

Collaborative Benchmarking: Discovering and Implementing Best Practices to Strengthen SEAs

Purpose: To help SEAs learn about and adapt best practices that exist in other SEAs and other organizations, the Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP Center) working closely with the Regional Comprehensive Centers will create multi-state groups, through a *Collaborative Benchmarking Best Practices Process* that allows SEAs, as critical stakeholders, to develop a deep understanding of best practices targeting matters of common interest. Based on the information gained from the collaborative benchmarking process, there are two key outcomes:

- The rich experience of the SEA participants who garner more specific information pertaining to their own needs, and feed it into a specific work plan outlining steps to improve their processes.
- *Benchmarking Best Practices Report*, a summary of the best practices and related recommendations included in a report of project findings for broad dissemination.

Definition: Collaborative Benchmarking is the process of identifying, understanding, and adapting outstanding practices from organizations anywhere in the world to help your organization improve performance¹.

Key Participants:

SEA Project Leaders: Staff within SEAs who participate consistently in the project. These leaders refine the learning objectives of the benchmarking effort, select potential best-practice organizations, participate in site visits, and work with support from Regional Comprehensive Centers, to adapt and implement the identified best-practices.

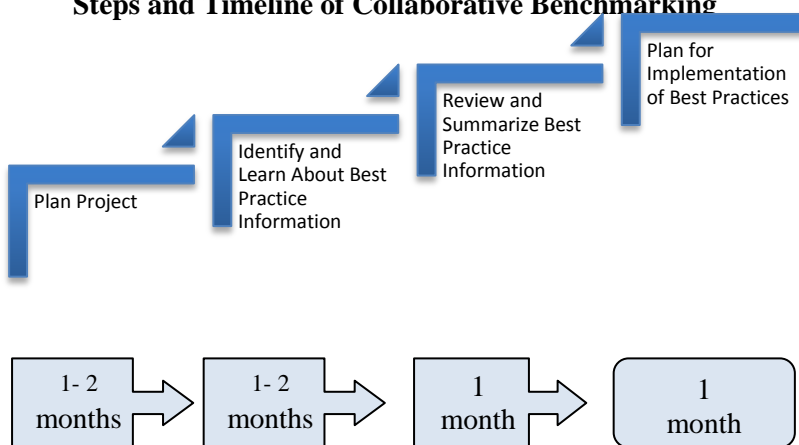
Facilitator: The Center plays a leadership role in recruiting SEA Project Leaders, conducting the background research on the topic, identifying best-practice organizations, facilitating site visits, and documenting key findings from the project.

Other special advisors: Representatives from the U.S. Department of Education and others as needed who bring important information about federal initiatives and policy.

Best-practice partners: SEAs and other organizations (including organizations outside of the education sector) identified as implementing innovative or “best” practices in the topic area share descriptions of their practices and artifacts or other information to aid understanding and application in the future. In addition to gaining public recognition for their best practices, these partners reflect on their own practices and network with and learn from other best-practice partners.

Subject Matter Experts: Experts in the topic area that provide key research and background to support the benchmarking as well as guidance to ensure that the goals are achieved.

Steps and Timeline of Collaborative Benchmarking



Questions to consider when selecting a topic:

- Is the topic a mission-critical process that must be improved within an SEA in order to significantly increase performance?
- What available research exists about the topic and organizations implementing best-practices to inform the benchmarking of this topic?
- Are there multiple SEAs interested in being project leaders in the benchmarking process who share an interest in learning, adapting, and implementing what is learned about this topic?
- Is this a topic where there is an opportunity for highly interactive structured and unstructured networking with peers and organizations implementing best-practices in the related process areas?

¹ American Productivity and Quality Center. (1997). *Benchmarking Pure and Simple: A Quick Reference Guide to Benchmarking*. Education and Training Division of the American Productivity and Quality Center, Inc.

Once the topic is selected and the participants have been recruited the steps of the Project begin.

Step 1: Plan Project Over a one to two month period of time, the BSCP Center will conduct a *background review* to understand what research has already been conducted in the topic area and begin to *locate potential best-practice partners* to engage. A brief report of the information gathered from the research review and search for best practice partners will be shared with the SEA Project Leaders. The BSCP Center and Regional Centers will work with SEAs to document their own current practices/processes related to this topic. The SEA Project Leaders will work with BSCP Center project staff to *develop a draft screening survey* for best practice partners, to ensure that the partners have the necessary expertise and processes in place in order to learn from them on the topic of focus. This step of the benchmarking process is finalized with a project *kick-off meeting*, where the full project team comes together to refine the survey, finalize the list of best-practice partners, and finalize the goals of the benchmarking process.

Maximizing Learning with Self Reflection:

- What are your learning goal(s) for participating in the benchmarking process?
- What are your current practices in this area? (Includes completion of an activity to map out current practices/processes and completing the final screening survey)
- What are the resources currently used in the process?
- What is the current timeframe it takes to complete the process?
- What are the current outcomes and perceived deficiencies in the current process?

Step 2. Identify and Learn About Best Practice Information Once the Benchmarking Best Practices Project Plan is in place, the *administration of the screening survey* to the selected best-practice partners follows. The survey is typically administered during a 2-3 week window. The results of the screening survey are analyzed by the BSCP Center staff and presented in a *de-identified (blind) summary to the SEA Project Leaders* approximately one week following data collection. The BSCP Center staff work with SEA Project Leaders during a conference call to *determine which best-practice partners* (in the de-identified summary) to visit in the project. Once the determination has been made, the identities of the best-practice partners are shared. Based on the data collected from the screening survey and the SEA Project Leaders stated learning goals and current practices, an *on-site data collection protocol and discussion guide is collaboratively created* over the next few weeks, allowing time for review by interested participants. Based on the identified partners, *three to five one-day site visits are scheduled* for SEA Project Leaders to visit the best practice partner organizations. *BSCP staff and SEA Project Leaders participate in the site visits* to collect data, participate in the discussion, and gather artifacts from the organization to refer to as examples.

Step 3. Review and Summarize Best Practice Information The BSCP staff analyzes and summarizes the information from site visits along with the data from the initial screening survey to create case study summaries. These case study summaries are provided to the best-practice organizations for review and feedback within two weeks of the site visit. A final report of the best practice case studies is written and shared during a one-day face-to-face meeting of the SEA Project Leaders.

Step 4. Plan for Implementation of Best Practices As a culminating activity, the SEA Project Leaders and other participants in the benchmarking process attend an Implementation Kick-off Meeting. At this meeting, it is vital that the appropriate Regional Comprehensive Centers and other Content Centers participate to hear how they can further support the SEAs in implementing what they have learned from the benchmarking process. This is a working session where the SEA Project Leaders revisit their initial learning goals and their current practices process maps to see where they can begin to make changes to implement improved processes and practices learned from this benchmarking activities. The goal is for each SEA to leave the meeting with a plan for implementation of best practices that includes a plan for support from the Regional Centers and others.

Learning from Outside the Education Sector

There are many best-practices to be learned from non-education organizations. In one frequently cited example, Southwest Airlines wanted to improve its turnaround time at the gate; it learned about streamlining its process from NASCAR's racing pit crews. Other examples include hospitals looking to Marriott to improve their admissions process and Apple looking to Ritz-Carlton to improve their customer service.

Jones, F. (1999, March/April). *Public Roads*. Is Benchmarking in Your Future? U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration. Vol. 62, No. 5.

Gallo, C. (2012, April 10). *Forbes*. How the Ritz-Carlton Inspired the Apple Store.

Time Commitment: The amount of time required for full participation in the Collaborative Benchmarking Project to maximize benefit is approximately five to 10 full days (40-80 hours) over a 4 to 6-month time period. However much of this work is spread over time through review activities, conference calls, and email exchanges.