

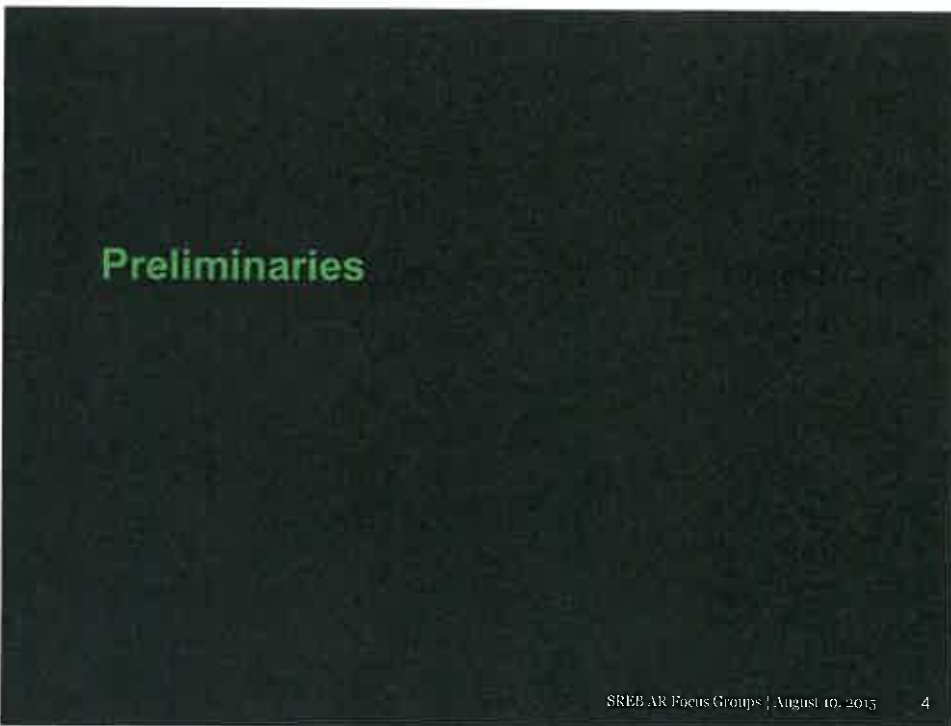
**Focus Group Report on
TESS and LEADS
Implementation**

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Little Rock

Never ask a question that
you don't want **answered**.

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Our charge

To gather feedback from Arkansas teachers, principals and central office staff on the design and implementation of the Arkansas's Teacher and Excellence Support System (TESS) and Leader Excellence Support System (LEADS) system in the spring of 2015.

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Where we went

29 focus groups in 8 locations
over May 5 – May 14, 2015

- Little Rock
- Monticello
- Arkadelphia
- Gilham
- Plumerville
- Farmington
- Melbourne
- Harrisburg

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Who talked to us

197 participants

- 82 teachers
- 14 school-based specialists
- 70 administrators
- 31 district-level leaders

Representing 91 districts

Except where noted, we did not see differences in responses across grade levels or subjects taught.

Teachers with less than 5 years experience were under-represented.

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What we asked

- Which aspects of TESS/LEADS have gone well and been valuable to you?
- What hasn't gone well?
- What questions or concerns do you have moving forward?
- In many districts, the quantitative measures are new to educators. What do you think would make the transition easier for schools?
- How do you see the connection between TESS/LEADS and your professional learning?

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This is what they told us.

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1. TESS clarifies teaching standards.

"I was observed for the first time in 15 years."

"[It shows us] how to reach higher...we have to be facilitators of student-controlled learning."

"Roadmap for good teaching."

- The quality of the feedback teachers receive depends largely on the skill and will of their principals.
- Currently, the quality varies widely.

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2. Paperless system good. BloomBoard platform posed challenges in first year.

"&#%!@?!"

"more computer time, less classroom time"

- Time and frustration dominated their experience of TESS.
- Punch list of suggested changes in full report.
- Still, vast majority does not want to start over with new platform.

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3. TESS takes a lot of (too much?) time.

"My time is now filled up with formal observations and documentation. I don't have time to meet teachers informally and just be around building."

"I had a teacher who uploaded 183 artifacts."

- Widespread concern of burdens of TESS requirements, particularly artifacts.
- Desire to streamline process.
- In most groups, someone had figured out how to make it work.

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4. TESS requires structural and cultural changes in schools.

"TESS is a conversation starter, but it's not enough to improve instruction. The framework identifies the problem, but then we have to take our teaching to next level."

"Before TESS, we took whatever PD we wanted. Now, we are trying to focus on our PGP goal."

- TESS illuminates strengths and weaknesses of instruction. Teacher and principals will have to take the next step to address.
- Requires intentional professional development and opportunities to improve together.

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5. Concern about consistent implementation.

"I think I know how to do TESS, but if I walk into your district and it's completely different, then TESS is subjective."

"We need more consistent training and specific guidelines to implement TESS in a more uniform way. Otherwise, it won't be fair."

- Some concern that TESS trainings had inconsistent messages.
- Significant fear among participants that future state-level personnel decisions based on TESS results would be unfair.

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6. Participants had little knowledge about student growth components.

[sound of crickets chirping]

"SOAR scores are going to be used to justify firing teachers."

- Scant knowledge of the Student Ordinal Academic Rankings (SOAR).
- Significant distrust of measures of impact on student growth

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7. LEADS significantly lags TESS.

"I am training my superintendent to evaluate me."

"My superintendent just calls me to say what I've done wrong, to tell me what parents are complaining about."

"We haven't had time to focus on LEADS. I did the self-assessment at the start of the year and haven't touched it since. Honestly, I just finished meeting with my teachers and I appreciate that we haven't done LEADS."

- Participants have concerns about capacity of superintendents to evaluate principals.
- Many worry that LEADS rubric does not apply fully to what they do on daily basis.

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In a nutshell...

"Give us time to work through the bugs and inconsistencies in TESS, and to get used to it.

We think it's a good system overall."

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17

A word of thanks

Thanks to the teachers, principals and district staff who gave their time to provide feedback to the improve the TESS/LEADS system.

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18