



Center for
Educator Compensation
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*The Role of Program Evaluation
on Communication Strategies:
Examples From Three Teacher
Incentive Fund Districts*

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Introduction

Effectively and strategically communicating and engaging stakeholders (i.e., educators, parents, the media, the wider community) are important for state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) that are designing and implementing a new educator compensation system (Koppich, Prince, Guthrie, & Schuermann, 2009). Importantly, to successfully sustain the new system, the project leaders of SEAs and LEAs must continue to engage and communicate with key stakeholders throughout and beyond the development of the new system (Ibid). SEAs and LEAs must not only continuously engage and communicate with stakeholders, but they must implement targeted communication strategies that most effectively encourage stakeholder participation and buy-in in order to sustain the new system (Ibid).

To ensure the use of effective communication strategies, prior research and, more importantly, SEA and LEA experiences show that program evaluation can be a very important tool (Ibid). To successfully evaluate programmatic communication strategies, SEAs and LEAs must hire neutral evaluators and

continuously conduct evaluations (Ibid). In the early years of a new system or program, evaluators most often use formative evaluations¹ to examine the fidelity of the program's communication strategies (Ibid). Using these results, SEAs and LEAs can then effectively adapt their communication strategies and plans (Ibid). Eventually, typically after at least three years of the new system or program, evaluators then begin conducting summative evaluations² to assess the impact of communication strategies on overall program outcomes (Ibid).

In order to better understand ways that SEAs and LEAs can effectively use program evaluation results to inform communication strategies in new educator compensation systems, this paper draws on the successful experiences of three Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grantees. The paper first briefly explains the methodology used to conduct the three descriptive case summaries. Second, the paper separately describes each of the three TIF grantees' experiences. Last, the paper draws on the collective TIF grantees' experiences to offer guidance to other SEAs and LEAs that are implementing new educator compensation systems.

¹ Formative (periodic) evaluations focus on answering implementation questions and provide ongoing feedback about program implementation for potential areas of improvement (Witham, Jones, Milanowski, Thorn, & Kimball, 2011).

² Summative (end-of-grant cycle) evaluations assess the overall effectiveness of a program and tend to connect to long-term outcomes (Koppich et al., 2009).

Methodology

During February 2012, a team of Center for Educator Compensation Reform researchers from the University of Wisconsin and Westat interviewed three TIF grantee program directors from the following grants: Maricopa County Education Service Agency, Ohio Department of Education, and Houston Independent School District. The participating grantees represented all the first and third rounds of TIF grants.³ The same researcher led each interview, and in some instances, additional researchers also participated in interviews and asked follow-up questions as needed. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

During each interview, the researchers used the same framework, a loosely structured protocol. The researchers decided to use a loosely structured protocol to allow for richer data collection, in that the interview participants, in this case the program directors, were able to “tell the stories” of their grants, thus allowing the case summaries to represent a richer picture of these grants. To best

understand how the three grants successfully used program evaluation to enhance their communication strategies, the researchers designed the protocol around the following three thematic questions:

- (1) What is the relationship between program evaluation and communication concerning educator compensation system reform initiatives within the SEA or LEA?*
- (2) How does the evaluation design allow for effective communication about the implementation and impact of the educator compensation system?*
- (3) How has the SEA or LEA used information from the program evaluation to make adjustments to communication planning and strategies?*

Following the interviews, the researchers used the interview data to create draft case summaries and then sent the summaries to the TIF program directors to review for accuracy. The research team also asked for general feedback from the project directors and encouraged them to provide additional information if they thought it necessary.

³ The U.S. Department of Education held three rounds of TIF competitions. The first cohort of grantees received funding during fiscal year (FY) 2006, the second cohort during FY 2007, and the third cohort during FY 2010. Each TIF grant is a five-year grant.

Maricopa County Education Service Agency

Program Overview

During school year 2010–11, Maricopa County Education Service Agency (MCESA) received a TIF 3 grant for its Rewarding Excellence in Instruction and Leadership (REIL) program. MCESA is implementing the program in six districts, which encompass 52 high-need schools, and aims to transform how participating districts recruit, retain, support, and compensate effective teachers and principals in these schools.

MCESA's Approach to Communication

During the TIF 3 proposal phase, MCESA recognized that establishing and supporting stakeholder partnerships was critical to program success. Thus, the agency created a framework for stakeholder engagement and communication. MCESA designed this framework to ensure ongoing and effective communication and to allow sufficient time for authentic stakeholder involvement. The three tenets of the framework are:

- 1) To have visible and consistent leadership;
- 2) To build and support momentum for the plan;
and,
- 3) To have ongoing communication.

MCESA addresses these tenets through the organizational structure of its REIL program. The REIL program management team guides the program, but works with an advisory council comprising public policymakers, superintendents, state associations, and REIL management staff; district-level transition teams who focus on

areas such as teacher and principal evaluation, professional development, and data management; cross-district specialty teams in the areas of human resources, finance, professional development, and data management; and, district leadership/communication teams to ensure successful implementation of the program. MCESA also relies heavily on MCESA staff called field specialists who serve as the main conduits of communication between MCESA management and each of the six participating districts. MCESA has embedded field specialists in all facets of the program (e.g., evaluation measures, fiscal sustainability, communications).

The field specialists' liaison role ensures that MCESA's presence is constantly visible and that the agency's messaging is consistent across districts. The specialists work with the management team to incorporate a range of strategies to ensure stakeholder buy-in and understanding, thus building ongoing support and momentum for the plan. MCESA's use of field specialists also creates ongoing communication, or a feedback loop, between the district-level leadership/communication teams and the MCESA management team. MCESA uses the feedback loop to assess progress toward communication goals and to determine necessary adjustments to communication planning.

In conjunction with the communication and stakeholder engagement structures and the field specialists, MCESA also uses a number of other communication strategies to support its REIL communication goals. These include written materials, electronic communications, and meetings directed toward multiple stakeholder groups (i.e., educators and district staff), as well as targeted communication with the media

MCESA's Use of Program Evaluation To Inform Communication Strategies

Early in its planning year, MCESA secured an external evaluator with experience in evaluating performance-based compensation systems (PBCS). During school year 2011–12, the evaluator will use multiple methods, including teacher and administrator surveys, one-on-one interviews with field specialists, and focus groups, to assess whether MCESA's communication strategies and efforts are effective and if the MCESA leadership should make adjustments to these strategies and efforts. As the evaluation reveals findings, MCESA draws on its communication structure to inform all stakeholders not only of the evaluation results but also the resulting implications for the TIF program.

The structure of the REIL program is well suited for using evaluation results to make timely adjustments to communication and outreach efforts. The REIL project director interacts regularly with the external evaluator, and engages the MCESA management team to discuss evaluation findings and potential impacts or suggested tweaks to communication strategies and efforts. If these discussions result in programmatic or procedural shifts, the management team then communicates these—and the accompanying rationale—to the field specialists. The field specialists then work with the district teams to communicate and implement the necessary change.

While the external evaluator has not yet completed a full evaluation of the REIL program in meeting its three overarching communication tenets, during Year 1 of the grant, the evaluator conducted focus group interviews with teacher leader groups and principal leader groups to gather their thoughts on the Learning Observation Instrument (LOI), which was developed by the district-level evaluation transition teams, cross-district evaluation teams, and the MCESA writing team during the previous year (REIL, 2012). These focus groups helped MCESA adjust its communication and feedback processes surrounding the development of the instrument, as focus group participants believed they did not have sufficient input in the development of the instrument. So, as the project director explained, the feedback “helped [the MCESA management team] go in a slightly different direction with [the LOI] development,” and prompted them to adjust outreach strategies (L. Renfro, personal communication, February 1, 2012). As such, MCESA established a cross-district principal evaluation and teacher evaluation team “to go through [the] instrument with a fine-toothed comb” and to identify areas in need of refinement and/or revision (Ibid). As a result, MCESA was able to make midcourse corrections to the instrument. The field specialists then communicated the new approach and its rationale to each of the district leadership/communication teams.

Ohio Department of Education

Program Overview

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) received both a TIF 1 and TIF 3 grant. The U.S. Department of Education awarded ODE the Ohio TIF (OTIF) 1 grant in 2006 to support four urban districts and the OTIF 3 grant in 2010 to support a statewide consortium of large urban, rural Appalachian, and other small-to medium-education agencies. Both grants support the state's commitment to create and sustain performance-based compensation systems that evaluate and reward educators for effectiveness (i.e., student achievement and value-added impact), leadership, and continued growth and professional development. Additionally, both grants align with state guidelines for teacher and principal evaluation systems.

ODE's Approach to Communication

ODE leadership views communication as essential to the implementation of both of its OTIF grants. As the project director explained, "One of [the] biggest lessons learned is you can never communicate enough about a performance-based compensation system" (M. Yoder, personal communication, February 3, 2012). Given the fact that communication was a challenge during TIF 1, ODE decided to place much emphasis on effective communication and transparency, especially for teachers and the community-at-large. Accordingly, the grantee partnered with Battelle for Kids (BFK), an external consultant that specializes in professional development, communication, and technology, to produce materials (e.g., PowerPoint presentations,

brochures, etc.) to help stakeholders better understand the TIF program.

Currently, ODE provides its districts both the organizational structure and resources to facilitate effective communication. The OTIF project director stands at the center of communications and is responsible for planning and oversight. The project director also works with ODE staff and BFK to develop communication materials to distribute at varying venues (e.g., site visits, seminars, online courses). She explained, "BFK has been extremely helpful in communicating the complexities of OTIF, particularly around payouts and value-added" (M. Yoder, personal communication, February 3, 2012). ODE has also hired part-time personnel in each participating district (with the exception of Cincinnati, which has a full-time staff member) to function as a liaison between ODE and the local districts.

ODE conducts quarterly meetings that provide a platform to disseminate information to districts, introduce new topics related to the TIF program, provide time for districts to work together, and, brainstorm solutions to surfacing issues. Also, during the fall and spring when ODE conducts audits, ODE staff use their time in the field to meet with various stakeholders, including teachers, evaluation teams, and transformation team members to discuss OTIF. Professional development teams also travel to participating districts to conduct presentations and to brief superintendents and other district leaders on the program. For OTIF 3, ODE has also increased technological support by purchasing Basecamp, an online project management tool that allows users to post and receive responses to program-related questions.

ODE's Use of Program Evaluation To Inform Communication Strategies

ODE staff views program evaluation as an essential tool for program improvement, such as helping the agency to create more effective communication strategies. The value of program evaluation, as it concerns communication, became evident to ODE during TIF 1 when the external evaluator pointed out to ODE that teachers struggled to understand the TIF program and its components and that communication between the participating districts and their respective schools was ineffective. Consequently, when ODE drafted the TIF 3 proposal, it paid close attention to enhancing its communication strategies.

The design of both OTIF evaluations addresses a range of implementation questions, including ODE's effectiveness in meeting communication goals and stakeholders understanding of the program and its components. The evaluation includes multiple feedback mechanisms, including surveys, focus groups, individual interviews, etc. The project director explained that targeted evaluation questions have been particularly useful in improving communication with stakeholders. For example, ODE has used stakeholders' evaluation responses to improve communication on value-added and

data quality. Two highly useful evaluation questions have been:

- Do you have an adequate understanding of value added and how it affects your score?
- Do you know the difference between student achievement and student growth?

Further, the OTIF 1 evaluation revealed the need for targeted site-level communication. ODE drew on the evaluation data when writing the OTIF 3 proposal and designed the program to ensure the grant would provide the necessary site-level support to the statewide consortium of districts. ODE required participating districts to employ a communications consultant and to establish school-level steering committees that develop communication plans with specific activities and timelines for completion.

According to the project director, the OTIF 1 evaluation was so valuable to ODE that ODE decided to conduct an internal evaluation of OTIF 3, despite the fact that OTIF 3 is a part of the U.S. Department of Education's national evaluation. As a participant in the national evaluation, ODE is not required to have a program evaluation, but ODE chose to hire an external evaluator because the formative feedback that these evaluators provide is vital to the program's success.

Houston Independent School District

Program Overview

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) received a TIF 1 and TIF 3 grant. In 2006, HISD received funds for Project SMART (Strategies or Motivating and Rewarding Teachers), which focuses on teacher effectiveness and growth in student learning. Then in 2010, HISD received TIF 3 funds to support Project ASPIRE (Accelerating Student Progress, Increasing Results & Expectations), a PBCS that rewards teachers, principals, and assistant principals and deans of instructions at more than 120 schools for effectiveness, as evidenced by increases in student growth and achievement. What follows is a discussion regarding the district's TIF 3 grant.

HISD's Approach to Communication

HISD believes that all stakeholders affected by Project ASPIRE are instrumental to the project's success. Drawing on this philosophy, the district intentionally uses various communication strategies to inform stakeholders of the district's PBCS and the district's continued efforts to improve the system. In these efforts, the district collaborates with The ASPIRE Award Program Advisory Committee, composed of educators and school administrators; The ASPIRE Executive Committee; and, BFK, an external consultant that provides support specifically around communication, training, and technology.

To disseminate information about the program, the district hosted ASPIRE Community Forums, which invite parents and other community members to learn more about Project ASPIRE. HISD also uses the bimonthly electronic *ASPIRE Newsletter*, the HISD website, and the ASPIRE portal to

disseminate information about the program to program participants and other HISD stakeholders. The district continually updates the portal, and according to the HISD project director, the district is currently in the process of redesigning the online ASPIRE portal "to provide as much information in as usable a format as possible" (C. Stevens, personal communication, February 14, 2012). HISD has also expanded its communication resources to include newsletters, emails, and voicemails that target areas "where there is a lower level of understanding," (e.g., award payouts) (Ibid).

Given that the district's PBCS relies heavily on value-added analysis, the district made available a bilingual publication titled *A Guide for Parents and Families to Value-Added Progress Measures & ASPIRE Awards* to define value-added analysis, describe value-added reports, and answer frequently asked questions about value-added and the ASPIRE program. In addition, the district annually gives the community public access to *District Value-Added Reports*, *School Value-Added Progress Reports*, and *Value-Added Summary Reports*.

Project ASPIRE's TIF grant implementation is housed in the Department of Research and Accountability, and as explained by the assistant superintendent/project director, "It is a priority to stay connected...[and to] work with staff on grant implementation to make appropriate programmatic and communication changes" when necessary (C. Stevens, personal communication, February 14, 2012). As such, the assistant superintendent/project director communicates regularly with representatives from Human Resources, Finance, Technology, Special Projects, and Research who sit on the ASPIRE Executive Committee. The assistant superintendent and members of the cross-functional executive committee also meet regularly to stay abreast of what is happening with the program, to discuss recommendations from the ASPIRE

Award Program Advisory Committee, and to stay up to date about any adjustments made to keep the program going forward.

HISD's Use of Program Evaluation To Inform Communication Strategies

Along with grant implementation, Project ASPIRE's program evaluation also falls under the HISD Research and Accountability Department and is thus conducted internally. Accordingly, the district has a structure in place that makes it simple to use information from program evaluations to inform project improvement, including communication efforts and strategies to better implement the district's PBCS. As explained by the project director, "with this structure, the ASPIRE Award executive committee is able to gather formative information from the program evaluation and make adjustments to the program and to communication strategies.... There is an expectation that the evaluation will provide an objective assessment of the program so that necessary improvements can be made" (C. Stevens, personal communication, February 14, 2012).

HISD's program evaluators collect both quantitative and qualitative data; however, qualitative data derived from The ASPIRE Award Surveys that campus-based staff complete have been particularly helpful in gathering feedback on implementation and in making adjustments to HISD's communication strategies. Importantly, the overall purpose of the survey is to gain insight about TIF participants' level of understanding of the program, including their perceptions of HISD's implementation of Project ASPIRE, and to gauge their overarching opinions and attitudes about pay-for-performance and the expansion of the district's PBCS into a career pathways and compensation system.

The ASPIRE Award Survey includes items that allow campus-based staff to rate the level of effectiveness of HISD's communication efforts, as well as the effectiveness of specific types of communication (e.g., ASPIRE newsletters, memos, emails, face-to-face interactions and trainings, etc.). It also solicits recommendations from campus-based staff on ways to make program adjustments. According to the project director, the following survey questions have helped HISD improve its communication strategies:

- What is your level of understanding of the program?
- What is your level of understanding of how ASPIRE awards are calculated?
- What is your level of satisfaction with the concept of performance pay overall and performance pay that is based specifically on student growth?
- Do you use value-added data as a diagnostic tool in your classroom?
- Do you use value-added data to make instructional decisions?

Responses to questions such as these, as explained by the project director, "help drive changes in communication planning. For example, if [the district] sees through the survey that people are not taking advantage of the online training courses, then [this is an area] where [HISD] need[s] to do more communication or modifications" (C. Stevens, personal communication, February 14, 2012). Over time, the survey also allows HISD to compare data from year to year and to determine if communication and training strategies have proven more or less effective as program implementation progresses.

Conclusion

Each of the TIF grantees highlighted above uses communication as a key component in its respective grant implementation. More important, the grantees have made it a point to use program evaluation data to adjust and improve their communication efforts. The evaluations' feedback, whether via surveys, focus groups, and/or individual interviews, has helped project management teams across these three TIF programs better define and refine communication goals and strategies. The descriptive cases of MCESA's REIL program, Ohio's OTIF program, and HISD's Project ASPIRE program provide several lessons for organizations on ways to effectively use program evaluation results to improve PBCS communication strategies with stakeholders.

In order for TIF grantees to effectively communicate to stakeholders (i.e., teachers, administrators, school personnel, parents, community-at-large), it is important that the leadership of the LEA/SEA establish an organizational structure that facilitates the effective implementation of communication goals and strategies. A key characteristic of such a structure is a feedback loop that permits a consistent flow of information about program implementation and that allows for adjustments to this implementation when necessary.

The case summaries above illustrate that program evaluations can serve as such a feedback loop, particularly because they can provide district and/or state leadership with data on progress toward

communication goals. Program evaluation is most useful to program staff when evaluators design questions specifically to measure progress toward communication goals, the effectiveness of specific communication strategies, and understanding of specific programmatic components, especially the most complex components (e.g., value-added, payouts, data quality).

On the whole, MCESA, Ohio, and HISD provide examples of how program evaluation is a useful means to inform and improve communication efforts and strategies. They have all used information derived from evaluations to improve the implementation of their respective PBCS and continue to rely upon evaluation results to make corrections to their programs.

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