

From the inside out

Improving internal communication to support standards implementation in Kansas

Richard Eyre
April 2016

The word “communication” often conjures up images of press releases, elaborate websites and speaking tours. But an important – and often neglected – aspect is internal communications. If education leaders don’t communicate well with each other about what they’re trying to achieve and how they’re planning to achieve it, implementation suffers. This edition of Special Delivery looks at how one team in the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), and a number of their internal colleagues, worked together to improve internal communication.

The situation

In the summer of 2014 KSDE invited EDI (with the support of the Council of Chief State School Officers) to conduct a “capacity review” looking at the state’s implementation of the Kansas College and Career Ready Standards – it’s new standards for English Language Arts and Math. The review gathered feedback from a range of education stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, parents, legislators and KSDE staff themselves. Following the review EDI worked with the standards and assessments team at KSDE to discuss the results and create a plan to strengthen standards implementation in the state.

The challenge

Looking at the feedback from the capacity review the team agreed that internal communication challenges were hampering their implementation effort. The team felt that their work was not always well understood by other staff in the agency, and this had implications for the way KSDE was

communicating with districts, schools and other external stakeholders. They saw that messages about standards implementation were not always joined up, and recognized feedback from the field that this could sometimes be confusing. For example, the agency had several email “listservs” for different groups of stakeholders, and there were instances of the same information being shared at different times, leaving some stakeholders feeling that they were “last to know” about decisions affecting them.

The action taken

The team identified three key strategies within their implementation plan, of which communication was one. Suzy Myers – KSDE’s Program Consultant for English Language Arts – was the team member assigned the lead for this strategy. “Because no one on our standards team specializes in communications specifically, it was difficult to assign someone to ‘own’ this strategy. We all had very full jobs to begin with.” says Suzy. “As it turns out, though, owning a strategy is not as time-consuming as we originally had thought.” Suzy worked with team members to assign leads for each project within the strategy, coordinate with those leads to determine steps for each project, schedule meetings to share updates about progress, and coordinate with the other two strategy leads to ensure meaningful integration of the work.

Within the communications strategy, the team instituted a number of specific actions, including:

- An internal monthly newsletter to inform the rest of the department about standards implementation.

- Weekly “stand-up” meetings for the team with a strict protocol that allowed for quick sharing of information without getting sidetracked.
- A statement explaining how the three strategies prioritized in the standards implementation plan – communications, professional learning and improving feedback from the field – related to the department’s wider strategic planning.
- Regular meetings between assistant directors to improve communication within the learning services division.
- A protocol for how to use “listservs” and a calendar that allowed staff to see what had been sent out and what was planned.
- More consistent use of the team’s intranet “portal” to store and share information.
- Key talking points on standards implementation, distributed across the department.

To keep track of this work, Suzy developed a simple project calendar (see Figure 1). “This calendar helped me to develop agendas for meetings in which leaders would provide updates on their progress” says Suzy.

The result and reflections

The work is ongoing, but the team is starting to see the impact of their efforts. In a follow-up survey of team members, all agreed that the new “stand-up” meetings were an innovation worth keeping with several team members saying that the discussion helped them stay “in the loop” with the work of their colleagues.

“Our internal standards staff newsletter helped to solve the problem of our agency staff not really understanding the scope of our standards staff’s work with the field. It also assisted with improving relationships with other agency staff members,” says Suzy. “Likewise, our attendance and sharing at other teams’ meetings helped to build a bridge of communications between teams and helped us become more in tune with potential opportunities for collaboration with other teams.”

Anchoring this work in a wider plan to improve standards implementation has also kept the team focused on their goals. “Our ultimate goal in improving our internal communications is to improve external communications and to keep the field from having to piece together various messages in order to understand an initiative,” reports Suzy. “We believe we are heading in the

Figure 1: Project calendar

Project/Task Name	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Responsible Personnel
Establish weekly CSAS newsletter		•											Jackie L. and Lue Ann S.
Send out newsletters with team updates and, when possible/applicable, information from asst. director’s meetings		• →	→	→	→	→	→	→	→				Jackie L. and Lue Ann S.
Evaluation of CSAS newsletter, with help from feedback loops group								X	X				Jackie L. and Lue Ann S.
Sharing of evaluation results and discussion of next steps for newsletter, including potential archival possibilities									X	X	X		Jackie L. and Lue Ann S.
Implementation of next steps for newsletters											X		Jackie L. and Lue Ann S. with CSAS consultant support
Project/Task Name	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Responsible Personnel
Develop stand-up meeting protocol		•											Don G.
Hold stand-up meetings every other week			→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	Don G., CSAS Education Program Consultants
Evaluation of stand-up meetings					X	X						X	Don G., with CSAS consultant support
Share results of evaluation of stand-up meetings with CSAS Coordinated Communications team, and discuss next steps for stand-up meetings and				X		X							Don G., with CSAS consultant support

right direction and will continue to work toward that end.”

What went well?

Looking back at their progress, the team identified a few lessons they believe helped them succeed:

- **Starting small:** As the team started to involve staff from other teams, they frequently heard calls to expand their new practices across the whole agency. While they welcomed this enthusiasm, the team knew that “going big” would require senior leadership approval, more complex calendar coordination, and generally more effort, so they decided to make progress in the areas they could control rather than delay the work. As Suzy explains, “we certainly hope that the rest of the agency might pick up and run with an idea we have generated, but we also wanted to keep making progress toward our own goals for better standards implementation.”
- **Staying focused:** Related to the idea of starting small, was a push to stay focused on the task at hand. The team kept coming back to the goal and strategies set out in their plan, and pushed themselves only to include people in meetings if they had a clear role in the work.
- **Engaging research and evaluation staff:** The team had not historically taken full advantage of the research and evaluation professionals in their own agency. By engaging these staff early in the planning process, they were able to draw on their expertise – for example, by designing-in opportunities for evaluation and feedback from the field.

Reflections for further improvement

With the benefit of hindsight, the team also had a number of reflections for anybody trying to improve internal communications:

- **Engaging communications specialists:** The agency’s communications director was engaged in the planning and was identified as the lead on one of the projects. However, as the agency’s only communications specialist, other urgent work, such as supporting the incoming commissioner, occupied her time. Communications specialists are often in responsive external-facing roles like this and may be limited in their capacity to support internal communications work. In fact, this

“Our ultimate goal in improving our internal communications is to ... keep the field from having to piece together various messages”

Suzy Myers, Kansas State Department of Education

highlights the wisdom of assigning a member of program staff to lead the strategy!

- **Balancing priorities with other teams:** Similarly, the way that casework was assigned to IT specialists in the agency made it hard for those staff to prioritize work on parts of the communication strategy for the standards. The team had to find ways to work around this when specialist support was not available.
- **Mandates vs. buy-in:** An ongoing challenge has been ensuring that the new practices do not feel like a mandate for staff. “We have tried to make the changes ‘friendly’ and ‘optional’ and have been careful to provide reasoning behind them in order to increase buy-in,” says Suzy. “We want them to see how a change in their process will make their jobs easier and create a better experience for the field.”

Richard Eyre is Director of Research and Delivery at EDI.

For **more information** contact:
Suzy Myers, Education Program Consultant,
Kansas State Department of Education
semyers@ksde.org

EDI’s tools to support communications are available at:
www.deliveryinstitute.org/5B