

Oklahoma Race to the Top
Regional Meetings: December 14 – 16, 2009

Executive Summary of Discussion Group Feedback

This document summarizes the recurring themes from the small group discussions held in Woodward, Altus, Ardmore, McAlester, Tulsa, and Oklahoma City. Participants included teachers, board members, superintendents from approximately 159 school districts, as well as community leaders, parents, higher education and career tech representatives.

Great Teachers and Leaders

Effectiveness

Teachers need more time and resources for collaboration with other teachers, professional development, and technology integration.

- Professional development should be effective and ongoing throughout the year, tailored to needs of individual teachers and relevant to improving student achievement.
- Online, on-demand professional development is needed.
- Technology integration is difficult to address within the regular school day. Even when teachers and administrators have the technology, they often do not receive adequate training on how to use it.
- Provide opportunities for teachers to have common planning times and to observe the classroom best practices of other teachers.
- Reduce paperwork at the teacher and administrator level.

Expand peer mentoring and coaching for teachers and administrators.

- Schools have high, costly turnover rates.
- The Commission for Teacher Preparation, OU's K-20 Center for Education Renewal, OEA, and OSU have an effective mentoring partnership.
- The Toledo Mentoring Program provides a good model.
- Increase mentoring and professional development for alternatively certified teachers on classroom management.

Develop community partnerships to address the out-of-school factors that impede student achievement and hamper teacher effectiveness (social and psychological, economic, hunger, health and attendance issues).

- Students cannot learn if their fundamental needs are not being met.
- Schools are unable to address external issues without community support.
- Schools who already provide wrap-around services could serve as a benchmark.

Recruitment

- Increase pay to the regional average.
- Every state bordering Oklahoma offers signing bonuses to teachers.
- It is difficult to recruit teachers to rural areas. Offer an incentive such as paying college tuition for teachers who agree to stay in a rural district for a certain number of years.

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-Offer signing bonuses and incentives for teachers who work in hard to staff schools and subjects.

Retention

- Create a system that supports and values teachers so they can support and value students.
- Current system is punitive rather than rewarding.
- Improve school working conditions, infrastructure and support systems for teachers.
- Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) provide support for teachers to stay in the classroom.
- Teachers are overloaded with prescribed testing mandates.

Evaluation

- Evaluations should be based on a growth model of individual student progress.
- Reward educators for improvement rather than for years of service.
- An effective evaluation model will require extensive training at all levels.
- There is a lack of time for administrators to adequately evaluate teachers.
- Any new evaluation process should include performance pay options for teachers in non-testing subjects.
- The Tulsa Public Schools/Gates Foundation model holds promise for the rest of the state.
- The Cornerstone model used by Ardmore and Plainview is also effective.
- Evaluations should be based on more than test scores, incorporating peer review, classroom observation, etc.
- LEA's should work with teachers to build a model that works best at the local level.
- Streamline and adjust evaluation process between new and career teachers.
- Consider a co-principal model that allows one principal to focus on management and one to focus on instructional support. (Colorado)

Policy Issues

- There is too much mandated testing.
- Teacher improvement programs should be ongoing for a full year rather than two months.
- The state needs exit strategies for ineffective teachers.
- Current State Department of Education stimulus fund reimbursement policy is providing reimbursement quickly enough.
- Community values are hard to change when considering changes in the school calendar.

Turning Around Lowest Achieving Schools

- Models that replace principals and teachers may work in rare cases, but the real challenges in low performing schools come from beyond the four walls of the schools.
- It is hard for students to learn when their basic needs are not being met.
- Provide wrap-around services.
- Community School models are effective.

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- Expand AVID program that teaches study skills and provides a support system for students. (Currently in place in four Oklahoma schools). In place statewide in Texas.
- Bring in turnaround coaches and teams of like-minded people to set changes in place.
- Offer summer and after-school programs for high-risk students.
- Create a strong connection between school, parent (or guardian) and community.
- Raise expectations.

Standards and Assessment

- A growth model would provide meaningful feedback for students, parents and teachers.
- Students should be able to get feedback on assessments within 24 hours. (Northwest Evaluation Association model).
- Although participants were not familiar with the common core standards, they like the concept and hope that assessments will replace current barrage of required tests.
- Assessment data must be useful, easy to analyze and applicable to improving student achievement at the classroom level.
- There are concerns about sustainability of effort after third year of grant funding.
- Time will be needed to learn new core standards and develop instructional methods for meeting the new standards.

Data Systems

- Develop an integrated, statewide data and accounting system featuring individualized student data and analysis. (North and South Carolina)
- Test coordinators are needed at the district level.
- WAVE is not functional.
- Extensive professional development and strong technical support will be needed for successful use of data systems.
- Real-time data is needed for student intervention and tracking individual student growth.
- Access to individualized student data will help address student mobility issues.
- Data is used to punish teachers and schools rather than improve student performance.
- Parental involvement and access is needed.

STEM

- Provide tuition assistance for math and science teachers.
- Include a strong career tech component. Pre-Engineering academies are working well.
- Integration of curriculum is key.
- Provide tuition assistance for master's level study.
- Develop innovative teaching practices in math and science.
- More training is needed at the elementary level.
- Concurrent enrollment for STEM students.
- Mandatory higher-level math is not the answer.

Most Promising Ideas

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- Increased professional development for great teachers and leaders.
- Using assessment data to improve student achievement.
- Providing opportunities for the most challenged teachers to learn from coaches and mentors.
- Educator involvement in the process.
- Increased technology support at the local level.
- Local decision-making on many aspects of the grant.

Challenges

- Cultural and demographic shifts have changed student needs dramatically.
- Unfunded mandates.
- An outdated mentality toward schools and learning creates barriers to change.
- Inconsistency in teaching and learning due to turnover among teachers and principals.
- Lack of time and concerns over sustainability of efforts.
- Changes in school culture will require changes at all levels.
- Fear of top-down controls.

If you had a magic wand, what would you do to transform schools?

- Improve technology access, including a laptop for every student.
- Implement one-on-one curriculum.
- Track individual student growth.
- Offer wrap-around services for students.
- Provide ongoing professional development and collaboration time for teachers and leaders.
- Offer an extended day and year for at-risk students.
- Expand extra-curricular offerings.
- Operate with flexible scheduling at the high school level, allowing students to advance at their own speed.
- Increase parental and community involvement,
- Assure that kids are on grade level by third grade.
- Increase the number summer and after-school programs.
- Extend the school day.
- Reduce class sizes.
- Remove the burden of under-funding.
- Empowerment of teachers and staff.