

Successfully Implementing Transformational Change in Education

Lessons Learned About the Importance of Effective Change Leadership and Strategic Communications

The federal Race to the Top (RttT) competition was one of the largest investments in K–12 education in our nation’s history, and the program has a far-reaching impact on education policy and practice in states that were awarded grants and those that were not. With the support of RttT dollars, states, districts, educators, and communities have the opportunity to transform their education systems and ensure that students are taught the skills necessary to succeed in college and their careers. However, one of the biggest challenges for Race to the Top states continues to be how to effectively communicate, build support for this change, and engage various stakeholders. Battelle for Kids has partnered with RttT states Ohio and Tennessee, as well as many districts across the country to implement large-scale educational-improvement initiatives. Following are some lessons we have learned through this work related to effective communications, change leadership, and stakeholder engagement as critical components of transformational education reform:

Develop a plan that connects the work to the overall vision.

Education reform is challenging work, particularly an effort as wide-reaching as Race to the Top. It can be easy for those on the ground responsible for implementing change to get discouraged and lose sight of the ultimate goal. It is critical to connect these efforts to the state or district’s larger educational-improvement vision.

Stakeholders need to understand that their hard work will have a long-term impact and is not just temporary to satisfy the requirements of the four-year RttT plan. As John Kotter outlines in his 8-Step Process for Leading Change, education leaders must “develop a vision and strategy” and then “communicate the change vision.”

- **Align RttT messages to the overall vision for educational improvement.** Make the message about the end result. There must be a cohesive, aligned message that helps educators understand how their day-to-day activities contribute to long-term reform, help strengthen their practice, and most importantly, make a difference for kids in the classroom.
- **Connect the dots.** Effectively communicating a cohesive and aligned message across all aspects of a district’s reform efforts is critical to long-term success. Help stakeholders to understand that your efforts are not just “one more thing” that will come and go after RttT funds are expended, but rather a new way of thinking and vision for our schools—every day. Race to the Top is a catalyst to drive this vision.
- **Develop a communications plan, and execute it flawlessly.** A successful communications and change management plan should not only include web and print materials, but it should also engage stakeholders through focus groups, community forums, surveys, and other strategies.
- **Make sure organizational leadership is on board.** Ultimately, successful communications campaigns require the support of state department of education, district, and school leadership. Make sure your leadership understands that continuous, effective, and transparent communications are essential to the success of not only Race to the Top, but the state’s education transformation efforts as well.
- **Consider engaging external partners.** Partnering with communications professionals who have experience working in the education field can be highly valuable. A trusted, knowledgeable third party can provide strategic counsel and tactical support to help districts develop and manage a communications and change management plan that is aligned with their unique improvement goals.

To go fast, go alone, but to go far, go together.

Key stakeholders must be engaged early as partners. Successful reformers seek out leaders from all constituencies, get their input, keep them informed, and let them lead. This also ensures that reforms remain institutionalized and are never about a single person. Powerful coalitions are built when leadership is shared and supported; it also makes it harder to give up when the going gets tough.

- **Form a coalition of partners as tribal leaders.** Effective change management requires the active involvement of lots of people to support and reinforce the vision for transforming education. A good change management strategy finds ways to cultivate networks of support and engage all stakeholders.
- **Keep all levels of leadership informed.** This can be difficult, particularly if leadership changes during the implementation process. Regular e-mails, weekly phone conversations, executive summaries, status reports, scorecards, and face-to-face meetings can be effective strategies for keeping all leaders up-to-date on RttT efforts, while giving them an opportunity to discuss future plans, share concerns, and brainstorm ideas to better implement a certain program or serve teachers and students.
- **Build champions for change internally and externally.** Successful change occurs when leaders are engaged, believe in what they are doing, and model the behaviors they are expecting of others in the system. Leaders must be visible at all levels. Building internal and external champions also will lay a foundation to better sustain support for reform work, especially as transition within districts occurs.
- **Reach the masses.** Find ways to engage not only superintendents and state-level education professionals, but also principals, teachers, regional union representatives, parents, community members, and others. Establish partnerships with regional and local organizations and educators who can share the message and provide support. For example, as part of their First to the Top plan, Tennessee trained and deployed more than 450 District Value-Added Leadership Team members and 30 credentialed Regional Value-Added Specialists to build the capacity of educators to understand and use value-added analysis to improve teaching and learning in every district.
- **Don't create silos.** Make sure support staff understand the state or district's Race to the Top goals and plan for action, and most importantly, how these align with existing work.
- **Encourage collaboration and idea sharing** through online tools (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, blogs, online platforms, etc.) as well as the creation of various stakeholder groups.

Communicate. Communicate. Communicate.

If you've connected stakeholders to the larger vision through meetings, communications, and input, they will believe it's worth it. Remember to consider all stakeholders—educators at all levels, students, parents, business and community leaders, media, unions, partners, and others. Personalize messaging to each group to ensure relevance and understanding. And, carefully consider the timing and sequencing of your communications.

- **Reinforce what you want people to know, feel, and do.** Most people will endure a change if they know “the why” and feel that these efforts will make a difference for students. From the beginning, educators need to understand why reform is important, how it's designed to help, and what they can do to ensure success. For example, Tennessee launched First to the Top with a discussion map and video to inform all stakeholders about why the effort was important and how they impacted its success. This engagement activity helped lay the foundation for all the work to come.
- **Make your message about improvement, not judgment.** Communicate how your reform efforts are designed to support teachers. Be clear about how you intend to use data as a diagnostic tool to inform instruction. It is critical that the link between the data and how the data can be used for educational-improvement purposes are explicit and directly taught to those who must do the actual work.
- **Customize communications.** One size does not fit all. Sometimes communications need to be built around a district's specific needs and where the district is relative to reform efforts.
- **Provide districts with the right resources and messaging to inform stakeholders on timely issues.** For instance, before the release of teacher value-added reports in Ohio, school districts received a comprehensive package of support materials and resources to help them respond appropriately, including e-mails, flyers, PowerPoint presentations, talking points, webinars, online courses, and training opportunities to learn more about the reports and how to appropriately respond to the information.
- **Use a variety of communications methods.** The work of Race to the Top is different than the day-to-day school communications. As a result, the approach to communications should be unique. Look for ways to circulate messages beyond the standard channels of communication. Social media, videos, a separate website, and interactive blogs/message boards are just a few examples.

Training and support matter.

Transformational change occurs when educators understand their students' achievement and learning progress and are aware of the resources, data, training, and support available to ensure college and career readiness for every child. If teachers know how to interpret and make instructional adjustments based on data, their students will perform at higher achievement levels.

- **Provide support services.** Many questions arise around large-scale initiatives, and sometimes educators need assistance locating resources online, logging in to participate in online courses, or identifying the location of training. They are more likely to take advantage of what's available if they can easily find answers to their questions. Therefore, all communications should include contact information for support.
- **Don't duplicate efforts.** In some RttT states, there have been groups that have moved forward with training and other work that was already being done elsewhere. Broad communication at the state level with all potential educator groups can help streamline efforts and eliminate confusion of "who's doing what."
- **Provide forums for discussion and support.** Arrange regular support sessions or online chats to provide RttT participants with a forum to discuss concerns, find solutions, and share ideas with their colleagues.
- **Differentiate program rollouts to meet district needs.** While challenged with a program as comprehensive as Race to the Top, states should do their best to meet districts where they are at in the reform process. For example, some districts may have been far along with implementing their own educator evaluation system before RttT was approved, while other districts may have no experience in this area. It's important to consider how we can learn from districts that have pioneered reforms and share lessons with others who are just getting started.

Celebrate and share success.

When states and districts create opportunities to recognize excellence, people develop an appetite for it. Make your communications about students and not tests. Consider how you can communicate the sense of urgency necessary for change, while recognizing and building upon the genuine successes of the past. It's important to celebrate progress made, while sharing efforts to continually raise expectations to ensure student success.

- **Collect and share testimonials and case studies** about how districts overcame challenges and achieved successes. Educators deserve praise for their hard work. They also like hearing from other educators about what works and what doesn't in districts, school, and classrooms. With so many districts across the country implementing new ideas and strategies, there are tremendous opportunities to collect success stories about different approaches to similar types of work.
- **Spread the word** about what's working through press releases, submissions to publications and journals, scorecards, and other creative outlets, including features in the state superintendent's newsletter, association articles, social media, e-mails, etc.
- **Engage and learn from pioneer districts** working to pilot new reforms. Exploring these pioneer districts' efforts allows state departments of education to address concerns, identify opportunities for improvement, and build understanding and support before implementing them on a larger scale.

These lessons learned are just a few among many that states should consider to support and lead transformational change in education that improves teaching and accelerates growth for all students.

Battelle for Kids is a national, not-for-profit organization that provides strategic counsel and innovative solutions for today's complex educational-improvement challenges. Our mission-driven team of education, technology, communications and business professionals specializes in creating strategies that advance the development of human capital, the use of strategic measures, the implementation of effective practices, and communication with all stakeholders in schools.

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