District Leader's Guide

Communicating Effectively with Stakeholders

Communicating Effectively with Stakeholders

Implementing Evaluation Systems: Learning from Pioneering Districts

In an effort to help districts implement local educator evaluation systems in line with the requirements of SB191, the Colorado Legacy Foundation is providing a suite of resources to district and school leaders. CLF worked with three Colorado districts who recently revised their evaluation process. Although these districts implemented their new systems prior to the passage of SB191, the process that each district went through is informative. We hope that highlighting these districts and the lessons they learned along the way will help other districts leverage their success and avoid reliving their most difficult challenges.

Three case studies provide the foundation for this work. District and school leaders can read the case studies for examples of how different districts have approached similar goals. A series of District Leader's Guides build on the case studies and provide more direct and specific guidance to district leaders as they move forward with implementation. The case studies and guides can be found on the Colorado Legacy Foundation's website.

Brighton Case Study - Brighton educators and administration agreed that their evaluation system was a "dog and pony show." In 2009 they revised their system, with terrific buy-in from the union, to more meaningfully support teachers.

Eagle Case Study - Eagle has spent nearly a decade developing their evaluation system and aligning it to instruction, assessment, and professional development.

Harrison Case Study - In 2007, Harrison hired a new superintendent who instituted a new evaluation system along with rigorous instructional supports, interim assessments and a pay-for-performance system.

Who should use this Guide?

This guide has been developed from the lessons learned from Brighton, Eagle and Harrison. District leaders should use it in conjunction with the case studies to prepare the district for a new evaluation system. This guide is developed for district leaders who:

- Have read "Preparing Your District to Implement a New Educator Evaluation System."

- Have established a district evaluation team.

- Have not started to implement a new system and want to ensure stakeholder buy-in.

- Have started implementing a new system and are experiencing resistance from different stakeholder groups.

- Who are looking for examples, lessons learned and implementation tips from Colorado school districts.

Successful Implementation Depends on Effective Communication

Supported by research and confirmed by Brighton, Eagle and Harrison, evaluation systems that have high levels of stakeholder involvement in their design are much more likely to be accepted, implemented and sustained.

Stakeholders include teachers, their association representatives, school board members, superintendent, district office staff, teacher and principal preparation program leaders, principals, parents, and business and community leaders. Each of these groups, and others specific to your local community, must be involved in identifying the goals of the educator evaluation system. They should be familiar with the definitions of effective teachers and principals as well as the state-wide quality standards to assess educator effectiveness.

Communication will be easier if district goals for the evaluation system are based in shared district core beliefs and values. If the evaluation system goals foster and reinforce the core beliefs, then stakeholders can see the connection of the evaluation goals to the district's broader goals. For guidance on aligning the evaluation system goals to the district's core beliefs and values, read the District Leader's Guide "Preparing Your District to Implement a New Educator Evaluation System" for background.

Communications Goals in Early Stages of Implementation

No pioneering district reported they had too much communication. Although all did a good job, all three districts wished they could have done more.

District leaders should consider developing a communications plan that identifies the essential messages and audiences. Stakeholders would then determine the most effective channel of communication for its purpose and target audiences. Brighton, Eagle and Harrison used a combination of the following communications tools.

- Online communications, especially the district's web site

- Community information nights

- Weekly or bi-weekly e-mail updates targeted to different stakeholder groups

- Events such an annual breakfasts for the district community or wider community

- Bus tours to schools for the business community

- Workshops for teachers and principals

- Videos

- Press releases

- FAQs

- Newsletters

- School board updates

One communication goal in the early implementation phase is to widely share the evaluation system goals and get feedback from the larger system. A communications strategy should invite and incorporate feedback from stakeholders. For example, consider asking stakeholder groups:

- Are these the right goals?

- Are there other goals that should be included?

- Should certain safeguards be put into place?

- What are the implications of each goal—fiscal, policy and political?

- Will the goals achieve the desired outcomes?

Frequent and timely follow up communication, demonstrating that feedback has been heard and incorporated into the plan, will reassure stakeholders that their voice is important and will help set the stage for positive communications moving forward.

A second communication goal is for stakeholders to begin to share the goals in their professional and social networks. Eventually stakeholders and members of the design team could play an integral role in the following ways:

- Mobilizing administrator, teacher and community support

- Marketing the system and publicizing the findings

- Interpreting policy implications

- Securing additional funding for the system

- Countering objections based on research data

- Conducting surveys to keep a pulse on the community

Even though it is early in the design process, the district evaluation team should be thinking about how effective evaluation systems will be used to inform professional learning opportunities for teachers and school leaders. Part of the communication plan is not just about the evaluation system's design, but how the district will support teachers and principals in their own professional learning that will lead to better instruction and student achievement.

Guiding Questions

In developing a communications plan that engages all stakeholders, the district evaluation team should consider these questions.

- How will the evaluation team get broader stakeholder feedback on the proposed design for the evaluation system? Which stakeholders should be kept apprised of progress and changes in the evaluation design?

- Are there other stakeholder groups already established (such as district working committees) that should be included?

- Who should be included to ensure the new evaluation system is aligned with other efforts in the district?

- Specifically how will parents be engaged?

- What role will each of the district evaluation team members have in designing the system? Communicating plans and progress? What will need to be communicated? By whom? To whom? By When?

- How will stakeholders outside of the design team be kept informed? Their feedback solicited?

- How will progress on the design and implementation of the evaluation system be tracked? How will it be communicated?

Learning from Pioneering Districts

Although Brighton, Eagle and Harrison undertook the reform of their evaluation systems prior to the passage of SB191, the process by which they developed the system and rolled it out district-wide yielded many lessons learned and implementation tips. District evaluation teams are encouraged to read the case studies and use the case study highlights to further inform their discussions.

The following sections include examples and lessons learned from the district case studies.

Brighton's Approach to Developing & Communicating a New Evaluation System

Two years ago Brighton's Chief Academic Officer asked staff for feedback about what was working in the district – and what wasn't. The biggest frustration? The teacher evaluation process, which was described as "having no value," "a joke" and a "source of conflict among teachers." Both teachers and administrators agreed.

In response, the district and the Brighton Education Association (BEA) agreed to a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to explore other teacher evaluation systems. Because the district and teachers' association have a solid relationship – they use an interest-based approach to solving problems– all issues and options could be put on the table for consideration.

After the MOU between the teachers' association and the district was signed, an evaluation subcommittee of six administrators and six teachers, representing all levels of the system, started by sharing what was working in the evaluation system – and what was not. Overwhelmingly, the bad experiences dominated discussions.

Some of these negative experiences included:

- Formal teacher evaluations were pre-announced and turned into staged "dog and pony" shows.

- The evaluations were pro forma with text from prior years' reviews cut and pasted into a current review.

- Teachers were given a summative rating and there was little connection between the grade and the supporting text.

- Teachers were evaluated only once every three years.

- Professional learning was disconnected from the evaluations.

Brighton's new system includes multiple teacher observations based on quality standards with immediate feedback on their instructional practice. Teachers set goals, have growth plans, and are assessed on multiple measures. Teachers either remain on the "growth track" or the "intensive track" where they receive an improvement plan and have just 60 days to improve skills assessed by the district's quality standards.

In rolling out the system, the principal and building teachers' association representative were trained by the district office and worked together to communicate the new system to teachers in their school. The modeling of a collaborative effort between the district and the teachers' association went a long way to securing teachers' buy-in.

Lessons Learned and Implementation Tips

Brighton, Eagle and Harrison shared the following lessons learned and implementation tips on communicating with stakeholders.

- **Help stakeholders understand the need for teacher responsibility to raise student achievement.** Some messages: Teaching is like any other job. People should be rewarded for doing a good job at work – including teachers. Effective teachers help create a strong workforce. A strong work force helps our community.

- **Leadership must be available to answer questions, keep a pulse on the district and help deepen peoples' understanding of the system and how it works**. When issues arise the superintendent or other district leadership should be available to answer questions. Widely disseminated, monthly FAQs help answer common questions. Leadership should also make adjustments in the system based on valid feedback.

- **Ensure communication is timely, targeted to specific audiences, and ongoing**. Early communication efforts were with teachers in schools, explaining how the new evaluation system would work. Then it spread to a larger group of stakeholders.

- **Communicate the design of the system to all stakeholders, especially teachers.** These systems are major paradigm shifts and teachers especially need to know how it will affect them. Absent communication to teachers and their knowledge of the system, worst fears can be created and shared around the district, creating what one district called "the fear factor."

- **Build ongoing relationships.** Good relationships are often built by working together successfully across stakeholder groups while using effective decision-making strategies.

- **Communicate all changes made to the evaluation system.** In Eagle, for example, the evaluation system was adapted over time to better meet the goals and needs of the district. As changes were made, they were communicated to principals, teachers and the community.

- **Use simple and understandable language.** In Harrison, the public information officer made simple translations when she talked about the evaluation plan to the community. Instead of "student achievement" she used "student success." Instead of effective instruction she used "great teacher." Instead of "CSAP" or "curriculum-based measures" she used "grade-level tests."

- **Identify and engage all stakeholders.** Embrace "fence sitters" and critics. When won over, they may be some of the best advocates.

- **Help the media understand the need for measurement.** Accurately communicate how student results will be linked to teachers' evaluation and how it is used to improve student achievement.

- **Do as much face-to-face communication as possible.** Harrison takes different community stakeholders (e.g. chamber of commerce members, senior citizens) on bus tours of schools often pointing out what effective instruction looks like.

- **Vet decisions and options with additional stakeholders.** Have a strategy to communicate why these decisions were made. Use data when available.

- **Create your own messages and media.** Sometimes negative press—without facts—can fuel opposition. In Harrison, criticism came from outside the district. Although the district began the redesign of the teacher evaluation system without media fanfare, they were ready to communicate it after the school board and teachers were on board.

In summary, engaging and communicating with stakeholders is a critical aspect of designing educator evaluation systems. By engaging them in the design they have knowledge of the system and will be more likely to support it publicly. Leadership at the highest levels needs to be vocally behind the system using clear messages and multiple strategies to communicate to stakeholders. The evaluation system will change over time and these changes must be communicated as they are made.