

Home

TIF Spotlight: Communications and Stakeholder Engagement—Preparing for Payouts

Grantee: [Ohio Teacher Incentive Fund \(Ohio Department of Education\)](#)

Greetings TIF Grantees! It is an honor for us to have the opportunity to highlight some of the TIF exemplary work that is transpiring throughout the country. This portion of the newsletter gives grantees the opportunity to learn in more detail best practices, strategic approaches, and specific action steps that have proven to be effective and successful for TIF grantees as they implement the Core Elements. It is our hope that you will learn more about the excellent educator quality reform work that is taking place in our TIF districts and schools.



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TIF SPOTLIGHT

Ohio Department of Education

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Theme: Communications and Stakeholder Engagement—Preparing for Payouts

Description: Explain and describe in detail Ohio's communications and stakeholder engagement plan specific to preparing for payouts?

Answer, TIF Project Director & Battelle for Kids: As our 22 participating Ohio TIF districts (excluding Cincinnati) prepared for the first year of payouts in the 2012–13 school year, communicating about the award payouts was an important focus, but it was just one focus of the overall communications strategy. We are fortunate with Ohio TIF to have a strong partnership between the Ohio Department of Education and Battelle for Kids (BFK), our not-for-profit partner. BFK brings a strong record of communications support to ensure successful implementation of education reforms.

Rather than focusing solely on the award payouts, the communications strategy for Ohio TIF has first and foremost **demonstrated** how involvement in this project **supports improved student outcomes** at all levels; **connected the dots** between TIF and the district's overall educational-improvement efforts; **stressed the benefits** Ohio TIF provides educators through professional development, recognition of excellence, and the opportunity to collaborate with other districts; and **kept the focus on the goal** of enhancing teaching practices and helping all students graduate ready for success in college and careers.

Specific to the award payout process, BFK helped develop customizable templates to support districts in building **awareness, understanding, engagement, and support** for the payouts.

Awareness: One of the first activities in starting the grant was providing districts with communication resources that focused on building awareness about the TIF work and how it would affect educators, students, and the community. TIF districts received brochures, PowerPoint, and newsletter templates to introduce the work of TIF to various audiences.

Understanding: Once there was a basic awareness, the communication support focused on building understanding. This included supporting district TIF teams in communicating components of the award model and the collaborative process that went into developing the award model. Important to this process was stressing the alignment between model components and desired student

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outcomes.

Engagement: Districts in Ohio TIF engaged in a transparent award payout process to review, verify, and finalize award amounts before final payouts were made. Districts received support to prepare and train principals and teachers for reviewing and verifying the awards using the BFK•Award® technology solution, and to communicate the awards received at an individual- and district- level.

Support: Support from internal and external stakeholders is essential to the success of the TIF work beyond the grant funding. To help build support, we developed e-mail, news release, and FAQ templates for superintendents to use in highlighting the awards to staff, parents, and communities.

Laying this communications groundwork was critical to this project, as it gave us the opportunity to manage expectations for the payout process at the district-, principal-, and teacher-levels. It also allowed us to be proactive in responding to unforeseen challenges.

Ohio TIF districts faced a number of unanticipated challenges as they prepared for the first year of payouts. In fall 2012, the state delayed the release of Ohio's student achievement and growth data as a result of a data investigation. This situation made communications even more critical to maintain support, trust, and credibility of the work of Ohio TIF.

The keys to keeping the TIF project on track through this delay included:

1. Making sure there were constant communications about the data delay with district leadership; and
2. Collaborating to develop alternatives for partial award payouts with participating districts.

Though the first-year payouts did not follow the planned timeline, we were able to implement payouts in two phases, with the second phase ending in March 2013. Throughout this process, it was important to balance teacher and principal expectations for awards with the need for accurate data by using finalized state data for student achievement and growth metrics.

Inquiry: What examples of your communications and stakeholder engagement artifacts, correspondence, public relations documents, etc. can you share with your fellow grantees that illustrate your payout plan?

Answer, TIF Project Director & Battelle for Kids: Our partners at BFK, in collaboration with the ODE team and our district partners, developed a communications toolkit with a variety of resources to help Ohio TIF districts communicate the award payout process to internal and external stakeholders.

This toolkit included customizable templates presented to TIF Coordinators, who were responsible for carrying out the communications in their respective districts. Some of the materials in the toolkit were:

PowerPoint presentation template to explain the award payout process to staff

E-mail templates for TIF Coordinators/superintendents to send to principals and teachers

Sample award letters from the superintendent for educators who received an award and those who did not

Sample article with award highlights to communicate the overall award impact to internal and external audiences (*attached*)

Frequently asked questions to respond to inquiries from educators and community members

Beyond the toolkit, the TIF project leaders were proactive and responded to issues and questions from districts. We hosted regular conference calls, webinars, and one-on-one consults with TIF Coordinators and district leadership teams to work through issues and related communications challenges.

Inquiry: What is working well, and how do you know (related to your payout communications plan)?

Answer, TIF Project Director & Battelle for Kids: After three years of Ohio TIF implementation, 23 out of 24 initial districts are engaged and excited about the work and its potential to have a lasting and positive impact on student outcomes. We are proud of the fact that we had a successful first year of payouts. Twenty-two of the 23 participating TIF districts paid out \$4.4 million in Year 1 awards for 2,064 teachers and 108 principals. Cincinnati is excluded from this information since its data are still being held; however, since it is part of the national evaluation, it has received partial award payments.

Communications played a huge role in the success of our award payouts. Survey data collected through communications and strategic compensation surveys as well as formative reports from our external evaluator, Westat, have told us that messages about Ohio TIF are getting down to the teacher-level, and the majority of educators in districts are well informed of TIF and are generally supportive of the work.

TIF Coordinators have indicated that they value receiving templates that they can customize to communicate about the work in the "voice" of their own district. The majority of TIF Coordinators have used the templates in their district and believe they are easy to use and customize.

Looking forward to the second year of award payouts, we will continue the strategy of providing communications resources and templates to support TIF Coordinators' efforts.

Description: What areas in this specific communications strategy require refinement, enhancement, or deletion? What evidence supports this?

Answer, TIF Project Director & Battelle for Kids: Because our communications has focused more on building internal communications capacity and staff awareness of the TIF work and how it supports improved student outcomes, we have not focused as heavily on communicating about the work to external audiences.

Another reason for this is that many of our Ohio TIF districts are small and rural—and for many, educators are among the highest paid people in their communities. We have been sensitive to this reality, and the feedback we have received from many of our TIF districts is that they are not ready to talk about this work publicly, for a variety of reasons. Several districts are ready for the community conversation and have been proactive with their local media. We need to honor and respect local context and provide districts with the support they need to engage their communities *when they are ready*.

We know that there is a need to share the success and impact of Ohio TIF publicly with parents, communities, and business partners to build support and sustainability for the work. However, as we develop and refine our strategy for external communications, we will keep the audiences in mind and continue providing resources for districts to customize to best fit their local culture.

Some of the messages we are working on with our TIF districts focus on student college- and career-readiness and how student outcomes are improving. We are also focusing on communicating what districts are doing to support improved student outcomes through professional learning, access to data, and knowledge around how to use that data to inform instructional practices. We expect more of our districts to share their successes with communities to promote the opportunities and return on investment realized as a result of being part of TIF.

This story is especially important as more Ohio TIF districts design their award models on college- and career-readiness metrics, including:

- Providing incentives for teachers to earn dual enrollment licensure to provide students with college credit while in high school;
- Providing awards based on numbers of students meeting ACT threshold scores; and
- Providing awards based on high school graduation percentage (four-year cohort).

Inquiry: What are the teachers' and principals' perceptions about the payout plan? How did you learn about their perceptions?

Answer, TIF Project Director & Battelle for Kids: From survey data, we are pleased that teachers and principals are well informed of the TIF work and are generally supportive of the program.

Another positive finding we have learned is that educators in TIF districts see a great deal of alignment between TIF and overall district improvement initiatives, including Race to the Top, the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative, and other areas of focus. We have prepared communications around connecting the dots between these initiatives and positioning Ohio TIF as just one aspect of larger education reform—and we are proud of this outcome.

Additional Information: Please share any additional insights, best practices, lessons learned per your discretion.

There are 23 districts participating in Ohio's TIF 3 grant, representing small rural districts, suburban districts, and one large urban district. We understand that each district has a unique culture, community, and strategy for effective communications. In our work with districts, we have stressed that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to communications and have helped build the capacity of each district to effectively communicate the work of TIF in the way that makes the most sense.

In the TIF grant, we established a .5 FTE TIF Coordinator in each district, and one of the responsibilities of these Coordinators is to lead the communications work. From a project leadership perspective, we have provided TIF Coordinators with training on effective communications, and BFK has developed templates, including brochures, PowerPoint presentations, FAQs, talking points, and news releases that districts have been able to customize and use in their own local communications channels. This way, everyone is using similar messages about Ohio TIF, but districts are delivering the message in their own voice.

Link to information about Ohio TIF on the web: www.BattelleforKids.org/ohio/ohio_tif.

This includes a map of all our participating districts, information about the work, and also features some videos of TIF coordinators talking about Ohio TIF. If it makes sense, you are welcome to include this in the feature to direct readers for where to learn more about Ohio TIF.

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