

No More Random Acts of School Improvement

The title for this paper came from a State Education Agency (SEA) staff member from Virginia as she participated in the year one review of working with the consultants from the Building State Capacity and Productivity (BSCP) Center and the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center (ARCC). She believes that one result from this cooperative effort is that SEA leaders are now beginning to use a coordinated planned strategy for school improvement across their agency. The rest of this paper will detail how this occurred.

In August 2013, Susan Hanes and Tom Kerins from BSCP traveled to Richmond, Virginia to meet with a Leadership Team formed by SEA staff. The purpose of the meeting was to go through a performance management rubric that focuses SEA staff on their state-wide System of Recognition, Accountability, and Support (SRAS).

For many years, the role of the typical State Education Agency has been evolving from simply compliance monitoring to an organization that will not tolerate business as usual, especially for low-performing districts and schools. The challenge has become how the SEA can move to this more proactive role and increased responsibilities while working with decreasing resources. “In some states, the SRAS may be pigeon-holed within the Title I office with little integration with other offices within the SEA that impact school improvement. The SEA may view the SRAS as simply a technical assistance outreach to low-achieving schools and not consider the state policies and regulations that may be burdensome to LEAs and schools embarked upon focused improvement efforts” (Hanes, Kerins, Perlman, Redding, & Ross, 2013, p. 9).

Virginia staff knew they had “...to conceptualize, position, and promote their SRAS as a real system that works to coherently support schools and districts, rather than a set of isolated parts moving independently” (Hanes et al., 2013). The first step to move in that direction was for a Leadership Team, representing a number of Virginia SEA Departments, to jointly go through a self-assessment process using the BSCP Evaluation Rubric that has 52 indicators, explanations, and exemplars.ⁱ

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Leadership Team, staff from ARCC, and the BSCP consultants met for two days. For each Indicator, SEA staff had come to agreement about its status. For example, Indicator 1.5 asks what evidence is available to show the extent to which the SRAS responsibilities are integrated within the SEA. The possibilities range from no evidence (I); to partial development or implementation (II), in which there might be a documented description of the SEA’s ongoing efforts to integrate the functions of the SRAS into and with other SEA offices; to a mostly functional level of development and implementation, in which evidence is available to show the integration (III); to that of a full level of implementation, in which the SEA has an ongoing process for evaluating and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of its integration of the functions of the SRAS into and with other offices (IV).

While some rubrics represent an afternoon's work with no accompanying support materials, the one used by Virginia from BSCP represents the work of multiple, in-depth SEA case studies and a national survey of all 50 SEAs regarding their school improvement efforts. As a result, each indicator statement is carefully defined using real SEA examples, and each indicator has examples of evidence from States. When in doubt, staff from Virginia went back to the basic document and reviewed their situation in light of this information.

This same process of discussion and debate about the ratings continued over all 52 indicators, - organized into four sections:

- Part A: Design and Assessment of the SRAS
- Part B: Resources and Services Provided to Districts and Schools
- Part C: Implementation
- Part D: Outcomes for Districts and Schools Served by the SRAS

Concurrent with the Leadership's team's rating on this I to IV scale is their determination as to its priority or importance and how easily it can be completed given current policy and budget constraints. All these numbers and ratings are critical, since--by the end of the day-- the team had to determine which of these 52 indicators it would tackle over the next 12 months. After a debate about all the possibilities, Virginia staff narrowed their particular priority list to eight. Then, the SEA staff and personnel from ARCC began to consider how the new set of Virginia priorities could be integrated into their annual plan for working with the SEA.

The final step during this two-day session was to take the selected indicators and incorporate them within the online platform, IndiSEA. The system takes the indicator statements and turns them into objectives. IndiSEA is organized so that everyone can see how each indicator was assessed, how plans and tasks are organized, and how the team monitors progress.

The VDOE Leadership Team chose a staff member to be in charge of each indicator/objective. That person selected other staff members (perhaps including other SEA staff who did not go through the training) to assist in developing tasks, timelines, and a full description of a final product.

All of this information was entered into the IndiSEA system. From one perspective, this system keeps SEA staff accountable; from another, it allows SEA staff to document their progress in moving the state forward in a strategic plan to improve its SRAS for districts and schools. In fact, the Virginia SEA staff used IndiSEA to present their work to the new State Superintendent at the July 2014 meeting of AARC BSCP and SEA staff. This annual meeting is used to evaluate progress to date and begin planning for the next year.

On a monthly basis, the goal was for the SEA Leadership Team, ARCC, and BSCP staff to have a one-hour conference call to review progress. The Virginia leader used a webinar approach so all participants could see the IndiSEA online tool and review actions taken to date as the appropriate staff members

discussed successes and continuing challenges. Due to unforeseen circumstances, a few conference calls were cancelled. The Team was unanimous in its year one review that not having the monthly calls was a serious problem. As a result, Virginia has already scheduled all its monthly calls through 2015.

VDOE already had started an Intra-agency Technical Assistance Team two years previous to the meeting with BSCP and ARCC staff in August of 2013. Its purpose is to "...provide a collaborative, integrative, and coordinated communication process within VDOE in order to maximize technical assistance support provided to divisions and schools across the Commonwealth."ⁱⁱ Among its accomplishments during the last year, the chair listed:

- Focused team's efforts to align with the SRAS, ARCC, and the IndiSEA planning process
- Implemented specific training on the use of IndiSEA as a tool for State Education Agency improvement planning including indicators and tasks that are identified as the responsibility of the Intra-agency Team
- Began the process of building Virginia's SRAS Model in response to IndiSEA Indicator 1.1, Task #1

The Performance Management Rubric is a way for the Virginia SRAS Leadership Team to organize and prioritize the most important actions that will be implemented throughout the year to improve the statewide system of support to schools. As a result of the August 2013 training VDOE personnel selected the following 8 indicators:

1.1 Designing and organizing an SEA System of Recognition Accountability, and Support

1.2 Managing the SRAS

2.2 Coordinating services for students with disabilities across SEA departments and programs to maximize service and reduce duplication

2.4 Coordinating services for English learners across SEA departments and programs to maximize service and reduce duplication

5.1 Coordinating state and federal funding streams and programs

7.2 Training, supervising, and evaluating support teams and district/school improvement consultants

11.1 Communicating with clear and systematic communication paths within the SRAS

13.2 Producing products and resources to help districts and school improve

In the Power Point accompanying this document are several slides showing a column entitled "ARCC Plan component." In that column, VDOE staff either noted that the indicator had been added to the ARCC plan or connected to an existing AARC component, (e.g., VA-1, VA-4, VA-5, or VA-6).

Let's take two of the above eight indicators and display some of the activities involved in organizing a plan of attack (see the last page of this document for the complete picture).

Indicator 2.2: The SEA has integrated its district/school assistance policies and programs, regardless of district funding sources, to better serve students with disabilities and has an ongoing process for evaluating and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the policies and programs.

This excerpt lists the current level of development, tasks, the person assigned to manage the tasks and the criteria staff will use to decide when the indicator/objective has been successfully completed. At the time this picture of progress was made, 6 out of 8 (75%) of the tasks had been completed by the task force headed by Samantha Hollins. The names of the other members of the task force, as well as the other indicators, were omitted for this presentation. Also listed is the target date (9-30-2014) and the goal for the objective: "VDOE will have an ongoing process for evaluating and improving the efficacy and effectiveness of policies and procedures for integrating its school division assistance programs, regardless of district funding sources, to better serve students with disabilities."

Note that even though the rubric score was a "3" out of a possible "4" points, it was identified as both a high priority and relatively easy to address. Therefore, its index score of 9 influenced the team to include it in the final list of eight.

Indicator 11.1: The SEA has implemented its written policies and procedures for communication among those who provide support such as SEA employees, regional offices, universities, and other members of the SRAS and has an ongoing process for evaluating and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of its policies and procedures.

This excerpt includes the same background information but has a target date of 2015. When complete, there will be a written plan for structuring, improving, and increasing communication within the SRAS; meeting agendas or records of inter-departmental interactions and other SRAS communications; reports of other documents associating communications with the improvement of services; and survey or formative evaluation data from SEA staff corroborating improved communications within the SRAS and one or more specific examples.

The complete planning document using this format is posted on the Virginia IndiSEA website. It is open to all members of the VDOE Leadership Team, other SEA staff they designate, and the State Superintendent. During the monthly phone calls, the team reviews these indicators to mark progress as well as to note whether other staff have been asked to participate, whether dates need to be changed, or target dates modified. The information within IndiSEA focuses the Leadership Team's discussions. A team member is designated to make the changes the Leadership Team approves. While IndiSEA itself is structured, the process allows the SEA staff to modify it as the team progresses throughout the year.

The ARCC Virginia coordinators wrote the following six paragraphs for this paper:

In the summer of 2013, the ARCC entered into an agreement with the BSCP Center to support their efforts to assist states in developing Systems of Recognition, Accountability, and Support (SRAS). In August, the two ARCC state coordinators met with representatives from the BSCP Center and members of the VDOE Leadership Team to complete the SRAS rubric and select an initial set of priority indicators (now called objectives since the IndiSEA changes the indicator statements into objectives) and create tasks designed to support the attainment of the selected objectives. At this meeting, VDOE staff emphasized the importance of noting which objectives were also being supported by initiatives described in the ARCC work plan for VDOE.

The VDOE leadership team rated each of the indicators in the SRAS rubric and then discussed the indicators that appeared to be most important and feasible to accomplish. The ARCC work plan initiatives did not play a direct role in the selection of the priorities. Instead, VDOE identified where there appeared to be alignment between indicators and the ARCC work plan. The ARCC state coordinators contributed to this discussion primarily by corroborating this alignment.

The ARCC work plan initiatives were not directly affected by VDOE's selection of priority indicators. However, it is possible that the activities and technical assistance associated with the ARCC initiatives were indirectly affected by the selection of priority indicators. For example, VDOE's creation and completion of tasks in support of priority indicators may have affected its perception of its capacity to accomplish certain indicators, possibly changing the role of the ARCC in supporting VDOE.

Two of the indicators prioritized in the past year were aligned with ARCC initiatives: 2.4 (serving English Learners) and 13.2 (products and resources to help districts and school improve). The ARCC initiative VA-3 (English Language Learner Instruction – Strategies for Core Content Teachers) supported 2.4 by planning to build expertise within VDOE to provide strategies for core content teachers to support ELs in the classroom.

Three of the ARCC initiatives supported 13.2. VA-1 (Improve Online Instructional Resources for Teachers and Division Staff) is designed to build organizational and structural capacity to analyze and improve the Division of Instruction's website to provide useful resources to teachers and other school district staff. VA-4 (Build Online Library of Resources for Using Student Achievement Goals in Teacher Evaluation) is building VDOE capacity to provide examples of student achievement goals in non-tested subjects and grades for teacher evaluation. VA-6 (Supporting the Use of Formative Assessment Instructional Practices) is building VDOE capacity to support teachers and division staff in the understanding and use of formative assessment instructional practices in the classroom.

VDOE continues to monitor its progress on each selected objective, and the Leadership Team tries to meet monthly to discuss work on each task. The ARCC state coordinators have been able to attend most of these meetings. This ongoing participation has facilitated the needs-sensing process for revising the ARCC work plan.

As mentioned earlier, part of the process of the agreement among ARCC, the SEA, and BSCP is an annual meeting in which the participants evaluate the utility of the entire process. In the case of Virginia, it also provided an opportunity for VDOE staff to discuss their year's work in front of their new superintendent.

In order to conduct our annual review with a State, we asked several questions. Below are the questions and summary responses.

1. Was the use of the Rubric and subsequent selection of indicators a useful activity for the Virginia Leadership Team? Why?

VDOE staff responded positively: It was the first time we had acted as a group to focus on the evaluation of our own work. The process challenged us to think about our initial higher ratings once we had to provide evidence.

2. A year later, do you believe you selected the right indicators? Why?

Yes, the ones we selected kept their relevancy over time. We passionately believe that this process can help us work successfully with the most deserving schools.

3. You used IndiSEA to track progress on each of the selected indicators.

- How did that work for you? *IndiSEA proved to be an efficient way to document all our actions and progress.*
- Would you do anything differently for the second year? *At times we delayed or skipped monthly meetings. That was a mistake...we need the constant checks on our progress and our challenges. When the team doesn't meet, less progress happens.*
- Could this tracking system be improved? How? *We would like a Dashboard-file cabinet to the site so we can store evidence and upload documentation. We could upload agendas and minutes. (Note this has been added.)*

4. Could you discuss how your SEA was more effective or efficient as a result of this SRAS process?

The process kept all of us continuously updated on our progress. We began to move from random acts of school improvement to become a much more efficient organization.

5. In the training process a year ago, you had an initial rating for the indicators you selected. If your Leadership Team rated these same indicators today would the ratings have changed?

No. We have made significant progress but need to do a better job of evaluation.

6. One of the goals of the training was to provide ongoing assistance from the BSCP as well as your Regional Comprehensive Center. Was this assistance useful? Could you provide examples? How could assistance from these two Centers be improved next year?

Need to continue working together and more closely integrate the ARCC and SRAS objectives.

7. Has your team decided that there are indicators that no longer need your attention but that others do?

We have integrated indicators 1.3 and 1.1. The more we worked on these two indicators the more it made sense to us to combine them. However, we have decided to continue working on the same indicators and dig deeper into them.

8. Within your own agency, are there changes that this Leadership Team desires for next year? What would they be?

We are considering the expansion of the membership of this team as we dig deeper into these indicators/objectives. State Education Agencies are always in the midst of change and we need to acknowledge that as we move forward. We always have to keep re-evaluating.

9. Is there anything else you wish to add?

The time spent on this Leadership Team was well spent; our offices are so separate. This process strengthened communication and collaboration among offices. This process provided a focus for planning and establishing clear targets.

Lots of Virginia schools are involved with Indistar. It's important that the State use comparable tools for planning and developing tasks as we ask the schools to do.

We are beginning to streamline appropriate technical assistance to schools by working with other departments. For example, this process enabled special education staff the opportunity to communicate and collaborate directly with other agency divisions such as School improvement. Special Education is working with Instruction so that when there is a statewide TA, meeting or conference, there is a special education teacher sitting next to regular instructional teacher.

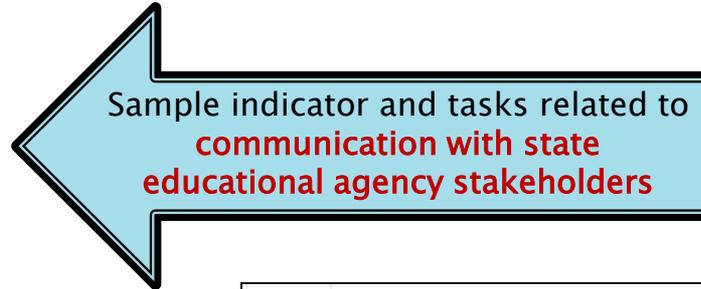
The SRAS process needs to be built into the culture of the SEA as in institution so that when one person leaves, the system doesn't stop in it its tracks. There needs to be a culture of candor

Hanes, S., Kerins, T., Perlman, C., Redding, S., & Ross, S. (2013). *Managing performance in the system of support: Rubric with 52 indicators, explanations, and exemplars*. Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute & Edvance Research. Retrieved from <http://www.adi.org/about/publications.html>

ⁱ The original set of rubrics was expanded to 52 after the authors had gone through the U.S. Department of Education Flexibility training as well as had the opportunity to be Flexibility Waiver reviewers.

ⁱⁱ Internal VDOE document "Intra-agency Technical Assistance Team" (June 2014).

Indicator	11.1 - The SEA has implemented its written policies and procedures for communication among those who provide support such as SEA employees, regional offices, universities, and other members of the SRAS and has an ongoing process for evaluating and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of its policies and procedures.(3145)	
Status	Tasks completed: 3 of 5 (60%)	
Assess	Rubric Score:	2
	Level of Development:	<i>Limited Development</i>
	Index:	6 (Priority Score x Opportunity Score)
	Priority Score:	3 (3 - highest, 2 - medium, 1 - lowest)
	Opportunity Score:	2 (3 - relatively easy to address, 2 - accomplished within current policy and budget conditions, 1 - requires changes in current policy and budget conditions)
Describe current level of development:	The Virginia Department of Education's intra-agency team is in its initial implementation stage. This team will serve as a communication hub for various offices within the department.	
Plan	Assigned to:	Yvonne Holloman
	How it will look when fully met:	The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) will develop written policies and procedures for communicating with SEA employees, regional offices, universities, and other members of the SRAS and establish an ongoing process for evaluating and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of its policies and procedures including: A written plan for structuring, improving, and increasing communication within the SRAS; meeting agendas or records of inter-departmental interactions and other SRAS communications; reports or other documents associating communications with the improvement of services; survey or formative evaluation data from SEA staff corroborating improved communications within the SRAS, and indicating one or more specific examples.
Target Date:	09/30/2015	
Tasks:	1. The members of the intra-agency team will review the VDOE internal stakeholders' survey results summary provided by Dr. Wright at the Leadership Team Meeting	
	Assigned to:	Yvonne Holloman June 30, 2014
	Target Completion Date:	12/20/2013



Indicator	2.2 - The SEA has integrated its district/school assistance policies and programs, regardless of distinct funding sources, to better serve students with disabilities and has an ongoing process for evaluating and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the policies and programs.(3119)	
Status	Tasks completed: 6 of 8 (75%)	
Assess	Rubric Score:	3
	Level of Development:	<i>Limited Development</i>
	Index:	9 (Priority Score x Opportunity Score)
	Priority Score:	3 (3 - highest, 2 - medium, 1 - lowest)
	Opportunity Score:	3 (3 - relatively easy to address, 2 - accomplished within current policy and budget conditions, 1 - requires changes in current policy and budget conditions)
Describe current level of development:	VDOE has implemented its written plan for integrating its school division assistance policies and programs, regardless of distinct funding sources, to better serve students with disabilities.	
Plan	Assigned to:	Samantha Hollins
	How it will look when fully met:	VDOE will have an ongoing process for evaluating and improving the efficacy and effectiveness of policies and procedures for integrating its school division assistance programs, regardless of distinct funding sources, to better serve students with disabilities.
Target Date:	09/30/2014	
Tasks:	1. Meet and debrief with TTAC to determine quality/efficiency of services provided	
	Assigned to:	Samantha Hollins
	Target Completion Date:	09/02/2013
	Frequency:	monthly
	Comments:	Ongoing through TTAC Director's Meetings and final de-brief at Summer TTAC Directors Meeting
	Task Completed:	01/02/2014
	2. Create a written plan for integrating policies and services to LEAs	
	Assigned to:	Samantha Hollins
	Target Completion Date:	02/21/2014

