For the last five years, the Georgia Department of Education has been engaged in a shift from the No Child Left Behind model of compliance and consequence toward a continuous improvement mindset and an emphasis on service and support. *It would be impossible for a siloed, segmented, or change-resistant state agency to lead this work.* Our move toward continuous improvement required a seismic shift in our agency’s organizational structure, culture, and the coherence of our mission.

From Compliance & Consequence to Service & Support
Building an Organization Equipped for Change

Strategy: Nimble & Responsive Organizational Structure
Excessive layers of hierarchy within the organization had the effect of contributing to siloes and bureaucratic hurdles, and some areas – including special education and CTAE – tended to get lost in the org chart. Instituting a flatter organizational structure has enhanced collaboration and made our agency quicker to react and adapt to change.

Strategy: Continuous Improvement Teams & Coherent School Improvement
We’ve set the expectation that school improvement is a shared responsibility between schools, districts, and the state – and the role of our agency as a whole, rather than the School Improvement division alone. We’ve operationalized that by creating Continuous Improvement Teams – true cross-divisional teams that leverage experience and expertise from across the agency to meet district improvement challenges.

Strategy: Meaningful Stakeholder Feedback
We’ve been intentional about moving away from traditional stakeholder input models and toward strategic engagement that produces genuine feedback to shape our work. CCSSO has provided significant support throughout this process, helping to lay a foundation for our ESSA working committees and facilitate the working group we convened as we completed our IADA application.

Strategy: Different Funding Sources, One Focus
Availability of funding is always an issue – but we have greater control over the direction of funding. We’ve worked to ensure we’re directing state and federal dollars toward identified areas of need that support our overall, agency-wide mission. Examples include:

- Using federal special education funding to place a Special Education Content Integration Specialist within each content area
- Using Title IV funds to support identified whole child needs
- Using federal school improvement funding to place a wraparound coordinator in each Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA)
- Expanding our ESSA school improvement criteria (adding “Promise Schools” category) to provide wraparound services in additional schools

Lessons Learned
Our Suggestions for SEAs Moving Toward Continuous Improvement

Organizations & Individuals Rise to the Standard You Set: We’ve worked to model good practices for districts (as an agency) and for agency staff (as a leadership team). The Continuous Improvement Team process is a perfect venue to set the tone of collaborative leadership for districts.

Partners Need Clear Lines of Contact: We’ve worked to make sure our partners know who they need to contact for agency-level questions. In some cases, that’s been a technology project: see our district support directory at gadoe.org/support. In others, it’s been a personnel decision: we’ve facilitated a stronger relationship with our Regional Educational Service Agencies by having a dedicated liaison for RESA Directors.

Proactive, Not Reactive: The bottom line – anticipating challenges and making structural changes so we’re better equipped to address them is better than reacting once an issue arises.