Reform Support Network

State Perspectives on Emerging Practices for Effective Communication with Educators around Evaluation

March 2013

Representatives of five Race to the Top grantees—Delaware, New York, North Carolina, Ohio and Rhode Island—gathered in Providence, Rhode Island on December 12, 2012 under the auspices of the Quality Evaluation Rollout (QER) Working Group to plan strategies for improving communication between teachers and State education agencies (SEAs) on teacher evaluation systems. Each State brought to the meeting a "problem of practice" statement to serve as a focus for cross-State dialogue about the potential of emerging practices for engaging teachers.

The leaders around the table represented different education systems, evaluation plans, history and policies, yet their reflections continually returned to a few principles, fundamental to effective communications but rediscovered through the trial-and-error process of communicating with teachers about evaluation. These principles represent ways of framing communications so as to respect the real concerns of teachers and to build the trust needed to introduce complex change into schools. For example, communicating effectively with teachers requires, first, recognizing their perspectives, and secondly, providing the information they need in a timely and forthright fashion. Designing a strategic communications plan encompasses both the content of the messaging and the vehicles for its distribution. Engaging teachers authentically also means seeking their feedback—and acting on it.

The Quality Evaluation Rollout Working Group is an offshoot of the Reform Support Network's Teacher and Leader Effectiveness/Standards and Assessment Community of Practice.

This brief explores emerging practices that put these principles into action and enable States to communicate more effectively with teachers about evaluation. Even those leaders many months into the development of evaluation systems may find this discussion of individual practices useful and the reinforcement of strategic communication fundamentals a valuable reminder. This brief does not, however, attempt either a comprehensive overview of communications practice or an assessment of the quality of the practices described at the gathering.

In addition to State representatives, experts in communications and teacher engagement took part in the discussions, offering presentations and circulating through the sessions to serve as resources: Celine Coggins, founder and CEO of Teach Plus; David Keeling, vice president for communications for TNTP; Adam Kernan-Schloss, president and CEO of KSA-Plus Communications; and Peter Tang, Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellow and seventh-grade mathematics teacher at Kate Bond Middle School in Memphis, Tennessee. Their observations are offered throughout this brief.

The Reform Support Network, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, supports the Race to the Top grantees as they implement reforms in education policy and practice, learn from each other, and build their capacity to sustain these reforms, while sharing these promising practices and lessons learned with other States attempting to implement similarly bold education reform initiatives.

Define the Basics of the Communications Plan

Adam Kernan-Schloss and David Keeling both spoke to the fundamental value of creating a strategic communications plan for reaching out to teachers (and other stakeholders) about the State's evaluation system. The communications plan should have actual dates and specify "who says what to whom when." The alternative—producing mass e-mailings, a town meeting or a new page on a Website, without feedback integrated into a system—leaves State staff with little knowledge about their impact.

Keeling described the elements of a communications plan that carefully defines the goals and parameters for engagement. The plan dedicates a staff member to coordinating outreach and communications. It establishes an e-mail list that continually grows. Its products include templates for school district leaders, principals and teachers. It creates or improves a Website that offers resources, including frequently asked questions (FAQs), news and updates, and success stories. The plan features a system for soliciting and responding to ideas and questions to help State staff craft appropriate responses to the concerns raised by teachers. Lastly, the communications plan includes follow-up, designed to promote teacher ownership by articulating how the system has changed based on teacher feedback.

Christopher Ruszkowski explained that, in order to build public confidence, Delaware has sought to put out a calendar and five-year plan with touch points for feedback. Julia Simmerer from Ohio underscored the importance of the communications plan including elements designed to obtain and process feedback from teachers.

The First Communications Bucket: Content

In thinking about the elements of a communications plan, Kernan-Schloss offered the concept of "two big buckets of communication: there's content, and then there's distribution." His view is that the State has a "huge role" in developing the content, as the architect, the implementer and the only entity that can ensure consistent messaging statewide. In those States where districts significantly determine the evaluation structure, like New York, the SEA may focus its materials primarily on the how and why, and avoid specificity about those elements that vary locally. As Keeling emphasized, the SEA has the opportunity to set its own message about the deeper purposes for the teacher evaluation system—improving student learning and recognizing teaching as a profession—to make that message visible and transmit it to teachers.

It is a truism that communicating effectively requires a willingness to listen to people and respect their perspectives. Teachers facing the advent of new statewide evaluation systems often bring apprehension and fear to their first encounters with the system. Their attitudes stem from concerns that the system will be unfair or ineffectual and lead to good teachers losing their jobs. Thus, in communicating about evaluation, agencies may find it most productive to prepare for the questions teachers are likely to have and address fears upfront.

> "To communicate well, you have to understand where people are coming from and empathize with them."
>
> David Keeling
> TNTP

The participants considered specific formats for communication about evaluation that would reflect a willingness to listen to teachers and respond to their perspectives—including myths-and-facts sheets, talking points, FAQs, and before-and-after summaries. Myths-and-facts and FAQs are a favorite with Kernan-Schloss, because these formats directly address fears and misinformation, and the big questions to which teachers seek answers. (For examples of myths-and-facts, see Ohio's *Teacher Evaluation System: Myth vs. Fact*, Tennessee's FAQs on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System, and the *TNTP Myths and Facts about Value-Added Analysis*.) Creating these tools prepares the SEA to respond to the apprehensions

and questions that people are likely to have, he said. Only after that would he recommend moving on to preparing one-pagers. For his part, Keeling stressed the value of finding "good stories," anecdotes that illustrate that a new system works well, if not perfectly, for teachers and school leaders.

In preparing these messages, the participants reinforced the practices of providing the core information that teachers need, framing the evaluation plan consistently and honestly, and providing actual data as soon as possible to make real what was previously theoretical.

Provide the Core Information That Teachers Need

Experts and teacher representatives in Providence concurred that transparency and advance planning are the hallmarks of an evaluation implementation that respects the teaching profession. Coggins described for participants the essential information to communicate to teachers about the evaluation system—and its timing. First, the State establishes and puts in place the basics of the system and its components at the start of the school year. This means identifying student assessments before school starts, so that teachers may incorporate them into the curriculum. The assessments are designed to reflect the student growth that occurs in each teacher's class. Teachers know how the evaluators were selected, and that their training ensured inter-rater reliability. The system links meaningful professional development to observation findings and other evaluations. Lastly, the State informs teachers about the impact of evaluation on their careers.

Be Consistent

Although States have the authority to make necessary mid-term adjustments critical to proper implementation of a quality evaluation system, it may often be in their best interest to hold off on major changes until the start of the following school year. Avoiding mid-year revision of the evaluation system is a key element of providing teachers with the basic information they need. Ruszkowski stated that Delaware was making a concerted effort to delay major changes until the start of the next academic year, partly to avoid mid-year confusion and frustration. Peter Tang commented that changing elements of the evaluation system during the academic year is exasperating to the teaching community. As a teacher, his goal is to make everything clear for his students, and the disruption caused by tweaking the evaluation system mid-year is difficult for both students and teachers.

> "Mediocre yet consistent decision-making is better than ever-changing decisions. Do not change during the school year—it is beyond frustrating."
>
> Peter Tang
> Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellow

Be Forthcoming

Several participants commented on the wisdom of honesty about anticipated challenges in implementing a new system, especially in its first year, noting that lack of candor reinforces mistrust. This includes honesty about the implications of the evaluation system, including its impact on human capital decisions, and the timeline for system implementation. States would be advised not to overpromise on the early capacity of the evaluation system's support function, but be forthright about timelines. Jennifer Preston noted that when North Carolina's system was first created, "We couched everything as support." Some teachers are now "astonished" to recognize that several years of poor evaluation ratings could lead to the end of their employment as teachers.

Provide Real Data

Providing real data about real people causes uncertainty to evaporate. Once the evaluation system is no longer hypothetical, many problems will resolve themselves, attendees noted. Individual teachers reviewing their own data for the first time, and administrators examining data for their school or system, have reported this result. "One of the most valuable things was, once I saw my own data, I had

understanding," Peter Tang recalled. "It made more sense." Another attendee remembered bringing lists of top-quartile teachers to principals and asking, Is this surprising? Once principals saw these findings, they became better advocates for evaluation who could offer empirically driven testimonials.

> "It's partly diving into the pool. Once we give them the numbers, many people will say their numbers make sense."
>
> Amy McIntosh
> Senior Fellow, New York

Tying the data back to the classroom also makes it real. Teachers may complain about the time that the evaluation process requires of them, but this occurs when they don't see any connection to improving what teachers do for their students, Coggins observed. Creating a system where the conversation seems valuable and connected to the classroom allows teachers to see evaluation as a professional opportunity to explore higher order questions about teaching and to improve what they are doing for their students. The Memphis City Schools initiative accomplished this by giving teachers decision-making authority over key elements of the evaluation system, including the piloting and adoption of observation rubrics.

The Second Communications Bucket: Distribution

The discussion in Providence about the "distribution" of messages to teachers considered direct communication with teachers statewide, Web-based communication with teachers, and outreach to others, in particular, principals and teacher leaders with whom individual teachers have frequent, in-person communication.

Ohio's representatives reported that the SEA has home addresses for all teachers in Ohio, and e-mail addresses for most. Ruszkowski commented that Delaware has home addresses and e-mails for all its teachers, and suggested that a State agency could obtain work e-mail addresses through a Freedom of Information Act request.

Reaching Teachers Through the Web

Delaware brought to the meeting its SEA staff's concern that the agency's Website is "overwhelming." It offers a large volume of posted documents and no way for teachers (or anyone else) to search effectively for the information sought. The group's response to their problem of practice led to an extensive conversation about Website purposes and effectiveness.

Several States, including Delaware and Ohio, raised the issue of staffing concerns, including critical positions as well as interactions between current personnel. Simmerer noted the difficulty of persuading the communications office to listen to the SEA point of view about which information was important to provide. Ruszkowski reported that Delaware's SEA has no webmaster and only one communications staffer. They would like a Web designer but hiring through the human resources department poses bureaucratic complexities, and many hurdles exist to hiring a contractor.

Faced with an SEA Website that McIntosh recalled as "a mess," New York's commissioner determined to build a new Website. Encountering obstacles within the agency, the SEA was able to secure private funding and design for a new Website. That Website became so popular that it was subsequently refurbished by the SEA's own IT staff and launched recently as EngageNY.

Another example of a Website designed to communicate with teachers is Tennessee's Website page that offers a variety of resources to those seeking to understand the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). These resources include a video series on TVAAS, a document library, another video series featuring teachers and school leaders who took part in a field test of the Tennessee Education Acceleration Model (TEAM), and tools to aid school and district leaders implementing the new system.

Ohio's Website also has an evaluation page, which has drawn 1.8 million hits since June 2012. Although

SEA staff had thought that administrators rather than teachers visit the page, they saw a dramatic spike and sustained increase in visitors after sending a postcard about the Website to licensed teachers.

The discussion also covered a number of purposes that a Website could accomplish: communicating technical details, telling a story, offering the "why" of the evaluation system, updating visitors, securing feedback from visitors, asking them to sign up for something and urging them to become advocates for reform. A Website may feature a link to a portal where teachers sign on to work, like the Website for the District of Columbia's IMPACT performance assessment system, which features a link at the bottom of the home page to the educator portal.

> "The angle at which teachers approach a website differs dramatically from how the State approaches the teacher."
>
> Brad Jupp
> Senior Program Advisor for Teacher Quality Initiatives in the U.S. Department of Education

Partnerships for Outreach

Even States that have established comprehensive mailing lists and Websites may wish to consider partnerships with other organizations that might be able to communicate more effectively with teachers. The type of organization will vary from one State to the next, depending on the context, but could include teachers unions, associations of principals or superintendents or curriculum directors, regional corps of evaluators, or others. Amy McIntosh noted that New York teachers unions have developed materials about evaluation that are both accurate and positive in tone. For its part, the statewide association of superintendents for instruction and curriculum could provide access to principals, who in turn could connect with teachers, McIntosh said.

Partnerships for communicating statewide may also serve as a conduit for feedback. The SEA staff, McIntosh suggested, could create a protocol, designed to obtain more systematic feedback, and provide it to staff members of partner organizations who are in contact with teachers throughout the State.

Fostering the Principal's Role

The conversation in Providence frequently circled back to the conviction that since teachers expect to hear about evaluation from their principals, SEAs wanting to reach teachers should redouble their efforts with principals. Kernan-Schloss commented that a lot of research exists to back up this approach. Tang observed that he trusts his principal on the topic of evaluation more than anyone else, but since that reflects their relationship, it wouldn't necessarily be true for every teacher. The Ohio representatives agreed that their State was also learning that teachers expect to hear about evaluation from their principals.

Others affirmed that while there is no guarantee that teachers will visit the SEA's Website, they will be in direct contact with their principals. If teacher views of evaluation are informed primarily by their own principals, then it is logical for the SEA to do whatever it can to support principals with guidance, training and tools. Mary Ann Snider of Rhode Island reported that the SEA is providing ongoing training and support to principals in Warwick to help them effectively communicate with teachers about evaluation. Their support includes "meetings-in-a-box" to encourage consistent messaging and communication with teachers; weekly e-mails with action items, deadlines, tips and FAQs; and practice-based trainings on conducting post-observation conferences, facilitating meetings and responding to concerns.

Ask for Feedback... and Act on It

Most of those in Providence reported discovering or rediscovering that soliciting feedback from teachers ultimately becomes a two-way channel for communications, and a tool for making the messages communicated more effective. Engaging teachers means inviting their feedback as well as talking "at" them. Too many States, Coggins observed, will ask of a communications consultant: "We want you to help us

tell teachers what's going to happen and then find a few who will say publicly that they love it."

In contrast, participants urged that an agency only solicit feedback from teachers when that agency is prepared to act on their feedback. Teachers may feel disrespected by new systems, and the most well-intentioned engagement efforts can make that worse, when a teacher receives no value for showing up. Teachers show up with the hope of offering data that will be acted upon and don't want their time wasted. They want to be listened to and be a vital part of the process. The District of Columbia Public Schools IMPACT Team has systematized a continuous improvement cycle in which this team collects feedback and trends from teachers and makes adjustments accordingly. Delaware is planning to implement changes in their evaluation system based partially on feedback from teachers.

Whatever the engagement strategy, there was agreement that its architects should always explain what was learned from teachers and publicize how it shaped decisions and action steps. The overarching questions then become which States have the regulatory flexibility and political will to make changes based on teacher feedback, and what decisions are State leaders able to entrust to teachers?

To secure input from teachers requires strategies such as surveys, focus groups and advisory councils. What do teachers know? What do they like and what do they dislike? How do they want to receive information?

> "Teacher engagement is about building trust. That means transparency, openness and honesty. Teachers want to see that you are listening and that they are being heard. It's tempting to think of engagement as a "special sauce," a superficial way to show teacher support. You need to bake teacher engagement into the plan."
>
> David Keeling
> TNTP

Case of the Memphis City Schools

Teachers led in developing key aspects of the evaluation system:

- Piloting three observation rubrics and choosing one
- Determining the relative weight of elements of the system
- Serving as well-trained teacher ambassadors
- Providing a sustained teacher presence in the media

Adapted from Teach Plus presentation, QER meeting, Providence, RI 12/12/2012

Surveys of Teachers

Conducting a statewide survey of the teacher workforce is an approach that several States, including New York and Tennessee, have undertaken. Surveys may illuminate not only the knowledge and attitudes teachers hold about the evaluation system, but also the sources from which they obtain their information. Through the Reform Support Network, New York has worked with the Education Delivery Institute to design feedback loop surveys that examine the communication chain and test each loop. A survey of teachers conducted by Tennessee produced documented results that enabled the State agency to say persuasively what its workforce thought about evaluation.

Focus Groups of Teachers

Some States have conducted focus groups with teachers to learn more about the knowledge and beliefs that teachers hold about evaluation, the source of their impressions, and their thoughts about ways to communicate more effectively with other teachers. Focus groups, unlike surveys, allow their moderators to pursue unexpected themes that emerge from a group's response to the protocol questions. Through focus groups, for example, Delaware discovered that teachers did not like how the SEA was communicating with them.

Advisory Groups of Teachers

Another suggestion emerged from the discussion of teacher focus groups: creating an advisory committee of teachers—perhaps principals as well—charged with communications. Kernan-Schloss noted that their charge could be as simple as asking the committee to read everything before it is sent out. SEA staff could also use an advisory committee to test out complex explanations or analyses of controversial topics, obtaining feedback from educators before the text is distributed statewide. Tang noted that his experience in the Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellowship demonstrated the value of selecting high-performing teachers to take part in focus and advisory groups—and not "stacking the deck." The Teaching Policy Fellows argued with one another, he recalled, but the outcome was so valuable that they've been asked to plan a conference to introduce the Common Core State Standards to teachers.

Another approach is to create a cadre of teachers that keeps their colleagues informed about the evaluation system and explains why the new approach to evaluation matters. The cadre may emphasize the context of professionalism—that teachers are professionals who are evaluated in order to advance and who themselves can learn through evaluation how to progress from effective to highly effective. The Houston Independent School District created campus representatives, teachers designated by the principal to distribute important resources and announcements about the assessment system to their colleagues and answer their questions. McIntosh raised the possibility that New York State's Teachers of the Year, or their Teacher Ambassadors—appointed to promote the Common Core State Standards—might serve similar roles.

Resources

For additional resources, visit the Stakeholder Communications and Engagement Community of Practice (CoP) online site titled "Promising Communications Practices." The material shared on this Website was collected through the CoP's initial scan in spring 2012 of communications efforts led by SEAs and external education advocacy organizations in many Race to the Top States. Materials posted are organized under these topics: State communications plans/outreach efforts; Race to the Top Websites; messaging guidance and opinion research; newsletters and updates; outreach and policy issue briefs; social media/new media/videos.

In addition, the PowerPoints and other resources from the December 12 QER Working Group Meeting are posted at this link.