

Improving Educator Feedback and Support: Lessons from Eight SREB States

The Southern Regional Education Board partnered with eight state departments of education from 2015 to 2018 to transform how they supported the professional growth of teachers and administrators. With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, SREB provided grants, technical assistance, and project management and evaluation support, but the initiative gave state partners significant autonomy to craft strategies based on their unique challenges and priorities. States invested in several areas, including:

- Expanding department capacity to serve districts and educators
- Offering more frequent and effective training to school administrators
- Adopting professional learning and performance management platforms
- Engaging local practitioners to learn more about the implementation of state strategies.

Most state departments focused their investments on building capacity and providing training for instructional leadership in schools. As evaluators and instructional leaders, administrators are central to successful professional learning and school transformation strategies.

Investments in technology-based solutions and learning management systems strengthened this primary focus on school leaders.

Significant challenges — some outside of grantees' control — affected the implementation of state strategies. This report describes some of these challenges and highlights the importance of considering how external factors could affect the success of state department initiatives.

The report also provides insights on successful strategies used by some states to improve the design and support of educator effectiveness systems and how the grant process provided crucial external support — which all identified as invaluable.

In this report, state policymakers, state department staff and others will learn:

- How the state departments invested funding.
- The impact of the investments on the eight states' strategies and their success.
- Key lessons from the states' efforts and SREB's process.

What Were the Investments?

Eight state departments of education — Alabama, Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and West Virginia — used the grant funding to invest over \$6 million in six areas identified during in-depth planning. State departments invested in leadership trainings (\$2.53 million or 38 percent of overall funding), SEA capacity building (\$1.67 million or 25 percent), software and online platforms (\$1.07 million or 16 percent), research and data support (\$667,000 or 10 percent), communications and engagement (\$400,000 or 6 percent), and district support (\$333,000 or 5 percent). SREB describes four of the investment types below.

Expanding and Strengthening Leadership Training

Four states used a large portion of funding for innovative training that, according to focus groups, yielded excellent results: high attendance, high participant satisfaction, and increased understanding of evaluation processes and instructional leadership strategies. **Arkansas's Quest** program trained over 700 principals

Project Planning

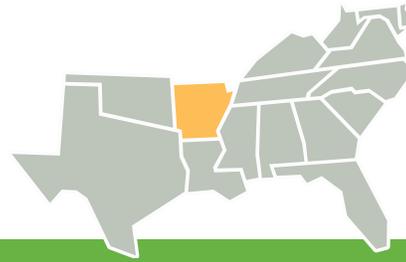
Before creating the state agency partnerships, the SREB educator effectiveness team discussed how to develop a grant structure that was supportive, reflective and iterative. The team also offered project management support to ensure that grantees focused on producing results. SREB required grantees to agree to four stipulations to participate in the regional effort:

- Sign a letter of understanding at the outset, highlighting the partnership focus and expectations and describing grant processes.
- Allow SREB or another entity to conduct an initial needs assessment and collaborate to develop a scope of work document outlining the agency's overall grant strategy.
- Engage in quarterly reflective and strategic conversations with the SREB EE team and submit short written reports.
- Collaborate with SREB to develop letters of agreement for additional funding every six months. Funding delivered at six-month intervals allowed for joint analysis of project impacts and regular mid-course corrections when needed.

Needs Assessment and Scopes of Work

Once state agency partners signed the letter of understanding, SREB began the process of conducting a needs assessment, or seeking an outside entity to do so, depending on state preference. The assessment process included a visit to the state, interviews with department staff, focus groups with educator stakeholders, and a data and communications plan review. These needs assessments yielded individualized results, but four key themes emerged:

- State agency capacity and skills to design or implement effective evaluation and growth systems was generally too low to support districts in a meaningful way.
- Educators largely misunderstood the true purpose of evaluations (growth and accountability), and most administrators had not been trained in instructional leadership in their preparation for principalship.
- States were not collecting and analyzing data to their fullest potential.
- States did not plan well for communicating, training and preparing educators before rolling out their systems.



in the state in two years. **Maryland's Promising Principals Academy** has received national recognition for preparing aspiring principals in instructional leadership, school strategic planning, and management. After SREB connected the Maryland and Oklahoma teams, Oklahoma developed a similar training called **Moving Up**, which helps aspiring and first-year principals from all over the state become instructional leaders. Maryland also began a new School Leadership Coaching initiative in 21 high-needs schools in Baltimore in 2017-18. High-quality coaches were hired to help school leaders focus on instructional growth. **South Carolina** partnered with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching after leadership decided to use NIET rubric and overhaul evaluation in the state. Funding allowed for NIET or state department staff to conduct 75+ trainings around the state over the last two years. Overall, SREB estimates that 3,000+ district and school leaders in the eight grantee states were trained on instructional leadership and conducting evaluation cycles. Approximately 100 teachers were also trained on the evaluation process.

Arkansas Spotlight

Through a collaboration with the South-Central Comprehensive Center, the Arkansas Department of Education reinvented evaluator and administrator trainings. The result was Quest instructional leadership training. School and district leaders choose one of three course pathways that focus on different professional development areas. Quest is supported by lead Rocci Malone, a former school principal, six regional support coaches and 15 lead principals. Quest is a year-long, in-person training program combined with online networking and support. ADE staff report the Quest training is the most successful professional learning delivered to date. The program's design — regular, in-person trainings delivered by regional cooperatives and supported by online PD, networking and coaching — could serve as a model for other state departments interested in delivering leader-centered professional learning.

Enhancing Staff Capacity

Several states, including North Carolina, Oklahoma and West Virginia, used grant funding to double or triple the size of their educator effectiveness departments, most going from one full-time employee to two or three. **Strategic Data Project fellows** from Harvard greatly expanded the capacity of the North Carolina and West Virginia teams, allowing them to enhance their data systems and reporting. Oklahoma added a Teacher and Leader Effectiveness director and a data specialist, tripling the size of its team from one to three. This new team designed a growth goal component, conducted complex data analyses and overhauled the state's communications and engagement strategies, resulting in significant growth in the department's reputation and educator support for TLE. Alabama dedicated the most funding of agency grantees for capacity-building to implement their highly decentralized approach, which allows districts discretion to design their own evaluation systems with only state guidance. However, staff turnover limited the team's size and guidance efforts throughout the grant period.

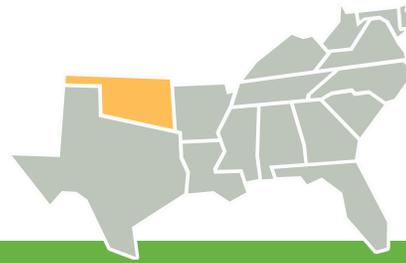
Adopting New Professional Learning and Evaluation System Platforms

North Carolina built a **Human Capital Dashboard data platform** and used grant funding to contract with the SAS Institute to enhance the platform with interactive upgrades based on district and school feedback. Changes based on feedback from educators include allowing users to find the specific list of teachers in each subject area and employment category and analyze equity gaps by identifying district trends in recruiting, retaining and losing teachers at different effectiveness levels.

Arkansas contributed significant funds for necessary upgrades to the state's online data management and professional development resource platform, **BloomBoard**. Mississippi and South Carolina used grant funding to work with different vendors to create new state online data platforms for observation and growth measurement. These are being piloted or in early implementation.

Engaging Local Stakeholders

Three states — Mississippi, Oklahoma and West Virginia — found success using funds to engage stakeholders in new ways around educator feedback and support. Oklahoma implemented a creative strategy after the legislatively formed Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Commission sunset in 2016. The Oklahoma State Department of Education convened **Regional Stakeholder Advisory groups** in five regions of the state, using an application process with a diverse list of stakeholders. Each advisory group has 20 to 30 members and meets with OSDE staff three times a year in a central location in their region. This is the third year for the advisory groups, and this year's members feel they are so important, they have agreed to continue three in-person meetings per year — despite OSDE no longer being able to pay travel stipends once the grant ended. Mississippi and West Virginia used their stakeholder groups to inform a current redesign of their frameworks.



Oklahoma Spotlight

Starting in 2016-17, the OSDE team took steps to ensure that more teachers and administrators viewed educator evaluation strategies as helpful in supporting professional growth. The state department improved relationships between OSDE, associations and educators. Recent focus groups show educators now trust OSDE and are very pleased with the new Professional Learning Focus measure. The current and past executive director were huge assets to instituting needed changes in strategic communications, leadership trainings and district support. Stakeholder relationships have improved significantly in a few years' time. The Moving Up training and Regional Stakeholder Advisory groups are two of the most successful initiatives in the SREB project because they support greater communication among educators and school leaders.

What Was the Impact?

Administrators were better supported as instructional leaders in several states.

In Arkansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma and South Carolina, leadership trainings were improved and scaled to build the capacity of school administrators as instructional leaders. In Maryland and West Virginia, efforts were made to prepare or test trainings that the state plans to scale in the future. Despite the funding support to increase capacity and improve training curriculum and delivery, grantees still fell short of being able to provide high-quality training for all districts.

Teachers began to receive additional instructional support, but not consistently.

As a result of an improved focus on instructional leadership with school leaders, a larger number of teachers in several states began to report increased observations, feedback and growth support via annual focus groups SREB conducted in each state. However, this support was still not consistent in all districts statewide; success largely depended on the will and skill of individual administrators.

Increases in student achievement were difficult to correlate with teacher growth.

During the grant period, only one state — Oklahoma — was able to run analyses that showed a correlation between instructional growth and student achievement. While that correlation is low, it does show promise that the process of observations, feedback and educator growth goals (called Professional Learning Focus in Oklahoma) can contribute to increased student growth. Other states are working on building their capacity to run similar analyses, including West Virginia, which has a robust data collection system in place, and South Carolina and Mississippi, both of which are beginning to work with new data systems.

What Did Grantees and SREB Learn?

SREB conducted exit interviews with the eight state department grantees in summer and fall 2018. Insights from the interviews and three years of interim grant reports informed the five lessons below.

1 External support for states makes a difference.

All eight grantees used funding to secure external assistance. Technical assistance providers and experts extended state department capacity by delivering professional learning, designing trainings, providing thought leadership and strategic advice, and convening local educators.

When interviewed, grantees mentioned several technical assistance partners as highly valuable: BloomBoard, a private communications firm in Oklahoma, National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, Education Counsel, and South Central Comprehensive Center. These external partners had a strategic mindset and looked beyond daily implementation struggles.

At the beginning of the project, SREB staff pledged support to help grantees find external partners and provide feedback on how to make course corrections based on interim data. However, as the project matured, SREB invested more staff time in acting as a strategic advisor and project manager for the eight grantees, which required more time than originally budgeted. All eight states shared appreciation for SREB's technical assistance and project management support and thought these supports were as helpful as the financial backing, if not more so.

2 Standard processes and regional meetings supported state efforts.

SREB gave grantees significant latitude to develop strategies that addressed their priorities. Within this flexible framework, SREB funded efforts at six-month intervals to ensure that states could revise their strategies as needed. The biannual cycles also allowed SREB to provide specific feedback on how

Assessing Impact

When assessing the impact of state investments, SREB staff asked three questions:

1. How did investments improve teaching and learning?
2. How did investments build capacity of school administrators to be instructional leaders?
3. Did investments support local understanding and buy-in, implementation and data analysis of growth systems? If so, how?

Although most grantees could point to specific ways that investments affected teaching and learning and district implementation, they were better equipped to speak about how training and infrastructure projects enhanced state and local capacity.

to improve the impact of investments. All but one state (Arkansas) significantly altered their course of action and increased or decreased funding for work streams as SREB helped them assess their progress. Our strategic and iterative grant processes, along with the complementary annual Progress Monitoring reviews and technical assistance, allowed for intimate reflection, evaluation of results, and mid-course corrections when needed, which all grantees reported as a significant improvement over receiving all funding and project management support at the beginning of the grant cycle.

Grantees also appreciated SREB's willingness to contract with consultants and vendors directly, allowing them to bypass lengthy procurement processes.

Accompanying progress monitoring reviews contributed to evaluating and providing additional support to agencies, as well as stakeholder feedback. However, if this opportunity arose again, our team would implement an RFP process to guard against funding efforts in states where leadership priorities misaligned with the project purpose. Organizations should only engage state agencies in sub-granting opportunities when the priorities of state leadership align with the focus of the initiative and teams are well-positioned to take on a large funding project.

State teams noted the benefit of meeting twice a year to learn from their state colleagues. Every grantee requested that SREB work to continue convening state department staff as a regional community of practice. SREB concluded that future collaboration efforts should encourage a regional community of grantees to pilot experimental strategies and use standard evaluation practices to assess the effectiveness of these untested approaches. By sharing results in a regional group setting, grantees could support the dissemination of promising practices across the region and the nation.

3 Investments in technology and infrastructure produced mixed results.

Online data platforms have been or are being implemented in all but one (Alabama) of the eight state grantees. These platforms allow for centralized data collection and help agency staff assess whether the evaluation system is being implemented as intended. Staff can identify teacher equity issues and develop professional learning supports based on the evaluation results. However, several states found that online platforms also caused many educators to equate evaluations with the platform, focusing only on their “paperwork,” their ratings, and their frustration with technology. The purpose of evaluations as a tool for measurement and growth of educators was lost with hasty, under-trained and under-communicated rollouts of these platforms. Other state departments should consider the benefits and drawbacks of using technology-based solutions for performance management and professional learning.

4 Scaling effective school and district leader support is challenging.

Despite their success in increasing the frequency and quality of trainings for evaluators, states were unable to scale these opportunities to develop observation and feedback skills to reach all leaders. The best trainings demonstrate how leaders can build administrator will to spend time and effort observing and coaching all teachers. Focus groups conducted as part of the SREB progress monitoring reviews show that up to 40 percent of teachers in some states still are not being observed regularly or are not receiving feedback that is timely, unbiased and actionable.

Administrators consistently cite time as the prime factor in not being able to complete instructional leadership tasks, but many also admit they do not feel comfortable in the role of instructional leader or do not have supervisors who understand and model professional growth. States are realizing that a lack of focus on school administrator observation and professional growth systems contributes to the uneven

implementation of educator evaluation systems. Only two agency grantees, Mississippi and South Carolina, partner with their higher education institutions to integrate instructional leadership skills into traditional principal preparation programs.

Many state departments struggle with how to support all districts. Staff capacity can limit support to only those districts needing the most help or where SEA leaders already have good relationships. Even agencies with high capacity struggle to scale efforts statewide, making sure trainings are of high quality in all regions or districts and that all educators have access to the same support. External support and interstate partnerships are integral to helping increase district support.

5 Educator growth system success is dependent on leaders' values and skills.

Several states learned (through data analysis, stakeholder engagement and support and training) that the rush to design and implement evaluations years earlier caused uneven and compliance-oriented implementation. As a result, educator buy-in was low, most saw the systems as punitive, and administrators strained to understand how to observe and give feedback, much less find the time to do so. Six of the eight states have or are undergoing system redesigns to re-focus on growth and educator support over compliance and accountability.

Evaluation systems still struggle to get past negative connotations and the tension between accountability and growth. This does a lot more damage than we thought — states will always need to work on communicating the importance of growth, highlighting best practices, and training for system understanding.

Evaluations should not be viewed as a compliance task, but rather as one tool in a cohesive system of structures related to effectiveness: preparation, development, compensation, recruitment and retention of high-quality educators. This way, educators are more likely to feel empowered and to take a leading role in their professional growth.

It is more difficult to correct misconceptions than to be strategic about presentation in the first place. Many states were so focused on designing and rolling out their systems quickly that they were not proactive enough about branding the system or providing coherent and strategic messages. In the future, state departments could empower teachers and leaders by showing how a comprehensive strategy supports their growth as professionals.



South Carolina Spotlight

SREB views South Carolina as one of the most successful state grantees. The system redesign (to Expanded ADEPT and the SCDE 4.0 rubric from NIET) and rollout has been well-planned, well-researched, and well-supported by a passionate team in the Office of Educator Effectiveness and Leadership Development. SCDE took advantage of SREB convenings and research to learn from other states' evaluation rollout mistakes and carefully plan for implementation. Bringing higher education on board from the start, providing transparent communication, constant feedback opportunities, mass training opportunities, tiered support and regional coaches, and rolling out a data and PD platform in the same implementation year are all evidence of a thoughtful and purposeful approach.

Funding state strategy development to increase educator support is a worthwhile investment.

SREB encourages grantors to continue funding efforts to help state departments design, implement and evaluate their strategies around key initiatives, especially projects that boost educator feedback and support. Enhancing the capacity of state actors to support local transformation makes sense, especially when foundations fund collaborative work between state policymakers and local implementers.

State departments set common expectations and help assure equitable and coherent implementation across districts. State actors also create the conditions (state policy, local flexibility, and funding) that facilitate (or impede) district transformation efforts. Concurrent funding of state and local strategies could allow organizations like SREB to align state and local efforts and resources, track progress, evaluate the efficacy of various strategies, and inform both policy and practice in the process.

While not every state made transformational gains, all teams benefited from SREB project management, research and strategic support, and half the states made significant strides to improve implementation of their educator evaluation and growth systems. As the grants wound down, SREB provided additional technical assistance to interested agencies to sustain the work viewed as creating the greatest impact — which included assisting in assessing project impact and helping staff to find other external funding sources. If opportunities develop, SREB will take a similar partnership approach when providing grant funding to state entities to further the successes achieved during this grant project.

SREB thanks state leads and their teams for their commitment to promoting the professional growth of teachers and administrators over the three-year initiative and their time investment in the grant partnership:

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South Carolina Department of Education – *Kristin Joannes, Lilla Toal-Mandsager and team*

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