

Hiring and Evaluating External Partners

Center on Innovation & Improvement

External providers can provide critical expertise and capacity to states and districts committed to initiating dramatic school improvement efforts. States and districts may hire external providers to:

1. **Assess the needs of individual schools** to determine which model would work best in that school; hire an external provider to conduct school quality reviews or needs assessments;
2. **Develop a state- or district-wide structure to support dramatic improvement** (e.g., hire an external provider to develop a pipeline of skilled school turnaround leaders);
3. **Manage a state- or district-wide cluster of schools identified for turnaround** (e.g., hire an external provider to coordinate targeted assistance to a cluster of lowest performing schools);
4. **Operate individual schools identified to implement the restart model** (e.g., partner with a charter management organization or education management organization to operate the school); or
5. **Provide targeted technical assistance to build the state’s or district’s capacity for dramatic district and school improvement** (e.g., hire an external provider to recruit, select, and train individuals to serve as instructional coaches in schools identified for intervention or improve programs for students with disabilities).

Regardless of which of the above tasks the contractor is being asked to perform, there will be some commonalities among the various contracts. The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center and The Finance Project (2006) provide criteria for assessing a prospective contractor’s organizational and financial ability to perform the necessary work. Building on extensive contracting in the charter sector, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (2005; 2009) has codified key steps to selecting and managing contracts with external service providers.

The foundation of the relationship between states or districts and external partners is a thoughtfully negotiated contract that articulates roles, responsibilities, performance expectations, and consequences for failure to meet expectations. Regardless of whether it is a state department of education or a district pursuing the relationship, a rigorous evaluation of the partner’s capacity is essential to fully leveraging the potential expertise of external partners to support focused and dramatic school improvement efforts. As experience with Supplemental Educational Services has shown, this is not an insignificant undertaking; care in vetting the capacity and experience of external partners before engaging in a contractual relationship is essential, and correcting deficiency in performance or terminating contracts once executed is a painful process for all concerned.

Steps for States and Districts in Hiring External Partners

States and districts interested in hiring external partners to help with school improvement efforts need to establish structures that will allow them to recruit, select, establish relationship terms, manage, and evaluate the providers (Kowal & Arkin, 2005). Building on the lessons culled from hiring external providers to work in traditional as well as chartered public schools, the following steps provide a blueprint for states and districts interested in creating a rigorous system to attract, select, manage, and continuously evaluate external providers offering a range of school improvement services (Hassel & Hassel, 2005; Kowal & Arkin, 2005; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2005; National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2005; Rhim, 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2009). These steps are important whether a state department of education or a local board of education is hiring the external provider:

1. Identify unambiguous reasons for hiring an external partner;
2. Engage stakeholders about the need to hire external providers and ensure the entire process is transparent and fair;

3. Articulate specific goals of the relationship with the external partner, including measurable expectations and criteria for selection of external partners to meet these goals;
4. Create conditions to attract multiple high quality external partners (e.g., extend key flexibilities, allocate adequate funds for external providers, infuse fairness and transparency into selection and accountability processes);
5. Budget adequate funding to support relationship with external partner for duration of contract;
6. Develop a rigorous process to select an external partner whose experience and qualifications match the specified goals (e.g., a written application, due diligence to confirm track record of success and financial stability, an in-person interview with the external provider's leadership team, and, if appropriate due to scope, a site visit to schools receiving services from the external partner);
7. Negotiate a contract outlining roles and responsibilities of the external partner as well as the district and relevant schools, and if applicable, state department of education, as well as explicit and measurable outcomes, including interim indicators of growth;
8. Provide support as needed and appropriate but do not micro-manage external partner;
9. Evaluate the external partner's progress toward goals; and
10. Define consequences for failure (e.g., termination or modification of contract).

Action Principles

For State

State departments of education are well positioned to *establish the conditions* for external providers to fill a distinct need in districts and schools as well as *hire external partners* for a variety of services.

1. Address policy barriers that might limit the role of the state education agency in such efforts.
2. Rather than asking individual districts to vet potential partners, state education agency staff should proactively identify qualified partners who meet certain standards and provide districts with a list of "approved" or "preferred" partners.
3. Provide assistance to district personnel by developing model selection procedures that assess multiple aspects of an external partner's performance.
4. Contribute to the evaluation of the effectiveness of an external partner by making certain that the state has high quality and coherent state assessment systems that provides districts with a nuanced understanding of overall school performance as well as growth of individual student sub-groups.
5. Create and adequately support a state-level office to identify specific schools for targeted assistance from external partners and thereafter recruit, select, establish relationship terms, manage, and evaluate the partners using the key action principles.

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