PBIS Forum 15 Practice Brief:
State and District System Alignment: Strategies

Introduction

Terminology often serves as a barrier to our work in education systems, so the logical first step in exploring the work involved with "state and district system alignment" is to clarify terms like multi-tiered framework, coaching and technical assistance. The word "alignment" appears in education literature and is often interchanged with other words such as "integration" or "unify". "Alignment" is defined as "the proper positioning of parts in relation to each other" and/or "an arrangement of groups in relation to one another" (Merriam-Webster, 2015). In education systems, the "parts" or "groups" might refer to the various organizations within an educational system--- federal education agencies, state education agencies, school districts, schools, and classrooms. Therefore, alignment within an educational system involves ensuring every member within an organization understands the identified outcomes for teaching and learning and the ways of work that lead to those outcomes. It seems that educational system alignment relies heavily on effective communication and quality leadership throughout the system to support behaviors shared by effective organizations that include: common language, common vision/values, and common experiences (OSEP, 2015).

Rationale

Today, education systems seem to work under the notion that somehow "more is better". This way of work results in too many initiatives competing for both organizational (e.g., time, personnel, financial) and individual (e.g., time, work-life balance) resources. "One of the major variables affecting sustained implementation of effective practices is the introduction of new initiatives that either (a) **compete with resources** needed for sustained implementation or (b) **contradict existing initiatives**" (McIntosh, 2015). This, coupled with a heightened emphasis on "sustainability" and "efficiency", have increased the need to make effective systems of alignment a priority (Greenwald, Poulos, & Horner, 2015).

> **"Because implementation systems have finite resources, need for and effectiveness of current and new practices and systems must be assessed and evaluated deliberately and systematically" (Sugai, 2015)**

Procedures

Identify the *WHY*: As state education agencies and school districts explore alignment of systems, it will be important for members of each of the organizations within the educational system to have a shared agreement about the "why" for engaging in alignment work. Gaunt et al. (2015) offer many logical reasons to pursue alignment:

- Improve fidelity of practices, programs or initiatives
- Improve efficiency of implementation support coordination
- Improve efficiency of resource allocation
- Improve effectiveness of outcomes for educators and students
- Promote strategic and data-driven selection of new approaches
- Align new initiatives with existing systems & practices

- Promote use of grants or short-term funding to sustain and enhance system implementation capacity with existing personnel
- Increase sustainability by decreasing burden on schools, educators, and students from having to complete alignment themselves

Identify the *Anchors*: In educational systems, we might anchor alignment between the various organizations to four interactive implementation components: measureable outcomes, data informed decision-making, evidence-based practices, and implementation systems (OSEP, 2015). Each organization within the educational system (state education agencies, districts, schools, classrooms) engages in alignment work. Engaging in alignment work throughout the organization at the state level allows state education agencies to provide organized, data-informed, systems of support to districts. Anchoring alignment to these four interactive components (as an example) would promote shared vision, common language and experiences (qualities of effective organizations) and increase efficiency and effectiveness of leadership throughout the educational system.

- *Outcomes*: Aligned systems promote a shared vision and understanding of academic and behavior indicators that are specified, endorsed, emphasized, and monitored because of their social and education significance throughout the educational system.
- *Data*: Aligned systems promote common experiences and language with information/data systems that are comparable and used consistently to select, monitor, and evaluate outcomes, practices, and systems. State and district alignment of data systems would streamline reporting expectations and allow districts and states to respond efficiently and effectively when schools are identified as needing additional support. Data should promote precision with how practices are selected to support student outcomes and how systems are designed to support adults to engage in implementation.
- *Practices*: Aligned systems promote selection and implementation of interventions and strategies that are evidence-based in achieving identified outcomes. State education agencies providing a systematic process for identifying and vetting practices to determine evidence-base and match to the identified need (data-informed) would support efficient and effective use of resources in districts. This might support movement away from "more is better" and adopting practices that are not supported with research, ultimately freeing valuable resources (e.g., time, budgetary, professional learning) to truly focus on implementing practices that support the identified academic and behavior outcomes.
- *Systems*: Aligned systems provide supports that are needed to enable the accurate and durable implementation of practices, efficient use of data, and achievement of outcomes. If state education agencies have engaged in alignment work within the organization, then districts have a clear understanding of resources available through the state education agency and how they can be leveraged to support outcomes within the district. For example, if a district knows that the state has a defined approach for supporting installation of three-tiered frameworks around social behavior, then a district identifying that as a need to support outcomes can leverage and incorporate resources provided by the state (e.g., professional learning, funding, policy support) into a comprehensive plan for implementation.
 (OSEP, 2015)
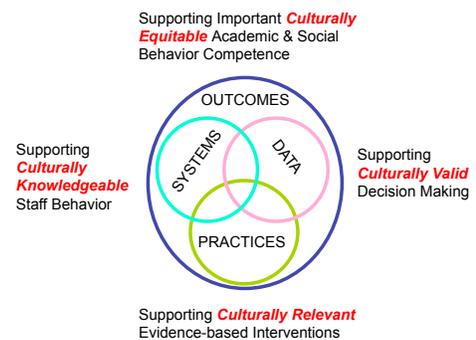
Identify effective *communication systems*: Communication systems should ensure that stakeholders throughout the educational system have access to accurate information. A shared understanding and consistency with the

way of work within each organization and between organizations in an educational system is necessary in order for everyone to benefit from aligned systems. Effective communication allows for timely dissemination of accessible information and mechanisms that allow for feedback loops within and among organizations within an educational system.

Identify *common way of work*: Aligned systems might also define a common way of work throughout the educational system. Organizations throughout the educational system can align with the common way of work and allow for contextual fit. For example, a state education agency identifying key components in a process for engaging in problem solving with data allows districts and other organizations within the system to adopt a problem solving approach that includes the common components. Engaging in a common approach would promote the effective components identified for effective organizations and allow organizations to respond more efficiently and effectively to changes in the educational system (e.g., schools needing additional support as indicated by data).

A common way of work may also include having shared agreements. The way of work may include agreements to utilize a formal process for selection and implementation of data, practices, and systems (Greenwald, Poulos, & Horner, 2015) and agreements to inform approaches to this formal process. For example, making agreements to honor and allow the time outlined in an action plan to implement identified practices and systems would move organizations away from chasing new initiatives/practices each year and focusing on the initiatives/practices selected with intentionality through a data informed decision making process. Agreements may also include organizations "granting permission" to discontinue implementation efforts with initiatives/practices previously adopted that do not fit with the current context or address the intended outcomes.

Resources/References

Aligning systems for outcomes
- Technical Assistance Brief on Alignment –INSERT link to brief
- Aligning Core Features (*Core Analysis Template* and *Aligning Core Features: An Example*): These resources provide a tool and a completed sample of alignment anchored to the core features of outcomes, data, practices, and systems. http://www.pbis.org/presentations/chicago-forum-15

Aligning systems for data
- *Michigan's Professional Learning Policy and Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative*: An example of how support for professional learning is aligned among various departments and units throughout the educational system in Michigan. http://miblsi.cenmi.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=pfo-aIpxtuM%3d&tabid=640
- *Critical Features of an Assessment Schedule*: Provides an example of critical features of an assessment schedule among various units of an educational system http://miblsi.cenmi.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=sKPD_PQp7Rs%3D&tabid=2443

Aligning systems for practices
- *Consumer Guide for Selecting Evidence-Based Practices*:
  - www.pbis.org/common/cms/file/Current%20Topics/Final-Monograph.pdf
- *Hexagon Tool*: A tool that supports states, districts, and schools use a systematic process to evaluate new and existing initiatives/practices for readiness and ability to implement. http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/resources/hexagon-tool-exploring-context

- *Implementing Effective Practices*: *A Systems Self-Assessment:* A tool for engaging in self-assessment and alignment of RtI features for School and District Implementation
http://www.pbis.org/presentations/chicago-forum-15

Aligning systems for systems of support
- District Capacity Assessment (DCA): A tool to provide structure for districts to engage in alignment of resources to support targeted outcomes.
http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/resources/district-capacity-assessment-dca
- Assessment of State Capacity for Scaling up Evidence-Based Practices/State Capacity Assessment (SCA): A tool that allows state leadership teams to explore and measure capacity for and plan for implementation of initiatives/practices (https://sites.google.com/a/midwestpbis.org/midwest-pbis-network/2012%2010-20%20SCA%20%28v%2019%29%20cover%202012%20%283%29.docx?attredirects=0&d=1)
- *Aligning Initiatives within an Organization*: There are several guidance resources for aligning initiatives/practices available from the OSEP Technical Assistance Center (2015 PBIS National Forum at Chicago) http://www.pbis.org/presentations/chicago-forum-15
- *Training and Professional Development Blueprint for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*: A resource that defines the essential features of building systems of support (e.g., professional learning, technical assistance, coaching) to plan for a capacity building approach to implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.
http://www.pbis.org/Common/Cms/files/pbisresources/PBIS_PD_Blueprint_v3.pdf

Frequently asked questions

Q: How do organizations within educational systems get started with this work around alignment?
A: Identifying a shared purpose and outcome for alignment with other organizations within the educational system is an important first step. Ideally, a team representative of the organization explores alignment options. Alignment will most likely be explored both within an organization (e.g., district and schools) and between organizations (e.g., district and state educational agencies). Representative team membership should include members with the authority to allocate resources (e.g., financial, personnel), oversight to work with policies, knowledge of all parts of the organization, knowledge about practices/initiatives being implemented or explored for implementation, and experience with implementation in different areas of the organization (e.g., district personnel, building administrators, classroom teachers). At the state level, team membership might include representation from other organizations within the educational system such as district personnel, building administrators, and/or classroom teachers.

Organizations engaging in alignment work with other organizations within the educational system will need documentation (e.g., strategic plan) from other organizations in order to have a clear understanding of the core features (e.g., outcomes, data, practices/initiatives, and systems of support) available at the state level. A cross-walk between documentation/strategic plans will support identifying commonalities and differences in core features within and between organizations. Organization leadership teams can engage in dialogue to explore alignment priorities and identify necessary steps to move towards alignment. Priorities may encompass work to align within the organization itself (e.g., elementary schools within a district aligned with district core features) in addition to work to align with other organizations within the educational system (e.g., districts aligned with state educational agency core features).

Organization teams leading this work should identify a tool for monitoring progress and outcomes of alignment work to inform on-going planning (e.g., DCA, SCA). Once a tool has been identified, teams engage

in a self-assessment of current status with regard to alignment goals. On-going work might include identifying and implementing important procedures for maintaining alignment. For example, a systematic vetting procedure for evaluating current and potential initiatives/practices should be utilized by all organizations (see resources above for examples).

An effective communication system that allows for two-way communication (feedback loops) between organizations will be important for ensuring sustainability of alignment within and between organizations. A systematic, regular process for disseminating communication and soliciting feedback within and between organizations should be included as a critical component of on-going planning. For example, the action plan should include a feature that explicitly identifies information pertaining to the who, what, how, and when of communication needs.

Q: Who should be responsible for engaging in alignment work in organizations of an educational system?

A: Alignment work should be done within each organization and then between organizations in an educational system (e.g., district with state educational agencies). Representative teams throughout the organization as described above are the best option for engaging in alignment work. It is best that practitioners (e.g., school administrators and classroom teachers) are not expected to complete alignment work. This allows for inconsistencies with interpreting and implementing multiple and possibly competing initiatives/practices and making choices about competing professional learning options attached to initiatives/practices.

Q: What can educational systems expect as a result of effective alignment work?

A: An important outcome of effective alignment work is efficient use of resources. For example, development of a comprehensive district professional learning plan that leverages state educational agency resources, addresses multiple initiatives/practices, and allows for necessary time for personnel to engage in these multiple opportunities with balance. Another key outcome of alignment between a state educational agency and a district is consistency with core features and a common *way of work* that allows effective and efficient systems of support (both preventative and responsive) to districts within a state, schools within a district, and classrooms within a school.

References

Greenwald, A., Poulos, J., & Horner, R. (2015). *Aligning multiple initiatives for efficiency and effectiveness* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from http://www.pbis.org/Common/Cms/files/Forum15_Presentations/B11_Horner_Poulos_Greenwald.pdf

Merrian Webster (2015). Retrieved from http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/alignment

OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (October 2015). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Implementation Blueprint: Part 1 – Foundations and Supporting Information. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon. Retrieved from www.pbis.org.