



# *fast five*

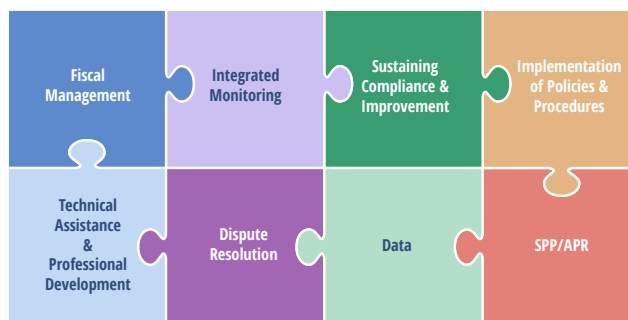
## Five Drivers of Coherence in State General Supervision Systems



States are required to have a system of general supervision that monitors local education agencies' (LEAs) compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and supports them to implement the law (National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring [NCSEAM], 2007; National Center for Systemic Improvement [NCSI], 2018). General supervision systems are fundamentally state systems of accountability and support. They include the constellation of policies, practices, beliefs, behaviors, messages, and resources at the state level that accomplish the following:

1. Direct attention toward achieving specific aims
2. Provide support and assistance to build the capacity of LEAs to achieve those aims
3. Hold LEAs responsible for achieving those aims

Over the years, state general supervision systems have been described as having distinct but interconnected components. As currently characterized by the U.S.



Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), these components of general supervision (often referred to as "puzzle pieces") are the following:

- Data
- The State Performance Plan (SPP) and Annual Performance Report (APR)
- Sustaining Compliance and Improvement
- Dispute Resolution
- Implementation of Policies and Procedures
- Fiscal Management
- Technical Assistance and Professional Development
- Integrated Monitoring

Supporting LEAs to achieve complex aims such as effective implementation of IDEA and improved results for children with disabilities requires that all components of the state general supervision system work seamlessly together. It may be helpful to imagine a state general supervision system as a sophisticated machine comprising many interlocking gears that must operate in concert to produce the desired outcomes.



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As NCSEAM stated in their 2007 resource *Developing and Implementing an Effective System of General Supervision*:

“It is important to note that although the components are presented as separate pieces of a puzzle, the components connect, interact and articulate to form a comprehensive system. Each component must inform and gain information from the other components. A state may have the independent components in place but not have an effective system because the components do not connect together as a system.”

(p. 2)

### In other words, the coherence of a general supervision system matters.

In their 2015 book, *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems*, Fullan and Quinn define coherence as “a shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work” that exists in “the minds and actions of people individually and especially collectively” (pp. 2–3). They outline four drivers that promote systems coherence:

1. Focusing direction
2. Cultivating collaborative cultures
3. Deepening learning
4. Securing accountability

Fullan and Quinn contend that the drivers work together interdependently to achieve systems

coherence, which is similar to our earlier gear analogy. Leadership is the thread that binds them together. Leaders within a system operationalize the drivers as the “way we do business.”

So how can a state education agency (SEA) strengthen the coherence of its general supervision system? It is interesting to note that the purposes of a state general supervision system align with Fullan and Quinn’s coherence drivers.

This Fast Five applies the coherence drivers to the work of general supervision and explores how they can strengthen the connective tissue between the system’s components. A coherent general supervision system will function in a coordinated and intentional fashion to achieve its ultimate aims—ensuring compliance with IDEA and improving student outcomes.

## 1. Focus direction

A coherent system is one that has clearly defined goals. This is sometimes referred to as a system’s “North Star.” Fullan and Quinn explain that setting a vision and clear goals for your system will provide the “glue” that sustains “focused direction in the face of competing and complex demands internally and externally” (p. 17). It is important to invite diverse perspectives to the table for the vision-setting process. Fullan and Quinn recommend developing goals collaboratively with stakeholders internal and external to the system. As they explain, “All parts of the organization...must feel they have a place in the process” to build buy-in and trust. A carefully crafted system vision will provide direction and allow those who work in the system to be “focused on a collective purpose” (p. 48).

Drivers of coherence (Fullan and Quinn)	Purposes of a state general supervision system
1. Focusing direction	Directing attention toward achieving specific aims
2. Cultivating collaborative cultures	Providing support and assistance to build the capacity of SEAs and LEAs to achieve those aims
3. Deepening learning	
4. Securing accountability	Holding LEAs responsible for achieving those aims
Leadership—activates and connects the components	



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## 2. Cultivate collaborative cultures

Fullan and Quinn discuss the power of cultivating a collaborative culture of growth to support systems coherence. An organization with a growth mindset is one that prizes continuous learning and innovation, fosters strong relationships based on trust, focuses on building the capacity of others, empowers those within the system to try new things, and embraces an orientation of partnership and collaboration. Leaders in collaborative cultures also model learning and learn alongside their colleagues. Establishing a collaborative culture is critical to achieving a system's goals (its "north star") because "people are motivated to change through meaningful work done in collaboration with others" (p. 60).

## 3. Deepen learning

For a system to reach its "north star," it is critical that people within the system have necessary capacity (including skills, knowledge, professional development, and resources) to do so. This requires a commitment to deep learning. State general supervision systems reflect a combination of accountability and support activities. Within the Results Based Accountability and Support (RBAS) cross-state learning

collaborative, we often say, "For every ounce of accountability, we must offer a pound of support." Therefore, a key role of the SEA is to help LEAs deepen their learning and capacity in areas where improvement (via the accountability system) is needed. Ultimately, when the SEA holds LEAs accountable for achieving certain aims (e.g., 100% compliance on an SPP/APR indicator or improved graduation rates), it must also consider how best to support those LEAs to reach that expectation. What skills, knowledge, professional development, or resources do LEAs need to meet the system's expectations? As Fullan and Quinn describe, it is important to "focus on the 'how' of shifting practice [and]... identify the processes that will support" that shift (p. 99).

In addition to considering how the SEA can build the capacity of LEAs to reach systems goals, it may be helpful for SEAs to reflect on how to continually deepen the learning and capacity of their own staff to engage in this work. This can be supported through cultivating collaborative cultures, but other structures can be employed as well. What internal professional development and learning opportunities are made available to SEA staff to ensure they have the needed capacity to support LEAs and implement the state's general supervision system effectively?

## 4. Secure accountability

Accountability is a core component of a state's general supervision system and is at the heart of IDEA. States must monitor LEA compliance with the law to ensure that the rights of students with disabilities and their families are upheld. States may also decide to develop a vision for their system focused on improving student outcomes and therefore incorporate outcomes or results data into their accountability system metrics (e.g., LEA determinations). In the context of general supervision systems, it is important that states consider the message conveyed by their accountability metrics. Are those metrics (e.g., LEA determinations) aligned to the system goals? Does the way the SEA holds LEAs accountable reflect the system vision?

Accountability mechanisms such as LEA determinations or monitoring activities represent forms of external accountability. Fullan and Quinn also address the importance of cultivating internal accountability within systems to promote coherence. They say, "Internal accountability occurs when individuals and groups willingly take on personal, professional, and collective responsibility for continuous improvement" (p. 110). States can strengthen internal accountability for general supervision system goals at the state and local levels by committing to the previous three drivers—by articulating their system vision and goals, by providing opportunities for LEAs to deepen their capacity to meet those goals, and by cultivating collaborative cultures that prioritize trust, relationships, and two-way learning.



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## 5. Foster leadership at all levels of the system

The thread that links all the drivers together is leadership. Fullan and Quinn contend that leadership at all levels of the system is required to initially develop and then continually support the implementation of this systems coherence framework. As they explain, “Leaders build coherence when they combine the four components of (the systems coherence framework) to meet the varied needs of the complex organizations they lead” (p. 128).

They go on to say that “achieving coherence in a system takes a long time and requires continuous attention” (p. 128). That is one of the many reasons Fullan and Quinn advise that leadership be fostered at all levels of the system as opposed to resting with a single person. They believe the mark of good leadership is a leader’s willingness to mentor and cultivate teams of leaders across the system with the commitment and capacity to support the system’s goals. In the context of general supervision, that can mean distributed leadership at the state level as well as a philosophical commitment by the state to foster leadership and ownership for

achieving the system’s goals within LEAs too. They argue that leaders should “establish a learning culture in which many people are expected to develop their leadership skills and help others do the same” (pp. 134–135).

We encourage readers to consider Fullan and Quinn’s coherence drivers in the context of your state’s system of general supervision. To what extent are each of these drivers reflected in your system design and functioning? Does your general supervision system currently have a defined vision and specified aims? Are your state’s accountability mechanisms (e.g., LEA determinations, risk assessment) aligned with those aims? What support and resources are LEAs offered to deepen their capacity to reach those aims? Which drivers are currently strengths in your system? Which drivers reveal gaps or opportunities for improvement in your system? How can you foster leadership at the state and local levels for pursuing systems coherence and achieving system goals?

We hope reflecting on the drivers and reflection questions in this resource is helpful in your state’s pursuit of greater general supervision systems coherence.

## References

**Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2015).** *Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems.* Corwin.

**National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring. (2007).** *Developing and implementing an effective system of general supervision: Part B.* [http://www.hdc.lsuhsd.edu/docs/TIERS/resources/Effective%20General%20Supervision%20Paper\\_Part%20B.pdf](http://www.hdc.lsuhsd.edu/docs/TIERS/resources/Effective%20General%20Supervision%20Paper_Part%20B.pdf)

**National Center for Systemic Improvement. (2018).** *Leveraging general supervision systems to improve student outcomes: A process guide for Part B.* WestEd.

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## Reflection Questions

### 1. Focus direction

#### Reflection Questions to Apply This Driver to General Supervision Systems:

- Has your state discussed the goals and purpose of your general supervision system?
  - » What are the goals of your state's general supervision system? What vision is your system trying to achieve?
    - Improved compliance with IDEA? Improved student outcomes? Both?
- If a vision for your general supervision system is in place, who was at the table when it was developed? Which educational partners (internal and external to the SEA) were involved?
- Where is the vision for your general supervision system documented?
- How has the vision for your general supervision system been shared and communicated within the SEA, to LEAs, to families and communities?
- How well is your general supervision system vision understood internally at the SEA and by external educational partners (LEAs, families, legislators, etc.)?
- To what extent is the vision of your general supervision system aligned with the vision of the SEA?

### 2. Cultivate Collaborative Cultures

#### Reflection Questions to Apply This Driver to General Supervision Systems:

- What is the nature of your SEA's relationship with LEAs? To what extent does your state's general supervision system reflect an orientation of partnership and collaboration with LEAs? How would LEAs characterize their relationship with the SEA?
- Would you characterize your state's general supervision system as one that values continuous learning and improvement? At the SEA level? At the LEA level?
- In what ways does your SEA model learning and continuous improvement for LEAs?
- Is the culture of your general supervision system collaborative? How often do the leads of the various components of your general supervision system work together? Is that collaboration effective?
  - » How well does information flow between the components of your general supervision system?
  - » Do data generated by one component of the system (e.g., the SPP/APR) inform the implementation of other components of the system (e.g., monitoring or technical assistance)?
- Do leaders of each system component consider the impact of decisions made about one aspect of the system on other parts of the system?
- Is the culture within the SEA collaborative? What degree of collaboration exists between your general supervision system and other accountability and support systems? Between the special education division within your SEA and other divisions (e.g., ESSA, school improvement, assessment)?



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## 3. Deepen Learning

### Reflection Questions to Apply This Driver to General Supervision Systems:

- How clearly have the goals of your general supervision system been communicated to LEAs? Are all LEAs “on the same page” about the expectations?
- What technical assistance, professional development, or support does your state offer LEAs (either directly or indirectly)?
  - » How is this support aligned to the accountability requirements of your system?
- » Are technical assistance, professional development, and support opportunities available to LEAs for each of the expectations in your state accountability system?
- How does your SEA assess LEA needs? What opportunities do LEAs have to articulate and share their needs with the SEA?
- Is your state’s support to LEAs *differentiated* based on district needs? What data are used to determine this differentiation?
  - » What technical assistance, professional development, or support is offered to all LEAs (universal)? To some LEAs (targeted)? To the LEAs with the highest needs (intensive)?
- To what extent are state support efforts like the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) or the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) aligned to your accountability system?
- What professional development and learning opportunities are available to SEA staff responsible for general supervision to support them to be effective in their roles and achieve the system’s goals?

## 4. Secure accountability

### Reflection Questions to Apply This Driver to General Supervision Systems:

- To what extent do your state’s accountability mechanisms (e.g., LEA determinations, risk assessments, monitoring practices) align to your system’s goals and vision? Where is there a mismatch?
- To what extent are the LEA support and capacity-building opportunities offered by the state aligned to the accountability requirements?
- How much of the accountability at play in your system is externally vs. internally driven? What other steps can you take to increase internal accountability to achieve your system’s goals? At the SEA level? At the LEA level?

## 5. Foster leadership at all levels of the system

### Reflection Questions to Apply This Driver to General Supervision Systems:

- What does leadership at the state level look like for meeting the goals of your general supervision system (i.e., achieving compliance with IDEA and improving student outcomes)? Does it rest with one person? Is it shared across individuals and teams?
- How can you deepen your state team’s commitment to achieving the goals of your system?
- What steps has your state taken to build ownership at the LEA level for achieving the goals of your general supervision system?
- What opportunities are LEAs given to lead? How often does the state identify, celebrate, and elevate successful practices at the local level?