Arkansas TESS & LEADS Focus Group Report

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SREB | Southern Regional
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Arkansas General Assembly passed legislation in 2011 defining a system to support effective teaching and leading in Arkansas schools. The Teacher Excellence and Support System (TESS) and Leader Excellence and Development System (LEADS) were piloted in the 2013-14 school year, and implemented statewide in 2014-15 with an online data management platform, BloomBoard. To inform the continuous improvement of TESS and LEADS, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) invited the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to conduct focus groups with teachers and administrators across the state in the spring of 2015.

The findings and recommendations offered in this report are based on focus group data from 197 educators (98 teachers and 99 administrators) who participated in 29 focus groups over eight days. While participants may not be representative of all educators, consistent patterns in the feedback from multiple focus groups lend credibility to the following major findings:

1. TESS has clarified teaching standards for Arkansas educators, but the quality of observation feedback for teachers still widely varies.

Almost all participants value the TESS framework for providing a much clearer, specific and detailed "roadmap for good teaching." Many administrators and teachers said they are having more objective conversations because of the TESS framework. However, post-observation conference experiences often differed within the same district.

2. Most educators welcome a paperless system for managing TESS, but nearly everyone had major challenges using BloomBoard.

Nearly all participants described numerous problems with using BloomBoard, which they attributed somewhat to poor training and system rollout. Many acknowledged BloomBoard technical support provided excellent help, but calling or emailing for help took too much time. Despite its glitches and limitations, most focus group participants want BloomBoard to be improved instead of replaced.

3. The majority of educators reported that artifacts and formal documentation are too much work and take away from informal observations and instructional conversations.

Artifacts are intended to supplement observations, but focus group participants reported that requirements for artifacts varied by district and in some cases by school. Many educators welcome more unannounced observations. They also asked for streamlined pre- and post-observation conferences and increased flexibility during informal years.

4. TESS may be a start to teachers' continuous improvement, but instructional excellence still depends on schools making structural and cultural changes that will take time.

Some participants described how teachers at their school have become more deliberate in choosing professional development based on areas in need of growth, but many admitted professional growth plans can be manipulated or continue to be about compliance. When asked what they need to improve their teaching, teachers across groups consistently asked for more time to work and learn with one another.

5. Administrators and teachers need more training and long-term support to implement TESS consistently across the state.

The purpose of passing the TESS legislation was to "standardize" evaluation and support for educators across Arkansas, but focus group participants reported substantial variation in TESS implementation. A majority of participants wanted more consistent training and specific guidelines to implement TESS in a more uniform way to ensure that the system is fair.

6. Most educators currently have little knowledge about the student growth aspect of TESS and will likely push back on its use for evaluation.

The majority of focus group participants had little to no knowledge of Student Ordinal Assessment Ranking (SOAR) and measures to assess student growth for teachers of non-tested grades and subjects. Even without specific understanding of growth measures, educators in Arkansas consistently and clearly expressed a general negative perception of test-based accountability.

7. LEADS implementation is lagging behind TESS.

Participants generally attributed the lag in LEADS implementation to insufficient time and limited training for superintendents. Focus group participants also revealed that school leaders may fundamentally lack confidence in their supervisors' capacity to effectively evaluate and support them.

The recommendations provided in this report are intended to inform the continuous improvement of TESS and LEADS. As system improvements are made, ADE should create long-term mechanisms for gathering feedback from educators across Arkansas. The BloomBoard electronic platform, while currently imperfect, is a great source of data for learning about implementation successes and problems. SREB is pleased to continue supporting ADE as a thought partner in monitoring TESS and LEADS implementation and providing technical assistance.

BACKGROUND

Arkansas's educator evaluation system was originally designed by a 36-member teacher evaluation task force formed in the spring of 2009 for the purpose of researching, evaluating and recommending a framework for summative evaluation. The task force designed the Teacher Excellence and Support System (TESS) and Leader Excellence and Development System (LEADS) to include valid measures of professional practice and impact on student growth and performance. In 2011, the Arkansas General Assembly introduced and passed legislation defining TESS: a system to support effective teaching and leading in Arkansas schools. TESS and LEADS were piloted in the 2013-14 school year, and implemented statewide in 2014-15 with an online data management platform, BloomBoard.

To inform the continuous improvement of TESS and LEADS, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) invited the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to conduct focus groups with teachers and administrators across the state in the spring of 2015. The purpose of the focus groups was to learn about TESS and LEADS implementation on the ground and gather honest feedback about how the systems could be improved. The findings and recommendations offered in this report are based on focus group data from 197 educators who participated in 29 focus groups over eight days.

METHODOLOGY

The focus group protocol used for this study was developed by SREB, working closely with ADE to prioritize questions. As shown in Appendix A, the focus group questions were broadly worded ("Which parts of TESS have gone well or not gone well for you?") to allow participants the greatest degree of freedom in sharing their thoughts. At the same time, facilitators were prepared to probe specific ideas to elicit more details ("Please share concrete details," "What questions do you have?").

ADE provided logistical support in selecting and setting up eight meeting locations around the state so all educators had access to at least one focus group site. In addition, ADE facilitated the initial process of inviting educators to register and attend. Where more educators registered than there were spaces, SREB conducted purposive sampling of individuals to represent as many districts, school levels and roles as possible. SREB also sent additional rounds of invitations for meeting locations where openings remained and tried to balance the number of teachers and administrators in attendance as much as possible.

SREB independently conducted data collection, analysis and reporting to limit bias in the findings and recommendations. The focus group team was comprised of SREB staff with training and experience in qualitative methods and background knowledge in educator evaluation systems. An educational researcher from the University of Arkansas also participated as a notetaker and provided knowledge of the local context and policies to inform data analysis and interpretation.

Data were carefully collected and analyzed in a multi-step process to ensure findings would be grounded in evidence and recommendations would be justified. All but one focus group had a notetaker present to scribe in real-time. In case of any gaps in the notes, sessions were also audiotaped so notes could be completed after the session. After every focus group, the facilitator and notetaker wrote separate analytic summaries that could be compared to identify differences in interpretation and improve data validity. The team debriefed each day to discuss emerging themes that could be probed further in later sessions. Finally, facilitators' and notetakers' summaries were used as the basis for cross-case analysis. Summaries were coded chunk-by-chunk and codes were tabulated to identify the major findings and inform the recommendations offered in this report.

PARTICIPANTS

SREB conducted focus groups in eight cities all around Arkansas between May 5 and 14, 2015. Generally, two focus groups were held in the morning for administrators and two in the afternoon for teachers. A total of 197 educators participated in 29 focus groups. Participants included 82 classroom teachers (language arts, math, science, physical education, career tech, music, etc.), 14 school-based specialists (librarian, interventionist, etc.), 70 school leaders (principals and assistant principals) and 31 district-level leaders (superintendents, TESS coordinators, etc.). Participants' responses did not vary systematically by subject area or role unless noted.

Participants represented 91 school districts that varied in size, geographic context (rural/urban) and type (charter/non-charter). Participants described varying numbers of resources available in their districts and for supporting TESS implementation (for example, a small number of large districts had TESS coordinators while most of the smaller districts did not). Overall, some themes were found to be consistent across all school contexts, while

variance in implementation was not easily attributable to differences in district and school contexts.

Table 1: Focus group participation by day

Day and Location	No. of administrators	No. of teachers	Daily total
May 5: Little Rock (ADE)	16	15	31
May 6: Monticello (Southeast Co-op)	10	12	22
May 7: Arkadelphia (Dawson Co-op)	14	9	23
May 8: Gillham (DeQueen Mena Co-op)	8	7	15
May 11: Plumerville (Arch Ford Co-op)	15	16	31
May 12: Farmington (Northwest Co-op)	18	18	36
May 13: Melbourne (Northcentral Co-op)	10	11	21
May 14: Harrisburg (Crowley's Ridge Co-op)	8	10	18
TOTAL	99	98	197

Table 2: Focus group participation by district

Academic Plus, Alma, Arkadelphia, Atkins, Augusta, Batesville, Bauxite, Benton, Bentonville, Bergman, Bradford, Bryant, Cabot, Cassatot River, Cave City, Centerpoint, Conway, Cutter Morning Star, Danville, Dardanelle, DeQueen, Drew Central, East Poinsett, El Dorado, eStem, Farmington, Fayetteville, Fort Smith, Fouke, Fountain Lake, Gentry, Gravette, Green County Tech, Greenbrier, Greenwood, Hamburg, Harford, Harmony Grove, Hazen, Heber Springs, Hermitage, Hot Springs, Huntsville, Jasper, Jonesboro, Lake Hamilton, Lakeside, Lamar, Lisa Academy, Little Rock, Little Rock Preparatory Academy, Loneke, Magnolia, Mammoth Spring, Manila, Mayflower, McCrory, Mena, Monticello, Mountain Home, Mountain View, Nashville, Norfolk, North Little Rock, Paragould, Pocahontas, Pottsville, Prairie Grove, Prescott, Pulaski County, Rogers, Russellville, Salem, Siloam Springs, South Conway, Southside, Springdale, Spring Hill, Star City, Stuttgart, Taxarkana, Trumann, Valley Springs, Valley View, Van Buren, Vilonia, Warren, West Fork, West Memphis, White County and Wynne.

Participants ultimately constituted a small percentage of Arkansas educators. Notably, few teachers with less than five years of experience were represented, which limits the generalizability of findings to the newest members of the state's teaching force. While participants may not be representative of all educators, the findings reported are based on consistent patterns seen across multiple focus groups, lending confidence to their significance. These findings are valid for informing ADE decisions about TESS and LEADS, especially when correlated with other sources of information such as educator surveys.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. TESS has clarified teaching standards for Arkansas educators, but the quality of observation feedback for teachers still widely varies.

- Almost all participants across the 29 focus groups value the TESS framework for providing a much clearer, specific and detailed "roadmap for good teaching." Teachers, including those with many years of experience, described learning from the rubric "how to reach higher…it's clear you should not just teach from the front of the room, we have to be facilitators of student-controlled learning."

- Having the rubric for self-reflection and lesson planning was commonly cited as the greatest benefit of TESS for teachers. Teachers are now able to see "a good picture pinpointing your strengths and weak areas," "where we are and where we are going," and "learn from the 'distinguished.'" Some participants did not completely agree. For example, special education teachers were not sure that the rubric applied well to them (if some of their students have limited speech and mobility). Specialists such as librarians and psychologists also wondered if their principals understand what they do adequately enough to evaluate them fairly, even though they appreciate being included more in evaluations now ("I was observed for the first time in 15 years").

- Many administrators and teachers said they are having more objective conversations because of the TESS framework. Conversations are now based on "evidence right in front of you of what you missed, instead of just checks." Expectations and ratings are now based on "seeable data." The rubric is a common language. Especially when there is any disagreement, "we can look at the evidence."

- The quality of observation feedback, which is critical for guiding teaching improvement, still widely varies across the state. Post-observation conference experiences can be very different even within the same district. One teacher said, "My admin met with me for 30 minutes and asked a lot of tough, but good questions." Another teacher in the same district said, "My admin met with me for less than five minutes, just asked me to sign and asked if I am happy with my score." Many participants said that whether the feedback process is done for compliance or is truly constructive still largely depends on the administrator.

Recommendations

1.1 Continue to develop look-for guides with critical indicators, especially for specialty areas, subjects and grade levels where a general rubric may not appear to fit well.

1.2 Provide more examples and illustrative videos of exemplary teaching in different subjects, grade levels and for different types of students that can be utilized for administrator and teacher training.

1.3 Further emphasize the importance of the feedback process. In TESS training, provide guidance for administrators in framing the process with teachers to emphasize growth instead of just "getting 'distinguished.'" Also, provide specific training for administrators on how to give feedback, addressing various challenges based on particular social dynamics (how to give feedback to a veteran teacher, how to give feedback in an unfamiliar content area, etc.).

2. Most educators welcome a paperless system for managing TESS, but nearly everyone had major challenges using BloomBoard.

- Educators' experience of TESS is inseparable from their experience with the technology involved. Nearly all participants in 27 of the 29 focus groups agreed that using BloomBoard was the greatest challenge they had with TESS. The most common trouble seemed to be around uploading, tagging and sharing documents, particularly non-Word files. The online rubric and other forms did not exactly match the paper versions and created more work for many educators (some ended up having to enter information in BloomBoard in addition to keeping a paper binder). All the BloomBoard-related issues participants shared are listed in Appendix B.

- Educators attributed some of the technology challenges to poor training and rollout of BloomBoard. Many shared that the initial BloomBoard training they attended occurred before the system was user-ready. The trainers demoed some functions, but educators did not get any hands-on experience. After the training, without good "user guides" and "cheat sheets," educators had to figure out a lot on their own by "trial and error," which cost a lot of time. Participants also reported frustration with midyear changes made to the BloomBoard interface without notification or support for users. As one participant described, "Buttons appear and disappear…I end up spending 20 minutes just looking for a document."

- Many acknowledged that BloomBoard technical support provided excellent help, but calling or emailing for help took yet more time. Designating "super-users" to provide local assistance also seemed to be a good idea, but focus group participants reported that super-users were learning at the same time and were not uniformly helpful.

- Despite its bugs and limitations, most focus group participants want BloomBoard to be improved instead of replaced. Comments like these were made often: "BloomBoard would be helpful if it worked consistently and was easier to use." "BloomBoard could be a great organizational tool with everything in one place, all right there." Focus group participants provided many suggestions to make BloomBoard more useful and user-friendly, which informed the recommendations below.

Recommendations

2.1 Increase efforts to gather and incorporate feedback from Arkansas educators in the technology development process. Possibly invest more in alpha testing in early development and beta testing after system implementation to identify unanticipated issues that users might face.

2.2 Create a demo site where educators can learn to use the system with no risk. This site can also show each group of users what other groups see (e.g., principals can see the teachers' screen and vice versa).

2.3 Develop staggered training and step-by-step guides for educators. Utilize local trainers and technical support as much as possible but ensure that they are

adequately trained first. They could include "super-users" and possibly other tech-savvy school or district staff members.

2.4 Improve communication about key dates when changes to BloomBoard will be made. Minimize midyear changes.

3. The majority of educators reported that artifacts and formal documentation are too much work and take away from informal observations and instructional conversations.

- Artifacts are intended to supplement observations where "things could be missed," but focus group participants reported that the requirements for artifacts varied by district, and in some cases, schools. In 22 of the 29 sessions, teachers and administrators expressed a common concern that they were spending too much time on artifacts. The problem goes beyond the time it takes to upload artifacts to BloomBoard and has to do with the number of artifacts teachers are uploading or being asked to upload in the first place (which administrators then have to review).

- Many teachers reported experiences such as "spending 40 hours uploading documents as artifacts," for which they provide several explanations. In some cases, principals appear to require the excessive artifacts ("My principal asked us for artifacts to show proof that we are not basic."). In other cases, teachers took it upon themselves to upload as many artifacts as possible to look their best for their evaluation; one principal reported that despite no expectation from the administration, "I had a teacher who uploaded 183 artifacts."

- Many principals reported spending "more computer time, less classroom time" now than before. Part of the computer time is reviewing artifacts. Another part is scripting and completing formal observation records. As one principal explained, "My time is now filled up with formal observations and documentation. I don't have time to meet teachers informally and just be around the building." Another principal said, "I am now focused on the 45-minute observations rather than lots of walkthroughs," and teachers across many groups said they want more of the instant feedback they used to receive after walkthroughs ("I just want the simple high point, low point, the glow and grow points.").

- Arkansas educators are concerned that an excessive focus on artifacts and formal documentation is counterproductive. As we often heard, "Are we just tooting our own horn and putting on a dog-and-pony show?" Teachers welcome more unannounced observations ("just come observe me any day") that they think would more accurately reflect "real life." Whether observations are announced or unannounced, both teachers and administrators agreed that they do not want to be "bogged down" by too much documentation. As one group suggested for informal observations, "Let's just share the lesson plan before an observation and sit down right after to discuss. Let's make this about conversation and feedback."

- Focus group participants made various suggestions to simplify TESS, reduce the time burden it places on educators and minimize the likelihood that "people cut corners and TESS ends up as a checklist." Suggestions include streamlining the pre- and post-observation conferences, reducing or controlling artifact requirements, and increasing flexibility during informal years ("maybe keep informal observations out of BloomBoard" and "focus on one domain per year"). Some groups also raised the possibility of allowing other administrators and teacher leaders to "help with the TESS process" even if they don't evaluate.

Recommendations

3.1 Clarify expectations about artifacts, and explicitly discourage or prohibit excessive practices.

3.2 Consider the possibility of monitoring BloomBoard activities such as excessive artifact uploads. Aggregated data by school could maintain the confidentiality of individual teachers while allowing the state to identify and address implementation problems.

3.3 Examine ways TESS could be incorporated into successful informal observation and feedback practices instead of replacing them. Case studies describing how one or two schools integrate TESS into their existing practices could provide helpful models for other schools.

3.4 Further study the suggestions from educators mentioned above for increasing flexibility in the TESS process and requirements.

4. TESS may be a start to teachers' continuous improvement, but instructional excellence still depends on schools making structural and cultural changes that will take time.

- The Professional Growth Plan (PGP) component of TESS, coupled with Arkansas law that mandates 18 hours of annual professional development (PD) to be tied to TESS, is intended to be a key driver of teachers' continuous improvement. In several focus groups, participants described how teachers at their school have become more deliberate in choosing PD based on areas in need of growth. There were many comments such as, "Before TESS we took whatever PD we wanted. Now we are trying to focus on our PGP goal. What do we really need to work on?"

- At the same time, many participants admitted that PGPs can be "manipulated." If a teacher wants to go to a certain PD based on "what you are good at and your comfort zone," they can "work backwards" to write their PGP based on their interest instead of a need. Educators recognized that the effectiveness of PD ultimately depends on "teachers' willingness to address our challenges and deficits." For some teachers, the PD requirement will continue to be about "checking the box and filing the paperwork." "Growth cannot be mandated," one leader said.

- Some administrators noted that limited money and time could hamper professional learning for even the most willing educators. Several teachers shared stories about an excellent training program they wanted to attend but being unable to go due to their district's budget constraints. However, lack of time seems to be a more ubiquitous challenge for educators, especially for some in rural districts who teach multiple subject areas and may play additional school roles. Even when they acknowledge wonderful resources such as those in BloomBoard Marketplace that are available, many educators simply do not have time to look them up and use them to improve lessons, with little to no additional time for planning and PD days already full.

- In the words of teachers, "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 the next level." When asked what they need to improve their teaching, teachers across groups consistently asked for more time to work and learn with one another. Teachers from a few districts described their book study program

("We met every Wednesday afternoon for 12 weeks.") as a way to unpack every component of the TESS rubric together. Teachers from another few districts talked about working in grade-level or subject-area teams to review student data to develop a team-level PGP, which they found meaningful (some teachers only had a team PGP but some had a combination of school and individual PGPs). However, the majority of focus group participants did not have such experiences.

One group wanted peer mentors who could "train us on how certain instructional approaches would actually work" and "time to visit other teachers' live classrooms, or watch a video of a great teacher, and then discuss what we saw." But then the group concluded, "Scheduling and [lack of] subs are the problem in making this happen."

Recommendations

4.1 Create more high-quality PD options and resources for districts across the state, starting with recommended resources from Arkansas educators, which include BloomBoard Marketplace offerings, Moodle resources (designed "by teachers for teachers" in Arkansas), and well-received trainings offered by Arkansas educational cooperatives.

4.2 Provide more guidance on supporting teacher development in TESS training for school leaders. Training should include promising uses of individual-, team- or school-level PGPs to maximize professional learning for teachers.

4.3 Similarly, encourage school leaders to make the scheduling and other zero-net-cost changes necessary to prioritize giving teachers more opportunities for professional learning and growth.

5. Administrators and teachers need more training and long-term support to implement TESS consistently across the state.

- The purpose of passing the TESS legislation was to "standardize" evaluation and support for educators across Arkansas, but focus groups reported substantial variation in TESS implementation around feedback quality, expectations for artifacts, the PGP process and PD supporting teachers' professional growth. Educators are concerned about this lack of consistency. As one administrator put it, "I think I know how to do TESS, but if I walk into your district and it's completely different, then TESS is subjective." In 19 of 29 sessions, administrator and teacher

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

- With some exceptions, focus group participants had received some TESS training but suggested that it could be improved for the future. One-day TESS training in the summer is "too much up front" and "overwhelming." Participants suggested TESS training be offered in "chunks" every two or three months, focusing each session only on what needs to happen in the upcoming time period. While training could be staggered, educators consistently asked for a clear overview from the start of the year of "what I am supposed to be doing, when…I need enough notice, like before the summative, to avoid a huge scramble."

- Educators want step-by-step directions, especially for how to do things in BloomBoard. "Little starters and example forms" could be helpful. Wanting "practical and hands-on" training, focus group participants said that they wanted trainings to be given by "people in the field, who aren't above our heads."

- If multiple trainers and trainings cannot be avoided, educators want greater assurance that "they all say the same thing…that we have clear and consistent expectations." Teachers especially want more direct communication from ADE with information they can trust about what is supposed to happen and when. Something more succinct than the Commissioner's memos would be appreciated. One group suggested ADE could send a monthly email to all educators on the same day every month with a short list of key messages.

- Many focus group participants brought up how "TESS has hit us the same time as Common Core and PARCC, piling a lot on us so we are overloaded." They recognized that TESS implementation has been challenging because "we're building the plane as we are flying it." But many expressed the hope that "TESS doesn't go away." This message echoed what several groups said, "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."

Recommendations

5.1 Invest in effective TESS training and trainers who can provide consistent information to all educators statewide. Training should include time for educators to support and help one another (sharing workarounds, troubleshooting together).

5.2 Develop additional channels of communication to share information with principals and teachers more regularly, directly and clearly.

5.3 Continue to monitor TESS implementation on an ongoing basis, possibly utilizing data from BloomBoard to study if and why there are unexpected inconsistencies. Again, data from BloomBoard could be aggregated by school to maintain the confidentiality of individual teachers and still be detailed enough to show implementation problems.

5.4 Use implementation data to refine training and communication toward continuous improvement of the system. Celebrate successes to secure continued support for TESS from educators, policymakers and the public.

6. Most educators currently have little knowledge about the student growth aspect of TESS and will likely push back on its use for evaluation.

- The use of student growth measures in teacher evaluation systems is a highly controversial subject in many states and districts around the country. As we have heard in many states, educators fear potential employment consequences of teacher evaluation systems, which they associate with student growth measures (and not professional practice measures). Surprisingly, over half (16 out of 29) of focus groups in Arkansas did not bring it up at all. In the 13 sessions where the subject of student growth measures was brought up by one or two individuals, the main concern was about the use of standardized test scores for accountability. One Arkansas teacher said, "SOAR scores are going to be used to justify firing teachers." Said another, "SOAR scores could be used as a weeding process...TESS was always intended to be a 'gotcha.'"

- The majority of focus group participants had little to no knowledge about: Student Ordinal Assessment Ranking (SOAR), how SOAR data would factor into educator evaluation in Arkansas or measures to assess student growth for teachers of non-tested subjects. Brief discussions revealed that most educators still do not understand how SOAR values are intended to measure student growth as opposed to

student proficiency levels. Most did not seem to know particularities about how SOAR values will be used to establish growth thresholds that will inform teachers' overall ratings over time. With few exceptions, participants did not discuss the possibilities or problems with student growth measures needed for teachers of non-tested subjects.

- Even without specific understanding of growth measures, educators in Arkansas, like their peers elsewhere, consistently and clearly expressed a general negative perception of test-based accountability and would likely push back on its use in TESS. Focus group participants said, "Evaluation should never be linked to test scores from any one point in time." "If students don't get graded on a test, it doesn't affect them and they don't take it seriously. I don't think it's right for that test to count against me either." "No one test can fit everyone in your class. One test cannot assess what students can do."

Recommendations

6.1 ADE should increase communication to educators about student growth measures including, but not limited to, SOAR. Prepare to better explain how growth will be calculated (unlike student proficiency levels) and how multiyear data will be used with multiple other measures to minimize educators' concerns and pushback based on misinformation and fear.

6.2 Growth calculations are normally complex and not intuitive to most educators. Plan communication about SOAR carefully, utilizing instructive examples and tools that have been shown to facilitate conversations and learning instead of creating more confusion or fueling more negative attitudes among educators.

6.3 Consider how ADE could ensure comparability of student growth measures for non-tested subjects. Given the inconsistencies reported in other areas of TESS, ADE can expect educators to be greatly concerned about the fairness of student growth expectations for teachers across all grades and subjects.

7. LEADS implementation is lagging behind TESS.

- A large majority of administrator groups (13 out of 15) agreed that implementing LEADS has been a far lower priority than TESS. Participants generally attributed the lag in LEADS implementation to insufficient time, especially for rural district superintendents who wear many hats and are already stretched too thin. As one principal explained, "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."

- In addition to the time challenge, most principals reported that their supervisors had received little to no training to implement LEADS. Several said, "Our supervisors still don't know what to do and where to do it." One said, "I am training my superintendent to evaluate me."

- Focus groups also revealed that school leaders may fundamentally lack confidence in their supervisors' capacity to effectively evaluate and support them. Some principals shared concern that "my superintendent doesn't really know what I do." Some understood that their leaders were under a lot of pressure to be the "public figure of our district, to deal with PR business." Others thought that "we need a culture change to really implement LEADS. My superintendent just calls me to say what I've done wrong, to tell me what the parents are complaining about."

- While assistant principals seemed more confident that their principals know what they do, several pointed out that their evaluation rubric tends to "not apply in a bunch of areas." Some are concerned about how well they will do, strengthening the argument that leader supervisor training is critical for ensuring that LEADS is implemented fairly.

Recommendations

7.1 Create and communicate expectations for consistent LEADS implementation. An effective school leader evaluation and feedback system is arguably the critical foundation for an effective teacher evaluation and improvement system.

7.2 Provide adequate training for school leader supervisors to implement LEADS, not only to help them find time for evaluations, but also to build knowledge and skills so they can inspire and support the professional growth of school leaders serving a variety of roles in unique school contexts.

7.3 As with TESS, monitor LEADS implementation progress and potential problems using BloomBoard data. LEADS data from BloomBoard could be aggregated by district to maintain the confidentiality of individual leaders and still be detailed enough to show implementation issues.

CONCLUSION

The focus group findings reported here provide insights into educators' perceptions and experiences with TESS and LEADS nearing the end of the initial year of statewide implementation. While participants were resoundingly positive about the TESS framework and rubric for evaluating teaching quality, they reported that TESS implementation currently varies a great deal across the state. We heard a few examples of schools where teacher communities are beginning to drive instructional improvement using PGPs informed by student performance data, but many schools have a long way to go to implement TESS in its fullest and best form.

It is understandable that LEADS implementation is trailing behind TESS, and is consistent with what we have observed in other states. Arkansas has an opportunity now to align school leader and teacher evaluations for continuous improvement throughout Arkansas.

SREB hopes the recommendations provided in this report contribute to the continuous improvement of TESS and LEADS. Moving forward, the BloomBoard electronic platform, while currently imperfect, is a great source of data for learning about implementation successes and problems. SREB is pleased to continue supporting ADE as a thought partner in monitoring TESS and LEADS implementation and providing technical assistance.

APPENDIX A: Focus Group Protocol

Facilitators: Lead with the questions in bold. Use probes to follow up as a topic comes up/as needed.

We are eager to hear about your experiences so far with all parts of TESS: professional growth plan (PGP), observation and feedback, student growth measures, BloomBoard and Teachscape; positives, negatives, questions, and suggestions. *Administrators: Towards the end we'll discuss your experiences with LEADS as well.*

A. **To start, what has gone well and been valuable for you — and please share concrete details so I can really visualize. Anyone can start and others add.**
   - What does that look like for you (teacher)/ *your school or district (administrators)* specifically?
   - Teachers: How has it changed your teaching/your interactions with other teachers/your interaction with your principal?
   - *Administrators: How has it changed your work and interactions as a school or district leader?*

B. **Now, on the flip side, what hasn't gone well for you? Please be specific so we can really understand the problem or challenge.**
   - How were you or your teaching (teachers)/ *school (administrators)* impacted — please say more specifically?
   - What kind of help were you able to get or not able to get?
   - What do you think could have better prepared you?

C. **What questions or concerns do you have moving forward?**
   - If they bring up student growth validity issues → What student growth measures would you choose?
   - If they bring up concerns that student growth is too narrow → If academic growth isn't everything, what else do you think should be looked at for evaluating a teacher's effectiveness (student perception, engagement, etc.)?
   - If they bring up fear/anxiety about student growth → From your experience, how should ADE improve the training and communication about student growth measures?

D. **TESS was designed to support teacher development so that Arkansas teachers could excel. So far, how do you see the connection between TESS and your professional learning?**
   - *Administrators: So far, how do you see the connection between TESS and professional learning for your school or district?*
   - If someone has an example of TESS connection to PD → Please walk us through that professional development/growth experiences in your district/school. What happened?
   - If little connection reported → How do you think TESS could become a system that supports teacher development, what needs to change?

E. *Administrators: Let's switch topics to LEADS. What have you experienced so far in terms of principal evaluation?*
   - *From your respective roles, what has been valuable/what are you looking forward to?*
   - *What are you concerned about?*
   - *What questions do you have?*

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2015 Arkansas TESS & LEADS Focus Group Report 19

APPENDIX B: Reported Issues with Using BloomBoard

Technical issues:
- Want "less clutter" on the first screen (for example, want to be able to filter teacher by track, more drop-down menus)
- Want to see which track a teacher is on and associated requirements for that teacher
- Want fewer tabs (for example, summative and end-of-year rating could be on the same tab)
- Want alternative to scanning; scanning is slow, and some do not have easy access to a scanner
- Want to be able to upload several at once; system loading time is excessive
- Want ability to resize, reorient or crop uploaded files
- Want tagging to work consistently for various file types including photos, PDFs, Google docs and videos
- Want uploaded files to not get deleted when a meeting is rescheduled
- Want sharing function to work consistently
- Want less complicated sharing management (some items they want to share aren't; some items they don't want to share are)
- Want saving function to work consistently
- Want to be able to associate artifacts with indicators instead of, or in addition to, meetings
- Want to make sure some sections like PGP goals can be "closed" at some point so inappropriate changes are not made
- Want to be able to send meeting invitations through email instead of, or in addition to, BloomBoard
- Want to be able to see multiple uploaded documents at once
- Want online signature functionality when formal documentation is needed by law
- Want more than 100 characters for SMART goals
- Want "I saw it" button for uploaded artifacts
- Want chat feature so they can respond to comments
- Want navigation shortcuts so "we don't have to go back and start from the dashboard each time"
- Want email notifications when new items are added that "takes you straight to the item"

- Want old PGPs and other items archived instead of deleted
- Want to be able to "undo" mistakes
- "No reds" – want a different color coding scheme to minimize anxiety and stress already associated with using BloomBoard

Technology management, training and support issues:
- Want teacher-school assignments to be accurate
- Want online and paper versions of rubric and forms (PGPs) to be identical
- Want midyear changes minimized (for example, some reported losing BloomBoard Marketplace midyear; others reported buttons being moved around)
- Want heads up about midyear changes when they cannot be avoided
- Want demo site for users to "play around without messing up"
- Teachers and administrators want to know what the other person sees
- Want training to be mostly hands-on, not lecture- or demo-style
- Want training to be "staggered," not "all at once"
- Want user-friendly guides with screencasts, video tutorials and cheat sheets
- Want Arkansas-specific trainers who deeply understand what Arkansas educators need to do
- Want trainers who understand administrators' and teachers' realities and can provide practical help (for example, time-saving tips)
- Want local technical support, "super-users" or others, to be well trained ahead of others
- Want local technical support to be carefully selected based on knowledge, temperament and job role (specifically, teachers who are not formally designated and compensated cannot be expected to provide the level of support needed by all their building colleagues)
- Want reliable wireless internet