



## DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS: IMPROVING SEA COMMUNICATION WITH LEAs, PARTNERS/VENDORS, AND THE PUBLIC

### The Need

As state education agencies (SEAs) seek to communicate information about new programs, policies and outcomes, there is a need to have a strategic vision and a proactive, coordinated plan for communication rather than a reactive response. Many SEAs are seeking support in developing the capacity to be more strategic and effective in developing and implementing a communication system.

### The Context

SEAs are central players in initiating and leading new reform efforts and in supporting and implementing Federal initiatives. Traditional approaches to providing public information are not adequate for producing public awareness and support and in supporting program implementation at the local level. With limited resources for communication, SEAs often have very few staff devoted to communication systems.

High interest and hot button issues that SEAs are grappling include the following:

- Are children in safe and secure environments and what are states and local officials doing to assure that students are adequately protected?
- What is the state doing about implementing the common core curriculum and what does that mean for schools, teachers and students?
- How are teachers and schools being evaluated? Are the evaluations fair? How will the evaluations be used to improve instruction?
- What does the state testing program say about the quality of education in the state? What is the impact of the testing program on individual students? Are changes to the state testing program being planned or contemplated?



Each of these issues is of interest to the public, policy makers and all educators. Their interests differ, and they need to have information that corresponds to those differing needs.

Messages need to be crafted carefully for each audience. The content, layout, timing, and language of the message need to be tailored for each audience, and be made understandable for the intended readers. Having a strategic vision for communication takes into consideration other competing initiatives that need communication and the calendar for the year to determine the best time to disseminate new information.

## The Opportunity

Words can be very powerful, and when it comes to communicating effectively it is important to consider not only what to say, but how well-crafted messages can help improve and build relationships and trust with your audience. To successfully implement a new policy or initiative, it is important to develop a specific plan for communicating with stakeholders and the public, one that includes a common consistent language and proactive messaging that take the audience's potential reaction into consideration. The plan must also include a feedback loop that outlines a strategy for receiving and responding to concerns and questions that may follow, even soliciting responses when appropriate. A strong communication system requires attention to different communications channels that are available to reach different audiences.

SEAs are seeking to learn from their peers and other organizations about effective strategies to improve communications. For example, several states have developed a centralized online data source for schools and the public to access, but which states have been successful in their communication as demonstrated by high levels of effective use of the online system by stakeholders? There are other organizations that may have communication strategies to learn from such as medical/health organizations which also have to communicate changes in policies and information that includes data of interest to stakeholders.

## The Work

The collaborative benchmarking process is described in the attached paper, *Discovering and Implementing Best Practices to Strengthen SEAs: Collaborative Benchmarking*. The study will be led by the Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP Center), meaning that we will provide the facilitation leader, provide or acquire the subject matter expert (SME), and provide the staff support to conduct the work. We will recruit interested RCC and SEA teams to obtain guidance on which specific aspects of effective communication systems they wish to learn about. The ideal SEA team will be comprised of individuals who have a high level of authority in the SEA in order to effect change, who know and lead the accomplishment of SEA goals, who collectively have knowledge of communication protocols, and who are motivated to make improvements in the communications systems. Ideally too, Regional Comprehensive Centers (RCCs) will participate with their SEAs throughout the process by giving them support, providing travel funding, and helping plan implementation of the process changes. Our goal is



that the RCCs will continue to support the SEAs in the implementation of the process improvement activities.

The Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP Center) focuses on helping state education agencies (SEAs) throughout the country, as they adapt to reduced fiscal resources and increased demands for greater productivity. As State Departments of Education are facing a daunting challenge of improving student performance with diminishing financial resources, the BSCP Center provides technical assistance to SEAs that builds their capacity to support local educational agencies (LEAs or districts) and schools, and to the other 21 regional and content comprehensive centers that serve them, by providing high quality information, tools, and implementation support. The partners in the BSCP Center are Edvance Research, Inc., the Academic Development Institute, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (University of Washington), and the Fiscal Analytics Unit (Georgetown University).

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