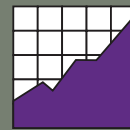# MOVING YOUR NUMBERS

State Education Agencies

The Critical Role of SEAs in Facilitating School District Capacity to Improve Learning and Achievement for Students with Disabilities
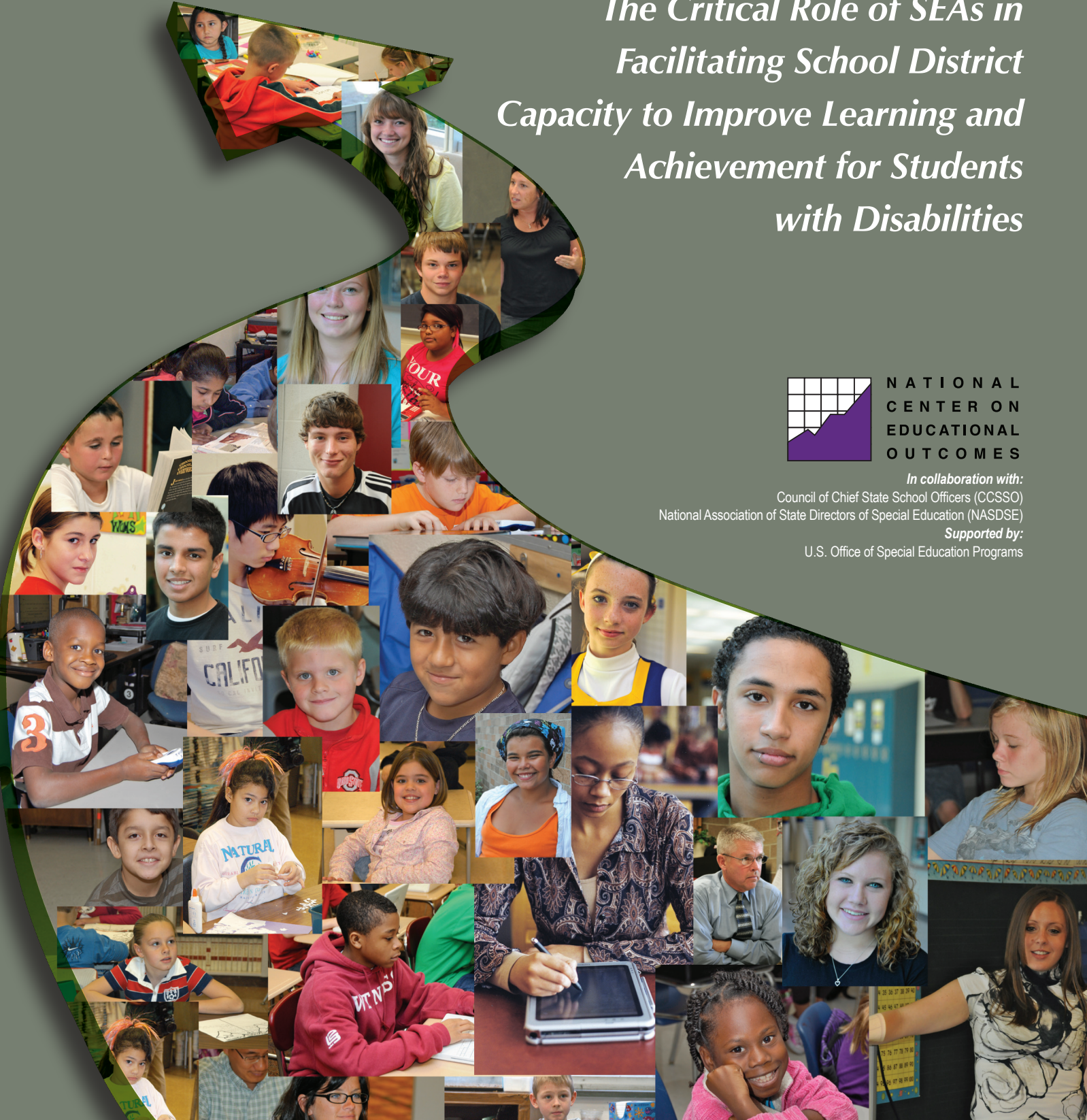
NATIONAL CENTER ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

About *Moving Your Numbers*

Moving Your Numbers: *Improving Learning for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-wide Reform,* examines how school districts with vastly different demographics increase the performance of students with disabilities and other at-risk learners as part of whole-district reform efforts. Case studies of featured districts, as described in the full report, provide evidence that students with disabilities, like all other students, can learn at higher levels when adults focus their collective efforts on improving instructional practice, consistently implement core work across the district, and use assessment and accountability as a lever for ongoing system and student learning and improvement.

Moving Your Numbers identifies six essential practices that must be in place to improve the performance of students with disabilities. Evidence suggests that these six practices, when used in an aligned and coherent manner, are associated with higher student achievement. These practices are *use data well, focus your goals, select and implement shared instructional practices (individually and collectively), implement deeply, monitor and provide feedback and support*, and *inquire and learn.*

Moving Your Numbers was initiated and is supported through the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) under the leadership of Dr. Martha Thurlow, NCEO Director; Rachel Quenemoen, NCEO Senior Research Fellow; and Dr. Laurene Christensen, NCEO Research Associate. Dr. Deborah Telfer, Director, School of Education and Allied Professions Grant Center, University of Dayton, coordinates the development and review of *Moving Your Numbers* on behalf of NCEO. NCEO was established in 1990 to provide national leadership in designing and building educational assessments and accountability systems that appropriately monitor educational results for all students, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs).

This *Moving Your Numbers* State Education Agency feature article was developed by Dr. Stephen Barr, Assistant Commissioner, Office of Special Education, Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, with input from the *Moving Your Numbers* Advisory/Work Group members. The document should be cited as:

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Photographs used in this publication have been provided courtesy of the districts featured and the Ohio Department of Education.

Additional case studies of featured districts will be added to the *Moving Your Numbers* website as they are developed. Go to www.MovingYourNumbers.org for the complete report and additional tools and resources, and to submit success stories.

Moving Your Numbers

The Critical Role of SEAs in Facilitating School District Capacity to Improve Learning and Achievement for Students with Disabilities

There is a lot of talk about systems and most people have some sense of general systems concepts. *Systems Thinking* has been defined as an approach to problem solving, by viewing "problems" as parts of an overall system, rather than reacting to specific parts, outcomes or events and potentially contributing to the further development of **unintended consequences**.

A SYSTEMS APPROACH: WHAT'S DIFFERENT?

- Go beyond integration to unification
- Redesign work at all levels to be about improving capacity at other levels (coherence)
- Redefine scale by designing state-developed products and tools for universal access and applicability
- Ensure intentional use by all regional providers of a consistent process and connected set of tools

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Systems thinking is not one thing, but rather a set of habits or practices within a framework that is based on the belief that the **component** parts of a **system** can best be understood within the context of relationships with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation. Systems thinking focuses on cyclical, rather than linear cause and effect, relationships.

So while we might agree that we can describe almost anything in terms of a system, we must acknowledge that there are significant differences in how people understand systems. After all, there are many dysfunctional, as well as functional, systems. Our task in education is to evolve toward more functional systems.

Basics truths. There is no such thing as a perfect man-made system. Education is constantly bombarded by the next new thing, the politically expedient, the increases/decreases in funding, making the component parts of the system vulnerable to instability. Well-designed and functional systems help mitigate the effects of the localized storms by viewing everything within a larger frame of reference, while still requiring the constant pursuit of improvement.

FEATURES OF A FUNCTIONAL SYSTEM

1. *A functional system goes beyond integration to unification*

Consider one-room schoolhouses. I wasn't there but I heard the stories. As the school and then the district got larger and identified more problems — each with separate and often isolated solutions — we built funding sources, structures, and empires specifically for each of these at-risk populations. At risk became economically disadvantaged, special education, English language learners, migrant, homeless, neglected, and so on. In doing so, we often isolated the children categorized by these labels and neglected to understand that the central issues for each of these populations were more similar than dissimilar. Consequently, we built special funding, special teachers, special curricula, special tests, and special strategies, invariably in isolation of the central purpose of schooling — effective teaching and learning.

Moving from isolated to layered. In many settings, individuals have moved from working in isolation to using a more layered approach characterized by teams of people working on similar tasks but functioning independently or separately. For example, many districts/schools still develop a variety of district/building plans that chase different funding sources, all while using the same tool or template. However, the resulting plans are totally separated from each other. Imagine trying to implement 10 different plans simultaneously, each of which is the most important!

Moving from layered to integrated. Integrating the work begins to highlight some of the similarities without totally committing to a unified approach. In federal programs, for example, we begin to see that almost all programs allow or require professional development, parent/community connections, and outcome improvement. Often, people begin to share resources, building bigger and connected solutions, but often ignoring those pieces that may not be directly related but still affect outcomes — policy, practices, teacher attendance, student attendance, and related issues.

Integration begins to move toward a unified approach when people look at all the subsystems as part of the larger system.

2. Redesign work at all levels to be about improving the capacity at other levels (coherence)

Often "systems" are designed to identify the problems as if there is a shortage of problems and we desperately need to identify new ones. For example, we send a team of people out to districts to look at their data, review their policies and interview their staff, parents, and students. Then we say, "Do you mind if we tell you what is wrong with you?" This occurs in compliance, in district improvement, in Title I, in Special Education, in Career Education, and in other areas. And even when these folks pull their reports together the majority of what they provide is a list of problems they found. It is rare for them to be able to dig down several layers deeper to the drivers of the problems, the multiple conflicting strategies, the inconsistent policies.

A functional system is built with a high degree of understanding of what is/is not working well and the inter-relatedness of all the component parts. The system is built to provide successful capacity at all levels, which assumes that no upper layer of the system can be successful if the layers beneath it are not also successful. Functional inter-relatedness takes into account the realization that state policies, practices, processes, and funding, affect districts and their schools, their teachers, and their students. It is somewhat difficult to imagine working with a building or two in the district without understanding the influence that district policies, practices, and decisions have on the building.

3. Redefine scale by designing state-developed products and tools for universal access and applicability

We do a lot of piloting with the assumption that we'll bring whatever is being piloted up to scale. Unfortunately, that is seldom the case. If the problem is sufficiently large to address, states and districts should fully understand the scale of the problem and the scale of the solution. If the cost of the solution is large, look for a more solid and practical solution. In fact, to get out in front, create your tools with 100 percent of the population in mind. People-intensive solutions are very personal, but not very efficient, scalable, or lasting. Technology is very efficient but assumes skills that may or may not be available. A combination of the two generally gets the critical mass involved at a scalable level as long as you can make decisions about who gets priority for service and how much hand holding is really necessary.

Our friend Brian McNulty of the Denver area Leadership and Learning Center continues to remind us that most of the expertise and knowledge is already available in most schools. The task, then, is to create system processes that take advantage of what is there and treat professionals as professionals who want to be successful.

4. Ensure the intentional use by all regional providers of a consistent process and a connected set of state-developed tools

This is generally one of the more difficult hurtles to cross since everyone is knowledgeable about something. What we need is a more focused approach, which only comes about when all the supports are aligned around a common purpose and are working together, rather than in competition.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM DISTRICTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SEAS

Each district featured in *Moving Your Numbers* has established a foundation and used it to focus and guide all work related to improving instructional practice and achievement across the system. They've each used relevant data points as leverage for making the kind of system improvements that are resulting in improved outcomes for all students and, particularly, for students who have traditionally been left behind (e.g., students with disabilities). This kind of data use is intentional. It's also systemic in that data are used at all levels of the district to focus the conversation and work of teams whose role is increasingly centered on improving the learning of adults and building the collective capacity to meet the instructional needs of all children.

Data use is strategic, helping people to move past "gut" responses and personal preferences about what is/is not effective, and bringing people together in meaningful ways around common or shared work. The teams that operate in the featured districts are using student and school-level data, but they're also using district data because they increasingly see themselves as sharing in the responsibility for the success of all the district's children.

Core work is aligned to the district's focused goals / district strategic plan to improve student learning, and all decisions, including policy and funding decisions, are made with the intent of supporting the district's focused work. Professional development (PD) is no longer provided through a "menu" approach where individual staff members select from

> **MOVING YOUR NUMBERS**
> *Some Lessons Learned from Districts*
>
> **USE DATA WELL:**
> - Use (and require the use of) data at all levels to focus critical conversations, identify needs, gauge/monitor progress, and make continual improvements to instructional practice (ensuring that teams are working with district-wide data, not only school-level data)
> - Require teachers and teacher teams to use data to establish instructional priorities and inform instructional practice on an ongoing basis
> - Model and monitor the use of data to inform instructional decisions
> - Provide support at all levels in the effective use of data to facilitate higher levels of learning for all students and student groups (e.g., students with disabilities)
>
> **FOCUS YOUR GOALS:**
> - Establish a foundation to guide all work
> - Align all work across the district with the district goals/district strategic plan to improve student learning
> - Focus all work across the district to meet district-wide goals and strategies
> - Align decisions about resource management with district goals
> - Focus PD on district goals and train EVERYONE

a long list of options what might be of interest to them. Instead, PD is directly related to the district's identified needs and focused goals, and everyone in the district is trained as part of the district's commitment to building its own capacity to meet student needs.

These lessons have implications for SEAs, highlighting the need for offices within SEAs to redesign their work and for the SEA to redesign its collective work in ways that facilitate and support the capacity of districts to use data well, focus their work, fully implement, and support scalability and sustainability of effective practices. SEAs are often organized into departmental silos, each of which requires districts to develop plans, establish structures, and submit documentation of compliance with whatever that particular component of the SEA requires.

> **PROMOTING SCALABILITY & SUSTAINABILITY OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE**
> *SEAs should...*
> - Support shared work on improvement of instructional practice and achievement
> - Promote a culture of shared accountability
> - Redefine leadership as set of essential practices that must be implemented at all levels
> - Provide consistent structures for helping people put essential practices in place

Make no mistake – the role of the SEA is far-reaching and has the potential to affect districts and schools in fundamental ways, and their actions can help districts get focused or contribute to competing demands and fragmentation. Through the development of tools, SEAs can help districts set the boundaries for their work.

Similarly, structures developed and promoted through the SEA can assist districts to build their own capacity for ongoing and shared learning and growth, which is required for all students to learn at significantly higher levels.

ONE STATE'S WORK: A CASE IN SUPPORT OF A SYSTEMS APPROACH

In 2007, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) embarked on the development of a statewide system of support (SSoS) – one that was truly statewide in scope (i.e., for all districts and their schools) and systemic in nature. Two inter-related initiatives provided the foundation for the development of Ohio's SSoS. They were (1) the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC), and (2) the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP). OLAC was a 30-plus member group co-directed by ODE and the Buckeye Association of School Administrators (BASA). The outcome of the first phase of OLAC's work was the development of a leadership framework (i.e., *Ohio's Leadership Development Framework*) for the state, which redefined leadership as a set of essential practices.[1]

At the same time, the OIP – a structured process that incorporated a connected set of web-based major tools – was created as Ohio's strategy for assisting not only districts and their schools in improvement status, but any district interested in focusing its work to better meet the instructional needs of all children. The OIP provided the mechanism for enacting *Ohio's Leadership Development Framework*.

In this case, the state asked the question "what do district/building leadership teams need in order to perform the essential practices identified by OLAC at a high level of effectiveness?" It was clear that most districts had few resources for effectively organizing data, analyzing data, and making decisions using data. However, it was equally clear that a state could develop an online tool that did all of those things: collect district/school team decisions related to their data; create a data-driven needs assessment that could easily be used to develop a focused improvement plan; and connect all available state and federal funding sources coming through the state to the implementation of the single district and aligned building plans. The added benefit for Ohio was that once the needs assessments were completed, the state had a clear picture of the common areas of district-identified needs by regions and across the state.

While the combined OLAC-OIP statewide effort led to the restructuring of core work and the establishment of district leadership teams, building leadership teams, and teacher-based teams in districts across the state, it was also intentionally used by the SEA to develop the collective capacity of Ohio's regional system [comprised of 56 educational service centers, 16 of which operate state support teams (SSTs)] to support the district-wide improvement efforts of any district.

> ## CONSIDERATIONS FOR SEAs
>
> **Do SEAs:**
> - ☐ Focus and align their work to effectively support ALL districts, schools, and teachers in improving student learning?
> - ☐ Establish mechanisms for providing high-quality and consistent support on a statewide basis?
> - ☐ Take steps to continually reduce fragmentation across SEA offices/departments?
> - ☐ Provide tools, products, and/or services that facilitate the development, implementation, and evaluation of coherent district plans focused on student learning?
>
> **Do SEAs:**
> - ☐ Limit the number of requirements to which districts must respond?
> - ☐ Ensure that all SEA initiatives soliciting district involvement require districts to align proposed work with district-identified goals, rather than identify new or different goals?
> - ☐ Support districts in designing and using protocols/procedures for providing feedback and differentiated support to their schools and teacher teams?
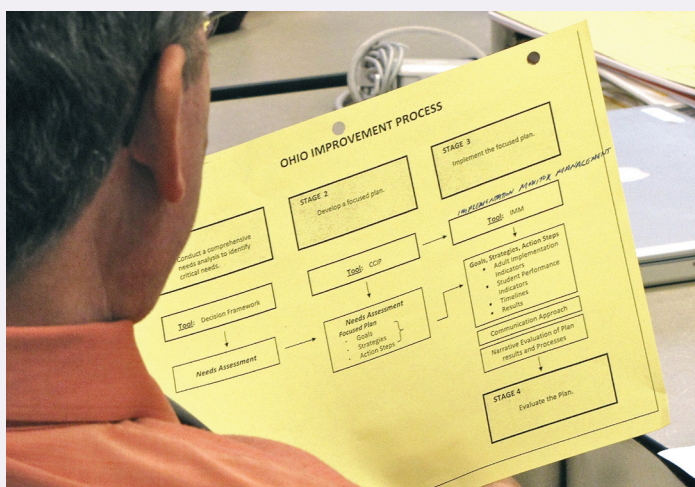> - ☐ Evaluate the degree to which SEA actions are affecting district performance?

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[1] See www.OhioLeadership.org for information about OLAC and the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP).

Under Ohio's approved differentiated accountability plan, OIP was designated as the required intervention for districts and their schools in improvement status and more than half of Ohio's 609 public school districts are using OIP today. Further, an increasing number of districts not in improvement status and therefore not required to use OIP has elected to do so because district administration sees merits in the approach.

RETHINKING THE SEA ROLE

Taylor, Nelson, & Adelman (1999), as referenced in *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature*,[2] noted that: *"those who set out to change schools and schooling are confronted with two enormous tasks. The first is to develop prototypes. The second involves large scale replication. One without the other is insufficient."* (p. 2).

In the example provided above, the state saw its role as one of facilitating good leadership throughout the system. It identified and created tools (prototypes) that allowed all districts and schools in the state to exercise effective leadership practices, while setting the boundaries for collective conversation among professional educators about what constituted high-quality instructional practice.

In *Moving Your Numbers*, the districts featured often had external support (e.g., through participation in state personnel development grant work) that helped them to: (1) focus and align their work; (2) develop internal accountability for improvement of instructional practice and achievement for all students; (3) move toward the use of shared leadership models that involved redefining leadership around essential practices; and (4) put in place structures that fostered coherence in core work across the system and consistency in the implementation of identified strategies/actions over time.

SEAs are in a unique position to set the stage for this kind of support to be provided. They can significantly affect the capacity of districts to improve teaching and learning in ways that better meet the needs of all children by helping districts to identify and prioritize needs, and stay on course despite the changing political and economic landscape. Or, they can create roadblocks that get in the way of districts being able to gain the focus needed to fully implement effective practices by bombarding them with disconnected, competing requirements that contribute to fragmentation at the local level.

Paul Reville (2007) noted that the "transformed SEA will need to guide its systemic school improvement work with a clear action plan toward school betterment. The focus of that plan should point to the systemic improvement of instruction, and by extension, on the state's role in improving instruction. How can states assist districts to help schools to help teachers improve instruction? How can teachers, through enhanced practice, help students to learn more?" [Commentary: A mountain beyond mountains. In Redding, S., & Walberg, H.J. (Eds.) (2007). *Handbook on Statewide Systems of Support*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement, p. 17].

Moving Your Numbers offers insights into the direction SEAs should take to more effectively support districts and schools in improving outcomes for all students.

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[2] Taylor, L. Nelson, Pl, & Adelman, H. (1999). Scaling-up reforms across a school district. *Reading and Writing Quarterly, 15*(4), 303-325.

Available *MOVING YOUR NUMBERS* Publications:

• Administrator Preparation Guide: Using Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-wide Improvement.

• District Self-Assessment Guide for Moving Our Numbers: Using Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-Wide Improvement.

• Moving Your Numbers: A Synthesis of Lessons Learned from Districts Using Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-Wide Improvement.

• Moving Your Numbers: Five Districts Share How They Used Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-Wide Improvement.

• Moving Your Numbers: The Critical Role of Regional Providers in Facilitating School District Capacity to Improve Achievement for Students with Disabilities.

• **Moving Your Numbers: The Critical Role of SEAs in Facilitating School District Capacity to Improve Achievement for Students with Disabilities.**

• Parent/Family Companion Guide: Using Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-Wide Improvement.

• Teacher Preparation Guide: Using Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-Wide Improvement.

For More Information on

***Moving Your Numbers*, Contact NCEO or Visit:**

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