

Not another meeting

How performance management routines help education systems deliver on their goals for students

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The first installment in EDI's series of research briefs – *Eyes on the prize: Building the capacity of education leaders to use system-wide goals and drive student success*ⁱ – considered the mixed extent to which education leaders anchor their work in clear student outcome goals. This research brief asks what data from the field can tell us about the ways in which leaders keep their systems focused on the goals through regular conversations about progress.

Goals are of limited use unless you check your progress

Clear, measurable goals – we have argued – are an essential first step in uniting a system to make change for students. But then what? Leaders may know what eventual success looks like – they may have even plotted a trajectoryⁱⁱ of interim targets on the way to the goal – but, unless they create formal opportunities to review progress, they run the risk of letting performance drift off track, realizing this only when it is too late to recover.

For K-12 state education systems, the impetus to account for progress has often come in recent years from the federal government. The new regime set out in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has already generated a healthy debate about the ways in which states hold schools accountable.ⁱⁱⁱ However – as commentators have observed – the wholesale increase in state and local autonomy embodied in ESSA implies the need for a more fundamental shift in thinking: from “external accountability” to “internal accountability.”^{iv} In

other words, now that state leaders have more freedom to set their own direction, the need for them to hold themselves and their staff accountable for progress has never been greater.

The obvious way for an education leader and his or her team to review their progress is to hold a meeting. There is certainly no shortage of meetings in most state education agencies (SEAs). But as Patrick Lencioni argues, a common challenge in organizations is not the number of meetings but the number of *bad* meetings.^v This paper looks at data that the Education Delivery Institute (EDI) has gathered through its “capacity review” process to explore the extent to which education leaders in a variety of contexts are using *good* meetings to have meaningful, timely discussions about system performance.

The “capacity review” methodology

A capacity review is a rapid but thorough review of an education system's capacity to drive reform and improve student outcomes. Since 2010 EDI has conducted 26 capacity reviews in 21 state agencies, three local education agencies and two systems of higher education.^{vi} During a capacity review, a small review team external to the system gathers evidence via a document review, focus groups with stakeholders and a facilitated self-assessment exercise with the system's leadership team. The review team then synthesizes the evidence it has collected into a series of qualitative judgments using the [Delivery Capacity Rubric](#).^{vii} For each of the fifteen elements in the rubric the system is assigned a rating on a four-point scale from Red (weak) to Green (strong). The ratings, along with rationales for each judgment and a set of recommendations for action, are then presented to the system leader.

The purpose of capacity reviews is to gather formative feedback for improvement. The review team gathers much of the evidence through candid interviews with stakeholders at all levels – from school principals, to agency staff, to community members, to the leadership team itself. As such, the cumulative lessons from all the capacity reviews undertaken to date, aggregated and presented here in an anonymized form, provide a unique insight into the self-reported experiences of education leaders.

What capacity reviews can tell us about performance management routines in the field

The Delivery Capacity Rubric asks whether the system has established “routines to drive and monitor performance.” It goes on to explain what it means by a “routine,” asking “are there regular results-driven conversations that allow for shared review of and action on performance?” Then it breaks this down further into three key questions:

- Are there regular, structured conversations to review progress, solve major challenges and make decisions to drive implementation forward between the system leader and those accountable for implementation?
- Do these “routines” provide system leaders with a clear view of how implementation is going in the field (using available indicators)?
- Are routines well-executed, so that they enable the right conversations to occur and result in action?

As expected, there was no shortage of meetings in the systems reviewed, but when faced with this set

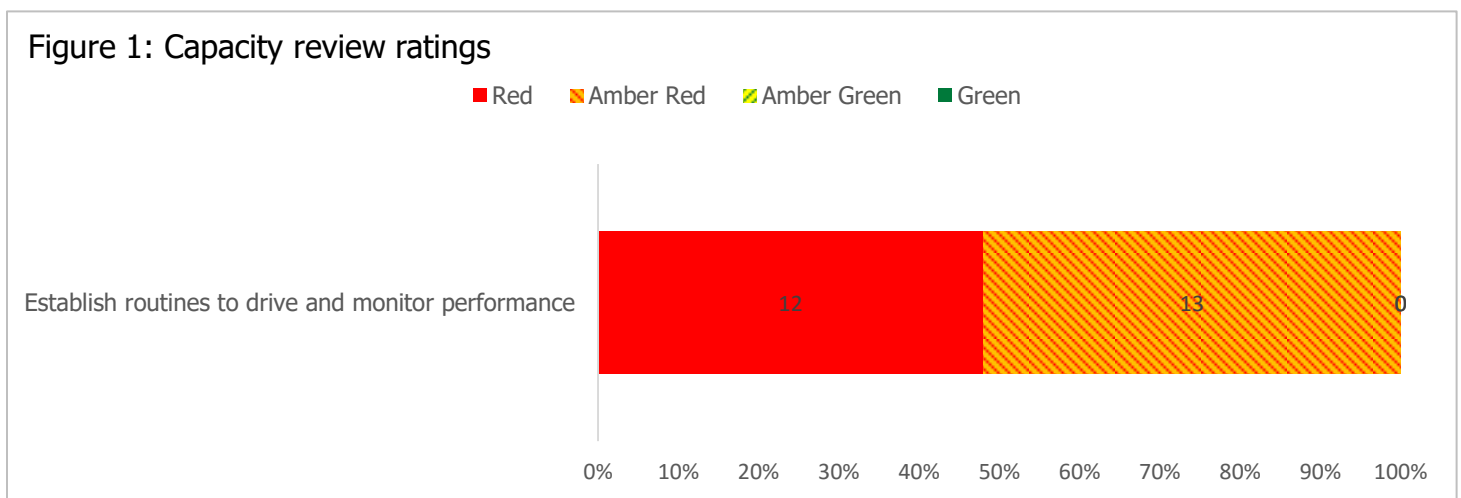
of questions capacity review participants struggled to conclude that the reality of meetings in their system matched up to the rubric’s description of a performance management routine. Of all the systems in which capacity reviews were conducted, not a single one was rated Green – or even Amber Green – on this element. Just over half of the reviews resulted in a rating of Amber Red (closer to weak than strong), while in the remaining 12 reviews the system was rated Red (see Figure 1).

Why so red?

Sitting behind these ratings were a number of different issues – which varied from system to system.

In some cases the idea of regular meetings to discuss progress was simply not part of the organizational culture; such discussions of progress as existed were informal, ad hoc and reactionary. Progress might be discussed once a year – perhaps as part of a strategic planning process, or after annual data were published – but these discussions were too infrequent to drive anyone’s day-to-day work in the meantime.

In other cases the challenge was more a question of getting the right people together on a regular basis. For example, in particularly siloed systems, communication took place “vertically” between managers and their staff, but the idea of cross-agency discussions was alien – members of the leadership team did not have a clear sense of what each other was doing, and no one was in a position to give the system leader a complete picture of performance on the system’s goals. Alternatively, some leadership teams met often, but this top-level collaboration did not filter down to middle



management, who reported feeling “out of the loop”. In both scenarios a forum for discussing progress on a regular basis, with all the key players in the room, was missing.

Sometimes regular meetings did take place, but particular aspects of their execution made them less useful than they could have been. A common model reported was the regular “update meeting,” consisting of a one-way flow of information from the person(s) presenting, with no opportunity for a deeper discussion of the most pressing issues. Frequently internal meetings were seen as lacking clarity (on the objectives or role of participants), making poor use of time and lacking in rigor when it came to identifying and following up on actions. Occasionally, rather than a lack of structure, participants reported that an over-complex or overambitious format for reporting on progress obscured the bigger picture and prevented a focused discussion.

However, the most common rationale for rating a system Red on this element was the failure of existing meetings and reporting structures to focus on performance – that is, to regularly pose the question: “are we on track to achieve our goals for students?” Either there was no discussion of progress at all (with participants merely using the meeting as a “check-in”), or the discussion was more focused on compliance than collective impact. For example, participants might discuss whether planned actions had been completed on time, but they did not use available data and intelligence to come to a shared view of whether the system’s work was having the desired impact in the field. As the findings of one review put it, the meetings were “management routines but not leadership routines.”

Even where regular discussions of performance data did take place, none of the systems reviewed had (at the time of the review) succeeded in using these conversations to drive action to improve performance – the true hallmark of what EDI would call a “delivery routine”. What this represented was a lack of accountability at the system level. In fact, some of the systems reviewed did have robust mechanisms in place for holding local actors (such as districts and schools) to account, but failed to apply the same rigor in tracking their own progress. One review found that “staff didn’t feel accountable for implementing the plan.” Another found that “teachers feel more accountability than any other actors [in the system].”

“Routines have helped us develop a more deliberate and intentional focus on the priorities and tactics in our strategic plan.”

Traci Wodlinger, Eagle County Schools

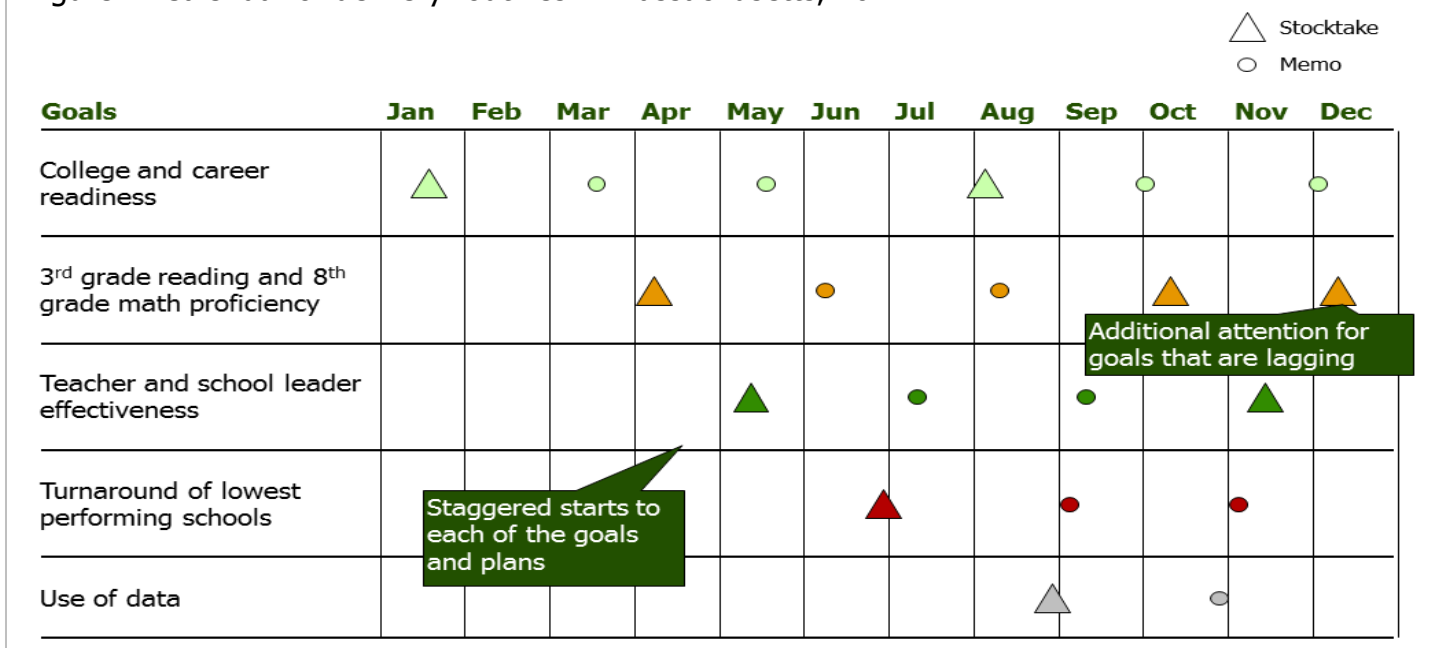
The stark truth, which the leaders of these systems had to confront, was that routines to drive and monitor progress are more than a “nice to have” or a dry exercise in project management. Without routines, leaders have no systematic way of keeping their staff focused on their goals. And unless the system holds itself to account, it cannot genuinely be said to be playing a leadership role.

Recommendations for improvement

The recommendations of each capacity review were specific to the systems in question, but in relation to performance management routines a few themes were repeated. Leaders were advised to:

- Put in place a “rhythm” of meetings to ensure that each of the system’s goals (and the strategies being put in place to achieve them) was discussed on a regular basis.
- Link the meetings to the goals and strategies set out in existing plans, especially where multiple teams or divisions needed to be involved.
- Use a wider range of data in meetings to come to a shared view of performance – for example, using qualitative feedback from the field rather than just waiting for annual test scores.
- Push themselves and staff to use meetings to solve problems and make decisions, not just provide updates.
- Prioritize time in meetings to focus on the most pressing issues (as indicated by the data).

Figure 2: Calendar of delivery routines in Massachusetts, 2011



- Invest the time and resources up front to make meetings successful – for example, by assigning someone to facilitate the meeting, agreeing a consistent protocol for discussion and developing tools for presenting data.
- Be explicit about the ways in which meetings are expected to create internal accountability; provide a forum for accountable staff to seek the support of colleagues and the system leader; and feed the agency’s efforts to engage its external stakeholders.

Commissioner Mitchell D. Chester holds the leader responsible for each goal accountable for progress every six months. Every other month, between stocktakes, the Delivery Unit prepares a concise memo for the Commissioner, keeping him apprised of progress. As Figure 2 shows, this approach means that throughout the year a rhythm of meetings and written notes allows the Commissioner to focus his attention on each of his key priorities in an efficient and systematic way.

Unleashing the power of routines

Armed with the recommendations of their capacity review many of the systems involved went on to establish their own performance management routines. In fact, supporting education systems to monitor and drive performance has been a major theme in EDI’s work over the past five years.

Each system had its own unique context, priorities and structure to begin with, so many of EDI’s partners have found innovative ways of adapting the classic “delivery routine” to meet their needs^{viii}. The basic concept remains the same though: a regular, well-executed meeting or process that brings relevant leaders together to focus on performance and take action.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has two main kinds of delivery routines, structured around the five key goals in its delivery plan. In “stocktake” meetings

“...Through the system of routines... we can make almost real time adjustments to the work... avoiding investment of time and resources... that won’t get us to our goal.”

Dale Sims, Tennessee Board of Regents

Commissioner Chester has commented that: “Too often, the gap between policy ambition and implementation is wide. The protocols and practices advanced by deliverology have been instrumental in narrowing this gap in Massachusetts. As a result, state education policies are translating into practices that are benefiting students.”

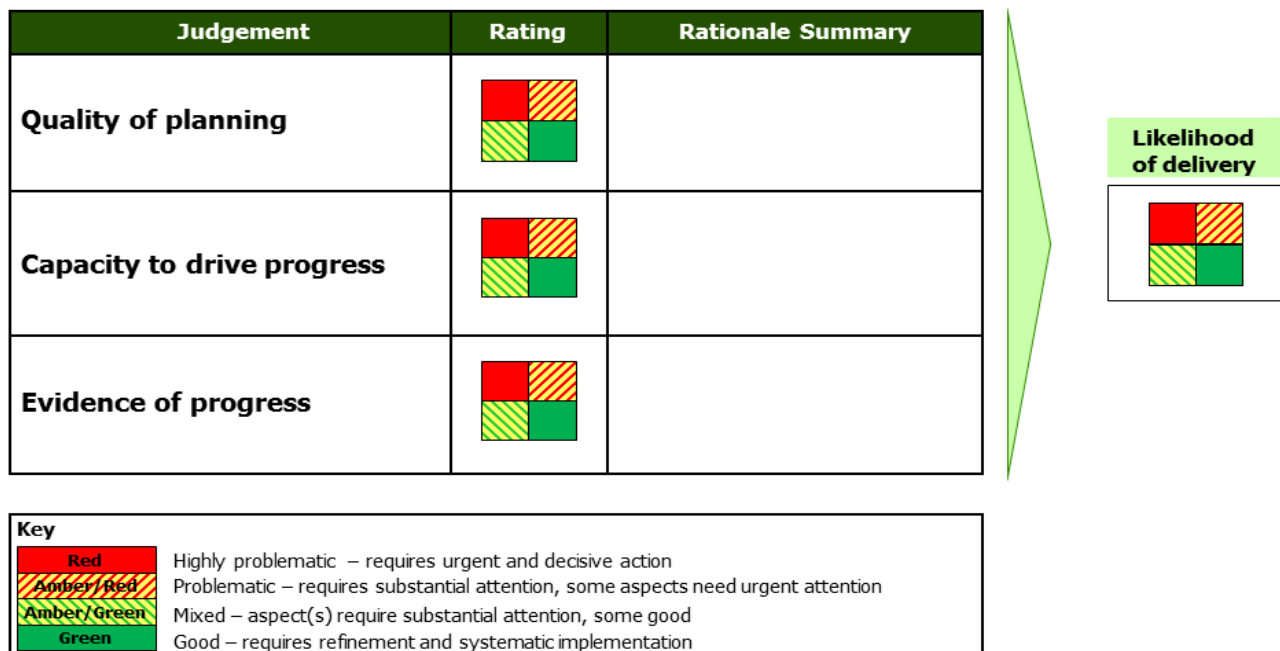
In Eagle County Schools, Colorado, the district established a regular series of stocktakes in which staff reported to the superintendent and board of education on the implementation of their core strategies and tactics. Ahead of the stocktake the Chief Strategy Officer, Traci Wodlinger, would sit down with the relevant strategy and tactic leaders to help them rate their progress using EDI’s assessment framework tool (see Figure 3). The tool uses a traffic light rating system – similar to that used in capacity reviews – to pinpoint which strategies/tactics require greatest attention during the stocktake discussion and organize the available qualitative and quantitative data on each strategy/tactic (under headings of planning, capacity, evidence of progress and overall likelihood of success). As Traci says: “Routines have helped us develop a more deliberate and intentional focus on the priorities and tactics in our strategic plan. This has allowed us to filter our work through the lens of our strategic plan and say no to events and activities that don’t align. Further,

the stocktakes have helped ensure that we regularly review progress with our superintendent and board, so we can take action to improve performance when things are off-track.”

The Tennessee Board of Regents’ (TBR) experience of routines shows how regular conversations about performance are helpful for key staff, not just the system leader. EDI worked with TBR’s Completion Delivery Unit (CDU) to set a clear target – 43,202 more degrees by 2025 – and define nine priority strategies for the system. The CDU has created a set of routines where strategy leaders report out to the Chancellor on progress and ask for help. Routines happen twice a year per strategy with a summative “global stocktake” of all strategies once a year. Dale Sims, a Vice Chancellor and Strategy Leader at TBR, says: “By virtue of the fact that through the system of routines I am constantly reviewing progress on the pieces involved in implementing my strategy with team members as well as with the Chancellor, other board staff and the Board, we can make almost real time adjustments to the work. This has resulted in avoiding investment of time and resources in something that won’t get us to our goal.”

The specific tools and approaches different systems used to create effective performance management routines are discussed in further detail in the 2015 book, *Deliverology in Practice*,^{ix} and on EDI’s website.^x

Figure 3: The Assessment Framework



Conclusion

Viewed from the classroom, education reform can feel like an endless stream of seemingly random initiatives, mandates and new expectations – all that seems to come from the system is more accountability and no support. In their excellent book, *Learning to Improve*, Tony Bryk and his colleagues identify the cause of this phenomenon as a lack of discipline by education leaders when it comes to implementation. “We consistently fail to appreciate what it actually takes to make some promising idea work reliably in practice,” they say. “We become disappointed when positive results do not readily emerge, and then we just move on to the next new reform idea. This should trouble all of us.”^{xi} Sir Michael Barber puts this another way, describing how he consistently reminds politicians that “policy is 10 per cent and implementation 90 per cent.”^{xii}

The humble meeting seems an unlikely candidate for the transformative tool through which leaders take the reins of implementation, but the examples from systems discussed in this paper show they can be just that. Likewise, the lessons from capacity reviews show how relatively light a lift it would be for most education systems to put in place a strong regime of delivery routines; they already devote a huge amount of time to meetings, they just need to have better meetings.

As the next generation of accountability systems in American education starts to take shape, it’s time for system leaders to embrace internal accountability. If they use delivery routines to hold themselves and their staff accountable for improving performance, they will simultaneously be giving themselves the best chance of seeing their goals for students become reality.

Notes

ⁱ Eyre, R. and Desperett, Z. (2016) *Delivery Research Brief: Eyes on the Prize: The capacity of education leaders to use system-wide goals to drive student success*. Available from: <https://www.deliveryinstitute.org/publication/delivery-research-brief-eyes-prize-capacity-education-leaders-use-system-wide-goals>

ⁱⁱ See: <https://www.deliveryinstitute.org/delivery-resources/3c-set-targets-and-establish-trajectories>

ⁱⁱⁱ Weiss, J. (February 6, 2016) ESSA Accountability Design Competition: My big takeaways. *The Education Gadfly*. Available from: <http://edexcellence.net/articles/essa-accountability-design-competition-my-big-takeaways>

^{iv} Rodriguez, N. (September 10, 2015) Do Education Leaders Have a Plan for the World After No Child Left Behind? *Real Clear Education*. Available from: http://www.realcleareducation.com/articles/2015/09/10/do_education_leaders_have_a_plan_for_the_world_after_no_child_left_behind_1223.html

^v Lencioni, P. (2004). *Death by meeting: A leadership fable about solving the most painful problem in business*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

^{vi} In all but one case EDI conducted a single review. The exception is an SEA where EDI conducted three reviews over several years. “Capacity review” is used in this paper to refer to reviews conducted using the Delivery Capacity Rubric; the capacity review methodology has also been used by EDI to conduct reviews against other rubrics.

^{vii} See: <https://www.deliveryinstitute.org/delivery-resources/1b-review-current-state-delivery> (the rubric has been refined over time, but the core principles remain the same. All quotations in this paper are drawn from the most current version of the rubric).

^{viii} For a detailed explanation of “delivery routines” see: Barber, M., Rodriguez, N., & Artis, E. (2015). *Deliverology in Practice* (Ch. 4A). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

^{ix} Barber, M., Rodriguez, N., & Artis, E. (2015). *Deliverology in Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin

^x See: <https://www.deliveryinstitute.org/delivery-resources/4a-establish-routines-drive-and-monitor-performance>

^{xi} Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America’s schools can get better at getting better* (p. 6). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

^{xii} Barber, M. (2015). *How to run a government: So that citizens benefit and taxpayers don’t go crazy* (p. 36). London: Allen Lane.

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