

Final Report

**Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary
Education School Improvement Regional Grant Evaluation**

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Massachusetts School Improvement Regional Grant Four Site Visits

I. Introduction

Since October of 2007, the New England Comprehensive Center and RMC Research Corporation have provided assistance to the Massachusetts Department of Education's Office of Accountability and Targeted Assistance in the development of its state system of support for districts that are identified as Commonwealth Priority Districts. These are districts that are in corrective action or are responsible for schools that are identified as Priority Schools. Supports for these districts will not come directly from the Department as is true for large districts identified as Commissioner's Districts, but rather from a system of intermediary providers. This newly conceived system represents a significant shift in the Department's approach to supporting districts and schools in need of improvement – from primarily school-based assistance to district-focused assistance and from the direct provision of services to the establishment of intermediary entities to support district improvement across the state. The Department consulted with stakeholders to inform the design of a regional system. In order to design such a system in sufficient detail to request funding in 2008 to implement a five year plan, significant effort was required.

This regional approach provides federal school improvement funds to districts to address areas of common need. It was designed to initiate and promote cross-district collaboration and cooperation in order to reduce duplication of effort, transcend district boundaries, and increase economies of scale. The ultimate goal is for district's to build mutually beneficial relationships that seek solutions to common challenges. These grants are awarded to schools and school districts that have an accountability status. Grant funds are used for many purposes, including professional development, instructional and non-instructional materials and supplies.

As part of the ongoing efforts of designing a regional system of support, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) sought an evaluation of the School Improvement Regional Grant process. RMC Research Corporation, of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, was contracted to conduct the evaluation and report the findings. This report describes how the four regional partnerships used the Title 1 School Improvement Regional Grant (SIRG) funds.

II. Methodology

RMC evaluators worked with the Department staff to identify the evaluation questions and sites to be visited. There were numerous approaches discussed before reaching the final decision. An evaluation framework and interview protocol were developed and approved by the Department to identify questions that would provide insight into the benefits and challenges of the SIRG process (see Appendix).

Site selection was based on the following criteria: 1) those that had two years of grant money to establish their district partnerships; 2) district size; 3) progress implementing their programs; and 4) regional diversity.

The Department staff contacted the selected sites to confirm their participation in the program evaluation. RMC evaluators followed-up with the lead contacts in each partnership to select dates and times for the site visits. Evaluators conducted the site visits and interviewed the key stakeholders to document their participation in the school improvement regional grant and the strategies they employed to implement their individual projects. Below we describe those partnerships in more detail.

III. District Partnerships

Shore Educational Collaborative, Chelsea, Revere, Somerville

These three districts worked with the Shore Educational Collaborative to provide professional development to improve middle school mathematics. The district contacts were instructional leaders who are responsible for providing and overseeing support. The interviewees included the Director of Mathematics K-12, Coordinator of K-8 Curriculum and Title 1, Math Support Specialist for K-12 and the Shore Educational Collaborative Lead for Professional Development.

Existing Networks

Revere and Chelsea worked together prior to this grant because of the cost effectiveness for professional development opportunities. It was through these informal contacts between the districts that they learned about the Fluency and Automaticity through Systematic Teaching with Technology (FASTT) Math program.

Work with Partner Districts

The cross-district contacts offered valuable opportunities to share expertise and information. These collegial relationships provided a network to support people who have similar responsibilities in their districts. The professional development activities across districts also provided opportunities for teachers to share with teachers from other districts. “The teachers are bonding and talking with each other,” commented one of the interviewees. The Shore Educational Collaborative facilitated this process and negotiated activities that are best for all the districts involved.

Added Value

The Shore Educational Collaborative was responsible for the grant and distribution of the funds. The lead for professional development said, “Keeping the ducks in a row is a huge challenge. The districts have different rates, stipends, professional development credits, and different forms.”

The Collaborative is working with the teachers, not just the administrators. Another interviewee said, "This is cutting edge math for English Language Learners that can be shared with others."

The group all agreed that training together will continue because of the positive experience.

Work Done Differently

The partner districts can do more collectively than separately because of the combined resources. Somerville is becoming part of the team which is important because of the relatively new curriculum director in that district. She commented, "There is no one like us in the district so we can call each other for support. Our Superintendents' have a similar relationship and they respect each other." She also explained that Somerville has small K-8 buildings which make it hard to provide professional development for only a few math teachers.

Continue the Approach

All three interviewees indicated that they will continue to offer professional development across the districts because it maximizes the opportunity by filling all the spaces. The lead from the Shore Educational Collaborative is also doing this with other districts because of the positive experience with the School Improvement Regional Grant approach.

Challenges

The interviewees were able to do everything they hoped to do with the grant. However, there was a discussion about getting all teachers to participate in the professional development. As one person stated, "We can't make them come. Even if they are in corrective action, they don't have to do the work because of the teacher contract." Another person said, "We need to find ways to make professional development part of the job. There is no accountability from the state to put teeth into it. It is always the same people that do the work."

There was also a concern that the lag time in receiving the funds coupled with the short time frame to expend the money can compromise the quality. For example, interviewees said the algebra lesson study professional development was offered too late, so they lost people who would attend if there was more lead time for the summer session. The teachers were already committed to other professional development activities that were planned earlier

Sustainability

The partner districts have put structures in place to sustain the work beyond the grant. The professional development activities will occur next year through each of the districts. Money will be used for more permanent items such as materials.

If they have more money, the partner districts would participate in professional development in lesson study.

Collaborative Agency

The Shore Educational Collaborative offers the facility to conduct professional development. They work with districts in a variety of ways. They provide information about best practices across their districts. “We are the point people for the vendors and the materials for the professional development requested by the districts,” said the contact for Shore. Another interviewee said, “It is easier for us to work through Shore than my own district because there is one contact, a discount, and one place for professional development.”

When the group was asked about how the Collaborative works with other external providers, they responded that it is all of their responsibility to make sure that the professional development is seamless, connected and coordinated.

Conditions for a Successful Regional Collaboration

- Flexibility within the grant to do what is needed for each of the districts e.g., the districts do not have to do exactly the same thing;
- Informal contact with each other beyond scheduled monthly liaisons meetings;
- The MA DESE offering solutions;
- Sufficient time to plan the professional development, i.e., at least a nine month spending window); and
- Access to coaches’ training in a partner district.

Salem, Gloucester, Peabody

A group interview was held with the key personnel from each district to gain their insights into the grant program. Participants included an Assistant Superintendent, an English Language Arts Coordinator/Title 1 Director, and an Assistant for Teaching and Learning/Title 1 Director.

Salem Public Schools took the lead for this collaboration. The focus of their grant was to strengthen the culture of collaborative inquiry, increase leadership by adding teachers to data teams, and enhance the use of data to inform instruction. In the second year, the goal was to expand the Data Coach Model in each of the school districts based on the course *Unleashing the Power of Collaborative Inquiry-A Professional Program for Data Coaches*. This partnership is supported by Research for Better Teaching (RBT) consultants who work with teachers and administrators.

Existing Networks

This is a new collaboration between Salem, Gloucester and Peabody. They did not work together prior to this grant.

Work with Partner Districts

The leads in each district worked together to write the grant for the summer of 2008 to get seed money. The professional development provided by RBT was shared across the districts. "The regional grant opened up lines of communication between districts because we have more contact with each other and share information. Our data coaches went to Lynn to see the coach model and the training," remarked one interviewee. [Lynn was an original partner until it became a Commissioner's District].

Added Value

The districts are thinking of ways to partner because of the success of this regional grant. They are looking at sharing professional development to address formative assessment. The three participants agree that they will work together when appropriate because of this positive experience.

Work Done Differently

Collaboration across districts brings together a critical mass of people to share resources. It also adds momentum to improvement efforts because the initiative is not seen as only one person's "bright idea." One participant stated, "Our teachers are more excited because of working with the other teachers from neighboring districts."

Challenges

They wanted more opportunities for staff to visit the other teachers and classes in the partner districts.

Sustainability

There are structures in place to sustain this initiative such as other grant money to work with the K-12 teaching and learning leadership teams to understand data coaching and to build a data management system. Thirty administrators attended six, three hour sessions. One district is holding monthly curriculum meetings to model the four steps of data coaching and one district is using Title 1 funds to train several teachers as data coaches each year. These data coaches have monthly grade level meetings throughout the year to work with teachers.

Professional development days are dedicated to doing this work. One participant explained, "The principals do the planning which makes it school-based. This shifted more quickly with this initiative than others. We were poised and ready because of the earlier work we did." The external support needed to sustain this work is money to train a new group of teachers each year, run study groups, and to support the trainers. This initiative has increased teachers' awareness of the power of data and improved their ability to make data-driven decisions. This will help teachers identify how to address gaps in teaching and learning.

Conditions for a Successful Regional Collaboration

- Share in the process of developing and writing the grant;
- Identify the common need across the collaborating districts;
- MA DESE's flexibility;
- Making decisions together when the grant money diminished; and
- Working together to balance the load.

The interviewees discussed additional initiatives including the following: 1) building a solid relationship with Salem State College; 2) working with West Ed's Galileo mathematics program to use the technology that analyzes and scores the assessments; and 3) using formative assessments.

A key aspect of a successful regional collaboration is advanced planning to support appropriate sustained professional development. This includes setting professional development dates throughout the year in order to have substitute teachers in the budget and available to release classroom teachers.

Leominster, Fitchburg, Gardner, North Central Charter Essential School, Southbridge, Webster and Winchendon

Leominster is the lead for this collaboration. All of the district leads, including superintendents, Title 1 directors, curriculum directors and a principal, worked together to write the grant. The district leads are also members of the steering committee. The full group was available for the interview. The focus of the grant was to build the capacity of teachers to become math leaders in their schools.

Existing Networks

Some of the districts have worked together in the past. They have monthly meetings with a local college and hold math round tables. They also reported that they connect through a Middle School initiative as well as the New England League of Middle Schools and the Math/Science Partnership.

Work with Partner Districts

One of the districts in the partnership has resources for working with data which has helped all the partner districts. One interviewee commented, "We did lots of information sharing and all of the professional development given was video taped." This allowed all districts to take a set of the video tapes and do "turn key" professional development for those who were not able to attend the summer professional development. Teachers attending the professional development also mentored a summer school student from their local school which enabled them to practice what they learned each day in the professional development. A math coach from both Leominster and Fitchburg conducted the professional development. Interviewees indicated that having math

coaches available to the other districts helped to embed the professional development in their own local context.

Added Value

All of the schools in the partnership learned best practices from their colleagues. “We would never have been able to do this without the grant. It has made a great difference in how classrooms look now and the instruction has improved tremendously,” commented one person.

Work Done Differently

The districts in the partnership report that they align their work to the standards now. In the past, they directed their work to a product, text, or program. They say they have different points of view. “When we think about an issue, it is more interesting and we get a more vibrant solution,” added another interviewee. Teachers are now speaking the same language. Infrastructure for organization is critical. Professional and personal relationships have developed across our region.”

Continue Approach

Districts continue to share information about high quality professional developers. “Now we have knowledge of what formative assessment is and we know how to use it. We will keep going with our formative assessment,” explained one interviewee. Teachers share content and pedagogy now and most likely will continue to do so. Institutes for administrators are likely to continue through electronic book study and distance work. Social networking allows administrators and staff to maintain the personal and professional relationships established through the collaborative. The Lesson Study Model and having coaches for English Language Arts is expected to go on and every district will continue to be standards-based.

Challenges

The partnership needs to be for a year in order to provide follow-up to the professional development. The approval for the grant came too late for the districts to plan professional development and get teachers there. Many of them already made vacation plans so attendance was not what it could have been. District partners did recognize that they would not be able to offer this professional development without the support of the grant money.

Sustainability

“We will continue to use the Lesson Study Model, as well as coaches for both Mathematics and English Language Arts. We keep things tied together. We have explicit plans all focused on needs based on data,” commented one person.

Conditions for a successful regional collaboration

- All districts have an equal voice;
- Working together allows for resources to be used more effectively; and
- MA DESE allowed partner districts to work on what they wanted. Normally a grant tells them what the focus should be. Districts were not constricted by conditions in this grant.

Hampshire Educational Collaborative, East Hampton, New Leadership Charter School, Ware, and Westfield

The Hampshire Educational Collaborative took the lead for this collaboration. The district contacts included district instructional leaders and one of the contacts is a principal. The focus of the grant was to provide mathematics professional development using the coaching model with teachers who trained to go back to their districts and coach other teachers.

Existing Networks

The Hampshire Educational Collaborative is a well established collaborative that continues to connect the districts in the region. The Collaborative knows all the districts well and is the 'hub' for Title I meetings and principal meetings. It also links districts together that have similar needs and provides grant writing to support the needs of the districts in this large rural area.

Work with Partner Districts

The districts in the collaborative have developed long-term, collegial relationships. The two staff members who provided the professional development came from the Hampshire Educational Collaborative. The goals focused on modeling good professional development as they delivered the coaching model as a strategy to improve mathematics instruction.

Added Value

Teachers had the ability to visit other classes in other districts. This was non-threatening because they worked with teachers who they did not know. "The teachers loved it," commented another person. They discussed what they had seen in classrooms and made new professional friendships. Districts are now working on a plan to embed mathematics.

Work Done Differently

"We will keep the format of the coaching model and we will go deeper into a professional development topic rather than just one-shot deals as before," remarked an interviewee. Money for coaches will be an issue for the Partnership if they do not have

grant support. They will work to have on-line forums so that they can be available to coach teachers. The goal will be to keep everyone talking together to build a professional learning community across the area.

Continue Approach

One person stated, “We would like to deepen our coaching pool in all the districts and begin to embed the professional development in the districts. Our districts are student-centered and look at student work. Staff focuses on students and teachers. They provide support versus evaluation.” All the districts use tiered instruction and have explicit plans based on identified needs.

Challenges

Everyone in the partnership had time constraints. District personnel wear too many hats because it is a rural area without many resources. They wish that they could be in buildings and classrooms supporting principals and teachers. Partners discussed the difficulties in getting the resources in place, collecting data, and being part of the professional development. Some of the teachers were not able to participate in the professional development because logistics were a challenge. The partnership wishes it could train more district coaches as well as outside coaches to make the program more robust.

Sustainability

The districts are currently working on a plan to embed mathematics. They hope that using technology will keep everyone connected and provide a venue for them to continue to work together.

Collaborative Agency

The Hampshire Educational Collaborative has been the hub for connection and professional development in the area for many years. One person commented, “We have known them for a long time and that brings continuity. They are always responsive to our needs and set a culture of on-going professional development.” The collaborative collects and studies data from across the region then makes the data available and useful to all the districts. The collaborative also uses this data to look for patterns of need in the area and writes grants that will bring money into the area to meet identified needs. For example, they brought in people from Deerfield on a “Teaching American History” grant that provides professional development on how to teach advanced placement classes.

Conditions for a Successful Regional Collaboration

- Have one central location with facilities that bring together highly trained people who are experienced in outreach;

- Have that central ‘hub’ provide a service that districts are not able to do (look at data and make decisions about improving classroom instruction based on data); and
- Have trust in the central hub and their staff.

IV. Findings

The site visits to four district partnerships provided the opportunity to gather data about the approaches of implementing the school improvement regional grants. Based on feedback from the partner leads at the four sites, the SIRG process was beneficial to their districts and they are considering a variety of strategies to maintain the partnerships beyond the grant.

In this section of the report, we summarize the findings that can be used as discussion points for MA DESE personnel to apply to other initiatives.

1. All four of the district partnerships indicated that the grant money was beneficial to support professional development in their districts based on identified needs.
2. The flexibility given to collaborating districts in the use of the grant money allowed them to make adjustments that were appropriate for the individual district needs within the partnership.
3. Partner leads are committed to sustaining the initiatives beyond the grant because of the positive experience with the SIRG. The leads for each of the districts envision continued collaborations because of the benefit of additional resources, networking and information sharing.
4. The districts that worked with the Shore Educational Collaborative and Hampshire Educational Collaborative discussed how helpful these agencies have been in the following areas:
 - providing trusted expertise in outreach and professional development;
 - garnering resources and acting as the fiscal agency;
 - understanding the districts’ professional development needs and their individual contexts; and
 - providing connections for districts to network within their regions.
5. Partner leads indicated that working together gave them support in their district roles because they are the only person who has that position (e.g., curriculum coordinator, assistant superintendent) and they wear multiple hats. This approach also distributes the leadership which helps to balance the work load.

6. The coaching model was implemented in three of the four sites because the district leads recognized that it is a successful strategy for embedded, sustained professional development that improves instruction.
7. The partner leads indicated that the use of data is the core for decisions about what is needed for instructional improvements. This focus also supports the implementation of an appropriate professional development plan.
8. Partner leads described the importance of their teachers having the opportunity to work with and share their expertise with other teachers across the districts. Through this grant, teachers recognized that they have similar experiences and professional interests regardless of the district.
9. The compressed timeline for applying for the grant money and the requirement to expend the funds within three months made it difficult to offer professional development to as many people as possible. For example, some teachers were not able participate because of other professional development activities that were scheduled much earlier.
10. Partner leads indicated that additional funding from the MA DESE would help to continue the efforts started with the SIRG money.
11. There was some concern about how to get all teachers to participate in professional development and how to embed and sustain it within the confines of teacher contracts.
12. Partner leads that work in rural districts indicated that time constraints and multiple responsibilities present challenges to providing appropriate resources and ongoing professional development.

APPENDIX

EVALUATION MATRIX

Key Evaluation Question: How does the opportunity for districts to collaborate on a common improvement strategy inform the development of a statewide system of support for Commonwealth Priority Districts?

Sub Questions <i>In what way does...</i>	Stakeholders	Data Collection
1. the district experience in the SIRG process influence their ability to collaborate with other districts?	district team	online survey
2. the provider experience in the SIRG process influence their ability to effectively support district improvement efforts? with others?	external providers	online survey
3. the state education agency support the collaborative effort?	state staff, district leaders, external providers	interview
4. the district make determinations about external service providers?	district leaders	online survey
5. the external provider services align with the district needs?	district leaders, external providers, state staff	online survey
6. the SIRG process bring added resources to meet district needs?	district team, state staff	online survey, interview
7. the district collaborations benefit from working with Collaboratives	district leaders, Collaborative providers	online survey
8. participating in the SIRG process help districts develop solutions that can be continued and further developed?	district team, providers, state staff	online survey, interview
9. the SIRG process help districts identify common needs, pool resources, and collaborate to develop and implement improvement?	district team, external providers, state staff, Collaborative providers	online survey, interview
10. the SIRG process align with other MA DESE program improvement strategies to support the states low performing schools (e.g., Performance Improvement Mapping, school support specialists)	state staff, district team	interview
11. the SIRG process build capacity to improve student achievement?	state staff, district Leaders	interview, online survey

MA SIRG Evaluation

Summer 2009

Case Study and Focus Group Questions

Participant Names and Roles/Responsibilities:

Date/Time:

Focus group site:

Facilitator:

Introduction: I am here today to discuss the Massachusetts School Improvement Regional Grant process that brought together school districts so they can collaborate to reach a mutually beneficial outcome with the grant funds. RMC Research Corporation was hired to look at this process and meet with four sites in the state to document the successes, challenges and lessons learned. This information will help the state guide their approach to school improvement.

1. What networks are already established among the districts in the region? (Probe for professional learning communities, regularly scheduled meetings for math/literacy teachers, principals, superintendents, etc.)

2. Please explain how you are working with the other partner districts? (e.g., professional development, shared goals to get at the level of collaboration) beyond what the grant states (Probe for some of the “intangibles”)

3. In what ways has there been added value to have multiple districts participating in the grant? More specifically, what assets were shared between/among districts and what capacity was added?

4. What have you done differently as a result of the collaboration with partner districts?

4a. Will you continue with this approach/practice?

5. What were you **not able to do** as a result of the collaboration that you hoped you could do? (Probe for challenges)

6. Have you put structures/systems in place to sustain the work beyond the grant? Yes_____ No_____ If yes, please describe them.

7. What more would you do together if you had additional funding? (Probe for what external support would help you sustain this work beyond this grant).

8. Please describe how collaborating with your partner districts helps schools in need of improvement... districts in need of improvement. (Probe for clear examples, and supports, etc.)

In this part of the discussion, we are looking at the role of the educational collaborative (e.g., HEC, Shore) that may work with the districts. Check to see if they are using educational collaborative for PD—if so ask the questions 9 and 10 as appropriate.

9. What expertise does [name the Collaborative] have to support schools/districts in need of improvement?

10. In what ways does [name the Collaborative] work with other external providers to achieve the goals of the partner districts? (Probe for seamless PD that supports the grant's outcomes)

11. What are some essential conditions that need to be present to ensure the success of the regional collaboration? (Probe for lessons learned)

12. What additional resources/partners do you or would you access in your region?

13. Is there anything you would do differently?

14. Is there anything else you want to share?