

Three Levers State Agency Leaders Can Use to Realize Positive Outcomes for Children with Disabilities



State agencies can — and should — play an essential leadership role in advancing positive outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families. Three important levers are available for states to use in their leadership work to support improved results for children receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Authority

au·thor·i·ty
noun



“the power to...make decisions”
([Oxford Languages](#))

Influence

in·flu·ence
verb



“to affect or change how someone or something develops, behaves, or thinks” ([Cambridge Dictionary](#))

Resources

re·sources
noun



“an available supply of something that is valued because it can be used for a particular purpose”
([Oxford Reference](#))

Under IDEA, state agencies are required to design and implement general supervision systems to provide accountability, oversight, and support to local programs — including early intervention programs for infants and toddlers, and local educational agencies for PreK-12 learners. State legislative and gubernatorial actions can also create mandates for state agencies to operationalize legislative and executive intent.

Through these directives, state agencies:

- Set targets on key performance indicators related to compliance and child, student, and family outcomes, and establish improvement strategies
- Collect, disaggregate, and analyze data to assess and understand performance on designated indicators
- Publicly report on the progress of each local program in achieving performance targets

State agencies can use these capacities to:

- Understand systemic successes and challenges, including whose needs are and not being well met under the current system
- Demand action for systems improvement that can change results

“We’re a local control state” is a seemingly ubiquitous perspective, with this concept frequently expressed in one form or another by many agency leaders. In those contexts in which state agencies don’t have the power to mandate action, they do have the opportunity to use their spheres of influence to shape what local programs pay attention to and take action upon.

State agency leaders have choices they can make relative to which systemic successes and challenges they want to call attention for local programs, educators/service providers, and the public. They also have choices about the ways that they might try to inspire or provoke action for change at the local level.

State agencies can use these capacities to:

- Share and explain qualitative and quantitative data to help local programs and their partners understand current status
- Decide which issues to elevate as suggested priorities for systemic change and bring them to the forefront of conversation and focus for improvement
- Introduce ideas and potential solutions coming from research and emerging promising practice on how systems could change to support the success of all children with disabilities and their families

The degree to which resources exist, as well as the levels and depth of available resources across states and state agencies varies widely. Writ large, state level resources that can be leveraged to support positive outcomes for children with disabilities and their families include:

- The time and attention of agency leaders and staff
- Relational/social capital with elected and appointed federal, state, and local leaders, family members, and community partners
- National and regional technical assistance expertise and support
- IDEA state set aside funds
- Federal and other grants
- State appropriations through legislation and approved state budgets

State agencies can use these capacities to:

- Create priorities for and make related decisions about how to allocate resources, and manage those resources accordingly
- Evaluate return on investment and make decisions to sustain or change current investments in response to impact data