A Capacity Agenda for State Departments of Education

Introduction

The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed a sobering reality for most of the nation: public school students had not achieved the post-pandemic recovery that policymakers and educators hoped for. While fourth-grade mathematics scores rose slightly, reading scores declined to their lowest level in decades [1]. Data from NWEA's MAP assessment in 2025 tells a similar story—mathematics achievement is gaining ground but remains below pre-pandemic levels, while reading achievement has stagnated [2].

Yet one state stands as a notable exception: Louisiana. It's the only state in the nation to have achieved gains in both fourth-grade reading and mathematics on NAEP between 2017 and 2024 [3]. Over the past two testing cycles in 2022 and 2024, Louisiana has led the nation in reading growth and ranked in the top five for mathematics growth [4]. These gains are particularly remarkable given Louisiana's socioeconomic context. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Louisiana is tied with Mississippi for the highest child poverty rate in the nation as of 2024 [5]. Furthermore, Louisiana ranks 39th nationally in per-pupil spending, providing approximately $13,000 to $13,500 per student—roughly $3,500 less than the national average [6].

We contend that Louisiana's impressive achievement gains are driven by the deliberate, systemic actions undertaken by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) over the past few decades and, particularly, starting in 2012. In this paper, we examine those actions through the lens of the "state capacity crisis" [7] [8] and the ideas within the "Capacity Agenda" recommended by Pahlka and Greenway [9].

We focus on four actions LDOE undertook to improve K-12 academics, drawing on Narechania's experiences as LDOE's Assistant State Superintendent for School Improvement and Kaufman's research studies in Louisiana:

1. Establishing a clear vision for end-user (i.e., student) experience and the implementation chain to achieve it, with a focus on ensuring adoption and use of high-quality instructional materials;
2. Restructuring the SEA to align with the state vision;
3. Clearing out the noise and focusing all carrots and sticks on making the right choice for kids the most simple and easy choice for districts, schools, and teachers; and
4. Creating feedback loops to help school systems improve.

We discuss ways in which these actions are closely aligned with particular aspects of Pahlka and Greenway's "Capacity Agenda," including massive staff reorganization, elimination of procedural obstacles to reform, and an emphasis on measurement and feedback loops to make decisions. We argue that these actions have decluttered and clarified the goals for local education agencies and, thus, created more consistent instruction across the state, leading to steady increases in achievement over time.

Importantly, LDOE's transformation did not occur overnight. The reforms required a strong foundation of accountability policies and goals for academic improvement starting in the late 1990s, alongside unwavering focus on improving *students' learning experiences* in service of raising test scores. This approach demanded buy-in at every level—from classroom teachers to state legislators—and a shared commitment to alignment and coherence across the system.

Before examining Louisiana's work in greater detail, we should establish the policy context in which LDOE operated and trace the historical developments that dictated where SEAs should focus their time and energy. We first describe the rise of a compliance orientation in state education agencies (starting around 1965), followed by the subsequent shift toward performance management (1990–2015). Understanding this history illuminates why Louisiana's actions represented a meaningful departure from traditional state agency practice and carved a new path for the state.

The Rise of Compliance Orientation in State Education Agencies: 1965–1990

State departments of education emerged in the late 19th century in response to the spread of compulsory education laws and accompanying administrative demands—including teacher certification and school financing [8][9]. These state agencies began as modest operations with small staff, although their scope and authority varied considerably across states [9][10]. The U.S. Office of Education (USOE), established in 1867, primarily served as a repository for educational data and a disseminator of information to states and schools, intended to support improvements in teaching and learning [10].

Federal and state education roles expanded dramatically following two pivotal pieces of legislation: the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 [11]. Both laws substantially increased federal funding via specific programs, which necessitated new mechanisms for distributing and monitoring those funds across state and local systems [10]. Those laws were quickly followed by amendments to establish funding for special education and bilingual education in, respectively, 1966 [12] and 1968 [13].

In response to these legislative requirements, federal agencies created separate offices to administer funding streams for each established program, including Title I (for schools serving low-income families), Title II (for library and instructional materials), and Title III (supplemental education centers), among others. State agencies replicated this structure, establishing parallel offices to manage each federal program, each office with considerable autonomy to make their funding contingent on various requirements [14].

As Timar noted of this era, state education agencies "promulgated detailed rules about the use of categorical funds" but "generally left decisions about curriculum to school districts"[8]. This compliance infrastructure—characterized by separate offices, procedural focus, and extensive monitoring—consumed significant state agency resources and attention that might otherwise have been directed toward supporting districts in improving instruction and student learning [11].

During this period, most states also passed laws or policies establishing minimum competencies for graduation and exams to assess students on those competencies [15][16]. As their name suggests, minimum competencies set a basic floor rather than a high bar for what students should master prior to graduation. Implementation of exams assessing these competencies was mostly uneven across states, with varied requirements for whether students needed to pass tests to graduate and no consequences for schools with lower pass rates [16][17].

The Shifting Role of State Agencies: From Compliance to Performance Management, 1990–2015

State agencies experienced another transformation beginning in the 1990s with the emergence of standards-based accountability systems. Driven by concerns about American competitiveness, the seeds of which were planted with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the Clinton administration advanced federal legislation in 1994 requiring states to develop clear K–12 academic standards and measure student progress toward mastering those standards through aligned assessments [18][19].

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 substantially intensified these demands. NCLB required states to assess all students in grades 3–8 annually in mathematics and reading, disaggregate results by school, and impose escalating sanctions on schools that failed to make "Adequate Yearly Progress" [9]. Suddenly, states had to assume the role of performance managers, requiring them to develop sophisticated expertise in measurement and assessment, establish incentive and sanction systems, and monitor school and district compliance [14] [18]. The Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative further elevated the state's reform role by providing financial incentives to states that adopted rigorous standards and assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards and that tied school and teacher evaluation to student achievement gains [20].

States responded to NCLB by investing heavily in data systems designed to measure student growth, building assessment expertise, and creating monitoring apparatus to enforce compliance with federal accountability mandates [14]. While some evidence suggests NCLB contributed to mathematics achievement gains, particularly for lower-achieving students [21][22], evidence of sustained reading gains has been less conclusive [22]. Importantly, researchers could not definitively determine whether NCLB policies or the increased funding associated with NCLB drove observed mathematics gains.

A critical limitation of NCLB was the gap it created between the accountability pressure it placed on states and supports it provided to help states raise achievement levels. As Sunderman and Orfield observed, the "limited" federal resources allocated through NCLB "were often absorbed with collecting data on inputs and tests, leaving little time for using data to facilitate educational reform" [23]. NCLB thus highlighted which schools and systems were failing but provided neither the resources nor the roadmap for teachers to improve instruction in those schools.

Louisiana's Journey Through the Compliance and Performance Management Eras of State Education Reform

As with most states, Louisiana passed laws in the late 1970s and 80s that put in place minimum competencies and assessments with some consequences for students [19][24]. In 1998, the Louisiana legislature made a big shift toward making *schools* accountable for student achievement [24]. Much like what NCLB would mandate starting in 2001, Louisiana developed a formula for calculating an annual school performance score, contingent upon schools meeting growth targets for progress each year. Schools that failed to meet targets received corrective action, and parents could transfer their child out of schools that were in corrective action for multiple years [24].

NCLB was thus not as drastic a shift for Louisiana as other states given the school accountability laws they already had in place. Yet, at the same time, NCLB forced Louisiana to layer federal requirements on top of metrics and sanctions they had already developed, making the school accountability system much more challenging to navigate and administratively demanding for both the state and school districts [25].

In the face of these growing accountability pressures and complicated administrative demands, Louisiana districts received a range of different messages about what they should be doing to increase student achievement. Specifically, the offices that had been established earlier to distribute federal funds—offices for Title I, Title II, etc—all set different and sometimes unaligned goals for districts, provided funding, and monitored improvement from a compliance orientation.

When Paul Pastorek became State Superintendent in 2007, he inherited this complex compliance and accountability system alongside the catastrophic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (2005), which destroyed school infrastructure and displaced hundreds of thousands of students. His tenure focused substantially on rebuilding New Orleans' schools and welcoming charter schools into the New Orleans' school ecosystem [26]. Beyond those recovery efforts, Pastorek championed more rigorous standards and assessments, setting the stage for Louisiana's 2010 adoption of the Common Core State Standards and participation in the PARCC assessment consortium.

Recognizing that assessments alone could not drive improvement, Pastorek also reorganized the LDOE to create offices focused on core academic subjects—literacy, STEM, and college and career readiness—explicitly aligned with academic outcomes rather than federal funding streams like Title I and Title II. Compliance offices for the receipt and distribution of federal funds were "hived off as a separate activity" [18] to insulate academic decision-making from compliance operations. However, these offices remained present within the agency, each office directing federal funding toward various activities depending on that office's mandate and foci.

Louisiana's Efforts to Create a Coherent Instructional System

When John White became State Superintendent in 2011, he sustained Pastorek's commitment to high academic standards and accountability. At the same time, his administration undertook a set of actions to reorient and streamline the work of the state

department of education to raise the bar for K-12 academics. While LDOE applied these strategies in multiple areas, including early childhood education, teacher preparation, and college and career pathways, this paper focuses on the state's actions to improve K-10 literacy and math instruction and outcomes.

Louisiana's earlier efforts—much like those across the United States—brought them closer to helping schools focus on the critical goal of ensuring student learning and increasing schools' accountability to meet those goals. Yet, they also made the state system itself far more complex, layering the goal of higher student achievement in literacy and math on top of numerous and diverse compliance-oriented goals tied to federal funding. Every office in the agency was creating plans, distributing funds, and supporting implementation without any coordination across teams. Districts across the state had to meet the demands of each of these offices, preventing them from creating coherent plans for student learning. For example, most districts completed over 50 different grant applications, each submitted to several different offices, to receive state funding. Literacy goals for a given district, for example, could be embedded in applications for Title I funding, Title II professional development funding, and literacy funding, as well as bilingual and special education funding. Each application would have slightly different goals aligned with the broader aims of that office. All these goals were housed in different state offices with different requirements, resulting in what education scholars have called a "fragmented" and "incoherent" policy environment for local education agencies [27] [28] [29].

Starting in 2011, White sought to make that environment more coherent for school districts, which involved many moves that closely align with the capacity agenda framework articulated by Pahlka and Greenway [7]. Pahlka and Greenway, among other scholars, argue that the central challenge of modern governance is insufficient implementation capacity, compounded by administrative complexity [30] [31]. The solution, they argue, is to focus on the "how" of government—i.e., state capacity to implement their goals—rather than the "what" of the just setting those goals. Pahlka and Greenway focus on four primary strategies to increase state capacity: hire the right people and remove ineffective personnel; reduce procedural obstacles and bloat; invest in digital infrastructure; and apply a "test-and-learn" approach for getting to outcomes.

This paper highlights aspects of these solutions embedded in four key actions by LDOE:

1. **Establishing a clear vision for end-user experience and laying out a hypothesis for the implementation that will lead to those experiences**: Pahlka and Greenway emphasized the importance of defining outcomes and establishing a learning agenda for achieving them. That said, they did not deconstruct all the steps necessary to define that agenda or the outcomes on which to focus. We argue that before learning and testing, or undertaking any other actions, states must make sure they have a concrete and tangible vision of what end-user experiences should look like. In the case of SEAs, the end user is the student. Typically, SEAs define end user experience in terms of raising test scores. Yet the goal to improve test scores is a destination without a roadmap, which often leads different state offices, along with each district and teacher, on their own route to improving student outcomes. In LDOE's case, they went about identifying critical student

experiences necessary to raise achievement and then backing out the key adult behaviors in the "implementation chain" that were critical for those experiences, including behaviors for school districts, school principals, and –perhaps most importantly—teachers. This action drove everyone down the same road and cut out all the circuitous routes being taken to improve student achievement.

2. **Vision-aligned restructuring to send coherent messages to school districts**: Pahlka and Greenway emphasize the importance of restructuring project teams by reforming hiring processes and re-focusing those teams to be mission and solutions-oriented, rather than putting up obstacles to end goals. Likewise, we discuss how LDOE substantially reorganized internal operations and eliminated redundancies that hindered coherence, repositioning the agency as a unified system focused on coordinated improvement rather than a collection of independent programs. Importantly, their team was guided by setting up a mission and vision for end user experience up front.

3. **Clearing out the noise and making the right choice the easy choice**: Just as Pahlka and Greenway emphasized the need to reduce procedural bloat and unnecessary bureaucratic processes, LDOE cleared out the noise by signaling what materials and supports were high-quality, and they made the right choice the easy choice by pointing every incentive in the system at adoption and use of HQIM.

4. **Creating feedback loops to measure and monitor quality.** The state implementation team visited school systems and classrooms on a regular basis to ensure that the specific shifts identified in the implementation chain were actually happening in districts, schools, and classrooms, and they then provided feedback and recommendations to school system leaders based on this data.

In the remainder of this paper, we describe each of these actions in more detail.

Having a Clear Vision for End-User Experience and the Implementation Chain

While NCLB's performance focus created unprecedented visibility into student outcomes, standardized test scores alone proved insufficient as guides for instructional improvement. As Firestone and Schorr observed, "all the pressure in the world [via NCLB accountability systems] seems unlikely to change practice, however, if educators do not receive adequate support to make the changes demanded by higher standards and more challenging tests" [32].

LDOE adopted a different approach: rather than beginning with achievement outcomes defined solely by test scores, the department articulated goals for students' classroom learning experiences. They recognized that these experiences had to change before student outcomes could change. When state officials initially walked into math classrooms across the state, they saw teachers doing the majority of the work, lecturing students and solving math problems on the board for students. In reading classes, they saw teachers asking students to read short passages and answer multiple-choice questions about them in worksheets.

LDOE knew the status quo they were seeing was not going to drive students to master grade-level standards to read and understand complex texts and engage in conceptual and procedural mathematical thinking. They therefore redefined expectations for what students should be doing and what observers should see when they walk into classrooms. In English language arts (ELA), LDOE's vision for student experiences centered on students reading complex, grade-level texts—and speaking and writing about them—activities closely aligned with state ELA standards and the scientific literature on reading development and instruction [33]. In mathematics, LDOE's vision emphasized students working on and solving complex mathematics problems, and justifying their thinking in their speaking and writing, which are practices interconnected with state mathematics standards and the Common Core's Standards for Mathematical Practice, such as reasoning abstractly and constructing viable mathematical arguments [34].

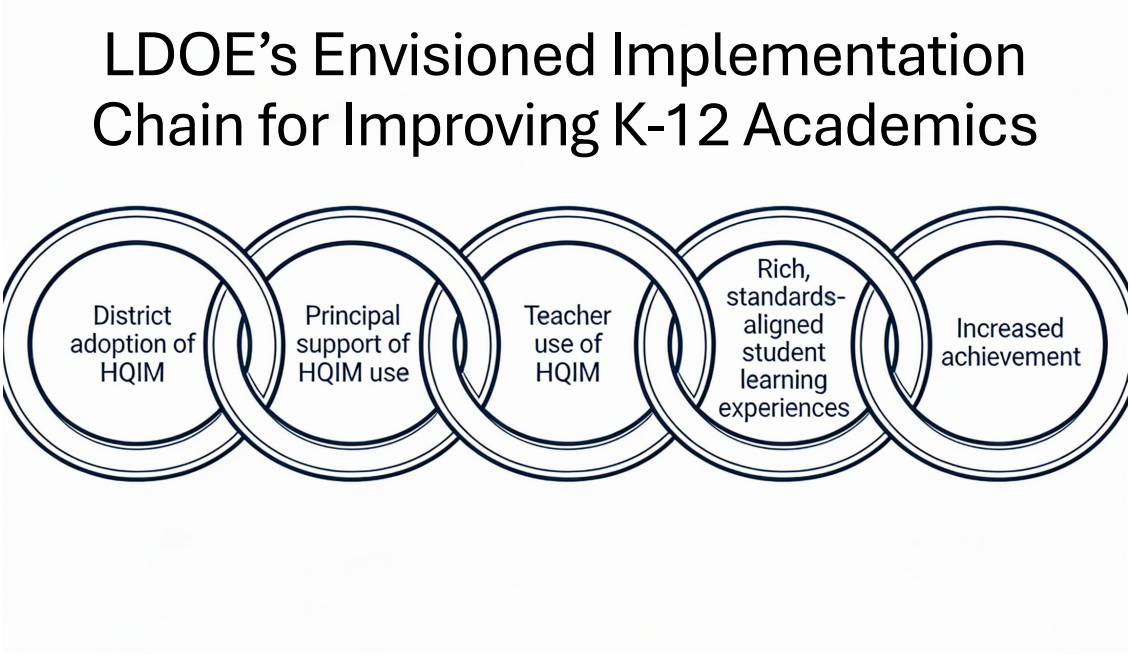
This vision for student experiences served multiple strategic purposes. First, and most importantly, it defined end user experience in a way that could be observed and measured in implementation. Educators across the system—from state officials to teacher coaches—could monitor whether intended student classroom experiences were, in fact, happening through feedback loops that we discuss in more detail later. In addition to defining impact in terms of test scores, they defined impact in terms of classroom experiences that could readily guide teachers' actions, which set them along the route of defining the "how" of where government must focus, rather than the "what" of raising test scores.

Second, the vision kept LDOE from giving in to pressure to revise their rigorous standards and assessments in ways that might water them down. Even when the Louisiana legislature moved to change the standards as part of a nationwide backlash to the Common Core, LDOE worked with educators and legislators to make smaller, targeted changes that maintained the rigor of the Common Core [35]. State officials attributed this consistency to their clear, unwavering vision for student experience [36].

Third, and perhaps most importantly, just as LDOE's vision reimagined students' classroom experiences, it pushed them to specifically name the ways in which every adult in the implementation chain, from the state to the student—including teachers, teacher coaches, principals, and district leaders—would need to shift their daily work to realize this vision for students. They realized that changing the student experience would require teachers to have, and be both expected and supported to use, high-quality instructional materials (HQIM). HQIM are the ideal instructional reform because they are prepackaged to be aligned with academic standards and intended to build knowledge systematically over time and across lessons. Research confirms that HQIM, especially when combined with curriculum-aligned professional development, can yield substantial learning gains [38].

But for teachers to use HQIM regularly and effectively, the other actors within the implementation chain would also need to shift their daily work. Districts would need to purchase the curricula and procure the training. Principals would need to structure teacher collaborative time and observation around these new curricula.

Figure 1.



They then aligned state communications, messages, incentives, and feedback to the implementation chain behaviors they wanted to see. That started with restructuring the SEA, which we discuss in the next section.

Restructuring the SEA to Send Coherent Messages to Districts

Although Pastorek had reorganized around academic subject matter offices, compliance-focused operations remained, and no clear mechanism existed to coordinate academic implementation within schools. School districts thus navigated the demands of multiple offices who all published different guidance, issued separate grants, and monitored varying aspects of district operations totally disconnected from other offices—similar to what Pahlka has termed "sludge," the procedural obstacles that paralyze government effectiveness. Districts routinely received unrelated communications and messages about LDOE priorities from these different offices. As one state official characterized it, "There were 600 people on staff and about 300 were emailing districts about something" [36].

To streamline services and create coherence, LDOE undertook a comprehensive reorganization, reducing its workforce from approximately 600 employees in 2012 to roughly 300 by 2015. While budget constraints contributed to this reduction, state officials noted that staff reductions proved "helpful to coherence because they created an environment where there just weren't as many people out there saying what they wanted to say" [39]. This focused the agency's messaging and ensured greater alignment around state priorities.

Rather than organizing around federal funding streams (Title I, IDEA, Title II offices, etc.) and offices for each academic subject, the department restructured around functional teams aligned to the lifecycle of school support. As Pahlka and Greenway write, they

transferred “power to make decisions” from “compliance personnel to the people closest to the work” [7]. This restructuring focused on creating planning, funding, and implementation teams for each major area under the department’s purview: early childhood, teacher preparation, core academics from elementary to early high school, and career and college readiness in high school. In this report, we focus on how these teams supported core academics, although other areas were reorganized similarly.

- **The "Planning Team"** was responsible for building the implementation chain, or the coherent vision of what teachers, coaches, school leaders, and district leaders should do, and then creating the guidance and tools for each layer of the system to get there. As we discuss in more detail later, this planning team work involved not only identifying high-quality curriculum and professional development but also putting in place supports, incentives, and monitoring tools to ensure their use.

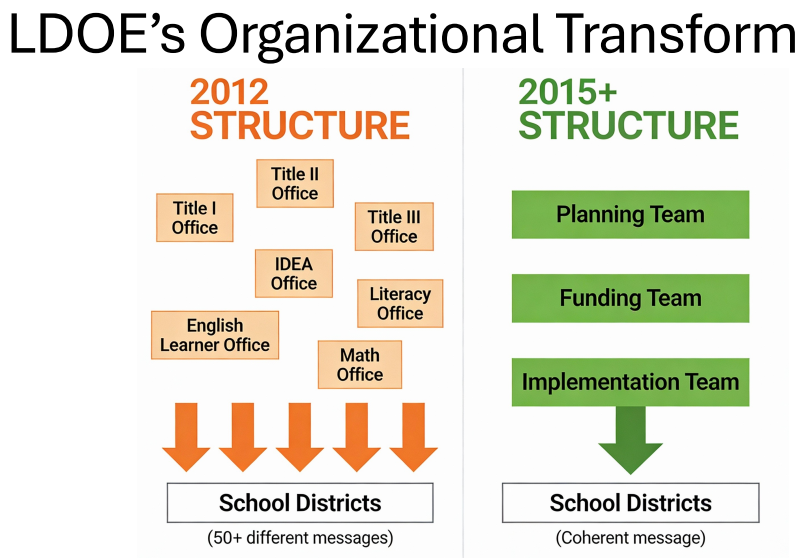
- **The "Funding Team"** consolidated resource allocation decisions. No longer did a Title I office, a special education office, and a Title II office, along with different offices for literacy, math, and other content areas, make independent funding decisions. Instead, one team directed all state resources toward state priorities. Importantly, the funding team consolidated over 50 separate grant applications into a single, unified application system—the "Super App"—which required a re-tooling of the existing grants management platform. The Super App tied funding to the goals identified by the planning team: to encourage the adoption and use of high-quality materials at every level of the implementation chain. While this tool did not reflect the comprehensive digital infrastructure advocated by Pahlka and Greenway, it was a simple action that drove all districts to one place where they applied for all state funding around a focused academic strategy rather than disconnected funding streams. By requiring districts to articulate a unified vision and budget all their federal and state grant dollars aligned to this vision in a single application, LDOE created structural incentives for systems thinking that reflected their own theory of action.

- **The “Implementation Team"** consisted of regional networks serving as liaisons and translators between state officials and school systems, ensuring that state priorities were translated into actionable school-level change. The individuals on these teams ensured that within each district, the leadership understood the vision and implementation chain, developed a Super App application aligned to the implementation chain, and monitored the extent to which each actor in the chain was making the named shifts.

Alongside this structural reorganization, LDOE dramatically reduced redundancy and miscommunication through centralized management of these three functions—planning, funding, and implementation—and management of the communication protocols needed to ensure district leadership, principals, and teachers were clear on the Department’s priorities. First and foremost, all outreach to districts required approval from the State Superintendent's office before transmission [36]. This simple but drastic change was intended to convey a powerful message to state officials—that LDOE was not a federation of independent programs but a unified organization focused on coherent, coordinated

improvement. Second, the Superintendent's office oversaw the development of a disciplined and routine set of communications between the state and each role group across the education system, including separate monthly calls and/newsletters with superintendents, assistant superintendents, school principals, and even technology supervisors [39][40]. In these meetings, state officials would provide resources to support decision making, like guidebooks for administrators laying out critical school system strategies closely aligned with the state's goals for adoption, use and support of HQIM [41].

Figure 2.



Another part of their communications strategy was establishing collaborative links to teachers to champion state efforts. Starting in 2013, Louisiana began cultivating a group of teacher leaders—approximately two people per school nominated by school districts—who participate in quarterly state trainings and an annual teacher summit where they could build their expertise in HQIM and receive coordinated information about state goals and activities [37][39]. More recently, LDOE developed an intensive content leader training for teachers who can then return to their school system to provide curriculum support to other teachers [37][42].

Clearing Out the Noise and Making the Right Choice the Easy Choice

Pahlka and Greenway identify procedural bloat as a big obstacle in the way of government action, and they provide multiple principles to guide de-proceduralization, including an acceptance of complexity as a problem in itself. SEA restructuring achieved part of this goal by streamlining SEA offices and messages to point toward the end-user experience they had identified and communicate with every part of the implementation chain about the actions they should be taking.

The next step for LDOE was to focus every stick and carrot in the system on the adult behaviors in the implementation chain they wanted to see. To that end, LDOE:

- Cleared out the noise by signaling what materials and supports were high-quality, and what was not; and
- Made the right choice the easy choice by pointing every incentive at the adoption and use of materials that were high-quality.

Clearing out the noise with clear signals about what is high-quality. When the White administration assumed leadership in 2012, district and school leaders received minimal guidance about which curriculum materials aligned with standards beyond a lengthy list of "approved" curricula updated periodically by a committee. Publishers frequently hired retired principals to serve as "trusted resources," tasked with convincing schools to adopt particular materials regardless of evidence of effectiveness. Districts lacked clear strategies for supporting teachers in implementing new curricula that often differed substantially from previous materials, and professional development opportunities frequently bore no relationship to the curricula districts selected [37].

To make more clear to all stakeholders which curriculum materials were high-quality and aligned with standards, the first step the academic planning team took was to replace its outdated curriculum approval process with a rigorous, transparent rubric-based review system. Beginning in 2015, LDOE evaluated and categorized all comprehensive curriculum materials as Tier I (exemplified quality), Tier II (approaching quality), or Tier III (not representing quality), posting curriculum reviews on its website [39][43]. This new review process required building political support among state legislators to pass new textbook review policies, as well as identifying districts with high-quality materials to serve as models and advocates. LDOE also worked with teacher leaders to conduct the reviews, which provide districts with transparent, evidence-based guidance.

To signal which professional development opportunities were high-quality, LDOE created a vendor catalog with information about which professional development they should procure, which has been replaced more recently with a professional learning partner guide [44]. The instructional materials professional learning guide focuses only on vendors that support use of specific HQIM and build teachers' content and curriculum knowledge in a variety of ways [45].

Making the right choice the easy choice by incentivizing quality. Merely signaling quality will prove insufficient if administrative friction and misaligned incentives prevent adoption. Louisiana's academic planning team addressed this challenge through what Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein have termed "choice architecture" [46], structuring the environment—and specifically policy, communications, funding, and training—so that the intended behavior became the easy, obvious choice for every actor in the implementation chain. More specifically, the planning team worked with the funding and implementation teams to develop choice architecture and remove procedural bloat that made the decision to adopt and use Tier I curriculum materials the one that made the most sense to districts, schools, and teachers.

First, with direction from the planning team, the funding team negotiated statewide contracts that offered Tier I materials at reduced prices [37]. This move removed cost barriers to adoption of the highest-quality options, and it also allowed districts to skip the complex and time-consuming procurement processes they would typically undertake to

purchase high-quality instructional materials. Instead, they could just work with the state to acquire those materials quickly and easily.

Through the SuperApp, the funding team also ensured that any funding to low-performing districts was contingent upon adoption of high-quality instructional materials, creating direct incentives for systems struggling to improve. Importantly, this requirement was not in place early on, when the state first provided information about which materials were high-quality and which were not. Instead, they required underperforming schools in Louisiana—based on performance on standardized assessments and graduation rates—to purchase Tier 1 curriculum materials for math and reading starting in the 2018-19 school year. At that point, a substantial portion of districts had adopted Tier 1 materials and spoke to their usefulness, which was a model to districts that had not adopted those materials [42].

Lastly, the implementation team aligned teacher professional learning and career ladder opportunities (e.g., content leader training) to Tier I curriculum materials [37]. Thus, any state-supported, free professional learning opportunities were most useful to those districts and teachers that adopted Tier I materials.

Creating Feedback Loops to Measure and Monitor Quality

The accountability incentives highlighted in the previous section were intended to ensure adoption of high-quality materials in low-performing districts. Yet, these requirements, in themselves, may not ensure rapid adoption or use of those materials. That use requires feedback loops that are often challenging for SEAs to put in place. For LDOE, those feedback loops operated through the implementation team charged with supporting specific school systems. As suggested by Pahlka and Greenway, these feedback loops allowed LDOE to test and learn with key stakeholders, as well as use the feedback to improve both schools and their own policies.

To help implementation teams monitor school systems, LDOE gave them simple checklists of actions closely tied to the implementation chain with evidence requirements, based on challenges that were blocking use of HQIM. For example, early on, implementation team members would come into low-performing districts in the summer and ask for the physical purchase order that demonstrated they had adopted high-quality instructional materials, along with proof that those materials had been taken out of the boxes in which they had been delivered and were in teachers' classrooms.

Later, the checklists also included a simple list of three indicators aligned to the state's vision for students that implementation team members would use when observing classrooms: (1) the teacher is delivering the lesson using HQIM; (2) all students are doing the heavy lifting in the classroom (e.g., speaking, writing, working); (3) the teacher is monitoring student learning and providing feedback guided by HQIM. Those rubrics have since been embedded in the more comprehensive Louisiana Educator Rubric [47].

Typically, implementation team members were out in schools alongside district leaders four out of five days, and they could observe a small number of classrooms in 1-3 schools within a district in a single day. Their findings would be recorded in a statewide database allowing the Department's leadership to identify and address statewide and regional trends. Additionally, the data would be shared with district superintendents along with recommendations on how to address the specific needs within their schools.

The implementation and planning teams would also connect regularly to ensure that what the implementation team was learning about school district implementation could further shape state decision-making. So, for example, while they had cultivated a group of teacher leaders to support implementation of curriculum in every school, they observed that some of these teacher leaders did not have all the tools they needed to do that. They then set about creating a content leader training that would provide more intensive preparation for teacher leaders to help other teachers.

Evidence of Implementation and Impact

Louisiana's approach has yielded measurable results. The state now has among the highest rates of adoption of high-quality instructional materials compared to almost any other state [42][48]. Teachers in Louisiana also report engaging in curriculum-focused professional development more frequently than their counterparts nationally [49].

Student outcomes—as reflected in both NAEP and state assessments—have improved substantially. On the 2024 NAEP, Louisiana's fourth-graders led the nation in reading growth [49]. The state ranked 16th nationally in fourth-grade reading (up from 50th in 2019) and 38th in fourth-grade mathematics (up from 50th in 2019) [4]. When the Urban Institute adjusted 2024 NAEP to compare how students in each state score with demographically similar students around the country, Louisiana ranked second in the nation in both 4th and 8th grade reading, third in 8th grade math, and fourth in 4th grade math [50].

These are results that have not happened by accident or through quick turnaround interventions. Instead, they are the result of the state's steady, relentless focus on the goal of ensuring students have access to high-quality instructional materials and teaching and the work they have done to ensure districts, schools and teachers embrace that goal.

Implementation Chain Planning and Execution: the How State Education Agencies Need

In their overview of a capacity agenda for government, Pahlka and Greenway asked, "Once we decide what our policies should be, do we know *how* to implement them in real life?" They continue, "Rebuilding our state capacity – the how of our government – is an arduous task that requires a stomach for learning and fixing the rules and culture of bureaucracy" [7].

In the case of state education agencies, identifying the how for improving student outcomes is imperative, given the layers of compliance and performance management that

have stifled them from planning for meaningful change. In Louisiana's example, the how was a four-part process: first, setting a concrete and simple vision for what students' experience should look like in classrooms, and then identifying adult behaviors in the implementation chain across the education system—from what teachers need to do in their classrooms to what districts and schools must do to support teachers; second, restructuring and streamlining every part of the state education agency to message those behaviors as the most critical goals for all system actors: district administrators, school leaders, and teachers; third, clearing out the noise and pointing all incentives at making the right choice the easiest choice for all stakeholders in the system; and fourth, creating feedback loops to monitor school systems and help them improve.

The implementation chain itself ungirded this entire process and defined the "how." The chain metaphor helped LDOE identify every actor or link in the "black box" that often lies between policy and outcomes. They recognized that simply having a goal to raise student achievement was not enough to make student achievement rise. Instead, they had to both determine the nature of students' classroom learning experiences as the critical link for pulling up test scores and then back out all the other links in the chain that had to be in place to make those learning experiences real. In LDOE's case, those links included district adoption of high-quality, standards-aligned materials and their use among all teachers.

Upon determining their vision and the implementation chain, what to restructure and reform fell into place for LDOE. The work itself was not easy, but—beyond using implementation chains as a blueprint for SEAs reform efforts—states can learn several additional lessons from LDOE's work that can guide future efforts.

First, state agency coherence directly enables school system improvement. When multiple state offices send conflicting messages or impose disconnected requirements, districts must expend substantial resources navigating bureaucratic complexity rather than investing in instructional improvement. By reorganizing themselves into reinforcing teams for planning, funding, and implementation, LDOE essentially reversed the tendency for SEAs to let funding direct planning and implementation. Furthermore, implementation was integrated into planning by ensuring the implementation chain itself was embedded in the planning process and not an overthought.

Second, a strong system of incentives for desired behaviors is critical in most state contexts where local control is historically valued. Making desired behaviors easy through choice architecture—negotiated pricing, streamlined processes, aligned professional development, and conditional funding—proved more effective in Louisiana than reliance on persuasion or mandate alone. Many officials and district administrators alike would agree that Louisiana is a "local control state," in that local education agencies have had considerable control over education processes. For these reasons, mandates telling districts what curriculum materials they must use would likely not receive wide support. Instead, starting with substantial incentives for use of state-approved materials proved the best way to encourage uptake.

Finally, sustained leadership commitment is essential. LDOE's transformation unfolded over multiple years and required consistent focus on the core goal of improving student

learning experiences. Coherence is not a one-time initiative but an ongoing commitment to alignment across all system activities.

Louisiana's curriculum policies have guided many other states, including those participating in a Council of Chief State School Officers network of 16 states that documented marked gains in high-quality material adoption [48]. Within these states, teachers' self-reported use of HQIM and participation in curriculum-aligned professional learning has been higher than across the rest of the nation. One important takeaway from RAND's evaluation of this network was the importance of SEAs defining and prioritizing a consistent focus on adoption and use of HQIM, alongside use of coaches and peer networks to help them keep their eye on the ball and overcome implementation hurdles [48]. These states did not all adopt uniform policies for encouraging use of desired curriculum materials, but many of these policies reflected Louisiana's strategies, including ones across all states that signaled which materials were high-quality, and which were not, and incentivizing their adoption.

Conclusion

We view the central challenge facing American public education as a lack of a clear vision for student experiences and coherent policies to guide school systems toward implementing that vision. Louisiana's experience demonstrates that state education agencies can shift from their historical role as compliance monitors and performance managers toward their potential role as drivers of coherent instructional improvement. By establishing a clear vision for student learning experiences, reorganizing agency structure to support that vision, leveraging regulatory and financial tools to make desired behaviors easy, and monitoring their progress, states can create systems where improvement becomes possible at scale.

As the nation grapples with declining achievement in reading and stagnant growth in mathematics, Louisiana's approach—grounded in research on effective instruction, high-quality materials, and strategic capacity building—offers a model worthy of attention and adaptation.

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