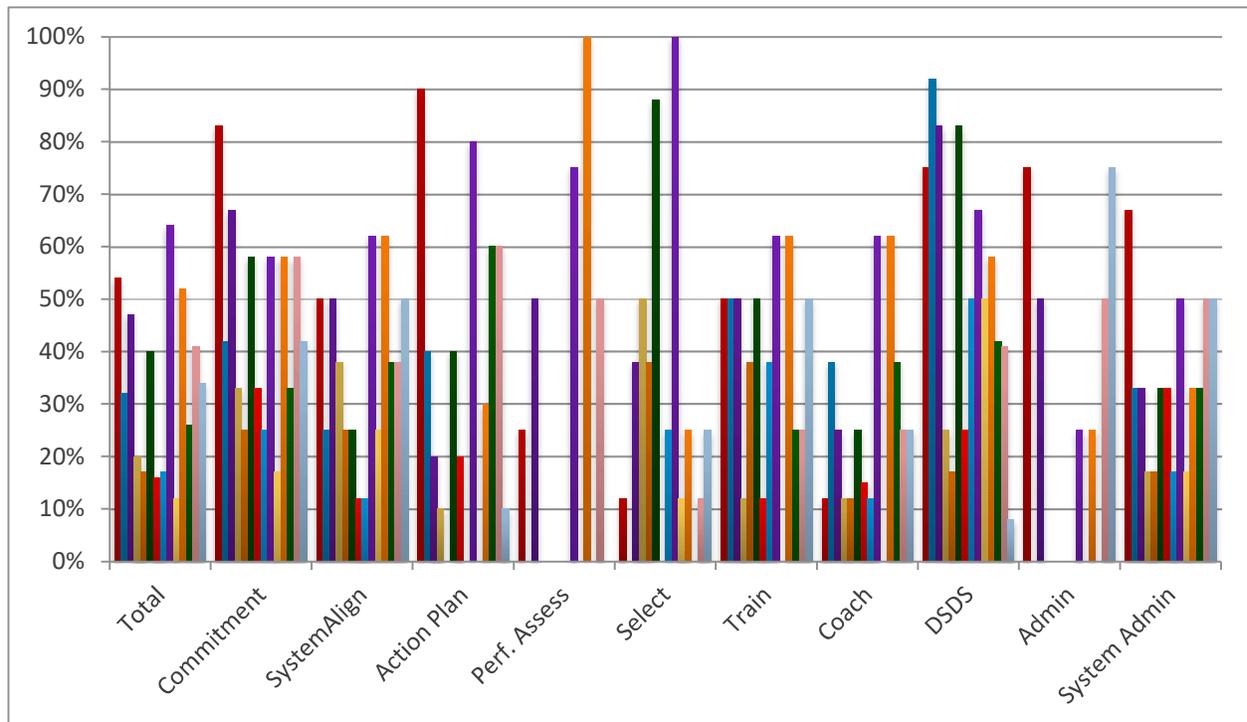
As shown in Figure 4, State #6 scores improved during the first year (baseline, 6 month, 12 month data points shown in Figure 4). SMT Investment increased from 41% to 54% and varied with turnover in key positions, SMT System Alignment improved from 0% to over 30%, and RIT Functioning improved steadily from 0% to over 40%. Rapid progress continues to be made in State #6. A baseline SCA is scheduled in State #7. Two more states will be added to Cohort 2 in the coming months. In these states SISEP is using the learning from Cohort 1 to do state capacity development work effectively *and* efficiently in Cohort 2 states.

### **District Capacity Assessment**

SISEP developed the District Capacity Assessment (DCA; first administered in 2013) to assess District Implementation Team (DIT) functioning and district supports for schools (Ward et al., 2015). The DCA provides (for the first time) a way to assess progress on key indicators of

implementation capacity development in district education systems. The DCA is administered two times a year in each active scaling district. Responses to the 26 items that make up the DCA are used to inform action planning at district and school levels. Scores in the **60%+** range indicate substantial progress. Scores in the **80%+** range are an indication of competence and consistency.

**Figure 5: DCA Baseline Results (Total and Subscale; 14 Districts in 4 States)**



Legend: Commit - Commitment; Syst Align –System Alignment; Action Plan – Action Planning; Perf Assess – Performance Assessment; Select – Selection; Train – Training; Coach – Coaching; DSDS – Decision Support Data System; Admin – Facilitative Administration; System Admin - System Administration

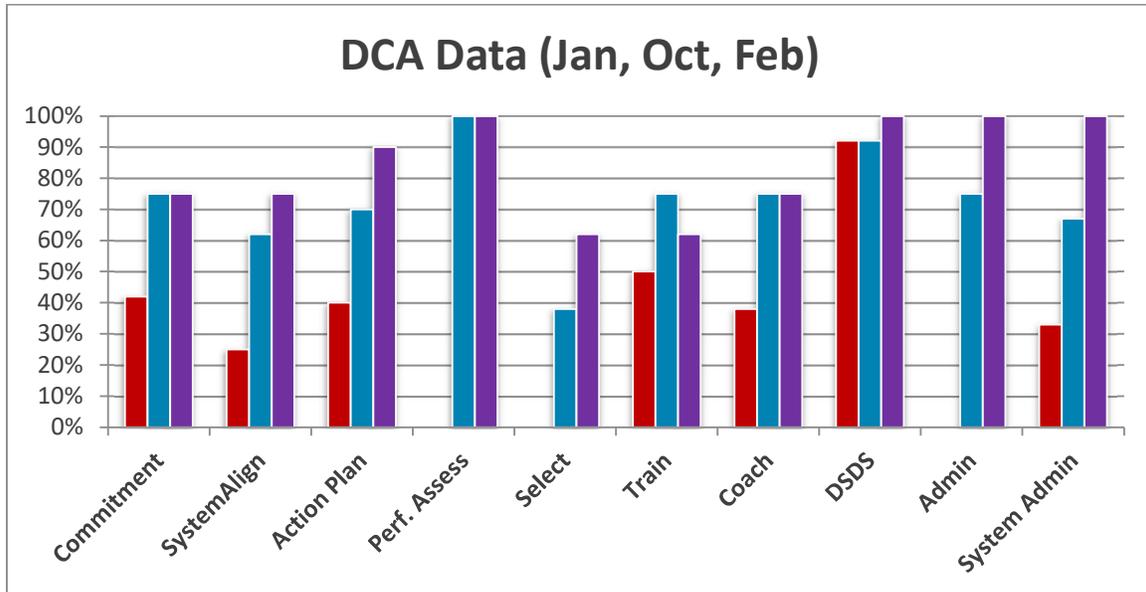
Figure 5 shows baseline measures for 14 medium-size districts located in four different states. Across all districts what is most apparent is the generally low total and subscale scores for implementation capacity and the variability across districts. These baseline DCA scores confirm the uniqueness of districts, document the general need for developing implementation expertise in education, and underscore the adaptive tasks required of Implementation Teams.

**RIT Supports for District Improvement**

In Cohort 1, repeated measures of the DCA are shown in Figure 6 for a district in State #4. With the support of the STSs and RIT, the gains from January one year to February the following year show all subscale scores exceeding 60% and significant progress toward reaching subscale

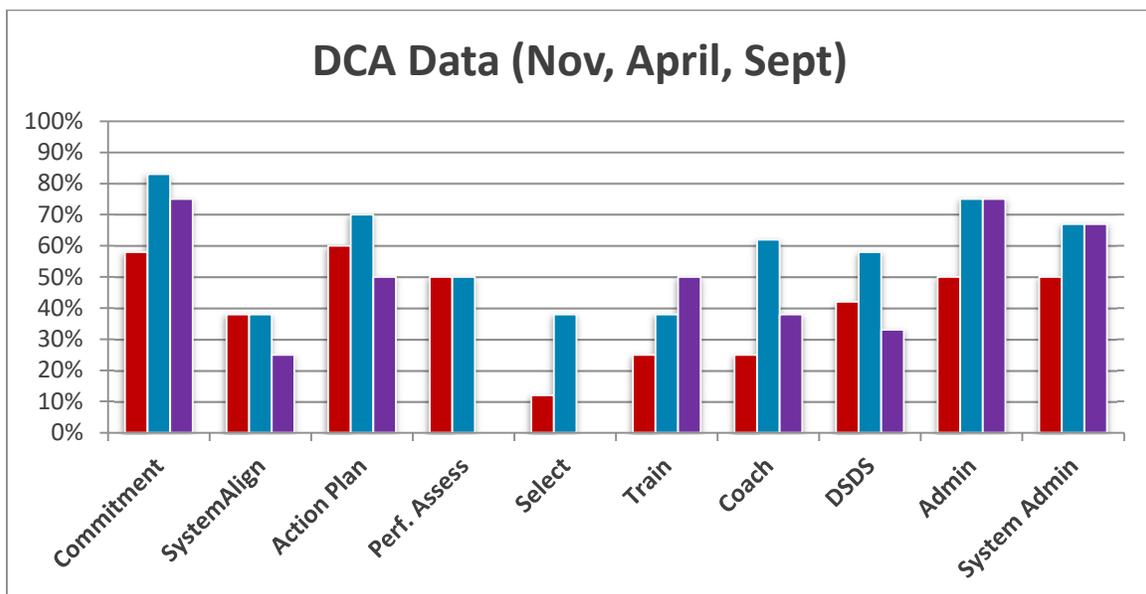
scores of 80% and above after one year of DIT development. The Total score (not shown) was 32% at baseline and 84% at the end of Year 1.

**Figure 6: Repeated DCA measures (one year) in a district supported by a RIT.**



In State #3 the absence of RIT support was noted in Table 1. Repeated measures of the DCA in one district in State #3 are shown in Figure 7. The gains from November one year to September the following year show few subscale scores exceeding 60%. The Total score (not shown) was 41% at baseline and 41% at the end of Year 1. Overall, there was a lack of DIT progress toward reaching subscale scores of 80% and above after one year.

**Figure 7: Repeated DCA measures (one year) in a district that was not supported by a RIT.**



Data such as these are indicators of the essential role of RITs in an implementation infrastructure. RITs are a major link between the state leadership and the districts and schools that educate students. As seen in Figure 6, with RIT support significant progress toward establishing district implementation capacity can be made in one year. The next step is to demonstrate the linkages between DCA scores, the quality of instruction provided to students, and student outcomes.

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## Summary

OSEP's investment in the development of implementation capacity in state education systems is paying off. The outline of the plan for a statewide infrastructure (Figure 1) is viable and the components are feasible in practice. SISEP is working systematically in states in a manner that comports with usability testing methods. While the feedback cycles are long (3-5 years), they are providing important lessons about creating systemic improvements in state education systems.

Repurposing existing resources to align the functions of State Management Teams, State Transformation Specialists, and Regional and District Implementation Teams results in a statewide implementation infrastructure to support improved instruction and student outcomes. The development of the State Capacity Assessment (that includes RIT development and functioning) and District Capacity Assessment provide ways to monitor the progress of capacity development and systems change and the information needed for sensitive and targeted action planning. Instead of "tinkering toward utopia" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), purposeful implementation capacity development may provide the methods to "behave a way" to consistently and repeatedly improve student outcomes.

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## Faster, Better, Cheaper: Pick any Two

The methodical approach employed by SISEP for implementation infrastructure planning, development, and testing may seem slow by some standards. The intensive work in states requires substantial investments in teaching and learning about implementation science and change processes from the capitol to the classroom. However, the approach is paying off with respect to discovering challenges and producing improved capacity development methods and measures that appear to increase effectiveness and efficiency.

Despite massive investments of intellectual and financial resources aimed at practice and policy reforms, NAEP scores have not changed in an educationally significant direction since the 1960s (National Center for Education Statistics & implementation, 2013; National Commission on Excellence in Education & implementation, 1983). Insisting on improvement and paying for improvement has not produced improvement. Perhaps 10 years from now the usability testing

approach to developing implementation capacity will seem like a rapid approach to discovering how to purposefully and repeatedly improve state education systems.

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## Next steps

Contrasting progress in unsuccessful states and continuing states has led to significant modifications in SISEP selection of and supports for states. Contrasting the progress made in one year for districts that do or do not have RIT support (Figures 6 & 7) provides initial evidence of the value of the overall design for a state implementation infrastructure. SISEP is learning by doing. The lessons from Cohort 1 are informing changes in SISEP work with Cohort 2 states. At the end of Year 1, Cohort 2 states have accomplished what has taken SISEP 2 - 4 years to accomplish in Cohort 1 States #4 and #5 and what SISEP was unable to accomplish in States #1, #2, and #3.

The rapid progress in Cohort 2 states already is producing important lessons for Cohort 3.

1. The intensity of the work is increased substantially since several levels of action are occurring simultaneously in a compressed time frame. Just enough, just in time preparation, active modeling to hasten knowledge and skill development, and intensive coaching at state, regional, and district levels is now the SISEP norm. The extra time and attention required by SISEP staff is noticeable.
  - a. Recommendation: One full time SISEP state liaison should be assigned to each active scaling state so sufficient time can be devoted to rapid development of multiple teams.
2. The lack of evidence-based approaches to education that a) are clearly operationalized and b) have an established assessment of fidelity of use in practice is a major impediment to rapid progress in district and building implementation capacity development. This slows the system change process when it reaches the classroom and relates to student outcomes. Operationalizing innovations and developing fidelity assessments are sophisticated skills and require more time and attention from SISEP staff.
  - a. Recommendation: One full time SISEP staff person should be assigned to begin work in each state at the district – school – classroom levels by month 6. The purpose is to identify effective education practices, operationalize them, and develop a fidelity measure. In this way, a usable innovation would be ready by the time RITs and DITs are formed and beginning to function.
3. The SCA and DCA have been developed and are being conducted twice a year in each active scaling state and district. To target action planning more specifically, new assessments are

being constructed and tested for a Regional Capacity Assessment (RCA, at the RIT level), a Building Drivers Assessment (BDA, school level supports for teachers), and an Observation Tool for Instructional Supports and Systems (OTISS, classroom walk through measure of instruction provided to students).

- a. Recommendation: One full time SISEP staff person should be assigned to manage the evaluation processes to assure adequate training for Administrators, proper use of administration protocols, and entry, storage, and use of valid information.
- b. Recommendation: Funds should be set aside to expand the use of [sisep.org](http://sisep.org) and continue to improve its usefulness and functionality as implementation capacity development and maintenance expand nationally.

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