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**Beyond Comprehensive School Reform:  
Managing and Mediating Environments to Support  
Systemic School-Level Improvement**

by

**Joshua L. Glazer  
Rothschild Foundation**

**Donald J. Peurach  
Michigan State University, Department of Educational Administration**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the efforts of two external school-reform programs to expand their systems of intervention to include districts and states. An analytic framework is put forth that highlights the implications of this strategy for the ability of interveners to promote improvement and to survive as organizations. The framework draws attention to interactions among interveners' designs for change, the environments in which they operate, and their organizational capabilities. Findings suggest that working with districts and states, on the one hand, presents interveners with opportunities to attain high-profile adoptions and to exert a measure of control over environmental influences, yet, on the other hand, demands an expansion of an intervener's enterprise that can quickly overwhelm organizational resources.*

**Introduction**

Over a decade of research into comprehensive school reform has repeatedly found that the effectiveness of systemic improvement efforts by external, nongovernmental change agents depends as much on “environmental” factors as it does on the particularities of intervention programs (Berends et al., 2002; Desimone, 2002; Rowan, et al., 2004). Among the most prominent findings, for example, is that districts and states constitute important organizations in the environments of both program developers and schools, and bear directly on the implementation and effectiveness of school improvement programs. For example, Berends et al. (2001) claimed that districts often undermined interveners' efforts by requiring schools to adopt other reform initiatives, limiting schools' autonomy, and withdrawing financial support. Desimone's (2002) review of the CSR literature found that “the success of schoolwide projects hinges on the districts' ability to provide effective coordination and service delivery” (Winfield, 1991), whereas Barnes et al. (2007) argued that district management interacts with state accountability systems to influence school-level implementation. In general, these and other researchers have shown that the incentives and resources that interveners offer schools are filtered through a system in which guidance comes from various directions and in various forms. Rowan

et al. (2004) captured this point, arguing that the work of “...aligning the various forms of instructional guidance in support of a coherent set of curricular and instructional practices within schools is a major challenge of CSR” (p. 71). In sum, while comprehensive school reform programs were initially developed as school-level interventions, experience and research have demonstrated that organizations in schools’ environment are highly consequential for interveners’ effectiveness and viability.

But while researchers have noted the salience of environmental organizations on external, nongovernmental improvement initiatives, they have done so primarily to explain variation in implementation, and usually simply to make the point that environments matter more than most analysts have typically assumed (e.g., Berends et al.; Bodilly, 1998). Far less scholarship has explored the salience of environmental organizations from the perspective of external change agents, as they actively position themselves in schools’ environments, construct alliances and partnerships with other organizations, lobby local, state, and federal governments, and attempt to create environmental conditions within which their school-level programs can flourish. This constitutes a significant gap in the literature that inhibits our ability to understand how external change agents operate, and the conditions under which they can play productive roles in the effort to improve teaching and learning across the larger education system.

The purpose of the proposed paper, then, is to complement emerging, implementation-centered research with new knowledge that illuminates the issue from the perspective of external, nongovernmental change agents (referred to hereafter as “interveners”). The current analysis draws from research on two leading comprehensive school reform programs—America's Choice and Success for All—to explicate the interdependent relationships between schools, designs for improvement, strategies for managing and mediating environments, and the consequent organizational challenges for interveners. The analysis suggests that while interveners cannot afford to ignore key organizations in schools’ environment, expanding the boundaries of their “system” to include districts, states, and the federal government greatly increases the complexity of their designs for

change, restructures and reshapes environmental influences, and places additional demands on their organizational capability and expertise.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. First, we elaborate our analytic framework, after which we discuss the research methods that we employed during this study. Third, we present the case of America's Choice, explicating the pressures that contributed to the expansion of the America's Choice system to include states and districts, and the consequences of that decision. Next, we consider the case of Success for All by examining the same set of dynamics. In the conclusion, we discuss the implications of these findings for the future of external interveners' efforts to support large-scale instructional improvement.

### **Analytic Frame: Design, Environment, Organization<sup>1</sup>**

If interveners face the difficult question of where to draw the boundaries of their systems, researchers confront an equally pressing problem of how to conceptualize and study the factors that comprise this dilemma. To meet this challenge, we elaborate an analytic frame that surfaces the key issues that bear on interveners' ability to maintain productive relationships with educational agencies and to keep their organizations afloat. The frame, sketched just below, is divided into three sections and includes designs for change, environments, and organization.

#### *Design for change*

Interveners' primary tool in their effort to exert leverage on schools is a "design" for change. Designs are the medium by which interveners' convey their ideas, plans, and goals to school leaders, teachers, and students. Comprehensive, school-level designs typically have two central components: an instructional design and an organizational design. The instructional design deals explicitly with classroom processes that relate to teaching and learning (e.g., grouping of students within classes, allocation of instructional

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<sup>1</sup> This frame was developed in the context of the Study of Instructional Improvement, and in particular owes a debt to David Cohen, Karen Gates, and Simona Goldin.

time, representation of content) while the organizational design addresses matters such as leadership, professional development, instructional planning, and collegial work. From an implementation standpoint, it is the interpretation and use of the organizational and instructional components of the design by teachers and school leaders on which success hinges. Designs, thus, must be a focal point for researchers' efforts to analyze interveners' work and the dilemmas of system-level change.

Moreover, the internal architecture of a design is, itself, consequential for implementation, and researchers have learned a good deal about the way in which designs both pose challenges to enactors and support their efforts to improve practice. Recent research emphasizes *elaboration* and *scaffolding* (i.e., professional learning) as aspects of designs that bear on implementation. Elaboration refers to the extent of detail and specificity with which interveners communicate ideas and intended practices to enactors. Designs can be elaborated through materials, videos, instructions, demonstrations, and other media that depict interveners' plans and intended practices. Intervenors can elaborate their designs in great detail or they can loosely elaborate them with general statements and broad guidelines. In general, the more broadly that a design is elaborated, the less guidance it offers enactors and the more it requires them to invent the details of practice on their own (Cohen & Ball, 2006). Some past studies have found that more elaborated designs lead to more faithful implementation (Rowan et al., 2004; Desimone, 2002; Porter et al., 1988).

In addition to elaboration, past research has also emphasized the importance of professional learning opportunities that designs afford teachers and school leaders. The extent to which interveners "scaffold" enactors into new practices by helping them cultivate new knowledge and skill, hone new techniques, and negotiate the dynamics of change has been found to bear on the quality of implementation (Rowan et al., 2004; Cohen & Ball, 2003; Desimone, 2002). But judgments about the quality and extent of professional learning opportunities offered by a design are only meaningful relative to the demands the design places on enactors and the extent to which those demands surpass

their existing knowledge and experience. All things being equal, designs that require a large break from existing methods and demand a high level of professional knowledge need to offer more support and guidance than designs that seek marginal changes. In this sense, designs can be interpreted in the context of the cognitive demands they pose to enactors, the degree of departure from past practice they require, and the extent of guidance they provide.

### *Environments*

Though designs are central to interveners' efforts to improve schools, researchers cannot limit their analysis to intervention designs, as neither implementation nor the work of intervening are exclusively matters of design. One reason for this is that designs are developed, interpreted, and used in environments, and the dilemmas of intervening are deeply entwined in those environments. Many of the problems that interveners set out to fix originate in environments, and the capacity of interveners to overcome those problems is mediated by those same environments. Designs, in other words, function not solely in tandem with schools, but also in interaction with environments, and for research to capture the complexity of interveners' work, it must take these complexities into account.

Consider, for example, the political organization of schooling in the United States. Constitutional checks on federal influence coupled with a tradition of local control have contributed to a system that offers an abundance of uncoordinated guidance that has been found to contribute to instructional chaos at the school level (Cohen & Spillane, 1993). Interveners that seek to remedy incoherence provide designs that are systemic and highly integrated, tying together curriculum, instruction, organization, and leadership. In theory, such designs promise a far more coherent version of schooling, yet in practice, their intent can be undermined by the very problems they set out to fix. Because even the most carefully coordinated design is unlikely to enhance instructional coherence if it lands in a school awash with other programs.

Another example of how environments mediate the relationship between design and

implementation is the problem of teacher mobility. Interveners seek to increase the level of expertise within a school faculty by providing professional development and continuous learning opportunities designed to enhance professional knowledge. Many scholars feel that robust professional learning for teachers is the sine qua non of instructional improvement. Yet even the most assiduous efforts to increase teacher knowledge are unlikely to be effective in schools with rampant teacher turnover. Policies that allow teachers with just a few years of experiences to seek work in new schools (and typically better ones) contribute to what is often a devastating rate of teacher mobility and a disproportionate number of under qualified teachers in high poverty schools' (Haycock, 2002; Rosenholtz, 1988). Efforts to create a cohesive faculty built on shared expertise and commitments will gain little traction in schools where teachers do not stay long enough to learn the design at a deep level or develop strong collegial ties with other teachers.

On a conceptual level, then, understanding interveners' dilemma of where to intercede in the system, involves consideration of how environments bear on implementation and interveners' work. Interveners cannot exert influence on all the social and political dimensions of the environment that bear on implementation for they are far too many, and their resources far too limited. Yet it is precisely because of the interaction between designs and environments that ignoring environments all together—as many past programs have done—risks weak and inconsistent implementation. How to strategically buffer schools, manage environments, and conserve resources is a major dilemma for interveners, and an important conceptual point for researchers.

*Intervener organizational capacity*

The more interveners attempt to develop comprehensive designs, support implementation, and actively manage schools' environment, the more they require robust, highly capable organizations that are capable of such work. For example, to develop highly elaborated designs that delve into the details of teaching and learning, interveners need to maintain capable teams of developers that bring expertise and experience in

multiple subject matters and grades. Materials that are developed need to be piloted, revised, and retested. Likewise, in order to provide schools with robust on-site professional development, interveners must cultivate their own team of professional developers, as well as the capacity to train and support them. For interveners that work at multiple levels of the system—e.g., schools and districts—the extent of material development, required expertise, and overall capacity grows exponentially. In general, the more support that interveners offer enactors, the more levels of the system they attempt to work at, and the more they attempt to both compensate for and manage educational environments, the more organizational capacity they require, and thus the more expensive and resource intensive their enterprises become.

In the discussion that follows, we examine the efforts of America’s Choice and Success for All to negotiate the dilemma of boundary drawing as a problem that sits at the nexus of a multifaceted design, complex and often weak educational environments, and interveners’ own organizations. In conceptualizing the work of intervention in this way, we show that the problem of gaining leverage on the system is in fact a question of how to manage these complex set of interactions in ways that advance interveners’ educational goals and maintain organizational viability. The experiences of America’s Choice and Success for All are a window into these dynamics, the implications they have for interveners’ work, and the challenges with which they confront reformers who operate in this domain.

## **Methods**

### *Case study selection*

This research was conducted as part of a longitudinal study that seeks to understand the impact of three school improvement programs on instruction and student performance in over 125 U.S. elementary schools. The programs selected for the larger study included America’s Choice, Successful for All, and Accelerated Schools. These programs were selected because of their distinctive approaches to school reform, the large number and diversity of schools they each worked with, and their willingness to participate in a long-

term study. The data collected for that larger study were ideally suited for a sublevel analysis of America's Choice and Success for All in large part due to their longitudinal nature, and the broad range of topics they covered.

### *Data*

In order to understand the evolution of the improvement strategies of both America's Choice and Success for All we employed four types of data collection for each intervention: document analysis, participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations with teachers and leaders in America's Choice and Success for All schools.<sup>2</sup> Between 1996 and 2006 we collected a comprehensive set of documents that included internal reports, books written by program leaders, external research, internal evaluations and reports, media accounts, and countless samples of curriculum materials and manuals. For America's Choice, we also examined over a dozen America's Choice videos that depict implementation of the design. One of us viewed two of these videos with America's Choice staff to further my understanding of the design. From November of 1998 until April of 2006, we observed 20 training events for America's Choice schools and staff members and 20 for Success for All. We produced detailed field notes for all training events, as well as a summary analysis for each event. Between March of 2003 and April of 2006, we conducted 25 open-ended interviews with NCEE executives, managers, developers, and trainers.

### *Analysis*

We analyzed the data for both programs in terms of conceptual categories that were derived from the analytic frame. These included categories corresponding to the design of America's Choice and Success for All both in terms of its school level and classroom level focus. We examined data relating to the degree of design elaboration and opportunities for professional learning, as well as the approach of each program to managing schools' environment. Here we looked for instances of involvement in district

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<sup>2</sup> Data collection and analysis for America's Choice was collected by Joshua Glazer, and by Donald Peurach for Success for All.

and state operations, efforts to help schools manage relations with upper levels of the system, and how intervention staff managed situations in which the environment interfered with school-level implementation. A third set of categories was derived from my interest our interest in the programs' organizational structure and capacity. We examined data to understand how America's Choice and Success for All's organizational capacity both enabled and constrained their work with schools, districts, and states. This highlighted a broad range of issues relating to systems for recruiting and training staff members, key decisions about the distribution of organizational resources, and the growth of the organization over time.

### **Case Study #1: America's Choice**

America's Choice was established in 1998 by its parent organization, the National Center for Education and the Economy (NCEE) which, itself, was created in 1985 by the Carnegie Corporation. Marc Tucker has served as president of NCEE since its inception, while Judy Coddling has overseen the development and day to day operation of America's Choice. Over the course of the last nine years, America's Choice has grown into one of the country's largest and most prominent comprehensive school reform initiatives with programs in reading, writing, and mathematics at the elementary, middle, and high school level. A descendent of the Alliance for Restructuring Education which itself was among the original cohort of New American School Designs, the America's Choice network has grown to include over 500 schools in 22 states, and since its inception, has operated in over 2,000 schools across the country.

The design of the America's Choice school-level program has evolved considerably since 1998 in response to both changes in the policy environment, as well as program leaders' developing understanding of what it takes to support improvement in poor performing schools. Since the current discussion examines the period between 1998 and 2003, we depict the design as it existed during these years. But as America's Choice is a highly detailed and elaborate program, we can only sketch the main contours of the design and

explicate its overall improvement strategy.

America's Choice school-level improvement strategy: a three-tiered approach

The America's Choice approach to instructional improvement at the school level can be seen in terms of three tiers: (1) an instructional design, (2) an organizational design, and (3) direct support from America's Choice staff. The center piece of the instructional design was a set of performance standards in reading, writing, and mathematics that were calibrated to grades K-4, 8, and 10. Though not an actual curriculum, the standards defined instructional goals for teachers and students, and were intended to be the focal point for classroom work. Numerous examples of student work animate the standards, and were meant to help teachers make connections between the more abstract goals of the standards and actual student performance.

Two other primary design components are readers and writers workshop.<sup>3</sup> The workshops were designed to turn classrooms into high functioning "systems" in which teachers carefully monitor student learning in relation to the standards and focus instruction on students' evolving needs. To guide teachers in this work, the design included instructional frameworks that included lesson plans, templates for constructing new lessons, processes for grouping students, techniques for assessing progress, specifications for allocating time, criteria for selecting and using texts, and more. While some of these resources such as the standards and assessments were elaborated in considerable detail, the design generally did not "script" instruction but rather called on teachers to use the design's resources and work within its instructional frameworks to develop lessons and academic tasks that cater to students' needs and that are aligned with the standards.

The second tier of the improvement strategy was the design for school organization and leadership. Early NCEE documents that predate America's Choice reveal a long-standing belief that the majority of teachers in U.S. schools require substantial intellectual and

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<sup>3</sup> There is also a design for math instruction but it is not included in this discussion.

social support in order to make effective use of instructional resources, and that such support is lacking in typical schools. In response to this, America's Choice leaders elaborated a plan for school organization and leadership designed to provide teachers with multiple opportunities to learn key practices and underlying ideas, offer consistent feedback, and create regular chances for teachers to work together. The design also elaborated social processes meant to foster a professional culture defined by common commitments to instructional goals and an unwavering belief in student learning. In other words, America's Choice sought to turn schools from buildings that house classrooms into organizations that support teachers' knowledge and expertise, and that cultivate common conceptions of professional work.

A primary mechanism for enabling these organizational changes was the creation of two new instructional leadership roles, referred to as the design coach and literacy coordinator.<sup>4</sup> The design coach and literacy coordinator were typically selected from the school faculty and received three to four weeks of training per year from America's Choice staff. These roles served functions critical to successful implementation. First, as the design coach and literacy coordinator progressed through a series of training seminars, they became sources of expertise within the school, bringing expert knowledge to bear on instructional issues. Second, both the design coach and the literacy coordinator performed and oversaw many new organizational functions, such as setting up "demonstration classes" for teachers to observe, running faculty meetings that focus on instructional problem solving, observing instruction, and monitoring overall implementation.

The third tier of the strategy involved direct support from America's Choice staff to schools in their network. This guidance came in various forms. One way involved a series of training events for school coaches during which they learned about the design, its underlying ideas, and the practices of instructional leadership. The sessions generally

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<sup>4</sup> In later cohorts, the design coach was replaced by an upper-elementary literacy coordinator, while the other literacy coordinator focused on the lower grades.

lasted 4-5 days, and for the first three years, coaches attended about four per year. In addition, America's Choice field staff, referred to as "cluster leaders," visited schools approximately eight times per year to provide on-site support. During these visits, cluster leaders visited classrooms, helped coaches assess areas of need, met with school leaders to plan next steps, and, in some cases, modeled specific instructional practices to the school faculty. Finally, an annual conference provided coaches and principals an opportunity to convene with their counterparts from other America's Choice schools, and to attend workshops and training sessions on a variety of topics related to the design.

### **Drawing Boundaries Around Schools: America's Choice, 1998-2000**

The America's Choice design represented a comprehensive and integrated approach to school improvement. Addressing multiple subject areas, instruction, assessment, leadership, and organization, the design was far more comprehensive than the great majority of past and present efforts to improve schools. But despite its multifaceted school-level design, America's Choice did little to directly intervene on schools' environments, and thus little to ensure that districts, states, and local communities would provide the time, funding, and support needed for the design to flourish. America's Choice leaders implicitly delegated to schools and districts responsibility for coordinating the design with local and state policies, and creating an environment that would contribute to effective implementation. This was not an entirely an oversight on the part of program leaders. Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR), signed into law the same year that America's Choice launched its first cohort of schools, channeled funds directly to schools, bypassing districts, thereby centering the market on school-level programs. At the time, Tucker (1998) expressed his reservations about this approach: "Obey-Porter (legislation) is totally school-based. The drafters of the bill totally ignored the district and focused exclusively on the school. Our design is a response to Obey Porter, but we carry around in our heads the idea that you have to work with districts in order to make lasting change."

Despite Tucker's concerns, America's Choice stood to benefit in multiple ways by

drawing a clear boundary around schools and investing few resources in the institutions that lay outside it. Were the strategy to succeed, it would allow America's Choice to concentrate its fiscal and human resources on further development of its school-level intervention rather than having to expand its operations into the uncertain territory of schools' environment; an endeavor that surely would have strained a new organization still trying to establish its footing. And in some ways the strategy worked. The school-level design fit well with CSRD legislation that directed resources toward individual schools, and the design's focus on standards appealed to school leaders eager to adapt to a standards-based environment (Barnes et al., under review). The match between the policy environment and the design contributed to a rapid rise in the number of participating schools. The first cohort contained 48 schools, but the network doubled in size each year for the first four years, quickly expanding to over 600 participating schools; more than double the number of schools in the city of Boston. The growth of the network increased the flow of revenue into the organization and enhanced America's Choice prestige and national reputation.

Evaluations by the Center for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and the Study of Instructional Improvement (SII) also pointed to a degree of success. The CPRE evaluation (Corcoran et al., 2000) of the first year found that the majority of schools in their sample took preliminary yet important steps toward implementing the design.<sup>5</sup>

There also was evidence that teachers and administrators were beginning to make changes consistent with the reform. School staff had begun to implement many of the design requirements. For example, design coaches were leading training for classroom teachers, and literacy coordinators had begun setting up model classrooms. Although training time often was limited, design coaches worked with staff so they understood the America's Choice design, became familiar with New Standards Performance Standards, and administered the New Standards Reference Exams (p. 10).

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<sup>5</sup> Corcoran, T., Hoppe, M, Luhm, T, & Supovitz, J., 2000. CPRE. p.10.

Likewise, SII researchers found “that students in AC schools, on average, score an additional 9 points on the reading comprehension outcome and about 7 additional points on the language scale score compared to students in comparison schools” (Rowan et al., in press). And while such effects may not seem dramatic, even modest gains in poor-performing schools that suffer from an array of social and professional problems and that are burdened with long histories of failure is a feat that few past programs have accomplished.

Yet these successes were tempered by troubling problems in schools’ environment that hampered implementation. Although the design meshed well with the political environment in ways that fueled rapid recruitment, and while some schools were able to show improvement, in many other instances, the design interacted with local educational environments in ways that compromised implementation and detracted from America’s Choice goals. Delegating to districts and schools the task of coordinating local policy with the design led to a lack of congruence that contributed to an array of problems. In some cases, district initiatives, though well intentioned, undermined schools’ capacity to use the design well. In one poor-performing New York district, for example, a district-sponsored professional development program was, if not in direct conflict with the design, poorly suited for the practices and knowledge needed for effective implementation. As Judy Coddling remarked: “They’re spending millions on America’s Choice and might actually be hindering implementation.” This was not a deliberate effort to undermine implementation, but the consequence of relying on a district with a history of poor performance to undertake the complicated work of aligning multiple sources of instructional guidance.

In many districts the sheer multitude of competing programs seemed to confuse teachers, and detract from the design’s comprehensiveness and coordination. During one training session, design coaches and literacy coordinators spoke of the conflict among all the programs and how hard it was to focus on just one. One design coach described the

resulting chaos:

At the district level, there are schools doing Modern Red Schoolhouse or Success for All or America's Choice, and there are districts within districts. And at our school which is supposed to be America's Choice, there are so many other initiatives. We have a new \$100,000 arts program that is supposed to permeate all classrooms. It can get pretty confusing.<sup>6</sup>

In other cases, district sanctioned roles preempted the new school leadership positions created by the design in ways that prevented full implementation. CPRE evaluators found that some schools simply moved the vice principal into the coach role regardless of the individual's qualifications to serve as an instructional leader, whereas in other cases the Title I Coordinator added the coach role to her pre-existing duties (Corcoran et al., 2000). In several instances, a qualified individual was chosen to serve as coach, but was not released from classroom teaching. Another example of the conflict between the design and environment transpired in an America's Choice training event for design coaches. During a debriefing session, a design coach explained that there had been complaints to the union about intrusions into teachers' work from design coaches (whose job it is to monitor and observe practice). But as it turned out, the design coach was also the school's union representative, and thus it was her job as the union rep to stop herself from performing her work as design coach. The clash between the design and the environment was embodied in the dual roles of a single individual!

In all of these instances—ranging from union resistance to Title I Coordinators serving as coaches—the environment acted on America's Choice schools in ways that compromised implementation. Different components of the system, each in its own way, hampered coaches' capacity to enact difficult leadership tasks, cut into the available time for teacher meetings and workgroups, or subtly intimidated to teachers that they need not fully engage the design. These types of occurrences contributed to the likelihood that coaches

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<sup>6</sup> Columbia, Literary Institute IV. 6/14/99.

would fail to construct potent and regular learning opportunities for teachers, that teachers would fail to develop deep knowledge and understanding of the design, and that the design would amount more to new forms of past practice than the deep change to instruction that America's Choice leaders sought.

These problems may help explain the pattern of inconsistent effects on student learning documented by external evaluations. Rowan et al.'s analysis of the SII data indicated that school-level gains were disproportionately concentrated in the upper grades, and that despite intensive efforts, "...the impressive gains in achievement produced by America's Choice in later grades are not duplicated in earlier grades" (p. 12). Likewise, CPRE's evaluation of 65 schools implementing the design in the 2001-2 academic year seemed to confirm that while many schools had made genuine efforts to improve, implementation was falling short of stated goals: "Our findings indicate that about 40% of teachers showed evidence of exemplary or solid lessons, about 45% exhibited partial implementation, and about 15% of the lessons only minimally adhered to the literacy workshop structures" (Supovitz et al., 2002, p. 16). "Deeply disappointed and determined to improve" was how Tucker (2004) characterized his and other senior leaders' response to the report's findings (p. 236).

By 2002, the leaders of America's Choice recognized that if they wished to improve results, they would need to exert more leverage on schools' environments in ways that would create more favorable conditions for implementation. No longer, they concluded, could they delegate to districts and schools the work of alignment and coordination, and instead would actively engage districts and even states in this process. As Tucker (2004) would later state, "...our long-standing conviction that districts matter was confirmed" (p. 245). The boundaries of the intervention would be redrawn to include additional levels of the educational system. But while the new strategy was a sensible response to past problems, it would significantly alter the dynamics of design, organization, and environment in ways that produced advantages, as well as a new set of challenges.

### **Combining School-Level Intervention With District and State Intervention: 2000-2003**

To exert more influence on schools' environment, America's Choice adopted a vertically integrated improvement strategy. Just as the school-level design established tight links between school management and classroom teaching, the new approach to the environment was to coordinate work between schools and institutions at the higher levels of the system. The strategy seemed to make good sense. Schools do not operate in a vacuum, but rather are shaped by a variety of social forces in their environments. And while America's Choice could not intervene on the full range of factors that constitute schools' environment (e.g., teacher education), they could try to exert at least some influence on local conditions that would aid implementation. If environments were a primary source of schools' poor performance and inconsistent implementation, it only made sense to try to intervene as closely as possible to the root of the problem. But as the ensuing account reveals, this strategy, while ameliorating old problems, also created a host of new ones.

#### *Intervention at upper levels of the system: strength and weakness*

The effort to create an environment in which critical decisions about resource allocation, professional development, hiring, text adoption, and the overall thrust of improvement efforts complemented rather than detracted from design implementation paid off in several circumstances. One such example is in Coverdale, FL., where America's Choice began working in 1999 with 14 schools and then, by the end of the third year, 63 schools.<sup>7</sup> In Coverdale, the complete commitment of the superintendent resulted in an unusual degree of cooperation between the district and America's Choice. In contrast to the first cohorts, America's Choice staff not only worked with individual Coverdale schools but also trained district personnel to provide professional development, monitor implementation, and orient their overall work toward supporting implementation. According to the agreement between America's Choice and the district, the district would assume virtually all functions related to the support of school-level implementation

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<sup>7</sup> Per agreement with the district, Coverdale is a pseudonym.

within three years, with America's Choice providing some occasional consulting and professional development. More than just school-by-school approach, this was a deliberate attempt to enhance district-wide capacity and institutionalize the design in a local environment.

Incorporating the district within the scope of intervention addressed several of the problems that had resulted from a lack of district support in other areas. Foremost, expectations that enlisted schools were to fully engage the design were clear. As one America's Choice staff member who worked in Coverdale put it: "... there was no confusion as to what people were supposed to do; they were expected to give [America's Choice] a try and to put things in place.... Everyone was committed to learning." In addition, the high level of cooperation between the district and America's Choice assured that text book adoptions, professional development, allocation of funds and other district prerogatives were managed in concert with America's Choice. One America's Choice cluster leader, who worked in America's Choice schools across the country, noted that while "there was not complete coherence, in comparison with other places, things were much more cohesive." Barnes et al. (2007), who observed the implementation of America's Choice in Coverdale, noted that in addition to a remarkable degree of alignment between the central office and the design, "[a]ll the central office staff..., as well as many of the principals, articulated a clear, common understanding of the America's Choice methods and principles" (p. 26). The joint efforts of America's Choice staff and the district seemed to be at least partially rewarded when an initial evaluation conducted by CPRE (2002) found that two cohorts of students in America's Choice schools outperformed students in comparison schools on the writing component of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test after only one or two years of implementation (Supovitz et al., 2002).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Supovitz et al.'s analysis of gains by students in America's Choice school revealed a complex picture. The largest gains were made by fourth-grade students in the 10 America's Choice cohort II schools. These statistically "significantly outgained fourth-grade students in the 53 other district elementary schools by about a fifth of a standard deviation" (8).

The new strategy was deployed at the state level as well, as America's Choice signed contracts to work with poor performing schools in Georgia and Mississippi in the years 2001 and 2003 (only Georgia is discussed in depth here). Although the arrangements were with states instead of districts, the governing logic was similar. In Georgia and Mississippi, America's Choice trained state officials to monitor design implementation, to focus their work on school leadership and classroom practice, and to help schools make steady progress in their efforts to improve. Moreover, local administrators pledged to establish an environment that would support school-level implementation. Tucker (2004), referring to America's Choice work in Georgia, described the effort in terms of local capacity building: "The whole effort has been a capacity-building effort in that we have, from the start, trained central and regional staff to provide the training, professional development, and technical assistance needed to implement our program on a very large scale" (pp. 252-253).

And as in Coverdale, the strategy paid off in certain respects. Recruiting at the state level rapidly increased the size of the America's Choice network as hundreds of new schools adopted the program. In addition, state involvement minimized the number of competing programs in America's Choice schools, funding was provided for the new leadership roles, texts were selected that meshed well with America's Choice materials, and professional development was coordinated with the design. The problems that had plagued the early cohorts, though not eradicated entirely, were made less severe. Moreover CPRE's evaluation of "Georgia Choice" (reflecting the partnership between America's Choice and the state) after the first year of implementation found statistical gains in writing performance at both the 5th and 8th grade level. Summing up their analysis, May et al. noted that "...during the 2001-2002 school year, Georgia's Choice elementary schools experienced significantly greater increases in the proportion of fifth graders scoring in higher writing proficiency categories than similar schools not participating in Georgia's Choice" (pp. 8-9).

### **Intervening in Schools' Environment: Unintended Consequences**

But while the new strategy produced benefits, it also carried with it steep costs. To intervene in schools' environment is to enter into partnership with institutions that were not designed and do not possess the resources to support a rigorous process of instructional improvement, that have typically failed to strike productive relations with schools, and that often suffer from a lack of professional knowledge. Although districts and states are key institutions within the educational system, and while ignoring them often leads to weak school-level implementation, they can be troublesome partners for interveners. Moreover, effective intervention at the district and state level can be as complex an undertaking as school-level intervention, requiring organizational expertise, experience, and capacity. As we will see, operating at multiple levels of the system makes the work of intervention a far more complex endeavor. More specifically, America's Choice efforts in Coverdale and Georgia were hampered by three types of problems that complicated their work and detracted from their success: loss of program integrity, volatile politics, and insufficient time to build local capacity.

#### *Maintaining program integrity*

One cost of America's Choice penetration into schools' environment was that, in more than one case, the partnership with districts and states slowly began to erode the integrity of the design. The control over personnel and support functions that America's Choice enjoyed in the first years receded as more of the key tasks of supporting schools and monitoring implementation was transferred to district and state personnel. In Coverdale, for example, the training of district staff to provide on-site assistance was a cost-effective way of supporting schools while limiting the burden on the America's Choice organization, and it appealed to the school board's desire to limit investment in an external intervener to only a few years. Yet, for America's Choice, the strategy meant forfeiting considerable control over key design components and strategic decision-making. A result of this was that the design evolved in ways that America's Choice staff did not anticipate and that departed from original intentions. Tucker (2004) saw these changes as a process of mutual adaptation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1979) in which the

district tailored the design to the needs of its schools, and as such, he claimed to be unconcerned by such occurrences. “[T]he design will metamorphose as the district makes the design its own over the years. The result will be a district whose policies are coherent and consistent with the design” (p. 251).

But other staff members were less sanguine about the process, and noted with dismay that the coordinated array of resources that comprised the design became less recognizable in Coverdale schools. According to one NCEE staff member with extensive experience in the district, relying on the district to monitor implementation weakened the design’s focus on school-level coherence. The problem stemmed from the district’s decision to train individual teachers directly rather than adhere to the original strategy of empowering school leaders to direct a schoolwide improvement effort. The lesser focus on school leadership contributed to inconsistency in how the design was interpreted and implemented both within the district and individual schools. The America’s Choice staff member located in Coverdale described the problem as follows:

The issue was a weak plan for connecting the teacher training to the training provided to school coaches. Even though there was a district implementation rubric, modeled after the America’s Choice rubric, there seemed to be an unclear expectation for how coaches will work with teachers within schools. There weren’t well defined criteria for which teachers would attend the training, nor that any teachers had to do that at all. Neither coaches nor principals seemed to have a clear responsibility for how to support or follow-up with these teachers (2006).

Rather than the design conforming to the needs of the district, as Tucker suggested, those who worked at the ground level saw the design’s potency attenuated by the inability of local leaders to fully appreciate how the complex array of integrated resources constituted a systemic approach to improvement at the school level. In their view, the district’s picking and choosing of design components made a comprehensive design less comprehensive. The loss of the design’s integrity and comprehensiveness points to the

difficulty of transferring oversight responsibilities to local leaders. There is little doubt that the district managers were committed to the ideas of America's Choice or that they were acting in what they thought was the best interest of the district's schools. Moreover, from the district's perspective, the cost of using America's Choice indefinitely was prohibitive. What is less certain, however, is whether three years is enough time for district leaders to understand a complex design in depth and to remake their leadership practices to support implementation. As Barnes et al. noted, monitoring and supporting implementation places "exceptionally challenging" demands on district personnel. This point was reinforced by one senior staff member at America's Choice who lamented local Coverdale leaders' rush to manage implementation on their own: "We hire the very best people, we train them intensely, and we're constantly updating their knowledge. Why would you think a district, even a good one, could replace that in three years?"

In Coverdale, then, America's Choice decision to expand the scope of the intervention to include both district and schools led to a new set of interactions among design, environments, and organization in ways that complicated the work of America's Choice staff and their capacity to gain leverage on implementation. America's Choice pushed into the local environment to create conditions in which the design could work, and while this was effective to some degree, it resulted in changes to the design that were not in keeping with the intentions of America's Choice leaders. Moreover, the district's perception of America's Choice as too expensive for a long-term partnership, led to a highly compressed time table of only three years. While America's Choice leaders did succeed in establishing a greater degree of environmental coherence than they had enjoyed in the past, the loss of control over the design and support functions within a very brief period of time led to a loss of design comprehensiveness and integration.

*A volatile political environment*

Penetration into schools' environment also exposes interveners to leadership instability and volatile politics that can negatively affect implementation and exact a steep price from the organization. Political dynamics and leadership turnover can be troubling issues

**Beyond Comprehensive School Reform**

for school-level intervention, yet as interveners operate at higher levels of the system the consequences grow exponentially. A change in district or state leadership can jeopardize intervener's work with hundreds of schools, as well as the large investment in time and money needed to initiate and sustain projects of this scope. In such cases, efforts to create a coherent environment for school-level designs result in significant uncertainty and even chaos. America's Choice experience in Georgia exemplifies this phenomenon.

In the Spring of 2001, America's Choice entered into an agreement with the Georgia State Board of Education to provide the America's Choice design to approximately 160 underperforming schools. The arrangement, referred to as "Georgia's Choice," amounted to a highly ambitious effort to bolster state capacity in a way that was cost effective for America's Choice and that would ensure a vital degree of coherence among schools, the state, and America's Choice. America's Choice leaders believed that, as with Coverdale, intervening at the system level would give them access to large number of schools in a single geographic area, and would provide leverage over a host of important issues that had proven consequential for implementation. Yet whereas in Coverdale America's Choice gained 63 new schools, in Georgia the addition of 160 schools greatly expanded the size of its network and its national prominence. Were America's Choice to succeed in Georgia, other state adoptions seemed likely to follow.

But the enormous potential of the Georgia contract was matched by the degree of complexity and risk. No sooner did America's Choice begin to develop a local infrastructure in Georgia, did it encounter a treacherous political situation that quickly undermined the intentions of both state leaders and America's Choice staff. In contrast to Coverdale where the contract was between America's Choice and a district, in Georgia, it was the governor's office that had sought out America's Choice and conducted negotiations. The arrangement instantly exposed deeply seeded tensions between the governor and the department of education that resented an external intervener meddling in its schools. A senior America's Choice staff member recounted DOE officials' distinct lack of enthusiasm for America's Choice: "The State Education Department was not keen

on it at all. Even though we had lip service support from the state superintendent of schools, she was going to run against the governor in the next election.”

The DOE’s lack of enthusiasm was compounded by the fact that the “team leaders”—state officials who were expected to play a critical role in supporting implementation—often had conflicting incentives that further weakened their commitment to America’s Choice. Unlike America’s Choice own field level staff who are outsiders to the schools and districts they support, the team leaders were long standing employees of the DOE who had a stake in the current system. In many cases, the team leaders were expected to dismantle school-based programs that they themselves had put in place, but that were now seen as diverting attention from America’s Choice. Not surprisingly, they did not fully embrace their new roles. As one America’s Choice staff member put it, “It’s not as if the state didn’t have a literacy program or a math program. How were we going to convince people, who were already doing these jobs, that they weren’t doing what they needed to do or that they weren’t doing it effectively?” (Judy A). Another way to consider this is that for state officials to successfully take on these new commitments, they needed a sophisticated understanding of how the design was meant to work, a strong understanding of the ways in which past programs and practices did not work, and the will to make the necessary changes. According to America’s Choice officials, this combination of capacity and commitment was hard to come by.

The lack of support from the state DOE trickled down to the school level, and in several schools, leaders and faculty showed little interest in embracing the design. “Kicking and screaming” was how one America’s Choice staff member described these schools’ approach toward implementation. After the first year, America’s Choice staff estimated that at least ten schools had made virtually no effort to even begin implementation, and in other schools commitment was not at the level needed for real changes in teaching and learning to occur. One staff member who worked intensively in Georgia noted that while the goal was for America’s Choice to change Georgia schools, in some schools it was the design that changed and the schools that stayed the same.

There was this sense that Georgia's Choice was just that—Georgia's Choice. They felt at liberty to make all kinds of demands from us without regard to what the design was or what the America's Choice process is supposed to be. And when I visited their schools there was virtually no implementation going on. They were very difficult to work with.

An already difficult situation took a turn for the worse when, in 2002, a Republican was elected to the governor's office for the first time since Reconstruction. The new governor had adopted an education policy focused on stream lining bureaucracy and bolstering community control of schools; a position that he animated with an official anti-America's Choice stance. Virtually over night, all the people in the governor's office and education department with whom America's Choice had forged agreements and established working relationships were gone. One America's Choice staff member involved in the negotiations with Georgia put it this way: "The woman that we thought was going to win the state superintendent position lost the election. It meant the immediate removal of all the people with whom we had worked and negotiated." And while the new superintendent purported to support America's Choice work in Georgia, noting in particular the gains made in writing, the state education budget for the ensuing year eliminated virtually all funding for Georgia's Choice.

Tucker and other America's Choice staff do not see the Georgia experience as a complete failure, and note moderate gains made by America's Choice schools in the state writing assessment at the fifth and eighth grade level (May et al., 2004). Anecdotally, many schools reported important changes in classroom instruction, and many teachers expressed great satisfaction with the design. In light of the circumstances, these accomplishments are remarkable. But to even the most ardent America's Choice supporters, success was tempered by the dispiriting political situation that prevented the design from reaching its potential. More generally, the America's Choice experience in Georgia shows that state level interventions can inadvertently get ensnarled in political

situations that stymie a productive and stable partnership between interveners and states. Even in Coverdale, where there was far more consensus about the role of America's Choice than in Georgia, the superintendent admitted that America's Choice was a "lightning rod" for his critics. Tucker would later say that in this business, if you are not prepared to "play politics, don't get started." But while state and district contracts can lure interveners with the promise of large numbers of schools and environmental support for implementation, the result can be more uncertainty than coherence, and the cost to the organization steep.

### **Case #2: Success for All**

Success for All is a comprehensive school reform program that seeks to improve reading instruction and achievement in chronically-underperforming elementary schools. From its inception, its developers were committed to anchoring the program in methods shown by research to be both effective in improving student achievement and replicable across schools. They were equally committed to constantly evaluating Success for All by these same standards.<sup>9</sup>

From its founding in 1987/1988 through 2001/2002, Success for All achieved unusual success. Originally developed at Johns Hopkins University, Success for All was initially fielded in a single Baltimore school in 1987/1988, supported by a team of approximately 10 researchers. By 2001/2002, Success for All was in use in over 1,500 schools and supported by the independent, nonprofit, 500-member Success for All Foundation (SFAF). Over that interval, Success for All also accumulated considerable (but disputed) evidence of effectiveness.<sup>10</sup> The scale-up of Success for All was linked closely to a succession of federal-level initiatives (both policy and nonpolicy) that created resources and incentives for schools to adopt and implement research-based and research-validated comprehensive school reform programs, including the New American Schools initiative;

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Slavin and Fashola (1998).

<sup>10</sup> For then-current evidence of effectiveness produced within and beyond SFAF, see Slavin and Madden (2001), Herman (1999), and Traub (1999). For then-current criticism of Success for All, see Greenberg and Walberg (1999) and Pogrow (2000).

the 1995 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA); the Obey-Porter Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Act of 1997; and the Reading Excellence Act of 1998. Scale-up was also linked closely to then-current enthusiasm for "site-based decision making" that located primary decision making authority for school improvement at the level of the school, itself.

While SFAF had long offered (and was actively developing) program components in other content areas (e.g., writing, math, pre-K and middle school reading), its cornerstone program remained its K-6 comprehensive school reform program. From its inception through 2001/2002, program developers remained steadfast in a set of core beliefs: that the school was the most powerful unit of intervention for improving achievement; that problems undermining achievement were many and systemic, thus requiring comprehensive, systemic solutions; and that Title I of the federal ESEA was the "engine" that would drive school-level change throughout the broader system.<sup>11</sup> Beyond ESEA and Title I, SFAF executives had attempted to reduce SFAF's dependence on U.S. educational environments, having failed in efforts to enlist states, districts, government-funded labs, and university partners as resources for supporting implementation.<sup>12</sup> Instead, SFAF used a formal contracting process to secure a small set of environmental conditions favoring effective, school-level implementation (e.g., securing stable sources of funding and securing exemptions from certain district requirements). Otherwise, SFAF assumed the burden of supporting implementation using its 250-member-strong training organization and its 1500 school-strong network of Success for All schools.

During the 2001/2002 school year, Congress passed (and President Bush signed) the reauthorization of ESEA as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. By the 2002/2003 school year, funding from NCLB was making its way through the system. And, with that, SFAF made the decision to expand beyond comprehensive school reform and to begin collaborating with states and districts to support systemic improvement in schools.

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<sup>11</sup> See Slavin (2001) for more on Title I as the engine of systemwide reform.

<sup>12</sup> See Slavin and Madden (1999) for a report on Success for All's experiences with external supports for program implementation.

Unlike America's Choice, SFAF's expansion was not motivated by problems of implementation in its comprehensive school reform program. Rather, it was motivated by sudden problems recruiting and retaining schools within its comprehensive school reform program, corresponding declines in revenues, and serious concerns about the continued viability of the Success for All enterprise. Below, we recount the Success for All design for comprehensive school reform as it was evolving in 2002/2003, concurrent with SFAF's decision to expand beyond comprehensive school reform; SFAF's interpretations of the influences that drove its problems recruiting and retaining schools (thus, its motivation to expand); how SFAF expanded by adapting its clients, designs, environmental relationships, and organization; and key questions that arise from these efforts.

**Design Overview: Success for All, 2002/2003**

Like America's Choice, SFAF's design for comprehensive school reform was structured in three tiers: an instructional design; an organizational design; and direct support from SFAF.<sup>13</sup> In 2002/2003, SFAF was completing a four year effort to make extensive improvements to all three tiers. The improvements targeted what SFAF, its schools, and its critics had come to recognize as a primary problem of the program: its extensive support for consistent, faithful use of the program by teachers, leaders, and trainers; and its comparatively weak support for using the program to identify and address the academic and non-academic needs of students. The problem became particularly acute in the two years following the passage of the Obey-Porter CSRD in 1997, a period in which SFAF doubled its installed base of schools (from 750 to over 1,500), doubled the size of its training organization (from approximately 125 to 250), and stressed consistency and fidelity (in part) to prevent losing control of the entire enterprise. Using the language of the program, SFAF's 1999-2003 development cycle focused on developing the supports needed to advance teachers, leaders, and trainers beyond "mechanical" and "routine" use

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<sup>13</sup> For an overview of the design of the Success for All comprehensive school reform program as it stood at the beginning of SFAF's 1999-2003 development cycle, see Slavin and Madden (2001). For evidence of program evolution over SFAF's 1999-2003 development cycle, see Madden and Cummings (2000) and Success for All Foundation (2002a; 2004).

of the program to "refined" and "integrated" use of the program, that is, using the program as a resource to organize the entire school around the work of identifying and addressing the needs of students.

From its inception, the centerpiece of Success for All was a core instructional design that combined cooperative learning with a "cycle of effective instruction" that included direct instruction, team practice, individual assessment, and recognition and celebration.

Together, the combination was intended to create opportunities for students to practice the use of reading skills and strategies and for teachers to monitor and respond to any problems experienced by students. This core instructional design was embedded in an integrated K-6 reading curriculum intended to support and coordinate reading instruction schoolwide. The curriculum consisted of three key components: Early Learning (for kindergarten); Reading Roots (for grade 1); and Reading Wings (grades 2-6). From its inception, the reading curriculum used key mechanisms to support immediate, consistent, schoolwide use, including: sequenced units; standard lessons; schedules and pacing guides; detailed guidance for the student and teacher roles in instruction (including scripts for the direct instruction of reading skills and strategies); and curriculum-based assessments. As it evolved over SFAF's 1999-2003 development cycle, the curriculum was extensively improved to increase support for assessment and adaptation. Key improvements include incorporating additional formative assessments; creating and reemphasizing opportunities for strategic adaptation in the context of lesson planning and instruction; and providing additional guidance for leveraging those opportunities (including multimedia resources that modeled the student and teacher roles in instruction).

The Success for All instructional design was complemented by a comprehensive organizational design that provided an array of supports intended to improve students' and teachers' success in reading instruction, including a 90-minute, schoolwide Reading Block (intended to increase and standardize time for reading instruction); quarterly assessment and regrouping of students by current reading performance level (intended to

narrow the focus of reading instruction in a given class); and two components charged with designing and coordinating supplemental academic and nonacademic services for students (a Tutoring Team and a Family Support Team). While all were improved over SFAF's 1999-2003 to include additional resources supporting assessment and adaptation, the feature of SFAF's organizational design that was most extensively improved was the design of its Leadership Team. The Leadership Team consisted of the building principal and two newly-created teacher leadership roles: the Reading Facilitator (responsible for program-wide implementation and effectiveness) and the Family Support Coordinator (responsible for the Family Support Team).<sup>14</sup> Between 1999 and 2003, the design for the Leadership Team evolved to include a full array of resources to support a complex set of responsibilities: analyzing implementation and outcome; analyzing state accountability assessments; improving the formal and social organization of the school; and supporting the practice-based learning of teachers. One such resource was the Goal Focused Improvement Process: a collection of routines, information resources, and supplemental guidance that structured analysis, improvement planning, and implementation monitoring. A second such resource was the "Building Better Readers Series": a school-based curriculum for the professional development of teachers coordinated with the Success for All reading curriculum.

Beyond materials, tools, and other "hardware" resources embedded within its designs for instruction and organization, SFAF provided a third tier of support for implementation: an extensive array of learning opportunities intended to scaffold teachers and leaders into their day-to-day work. SFAF's scaffolding design included direct instruction for teachers and leaders in advance of Year 1 implementation, on-going direct instruction for school leaders in the context of annual conferences, and optional direct instruction for teachers on a school-by-school basis. The scaffolding design also included school visits from SFAF trainers, both in the context of standard "Implementation Visits" and in the context of optional, monthly Leadership Academy sessions. These visits focused primarily on

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<sup>14</sup> At the end of the 1999-2003 development cycle, the Family Support Coordinator and Team were renamed the "Solutions Coordinator" and the "Solutions Team."

providing assistance to school leaders in enacting their new roles, though they also included opportunities for ad hoc assistance to teachers. Lastly, the scaffolding design including extensive opportunities for on-going, practice-based learning by teachers and leaders. For teachers, this included one-on-one coaching from the Reading Facilitator, regular team meetings with colleagues, and the individual and collective use of the Building Better Readers series. For leaders, this included collegial learning among the Leadership Team and participation in networks of Success for All schools (local and national).

Developing and fielding this complex, three-tiered design required a complex organization. Concurrent with its 1999-2003, SFAF evolved as an organization to expand its capabilities along multiple dimensions, including program development; training; media and information systems development; publishing and distribution; travel and conference planning; and research. Expanding its organization while simultaneously engaging in programwide improvement proved challenging for SFAF. The extent and rapid pace of program improvements created problems of coordination within its development organization, problems of integration among program components, and problems developing capabilities in its training organization to support the use of program improvements. A central task for SFAF became addressing these organizational problems concurrent with improving the program. Organizational problems notwithstanding, improvements made during the 1999-2003 development cycle had SFAF developers, trainers, and executives enthused about new potential in Success for All to support higher levels of program use in more and more schools.

**The Problem: Recruiting and Retaining CSR Schools in Post-NCLB Environments**

The year 2002/2003 was pivotal for SFAF. NCLB was signed into law in January of 2002, and funding began entering the system in the 2002/2003 school year. With that, SFAF was projecting an increase in adoptions of its cornerstone comprehensive school reform program, with an eye on the possibility of doubling its installed base of schools. Toward that goal, SFAF's 1999-2003 development cycle included an effort to package a

special version of its comprehensive school reform program that targeted one of NCLB's primary programs: "Success for All—Reading First", described by promotional literature as "precisely aligned with the requirements of this new legislation".<sup>15</sup> However, rather than expanding, SFAF began experiencing problems recruiting and retaining schools, with its installed base of schools eventually declining to 1,200 by 2005/2006. The contraction in schools was matched with a contraction in the organization, which shrunk from 500 to 200 people over this same interval. Especially problematic for SFAF was its struggles recruiting, as its financial strategy depended heavily on revenues from the sale of materials and training services to newly recruited schools. Beginning in 2002/2003, SFAF executives engaged an urgent effort to understand problems of recruitment and retention. An interpretation began to form among them that NCLB (and, especially, Reading First) had effected a complex set of interdependent dynamics at all levels of the formal system (school, district, state, and federal) that threatened the viability of the enterprise.

At the school level, SFAF executives reporting recognizing more diverse needs in schools pursuing external assistance—and, with that, a demand for solutions beyond comprehensive school reform programs. SFAF executives reported that not only were chronically underperforming schools pursuing external assistance (as had been the case preceding NCLB) so also were less-impacted schools that had fared well on state accountability assessments in the past. They attributed expansion in the range of schools to a narrowing in the accountability sieve under NCLB, key features of which included expanding accountability assessment to grades 3-6 in reading and math; ambitious goals for adequate yearly progress by 2013/2014 that required annual increases in performance expectations; and accountability for adequate yearly progress both for the school as a whole and for subgroups of at-risk students. As reported by SFAF executives, these less-impacted schools were not seeking comprehensive school reform programs (which were too expensive and not necessary) but, instead, component-based solutions with which to target specific, niche problems. For SFAF, this was a good news/bad news scenario:

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<sup>15</sup> For more on Success for All—Reading First, see: Success for All Foundation (2002b; 2002c).

While the pool of potential clients had expanded under NCLB to include less-impacted schools, SFAF did not have programs that met their needs.

At the district level, SFAF executives reported recognizing a shift in decision-making authority, especially in districts serving large numbers of schools identified as "in need of improvement" under NCLB: a shift away from site-based decision making in schools and towards district-level decision making. They attributed the shift, in part, to new district-level accountability guidelines under NCLB that held districts accountability both for the performance of schools and for the district-wide performance of subgroups of at-risk students. As reported by SFAF executives, the desire in districts was to concentrate district support behind a coherent, district-wide improvement strategy and, then, to develop district-level capabilities to support variable improvement needs in schools. The effect was to amplify the school-level shift away from comprehensive school reform programs (which, again, were expensive and unnecessary in many schools) to component-based solutions (which could be configured differently to meet different needs in different schools). In the analysis of SFAF executives, NCLB's Reading First program provided districts with the resources needed to pursue precisely such a strategy, in that Reading First structured district and school improvement around three core components: reading, assessment, and professional development programs. Problematic for SFAF was that it had neither the organizational infrastructure nor the programs that it needed to target districts. Explained SFAF's chief operating officer, in a 2004 interview:

More and more decisions were being made at a district level. Historically, we were organized and dealt almost exclusively on a school by school basis, with site based decision making.... And we weren't prepared for it. We weren't organized, nor were our programs perceived as programs that were applicable across districts. They were seen primarily as comprehensive, intensive, total school reform programs that were really meant for the poorest and the worst of the schools. And other than maybe some large urban districts, any other given district might have one or two

of those schools. But certainly the majority of the schools in the district aren't perceived to need that level of intensity, that level of comprehensiveness. And so that started to shut us out.

At the state level, SFAF executives reported recognizing increased involvement of state departments of education in district-level and school-level improvement activities, with the effect of further marginalizing SFAF's comprehensive school reform program. A particular focus of SFAF executives was to understand states' involvement in NCLB's Reading First program. At the highest level, Reading First was a state-level competitive grant program that required that states (among other things) use their grant applications to identify program components that they approved for use in Reading First districts. From the perspective of SFAF executives, the problem was in how states identified and approved qualifying reading programs. Pressed for quick action, absent capabilities to identify and carefully evaluate available alternatives, and wanting to secure federal approval of their applications, SFAF executives reported states working within highly institutionalized textbook adoption processes to identify programs that complied with federal guidance. SFAF executives reported that such dynamics had SFAF working at a disadvantage. SFAF had neither the financial nor organizational resources to navigate 50 independent, state-level adoption processes. Further, the version of SFAF with which it targeted states (the carefully aligned Success for All—Reading First) combined Success for All's reading curriculum, assessment systems, and professional development into a coherent, integrated package—a package that didn't fit neatly within state-level textbook adoption processes. At the same time that that these dynamics disadvantaged SFAF, executives reported that they advantaged large, commercial publishers that (a) had established textbook series that were clearly recognizable as reading programs and, thus, fit neatly within conventional textbook adoption processes and (b) had financial and organizational resources to advocate for their programs across all 50 states.

In the analysis of SFAF executives, a final problem was in federal guidance and oversight of interdependent state, district, and school dynamics, especially with respect to guiding

and overseeing the identification of scientifically-based reading programs in states' Reading First applications. As seen by SFAF executives and others, a key feature of NCLB was its emphasis on the adoption and use of reform programs both based on and validated by scientifically based research (a phrase used famously 111 times in NCLB). However, in the analysis of SFAF executives, federal guidance and oversight on this point were weak, especially with respect to Reading First. While Reading First established clear criteria for research-based reading programs (e.g., that they address phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension), the analysis of SFAF executives was that these criteria were weighted heavily towards low-level reading skills and present in some form in virtually all available reading curricula, thus of little use in discriminating one from the other. In the analysis of SFAF executives, thin guidance was matched with questionable oversight. The message that SFAF executives (and others) were hearing out of the Department of Education was that state Reading First plans were more likely to be approved if they favored a small number of commercial reading programs.<sup>16</sup> In the analysis of SFAF executives, the result was that conventional commercial publishers appeared to be gaining quick access to the new state, district, and school markets that were emerging under NCLB, while SFAF was struggling to gain entry. As explained by SFAF chairman Robert Slavin in a March, 2003 interview:

What's happening is that the five largest basals in America are getting all of the money and everything else is being ignored. The concept of scientifically based practice was that states were supposed to designate programs one way or another that would be based on scientifically-based reading research. Well, you might imagine, stepping aside and being fair, that in such a circumstance you'd expect that Direct Instruction, Success for All, and maybe Open Court would be favored in some form as recipients of this money. Exactly the opposite is taking place. Open Court is doing fine, but the big ones are Harcourt, Scott-Foresman, Macmillan—the usual basals. We don't lobby or advocate. The states

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Manzo and Washington (2002).

have set up review processes to review materials and see whether they're scientifically-based, and so we've certainly fully participated in that. We're just not big enough or savvy enough to go around trying to lobby individual states. But it's shocking. I mean it's really, genuinely shocking. What is happening is 180 degrees different from the intention, this mentioning 111 times of scientifically based reading research. It's basals. In fact, if anything, what's happening right now is a transition to basals from anything that uses novels or trade books or any innovative programs or anything else. Four states approved Direct Instruction. Three states approved Success for All among the places that are making those approvals. Excuse me. What did we intend to do here? If you look at the patterns, you'd say this is not about scientifically based research, this is about large basal companies with multimillion-dollar advertising and lobbying budgets.

Thus, contrary to their initial projections, the analysis of SFAF executives was that the growth market under NCLB was *not* comprehensive school reform programs. Rather, at the school level, the growth market was flexible, component-based programs that could target specific, niche needs in schools. At the state and district level, markets were emerging for additional programs that developed states' and districts' capabilities to assist schools. And, in the analysis of executives, SFAF was shut out of these growth markets by complex, interdependent dynamics at all levels of the formal system. None of these dynamics was new. All had been building for over a decade: less-impacted schools feeling the press of accountability and beginning to engage improvement; districts assuming decision making responsibility for school improvement; states structuring resources and incentives for districts and schools; and federal policy championing the use of scientifically based and scientifically validated programs. However, all were amplified under NCLB in a very compressed period of time—between the signing of the legislation in January of 2002 and funding entering the system in September of 2002.

While such dynamics were distressing for SFAF executives who had been with the enterprise from its founding, they were especially distressing for new executives that SFAF recruited from the business sector to assist in interpreting the dynamics of post-NCLB environments. For example, in a 2004 interview, SFAF's newly recruited chief operating officer explained that the challenge in moving from the business sector to the education sector was not in transporting business knowledge into SFAF as an organization. Rather, it was in understanding the complex environments of U.S. public education.

The principals, the tenets, the basic beliefs and fundamentals of "managing and leading and business"—it's all the same. It's probably been the same since people bartered 5000 years ago. Not much has changed there. And a nonprofit needs the same level of focus and discipline and organization and leadership as does a big for-profit company. So that's totally transferable, completely transferable. The world of education— that's not a "market" I knew anything about. All of the federal regulations and the politics that get played out. And the jealousies that seem to exist out there, the "my program is better than your program" kind of thing. All of that was completely new to me. That whole part has been one gigantic, new learning experience. I thought some of the markets that I did business in for 30 years were competitive. I've never seen anything like this. I've never seen anything like this. People just simply can't put that stuff aside and think about kids. They just can't, for whatever reason. It's amazing.

### **The Solution: Expanding Beyond Comprehensive School Reform**

With a growing understanding that the viability of the Success for All enterprise was in doubt, SFAF executives immediately began to formulate a strategy to sustain the enterprise amidst the complex school, district, state, and federal dynamics following the passage of NCLB. They elected to pursue a two-part strategy. First, they remained

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committed to stabilizing and sustaining the installed base of schools using the Success for All comprehensive school reform program, and they succeeded in doing so. By 2005/2006, they stabilized the installed base at approximately 1,200 schools, and they sustained that level through 2007/2008. Second, they decided to expand beyond comprehensive school reform to pursue growth markets that were emerging under NCLB. Doing so had SFAF reconceptualizing its clients, developing new designs to serve them, asserting itself in new ways to establish favorable environmental conditions, and expanding its own organizational capabilities. As with its 1999-2003 development cycle, expanding beyond comprehensive school reform was a long and difficult process that spanned five years—the entire authorization period of NCLB. Yet, by 2007/2008, SFAF made sufficient progress on all fronts to sustain the enterprise for the near term.

SFAF began moving beyond CSR by redefining its clients to incorporate what had previously been key elements of its environments. SFAF began collaborating with a newly founded partner organization, the Center for Data Driven Reform in Education (CDDRE), to work with state education agencies. One goal was to develop state-level capabilities to engage in summative and formative evaluation of districts and schools. A second was to develop state-level capabilities to provide direct support to districts to improve their operations. A third was to develop state-level capabilities to identify evidence-based solutions to problems in districts and schools. SFAF continued by collaborating with districts (alone and with state education agencies) to develop comparable, district-level capabilities for formative evaluation, summative evaluation, solution identification, and school support. Finally, SFAF began targeting stronger schools by devising component-based solutions that could be used to address the specific, localized needs. In some cases, SFAF worked at the state, district, and/or school levels independently. In others, SFAF worked at all three levels simultaneously.

Expansion in the scope of SFAF's client base was matched with an expansion in its designs. For states and districts, SFAF developed key resources to support the day-to-day work of state and district officials, including: the "Raising the Bar" process, a state-

and district-level derivative of the Goal Focused Improvement Process that structured interdependent routines for analysis, improvement planning, and implementation monitoring; 4Sight Quarterly Benchmark Assessments that mirrored the content, question format, and scoring of individual states' accountability assessments; a web-based information system called the Member Center that supported communicating, reporting, and analyzing 4Sight assessment results; manuals detailing the state- and district-level designs and the use of associated resources; and Implementation Self Assessment Guides that (among other things) linked assessment results both to possible root causes and possible interventions at the classroom level. SFAF complemented these resources with on-site consulting and coaching for state and district officials spanning the entire school year. For less-impacted schools, SFAF developed a comprehensive suite of stand-alone program components, materials, and training services targeting a wide range of activities possibly needing improvement, including: preschool education; kindergarten; beginning reading (Grade 1); intermediate reading (grades 2-5); middle school reading (grades 6-8); basic phonics (grades K-1); advanced phonics (grades 2-8); reading comprehension; tutoring; after school programs; writing/language arts (K-8); mathematics (K-6); English language development; cooperative learning; diagnostic instruction; classroom management; attendance; parental involvement; family and community outreach; assessment and information systems; and school-level leadership.

SFAF matched expansion in its clients and designs with continued efforts to manage and to mediate environments to secure environmental conditions favoring its expansion, with a continued, keen focus on the federal level. One key initiative was an attempt to influence federal guidance and oversight of Reading First to eliminate barriers to entering NCLB-sparked markets. In 2005, SFAF joined two other parties in requesting investigations by the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Education and by the Government Accountability Office into the Department of Education's administration of Reading First, with particular attention to alleged favoritism shown to a subset of commercial publishers. In 2006, findings from these investigations corroborated SFAF's own interpretations, and they included comprehensive recommendations for overhauling

the administration of Reading First. A second key initiative involved SFAF collaborating with CDDRE to establish a resource that would support states, districts, and schools in more readily identifying evidence-based and evidence-proven improvement programs. Called the "Best Evidence Encyclopedia" and intended to complement the Department of Education's "What Works Clearing House", the resource is a publicly accessible web site that provides research syntheses of reform programs in: elementary mathematics; middle and high school math; technology in reading and math; secondary reading; reading for English language learners; comprehensive school reform (K12, elementary, and secondary); and education service providers. Third, SFAF lobbied hard to influence two new pieces of federal legislation (both introduced in the fall of 2007) that had potential to strengthen federal policy support for the development, adoption, and implementation of evidence-based and evidence-proven programs: the Proven Programs for the Future of Education Act and the Education Research and Development to Improve Achievement Act.

To support all of the preceding, SFAF also developed and diversified its own organization. Within SFAF, one primary focus was to increase development capabilities to create new resources for use in states, districts, and less-impacted schools, both from scratch and by "debundling" its comprehensive school reform program into components. A second primary focus was to develop capabilities within its training organization to serve both districts and less-impacted schools. At the same time that it developed new, internal capabilities, SFAF executives collaborated in the founding and management of two new partner organizations that provided support for expanding beyond comprehensive school reform. Founded at Johns Hopkins University in 2004/2005 and directed by SFAF chairman Robert Slavin, the Center for Data Driven Reform was instrumental in recruiting states, districts, and less-impacted schools, providing consulting services to states and districts, and managing and mediating environments by developing and maintaining the Best Evidence Encyclopedia. Founded at the United Kingdom's University of York in 2007 and directed by SFAF chairman Robert Slavin, the Institute for Educational Effectiveness created a second platform for managing

environments to promote the cause of evidence-based and evidence-proven reform initiatives. It also functioned as a source of revenue for SFAF by contracting with SFAF to develop new resources to support school-level improvement (with an emphasis on embedding media resources in regular classroom instruction).

The preceding efforts gave SFAF purchase on the complex dynamics at the federal, state, district, and school levels that had impeded entry into new markets that had emerged under NCLB. With that, SFAF succeeded in securing the new business (and, thus, essential revenues) needed to sustain the enterprise in the near term. By 2007/2008, SFAF's efforts to expand beyond comprehensive school reform had progressed to a formidable scale of operations. In February of 2008, SFAF executives reported that SFAF and CDDRE were collaborating to support seven states and 59 districts. They estimated that over 330 districts and over 2,200 schools were using the 4Sight Benchmark Assessments and Member Center information system. They estimated that an additional 208 schools were using SFAF-provided program components that combined both SFAF-provided materials and training. And they estimated that over 50 additional schools were participating in a program that supported schools' use of their existing curriculum materials with a combination of direct instruction from SFAF trainers with practice-based follow-up from districts. In association with CDDRE, SFAF had achieved this scale of operations while, at the same time, continuing to sustain and support the installed base of 1,200 schools using SFAF's core, comprehensive school reform program, Success for All.

**Key Questions: Organization, Effectiveness, and Sustainability**

Though the work had been on-going for five years, and though they had achieved a formidable scale of operations, SFAF's efforts to expand beyond comprehensive reform were still in the early stages at the time of this writing. How, exactly, these activities were playing out remained to be investigated, and how they would play out over time remained to be seen. At the close of 2007/2008, three key questions arise from SFAF's

efforts to expand beyond comprehensive school reform: questions of organization, effectiveness, and sustainability.

Regarding organization: Would SFAF executives (in collaboration with colleagues in CDDRE and IEE) succeed in managing the complex organizational arrangements required to recruit clients, provide necessary designs and supports, and secure favorable environmental conditions? Again, coming out of its 1999-2003 development cycle, improvements in SFAF's comprehensive school reform program were tempered by organizational problems that had arisen en route, including problems coordinating development activities, integrating program improvements, and developing requisite training capabilities. Expanding beyond comprehensive school reform actually amplified these problems concurrent with efforts by SFAF to solve them: for example, by requiring that developers work to better integrate the comprehensive school reform program while simultaneously working to "disintegrate" it into components; by requiring that developers slow the pace of development to improve coordination and integration while simultaneously responding to the urgent need for new resources to support states and districts; and by requiring that the training organization develop capabilities to support districts and less-impacted schools while still improving capabilities to support the core, comprehensive school reform program. Such organizational challenges would now span a constellation of three organizations. The demands on the managerial capabilities of SFAF executives (and their colleagues in CDDRE and IEE) were steep.

Regarding effectiveness: Would SFAF's designs and supports for expanding beyond comprehensive school reform actually work to improve student achievement? What made the question especially salient was SFAF's staunch advocacy for evidence-based and evidence-proven solutions. The point wasn't lost on SFAF. Concurrent with all of the preceding, SFAF and CDDRE researchers were fielding a randomized study of districts designed to answer exactly that question. As of SY 2007/2008, results were still pending. There were reasons for tempered expectations, as the route to improved student achievement was thick with interdependencies. Working up from the school level,

providing component-based solutions to schools closely resembled the very reform strategies that SFAF had long argued to be insufficient for realizing deep change in the day-to-day practice of teachers and leaders. For such a strategy to play out otherwise would require developing new capabilities to provide extensive, practice-based supports to teachers and leaders in less-impacted schools, either among its own trainers or in districts. But, again, SFAF was simultaneously working to develop trainers' capabilities to work with districts, and it was simultaneously working to develop districts' capabilities to work with schools. Building district capabilities, in turn, required developing new capabilities in state education agencies, which, in turn, required developing capabilities in both SFAF and CDDRE to do that. Producing evidence of effectiveness depended heavily on whether SFAF and its partner organizations could successfully manage these complex, multi-level interdependencies.

Regarding sustainability: While SFAF's efforts to expand beyond comprehensive school reform appeared sufficient to ensure short-term viability, would they be sustainable over the long term? The answer was not entirely clear. To start, moving beyond comprehensive school reform had SFAF deeply enmeshed in precisely the sort of state and district activity from which it had long sought to buffer itself and its schools, thus susceptible to political, financial, and other turbulence at those levels. Further, though expanding beyond comprehensive school reform was providing SFAF with new sources of revenue, SFAF, CDDRE, and IEE were still heavily dependent on grants and philanthropic contributions—long a point of vulnerability for nonprofit educational reformers.<sup>17</sup> Finally, there was much uncertainty in SFAF's efforts to manage federal environments to support the enterprise. An artifact of the Inspector General's investigation was a loss in both political support and funding for Reading First, with the annual funding slashed by two thirds in December of 2007. The implications for state, district, and school decision making were not clear, nor were the implications for SFAF's efforts to expand beyond comprehensive school reform. Looming larger, however, was the pending reauthorization of NCLB. While reauthorization had originally been targeted

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<sup>17</sup> For example, see Rowan (2002).

for 2007, political disagreements and the pending presidential election had delayed the reauthorization (likely into 2009). How NCLB would be adapted upon reauthorization weren't clear, nor were the ways that states, districts, and schools would respond to those changes. Even so, everything in SFAF's history suggested that the reauthorization would have profound implications for its operations (for better or worse), with the added complication that SFAF would now need to adapt a much more complex set of clients, designs, environmental dependencies, and organizational arrangements in order to respond.

### **Conclusion**

We conclude by returning to the two fundamental questions of this paper: (1) what happens when nongovernmental interveners expand the boundaries of their systems in ways that extend beyond schools; and (2) how can scholars frame the nature of interveners work in ways that capture the complexity of these dynamics? In general, we have seen that the question of boundary-drawing constitutes a dilemma for interveners; on the one hand, to draw boundaries around schools is to locate the point of intervention further away from the source of the problems, and to relinquish considerable leverage over implementation. On the other hand, to draw boundaries more broadly around districts, states, and even the federal government is to assume a daunting organizational burden, and to greatly expand the problems that must be contended with. This dilemma, we have argued, is best conceptualized as residing amidst the interactions of interveners' designs, the environments in which they work, and their own organizations.

From a practical perspective, we have used two case studies to suggest that in the NCLB era, multiple forces have created incentives for CSRs to redraw the boundaries of their systems beyond schools so as to include districts and states. Looking across Success for All and America's Choice, we found that issues regarding the quality of implementation, as well as changes in the marketplace for school improvement pressured these two CSRs to expand the boundaries for their systems. For America's Choice, the primary motivation to incorporate districts and states was to gain leverage of educational issues so

as enhance coherence and implementation at the school level. Success for All, on the other hand, reported fewer problems with implementation, yet perceived that the NCLB environment favored programs marketed to districts rather than individual schools. Although we do not present evidence on other programs, we believe that if this is in fact a more general phenomenon, it represents a major development to one of the most important and noteworthy reform efforts of the last 15 years.

While it may be too early to evaluate the implications of these changes, we have identified a few emergent themes that warrant continued scrutiny. The first is that while operating exclusively at the school level may no longer be viable for large, national organizations like Success for All and America's Choice, the expansion into schools' environments significantly increases the complexity and scope of the overall enterprise, and thus brings new risks. More specifically, larger systems of intervention entail a host of new environmental relationships that must be managed, new organizational burdens that must be coped with, and new problems that must be solved. And while both programs seem to be currently thriving, the increased scopes of their operations are not without considerable risks. Indeed, for America's Choice, we saw the case in which a broader set of operations complicated the nature of the work and at times led to disappointing outcomes and costly entanglements for the organization.

Moreover, the ultimate litmus test for both America's Choice and Success for All—improved outcomes measures of student performance—is still in question. Both organizations made their reputations by devising comprehensive, systemic, and highly elaborated designs that operated on the school level, and that were able to demonstrate effectiveness. In part, what enabled this degree of success was both organizations' singular focus on enhancing school-level capacity. Whether America's Choice and Success for All can both expand their operations and still maintain school-level effectiveness is a major question.

One way to understand this dilemma is that these interventions—nongovernmental and with limited resources—are, by definition, partial solutions to the problems they seek to resolve. They can expand into districts, states, and even the federal government, but their involvement in the environment will always be limited relative to the nature of the problems they seek to remedy. They will never get full leverage on all that ails schools, or all that bears on implementation of their designs. Consequently, the question of where to draw boundaries is inherently a balancing act, because the optimal solution is well beyond these interveners' span of control.

But despite these limitations, there are strong incentives for interveners, districts, and states to invest in and sustain these partnerships. For interveners, operating at the upper levels of the system provides access to large numbers of schools in a single geographic area, revenue, prestige, and the promise of a more coherent environment for their school level programs. The incentives for districts and states are no less compelling. Many states and districts currently face daunting social and educational challenges for which they have insufficient experience, capacity, and knowledge (McDermott, 2007; Elmore, 2003; Jennings & Rentner, 2006). As long-time policy critic Jack Jennings concluded in his report on NCLB, “[m]ost state departments of education do not have the capacity to carry out all th[e] duties” required by the law, and many districts lack the necessary resources to maintain adequate yearly progress. Thus, interveners' experience and expertise can provide much-needed help to states and districts under pressure to enhance their own performance and that of their schools. Intervenors may lack the leverage to make all the profound changes they seek, but their expertise in the work of instructional improvement is an increasingly valuable commodity in American education.

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