Bringing the Alliance District Program into Focus

Implications from a Study of the Alliance District Program Conducted by the The Neag School of Education at UConn[1]

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Connecticut's 30 highest-need districts have been called the "Alliance Districts" since 2012. Each year, they receive increased state funding in exchange for producing annual district improvement plans. In total, the state has invested almost half a billion dollars in this program since its inception. In theory, the purpose of these extra funds is to promote innovation. However, many district leaders have reported needing to use the funding to cover much more routine expenses, due to reductions in local funding.

To date, no formal study has been conducted to measure the impact of the Alliance District program overall.

Focus: How Long-term Planning Processes Can Improve State-Led Turnaround in Connecticut is a study of the Alliance District program that was conducted by a research team at the Neag School of Education at UConn. It analyzes the effectiveness of the required annual district improvement plans as tools for change. In addition, it explores the link between these plans and some positive outcomes that districts within the program have seen over time. The findings in this study raise important implications for how best to strengthen the Alliance District program and leverage state improvement dollars.

(1) Each year, the state made changes to both the scope and the requirements of the Alliance District program—likely reducing impact.

Over the life of the Alliance District program, the format and requirements for district improvement plans have changed each and every year. They became a moving target into which districts were required to "fit" their improvement strategies. By making these planning tools inconsistent and sometimes overly prescriptive, the state has impeded districts' ability to focus on a small set of initiatives over the long-term. Moreover, the planning process became an exercise in compliance, rather than a helpful guiding force for meaningful improvement.

Instead of shifting requirements each year, an effective planning tool will include processes that ensure districts are always building each year upon the previous year's work. An effective planning tool should also address the sorts of fiscal and human capital investments that can advance progress over time—without shifting focus each year.

It is possible that the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), itself, may need technical support on facilitating and monitoring strategic planning for district improvement. The size of the program should likely also be reduced so that the CSDE has sufficient capacity to meaningfully facilitate and monitor districts' efforts.

Action Steps: Develop a research-based planning tool to support focused and thoughtful district improvement work, and implement it consistently.

- Require the CSDE to formally develop a clear and consistent planning tool for the Alliance District program. Base the tool's design on research about long-term strategic planning processes that propel improvement. In order to facilitate and manage district improvement over time, the planning tool must emphasize measuring both the implementation of interventions and their impact on student learning.
- Focus the CSDE's technical assistance on the ten highest-need districts to provide guidance where it is most needed.

- Establish a legislative timeline and targets for measurable district improvement. Use performance data to move districts along a continuum of state intervention, including state-led systemic takeover/receivership in extreme cases.

(2) An analysis of the plans of all 30 Alliance Districts over the life of the program suggested that districts need increased professional development on effective strategic planning practices.

The state-led district improvement effort is an opportunity to build leadership capacity within the Alliance Districts. To that end, the state should allocate time and resources towards developing district leaders' knowledge and skills in strategic planning for district improvement.
An interesting finding in our study is that there are trends in plan effectiveness among districts that are showing improvement. We found eight districts that were showing more improvement than their peers on our selected indicators.[1] A deeper dive revealed that they showed patterns in their approaches to planning. Their plans tended to:

- Build over-time upon a small and consistent group of core interventions.
- Couple new initiatives and infrastructures with capacity-building activities so that these efforts support one another.
- Monitor their progress using data on both implementation of new initiatives and student results.

The state should support districts in emulating similar planning practices. For instance, the state might adopt a coaching model to give districts targeted, contextualized feedback that helps districts think about:
- Long-term investments and outcomes;
- Selectively choosing high-leverage strategies upon which to focus;
- Considering institutional barriers to student outcomes; and
- Data-monitoring processes that identify the extent to which selected interventions are implemented effectively.

Action Steps: Focus the Alliance District program to develop districts' leadership and planning capacity.

- For districts in need of the most intense tier of state intervention, require the CSDE to provide specific, technical support and professional development on how to:
  - Develop and implement impactful improvement plans;
  - Guide planning and the selection of improvement priorities by monitoring data both on the implementation of interventions and their impact on student learning; and
  - Effectively communicate strategies to ensure all stakeholders understand the district improvement plan.

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[1] From the components of Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System, we selected indicators that were publicly-available, academic, and assessment-based: Change in district-wide SBAC math and ELA scale scores from school year (SY) 2015 to SY 2016; Change in district-wide Math and ELA T-scores from SY 2012 to SY 2016; and district-level SBAC Math and ELA growth scores for the 2016 school year to capture academic growth.