

Building State Capacity to Support Evidence-Based Improvement



In 2016, the Delaware Department of Education decided to expand its role by providing more direct and extensive technical assistance and support for schools' professional learning efforts. The department saw the need to advance implementation of new professional learning standards and more effectively use data to guide improvements in educational practice. To help build capacity to support schools' evidence-based improvement efforts, Delaware turned to the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center (MACC) at WestEd.

THE CHALLENGES

- 1 Several years after Delaware's adoption of professional learning standards based on Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, statewide surveys and other data indicated that teachers felt they lacked professional learning experiences differentiated to their individualized needs.
- 2 The Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) knew that schools were collecting data and saw data use as key to improving professional learning. But it also recognized that neither schools nor the department itself had the necessary expertise to effectively analyze and use data to guide professional learning improvements.
- 3 After launching an initiative that provided grants to selected schools to reimagine and improve teacher professional learning, DDOE soon recognized that for the initiative to be successful, grantees needed technical assistance and other guidance beyond what the department had traditionally provided, particularly in the areas of using data for planning and monitoring.

THE SOLUTIONS

DDOE called on the MACC and, through it, the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders to review both the grantees' improvement efforts and the department's efforts to support grantees.

The centers provided guidance and modeling as they analyzed the quality of schools' data, surveyed grantees, gathered information from the DDOE, and conducted site visits to selected schools.

DDOE and the MACC created a midyear check-in protocol that, according to DDOE's Director of Assessment, Theresa Bennett, "was directly aligned to our needs," helping sites and the state "calibrate the evidence collected" using a research-based model.

Based on analysis of the midyear protocol, DDOE worked with the MACC to create questions that guided site visits, interviews, and walkthroughs, "allowing liaisons to provide specific, differentiated feedback to grantee principals and teacher leaders," according to Kathy Kelly, DDOE project lead.

THE RESULTS

With the Centers' guidance, DDOE effectively **expanded the expertise** it needed in order to provide greater support for schools; Learning Forward recently described DDOE as "demonstrating how a state education agency can be an enabler for substantive change" by becoming "thought partners and critical friends to school-based practitioners."

MACC survey results indicate that grantees view DDOE as having played a **critical role in ensuring successful experiences and outcomes**, providing support that enhanced their understanding of the professional learning standards, and guiding their use of data to inform professional learning improvements.

Grantees reported **positive experience** with, and results from, their professional learning efforts funded by the state; they expressed strong interest in continuing the professional learning activities, regardless of external funding support.

As a result of the Centers' guidance in the professional learning grants initiative, "schools showed **great improvement** in how evidence was being selected, its use and purpose," according to DDOE's Bennett.

As a result of what had been accomplished through its professional learning grants initiative, the DDOE decided — despite sizable statewide budget cuts — to expand the initiative, funding another cohort of schools. DDOE's Kelly says, "We see our internal processes and **level of technical expertise increasing**, which in turn, allows us to build capacity at the school/district level."

“It is one thing to aspire to collect valid and reliable evidence at the SEA level and quite another to make it happen . . . we needed a partner to help us with the quality and efficacy of the evidence.”

— Theresa Bennett, DDOE's Director of Assessment