

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent Interview Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan, or AIP, process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will identify the districts, but will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals.

Permission to Record

The interview will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

[Prior to the interview, review the background of the district's involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on the specific needs and challenges in the district (district review), and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly.]

Background

I would like to start by talking a little bit about your background and role in the district.

1. How long have you worked in the district? How long have you been in your current role in this district? What prior experience do you have (what roles) in this district? Have you held a leadership role in other districts? If so, in what role(s)? *[Probe for prior experience with district-wide improvement initiatives.]*

[Assistant Superintendents Only:] Can you describe your primary roles and responsibilities in your current position?

AIP Plan Development

Given that the first major phase of the AIP process is Plan Development, I would like to start by spending some time talking about the development of your AIP. We will then talk about AIP implementation and impact, followed by questions about your Plan Manager/Management Team and Monitor, and will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability.

2. In your most recently approved AIP, the strategies are [XXX] with a number of related initiatives. How did the district decide to focus on these strategies and initiatives?
 - *[Listen for who was involved in developing the plan but don't prompt for it if it doesn't come up.]*
3. Can you describe how you received feedback from ESE on your plan during the process of plan development and approval? How helpful was the feedback and how did you use it?

Listen/probe for:

- *How the feedback could be more useful, as appropriate;*
- *Whether ESE expectations for the plan were clear;*
- *And the different roles of Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and ESE Malden staff in giving feedback to the district.*

AIP Plan Implementation

4. Who are the key individuals responsible for ensuring effective implementation of the plan, and what are their primary responsibilities?

Listen/probe for:

- *How broad the meaningful involvement is across the district, how much they rely on the Plan Manager. [Listen (but don't probe) for how this relates to who was involved in developing the plan.]*
- *To what extent are the priorities, strategies, and goals in the AIP understood by stakeholders? How do you know?*

- To what extent have stakeholders used the strategies and resources in the AIP to inform and alter their work? *Probe for specific examples.*

4a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is little to no implementation of the plan and 5 is full implementation, how successful has the district been in following through on the activities outlined in the AIP?

5. How does the AIP process align, integrate, enhance, or conflict with other major improvement initiatives your district is undertaking (e.g., Educator Evaluation, New Curriculum Frameworks, PARCC, and RETELL/WIDA)?
 - *[If they just say the AIP aligns]* Are there any specific statewide initiatives that detract from or impede your district's ability to implement the AIP?

AIP Plan Impact

Now, I want you to reflect on your AIP work and experience thus far. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work has or has not impacted district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

6. What permanent structures and systems for improvement has the district put in place in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem) for instructional support and supervision, data use, etc? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.

6a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process helped the district establish these systems and structures? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

6b. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the district is making decisions differently as a result of the AIP process (for example during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples.

7. Has the district seen meaningful changes in teaching practices and/or instructional supports across the district in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
 - *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact?

7a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process helped with these improvement? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

8. Has the district seen meaningful changes in student outcomes across the district in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
 - *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact?

8a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process helped the district improve student outcomes? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

- *[If 'yes' to teaching practices but 'not yet' for student outcomes]* – How long do you think it will take for improved teacher practices to result in measurable student outcomes? Why is that?
- *[If no or 'not yet']* Why do you think the AIP has not yet had any impact on *[ask as appropriate]* instructional supports, teaching practices and/or student outcomes? And what do you think will need to change, with regards to your district's plan or the AIP process, to see improvement in these areas?
 - *Listen for: When* do you think there will be an impact on instructional supports, teaching practices, and/or student outcomes?

9. In what ways, if any, has this process helped your school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.

[Listen for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts.]

10. In what ways, if any, has participation in the AIP process increased the district's capacity to do this kind of work without support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?

- *[Listen for changes in:*
 - *Communication with stakeholders*
 - *Expectations and/or role of district-level staff*
 - *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
 - *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to monitor progress and inform adjustments to practice*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
- *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

11. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) have had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) have detracted the most from your district improvement efforts?

[For impact questions please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components.]

- ***ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials***
- *Process of developing a focused plan*

- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE – written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
- ***Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)***
- ***Written Quarterly Progress Reports***
- ***Presentations to school committee***
- *Periodic convenings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)]*

AIP Support and Monitoring

[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]

12. Moving on to think specifically about your plan manager/management team, please briefly describe how your plan manager/management team works with your district and/or school staff to help implement and monitor the effectiveness of your AIP.

- *Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
 - With whom does the manager/management team work? How frequently?

[For 12a-b listen/probe for their support for plan design/development, communication, implementation, monitoring, including helping the district to set up systems to do this work on their own.]

12a. In what way has the manager/management team most helped your progress in implementing your AIP?

12b. What supports or activities provided by the manager/management team have been unnecessary or even hindered progress?

12c. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high, how would you rate the overall quality of the support offered by the manager/management team, and why? *[Probe for specific examples that support assessment of quality.]*

13. Thinking specifically of your Plan Monitor, please briefly describe how your plan Monitor works with your district to monitor effectiveness of your AIP implementation?

- *Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
 - With whom does the monitor primarily interact (e.g. who participates in

highlight discussions or monitor's observations of key district activities)?

[For 13a-b: Listen/probe for what happens: In highlight meetings, in observations of key district activities, in written quarterly progress reports, in school committee presentations.]

13a. In what way has the monitor most helped your progress in implementing your AIP?

13b. What supports provided by the monitor have been unnecessary or even hindered progress?

13c. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high, how would you rate the overall quality of the questions and feedback provided by the monitor, and why? *[Probe for specific examples that support assessment of quality.]*

Sustainability

Before we wrap up, I would like to ask you a few questions about how this work has changed over time and how continued improvement in the district can be sustained.

14. In terms of sustainability, what indicators do you think would signal that a district is ready to continue this work without the AIP support and monitoring provided by ESE?
15. What tangible systems or structures have you put in place to continue to manage and monitor the plan without the AIP supports provided by ESE?
16. *[For Randolph, Holyoke, New Bedford, Southbridge superintendents:]* How, if at all, did the AIP process support your transition into your new role in the district?
17. *[For Randolph Superintendent only:]* Are you planning or implementing any specific strategies to ensure that the AIP work will continue with your successor, and if so, what are they?

Closing

18. *[If they mentioned any experience with other approaches to district-wide improvement in response to Q1]* Earlier, you mentioned some experience with district-wide improvement efforts in [XXX]. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all effective, and 5 is very effective, how effective is the AIP process compared to those? Please briefly explain your thinking.
19. Could the district have gotten to where you are without the AIP process? Has it helped or hindered district's overall progress and achievement? Please provide examples.
 - *[Listen/probe for how central the AIP has been to district work.]*
20. Is there any aspect of how the AIP process is designed and/or implemented that could be improved? If yes, can you describe this?

[Reference the list of components above and prompt if necessary.]

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Plan Manager Interview Protocol (Multiple Districts)

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name and will not attribute any quotes to individuals or name the positions of individuals. We will identify the districts but will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals. For example, the information reported by all district leaders (superintendents and assistant superintendents), Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and school leaders will be reported in the aggregate for each district and/or for each role (e.g., a summary of perspectives shared by Plan Managers). However, given that each individual interviewed plays a key role in the AIP process, it is possible that readers of the report may infer who we interviewed. That said, we will endeavor to protect your confidentiality and privacy to the greatest extent possible; for example, we will omit any details that would identify respondents.

Permission to Record

The interview will take about 60 minutes [*90 minutes for Randolph*]. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, please just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

[Prior to the interview, review the background of the district's involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on the specific needs and challenges in the district (district review), and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly.]

Background

I would like to start by talking a little bit about your background.

1. We understand you have been a Plan Manager in *[District Name]* for X years. Is this correct?
2. What prior experience do you have serving as a Plan Manager (or similar support role) elsewhere? Do you currently work with other AIP districts in a different role or capacity? If so, what roles?
3. Aside from your AIP work, do you have any prior experience with districtwide improvement initiatives? If so, please describe.

I would like to start by talking primarily about your role and experience in *[District]*, but you will also have an opportunity to compare that to your role and experience in other districts.

Thinking only of *[District 1]*

AIP Plan Development

Given that the first major phase of the AIP process is Plan Development, I would like to start by spending some time talking about the development of *[District's]* AIP. We will then talk about AIP implementation and impact, followed by questions about the Plan Monitor role. We will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability.

4. Can you describe your approach to helping the district develop their most recently approved AIP?
 - *[Listen (and probe) for*
 - *What supports they as Plan Manager **provided***
 - *How much of the work the district did versus the Plan Manager*
 - *How did the district use or leverage the supports*
 - *Who the district involved and why*
 - **Other supports from ESE throughout the process**
 - How, if at all, has your approach to developing the plans changed over the past three years (two years for Salem)?
 - *[Probe for lessons the Plan Manager has learned about how to be more effective as well as adjustments they have made in response to district context.]*
 - Of all the supports you provided during plan development, which were **most** important to ensuring the development of a clear and focused plan? Has this changed over time? Were there any supports you provided during plan development that you think the district could have done without?
5. Can you describe the ways in which the district received feedback from ESE on the plan

during the process of plan development and approval?

[Listen and probe for:

- *Whether and how ESE made its expectations for the plan clear*
- *How the district used the feedback*
- *How the feedback could be more useful, as appropriate]*

6. In what ways, if any, did ESE's feedback on the plan result in better work in the district?
[Probe for specific evidence.]
7. Do you feel the district has gotten better at developing a focused plan with a few clear priorities and measurable outcomes?

AIP Plan Implementation

8. Can you describe the specific strategies you use or **actions** you take as Plan Manager to ensure effective implementation of the plan? Note that effective implementation includes both meeting the benchmarks in the plan and building the district's capacity to do this work on their own.
 - How do you make sure the district understands what effective implementation looks like?
 - How do you know if district capacity is growing?
 - *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:]*
 - With whom does the Plan Manager or management team work? Why? How frequently? How do you decide who to involve in the AIP, and when?
 - How do you know when to work around district inefficiencies versus tackle them head-on (e.g., ineffective staff or processes)?
 - When and how do you decide whether to take on the work yourself so it gets done or to build district capacity so the district can do it themselves?
 - Where do you push hardest on the district, and how do you decide?
 - How do you decide where and how to focus your time and energy?
 - How do you help the district plan to do this work without you?
 - How, if at all, have you modified your approach over the past three years (two for Salem) to ensure effective implementation? *[Probe for indications of whether the district is getting better at follow-through on implementation of the plan.]*
 - Were any of these modifications a direct result of shifts in ESE guidance for your role versus your own personal approach?
- 8a. What specific actions you have taken as a Plan Manager do you believe have most helped the district to meet benchmarks and build capacity (e.g., ways to ask questions, structure their work, when do "do for" versus "do with" versus "you do, I watch")?
- 8b. Are there any actions or activities you have provided that, in your opinion, have been less critical or even distracting to ensuring implementation?
9. Who are the other key individuals responsible for ensuring effective implementation of the plan? What are their primary responsibilities?

[Listen and probe for:]

- How broad is the meaningful involvement of individuals (e.g., district staff, school leadership, and classroom educators) in the implementation of the plan across the district. *[Listen (but do not probe) for how this relates to who was involved in developing the plan.]*
 - To what extent are the priorities, strategies, and goals in the AIP **understood** by stakeholders? How do you know?
 - To what extent have stakeholders **used** the strategies and resources in the AIP to inform and alter their work? *[Probe for specific examples.]*
- 9a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is little to no implementation of the plan and 5 is full implementation, how successful has the district been this year in following through on the activities outlined in the AIP?
- 9b. Has the level of follow-through been more, less, or about the same in recent years as it was prior to that? To what do you attribute the increase or decrease in follow-through?
- *[Listen for whether the changes are caused by the AIP or changes in district leadership, school committee, and other school groups.]*
 - *[Listen for (but do not prompt) for how follow-through has improved at the school level as well.]*
10. From your perspective, how do the district's primary goals and related initiatives align, integrate, or conflict with other key initiatives underway in the district?
- [Key statewide initiatives include Educator Evaluation, New Curriculum Frameworks, PARCC, RETELL/WIDA; key district initiatives may include literacy across the curriculum, PBIS, wraparound, and other initiatives.]*
- Do principals and teachers see these as coherent strategies to improve teaching and learning, or as a series of stand-alone initiatives? *[Probe for which initiatives seem to work together and which are outliers or distracters.]*
 - *[Listen and probe for how strategic the district has been in using the AIP to integrate and align different initiatives and message what their vision is for teaching and learning.]*

AIP Plan Impact

Now, I want you to reflect on your AIP work and experience thus far. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work has or has not impacted district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

11. What permanent structures and systems for improvement has the district put in place in the past three years (two years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
- 11a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the **AIP process** as a whole helped the district establish these systems and structures? (By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and related activities. *[Note: Repeat this reminder as needed throughout.]*)

Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

12. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the district is making decisions differently as a result of the AIP process (for example, during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in teaching practices in the past three years (two years for Salem)?

12a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the **AIP process** helped with this improvement?

- *[If high]* What specific aspects of the AIP process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed and how the AIP has helped.
- *[If low]* Why do you think that is?

13. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in student outcomes in the past three years (two years for Salem)?

13a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process helped the district improve student outcomes?

- *[If high]* What specific aspects of the AIP process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
- *[If low]* Why do you think the AIP process has not yet had any impact on student outcomes? And what do you think will need to change, with regard to the district's plan or the AIP process, to see improvement?

14. To what extent do you think the AIP process helps the district address root causes for student underperformance? Please provide specific examples.

15. In what ways, if any, has the AIP process helped the district's school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples. What about in any of the other districts?

[Listen and probe for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts such as resource allocation, decision making, and monitoring of impact.]

16. In what ways, if any, has participation in the AIP process increased the district's capacity to do this kind of work **without** support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?

- *[Listen for changes in*
 - *Communication with stakeholders*
 - *Expectations and/or role of district-level staff*
 - *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
 - *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to monitor progress and inform adjustments to practice*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*

- *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

17. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) have had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) have detracted the most from your district improvement efforts?

[For impact questions, please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components.]

- **ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials**
- *Process of developing a focused plan*
- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE—written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
- **Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)**
- **Written Quarterly Progress Reports**
- **Presentations to school committee**
- *Periodic meetings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)]*

18. Now, focusing specifically on monitoring activities,

- How do you leverage highlight discussions so they are both evidence-gathering and capacity-building conversations? To what extent do you see both of these happening? Please provide specific evidence. Which specific indicators (e.g., changes in behaviors) illustrate this?
- QPRs and school committee presentations are public reports to the community and district to report on and hopefully help them reflect on their work. Do you see evidence that QPRs accomplish these goals?
- What information do you prioritize for highlight discussions and QPRs? How do you know whether that information is meaningful? When do you push or ask districts for more data or evidence and why? How do you REALLY know if meaningful change is happening?

AIP Support and Monitoring

[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]

19. Thinking specifically of the district's Plan Monitor, *[insert name]*, can you describe how you work with the Plan Monitor to support the district? *[Probe for specific information about frequency and nature of interaction. Do they seem to have a good, supportive working relationship?]*
- Do the two of you seem to be operating with the same understanding of ESE guidance for the work? *[If yes] Great! [If no] Where specifically are the differences in understanding?*
- 19a. From your perspective, what aspects of the plan monitor role **most help** the district implement its AIP? Consider both how they have helped the district meet AIP benchmarks and goals as well as build capacity to do the work on their own.
- [Interviewer: We are most interested in their perspectives of how the role is structured, not in the particular performance of the individual—although we recognize, you may hear some of that too.]*
- 19b. From your perspective as the Plan Manager, which aspects of the plan monitor role, if any, have been **unnecessary** or even hindered progress?

Thinking of your perspective *all AIP districts* based on your roles as supervisor of Plan Managers hired by SchoolWorks and your role as Networking Support for ALL Plan Managers

AIP Plan Development

20. Can you describe the **most effective** strategies **you have seen other Plan Managers use** to help districts develop their most recently approved AIP?
- *[Listen (and probe) for*
 - *What supports they as Plan Manager **provided***
 - *How much of the work the district did versus the Plan Manager*
 - *How did the district use or leverage the supports*
 - *Who the district involved and why*
 - ***Other supports from ESE throughout the process]***
 - How, if at all, **have their specific strategies** to developing the plans changed over the past three years (two years for Salem)?
[Probe for lessons the Plan Manager has learned about how to be more effective as well as adjustments they have made in response to district context.]
 - Of all the supports Plan Managers as a whole have provided during plan development, which were **most** important to ensuring the development of a clear and focused plan, and has this changed over time? Which supports provided by Plan Managers during plan development, if any, do you think the districts could have done without?

21. Do you feel the districts, as a whole, have gotten better at developing focused plans with a few clear priorities and measurable outcomes? Are there any districts that have not gotten better at developing focused plans, and if so, why do you think that is?

AIP Plan Implementation

22. Can you describe the **most effective strategies** Plan Managers use or have used to ensure effective implementation of the plans? Note that effective implementation includes both meeting the benchmarks in the plan and building the district's capacity to do this work on their own.
- How do you make sure the district understands what effective implementation looks like?
 - How do you know if district capacity is growing?
 - *Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
 - With whom does the Plan Manager or management team work? Why? How frequently? How do you decide who to involve in the AIP and when?
 - How do you know when to work around district inefficiencies versus tackle them head-on? (e.g., ineffective staff or processes)?
 - When and how do they decide whether to take on the work yourself so it gets done versus build district capacity so they can do it themselves?
 - Where do you push hardest on the district, and how do you decide?
 - How do you decide where and how to focus your time and energy?
 - How do you help the district plan to do this work without you? How, if at all, have Plan Managers modified their approach over the past three years (two for Salem) to ensure effective implementation? [*Probe for indications of whether the district is getting better at follow-through on implementation of the plan.*]
 - *Were any of these modifications a direct result of shifts in ESE guidance for your role versus your own personal approach?*
- 22a. What specific actions do you believe have most helped districts to meet benchmarks and build capacity? (e.g., ways to ask questions, structure their work, when do “do for” versus “do with” versus “you do, I watch”)
- 22b. Are there any actions or activities Plan Managers have provided that, in your opinion, have been less critical or even distracting to ensuring implementation?
23. Has the level of follow through across districts been more, less, or about the same in recent years as it was prior to that? To what do you attribute the increase or decrease in follow-through?
- [*Listen for whether the changes are caused by the AIP or changes in district leadership, school committee, or other variables.*]
 - [*Listen (but do not prompt) for how follow-through has improved at the school level as well.*]

AIP Plan Impact

Now, I want you to reflect on the ways in which this work has or has not impacted district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

24. To what extent has the AIP process as a whole helped the other districts establish systems and structures for improvement? (By AIP process, we mean the Plan itself as well as the Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and related activities.) Please provide specific examples of how it helped. To what would you attribute any differences across districts?
25. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the districts are making decisions differently as a result of the AIP process (or example during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples.
26. To what extent has **the AIP process** helped improve teaching practices across the other districts? To what would you attribute any differences across districts?
27. To what extent has the AIP process helped districts improve student outcomes? To what would you attribute any differences across districts?
28. To what extent do you think the AIP process helps districts address root causes for student underperformance? Are there any districts for which you think the AIP process does not address root causes?
29. In what ways, if any, has the AIP process helped districts' school committees increase their focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.

[Listen and probe for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts such as resource allocation, decision making, and monitoring of impact.]

30. In what ways, if any, has participation in the AIP process most increased the districts' capacity to do this kind of work **without** support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples? Have any districts been affected differently? If so, to what would you attribute that difference?

▪ *[Listen for changes in:*

- *Communication with stakeholders*
- *Expectations and/or role of district-level staff*
- *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
- *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to monitor progress and inform adjustments to practice*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
- *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

31. *[For Holyoke, New Bedford, Salem, and Fall River]* Has the AIP process helped the

district's efforts to turnaround its Level 4 schools?

- *[Listen and probe for how the two processes are integrated.]*

31a. Thinking of the Level 4 school Monitoring Site Visits (MSV) and the district Quarterly Progress Reports, to what extent does the feedback from each feel consistent, or does it feel disparate? Confusing? Conflicting? Please elaborate.

32. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) have had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) have detracted the most from district improvement efforts?

[For impact questions, please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components.]

- **ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials**
- *Process of developing a focused plan*
- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE—written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
- **Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)**
- **Written Quarterly Progress Reports**
- **Presentations to school committee**
- *Periodic meetings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)]*

33. **Focusing specifically on monitoring activities**

- How do Plan Managers leverage highlight discussions so they are both evidence-gathering and capacity-building conversations? To what extent do you see both of these happening? *[Probe for evidence.]* What are the specific indicators (e.g., changes in behaviors) that illustrate this?
- QPRs and school committee presentations are public reports to the community and district to report on and hopefully help them reflect on their work. Do you see evidence that QPRs accomplish these goals?
- What information do Plan Managers prioritize for highlight discussions and QPRs? How do they know if that information is meaningful? When do they push or ask districts for more data or evidence and why? How do they REALLY know if meaningful change is happening?

AIP Support and Monitoring

[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]

34. Thinking about all of the Plan Managers, can you describe how they work with the Plan Monitors to support the districts? *[Probe for specific information about frequency and nature of interaction. Do they seem to have a good, supportive working relationship?]*

- Do they seem to be operating with the same understanding of ESE guidance for the work? *[If yes] Great! [If no] What are the specific differences in understanding?*

34a. From your perspective, what aspects of the plan monitor role **most help** the districts implement their AIPs? (Consider both how they have helped the district meet AIP benchmarks and goals as well as build capacity to do the work on their own.)

[Interviewer: We are most interested in their perspectives of how the role is structured not in the particular performance of the individual—although we recognize, you may hear some of that too.]

34b. From your perspective as the Plan Manager, which aspects of the plan monitor role, if any, have been **unnecessary** or even hindered progress?

35. *[Randolph only.]* In what ways, if any, do the other supports you provide or have provided (e.g., supervising other Plan Managers (Salem and Gill-Montague) and networking Plan Managers (Holyoke and New Bedford)] impact the effectiveness of the AIP process?

Sustainability

36. In terms of sustainability, what indicators do you think would signal that a district is ready to continue this work without the AIP support and monitoring that you, and ESE, currently provide?

37. What tangible systems or structures have districts put in place to continue to manage and monitor the plan without the AIP supports provided by ESE?

Closing

38. Overall, to what extent are ESE's expectations for you in your role as Plan Manager clear? To what extent do all Plan Managers understand the expectations?

- In what ways has ESE supported you in your role as Plan Manager? *[Probe for specific training, resources, meetings, and other supports.]* What support(s) has been the most important to your ability to serve as an effective Plan Manager?
- What support(s), if any, has been the least helpful? Why?
- Have any aspects of your role been confusing or unclear?
- Are there any other supports, that you do not currently receive, that would help you in your role as Plan Manager?

39. *[If they mentioned any experience with other approaches to districtwide improvement in response to Q3.]* Earlier, you mentioned some experience with district-wide improvement efforts in [XXX]. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all effective and 5 is very effective, how effective is the AIP process compared with those?

Please briefly explain your thinking.

40. Is there any aspect of how the AIP process is designed and/or implemented that could be improved? If yes, can you describe how and why?
41. Thinking across the board to all AIP districts, could they have gotten to where they are without the AIP process? Has it helped or hindered the districts' overall progress and achievement? Please provide examples. *[Listen and probe for how central the AIP has been to district work.]*
42. *[If applicable]* To what would you most attribute any differences in how successful AIP has been across all the districts you have worked with?
43. Are there any specific supports that AIP districts do not currently receive that you think they should? If so, what are those supports? Why do you think they are important to the successful implementation of an AIP?
44. Do you think the AIP process would be beneficial to other districts, if done with a lighter touch? If so, which components of the process would be essential to retain and why?
45. Is there anything else about your experience working with AIP districts that you would like to share?

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Plan Monitor Interview Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name and will not attribute any quotes to individuals or name the positions of individuals. We will identify the districts, but will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals. For example, the information reported by all district leaders (superintendents and assistant superintendents), Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and school leaders, will be reported in the aggregate for each district and/or for each role (e.g., a summary of perspectives shared by plan monitors). However, given that each individual interviewed plays a key role in the AIP process, it is possible that readers of the report may infer who we interviewed. That said, we will endeavor to protect your confidentiality and privacy to the greatest extent possible; for example, we will omit any details that would identify respondents.

Permission to Record

The interview will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

[Prior to the interview, review the background of the district's involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on the specific needs and challenges in the district (district review), and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly.]

Background

I would like to start by talking a little bit about your background.

1. We understand that you are a Plan Monitor in *[refer to all current and former roles]*. Is this correct? What prior experience do you have serving as a Plan Monitor (or in a similar monitoring role) elsewhere? Do you currently work with other AIP districts in a different role or capacity?
2. Aside from your AIP work, do you have any prior experience with districtwide improvement initiatives? If so, please describe.

I would like to start by talking about your role and experience in *[District 1]* and then we will talk about your role and experience in *[District 2]*. There will be some time at the end to talk about your other roles in support of the AIP process.

Thinking only of *[DISTRICT 1]*

AIP Plan Development

Given that the first major phase of the AIP process is Plan Development, I would like to start by spending some time talking about the development of *[District's]* AIP. We will then talk about AIP implementation and impact, followed by questions about the Plan Manager role. We will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability.

3. Can you describe your approach in reviewing and/or providing feedback on the district's most recently approved AIP?
 - How, if at all, has your approach to reviewing plans changed over the past three years (two years for Salem)? *[Probe for lessons the Plan Monitor has learned about how to be more effective, as well as adjustments they have made in response to district context.]*
4. Can you describe the ways in which the district received feedback from ESE on the plan during the process of plan development and approval?

[Listen and probe for:

 - *Whether and how ESE made its expectations for the plan clear*
 - *How the district used the feedback*
 - *How the feedback could be more useful, as appropriate]*
5. What evidence do you have that feedback on the plan from the monitoring team resulted in better work in the district?

AIP Plan Implementation

6. Can you describe the actions you take to monitor how effectively the district is implementing the plan to meet benchmarks and build capacity (e.g., questions you ask,

actions you take, evidence you review, and other ways)? *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:]*

- How do you know if the district understands what effective implementation looks like?
- How do you know if district capacity is growing?
- With whom do you work? How frequently?
- Specifically, how do you leverage highlight discussions? Highlight discussions are both evidence-gathering and capacity-building conversations. To what extent do you see both of these happening (evidence)?
- QPRs and school committee presentations are public reports to the community and district to report on and hopefully help them reflect on their work. Do you see evidence that QPRs accomplish these goals?
- What information do you prioritize for highlight discussions and QPRs? How do you know if that information is meaningful? When do you push or ask districts for more data or evidence and why? How do you REALLY know if meaningful change is happening?
- How, if at all, have you modified your approach over the past three years (two years for Salem) to ensure effective monitoring? *[Probe for indications of whether the district is getting better at follow-through on implementation of the plan.]*
 - Were any of these modifications a direct result of shifts in ESE guidance for your role versus your own personal approach?

6a. Which specific monitoring strategies (e.g., ways to ask questions, or components like school committee presentations) do you believe have **most** helped the district implement its AIP to meet benchmarks and build capacity?

6b. Which, if any, monitoring strategies, in your opinion, have been less critical or even distracting to successful plan implementation?

7. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is little to no implementation of the plan and 5 is full implementation, how successful has the district been this year in following through on the activities outlined in the AIP?

8. Has the level of follow-through been more, less, or about the same in recent years as it was prior to that? To what do you attribute the increase or decrease in follow-through?

- *[Listen for whether the changes are caused by the AIP or changes in district leadership, school committee, and other school groups.]*

AIP Plan Impact

Now, I want you to reflect on your AIP work and experience thus far. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work has or has not impacted district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

9. What permanent structures and systems for improvement has the district put in place in the past three years (two years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.

9a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has

the AIP process as a whole helped the district establish these systems and structures? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

10. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the district is making decisions differently as a result the AIP process (e.g., during plan development, after a highlight discussion, or after a QPR presentation)? Please give examples.

11. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in teaching practices in the past three years (two years for Salem)?

11a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the **AIP process** helped with these improvements? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and related activities. *[Note: Repeat this reminder as needed throughout.]*

- *[If high]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed and how the AIP has helped.

- *[If low]* Why do you think that is?

12. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in student outcomes in the past three years (two years for Salem)?

- *[If high]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.

- *[If low]* Why do you think the AIP process has not yet had any impact on student outcomes? And what do you think will need to change, with regard to the district's plan or the AIP process, to see improvement?

13. To what extent do you think the AIP process helps the district address root causes for student underperformance?

14. In what ways, if any, has the AIP process helped the district's school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.

[Listen/probe for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts, such as resource allocation decision making, and monitoring of impact.]

15. In what ways, if any, has participation in the AIP process increased the district's capacity to do this kind of work **without** support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?

- *[Listen for changes in:*

- *Communication with stakeholders*

- *Expectations and/or role of district-level staff*

- *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*

- *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to monitor progress and inform adjustments to practice*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
- *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

16. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) have had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) have detracted the most from the district's improvement efforts?

[For impact questions please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components.]

- ***ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials***
- *Process of developing a focused plan*
- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE—written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of Plan Monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
- ***Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)***
- ***Written Quarterly Progress Reports***
- ***Presentations to school committee***
- *Periodic meetings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)]*

AIP Support and Monitoring

[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]

17. Thinking specifically of the district's Plan Manager, [insert name], can you describe how you work with the Plan Manager to support the district? *[Probe for specific information about frequency and nature of interaction. Do they seem to have a good, supportive working relationship?]*

- Do the two of you seem to be operating with the same understanding of ESE guidance for the work? *[If yes] Great! [If no] Where specifically are there differences in understanding?*

17a. From your perspective, what aspects of the Plan Manager role most help the district implement its AIP? Consider both how they have helped the district meet AIP benchmarks and goals as well as build capacity to do the work on their own.

[Interviewer: We are most interested in their perspectives of how the role is structured, not in the particular performance of the individual—although we recognize, you may hear some of that too.]

17b. From your perspective as the Plan Monitor, which aspects of the Plan Manager role, if any, have been **unnecessary** or even hindered progress?

Sustainability

18. What tangible systems or structures has the district put in place to continue to manage and monitor the plan without the AIP supports provided by ESE?

19. *[For Randolph only:]* Is the district planning or implementing any specific strategies to ensure that the AIP work will continue with the Superintendent's successor, and if so, what are they?

20. Is there anything else you would like to share about your work as a Plan Monitor in this district?

Thinking only of [District 2]

AIP Plan Development

Now I would like you to think specifically about your work in *[District 2]*.

21. Can you describe your approach in reviewing and/or providing feedback on the district's most recently approved AIP?

- How, if at all, has your approach to reviewing plans changed over the past three years (two years for Salem)? *[Probe for lessons the Plan Monitor has learned about how to be more effective, as well as adjustments they have made in response to district context.]*

22. Can you describe the ways in which the district received feedback from ESE on the plan during the process of plan development and approval?

[Listen and probe for

- *Whether and how ESE made its expectations for the plan clear*
- *How the district used the feedback*
- *How the feedback could be more useful, as appropriate]*

23. What evidence do you have that feedback on the plan from the monitoring team resulted in better work in the district?

AIP Plan Implementation

24. Can you describe the actions you take to monitor how effectively the district is implementing the plan to meet benchmarks and build capacity (e.g., questions you ask, actions you take, evidence you review, and other ways)? *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:]*

- With whom do you work? How frequently?

- Specifically, how do you leverage highlight discussions? Highlight discussions are both evidence-gathering and capacity-building conversations. To what extent do you see both of these happening (evidence)?
- QPRs and school committee presentations are public reports to the community and district to report on and hopefully help them reflect on their work. Do you see evidence that QPRs accomplish these goals?
- What information do you prioritize for highlight discussions and QPRs? How do you know if that information is meaningful? When do you push/ask districts for more data/evidence and why? How do you REALLY know if meaningful change is happening?
- How, if at all, have you modified your approach over the past three years (two for Salem) to ensure effective monitoring? *[Probe for indications of whether the district is getting better at follow-through on implementation of the plan.]*
 - Were any of these modifications a direct result of shifts in ESE guidance for your role versus your own personal approach?

24a. Which specific monitoring strategies (e.g., ways to ask questions, or components like school committee presentations) do you believe have **most** helped the district implement its AIP to meet benchmarks and build capacity?

24b. Are there any monitoring strategies that, in your opinion, have been less critical or even distracting to successful plan implementation?

25. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is little to no implementation of the plan and 5 is full implementation, how successful has the district been this year in following through on the activities outlined in the AIP?

26. Has the level of follow-through been more, less, or about the same in recent years as it was prior to that? To what do you attribute the increase/decrease in follow-through?

- *[Listen for if the changes are caused by the AIP or changes in district leadership, school committee, or other school groups.]*

AIP Plan Impact

Now, I want you to reflect on your AIP work and experience thus far. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work has or has not impacted district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

27. What permanent structures and systems for improvement has the district put in place in the past three years (two years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.

27a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process as a whole, helped the district establish these systems and structures? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

28. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the district is making decisions differently as a result the AIP process (e.g., during plan development, after a highlight discussion, and after a QPR presentation)? Please give

examples.

29. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in teaching practices in the past three years (two years for Salem)?

29a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the **AIP process** helped with these improvements? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and related activities. *[Note: Repeat this reminder as needed throughout.]*

- *[If high]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed and how the AIP has helped.
- *[If low]* Why do you think that is?

30. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in student outcomes in the past three years (two years for Salem)?

- *[If high]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
- *[If low]* Why do you think the AIP process has not yet had any impact on student outcomes? And what do you think will need to change, with regards to the district's plan or the AIP process, to see improvement?

31. To what extent do you think the AIP process helps the district address root causes for student underperformance?

32. In what ways, if any, has the AIP process helped the district's school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.

[Listen and probe for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts, such as resource allocation, decision making, and monitoring of impact.]

33. In what ways, if any, has participation in the AIP process increased the district's capacity to do this kind of work **without** support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?

- *[Listen for changes in*
 - *Communication with stakeholders*
 - *Expectations and/or role of district-level staff*
 - *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
 - *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to monitor progress and inform adjustments to practice*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
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- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

34. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) have had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) have detracted the most from the district's improvement efforts?

[For impact questions, please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components.]

- **ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials**
- *Process of developing a focused plan*
- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE—written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
- **Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)**
- **Written Quarterly Progress Reports**
- **Presentations to school committee**
- *Periodic meetings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)]*

AIP Support and Monitoring

[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]

35. Thinking specifically of the district's Plan Manager, *[insert name]*, can you describe how you work with the Plan Manager to support the district? *[Probe for specific information about frequency and nature of interaction. Do they seem to have a good, supportive working relationship?]*

- Do the two of you seem to be operating with the same understanding of ESE guidance for the work? *[If yes] Great! [If no] Where specifically are the differences in understanding?*

- 35a. From your perspective, what aspects of the Plan Manager role most help the district implement its AIP? Consider both how they have helped the district meet AIP benchmarks and goals as well as build capacity to do the work on their own.

[Interviewer: We are most interested in their perspectives of how the role is structured, not in the particular performance of the individual—although we recognize, you may hear some of that too.]

- 35b. From your perspective as the plan monitor, which aspects of the Plan Manager role, if any, have been **unnecessary** or even hindered progress?

Sustainability

36. What tangible systems or structures has the district put in place to continue to manage and monitor the plan without the AIP supports provided by ESE?
37. Is there anything else you would like to share about your work as a monitor in this district?

Prior Roles

38. Thinking back to your experience in other districts, in what ways did your experience differ most (in terms of plan development, implementation, and the impacts you observed)? In what ways were they largely the same?

Closing

39. Overall, to what extent are ESE's expectations for you in your role as Plan Monitor clear?
 - In what ways has ESE supported you in your role as Plan Monitor? *[Probe for specific training, resources, meetings, and other supports.]*
 - What support(s) has been the most important to your ability to serve as an effective Plan Monitor?
 - What support(s), if any, has been the least helpful? Why?
 - Have any aspects of your role been confusing or unclear?
 - Are there any other supports, that you do not currently receive, that would help you in your role as Plan Monitor?
40. *[If they mentioned any experience with other approaches to districtwide improvement in response to Q2.]* Earlier, you mentioned some experience with districtwide improvement efforts in *[XXX]*. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all effective and 5 is very effective, how effective is the AIP process compared with those initiatives? By AIP process, we mean the Plan itself as well as the Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and related activities. Please briefly explain your thinking.
41. Can any aspect of how the AIP process is designed and/or implemented be improved? If yes, can you describe this?
42. Could *[District 1]* have gotten to where they are without the AIP process? Has the AIP process helped or hindered district's overall progress and achievement? Please provide examples.
 - *[Listen and probe for how central the AIP has been to district work.]*
 - Southbridge? Holyoke?
43. *[If applicable]* To what would you most attribute any differences in how successful AIP has been in District 1 as compared with District 2?
44. Are there any specific supports that AIP districts do not currently receive that you think they should? If so, what are those supports, and why do you think they are important to successful implementation of an AIP?
45. Do you think the AIP process would be beneficial to other districts, if done with a lighter touch? If so, which components of the process would be essential to retain and why?

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Principal Interview Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. ESE has helped all of these districts develop, implement, and monitor plans to accelerate and sustain district improvement; AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. To do that, we are collecting information from district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and other key stakeholders in the AIP process about improvement efforts at the school and district level. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will identify the districts but not the schools selected, and we will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals.

Prior to this interview, I sent you a document that outlines the scope of this study and some of the issues I have mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Do you have any questions about that document? At your convenience, please sign, scan, and return the form to me.

Permission to Record

The interview will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, please just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

[Prior to the interview, review the background of the district's involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on specific needs and challenges in the district (district review) and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly.]

Background

I would like to start by asking about your background and your role in the district.

1. How long have you worked in the district? How long have you been a principal in this district? What prior experience in the district do you have (what roles)? Have you held a leadership role in other schools and/or other districts? If so, in what role(s)? *[Probe for prior experience with districtwide improvement initiatives.]*
2. What do you see as the main goals and strategies for improvement **in your district** this year? *[Listen for how aware they are of the AIP plan and goals and how those goals do or do not align with their school and individual goals. Do NOT prompt with AIP language; however, feel free to use AIP language if they indicate a familiarity.]*
 - How do those compare with the main goals and strategies for improvement in your **school**?
 - Do you feel your school's improvement goals are aligned with and complementary to the goals of the district? How do you know? *[Listen for expectations communicated to the principal, and feedback he or she has received from the district, regarding school improvement plan/AIP implementation.]*
 - Did the school and district goals influence the development of your individual educator practice and student outcome goals? If so, then how? If not, then why do you think that was the case? *[Note: These individual goals are a required part of the new state educator evaluation system.]*
3. In what ways, if at all, are any of the goals or strategies for improvement different than in the past? *[Probe for when they changed—to compare with AIP timeline for that district.]*

Plan Development

4. Are you familiar with your district's process for establishing this year's priorities and strategies for improvement? If so, then can you please describe it?
 - How does this year's process for establishing district priorities and strategies for improvement compare with the process used in previous years? *[Listen for whether it has become more effective or has involved more people.]*
 - *[If applicable]* What role did principals/you play in shaping the district's current improvement plan? Has that role changed in recent years?

Plan Implementation

I am interested in hearing more about how the district's goals and strategies for improvement have affected your work.

5. Over the past four to five years, how, if at all, have expectations for **you as a school leader** changed?
 - How have these expectations been communicated to you and by whom?
 - What is your understanding of why these changes were necessary?
 - How, if at all, has the district supported your ability as a school leader to meet these new expectations (e.g., resources, PD, PLC meetings, coaching, feedback, and other ways)?
 - *[For new/newer principals]* Can you share your understanding of the changing role of principal in the district?
6. Over the past four to five years, how, if at all, have expectations for **teachers** changed?
 - How have these expectations been communicated to teachers?
 - To what extent do you think teachers understand why these changes are necessary?
 - In what ways, if at all, has the district supported you in helping teachers meet these new expectations?
7. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent is your staff **aware** of the district's primary goals for improvement?
 - On a scale from 1 to 5, to what extent do they **understand** what those goals mean for them?
 - On a scale from 1 to 5, to what extent are teachers in your school **bought into** the district's current primary goals?]
8. Has your school received any new training, resources, or support in the past few years to help you or your staff meet the district's goals? If yes, then what are they? Which have been most useful? Which have been unused/ less useful?
9. From your perspective, how do the district's primary goals and related initiatives align, integrate, or conflict with other key initiatives underway in the district?

[Key statewide initiatives include Educator Evaluation, New Curriculum Frameworks, PARCC, RETELL/WIDA; key district initiatives may include literacy across the curriculum, PBIS, wraparound, and other initiatives.]

 - Do teachers view these as coherent strategies to improve teaching and learning, or as a series of stand-alone initiatives? *[Probe for which initiatives seem to work together and which are outliers or distracters.]*
 - Are there any ways in which the district's and school's goals are in competition with one another? *[Listen for whether various initiatives are part of a common vision or a conflicting cacophony of projects. Also, listen for whether the school works with the district or feels "put upon" by the district.]*
10. To what extent do families and community members **understand** the district's priorities and goals?
 - To what extent do they take active roles to **support** these goals? In what ways? In what ways, if any, has their involvement changed in recent years?

12. What do you know of the school committee's role in supporting district improvement efforts?
- *[If you know something.]* Do you know if they have become more or less supportive/focused on district improvement efforts in recent years?
13. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the district followed through on its goals and strategic initiatives over the past three years (two years for Salem)? Has the level of follow through been more, less, or about the same in recent years as it was prior to that? To what do you attribute the increase/decrease in follow-through?
- *[Listen for whether the changes are caused by the AIP or changes in district leadership, school committee, and other groups.]*
 - *[Listen (but do not prompt) for how follow-through has improved at the school level as well.]*

Plan Impact

I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which district and school practices have, or have not, changed over the past three years (two years for Salem) as a result of the district's focus on improving student outcomes. *[Use information from the earlier discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

14. What structures, systems, or policies have been put in place in the past three years (two years for Salem) to support teaching and learning?
- Which of these feel like they would be likely to continue despite teacher turnover? *[Probe for specific examples.]*
 - Thinking of all these changes, how many do you think would continue if/when you as **principal** leave the school? Why? How many would survive a change at the **district** level? Why?
 - Which of these changes have become embedded enough that they are just the "district way"?
 - *[Listen, but do not probe (because it comes up again later), for structures to help principals collaborate and improve practice.]*
15. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the district is making decisions differently as a result of the AIP process (for example during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples.
16. Do you think that the district's recent improvement efforts have had a positive impact on **teaching practices in your school**? What specific changes, at the classroom level, have you seen as a result?
- *[If yes]* What specific goals or strategies have supported these changes? *[Probe for specific changes in the way teachers are supported or monitored.]*
 - *[If no]* When, if ever, do you think there will be an impact on instructional supports and/or teaching practices? And what do you think will need to change, with regard to your district's efforts, to observe an impact on instructional supports and teaching practices?

17. Do you think that the district's recent efforts have led to improved **student outcomes in your school**?
- *[If yes]* In what areas have you seen improvements? Do you attribute this improvement to particular goals or strategies?
 - *[If no]* Do you believe there will eventually be an improvement in student outcomes, if the district continues on its current course?
 - *[If yes]* What type of improvement do you anticipate and do you believe that specific parts of the district's improvement process, or specific strategies, will contribute to this?
 - *[If no]* What do you think will need to change, with regard to your plan or the district's improvement process, or strategies, to see an impact on student outcomes?
18. To what extent do the district improvement efforts address the root causes for student underperformance?
19. Of all of the district's improvement efforts in the past three years, which do you think has had the biggest impact on student learning?
- *[Listen for:*
 - *Development of a focused plan*
 - *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
 - *Ongoing use of data at the district or school level to monitor implementation and impact—If mentioned, probe for specific examples*
 - *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
 - *Outside perspective of monitor*
 - *Engagement of school committee*
 - *Monthly monitoring and feedback*
 - *Additional supports and resources to principals—If mentioned, probe for specific examples*
 - *Additional supports and resources to teachers—If mentioned, probe for specific examples*
 - *Other]*
20. How do the district's recent improvement efforts compare with other district improvement efforts you have been part of (in this district or elsewhere)?
21. Do you think that the district's recent improvement efforts have helped you and the other principals in the district become more effective/impactful instructional leaders? If yes, then please provide specific examples.
- *[If no]* Why do you think that is?
 - In what ways, if any, has the district supported you in making and sustaining these changes? *[Listen for whether the level or nature of support has changed.]*

- What structures or policies are in place for monitoring principals' performance and holding them accountable for these new roles and responsibilities?

[Listen for:]

- To what extent do you feel the district's improvement efforts have increased your **school's** capacity to engage in self-directed inquiry and improvement? How do you know? *[Probe for specific examples.]*
- To what extent do you feel the district's improvement efforts have improved your **staff's** focus on continuous improvement and their capacity to improve their teaching practice continuously? How do you know? *[Probe for specific examples.]*

Sustainability

Before we finish, I would like to ask you a few questions about how this work has changed over time and how you think continued improvement in the district can be sustained.

22. Has the district's overall approach to district and school improvement changed significantly over the past X years, and if so, in what ways?
 - *[If yes]* To what would you attribute those changes? *[If not mentioned, then probe accordingly.]*
 - Has there been a transition of district leadership during the last two years?
 - *[If yes]* Which of the prior leadership's goals have continued and what aspects have been modified or abandoned?
 - *[If no]* How do you think a transition in district leadership would impact your improvement process? Are there any systems or structures in place specifically to ensure continuity and sustainability?

Support and Monitoring

As you may know, as one of the eight AIP districts, your district currently receives support from a plan manager/management team and plan monitor to help develop, implement, and monitor its district improvement plan.

23. Have you had any interactions with your plan manager or plan monitor *[refer to by names]*? In what ways?
 - *[If yes]* What has been the nature of your interaction? What value, if any, have they added to your improvement process?

Closing

24. We understand that the current district improvement efforts are a lot of work. Overall, is the effort worth it, or would your district, or school, be better off without the added distraction?
 - Could you and your colleagues have made the progress you have described without the district's help?
25. Is there any aspect of your district's or school's current improvement process that could be improved? If yes, can you please describe this?

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Teacher Focus Group Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity, teacher practices, and ultimately, student outcomes. To do that, we are collecting information from district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and other key stakeholders in the AIP process about improvement efforts at the school and district level. Please note that we are interested in your experiences as a teacher in this district, considering recent school and district improvement efforts, not your level of familiarity with the AIP process or the AIP itself. Your input about your experiences as a teacher in this district will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will identify the districts but not the schools we visit, and we will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals.

In front of you is a document that outlines the scope of this study and some of the issues I have mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Do you have any questions about that document? If not, then please go ahead and sign your name at the bottom indicating that you consent to participate.

Permission to Record

The focus group will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, please just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the focus group.

[Prior to focus group, review the background of the district's involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on specific needs and challenges in the district (district review) and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly.]

[Use the following general probes, as needed, throughout:

- ***Does anyone have a different opinion?***
- ***Is there anything else that has not yet been mentioned?***
- ***Would anyone else like to respond?]***

Background

1. I would like to start by having each person introduce him or herself, first names only, and tell me:
 - How long you have been at this school?
 - How long you have been in the district?
 - Which grade(s) and subjects you teach?
 - What, if any, other roles you have at the school?
2. What do you see as the main goals and strategies for improvement **in your district** right now? We can start with anyone. *[Listen for how aware of the AIP plan and goals they are and how those goals do or do not align with their school and individual goals. Do NOT prompt with AIP language; however, feel free to use AIP language if they indicate a familiarity.]*
 - How do those district strategies compare to the main goals and strategies for improvement **in your school**?
3. Did the school and district goals influence the development of your individual educator practice and student outcome goals? If so, then how? If not, then why do you think that was the case? *[Note these individual goals are a required part of the new state educator evaluation system. Listen (but do not probe) for the extent to which teachers were involved in development of the plan/priorities?]*
4. From your perspective, do these district strategies for improvement address the **root causes** of student underachievement?

Plan Implementation

5. How, if at all, have the district's expectations for teachers changed in the last four to five years? How have these expectations been communicated?
[If applicable:]
 - How has the **district** supported you with these new expectations (e.g., resources, PD, PLC meetings, learning walks, and other ways)?
 - How have **school leaders** supported you with these new expectations (e.g., feedback, common planning time support, and other ways)?
 - *[Listen/probe: Have any new **systems or structures** been put in place over the past four to five years to address the district's goals? If so, then what are they*

(e.g., committees, teams, regular meetings, or memos)? Listen for new systems and structures at both the school and district level that do not rely on specific individuals.]

- *[Listen/probe: Has your school, or any of you individually, received any new **training, resources, or other support** in the past few years to help you or your colleagues meet the district's goals? If yes, then what are they? Which have been most useful? Which have been unused/less useful?]*
 - In what ways do **teachers** support each other with these new expectations?
 - *[Listen for leadership roles and opportunities for collaboration.]*
6. What is your understanding of why these changes were necessary? To what extent do you support and buy in to these new expectations?
 7. Are teachers monitored or held accountable, in any way, for these new roles and responsibilities? Please describe. *[Probe for increase in how frequently teachers are observed and receive feedback; reviews of lesson plans, action plans, team meeting notes; and district walkthroughs.]*
 - Is this monitoring or accountability helpful? If so, then how? If not, then why not?
 8. We know that the education field is changing rapidly and a lot is being asked of teachers—new curriculum frameworks, educator evaluation, PARCC, WIDA/RETELL, and maybe some districtwide curriculum initiatives. Do you feel that these are all working together or do they feel like a bunch of stand-alone initiatives? Do some frameworks conflict with others?

[Note that key district initiatives may include literacy across the curriculum, PBIS, wraparound, and other initiatives.]

- *[Probe for which initiatives seem to work together and which are outliers or distracters.]*
 - *[Listen for whether various initiatives are part of a common vision or a conflicting cacophony of projects. Also, listen for whether the school works with the district or feels “put upon” by the district.]*
7. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the district followed through on its goals and strategic initiatives this year? Has the level of follow through been more, less, or about the same in recent years as it was prior to that? To what do you attribute the increase/decrease in follow-through?
 - *[Listen, but do not probe, for whether the changes are caused by the AIP or changes in district leadership, school committee, and other groups.]*
 - *[Listen, but do not probe, for how follow-through has improved at the school level as well.]*

Plan Impact

I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which district and school practices have, or have not, changed over the past few years as a result of the district's focus on improving student outcomes. *[Use information from the earlier discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

8. Overall, do you think that the district's recent improvement efforts have had an impact on

your teaching practices? If so, in what ways? How (if at all) have they impacted **schoolwide** teaching practices? How do you know?

- *[If yes] What specific goals or strategies have supported these changes? [Help respondents distinguish between district and school improvement efforts—focus on the district in particular.]*
 - *[Listen for to what extent teachers are on the same page—using same teaching practices, and other ways.]*
9. Do you think that the district's recent efforts have helped **improve outcomes** for students? How do you know?
- *[If yes] In what areas have you seen improvements? To what would you attribute this improvement?*
 - *[If no] Do you believe there will eventually be an improvement in student outcomes, if current improvement strategies continue to be implemented?*
 - *[If yes] What type of improvement do you anticipate and do you believe that specific components of the district's improvement efforts will contribute to this?*
 - *[If no] What do you think will need to change, with regard to your district's current improvement efforts, to see an impact on student outcomes?*
 - *[If they say that teaching practices are improving but student outcomes are not] How do they explain this discrepancy?*
10. Of all the of the district's improvement efforts in the past three years, which do you think has had the **biggest** impact on student learning? Does anyone have a different opinion?
11. Of all the district's improvement efforts in the past three years, which do you think have had the **least** impact on, or perhaps even gotten in the way of, student learning? *[Steer away from families, budget, community factors, and other nonschool factors and focus on district plan.]*
- Is there something else the district should be doing, but isn't, to improve student outcomes?
12. *[If time allows]* To what extent do you think families and community members **understand** the district's priorities and goals?
- To what extent do they take active roles to **support** these goals? In what ways? In what ways, if any, has their involvement changed in recent years?

Sustainability

Before we wrap up, I would like to hear your thoughts on how continued improvement in the district can be sustained over time.

14. Of all of the **district's** improvement efforts, which have become embedded enough that they are just "how we do things here"? *[Note, listen for school efforts that have become embedded as well.]*
15. Is there any aspect of your district's or schools current improvement process that could be improved?

Closing

16. Is there anything else anyone would like to share about your district's current improvement efforts?

Thank you all again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process:

ESE Staff Focus Group Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent, non-profit, behavioral research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process. I am here today as a member of the AIR evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will aggregate findings at the district and stakeholder level, and we will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals. However, all of you hold leadership roles in the AIP process, so it is possible that readers of the report may infer identities.

In front of you is a document that outlines the scope of the study and some of the issues I have mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Please go ahead review the document. If you do not have any questions, then please sign your name at the bottom indicating that you consent to participate and return it to me. I have extra copies if you would like to keep one for your records.

Permission to Record

The focus group will take approximately 90 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, please just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

[Use the following general probes, as needed, throughout:

- ***Does anyone have a different opinion or perspective?***
- ***Is there anything else that has not yet been mentioned?***
- ***Would anyone else like to respond?]***

Background (10 minutes)

1. I would like to start by having each person introduce herself, first names only, and tell me:
 - Your title
 - Your primary role and responsibilities, at ESE
 - If you have not already mentioned them, your primary roles and responsibilities, as they relate to AIP
2. What was the rationale for designing the AIP process as it currently exists, including specific components of the process, such as the Plan Manager/Management team and Monitor? What evidence/research did you use to develop and refine the process? We can start with anyone.

AIP Plan Impact (20 minutes)

I would like to spend some time talking about your perspectives on the impacts that the AIP process has had on district and school improvement.

3. What kind of impact are you seeing as a result of this work, in terms of **district** capacity?
[Probe for:
 - *Planning*
 - *Follow-through*
 - *Monitoring]*
4. What kind of impact are you seeing as a result of this work, in terms of **school** capacity?
[Probe for:
 - School leadership
 - Instructional improvement/teacher practices
 - Student outcomes
 - ***Does the AIP process address root causes for student underperformance?***

Also interested in:

- *Impact on family and community involvement?*
- *Impact on School Committee support and involvement?]*

[For both Questions 3 and 4, probe for how and why impact across districts varies.]

5. Which aspect(s) of the AIP process (plan, Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, or anything else) has had the **biggest impact** on student outcomes? *[Probe for specific information about*

each aspect of the process, e.g., what is it about the Plan Manager or what the Plan Manager does that has had such a big impact?] Does this vary, or is it consistent across districts?

- *[If applicable]* What factors or combination of factors seem to most contribute to this variation?

AIP Support and Monitoring (20 minutes)

I want to talk now specifically about the supports AIP districts receive including support from ESE, a Plan Manager or management team, and a Plan Monitor.

6. To what extent does the **amount** of support each district receives from ESE, including support from Plan Managers and Plan Monitors, vary?

- *[If appropriate]* In what ways, and why does support vary?

7. To what extent does the **quality** of support that each district receives from ESE vary, including support from Plan Managers and Plan Monitors?

- *[If appropriate]* In what ways, and why does the quality of support vary?

[For both Questions 6 and 7, listen for whether variation is by design or just how things ended up.]

- To what extent does it matter whether a district has a single individual or a team that acts as the **Plan Manager**? *[If appropriate]* In what ways, and why does it matter?
 - To what extent does it matter whether a district has the **SAME** Plan Manager throughout the AIP process? *[If appropriate]* In what ways, and why does it matter?
8. We are familiar with the AIP exit criteria, but we would like you to talk about what specific strategies and evidence you look for given your expertise that indicates a district is ready to move out of the AIP process. How do **you** know when a district is ready to manage its own district improvement without a Plan Manager or Plan Monitor?
 9. What do you look for to determine whether a district is building capacity as a result of the AIP process? Are there any ways in which ESE could encourage further or more rapid capacity building?

Sustainability (20 minutes)

We understand that the AIP process is a lot of work, for both district and school leaders and staff, as well as AIP Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and ESE.

10. What kind of effort and resources, including both human and fiscal, are you currently putting into this work?

11. Which AIP-related activities do you think give you the biggest “bang for your buck?” Which supports and resources balance the constraints on time, funding, and human resources with the desired AIP outcomes?

- Where you feel you are spending too much time and the pay-off is not worth it (low leverage)?
- *[Probe for ESE supports, Plan Manager, and Plan Monitor.]*

12. We know that ESE is very interested in how it might implement the AIP process with a “lighter touch.” If the AIP process were to be implemented with a “lighter touch,” then which components, if any, could the process live without and why? Which components would be essential to keep and why?

Wrapping Up (20 minutes)

Before we wrap up, I would just like to ask you a few questions about the overall effectiveness of the AIP process across districts and spend some time talking about ways the process could be improved in the future.

13. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all effective and 5 is very effective, how effective is the AIP process compared with other district improvement initiatives that you have been involved with?
 - *[If there is time]* Are all eight districts making progress? Can you briefly describe the progress or lack thereof you see in each of the eight districts?
 - *[If no]* Do you believe each of the districts will begin to make progress if they “stay the current course” or will specific changes need to be made to the plan, the process, and/or the people?
14. Based on your experience with AIP districts, which characteristics, if any, do you think make a district particularly well-suited to implement the AIP process successfully (e.g., leadership, size, and other characteristics)? Which characteristics, if any, do you think would particularly hinder a district from having success with this approach?
15. Knowing what you know now, are there any ways in which you wish you had designed the AIP process differently?
 - Are there any specific ways in which the process could be improved in terms of its ability to impact district capacity and improve teaching practice and student outcomes?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the AIP process?

Thanks for taking the time to speak with me.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent Interview Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan, or AIP, process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will identify the districts, but will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals.

Permission to Record

The interview will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

Prior to the interview, review the background of the district's involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on the specific needs and challenges in the district (district review), and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly. In all questions, listen/probe for:

- **Impacts of turnover in district leadership**
- **Impacts of turnover in plan manager/monitor**
- **What was an issue early on vs. what remains an issue now?**
- **Any time they say something about 'the plan' – please clarify what exactly they mean by that – do they mean the written document, or how it's implemented, supported, and/or monitored?**

Background

I would like to start by talking a little bit about your background and role in the district.

1. How long have you worked in the district? How long have you been in your current role in this district? What prior experience do you have (what roles) in this district? Have you held a leadership role in other districts? If so, in what role(s)? *[Probe for prior experience with district-wide improvement initiatives.]*
2. *[Assistant Superintendents Only:]* Can you describe your primary roles and responsibilities in your current position?

AIP Plan Development (10 minutes)

Given that the first major phase of the AIP process is Plan Development, I would like to start by spending some time talking about the development of your AIP. We will then talk about AIP implementation and impact, followed by questions about your Plan Manager/Management Team and Monitor, and will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability.

3. *[Southbridge and Gill-Montague only]* How did the district decide to focus on the strategies and initiatives included in your AIP?
 - *[Listen for who was involved in developing the plan and why, but don't prompt for it if it doesn't come up.]*
 - Was there ample opportunity during plan development to identify existing barriers to implementing the AIP?
 - Did the development of the plan help the district reflect on systems/structures, identify root causes of underperformance, and make plans to address them?
4. Can you describe how you received feedback from ESE on your plan during the process of plan development and approval? How helpful was the feedback and how did you use it?

Listen/probe for:

- *Examples of ways the AIP and/or implementation improved as a result of feedback;*
- *Specific aspects of the feedback that hasn't been useful, if applicable;*
- *How the feedback could be more useful, as appropriate – **If they have feedback, have them map out an actual process for feedback on plan development that they would find more useful – e.g. first X happens, then Y, then Z;***

- **Whether ESE expectations for the plan were clear, and whether this has improved over time;**
 - *And the different roles of Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and ESE Malden staff in giving feedback to the district.*
5. Do you feel the district has gotten better at developing a focused plan with a few clear priorities and measurable outcomes? If so, in what ways? To what do you attribute this improvement?

AIP Plan Implementation (10 minutes)

6. Who are the key individuals responsible for ensuring effective implementation of the plan, and what are their primary responsibilities?

[Listen/probe for:

- *Who do they decide to involve in the leading the work, when, and how? Do they have folks show ownership then delegate to them, or delegate to them first and then let them develop ownership?*
 - **How broad the meaningful involvement is across the district, how much they rely on the Plan Manager.** *[Listen (but don't probe) for how this relates to who was involved in developing the plan.]*
 - **To what extent are the priorities, strategies, and goals in the AIP understood by stakeholders? How do you know?**
 - **To what extent have stakeholders used the strategies and resources in the AIP to inform and alter their work? Probe for specific examples.**
 - **To what extent has the AIP encouraged the district to reconsider how they organize, structure, and staff their central office.]**
7. How does the AIP process align, integrate, enhance, or conflict with other major improvement initiatives your district is undertaking (e.g., Educator Evaluation, New Curriculum Frameworks, PARCC, and RETELL/WIDA)?
- *[If they just say the AIP aligns] Are there any specific statewide initiatives that detract from or impede your district's ability to implement the AIP?*

AIP Plan Impact (15-20 minutes)

Now, I want you to reflect on your AIP work and experience thus far. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work has or has not impacted district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

8. What permanent structures and systems for improvement has the district put in place in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem) for instructional support and supervision, data use, etc? Please provide specific examples of what has changed. *[Probe for changes in how they structure and use their district and/or school leadership teams, including how they leverage principal meetings.]*
- 8a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process helped the district establish these systems and structures? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities.

Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

8b. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the district is making decisions or prioritizing issues differently as a result of the AIP process (for example during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples.

8c. Over the last 3 years (2 years for Salem) in what ways, if any, are school leaders functioning differently, as a result of the AIP process?

9. Has the district seen meaningful changes in teaching practices and/or instructional supports across the district in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
- *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact?

9a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process helped with these improvement? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

10. Has the district seen meaningful changes in student outcomes across the district in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
- *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact?

10a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process helped the district improve student outcomes? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

- *[If 'yes' to teaching practices but 'not yet' for student outcomes]* – How long do you think it will take for improved teacher practices to result in measurable student outcomes? Why is that?
- *[If no or 'not yet']* Why do you think the AIP has not yet had any impact on *[ask as appropriate]* instructional supports, teaching practices and/or student outcomes? And what do you think will need to change, with regards to your district's plan or the AIP process, to see improvement in these areas?
 - *[Listen for:]* When do you think there will be an impact on instructional supports, teaching practices, and/or student outcomes?
- To what extent do you think the AIP gets at root causes of student underperformance?

11. In what ways, if any, has this process helped your school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.

[Listen for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts.]

- What is the ideal role of the school committee in the AIP process?

12. In what ways, if any, has participation in the AIP process increased the district's capacity to do this kind of work without support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for

improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?

- *[Listen for changes in:*
 - *Communication with stakeholders*
 - *Expectations. Organization, and/or role of district-level staff*
 - *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
 - *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to fully understand an issue, inform a plan, monitor progress, and inform adjustments to practice*
 - *Use of district/school leadership teams*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
- *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

13. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) have had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) have detracted the most from your district improvement efforts?

[For impact questions please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components. If respondent says that the plan itself has had the biggest impact, probe for what specific things about the plan have been impactful, including the benchmarking and progress reports included, and how the plan is used – following on the already reported utility of the plan as a communication tool, as a document that provides a cohesive model and message, etc. Probe for what sets ‘the plan’ apart from any other district improvement plan or other similar improvement plan required by the state. Are the template and guidance materials alone enough to gain the traction they have seen?]

- ***ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials***
- *Process of developing a focused plan*
- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE – written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
- ***Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)***

- **Written Quarterly Progress Reports**
- **Presentations to school committee**
- *Periodic convenings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)*

AIP Support and Monitoring *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.](10 minutes)*

14. Moving on to think specifically about your plan manager/management team, please briefly describe how your plan manager/management team works with your district and/or school staff to help implement and monitor the effectiveness of your AIP. *[Listen for who is doing the preparation and for who is talking during highlight discussions and how, if at all, this has changed over time.]*

- *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
 - *With whom does the manager/management team work? How frequently?*
 - *Has the manager been consistent over time (including the manager(s) themselves and the configuration of manager teams), and if not, does this matter?]*

[For 14a-b listen/probe for their support for plan design/development, communication, implementation, monitoring, including helping the district to set up systems to do this work on their own.

14a. In what way has the manager/management team most helped your progress in implementing your AIP? *[Probe for specific examples of how the manager/management team is building capacity, as opposed to being capacity.]*

14b. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high, how would you rate the overall quality of the support offered by the manager/management team, and why? *[Probe for specific examples that support assessment of quality.]*

15. Thinking specifically of your Plan Monitor, please briefly describe how your plan Monitor works with your district to monitor effectiveness of your AIP implementation?

- *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
 - *With whom does the monitor primarily interact (e.g. who participates in highlight discussions or monitor's observations of key district activities)?*
 - *Has the monitor been consistent over time, and if not, does this matter?*
 - *Do the manager and monitor seem to work together, and if not, does this matter?]*

[For 15a-b: Listen/probe for what happens: In highlight meetings, in observations of key district activities, in written quarterly progress reports, in school committee presentations. During highlight discussions, who is doing the talking and how, if at all, has this changed over time?]

15a. In what way has the monitor most helped your progress in implementing your AIP?

15b. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high, how would you rate the overall quality of the questions and feedback provided by the monitor, and why? *[Probe for specific examples that support assessment of quality.]*

Sustainability (5 minutes)

Before we wrap up, I would like to ask you a few questions about how this work has changed over time and how continued improvement in the district can be sustained.

16. In terms of sustainability, what indicators do you think would signal that a district is ready to continue this work without the AIP support and monitoring provided by ESE?
 - What do you think would serve as adequate evidence for ESE to determine that these indicators are in place?
17. What tangible systems or structures have you put in place to continue to manage and monitor the plan without the AIP supports provided by ESE?

Closing (5 minutes)

18. *[If they mentioned any experience with other approaches to district-wide improvement in response to Q1] Earlier, you mentioned some experience with district-wide improvement efforts in [XXX]. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all effective, and 5 is very effective, how effective is the AIP process compared to those? Please briefly explain your thinking.*
19. Could the district have gotten to where you are without the AIP process? Has it helped or hindered district's overall progress and achievement? Please provide examples.
 - *[Listen/probe for how central the AIP has been to district work.]*
20. In what ways, if at all, has your philosophy about or approach to district improvement changed as a result of your involvement in the AIP process?
21. Is there any aspect of how the AIP process is designed and/or implemented that could be improved? If yes, can you describe this? *[Reference the list of components above and prompt if necessary. Probe for what else the plans, in particular, ought to include.]*
 - Are there any specific supports that you wish you had received, but did not, as part of this process? If so, what are those supports, and why do you think they are important to successful implementation of an AIP?
 - Is there any aspect of the process that could be dropped while still getting the same positive results? *[NOTE: Push hard here on why they think it wouldn't harm implementation to drop whatever they come up with.]*

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Former Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent Interview Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan, or AIP, process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future. For the purposes of this interview, please respond based only on your experience as superintendent/assistant superintendent, not based on anything you know or have heard about the district since then.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will identify the districts, but will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals.

Permission to Record

The interview will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

[Prior to the interview, review the background of the district’s involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on the specific needs and challenges in the district (district review), and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly. In all questions, listen/probe for:

- ***Impacts of turnover in district leadership***
- ***Impacts of turnover in plan manager/monitor***
- ***Any time they say something about ‘the plan’ – please clarify what exactly they mean by that – do they mean the written document, or how it’s implemented, supported, and/or monitored?]***

Background

I would like to start by hearing a little bit about your background and role in the district.

1. How long did you work in the district, and in what role(s)? *[Probe for prior experience with district-wide improvement initiatives.]*
2. *[Assistant Superintendents Only:]* Can you describe what your primary roles and responsibilities were in that position?
3. *[For all]* How many years did you personally engage with the AIP? Where was the district with its AIP while you were there (e.g., just getting started, already underway)?

AIP Plan Development (10 min)

Given that the first major phase of the AIP process is Plan Development, I would like to start by spending some time talking about the development of the district’s AIP. We will then talk about AIP implementation and impact, followed by questions about the Plan Manager/Management Team and Monitor, and will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability.

4. Can you describe how you received feedback from ESE on your plan during the process of plan development and approval? How helpful was the feedback and how did you use it?

[Listen/probe for:

- ***Whether and how ESE made its expectations for the plan clear, and **whether this improved over time*****
- *How the district used the feedback – including examples of ways the AIP and/or implementation improved as a result of feedback*
- *Specific aspects of the feedback that wasn’t useful, if applicable (the content or the way it’s communicated)*
- ***How the feedback could have been more useful, as appropriate (If they have feedback, have them map out an actual process for feedback on plan development that they would find more useful – e.g. first X happens, then Y, then Z)***
- *And the different roles of Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and ESE Malden staff in giving feedback to the district.]*

AIP Plan Implementation (10 min)

5. Who were the key individuals responsible for ensuring effective implementation of the plan, and what were their primary responsibilities?

[Listen/probe for:

- *How did you decide who to involve and when? [Interviewer may want to listen/probe for any impact of how new they were in their role as supt, and/or if they were interim – I would expect new and interim supts to involve fewer people than more established ones.]*
- *How broad the meaningful involvement was across the district, how much they relied on the Plan Manager. [Listen (but don't probe) for how this relates to who was involved in developing the plan.]*
- *To what extent were the priorities, strategies, and goals in the AIP understood by stakeholders? How do you know?*
- *To what extent had stakeholders used the strategies and resources in the AIP to inform and alter their work? Probe for specific examples.*
- *To what extent did the AIP encourage the district to reconsider how they organized, structured, or staffed their central office?*

6. How did the AIP process align, integrate, enhance, or conflict with other major improvement initiatives your district was undertaking? Please provide specific examples.

AIP Plan Impact (20 min)

Now, I want you to reflect on the ways in which this AIP work did or did not impact district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

7. What permanent structures and systems for improvement did the district put in place under the AIP while you were there? Please provide specific examples of what changed. *[Probe for changes in how they organized, structured, and staffed their central office, and how they used their district and/or school leadership teams, including how they leveraged principal meetings.]*

7a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent did the AIP process help the district establish these systems and structures? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

8. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. In your opinion, did the district make decisions or prioritize issues differently as a result of the AIP process (for example during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples.
9. Did you notice school leaders functioning differently, as a result of the AIP process? Please provide specific examples of any new actions school leaders took.
10. Did the district see meaningful changes in teaching practices and/or instructional supports across the district under the AIP while you were there? Please provide specific examples of what changed.
 - *[If yes] What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact?*

[If no] Why do you think you didn't see any change? Did that surprise you?

10a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent did the AIP process help with these improvements? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

11. Did the district see meaningful changes in student outcomes across the district under the AIP while you were there? Please provide specific examples of what changed.

- *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact?

11a. *[If yes]* On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent did the AIP process help the district improve student outcomes? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

- *[If 'yes' to teaching practices but 'not yet' for student outcomes]* How long do you think it would have taken for improved teacher practices to result in measurable student outcomes? Why is that?
- *[If no or 'not yet']* Why do you think the AIP had not yet had any impact on *[ask as appropriate]* instructional supports, teaching practices and/or student outcomes? And what, if anything, do you think needed to change, with regards to your district's plan or the AIP process, to see improvement in these areas?
 - *[Listen for: How long do you think it would have taken to see an impact on student learning outcomes?]*

12. In your opinion, did the AIP help the district get at root causes for student underperformance?

13. In what ways, if any, did the process help your school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.

[Listen for changes in ways School Committee supported district improvement efforts.]

- In your opinion, what would the ideal role of the school committee be in the AIP process?

14. In what ways, if any, did participation in the AIP process increase the district's capacity to do this kind of work without support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?

- *[Listen for changes in:*
 - *Communication with stakeholders*
 - *Expectations, organization, and/or role of district-level staff*
 - *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
 - *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to fully understand an issue, inform a plan, monitor progress, and inform adjustments to practice*
 - *Use of district/school leadership teams*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*

- *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

15. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) detracted the most from your district improvement efforts?

[For impact questions please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components. If respondent says that the plan itself had the biggest impact, probe for what specific things about the plan were impactful, including the benchmarking and progress reports included, and how the plan was used – following on the already reported utility of the plan as a communication tool, as a document that provides a cohesive model and message, etc. Probe for what set ‘the plan’ apart from any other district improvement plan or other similar improvement plan required by the state. Were the template and guidance materials alone enough to gain the traction they have seen?]

- ***ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials***
- *Process of developing a focused plan*
- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE – written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
- ***Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)***
- ***Written Quarterly Progress Reports***
- ***Presentations to school committee***
- *Periodic convenings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)]*

AIP Support and Monitoring *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

16. Moving on to think specifically about your plan manager/management team, please briefly describe how your plan manager/management team worked with your district and/or school staff to help implement and monitor the effectiveness of your AIP.

- *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
- *Who the plan manager, or primary point of contact, was.*

- *With whom did the manager/management team work? How frequently?*
- *Was the plan manager consistent over time, and if not, did this matter?]*

[For 16a-b listen/probe for their support for plan design/development, communication, implementation, monitoring, including helping the district to set up systems to do this work on their own.]

16a. In what way did the manager/management team most help your progress in implementing your AIP? *[Probe for specific examples of how the manager/management team built capacity, as opposed to being capacity. What capacities in particular did the district develop?]*

16b. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high, how would you rate the overall quality of the support offered by the manager/management team, and why? *[Probe for specific examples that support assessment of quality.]*

17. Thinking specifically of your Plan Monitor, please briefly describe how your plan Monitor worked with your district to monitor effectiveness of your AIP implementation?

- *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
 - *Who the plan monitor, or primary point of contact, was.*
 - *With whom did the monitor primarily interact (e.g. who participates in highlight discussions or monitor's observations of key district activities)?*
 - *Did the manager and monitor seem to work together, and if not, did this matter? Would you prefer that your plan manager and monitor work in close partnership or keep clear boundaries? By partnership we mean meeting between highlight discussions without district or ESE present. By clear boundaries we mean they only interact as part of formal AIP structures like highlight discussions. Why? Would your answer be different at another stage in the process (e.g., earlier or later, or with a new vs. established manager/monitor team)?*
 - *Note: by probing for 'why' we are looking for examples of how this adds to or detracts from district's ability to implement the plan and get results.*
 - *Was the monitor consistent over time, and if not, did this matter?]*

[For 17a-b: Listen/probe for what happens: In highlight meetings, in observations of key district activities, in written quarterly progress reports, in school committee presentations. During highlight discussions, who did the preparation for and talking and how, if at all, did that change over time?]

17a. In what way did the monitor most help your progress in implementing your AIP?

17b. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high, how would you rate the overall quality of the questions and feedback provided by the monitor, and why? *[Probe for specific examples that support assessment of quality.]*

Sustainability

Before we wrap up, I would like to ask you a few questions about how this work changed over time and how continued improvement in the district can be sustained.

18. In terms of sustainability, what indicators do you think would signal that a district is ready to continue this work without the AIP support and monitoring provided by ESE? What do

you think would serve as adequate evidence for ESE to determine that these indicators are in place?

19. *[For Mark Prince and Mike Shea:]* How, if at all, did the AIP process support your transition into your new role in the district? How, if at all, did the district leverage the AIP in the recruitment, selection, and on-boarding of the new superintendent?
20. *[Mark Prince and Mike Shea:]* Did you plan or implement any specific strategies to ensure that the AIP work would continue with your successor, and if so, what were they?

Closing

21. *[If they mentioned any experience with other approaches to district-wide improvement in response to Q1]* Earlier, you mentioned some experience with district-wide improvement efforts in [XXX]. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all effective, and 5 is very effective, how effective was the AIP process compared to those? Please briefly explain your thinking. *[For Kim Wells – you might probe specifically in comparison to America’s Choice.]*
22. In what ways, if at all, did your philosophy about or approach to district improvement change as a result of your involvement in the AIP process?
23. Is there any aspect of how the AIP process is designed and/or implemented that could be improved? If yes, can you describe this? *[Reference the list of components above and prompt if necessary. Probe for what else the plans, in particular, ought to include.]*
 - Are there any specific supports that you did not receive as part of the AIP process that you think you should have? If so, what are those supports, and why do you think they would be important to successful implementation of an AIP?
 - Is there any aspect of the process that could be dropped while still getting the same positive results? *[NOTE: Push hard here on why they think it wouldn’t harm implementation to drop whatever they come up with.]*

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

**Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process:
Former Superintendent/ Monitor Interview Protocol**

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan, or AIP, process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future. For the purposes of this interview, please respond based only on your experience, not based on anything you know or have heard about the district since then.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will identify the districts, but will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals.

Permission to Record

The interview will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

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Note: Any time they say something about ‘the plan’ – please clarify what exactly they mean by that – do they mean the written document, or how it’s implemented, supported, and/or monitored?

Background

I would like to start by hearing a little bit about your background.

1. How long did you work in Randolph, and in what role(s)? *[Probe for prior experience with district-wide improvement initiatives.]*
2. I understand you also served as a Plan Monitor in Salem, is that correct? Where was the district with its AIP while you were there (e.g., just getting started, already underway)?

I want to first talk about your experience in Randolph. Then we’ll discuss your experience as a Plan Monitor in Salem.

Randolph Improvement Plan

3. From what you now know about the AIP process, how does it compare to the improvement processes Randolph was engaging in while you were there?
 - *Probe for:*
 - *How goals and strategies for improvement were identified*
 - *How the turnaround plan was developed and who wrote it*
 - *Whether the process got at root causes of underperformance*
 - *How the process aligned, integrated, enhanced, or conflicted with other major improvement initiatives*
 - *How, if at all, ESE was involved:*
 - *Whether ESE provided specific expectations for the plan (if so, what were they?)*
 - *Whether ESE provided any types of support for writing the plan, and whether any feedback was received from ESE on the plan*
 - *What support, if any, ESE provided for implementing the plan*
 - *What types of accountability, if any, existed for meeting the goals in the plan*
 - *Did he do things differently as a result of the strategies and goals laid out in the plan? (If so, probe for examples)*
 - *Did principals and/or teachers do things differently as a result of the strategies and goals laid out in the plan? (If so, probe for examples)*
 - *Who was involved at the district level in implementing the plan and, if applicable, monitoring plan implementation*
 - *What impact, if any, did the turnaround plan initiative have on student outcomes? (Please be specific)*
4. In your opinion, does the AIP process have more, less, or about the same potential to bring about rapid district improvement than the process Randolph was engaging in while

you were there? Why do you say that?

- *Probe for information about potential impact on:*
 - *District capacity (systems, structures)*
 - *Teaching practice*
 - *Student outcomes*

Role as Plan Monitor

Now I want you to think about your experience as a Plan Monitor in Salem. I would like to talk about AIP implementation and impact, followed by questions about the Plan Manager role, and will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability.

5. Can you describe the specific strategies you used or actions you took to monitor how effectively the district was implementing the plan to meet benchmarks and build capacity (e.g., questions you asked, actions you took, evidence you reviewed, etc.)?
 - *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
 - *Specifically, how did you leverage highlight discussions? Highlight discussions are both evidence-gathering and capacity-building conversations. To what extent do you see both of these happening (evidence)?*
 - *QPRs and school committee presentations are public reports to the community and district to report on and hopefully help them reflect on their work. Did you see evidence that QPRs accomplish these goals?*
 - *What information did you prioritize for highlight discussions and QPRs? How did you know if that information is meaningful? When did you push/ask districts for more data/evidence and why? **How did you REALLY know if meaningful change was happening?***

5a. Which specific monitoring strategies do you believe most helped the districts implement their AIP to meet benchmarks and build capacity, and why? *[Listen for: highlight discussions, QPRs, school committee reports, onsite visits, other.]*

5b. Are there any monitoring strategies that, in your opinion, were less critical or even distracting to successful plan implementation?

AIP Plan Impact

Now, I want you to reflect on the impact of your AIP work. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work did or did not impact district and school practices. I do understand, however, that you served as Plan Monitor for less than a year and that it was Salem's first year as an AIP district. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

6. What permanent structures and systems for improvement did district put in place while you were there? Please provide specific examples of what changed. *[Probe for changes in how districts organize, structure, and staff their central office, and how they use their district and/or school leadership teams, including how they leverage principal meetings.]*
 - 6a. *[Ask as a follow up when someone answers the question above]:* On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent did the AIP process as a whole, helped the district establish these systems and structures? By AIP process we

mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. *[Note: Repeat this reminder as needed throughout.]* Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

7. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Did you notice ways in which the district was making decisions or prioritizing issues differently as a result the AIP process (e.g., during plan development; after a highlight discussion; after a QPR presentation)? Please give examples.
8. From your perspective, did the district see meaningful changes in teaching practices while you were there?
 - *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed and how the AIP has helped.
 - *[If no]* Why do you think that is?
9. *[Ask as a follow up when someone answers Q8]:* From your perspective, did the district see meaningful changes in student outcomes while you were there?
 - *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
 - *[If no]* Why do you think the AIP process had not yet had any impact on student outcomes? And what do you think will need to change, with regards to the district's plan or the AIP process, to see improvement?
10. To what extent do you think the AIP process helped the district address root causes for student underperformance? Please give examples of root causes that are or are not adequately addressed by the AIP process.
11. In what ways, if any, did the AIP process help the district's school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.
 - *[Listen/probe for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts, such as resource allocation decision-making, and monitoring of impact.]*
12. In what ways, if any, did participation in the AIP process increase the district's capacity to do this kind of work without support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?
 - *[Listen for changes in:*
 - *Communication with stakeholders*
 - *Expectations, organization, and/or role of district-level staff*
 - *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
 - *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to fully understand an issue, inform a plan, monitor progress, and inform adjustments to practice*
 - *Use of district/school leadership teams*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
- *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*

- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

13. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) detracted the most from the district's improvement efforts?

[For impact questions please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components. If respondent says that the plan itself has had the biggest impact, probe for what specific things about the plan have been impactful, including the benchmarking and progress reports included, and how the plan is used – following on the already reported utility of the plan as a communication tool, as a document that provides a cohesive model and message, etc. Probe for what sets 'the plan' apart from any other district improvement plan or other similar improvement plan required by the state. Are the template and guidance materials alone enough to gain the traction they have seen?]

- **ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials**
- *Process of developing a focused plan*
- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE – written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
- **Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)**
- **Written Quarterly Progress Reports**
- **Presentations to school committee**
- *Periodic convenings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)]*

AIP Support and Monitoring *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

14. Thinking specifically of the district's Plan Manager, can you describe how you worked with the Plan Manager, John Brackett, to support the district? *[Probe for specific information about frequency and nature of interaction. Do they seem to have an effective working relationship?]*

- Did the two of you seem to be operating with the same understanding of ESE guidance for the work? If yes – great! If no – where specifically were there differences in understanding? Is there specific guidance or support from ESE that

would help to bridge this gap?

14a. From your perspective, what aspects of the plan manager role most helped the district implement its AIP? Consider both how they have helped the district meet AIP benchmarks and goals as well as build capacity to do the work on their own.

[Interviewer: we are most interested in their perspectives of how the role is structured, not in the particular performance of the individual – although we recognize, you may hear some of that too.]

14b. From your perspective as the plan monitor, which aspects of the plan manager role, if any, were unnecessary or even hindered progress? *[Listen but don't probe for whether a plan manager can be too embedded such that they lose perspective and the ability to push back on the district, and/or act as though they are a member the district team that the district relies on as though they will never leave.]*

Sustainability

15. In terms of sustainability, what indicators do you think would signal that a district is ready to continue this work without the AIP support and monitoring provided by ESE? What do you think would serve as adequate evidence for ESE to determine that these indicators are in place?

Closing

16. To what extent were ESE's expectations for you in your role as Plan Monitor clear?

- In what ways did ESE support you in your role as Plan Monitor? *[Probe for specific training, resources, meetings, etc.]* What support(s) were the most important to your ability to serve as an effective Plan Monitor?
- What support(s), if any, were the least helpful? Why?
- Are there any other supports, that you did not receive, that would have helped you in your role as Plan Monitor?

17. From your perspective, could Salem have gotten to where they did during your tenure without the AIP process? Did it help or hinder the district's overall progress and achievement? Please provide examples.

- *[Listen/probe for how central the AIP has been to district work.]*

18. Is there any aspect of how the AIP process is designed and/or implemented that could be improved? If yes, can you describe this? *[Reference the list of components above and prompt if necessary. Probe for what else the plans, in particular, ought to include.]*

- Are there any specific supports that you did not receive as part of the AIP process that you think you should have? If so, what are those supports, and why do you think they would be important to successful implementation of an AIP?
- Is there any aspect of the process that could be dropped while still getting the same positive results? *[NOTE: Push hard here on why they think it wouldn't harm implementation to drop whatever they come up with.]*

19. Is there anything else about your experience with the AIP process in Salem, or your experience in Randolph, that you would like to share?

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Plan Manager Interview Protocol (Multiple Districts)

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan, or AIP, process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name and will not attribute any quotes to individuals or name the positions of individuals. We will identify the districts, but will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals. For example, the information reported by all district leaders (superintendents, assistant superintendents), plan managers, monitors, and school leaders will be reported in the aggregate for each district and/or for each role (e.g. a summary of perspectives shared by Plan Managers). However, given that each individual interviewed plays a key role in the AIP process, it is possible that readers of the report may infer who we interviewed. That said, we will endeavor to protect your confidentiality and privacy to the greatest extent possible; for example, we will omit any details that would identify respondents.

Permission to Record

The interview will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

Prior to the interview, review the background of the district's involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on the specific needs and challenges in the district (district review), and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly. In all questions, listen/probe for:

- **Impacts of turnover in district leadership**
- **Impacts of turnover in plan manager/monitor**
- **What was an issue early on vs. what remains an issue now?**
- **Any time they say something about 'the plan' – please clarify what exactly they mean by that – do they mean the written document, or how it's implemented, supported, and/or monitored?**

Background (1 min)

I would like to start by talking a little bit about your background.

1. We understand you have been a plan manager in _____ for X years. Is this correct?
2. What prior experience do you have serving as a plan manager (or similar support role) elsewhere? Do you currently work with other AIP districts in a different role/capacity? If so, what?
3. Aside from your AIP work, do you have any prior experience with district-wide improvement initiatives, and if so, please describe.
 - *[For DMC (Holyoke and New Bedford)]:* What about the other members of the plan management team? How long have they been in X district? What other experiences do they have? And what is their experience with district improvement efforts?

AIP Plan Development (10 min)

Given that the first major phase of the AIP process is Plan Development, I would like to start by spending some time talking about the development of [district's] AIP. We will then talk about AIP implementation and impact, followed by questions about the Plan Monitor role, and will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability.

4. Can you describe your approach to helping the district develop their most recently approved AIP? *[For DMC, probe for how they deploy the team, and how that has changed over time, including adding/removing team members to meet district needs.]*
 - *[Listen for (and probe)]*
 - **What supports they as plan manager provided**
 - **How much of the work the district did vs. the plan manager**
 - **How did the district use/leverage the supports**
 - *Who the district involved and why*
 - **Whether there was ample opportunity during plan development to identify existing barriers to implementing the AIP?**
 - *Whether the development of the plan helped the district reflect on systems/structures, identify root causes of underperformance and make plans to address them*
 - *Other supports from ESE throughout the process]*

- How, if at all, has your approach to developing the plans changed over the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? *[Probe for lessons the manager has learned about how to be more effective as well as adjustments they have made in response to district context.]*
 - What ‘aha moments,’ if any, have you had?
 - Of all the supports you provided during plan development, which do you believe were most important to ensuring the development of a clear and focused plan, and why, and has this changed over time? Were there any supports you provided during plan development that you think the district could have done without? Or you would, in retrospect, have altered in some way to be more effective?
5. Can you describe the ways in which the district received feedback from ESE on the plan during the process of plan development and approval this year?
- In what ways, if any, did ESE’s feedback on the plan result in better work in the district? *[Probe for specific evidence.]*
 - *[Listen/probe for:*
 - *Whether and how ESE made its expectations for the plan clear, and **whether this has improved over time** – be sure to clarify what issues/concerns still exist*
 - *How the district used the feedback – including examples of ways the AIP and/or implementation improved as a result of feedback*
 - *Specific aspects of the feedback that hasn’t been useful, if applicable (the content or the way it’s communicated)*
 - ***How the feedback could be more useful**, as appropriate (If they have feedback, have them map out an actual process for feedback on plan development that they would find more useful – e.g. first X happens, then Y, then Z)]*
6. Do you feel the district has gotten better at developing a focused plan with a few clear priorities and measurable outcomes? If so, in what ways? To what do you attribute this improvement? If not, what suggestions do you have to help the district improve in this area?

AIP Plan Implementation (10 min)

7. Can you describe the specific strategies you use or actions you take as Plan Manager to ensure effective implementation of the plan? Note that effective implementation includes both meeting the benchmarks in the plan and building the district’s capacity to do this work on their own. *[For DMC, probe for how they deploy the team, and how that has changed over time, including adding/removing team members to meet district needs.]*
- How do you make sure the district understands what effective implementation looks like?
 - How do you know if district capacity is growing? What specific capacities are you trying to help them build?
 - *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
 - *With whom does the manager/management team work? Why? How frequently? How do you decide who to involve in the AIP, and when?*

- ***How do you decide where/how to focus your time and energy?***
- ***How do you personally know when to work around district inefficiencies vs. help the district tackle them head-on (e.g., ineffective staff or processes)?***
- ***When/how do you decide whether to take on the work yourself so it gets done, vs. build district capacity so the district can do it themselves?***
- *How do keep a sense of urgency for this work, especially in the face of district resistance (e.g., district thinks ESE is pushing too hard too fast, or you see an area that you think needs attention that they aren't addressing, or district is side-stepping a root cause, or you feel they are making a poor decision)?*
- ***How do you help the district DO this work without you?]***
 - How, if at all, have you modified your approach over the past 3 years (2 for Salem) to ensure effective implementation? *[Probe for indications of whether the district is getting better at follow-through on implementation of the plan.]*
 - Which of these modifications were a direct result of shifts in ESE guidance for your role vs. your own personal approach?
 - What 'aha moments,' if any, have you had about how to help the district ensure effective implementation?

7a. Which of the specific strategies or actions that you as a plan manager have taken do you believe have most helped the district to meet benchmarks and build capacity (e.g., ways to ask questions, structure their work, when do 'do for' vs. 'do with' vs. 'you do, I watch')?

AIP Plan Impact (15-20 min)

Now, I want you to reflect on your AIP work and experience thus far. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work has or has not impacted district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

8. What permanent structures and systems for improvement has the district put in place in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed. *[Probe for changes in how districts organize, structure, and staff their central office, and how they use their district and/or school leadership teams, including how they leverage principal meetings.]*
9. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the district is making decisions or prioritizing issues differently as a result of the AIP process (for example during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples.
10. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in how school leaders function in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)?
11. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in teaching practices in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)?
12. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in student outcomes in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? *[If they only mention MCAS scores, prompt for*

possible changes in other student outcomes, like attendance, graduation, etc.]

- *[If yes] What specific aspects of the AIP process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.*
- *[If no] Why do you think the AIP process has not yet had any impact on student outcomes? And what do you think will need to change, with regards to the district's plan or the AIP process, to see improvement?*

13. To what extent do you think the AIP process helps the district address root causes for student underperformance? Please provide specific examples.

14. In what ways, if any, has the AIP process helped the district's school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.

- What do you think the ideal role for a school committee would be in the AIP process?

[Listen/probe for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts such as resource allocation, decision-making, and monitoring of impact.]

15. In what ways, if any, has participation in the AIP process increased the district's capacity to do this kind of work without support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?

- *[Listen for changes in:*
 - *Communication with stakeholders*
 - *Expectations, organization, and/or roles of district-level staff*
 - *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
 - *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to fully understand an issue, inform a plan, monitor progress, and inform adjustments to practice*
 - *Use of district/school leadership teams*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
- *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

16. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) have had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) have detracted the most from your district improvement efforts?

[For impact questions please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components. If respondent says that the plan itself has had the biggest impact, probe for what specific things about the plan have been impactful, including the benchmarking and progress reports included, and how the plan is used – following on the already reported utility of the plan as a communication tool, as a document that provides a cohesive model and message, etc. Probe for what sets 'the plan' apart from any other district improvement plan or other similar improvement plan required by the state. Are the template and guidance materials alone enough to gain the traction they have seen?]

- **ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials**
- *Process of developing a focused plan*
- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE – written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
- **Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)**
- **Written Quarterly Progress Reports**
- **Presentations to school committee**
- *Periodic convenings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)]*

17. Now, focusing specifically on monitoring activities,

- How do you leverage highlight discussions so they are both evidence-gathering and capacity-building conversations. To what extent do you see both of these happening? Please provide specific evidence. What are the specific indicators (e.g. changes in behaviors) that illustrate this? *[Listen for who is doing the preparation and for who is talking during highlight discussions and how, if at all, this has changed over time.]*
- QPRs and school committee presentations are public reports to the community and district to report on and hopefully help them reflect on their work. Do you see evidence that QPRs accomplish these goals?
- What information do you prioritize for highlight discussions and QPRs? How do you know if that information is meaningful? When do you push/ask districts for more data/evidence and why? How do you REALLY know if meaningful change is happening?

AIP Support and Monitoring *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.] (5 min)*

18. Thinking specifically of the district's Plan Monitor, [insert name], would it be accurate to say that you work with the Plan Monitor to support the district? If so, can you describe how? *[Probe for specific information about frequency and nature of interaction. Do they seem to have an effective working relationship?]*

- Do the two of you seem to be operating with the same understanding of ESE guidance for the work? If yes – great! If no – where specifically are there differences in understanding? Is there specific guidance or support from ESE that would help to bridge this gap?

18a. From your perspective, what aspects of the plan monitor role most help the district implement its AIP? Consider both how they have helped the district meet AIP benchmarks and goals as well as build capacity to do the work on their own.

[Interviewer: we are most interested in their perspectives of how the role is structured, not in the particular performance of the individual.]

Sustainability (5 min)

19. In terms of sustainability, what indicators do you think would signal that a district is ready to continue this work without the AIP support and monitoring you, and ESE, currently provide? *[Note: If a respondent points to a strong leader as critical to the success of this process, probe for how they know they have a strong, committed leader and what specific, replicable ACTIONS the leader takes.]*

- Are there any specific embedded practices that districts ought to demonstrate in order to show readiness to exit?
- What do you think would serve as adequate evidence for ESE to determine that these indicators are in place?

Closing (10 min)

20. Overall, to what extent are ESE's expectations for you in your role as Plan Manager clear?

- In what ways has ESE supported you in your role as Plan Manager? *[Probe for specific training, resources, meetings, etc.]* What support(s) has been the most important to your ability to serve as an effective Plan Manager?
- Are there any other supports, that you do not currently receive, that would help you in your role as Plan Manager?

21. *[If they mentioned any experience with other approaches to district-wide improvement in response to Q3]* Earlier, you mentioned some experience with district-wide improvement efforts in [XXX]. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all effective, and 5 is very effective, how effective is the AIP process compared to those? Please briefly explain your thinking.

22. Is there any aspect of how the AIP process is designed and/or implemented that could be improved? If yes, can you describe how and why?

- Are there any specific supports that AIP districts do not currently receive that you think they should? If so, what are those supports, and why do you think they are important to successful implementation of an AIP?
- Is there any aspect of the process that could be dropped while still getting the same positive results? *[NOTE: Push hard here on why they think it wouldn't harm implementation to drop whatever they come up with.]*

23. Do you think the AIP process would be beneficial to other districts, if done with a lighter touch? If so, which components of the process would be essential to retain and why? What would the ideal "light touch AIP" process look like?

24. Is there anything else about your experience working with AIP districts that you'd like to share?

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Former Plan Manager Interview Protocol (One district – plus Level 3)

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan, or AIP, process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future. For the purposes of this interview, please respond based only on your experience as manager, not based on anything you know or have heard about the district since then.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name and will not attribute any quotes to individuals or name the positions of individuals. We will identify the districts, but will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals. For example, the information reported by all district leaders (superintendents, assistant superintendents), plan managers, monitors, and school leaders will be reported in the aggregate for each district and/or for each role (e.g. a summary of perspectives shared by Plan Managers). However, given that each individual interviewed plays a key role in the AIP process, it is possible that readers of the report may infer who we interviewed. That said, we will endeavor to protect your confidentiality and privacy to the greatest extent possible; for example, we will omit any details that would identify respondents.

Permission to Record

The interview will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

[Prior to the interview, review the background of the district's involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on the specific needs and challenges in the district (district review), and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly. In all questions, listen/probe for:

- ***Impacts of turnover in district leadership***
- ***Impacts of turnover in plan manager/monitor***
- ***Any time they say something about 'the plan' – please clarify what exactly they mean by that – do they mean the written document, or how it's implemented, supported, and/or monitored?***

Background (1 min)

I would like to start by talking a little bit about your background].

1. We understand you were a plan manager in _____ for X years. Is this correct?
2. What prior experience did you have serving as a plan manager (or similar support role) elsewhere?
3. Aside from your AIP work, do you have any prior experience with district-wide improvement initiatives, and if so, please describe.

AIP Plan Development (10 min)

Given that the first major phase of the AIP process is Plan Development, I would like to start by spending some time talking about the development of [district's] AIP. We will then talk about AIP implementation and impact, followed by questions about the Plan Monitor role, and will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability. *[For Paul Only]:* I will try to reserve some time at the end to talk about your experience using the AIP process with Level 3 districts.

4. Can you describe your approach to helping the district develop their AIP?
 - *[Listen for (and probe?)*
 - *What supports they as plan manager provided*
 - *How much of the work the district did vs. the plan manager*
 - *How did the district use/leverage the supports*
 - *Who the district involved and why*
 - *Whether there was ample opportunity during plan development to identify existing barriers to implementing the AIP*
 - *Whether the development of the plan helped the district reflect on systems/structures, identify root causes of underperformance and make plans to address them*
 - *Other supports from ESE throughout the process*
 - How, if at all, did your approach to developing the plans change over time?
 - *[Probe for lessons the manager learned about how to be more effective as well as adjustments they have made in response to district context.]*
 - Of all the supports you provided during plan development, which were most

- important to ensuring the development of a clear and focused plan, and did this change over time?
5. Can you describe the ways in which the district received feedback from ESE on the plan during the process of plan development and approval?
 - In what ways, if any, did ESE's feedback on the plan result in better work in the district? *[Probe for specific evidence.]*
 - *[Listen/probe for:*
 - *Whether and how ESE made its expectations for the plan clear, and **whether this improved over time***
 - *How the district used the feedback – including examples of ways the AIP and/or implementation improved as a result of feedback*
 - *Specific aspects of the feedback that weren't useful, if applicable (the content or the way it's communicated)*
 - ***How the feedback could have been more useful**, as appropriate (If they have feedback, have them map out an actual process for feedback on plan development that they would find more useful – e.g. first X happens, then Y, then Z)]*
 6. Do you feel the district got better over time at developing a focused plan with a few clear priorities and measurable outcomes? If so, in what ways? To what would you attribute this improvement?

AIP Plan Implementation (10 min)

7. Can you describe the specific strategies you used or actions you took as Plan Manager to ensure effective implementation of the plan? Note that effective implementation includes both meeting the benchmarks in the plan and building the district's capacity to do this work on their own.
 - How did you make sure the district understood what effective implementation looks like?
 - How did you know if district capacity is growing?
 - *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:]*
 - *With whom did the manager/management team work? Why? How frequently? How did you decide who to involve in the AIP, and when?*
 - *How did you decide where/how to focus your time and energy?*
 - *How did you know when to work around district inefficiencies vs. tackle them head-on (e.g., ineffective staff or processes)?*
 - *When/how did you decide whether to take on the work yourself so it gets done, vs build district capacity so the district can do it themselves?*
 - *How did you keep a sense of urgency for this work, especially in the face of district resistance (e.g., district thinks ESE is pushing too hard too fast, or you see an area that you think needs attention that they aren't addressing, or district is side-stepping a root cause, or you feel they are making a poor decision)?*

- *How did you help the district plan to do this work without you?*
- How, if at all, did you modify your approach over time to ensure effective implementation? *[Probe for indications of whether the district is getting better at follow-through on implementation of the plan.]*
 - Were any of these modifications a direct result of shifts in ESE guidance for your role vs. your own personal approach?

7a. What specific strategies or actions most helped the district to meet benchmarks and build capacity (e.g., ways to ask questions, structure their work, when do 'do for' vs. 'do with' vs. 'you do, I watch')?

AIP Plan Impact (15-20 min)

Now, I want you to reflect on your AIP work and experience. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work did or did not impact district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

8. What permanent structures and systems for improvement did the district put in place? Please provide specific examples of what changed. *[Probe for changes in how the district organized, structured, and staffed their central office, and how they used their district and/or school leadership teams, including how they leveraged principal meetings.]*
9. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Did you notice ways in which the district was making decisions or prioritizing issues differently as a result of the AIP process (for example during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples.
10. From your perspective, did the district see meaningful changes in how school leaders function as a result of the AIP?
11. From your perspective, did the district see meaningful changes in teaching practices as a result of the AIP?
12. From your perspective, did the district see meaningful changes in student outcomes as a result of the AIP?
13. To what extent do you think the AIP process helped the district address root causes for student underperformance? Please provide specific examples.
14. In what ways, if any, did the AIP process help the district's school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.

[Listen/probe for changes in ways School Committee supported district improvement efforts such as resource allocation, decision-making, and monitoring of impact.]
15. In what ways, if any, did participation in the AIP process increase the district's capacity to do this kind of work without support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?
 - *[Listen for changes in:*
 - *Communication with stakeholders*
 - *Expectations, organization, and/or role of district-level staff*
 - *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*

- *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to fully understand an issue, inform a plan, monitor progress, and inform adjustments to practice*
- *Use of district/school leadership teams*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
- *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

16. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) detracted the most from your district improvement efforts?

[For impact questions please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components. If respondent says that the plan itself had the biggest impact, probe for what specific things about the plan were impactful, including the benchmarking and progress reports included, and how the plan was used – following on the already reported utility of the plan as a communication tool, as a document that provides a cohesive model and message, etc. Probe for what set ‘the plan’ apart from any other district improvement plan or other similar improvement plan required by the state. Were the template and guidance materials alone enough to gain the traction they have seen?]

- ***ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials***
- *Process of developing a focused plan*
- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE – written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
- ***Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)***
- ***Written Quarterly Progress Reports***
- ***Presentations to school committee***
- *Periodic convenings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)]*

17. Now, focusing specifically on monitoring activities,

- How did you leverage highlight discussions so they are both evidence-gathering and capacity-building conversations. To what extent did you see both of these happening? Please provide specific evidence. What were the specific indicators (e.g. changes in behaviors) that illustrate this? *[Listen for who did the preparation for and talking during highlight discussions and how, if at all, this changed over time.]*
- QPRs and school committee presentations are public reports to the community and district to report on and hopefully help them reflect on their work. Did you see evidence that QPRs accomplish these goals?
- What information did you prioritize for highlight discussions and QPRs? How did you know if that information is meaningful? When did you push/ask districts for more data/evidence and why? How did you REALLY know if meaningful change was happening?

AIP Support and Monitoring *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.] (5 min)*

18. Thinking specifically of the district's Plan Monitor, [insert name], can you describe how you worked with the Plan Monitor to support the district? *[Probe for specific information about frequency and nature of interaction. Did they seem to have a good, supportive working relationship?]*

- Did the two of you seem to be operating with the same understanding of ESE guidance for the work? If yes – great! If no – where specifically were there differences in understanding?

18a. From your perspective, what aspects of the plan monitor role most helped the district implement its AIP? Consider both how they helped the district meet AIP benchmarks and goals as well as build capacity to do the work on their own.

[Interviewer: we are most interested in their perspectives of how the role is structured, not in the particular performance of the individual – although we recognize, you may hear some of that too.]

Sustainability (5 min)

19. In terms of sustainability, what indicators do you think would signal that a district is ready to continue this work without the AIP support and monitoring you, and ESE, were providing? *[Note: If a respondent points to a strong leader as critical to the success of this process, probe for how they know they have a strong, committed leader and what specific, replicable actions the leader took.]*

- Are there any specific embedded practices that districts ought to demonstrate in order to show readiness to exit?
- What do you think would serve as adequate evidence for ESE to determine that these indicators are in place?

Closing (10 min)

20. Overall, to what extent were ESE's expectations for you in your role as Plan Manager clear?

- In what ways did ESE support you in your role as Plan Manager? *[Probe for specific training, resources, meetings, etc.]* What support(s) was the most important to your

ability to serve as an effective Plan Manager?

- Are there any other supports, that you did not receive, that would have helped you in your role as Plan Manager?
21. Is there any aspect of how the AIP process is designed and/or implemented that could be improved? If yes, can you describe how and why?
- Are there any specific supports that AIP districts do not currently receive that you think they should? If so, what are those supports, and why do you think they are important to successful implementation of an AIP?
 - Is there any aspect of the process that could be dropped while still getting the same positive results? *[NOTE: Push hard here on why they think it wouldn't harm implementation to drop whatever they come up with.]*
22. *[For Christine Only]:* Do you think the AIP process would be beneficial to other districts, if done with a lighter touch? If so, which components of the process would be essential to retain and why? What would the ideal "light touch AIP" process look like?
23. *[For Paul Only]:* I understand that you have been working with Level 3 districts to implement a version of the AIP process. Can you briefly describe what this entails and how, if it all, it differs from the AIP process you managed in Southbridge? *[Probe for specific details about support provided to district.]*
- Which components of the process are essential to retain in any district interested in accelerated improvement?
 - Which components of the process are only necessary in the Level 4 districts? In other words, are there components of the process that Level 3, or other, "light-touch" AIP districts could do without?
 - Which aspects/components can be implemented without plan manager/monitor involvement, and which ones really need that outside role in order to be effective?
 - From your perspective, what would the ideal "light-touch" AIP process look like?
24. Is there anything else about your experience working with AIP districts that you'd like to share?

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Plan Monitor Focus Group Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan, or AIP, process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name and will not attribute any quotes to individuals or name the positions of individuals. We will identify the districts, but will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals. For example, the information reported by all district leaders (superintendents, assistant superintendents), plan managers, monitors, and school leaders, will be reported in the aggregate for each district and/or for each role (e.g., a summary of perspectives shared by plan monitors). However, given that each individual participating plays a key role in the AIP process, it is possible that readers of the report may infer who we spoke with. That said, we will endeavor to protect your confidentiality and privacy to the greatest extent possible; for example, we will omit any details that would identify respondents.

In front of you is a document that outlines the scope of the study and some of the issues I've mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Please go ahead review the document. If you don't have any questions, please sign your name at the bottom indicating that you consent to participate and return it to me. I have extra copies if you'd like to keep one for your records.

Permission to Record

The focus group will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin.

Prior to the focus group, review the background of the districts' involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on the specific needs and challenges in the district (district review), and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly. In all questions, listen/probe for:

- ***Impacts of turnover in district leadership***
- ***Impacts of turnover in plan manager/monitor***
- ***Any time they say something about 'the plan' – please clarify what exactly they mean by that – do they mean the written document, or how it's implemented, supported, and/or monitored?***

Use the following general probes, as needed, throughout:

- ***Does anyone have a different opinion?***
- ***Is there anything else that has not yet been mentioned?***
- ***Would anyone else like to respond?***

Background

1. I'd like to start by having each person introduce himself or herself, first names only, and tell me:
 - Which district(s) you currently work with as a Plan Monitor and how long you've worked with each district;
 - What prior experience you have serving as a plan monitor, or in a similar monitoring role; and
 - Whether you currently work with any other AIP districts in a different role or capacity.
2. Aside from your AIP work, does anyone have any prior experience with district-wide improvement initiatives, and if so, please describe.

For those of you who work with more than one district, please think about both districts throughout our conversation and be sure to let me know when your experience in one district differs from your experience in the other. I'll be asking some specific questions about each district and some questions that refer to the group of AIP districts.

AIP Plan Development

Given that the first major phase of the AIP process is Plan Development, I would like to start by spending some time talking about the development of [district's] AIP. We will then talk about AIP implementation and impact, followed by questions about the Plan Manager role, and will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability.

3. Can you describe your approach in reviewing and/or providing feedback on the districts' most recently approved AIPs? We can start with anyone
 - How, if at all, has your approach to reviewing plans changed over the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? *[Probe for lessons the monitor team has learned about how to be more effective, as well as adjustments they have made in response to district context]*
4. Can you describe the ways in which each district received feedback from ESE on the plan during the process of plan development and approval?
 - What evidence do you have that feedback on the plan from ESE resulted in better work in the district?

[Listen/probe for:

- *Whether and how ESE made its expectations for the plan clear, and whether this has improved over time – be sure to clarify what issues/concerns still exist*
- *Whether the feedback that ESE provided to the district clearly described the feedback that the monitors generated during their review of the plan*
- *How the district used the feedback – including examples of ways the AIP and/or implementation improved as a result of feedback*
- *Specific aspects of the feedback that hasn't been useful, if applicable (the content or the way it's communicated)*
- ***How the feedback could be more useful, as appropriate (If they have feedback, have them map out an actual process for feedback on plan development that they would find more useful – e.g. first X happens, then Y, then Z)]***

AIP Plan Implementation

5. Can you describe the specific strategies you use or actions you take to monitor how effectively districts are implementing the plan to meet benchmarks and build capacity (e.g. questions you ask, actions you take, evidence you review, etc.)? Again, we can start with anyone. *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:]*
- How do you know if the district understands what effective implementation looks like?
 - How do you know if district capacity is growing? *[Listen for who is doing the preparation for and talking during highlight discussions and how, if at all, this has changed over time.]*
 - To what extent has the AIP encouraged the district to reconsider how they organize, structure, and staff their central office.
 - *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
 - *Specifically, how do you leverage highlight discussions? Highlight discussions are both evidence-gathering and capacity-building conversations. To what extent do you see both of these happening (evidence)?*
 - *QPRs and school committee presentations are public reports to the community and district to report on and hopefully help them reflect on their work. Do you see evidence that QPRs accomplish these goals?*
 - *What information do you prioritize for highlight discussions and QPRs? How do you know if that information is meaningful? When do you push/ask districts for more data/evidence and why? **How do you REALLY know if meaningful change is happening?***
 - How, if at all, have you modified your approach over the past 3 years (2 for Salem) to ensure effective monitoring? *[Probe for indications of whether the district is getting better at follow-through on implementation of the plan.]*
 - Were any of these modifications a direct result of shifts in ESE guidance for your role vs. your own personal approach?
- 5a. Which specific monitoring strategies do you believe have most helped the districts implement their AIPs to meet benchmarks and build capacity, and why? *[Listen for: highlight discussions, QPRs, school committee reports, onsite visits, other.]*
- 5b. Are there any monitoring strategies that, in your opinion, have been less critical or even distracting to successful plan implementation?

AIP Plan Impact

Now, I want you to reflect on your AIP work and experience thus far. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work has or has not impacted district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

6. What permanent structures and systems for improvement has each district put in place in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed. *[Probe for changes in how districts organize, structure, and staff their central office, and how they use their district and/or school leadership teams, including how they leverage principal meetings.]*
 - 6a. *[Ask as a follow up when someone answers the question above]:* On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process as a whole, helped each district establish these systems and structures? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. *[Note: Repeat this reminder as needed throughout.]* Please provide specific examples of how it helped.
7. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which districts are making decisions or prioritizing issues differently as a result the AIP process (e.g., during plan development; after a highlight discussion; after a QPR presentation)? Please give examples.
8. From your perspective, has each district seen meaningful changes in teaching practices in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)?
 - *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed and how the AIP has helped.
 - *[If no]* Why do you think that is?
9. *[Ask as a follow up when someone answers Q8]:* From your perspective, has each district seen meaningful changes in student outcomes in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)?
 - *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
 - *[If no]* Why do you think the AIP process has not yet had any impact on student outcomes? And what do you think will need to change, with regards to the district's plan or the AIP process, to see improvement?
10. To what extent do you think the AIP process helps districts address root causes for student underperformance? Please give examples of root causes that are or are not adequately addressed by the AIP process.
11. In what ways, if any, has the AIP process helped districts' school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.
 - *[Listen/probe for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts, such as resource allocation decision-making, and monitoring of impact.]*

12. In what ways, if any, has participation in the AIP process increased districts' capacity to do this kind of work without support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?

- *[Listen for changes in:*
 - *Communication with stakeholders*
 - *Expectations, organization, and/or role of district-level staff*
 - *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
 - *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to fully understand an issue, inform a plan, monitor progress, and inform adjustments to practice*
 - *Use of district/school leadership teams*

Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:

- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
- *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
- *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
- *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

13. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) have had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) have detracted the most from the district's improvement efforts?

[For impact questions please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components. If respondent says that the plan itself has had the biggest impact, probe for what specific things about the plan have been impactful, including the benchmarking and progress reports included, and how the plan is used – following on the already reported utility of the plan as a communication tool, as a document that provides a cohesive model and message, etc. Probe for what sets 'the plan' apart from any other district improvement plan or other similar improvement plan required by the state. Are the template and guidance materials alone enough to gain the traction they have seen?]

- ***ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials***
- *Process of developing a focused plan*
- *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
- *Feedback from ESE – written and in person*
- *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
- *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
- *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
- *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
- *Focus on outcomes and results*
- *Outside perspective of monitor*
- *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*

- **Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)**
- **Written Quarterly Progress Reports**
- **Presentations to school committee**
- *Periodic convenings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)*

AIP Support and Monitoring *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

14. Thinking specifically of each district's Plan Manager, can you describe how you work with the Plan Manager to support each district? *[Probe for specific information about frequency and nature of interaction. Do they seem to have an effective working relationship?]*

- Do the two of you seem to be operating with the same understanding of ESE guidance for the work? If yes – great! If no – where specifically are there differences in understanding? Is there specific guidance or support from ESE that would help to bridge this gap?

14a. From your perspective, what aspects of the plan manager role most help the district implement its AIP? Consider both how they have helped the district meet AIP benchmarks and goals as well as build capacity to do the work on their own.

[Interviewer: we are most interested in their perspectives of how the role is structured, not in the particular performance of the individual – although we recognize, you may hear some of that too.]

14b. From your perspective as the plan monitor, which aspects of the plan manager role, if any, have been unnecessary or even hindered progress? *[Listen but don't probe for whether a plan manager can be too embedded such that they lose perspective and the ability to push back on the district, and/or act as though they are a member the district team that the district relies on as though they will never leave.]*

Sustainability

15. In terms of sustainability, what indicators do you think would signal that a district is ready to continue this work without the AIP support and monitoring you, and ESE, currently provide? *[Note: If a respondent points to a strong leader as critical to the success of this process, probe for how they know they have a strong, committed leader and what specific, replicable actions the leader takes.]*

- Are there any specific embedded practices that districts ought to demonstrate in order to show readiness to exit?
- What do you think would serve as adequate evidence for ESE to determine that these indicators are in place?

Closing

16. Overall, to what extent are ESE's expectations for you in your role as Plan Monitor clear?
 - In what ways has ESE supported you in your role as Plan Monitor? *[Probe for specific training, resources, meetings, etc.]* What support(s) has been the most important to your ability to serve as an effective Plan Monitor?
 - What support(s), if any, has been the least helpful? Why?
 - Have any aspects of your role been confusing or unclear?
 - Are there any other supports, that you do not currently receive, that would help you in your role as Plan Monitor?
17. *[If they mentioned any experience with other approaches to district-wide improvement in response to Q2]* For those of you who mentioned some experience with district-wide improvement efforts earlier, how effective is the AIP process compared to those initiatives? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please briefly explain your thinking.
18. In what ways, if at all, has the district's philosophy about or approach to district improvement changed as a result of involvement in the AIP process?
19. Could the districts have gotten to where they are without the AIP process? Has the AIP process helped or hindered the districts' overall progress and achievement? Please provide examples.
 - *[Listen/probe for how central the AIP has been to district work.]*
 - *[If applicable]* To what would you most attribute any differences in how successful AIP has been in the districts you work with?
20. Is there any aspect of how the AIP process is designed and/or implemented that could be improved? If yes, can you describe this?
 - Are there any specific supports that AIP districts do not currently receive that you think they need? If so, what are those supports, and why do you think they are important to successful implementation of an AIP?
 - Is there any aspect of the process that could be dropped while still getting the same positive results? *[NOTE: Push hard here on why they think it wouldn't harm implementation to drop whatever they come up with.]*
21. Do you think the AIP process would be beneficial to other districts, if done with a lighter touch? If so, which components of the process would be essential to retain and why? What would the ideal "light touch AIP" process look like?
22. Is there anything else about your experience working with AIP districts that you'd like to share?

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Principal Interview Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. ESE has helped all of these districts develop, implement, and monitor plans to accelerate and sustain district improvement; AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. To do that, we are collecting information from district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and other key stakeholders in the AIP process about improvement efforts at the school and district level. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will identify the districts but not the schools selected, and we will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals.

Prior to this interview, I sent you a document that outlines the scope of this study and some of the issues I have mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Do you have any questions about that document? At your convenience, please sign, scan, and return the form to me.

Permission to Record

The interview will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, please just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

[Prior to the interview, review the background of the district's involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on specific needs and challenges in the district (district review) and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly.]

Background

I would like to start by asking about your background and your role in the district.

1. How long have you worked in the district? How long have you been a principal in this district? What prior experience in the district do you have (what roles)? Have you held a leadership role in other schools and/or other districts? If so, in what role(s)? *[Probe for prior experience with districtwide improvement initiatives.]*
2. What do you see as the main goals and strategies for improvement **in your district** this year? *[Listen for how aware they are of the AIP plan and goals and how those goals do or do not align with their school and individual goals. **Do NOT prompt with AIP language; however, feel free to use AIP language if they indicate a familiarity.]***
 - How do those compare with the main goals and strategies for improvement in your **school**?
 - Do you feel your school's improvement goals are aligned with and complementary to the goals of the district? How do you know? *[Listen for expectations communicated to the principal, and feedback he or she has received from the district, regarding school improvement plan/AIP implementation.]*
 - Did the school and district goals influence the development of your individual educator practice and student outcome goals? If so, then how? If not, then why do you think that was the case? *[Note: These individual goals are a required part of the new state educator evaluation system.]*
3. In what ways, if at all, are any of the goals or strategies for improvement different than in the past? *[Probe for when they changed—to compare with AIP timeline for that district.]*

Plan Development

4. Are you familiar with your district's process for establishing this year's priorities and strategies for improvement? If so, then can you please describe it?
 - How does this year's process for establishing district priorities and strategies for improvement compare with the process used in previous years? *[Listen for whether it has become more effective or has involved more people.]*
 - *[If applicable]* What role did principals/you play in shaping the district's current improvement plan? Has that role changed in recent years?

Plan Implementation

I am interested in hearing more about how the district's goals and strategies for improvement have affected your work.

5. Over the past four to five years, how, if at all, have expectations for **you as a school leader** changed?
 - How have these expectations been communicated to you and by whom?
 - What is your understanding of why these changes were necessary?
 - How, if at all, has the district supported your ability as a school leader to meet these new expectations (e.g., resources, PD, PLC meetings, coaching, feedback, and other ways)?
 - *[For new/newer principals] Can you share your understanding of the changing role of principal in the district?*
6. Over the past four to five years, how, if at all, have expectations for **teachers** changed?
 - How have these expectations been communicated to teachers?
 - To what extent do you think teachers understand why these changes are necessary?
 - In what ways, if at all, has the district supported you in helping teachers meet these new expectations?
7. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent is your staff **aware** of the district's primary goals for improvement?
 - On a scale from 1 to 5, to what extent do they **understand** what those goals mean for them?
 - On a scale from 1 to 5, to what extent are teachers in your school **bought into** the district's current primary goals?]
8. Has your school received any new training, resources, or support in the past few years to help you or your staff meet the district's goals? If yes, then what are they? Which have been most useful? Which have been unused/ less useful?
9. From your perspective, how do the district's primary goals and related initiatives align, integrate, or conflict with other key initiatives underway in the district?

[Key statewide initiatives include Educator Evaluation, New Curriculum Frameworks, PARCC, RETELL/WIDA; key district initiatives may include literacy across the curriculum, PBIS, wraparound, and other initiatives.]

 - Do teachers view these as coherent strategies to improve teaching and learning, or as a series of stand-alone initiatives? *[Probe for which initiatives seem to work together and which are outliers or distracters.]*
 - Are there any ways in which the district's and school's goals are in competition with one another? *[Listen for whether various initiatives are part of a common vision or a conflicting cacophony of projects. Also, listen for whether the school works with the district or feels "put upon" by the district.]*
10. To what extent do families and community members **understand** the district's priorities and goals?
 - To what extent do they take active roles to **support** these goals? In what ways? In what ways, if any, has their involvement changed in recent years?
11. What do you know of the school committee's role in supporting district improvement efforts?

- *[If you know something.] Do you know if they have become more or less supportive/focused on district improvement efforts in recent years?*
12. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the district followed through on its goals and strategic initiatives over the past three years (two years for Salem)? Has the level of follow through been more, less, or about the same in recent years as it was prior to that? To what do you attribute the increase/decrease in follow-through?
- *[Listen for whether the changes are caused by the AIP or changes in district leadership, school committee, and other groups.]*
 - *[Listen (but do not prompt) for how follow-through has improved at the school level as well.]*

Plan Impact

I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which district and school practices have, or have not, changed over the past three years (two years for Salem) as a result of the district's focus on improving student outcomes. *[Use information from the earlier discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

13. What structures, systems, or policies have been put in place in the past three years (two years for Salem) to support teaching and learning? *[Probe for any changes in how district and/or school leadership teams are structured and used.]*
- Which of these feel like they would be likely to continue despite teacher turnover? *[Probe for specific examples.]*
 - Thinking of all these changes, how many do you think would continue if/when you as **principal** leave the school? Why? How many would survive a change at the **district** level? Why?
 - Which of these changes have become embedded enough that they are just the "district way"?
 - *[Listen, but do not probe (because it comes up again later), for structures to help principals collaborate and improve practice.]*
14. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the district is making decisions or prioritizing issues differently as a result of the AIP process (for example during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples.
15. Do you think that the district's recent improvement efforts have had a positive impact on **teaching practices in your school**? What specific changes, at the classroom level, have you seen as a result?
- *[If yes] What specific goals or strategies have supported these changes? [Probe for specific changes in the way teachers are supported or monitored.]*
 - *[If no] When, if ever, do you think there will be an impact on instructional supports and/or teaching practices? And what do you think will need to change, with regard to your district's efforts, to observe an impact on instructional supports and teaching practices?*
16. Do you think that the district's recent efforts have led to improved **student outcomes in your school**?

- *[If yes]* In what areas have you seen improvements? Do you attribute this improvement to particular goals or strategies?
 - *[If no]* Do you believe there will eventually be an improvement in student outcomes, if the district continues on its current course?
 - *[If yes]* What type of improvement do you anticipate and do you believe that specific parts of the district's improvement process, or specific strategies, will contribute to this?
 - *[If no]* What do you think will need to change, with regard to your plan or the district's improvement process, or strategies, to see an impact on student outcomes?
17. To what extent do the district improvement efforts address the root causes for student underperformance?
18. Of all of the district's improvement efforts in the past three years, which do you think has had the biggest impact on student learning? *[If respondent says that the plan itself has had the biggest impact, probe for what specific things about the plan have been impactful, including the benchmarking and progress reports included.]*
- *[Listen for:*
 - *Development of a focused plan*
 - *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
 - *Ongoing use of data at the district or school level to monitor implementation and impact—If mentioned, probe for specific examples*
 - *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
 - *Outside perspective of monitor*
 - *Engagement of school committee*
 - *Monthly monitoring and feedback*
 - *Additional supports and resources to principals—If mentioned, probe for specific examples*
 - *Additional supports and resources to teachers—If mentioned, probe for specific examples*
 - *Other]*
19. How do the district's recent improvement efforts compare with other district improvement efforts you have been part of (in this district or elsewhere)? Please be as specific as possible *(especially if they note differences compared to other efforts)*
20. Do you think that the district's recent improvement efforts have helped you and the other principals in the district become more effective/impactful instructional leaders? If yes, then please provide specific examples.
- *[If no]* Why do you think that is?
 - In what ways, if any, has the district supported you in making and sustaining these changes? *[Listen for whether the level or nature of support has changed.]*

- What structures or policies are in place for monitoring principals' performance and holding them accountable for these new roles and responsibilities?

[Listen for:]

- To what extent do you feel the district's improvement efforts have increased your **school's** capacity to engage in self-directed inquiry and improvement? How do you know? *[Probe for specific examples.]*
- To what extent do you feel the district's improvement efforts have improved your **staff's** focus on continuous improvement and their capacity to improve their teaching practice continuously? How do you know? *[Probe for specific examples.]*

Sustainability

Before we finish, I would like to ask you a few questions about how this work has changed over time and how you think continued improvement in the district can be sustained. *[Note: If a respondent points to a strong leader as critical to the success of this process, probe for how they know they have a strong, committed leader and what specific, replicable actions the leader takes.]*

21. Has the district's overall approach to district and school improvement changed significantly over the past X years, and if so, in what ways?
 - *[If yes]* To what would you attribute those changes? *[If not mentioned, then probe accordingly.]*
 - Has there been a transition of district leadership during the last two years?
 - *[If yes]* Which of the prior leadership's goals have continued and what aspects have been modified or abandoned?
 - *[If no]* How do you think a transition in district leadership would impact your improvement process? Are there any systems or structures in place specifically to ensure continuity and sustainability?

Support and Monitoring

As you may know, as one of the eight AIP districts, your district currently receives support from a plan manager/management team and plan monitor to help develop, implement, and monitor its district improvement plan.

22. Have you had any interactions with your plan manager or plan monitor *[refer to by names]*? In what ways?
 - *[If yes]* What has been the nature of your interaction? What value, if any, have they added to your improvement process?
23. Do you feel that you have a clear understanding of the data that is being collected and reported on at the district level as part of the AIP process?

Closing

24. We understand that the current district improvement efforts are a lot of work. Overall, is the effort worth it, or would your district, or school, be better off without the added

distraction?

- Could you and your colleagues have made the progress you have described without the district's help?

25. Is there any aspect of your district's or school's current improvement process that could be improved? If yes, can you please describe this?

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: Teacher Focus Group Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity, teacher practices, and ultimately, student outcomes. To do that, we are collecting information from district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and other key stakeholders in the AIP process about improvement efforts at the school and district level. Please note that we are interested in your experiences as a teacher in this district, considering recent school and district improvement efforts, not your level of familiarity with the AIP process or the AIP itself. Your input about your experiences as a teacher in this district will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will identify the districts but not the schools we visit, and we will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals.

In front of you is a document that outlines the scope of this study and some of the issues I have mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Do you have any questions about that document? If not, then please go ahead and sign your name at the bottom indicating that you consent to participate.

Permission to Record

The focus group will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, please just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the focus group.

[Prior to focus group, review the background of the district's involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on specific needs and challenges in the district (district review) and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly.]

[Use the following general probes, as needed, throughout:

- ***Does anyone have a different opinion?***
- ***Is there anything else that has not yet been mentioned?***
- ***Would anyone else like to respond?]***

Background

1. I would like to start by having each person introduce him or herself, first names only, and tell me:
 - How long you have been at this school?
 - How long you have been in the district?
 - Which grade(s) and subjects you teach?
 - What, if any, other roles you have at the school?
2. What do you see as the main goals and strategies for improvement **in your district** right now? We can start with anyone. *[Listen for how aware of the AIP plan and goals they are and how those goals do or do not align with their school and individual goals. Do NOT prompt with AIP language; however, feel free to use AIP language if they indicate a familiarity.]*
 - How do those district strategies compare to the main goals and strategies for improvement **in your school**?
3. Did the school and district goals influence the development of your individual educator practice and student outcome goals? If so, then how? If not, then why do you think that was the case? *[Note these individual goals are a required part of the new state educator evaluation system. Listen (but do not probe) for the extent to which teachers were involved in development of the plan/priorities?]*
4. From your perspective, do these district strategies for improvement address the **root causes** of student underachievement? If not, what do you think should be done differently?

Plan Implementation

5. How, if at all, have the district's expectations for teachers changed in the last four to five years? How have these expectations been communicated?
[If applicable:]
 - How has the **district** supported you with these new expectations (e.g., resources, PD, PLC meetings, learning walks, and other ways)?
 - How have **school leaders** supported you with these new expectations (e.g., feedback, common planning time support, and other ways)?
 - *[Listen/probe: Have any new **systems or structures** been put in place over the*

past four to five years to address the district's goals? If so, then what are they (e.g., committees, teams, regular meetings, or memos)? Listen for new systems and structures at both the school and district level that do not rely on specific individuals.]

- *[Listen/probe: Has your school, or any of you individually, received any new **training, resources, or other support** in the past few years to help you or your colleagues meet the district's goals? If yes, then what are they? Which have been most useful? Which have been unused/less useful?]*
 - In what ways do **teachers** support each other with these new expectations?
 - *[Listen for leadership roles and opportunities for collaboration.]*
6. What is your understanding of why these changes were necessary? To what extent do you support and buy in to these new expectations?
7. Are teachers monitored or held accountable, in any way, for these new roles and responsibilities? Please describe. *[Probe for increase in how frequently teachers are observed and receive feedback; reviews of lesson plans, action plans, team meeting notes; and district walkthroughs.]*
- Is this monitoring or accountability helpful? If so, then how? If not, then why not?
8. We know that the education field is changing rapidly and a lot is being asked of teachers—new curriculum frameworks, educator evaluation, PARCC, WIDA/RETELL, and maybe some districtwide curriculum initiatives. Do you feel that these are all working together or do they feel like a bunch of stand-alone initiatives? Do some frameworks conflict with others?
- [Note that key district initiatives may include literacy across the curriculum, PBIS, wraparound, and other initiatives.]*
- *[Probe for which initiatives seem to work together and which are outliers or distracters.]*
 - *[Listen for whether various initiatives are part of a common vision or a conflicting cacophony of projects. Also, listen for whether the school works with the district or feels “put upon” by the district.]*
7. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the district followed through on its goals and strategic initiatives this year? Has the level of follow through been more, less, or about the same in recent years as it was prior to that? To what do you attribute the increase/decrease in follow-through?
- *[Listen, but do not probe, for whether the changes are caused by the AIP or changes in district leadership, school committee, and other groups.]*
 - *[Listen, but do not probe, for how follow-through has improved at the school level as well.]*

Plan Impact

I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which district and school practices have, or have not, changed over the past few years as a result of the district's focus on improving student outcomes. *[Use information from the earlier discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

8. Overall, do you think that the district's recent improvement efforts have had an impact on **your teaching practices**? If so, in what ways? How (if at all) have they impacted **schoolwide** teaching practices? How do you know?
 - *[If yes] What specific goals or strategies have supported these changes? [Help respondents distinguish between district and school improvement efforts—focus on the district in particular.]*
 - *[Listen for to what extent teachers are on the same page—using same teaching practices, and other ways.]*
9. Do you think that the district's recent efforts have helped **improve outcomes** for students? How do you know?
 - *[If yes] In what areas have you seen improvements? To what would you attribute this improvement?*
 - *[If no] Do you believe there will eventually be an improvement in student outcomes, if current improvement strategies continue to be implemented?*
 - *[If yes] What type of improvement do you anticipate and do you believe that specific components of the district's improvement efforts will contribute to this?*
 - *[If no] What do you think will need to change, with regard to your district's current improvement efforts, to see an impact on student outcomes?*
 - *[If they say that teaching practices are improving but student outcomes are not] How do they explain this discrepancy?*
10. Of all the of the district's improvement efforts in the past three years, which do you think has had the **biggest** impact on student learning? Does anyone have a different opinion?
11. Of all the district's improvement efforts in the past three years, which do you think have had the **least** impact on, or perhaps even gotten in the way of, student learning? *[Steer away from families, budget, community factors, and other nonschool factors and focus on district plan.]*
 - Is there something else the district should be doing, but isn't, to improve student outcomes?
12. *[If time allows]* To what extent do you think families and community members **understand** the district's priorities and goals?
 - To what extent do they take active roles to **support** these goals? In what ways? In what ways, if any, has their involvement changed in recent years?

Sustainability

Before we wrap up, I would like to hear your thoughts on how continued improvement in the district can be sustained over time.

14. Of all of the **district's** improvement efforts, which have become embedded enough that they are just "how we do things here"? *[Note, listen for school efforts that have become embedded as well.]*
15. Is there any aspect of your district's or schools current improvement process that could be improved?

Closing

16. Is there anything else anyone would like to share about your district's current improvement efforts?

Thank you all again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: DSAC Focus Group Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan, or AIP, process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Study Purpose

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. In addition, I understand that you all have been involved in helping to facilitate a modified version of this accelerated improvement planning in Level 3 districts. AIR's charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved or who will be involved in the future.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name and will not attribute any quotes to individuals or name the positions of individuals. We will endeavor to protect your confidentiality and privacy to the greatest extent possible; for example, we will omit any details that would identify respondents.

Permission to Record

The focus group will take no more than 90 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin.

Prior to the interview, review the Level 3 survey results, overview of districts involved, and description of the Level 3 AIP Process. In all questions, listen/probe for:

- **Impacts of turnover in district leadership**
- **Nature of the relationship with DSACs prior to, during, and after AIP engagement. Was this the district's first engagement with DSACs, or a continuation of prior involvement?**
- **What was an issue early on vs. what remains an issue now?**
- **Any time they say something about 'the plan' – please clarify what exactly they mean by that – do they mean the written document, or how it's implemented, supported, and/or monitored?**

Use the following general probes, as needed, throughout:

- **Does anyone have a different opinion?**
- **Is there anything else that has not yet been mentioned?**
- **Would anyone else like to respond?**

Background (5-10 min)

I would like to start by hearing a little bit about each person's background. Please tell me:

1. Which districts are currently engaging with a Level 3 AIP with your support and for how long [to distinguish between those doing L3 AIP without DSAC support, and to distinguish from all other districts DSACs engage with]?
2. Whether you work with any other individuals to support the AIP process in this district; and
3. What prior experience, if any, you have working with this district.

AIP Plan Development (15 min)

Given that the first major phase of the AIP process is Plan Development, I would like to start by spending some time talking about the development of the districts' AIPs. We will then talk about AIP implementation and impact, and will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability.

4. Can you describe your approach to helping the district develop their most recently approved AIP? We can start with anyone.
 - [Listen for (and probe)]
 - **What supports they provided, and who provided it. [Please ask for names and clarify their roles. We have some DSAC staff hired specifically for Level 3 AIP support (Bruce, Sally, Paul) but other DSAC staff may also provide support for the process. Would be good to distinguish if/when/how this happens.]**
 - **How much of the work the district did vs. the DSAC team/consultant**
 - **How did the district use/leverage the supports**
 - **Who the district involved and why**
 - **Whether there was ample opportunity during plan development to identify**

how this would get traction where previous district improvement plans didn't? (Probe for how it addresses existing barriers to implementing the AIP.)

- *Whether the development of the plan helped the district reflect on systems/structures, identify root causes of underperformance and make plans to address them*
 - *Whether the district had exposure to examples of other districts' AIPs? If so, how were those shared and was that helpful?*
 - *Other supports from ESE throughout the process]*
 - For those of you who work with districts that began this process last year or the year before, how, if at all, has your approach to helping develop the plans changed over time? [*Probe for lessons learned about how to be more effective as well as adjustments they made in response to district context.*]
 - **What 'aha moments,' if any, have you had?**
 - Of all the supports you provided during plan development, which do you believe were most important to ensuring the development of a clear and focused plan, and why, and has this changed over time? Were there any supports you provided during plan development that you think the district could have done without, or that you would, in retrospect, have altered in some way to be more effective?
5. Can you describe the ways in which the district received feedback from the DSAC or ESE on the plan during the process of plan development and approval this year?
- In what ways, if any, did the feedback on the plan result in better work in the district? [*Probe for specific evidence.*]
 - [*Listen/probe for:*
 - *Whether the feedback was mainly given AS the district developed the plan, or whether it was more formal and district.*
 - *How the feedback could be more useful, as appropriate]*
6. For those of you who work with districts that began this process last year or the year before, do you feel the district has gotten better at developing a focused plan with a few clear priorities and measurable outcomes? If so, in what ways? To what do you attribute this improvement? If not, what suggestions do you have to help the district improve in this area? Probe for concrete suggestions/actions the district could take

AIP Plan Implementation (15 min)

7. Can you describe the specific strategies you use or actions you take to help the district ensure effective implementation of the plan? Note that effective implementation includes both meeting the benchmarks in the plan and building the district's capacity.
- How do you help the district to understand what effective implementation looks like?
 - How do you know if district capacity is growing? What specific capacities are you trying to help them build?
 - [*Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
 - *With whom does the DSAC team/consultant work? Why? How frequently? How*

do you decide who to involve in the AIP, and when? (Again, as interviewers please strive to clarify who specifically is working with the district – name and role within the DSAC team)

- **How do you decide where/how to focus your time and energy? And how do you decide who on the DSAC team should engage with the district around their AIP?**
 - **How do you personally know when to work around district inefficiencies vs. help the district tackle them head-on (e.g., ineffective staff or processes)?**
 - *How do keep a sense of urgency for this work, especially in the face of district resistance (e.g., district thinks ESE is pushing too hard too fast, or you see an area that you think needs attention that they aren't addressing, or district is side-stepping a root cause, or you feel they are making a poor decision)?*
8. For those of you who work with districts that began this process last year or the year before, how, if at all, have you modified your approach over time to ensure effective implementation? *[Probe for indications of whether the district is getting better at follow-through on implementation of the plan.]*
- Which of these modifications were a direct result of shifts in ESE guidance for your role vs. your own personal approach?
 - What 'aha moments,' if any, have you had about how to help the district ensure effective implementation?
- 8a. Which of the specific strategies or actions that you have taken do you believe have most helped the district to meet benchmarks and build capacity (e.g., ways to ask questions, structure their work, when do 'do for' vs. 'do with' vs. 'you do, I watch')?
9. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is little to no implementation of the plan and 5 is full implementation, how successful have districts been in following through on the activities outlined in the AIP? How do you know?
- 9a. Has the level of follow through been more, less, or about the same in recent years as it was prior to that? To what do you attribute the increase/decrease in follow-through?
- *[Listen for if the changes are due to the AIP or changes in district leadership, school committee, etc.]*
 - *[Listen for (but don't prompt) for how follow-through has improved at the school level as well.]*

AIP Plan Impact (25 min)

Now, I want you to reflect on your AIP work and experience thus far. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work has or has not impacted district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

First, how many of you have been involved with a Level 3 AIP district long enough to start seeing impact? *[Note who/which districts indicate they have begun to see impact.]* For those of you that have begun to see an impact...

10. What permanent structures and systems for improvement has the district put in place since beginning to implement their AIP? Please provide specific examples of what has

changed. *[Probe for changes in how districts organize, structure, and staff their central office, and how they use their district and/or school leadership teams, including how they leverage principal meetings.]*

- To what extent was this a result of the AIP process? Are there specific aspects of the AIP process in particular that helped or hindered the development of these structures and systems?
11. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the district is making decisions or prioritizing issues differently as a result of the AIP process (for example during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples.
12. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in teaching practices since finalizing their AIP? since the AIP process began?
13. From your perspective, has the district seen meaningful changes in student outcomes since beginning to implement their AIP? *[If they only mention MCAS scores, prompt for possible changes in other student outcomes, like attendance, graduation, etc.]*
- *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the AIP process do you think most contributed to that impact? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
 - *[If no]* Why do you think the AIP process has not yet had any impact on student outcomes? And what do you think will need to change, with regards to the district's plan or the AIP process, to see improvement?
14. To what extent do you think the AIP process helps the district address root causes for student underperformance? Please provide specific examples.
15. In what ways, if any, has the AIP process helped the district's school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples. *[Listen/probe for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts such as resource allocation, decision-making, and monitoring of impact.]*
16. In what ways, if any, has participation in the AIP process increased the district's capacity to develop, implement, and reflect on a focused strategic plan (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?
- *[Listen for changes in:*
 - *Communication with stakeholders*
 - *Expectations, organization, and/or roles of district-level staff*
 - *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
 - *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to fully understand an issue, inform a plan, monitor progress, and inform adjustments to practice*
 - *Use of district/school leadership teams*
- Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:*
- *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
 - *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
 - *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
 - *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

17. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, including the training and support you provide, developing a focused plan, monitoring implementation and outcomes, etc., which aspects (if any) have had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) have detracted the most from your district improvement efforts?
- *ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials*
 - *Process of developing a focused plan*
 - *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
 - *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
 - *Implementation support from DSAC/consultants*
 - *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
 - *Focus on outcomes and results*
 - *Periodic convenings with other AIP districts*
18. Do you (individually or collectively) play any role in helping the districts monitor their AIP? If so, please describe.
- When do you push/ask districts for more data/evidence and why? How do you REALLY know if meaningful change is happening?

Sustainability (5-10 min)

19. In terms of sustainability, what indicators do you think would signal that a district is ready to continue this work without the AIP support and monitoring you currently provide?
[Note: If a respondent points to a strong leader as critical to the success of this process, probe for how they know they have a strong, committed leader and what specific, replicable ACTIONS the leader takes.]
- Are there any specific embedded practices that districts ought to demonstrate in order to show readiness to do this work on their own?
 - What do you think would serve as adequate evidence for ESE to determine that these indicators are in place?

Closing (15 min)

20. Overall, to what extent are ESE's expectations for you clear regarding support for districts with a Level 3 AIP?
- In what ways has ESE supported you in your efforts with the Level 3 AIP? *[Probe for specific training, resources, meetings, etc.]* What support(s) has been the most important to your ability to effectively support these districts with Level 3 AIP development, implementation, and monitoring?
 - Are there any other supports, that you do not currently receive, that would help you better support districts with a Level 3 AIP?
21. In what ways, if at all, has the district's philosophy about or approach to district improvement changed as a result of involvement in the AIP process?
22. Is there any aspect of how the AIP process for Level 3 districts is designed and/or implemented that could be improved? If yes, can you describe how and why?
- *Are there any specific supports that Level 3 AIP districts do not currently receive that*

you think they should? If so, what are those supports, and why do you think they are important to successful implementation of a Level 3 AIP?

- Does it matter whether a district receives support from DSAC, an outside consultant, or both?
23. As you may know, most Level 4 AIP districts currently receive support via a part-time Plan Manager and Plan Monitor. Do you think the AIP process is still beneficial to these Level 3 districts, without those dedicated supports? Which components of the AIP process are critical to the success of an AIP in a district? *[Listen also for what is critical in terms of leadership and buy-in, both at the school and district levels.]*
24. Is there anything else about your experience working with Level 3 AIP districts that you'd like to share?

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process: ESE Staff Interview Protocol

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent, non-profit, behavioral research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process. I am here today as a member of the AIR evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

Confidentiality

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will aggregate findings at the district and stakeholder level, and we will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals. However, all of you hold leadership roles in the AIP process, so it is possible that readers of the report may infer identities.

In front of you is a document that outlines the scope of the study and some of the issues I have mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Please go ahead review the document. If you do not have any questions, then please sign your name at the bottom indicating that you consent to participate and return it to me. I have extra copies if you would like to keep one for your records.

Permission to Record

The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, please just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

Background

1. To start, can you please describe your primary roles and responsibilities, as they relate to AIP?
2. What was the rationale for designing the AIP process as it currently exists, including specific components of the process, such as the Plan Manager/Management team and Monitor? What evidence/research did you use to develop and refine the process?

AIP Plan Impact

I would like to spend some time talking about your perspective on the impacts that the AIP process has had on district and school improvement.

3. What kind of impact are you seeing as a result of this work, in terms of **district** capacity?

[Probe for:

- *Planning*
- *Follow-through*
- *Monitoring]*

4. What kind of impact are you seeing as a result of this work, in terms of **school** capacity?

[Probe for:

- *School leadership*
- *Instructional improvement/teacher practices*
- *Student outcomes*
 - ***Does the AIP process address root causes for student underperformance?***

Also interested in:

- *Impact on family and community involvement?*
- *Impact on School Committee support and involvement?]*

[For both Questions 3 and 4, probe for how and why impact across districts varies.]

5. Which aspect(s) of the AIP process (plan, Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, or anything else) has had the **biggest impact** on student outcomes? *[Probe for specific information about each aspect of the process, e.g., what is it about the Plan Manager or what the Plan Manager does that has had such a big impact?]* Does this vary, or is it consistent across districts?
 - *[If applicable]* What factors or combination of factors seem to most contribute to this variation?

AIP Support and Monitoring

I want to talk now specifically about the supports AIP districts receive including support from ESE, a Plan Manager or management team, and a Plan Monitor.

6. To what extent does the **amount** of support each district receives from ESE, including support from Plan Managers and Plan Monitors, vary?
 - *[If appropriate]* In what ways, and why does support vary?

7. To what extent does the **quality** of support that each district receives from ESE vary, including support from Plan Managers and Plan Monitors?
 - *[If appropriate]* In what ways, and why does the quality of support vary?
[For both Questions 6 and 7, listen for whether variation is by design or just how things ended up.]
 - To what extent does it matter whether a district has a single individual or a team that acts as the **Plan Manager**? *[If appropriate]* In what ways, and why does it matter?
 - To what extent does it matter whether a district has the **SAME** Plan Manager throughout the AIP process? *[If appropriate]* In what ways, and why does it matter?
 - To what extent does it matter whether a district has the **SAME** Plan Monitor throughout the AIP process? *[If appropriate]* In what ways, and why does it matter?
8. We are familiar with the AIP exit criteria, but we would like you to talk about what specific strategies and evidence you look for given your expertise that indicates a district is ready to move out of the AIP process. How do **you** know when a district is ready to manage its own district improvement without a Plan Manager or Plan Monitor?
9. What do you look for to determine whether a district is building capacity as a result of the AIP process? Are there any ways in which ESE could encourage further or more rapid capacity building? What specific capacities are you trying to build?

Sustainability

We understand that the AIP process is a lot of work, for both district and school leaders and staff, as well as AIP Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and ESE.

10. What kind of effort and resources, including both human and fiscal, are you currently putting into this work?
11. Given that there are always going to be constraints on time, funding, and human resources, which AIP-related activities do you think give you the biggest “bang for your buck?”
 - Where do you feel you are spending too much time and the pay-off is not worth it (low leverage)?
 - *[Probe for ESE supports, Plan Manager, and Plan Monitor.]*
12. We know that ESE is very interested in how it might implement the AIP process with a “lighter touch.” If the AIP process were to be implemented with a “lighter touch,” then which components, if any, could the process live without and why? Which components would be essential to keep and why?

Wrapping Up

Before we wrap up, I would just like to ask you a few questions about the overall effectiveness of the AIP process across districts and spend some time talking about ways the process could be improved in the future.

13. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all effective and 5 is very effective, how effective is the AIP process compared with other district improvement initiatives that you have been involved with?
 - *[If there is time]* Are all AIP districts making progress? Can you briefly describe the

progress or lack thereof you see in each of the eight districts?

- *[If no]* Do you believe each of the districts will begin to make progress if they “stay the current course” or will specific changes need to be made to the plan, the process, and/or the people?
14. Based on your experience with AIP districts, which characteristics, if any, do you think make a district particularly well-suited to implement the AIP process successfully (e.g., leadership, size, and other characteristics)? Which characteristics, if any, do you think would particularly hinder a district from having success with this approach?
 15. Knowing what you know now, are there any ways in which you wish you had designed the AIP process differently?
 - Are there any specific ways in which the process could be improved in terms of its ability to impact district capacity and improve teaching practice and student outcomes?
 16. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the AIP process?

Thanks for taking the time to speak with me.