

Lessons Learned from the School District Collaboration Fund Grants



November 5, 2019

Lessons Learned from the School District Collaboration Fund Grants

In the 2017/2018 school year, 15 Oregon districts received School District Collaboration Fund (SDCF) grants; in 2018/2019, nine of those districts continued to receive the grant. All of the districts focused on using a continuous improvement process to create and refine local solutions to problems of practice related to teacher professional learning, evaluation, compensation and leadership.

During those two years, an external evaluation focused on the implementation process and the learning that could be gained from the experience of the 15 districts. This document describes high-level findings and links to evaluation memos that dive deeper into the lessons learned.

The evaluation generated lessons on the following topics:

[HIGH-QUALITY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE](#)

[HUMAN-CENTERED / USER-FOCUSED APPROACH TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT](#)

[ALLOWING LOCAL VARIATION](#)

[BRINGING DIVERSE VOICES TO IMPROVEMENT WORK](#)

[STRUCTURED COLLABORATION & INTENTIONAL COMMUNICATION](#)

[COMMON CHALLENGES WITH THE WORK](#)

[IMPORTANCE OF INVOLVING PRINCIPALS](#)

[TEACHER LEADERSHIP & TEACHER VOICE](#)

[MEASURING IMPLEMENTATION & IMPACT](#)

[CHANGES FROM THE SDCF GRANT](#)

[TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SURVEYS](#)

HIGH-QUALITY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Technical assistance and coaching support evolved to attend to system variation and improving disparate outcomes for students, educators, and families currently not served by the system. Coaches centered equity in their continuous improvement approach and encouraged districts to think broadly about who should be at the table.

Coaches provided support to teacher leaders and administrators in a number of ways:

- Leaders could attend a coaching academy to build their capacity to lead equity-focused continuous improvement work
- Members of district teams attended regional convenings and had the opportunity to learn in structured ways with teams from other districts
- Coaches made regular visits out to districts, built personal relationships, provided individualized support, and helped promote a sense of accountability
- Coaches provided virtual support via phone, emails and web meetings

- Coaches supplied actionable research and information about the technical and implementation considerations for making changes to teacher evaluation, compensation or professional learning systems

SDCF grant managers--who were usually teacher leaders, occasionally administrators--felt that having access to high-quality technical assistance from external coaches was crucial to the success of their work.

The role of grant manager, a role usually held by a teacher, was a demanding one. Grant managers needed to have or develop skills different from those they needed as a classroom teacher. They reported that there was an initial steep learning curve for them as they facilitated committees of adults using continuous improvement methods to create change in their districts.

Grant managers, teacher leaders and potential future coaches reported benefiting from systematic training to lead continuous improvement work at the Coaching for Improvement Academy. Conducting empathy interviews, PDSAs, coaching for improvement, and root cause analysis (in that order) were the areas in which the largest number of participants said they improved the most.

READ MORE:

[Voices of Experience: SDCF District Grantees' Advice to Other Districts \(2019\)](#)

[Advice to Policymakers from Participants in the SDCF Grant \(2018\)](#)

[Support for Design Districts \(2018\)](#)

[Using Coaching Skills and Strategies to Improve Equity \(2019\)](#)

[SDCF Grant Manager Reflections on What It Takes to be an Effective Grant Manager \(2018\)](#)

[Coaching for Improvement Academy Learning Report \(2019\)](#)

HUMAN-CENTERED / USER-FOCUSED APPROACH TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

SDCF districts agreed that using a systematic approach to improvement was helpful, particularly one that

- Incorporated aspects of improvement science and human-centered design (also called, at times, user-focused)
- Took time to understand a problem rather than rushing to purchase a packaged solution
- Collected empathy data as part of the process of understanding the problem
- Understood inequities in outcomes as a product of the system and the need to center equity in continuous improvement
- Worked collaboratively to create and test solutions that could work in their specific setting
- Tried out these solutions on a small scale before rolling them out districtwide
- Measured the implementation and impact of solutions to see if they worked as intended

For the most part, districts embraced a continuous improvement approach, although they found some components more challenging than others. They often found that measuring outcomes was often especially difficult.

READ MORE:

[Use of Improvement Science \(2018\)](#)

[Measuring the Impact of the SDCF Grant: From Participant Reaction to Student Outcomes \(2019\)](#)

Although all districts learned about the formal component parts and tools of improvement science--AIM statements, root cause analysis using fishbones, empathy data, PDSAs--they varied in what and how much they were used. Some found the language and heavy focus on theory of improvement science confusing, at least at first. Over time, nearly all districts practiced regularly collecting and using-empathy data and tried at least a few PDSAs.

READ MORE:

[To What Degree Have SDCF Districts Achieved Their Professional Learning AIM? \(2018\)](#)

[Measuring the Impact of the SDCF Grant: From Participant Reaction to Student Outcomes \(2019\)](#)

ALLOWING LOCAL VARIATION

Many of the educators integrally involved in the SDCF grant work felt strongly that much of the value of the collaborative approach to continuous improvement was the ability to **address issues locally in a way that fits the specific district context**. They were excited about moving away from “one-size-fits-all” approaches that failed to recognize the strengths, needs and constraints of particular communities.

READ MORE:

[Advice to Policymakers from Participants in the SDCF Grant \(2018\)](#)

Even though all districts worked to reshape teacher professional learning, often increasing teacher choice and even teacher creation of professional learning, the way this looked in practice varied substantially across the different districts. The format of teacher professional learning sometimes included focused PLCs, learning walks, and workshops in which teachers taught their colleagues.

READ MORE:

[From Sit-and-Get to Collaborative and Teacher Led: Changes in Professional Learning Under the SDCF Grant \(2019\)](#)

[Professional Learning White Paper 2018](#)

BRINGING DIVERSE VOICES TO IMPROVEMENT WORK

SDCF districts were widely successful in incorporating teacher voice into their continuous improvement process. Emerging lessons indicate that it is valuable 1) to include a wide range of teachers, including those sometimes dismissed as “nay-sayers” and 2) there is value in including not only teachers, but also other educators, students, and their families in the improvement of school and district systems. Listening to diverse voices is part of taking a human-centered, user-focused approach to designing effective systems.

READ MORE:

[Expanded Opportunities for Teacher Leadership and Teacher Voice \(2019\)](#)
[Voices of Experience: SDCF District Grantees’ Advice to Other Districts \(2019\)](#)

STRUCTURED COLLABORATION & INTENTIONAL COMMUNICATION

Collaboration across diverse groups of stakeholders benefits from high-quality meeting norms, protocols, and facilitators with training in leading difficult conversations. It is also helpful to communicate broadly about the work done by collaborative committees of administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders. Over time, teacher leaders working on the SDCF grant identified a series of communication practices that they felt helped involve and inform a wide range of stakeholders.

READ MORE:

[Voices of Experience: SDCF District Grantees’ Advice to Other Districts \(2019\)](#)
[Within-District Communication About the SDCF Grant \(2018\)](#)

COMMON CHALLENGES WITH THE WORK

While many of the challenges that stakeholders discussed were specific to the local context, there were some that showed up across multiple districts. These included: staff and especially administrator turnover, administrator opposition, structural and time constraints, uncertainty about long-term funding, the demands of curriculum-adoption processes, and the steep learning curve for teacher leaders without prior experience in working with a systems perspective. Whether improvement processes and group goals aligned well to other district initiatives was an issue that could also facilitate or slow down progress in this work.

READ MORE:

[What Obstacles to Implementation did SDCF Grantees Encounter? \(2019\)](#)
[Voices of Experience: SDCF District Grantees’ Advice to Other Districts \(2019\)](#)
[SDCF Compensation Memo 2018](#)

IMPORTANCE OF INVOLVING PRINCIPALS

A lack of involvement or support from school administrators could reduce the viability and effectiveness of teacher leadership and teacher-led professional learning. Teachers found a number of ways to improve principal understanding and buy-in for the work.

READ MORE:

[Engaging School Administrators in Teacher-Led Improvement Work \(2019\)](#)

SHIFTING CONCEPTIONS OF TEACHER EVALUATION

Many teacher leaders reported that initial teacher feelings about existing evaluation systems were negative, and many felt it was an exercise in hoop-jumping. However, about two-thirds of districts reported making significant changes to their system under the grant. A primary change was **the creation of opportunities for peer observation and group discussion that helped teachers better understand the rubrics used to evaluate their instruction**. This meant the rubrics became a way for them to self-reflect and set their own improvement goals.

One thing many teacher leaders and administrators noted in both 2018 and 2019 was that **a meaningful evaluation system overlaps considerably with on-going professional learning**.

READ MORE:

[Teacher Evaluation under the SDCF \(2018\)](#)

[Teacher Evaluation in the School District Collaboration Fund Grant \(2019\)](#)

IMPROVING TEACHER COMPENSATION SYSTEMS

Most SDCF districts made **some attempt to alter teacher compensation systems; most also found this harder to change than anything else they worked on**. However, after 3-4 years, most districts found some ways to reward teachers financially for taking on leadership roles

READ MORE:

[Shifting Systems for Compensating Teachers under the SDCF Grant \(2019\)](#)

TEACHER LEADERSHIP & TEACHER VOICE

The most common form of teacher leadership under the SDCF grant was teachers planning, creating, facilitating and/or delivering professional learning to other teachers. But they also led through their participation on grant committees or by trying out the implementation of new ideas. In some cases, this led districts to start experimenting with bringing teacher voice into other areas of district-level decision-making. **In a few cases, the**

role of teacher leader was formalized into district systems, but usually it was not, and some people were concerned about the sustainability of teacher leader roles over the long term.

Over time, a growing percentage of teachers reported feeling they had many opportunities to demonstrate leadership and make decisions. Still, only about half of teachers felt that their districts took their voice into account when making decisions that affected them.

READ MORE:

[Expanded Opportunities for Teacher Leadership and Teacher Voice \(2019\)](#)

[What We Can Say about SDCF Survey Findings \(2019\)](#)

[Elevating Teacher Voice \(2018\)](#)

MEASURING IMPLEMENTATION & IMPACT

Districts find it challenging to measure the implementation and, especially, the impact of this kind of collaborative, continuous improvement work. Most districts found ways to routinely collect teacher opinions about initiatives. However, they seldom measured teacher learning or levels of implementation in a systematic way. Also, though there was great interest in knowing how system changes impacted student learning, most districts found this very difficult. There were a few examples, however, where districts did a good job examining the impact on students.

READ MORE:

[Measuring the Impact of the SDCF Grant: From Participant Reaction to Student Outcomes \(2019\)](#)

[What We Can Say about SDCF Survey Findings \(2019\)](#)

CHANGES FROM THE SDCF GRANT

The districts involved in this collaborative, inclusive, continuous improvement work saw considerable change in at least some aspect of teacher leadership, professional learning, evaluation and/or compensation. Some of those changes were apparent after only a year. Most districts involved for multiple years said they witnessed large changes in their district culture and systems.

Professional learning was usually the area in which people reported seeing the largest changes. Also, six of the nine districts reported making meaningful changes in their teacher evaluation system.

READ MORE:

[Did the SDCF Grant Prompt Small, Medium, or Large Changes in Grantee Districts? \(2019\)](#)

[From Sit-and-Get to Collaborative and Teacher Led: Changes in Professional Learning Under the SDCF Grant \(2019\)](#)

[Teacher Evaluation in the School District Collaboration Fund Grant \(2019\)](#)

[What We Can Say about SDCF Survey Findings \(2019\)](#)

[Sustainability: Concerns, Predictions, and Experience](#)

TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SURVEYS

[2018 1-29 Preliminary Report on SDCF Teacher Survey Results](#)

[SDCF Teacher & Administrator Survey 2017-2018 - Summary of Overall Findings](#)

[Methods for SDCF Developmental Evaluation 2018](#)