

Technical Assistance to Support Evidence-Based Policymaking: A Conversation With the Regional Comprehensive Centers

Facilitated By
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The following is an edited transcript of the conversation the editors Betheny Gross (Research Director, Center on Reinventing Public Education) and Ashley Jochim (Research Analyst, Center on Reinventing Public Education) had with Kathleen Dempsey (Director, North Central Regional Comprehensive Center), Caitlin Howley (Director, Appalachian Regional Comprehensive Center), and Paul Kohler (Director, West Regional Comprehensive Center). To listen to the audio, visit BSCPCenter.org. Readers interested in learning more about how one state featured in this conversation built SEA capacity for research should look at the Nebraska Blueprint, featured at the end of this conversation.

Betheny: Many people talk about the value of evidence-building in state education agencies, but it's often not obvious where states should start or how research can inform their work supporting districts and schools. Paul, can you get us started by telling us a little bit about where you have seen research add value to state education agencies?

Paul: Sure, I'd be glad to do that, and let me as a way to get started, talk about a regional collaborative with four states, and then talk about what's happened with that. The states I'm going to talk about (Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, and Utah) were all prompted by national initiatives such as Race to the Top, or the school improvement grants, or the ESEA waivers. Each passed legislation on educator effectiveness that set specific requirements and timelines for the new standard statewide systems of teacher and principal evaluation. It included using student achievement as a significant indicator of effectiveness, and this was new for each of these states. Teacher evaluation has both technical components that require validation and implementation, and components that need to be monitored for [implementation] fidelity.

In 2012, the West Comp Center formed a community practice and convened state department education leaders, which included policymakers and stakeholder groups from the four states to address these issues collectively and use available expertise and experiences to inform the design of these new evaluation systems. Once their frameworks were developed and adopted, it was apparent that the studies of these systems would need to be conducted. The West Comp Center partnered with a regional lab, in this case the Regional Education Laboratory West, to provide assistance to the Arizona Department of Education to study a pilot of the evaluation model in the selected districts. The findings from year one of the pilots informed changes to the program in year two with the West Comp Center and the REL West supporting the translation of findings into practice.

After the pilot was completed, Arizona Department of Ed turned its attention to gathering information on how districts were using the data from teacher evaluations to inform the decisions related to professional development or assignment, compensation, remediation, retention, as well as identifying

teacher leaders. In Arizona, five districts participated in the study to understand how their districts were using the evaluation system and whether it aligned with the state policies and best practice guidelines.

Betheny: Why do you think [the collaboration] was so effective in this case?

Paul: [T]he three-year collaboration, and, by the way, it continues now into the fourth year, is an example of a strong partnership between the state education agency, a regional lab, which offered guidance in research design, methodology analysis of data, and the West Comprehensive Center, which provided technical assistance in the design and implementation of this system, and in using research findings to inform practice. The focus has been to help the state adopt a thoughtful, evidence-based improvement approach to implementation, and it has been shared work, collaboratively with defining questions of interest, as well as data and methods needed to address them. Then after data are collected by Arizona Department of Ed and the West Comprehensive Center, and analyzed by the regional lab, the preliminary findings were reviewed internally and the implications discussed.

The collaboration has resulted in four of the lab studies and they are available on REL West's website. Two have been published, one is in final editorial review, and another is now entering peer review. The Arizona Department of Ed is currently sharing the available results of these studies to districts across the state, not just the original five, as well as the state board of education, and they recently convened a task force by revisiting the state framework and timelines. In this case, the Arizona Department of Ed was successful at identifying changes that needed to be made in the model, capacity issues at the district level and at the state, by the way, early implementation strengths and the needs for improvement, and in making needed adjustments in a continuous improvement cycle.

Arizona was able to take advantage of the complementary services and collaborations between the regional lab and the West CC and use the findings to inform their decisions, and we did this and we continue to support it because the state agency itself needed that assistance and really didn't have the capacity to do that kind of work.

Betheny: Caitlin, Paul's discussion shows how fruitful good research can be for SEAs, but it also highlights how complex it is to get the pieces together. You've noted that many state agencies are hungry for research. In your experience, what do you think is holding SEAs back from building the requisite analytic capacities?

Caitlin: Unfortunately, although lots of state education agencies really want good systematically collected information, they face some pretty substantial

obstacles to their ability to perform those analyses themselves. For example, the majority of their work tends to focus on implementing, often really ambitious, programs. Much of their knowledge and skill and energy ends up concentrated on crafting policies and guidelines that will work, standing up new programs, managing communication about new efforts and helping districts and schools with new implementations.

At the same time, adding fuel to the proverbial fire, state agencies facing a proliferation of responsibilities including new federal requirements and work that emerges from the continually shifting policy environment that they are working in. Given the precedence of these responsibilities and pressures, there's relatively less time and energy available for analytic work.

Another challenge is that SEA staff are generally hired for their content knowledge, their management skills, their familiarity with federal education regulations, etc., not as often for their research capacities. While many states do have research offices, they often are overburdened with requests for help, so they may not be available to answer staff's questions.

A third challenge: lack of, or depleting, funding. For example, in the four states that Appalachian Regional Comprehension Center serves, education funding from the state remains lower than it was before the recession in 2009. Those kinds of funding losses make education more difficult all-around and money for research and evaluation is often not the highest priority.

Betheny: Kathleen, I know that you have had the experience of working with Nebraska in overcoming some of these challenges. Can you say a little bit more about how states you've worked with are meeting the challenges Caitlin discussed?

Kathleen: The North Central Comprehensive Regional Center worked with Nebraska Department of Education starting in 2012. The Nebraska Department of Education had received a three-year state longitudinal data system grant, and they had four goals with this grant. One of the goals was to provide a data analysis tool to districts that used multiple data sources to produce reports for local decision makers. Another goal was to provide a statewide system of data analysis, professional development for every district. The third goal was to build a research and evaluation, or an RE, team. Then, of course, they needed to be able to sustain this grant.

North Central Comprehensive Center was asked to help NDE with this third goal, and that was to build a research and evaluation team. Because of some internal staffing transitions, NDE had lost the expertise necessary to establish this blueprint for this new data team, and so NCC was called to support them with that. What we did was to help bring in someone with some strong

experience and background in working with research teams, and that was one of our REL directors. Through that experience, as far as having that expertise, he started work with that team to think about the course of action that they might take, and so some milestones were set up for the work.

The first one was to determine how the data and research team at Nebraska would actually be positioned within their department. The second goal was to determine the mission, the vision, and the values of this team. The third goal was to determine the priorities for the team. The fourth one was to identify the roles and responsibilities of what was called a cross-team group. As they were putting this data research team together, they actually had people from across the department participate to help establish what the mission and vision of this team would be. Finally, to create a blueprint document that was to guide the work of the data research team.

We were so glad to be able to work with them in this way, and within the year we were able to help them set up their team. They, in fact, did identify their mission, vision, and values. They set up priorities, meaning what they would do in-house, what they should outsource, when they might work with a partner, and all of those kinds of things just to kind of set up their working system, their processes and procedures. They got their roles and responsibilities set up and all of those things within that first year. They had a blueprint for how they would work as an organization.

We continue to work with them. In fact, in this last year, we've been helping them put together a curriculum for how they will work with internal Nebraska Department of Education staff to help them be able to better use data to support their own decisions.

Betheny: All three of you have really pointed to the fact that the lack of research capacity isn't because states lack the desire to do the work. There's a lot of interest out there in our SEAs, and they're just sort of coming up against some challenges. Caitlin and Kathleen, what are other ways that states can tap the regional centers for more help when it comes to leveraging research to support their work?

Caitlin: In our experience, state education agencies definitely want research. Not necessarily the "what works" experimental or consumer reports kind of research, but often more descriptive analyses of how certain groups of students are performing or how various programs that they're running are implemented and with what results. What other state education agencies are doing to address shared issues or achieve similar goals. Given these kinds of needs, Regional Comprehensive Centers are really well positioned to provide technical assistance around analytical needs.

For example, the Appalachian Regional Comprehensive Center has assisted one state to plan, implement, and assess outcomes from a pilot of formative assessment instructional practices implemented in several school divisions, and is helping the state to use findings from that pilot to plan for scaling up.

In another state, our team provided what's essentially evaluation capacity-building services, to help the state plan, administer, and analyze results from a survey about which teacher performance assessment the state should begin using.

Other examples include technical assistance to a state board of education to identify, review, adapt, administer, and analyze their first self-evaluation. In another state, we've helped the state education agency to investigate how teachers use that state's online professional development system to better inform decisions that they were planning to make about whether or not or how to continue the use of that online professional development system.

Other kinds of analytic assistance we've provided include help with the development of logic models so that states can monitor the progress of various initiatives, or assistance with creation of crosswalks to compare various state policies, so even as Regional Comprehensive Centers help state education agencies build their capacity to implement important new reforms, we also help enhance their capacity to access and use research to support their implementations of such reforms.

Kathleen: Certainly, there are many ways to help our SEAs use and get the research that they need to make those decisions. The North Central RCC is helping the Wyoming Department of Education to find out about what's happening in other states and in other locales as far as schools that serve populations with large numbers of Native Americans. We're working with the department to identify schools that serve a high population of Native American students, and that are achieving at high rates regarding student attendance, graduation rates, and academic achievement in English language arts and mathematics.

To do this, we turn to our REL Central partners, and they've been a part of the discussions with Wyoming Department of Education, so we worked with them to identify schools and to help us craft survey questions. There have been more than 100 schools that have been identified across 10 states, and we're getting ready to send out surveys, and hopefully we'll get a good response on that. Wyoming is looking forward to the information, so they'll inform next steps and certainly it's aimed at thinking about better ways to serve Native American schools in Wyoming.

Paul: I think the point that needs to be made is that state agencies need a research component as they work to implement some of these policies. The

districts are asking for it. State policymakers, both at the legislature and the state board, are asking for it.

You've already heard in this conversation that while the states are interested in doing it, they don't always have the capacity to provide that service. The West Comp Center Department of Education does a lot of turnaround school work by training leaders and their teams, and we are following up those state initiatives with case studies that are being written by our staff at the Comp Center, but also with the help of the REL, to find out what the impact of the turnaround leadership work is in school districts that are sponsored by the states. That's another example where the credibility of a research group such as an REL can be very helpful to a state, again providing a service that they may not be able to do, but providing a third party credibility and validations to some of the work.

THE NEBRASKA BLUEPRINT

Context: The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) received a three-year State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) grant in July 2012. The grant goals were to provide a data analysis tool to districts that uses multiple data sources to produce reports for local decision makers, provide a statewide system of data analysis professional development for every district, build a research and evaluation (R&E) team in NDE, and sustain the SLDS. NDE requested NCCC assistance with the third grant goal. Due to internal NDE staffing transitions, NDE lost the expertise necessary to establish a blueprint for the new team. NCCC support intended to help NDE create a Data, Research, and Evaluation (DRE) Team to support SLDS work in collaboration with the NE research community (i.e., higher education institutions, Education Service Units [ESUs], and schools), assist NDE with R&E needs, coordinate the research community's involvement in the NDE Data Analysis Cadre (a combined NDE and ESU cadre team), and disseminate research findings to NDE and the NE research community. NCCC assistance on this project included supporting a McREL Senior Fellow to collaborate with the DRE Team director on how to develop a blueprint to guide the formation of the DRE team. Progress toward milestones includes:

1. Determine how the DRE team will be positioned within NDE.

During a February 2013 meeting, participants decided the DRE Team should be reflected in the NDE organizational chart to highlight their role as an NDE supporting unit. DRE Team work is expected to help NDE become more intentional about integrating work across NDE. NCCC assistance included supporting the attendance of the McREL Senior Fellow at two meetings and providing meeting facilitation.

2. Determine the mission, vision, and values of the DRE team.

NCCC supported participants in identifying a mission, vision, and values by facilitating the meeting in a way that all voices were heard. The revised mission emphasizes new R&E functions and expands the scope of NDE work. The DRE Team will collect and report on data necessary to comply with state and federal legislation and data related to other NE research community priorities.

3. Determine the DRE team work priorities.

A third priority for the meeting was to establish parameters for the DRE team to ensure quality work. Questions guided the discussion of work parameters: what work do we do in-house, what work should we outsource, and what work do we partner to accomplish. NCCC supported these discussions by suggesting productive meeting structures for discussions, taking notes, and facilitating discussions.

4. Identify the role and responsibilities of the cross-team group.

The cross-team group was established to provide guidance to the DRE team, including the new director. Participants will meet to support the DRE team. NCCC supported this milestone by providing productive meeting structures.

5. Create a blueprint document to guide the work of the DRE team.

After each meeting, NCCC compiled a blueprint document with detailed notes on meeting discussions by topic. This document is intended to provide guidance to the DRE team.

Another milestone was to determine the agenda and structure for two cross-team meetings. NCCC, McREL Senior Fellow, and DRE team director held several meetings to plan the cross-team meetings goals and the meeting structure to get input from all participants. The planning insured that the meetings were productive and that the milestones were met.

Outcomes: Progress toward the project outcomes was made in Year 1. The DRE team role was formalized, including policies and procedures to guide their work.

NCCC continues to assist NDE to build internal SEA capacity for using data to inform decision-making.