



Center for
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Meeting the Challenges of Stakeholder Engagement and Communication:

Lessons From Teacher Incentive
Fund Grantees

The Harvesting Project

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As of August 2010, a total of 33 states, school districts, charter school coalitions, and other education organizations¹ had received Teacher Incentive Funds (TIF) to redesign compensation programs for teachers and principals. The U.S. Department of Education named a new cohort of TIF grantees on September 23, 2010.

TIF grantees have faced a number of challenges as they have worked to design and implement new educator pay programs. Among the most demanding challenges has been developing a targeted set of metrics around available and manageable data. Grantees use these metrics to measure teacher or principal effectiveness and assign pay. Recently, grantees have made it a priority to sustain operation programs once their federal funding expires.

TIF grantees have also found, often belatedly and unexpectedly, that effective stakeholder engagement and communication are challenging and essential to the success of their pay programs. Stakeholder engagement helps to create buy-in and initial acceptance of the TIF plan. It allows different voices and perspectives to be heard and recognized as new approaches to compensation develop. Communication provides the synergy to broaden buy-in and sustain support for the program.

This paper describes the ways in which TIF grantees have approached stakeholder engagement. It is based on data from multiple sources, including TIF program monitoring reports, Center for Educator

Compensation Reform (CECR) technical assistance notes, grantees' internal and external evaluations, and interviews with selected grantees. We reviewed and analyzed these data with an eye toward shedding light on the following issues:

1. What stakeholder engagement and communication challenges have TIF grantees faced?
2. What kinds of technical assistance did grantees seek and from whom?
3. What lessons can grantees learn about engagement and communication strategies?

Throughout, the paper uses named grantees in describing examples of engagement and communication efforts. A few examples also use non-TIF sites that have developed innovative new compensation programs. Wherever examples appear, they are meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive.

Before beginning to answer the three focus questions that frame this paper, we take up the question, "Who are TIF stakeholders?"

Defining Stakeholders

TIF stakeholders are groups and individuals who have a claim to or vested interest in the TIF-funded compensation program. Two broad groups of stakeholders—internal and external—are relevant to this discussion.

¹ For example, New Leaders for New Schools.

Internal stakeholders include those whose pay will be affected by the program and those who have responsibility for approving and implementing the new compensation plan. In a district-based teacher TIF program, for example, internal stakeholders include teachers and their associations or unions, the superintendent and other school and district administrative staff, and the local school board.

External stakeholders are groups and individuals who have an interest in the program and its outcomes, but may be less directly and immediately affected by it. These include parents and the community (including the business community, whose potential to bring in sustaining dollars for the program can be significant) and the media.

Effective communication, in other words, providing relevant and timely information for both internal and external stakeholders, is essential to building and sustaining support for the TIF program.

Internal stakeholders, especially educators whose pay is subject to change, need to understand the essential components of the program. Who is eligible for new dollars? What are the award criteria? What is the size of the incentives? If I fail to earn a bonus one year, will I have the opportunity to earn it the following year?

External stakeholders, parents and the broader community, want to know how new pay plans might contribute to improving educator effectiveness and, thus, to improving levels of student achievement. The media represents a special external stakeholder case. What the local media prints or says about a grantee's program can generate or quell enthusiasm for it among both internal as well as other external stakeholders.

Defining who the stakeholders are makes it possible to shape the appropriate communication strategies. As TIF grantees have discovered, determining the composition of internal and external stakeholder

groups is just the first among a number of engagement and communication challenges. Meeting these challenges has proven crucial to implementing TIF programs.

KEY ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

TIF grantees have faced a number of engagement and communication dilemmas on the road to implementing new pay programs. Sifting through the data, two challenges stand out most prominently: 1) securing and maintaining educator buy-in and support and 2) communicating about the compensation plan to a broad spectrum of stakeholders.

Gaining Educator Buy-in and Support

TIF grantees' experience, as well as a growing research base, shows that a prerequisite to smoothly implementing a new educator pay program is ensuring that those who are most directly affected by the plan—teachers or principals—are part of the work from the outset. Excluding key internal stakeholders from the compensation decision arena can engender mistrust and misunderstanding about the intent and purpose of the pay program. As Phil Gonring, Senior Program Officer at Denver's Rose Community Foundation² notes, "This is all about getting the right people to the table at the beginning."

Who are "the right people"? The answer to this question may vary by grantee. But particularly in the case of district grantees, the organizations that represent educators—teachers' and principals' unions and associations—need to be part of this mix.

² The Rose Community Foundation invested heavily in the development of Denver's ProComp program for teachers.

Some TIF grantees have found engaging associations and unions challenging. In states with collective bargaining laws, these organizations legally must be involved in shaping new pay programs. Legally required or not, however, engaging educators' organizations at the developmental stage of a TIF program just makes sense. As the experiences of TIF grantees have demonstrated, without union support—and support often is a consequence of engagement—TIF programs can be on very shaky ground. Philadelphia, one of the earliest grantees, failed to secure the local teachers' union support, and the district was forced to substantially alter its planned program, substituting charter schools, which are not covered by the district's union contract, for Philadelphia's traditional public schools.

A number of grantees have effectively brought their unions into the compensation discussion through joint labor-management councils. Among these grantees are Chicago and Prince George's County, Maryland.

Non-TIF compensation programs also have built union support through engagement. New York City's School-based Compensation Program represents a joint effort between the New York City Department of Education and the United Federation of Teachers. Compensation programs in Austin and Minneapolis are also collaborative district-union efforts.

Successful engagement is a process of collaboration and compromise. TIF grantees have discovered that earning educator buy-in requires time, patience, and a willingness to view the challenges of changing pay structures from multiple perspectives. Gathering together the right set of players when the program is in its earliest stages is just the first step.

A Multiple Strategies Approach

TIF grantees have used a variety of strategies to build educator support and buy-in. Among the most often used are multi-stakeholder steering committees, TIF advisory boards, and issue-specific compensation task forces.

Ohio's TIF grant encompasses four urban districts: Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, and Toledo. Each of these districts maintains a multi-stakeholder governing board to oversee its TIF program. South Carolina, like Ohio, a state TIF grantee, has designated a program Advisory Board to help coordinate TIF efforts across the state. Denver has established a Principal Design Committee to develop its TIF-funded principal pay program.³

Some grantees have coupled broad-based steering committees and advisory boards with targeted task forces. Weld Re-8 (Ft. Lupton, Colorado) instituted a TIF Steering Committee as well as stakeholder task forces that are charged with recommending to the negotiation team student achievement measures and the calculations used to award financial rewards for non-core teachers. The TIF Steering Committee and stakeholder task forces, however, do not recommend the monetary levels of the financial rewards. Amphitheater (Tucson, Arizona) has multi-stakeholder design teams on teacher compensation, school administrator evaluation, instructional support, and student assessment.

A number of grantees, Charlotte-Mecklenburg among them, have used surveys to do double duty, both to collect information about how educators view the TIF program, especially what they understand about it and where they lack sufficient understanding, and to enhance buy-in by making educators feel they are part of the process and that their ideas are contributing to shaping

³ Denver's TIF program for principals is an analog to the district's ProComp compensation for teachers.

the program. Charlotte-Mecklenburg developed a comprehensive survey plan to solicit views from all major constituency groups and then used these data to inform program decisions.

Eagle County (Colorado) found stakeholder buy-in essential to moving the district's TIF program forward. Initially implemented without teacher involvement, Eagle added teachers to its compensation committee and conducted focus groups to assess teacher understanding of and support for the newly emerging pay program. According to the district, buy-in and support improved markedly.

TIF grantees that have chosen to implement the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) are required to have potential participating schools vote on whether they will become "TAP schools."⁴ South Carolina, Chicago, and Texas, all TIF grants that use TAP, made sure that teachers in potentially participating schools chose to participate in the program. New York City is not a TIF grantee but recently implemented a new teacher compensation program. The terms of this program also require that teachers vote on whether their school will participate. Asking educators to make the decision about participating in a new pay program is another strategy to build support and buy-in. Casting a vote gives educators an immediate vested interest in the program that results.

Another buy-in and support issue, essential but often less considered, is ensuring that local district officials are onboard with the program. A number of TIF grantees have faced changes in the composition of local school boards or have changed superintendents. In South Carolina, for example, of the seven districts participating in TIF, five have changed superintendents since the program began. Changes in leadership mean that key individuals who were

not a part of the development of the TIF plan, and may know little about it, now have authority to communicate and make decisions about the plan. A break in leadership continuity can contribute to mixed, unclear, or inconsistent messages being sent to the district staff about an established or just-getting-off-the-ground program. As one TIF project director remarked, "When leadership changed, we experienced more than a few hiccups in the program." TIF program directors' engagement plans, then, need to include regular checking in with district (or state) leadership to ensure that those at the top of the organizational chart are and remain onboard with and knowledgeable about the TIF program.

Beyond Engagement to Understanding

Understanding—knowing what the TIF program components are and, for internal stakeholders, how to apply to them—may seem an obvious prerequisite to support and buy-in. Experience, however, suggests that this may not quite be the case. Many grantees have found that even when educators accept the general outlines of the new compensation program and seem to understand it, that ostensible understanding can fall apart when the payouts begin.

Many TIF grantees have learned that what appeared to be educators' grasp of the essential elements of the TIF program was far less firm than they imagined. When insufficient understanding meets unexpected financial outcomes, the result can be diminished trust in the program among educators.

Dallas discovered teachers did not understand its TIF program eligibility requirements, the procedures that allowed them to opt in or out, or requirements for the classroom observation element of the program. Weld encountered difficulty with educators understanding its compensation program's payout system. This dilemma was compounded in Weld

4 This is a requirement of the national TAP program.

when the district discovered after the first payout that the system had not been properly calibrated and needed to be substantially revised.

The challenge in Chicago was typical. Chicago, as previously mentioned, uses its TIF funds to implement the TAP program in designated schools. Part of TAP requires using a value-added method of calculating student test scores as part of the compensation formula.

Value-added models are complicated and often controversial among teachers. Some, for example, question the fairness of using student test scores to award teacher pay. Helping teachers understand value added, especially that using it does not mean teachers of high-performing students will automatically earn dollars while those of low-performing students will not, can be difficult and time consuming. As a number of TIF grantees have discovered, they need to take special care to ensure that teachers, who may not need a deep understanding of the intricacies of the statistical calculations, nevertheless have a clear enough understanding of the value-added system to trust it.

Chicago TIF decisionmakers dealt with teacher concerns about value added by bringing in additional expert advisors from outside the Chicago Public Schools to buttress understanding of the pay model and enhance support for it. In particular, representatives of the Value Added Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and officials of the American Federation of Teachers, the parent union of the Chicago Teachers Union, spent time in the district ensuring that stakeholders had the information and understanding needed to accept value added as part of their compensation formula.

Reaching Multiple Audiences

One of the principal challenges TIF grantees have faced is communicating effectively with internal and external stakeholders, in other words, with multiple and widely disparate audiences. Each stakeholder group—teachers, principals, unions, local education officials, parents, and community members—represents a different constituency. Each constituency has a different set of priorities and varying beliefs about and expectations for the new pay plan. Grantees have learned they must consider both the form of communication and the level of detail required to ensure buy-in and support. In addition, grantees have grappled with the challenge of conveying consistent, though often tailored, messages to quite different audiences.

Joe Hauge of South Dakota TIF notes that the state's program includes 10 districts, most of which are made up of rural schools. As he says, "It is essential to get a consistent message out to all levels of stakeholders. It's easy to focus just on [program participants], but you need to get information to other stakeholders at the same time in order to secure and maintain support [for the program]."

Communicating With Internal Stakeholders

The previous section of this paper described some of the strategies TIF grantees have used to secure educator buy-in. Working to build this initial program support has the salutary benefit of creating early internal stakeholder communication strategies. This is only part of the picture, however.

TIF grantees have used a broad range of strategies to move beyond initial buy-in and bring a clear and consistent message to internal stakeholders. Grantees have designed these communication efforts to secure deeper and longer lasting support for their TIF program.

South Carolina TIF issues monthly newsletters to educators, presents program updates at various state education meetings, and holds an annual TIF conference. Columbus, one of the four Ohio TIF districts, used its TIF funds to implement TAP. The district regularly distributes an informational newsletter, *TAP Times*, to teachers and other district educators.

Some grantees also have used a modified trainer-of-trainers model to boost educator awareness and understanding of the TIF program. South Carolina trains at least one teacher from each participating school as a resident expert on its TIF-funded TAP program. This strategy provides teachers with information, conveyed by a trusted colleague, designed to answer their specific questions. Non-TIF sites Denver (for teacher ProComp) and Minneapolis have successfully used this approach as well.

Other grantees have established email hotlines and held on-site Q&A sessions to handle teachers' and principals' questions and concerns about the compensation program. A number of grantees—South Carolina and Charlotte-Mecklenburg as previously mentioned—as well as Eagle County, Amphitheater, and Cumberland County (North Carolina), have used surveys and focus groups simultaneously to gather and give information.

Many grantees make use of technology, particularly websites, to provide consistent and ongoing TIF information to educators. Of particular note, a number of grantees have dedicated websites that offer program-specific details. Guilford County (North Carolina), Denver, and Houston provide extensive web-based information about their TIF programs. Ohio includes a TIF program page on the state department of education's website. Weld's TIF program has a spot on the district's website. Hillsborough County (Florida) uses web-based

software to turn its TIF website into a one-stop reference for teachers and principals.

Most grantees use a combination of these strategies. As experience has shown, no single strategy is sufficient to do the job of reaching all internal stakeholders.

Communicating With External Stakeholders

External stakeholders have not received much attention in this paper so far. Grantees must engage internal stakeholders from the beginning and continue to hold their support if the TIF program is to function effectively. This support must be sustained through continuing communication. As TIF grantees have also learned, ongoing communication with *external* stakeholders is key to building and maintaining program support.

Experience suggests that successful initial communication with external stakeholders provides an overview of the basic architecture of the grantee's program and answers essential questions such as, Why is my school (or district or state) involved in this program? How is the program funded? and Who is eligible to participate? Regular program updates and progress reports provide the basis for ongoing communication with this set of stakeholders. Grantees have approached this communication task in a variety of ways.

Weld distributes a monthly district newspaper, *Schoolhouse News*, to all mailing addresses in the district. The newsletter includes an article each month on TIF. In addition, Weld's TIF director attends local Chamber of Commerce meetings to report on the project, makes periodic presentations before organizations such as the Colorado Association of School Boards and the Colorado Association of School Executives, and conducts an annual parent and community TIF survey to assess external stakeholders' knowledge about and

understanding of the compensation program. The Weld school district also holds an annual community summit at which TIF has a place on the agenda.

South Carolina TIF officials attend local Rotary Club meetings to report on program progress, distribute informational pamphlets to local libraries and at state education conferences, hold regional town hall-type meetings, and, like Weld, conduct annual parent surveys. The Cincinnati and Cleveland school districts, participants in the Ohio TIF grant, conduct targeted outreach to local universities and foundations.

Communication is a constant work in progress. TIF grantees have learned that both educators and the broader community, internal and external stakeholders, require a regular program of communication as part of the overall plan to sustain compensation change efforts. As Weld's Carol Ruckel notes, "There's no such thing as over-communicating. People assume [the program] is static, but it's not. Things are always changing."

A Special Situation: The Media

As the experiences of TIF grantees illustrate, the ability to communicate effectively with the local media is an essential skill. A good working relationship with local media enhances the prospects that a story will be accurate and makes it more likely it will be positive.

South Carolina, for example, has implemented a media strategy since the inception of its TIF program. Program officials have maintained regular contact with the state's education media and have kept tabs on local media to help participating districts recognize and respond to opportunities to publicize the program.

TIF grantees have found their names in the newspaper under a variety of circumstances—news reports announcing receipt of the grant; editorials, both pro and con; and straight news stories. Some grantees have escaped the media spotlight. Reports about Denver, its near neighbor, have eclipsed news about Weld's TIF program. Other grantees received media attention they neither sought nor could control.

The Chicago Public Schools and Chicago Teachers Union, after some tense discussions and negotiations, reached an accord on the specifics of the district's TIF-funded TAP program. Among the district-union agreements was that neither side would refer to the program as "merit pay," a term that, for historical reasons, has negative connotations for some teachers. When the new pay program was ready to begin, district and union officials met with the editorial board of the *Chicago Tribune* to explain it. District and union representatives made it clear to the newspaper that the program was not merit pay and should not be referred to as such. Nevertheless, the next day, a front-page article announced that Chicago teachers had "agreed to merit pay."

Houston experienced a different media issue with its first TIF payout. The day before the district announced which teachers would receive awards, the *Houston Chronicle* asked the district for the names and schools of the recipients. As a public agency, the district was required to turn this information over to the paper. The newspaper made names and schools public before the district had an opportunity to notify teachers or principals. School systems need to be prepared for this kind of potentially disruptive media involvement.

The recent release by the *Los Angeles Times* of teachers' value-added test scores presents another vivid example of potentially crisis-producing media situations TIF grantees might face. Los Angeles

is not a TIF grantee and the issue was teacher evaluation, not compensation. Nevertheless, the situation is sufficiently analogous to raise a red flag for TIF grantees. In the case of Los Angeles, the newspaper developed its own database of teacher value-added scores and drew conclusions from these data about teachers' levels of effectiveness. Neither the district nor its teachers knew what the *Times* was planning. The *Times* release of the scores to the public and its analysis of them created a firestorm of anger among teachers and an unanticipated public crisis for the district.

Chicago, Houston, and Los Angeles, then, offer cautionary tales. The media will choose what it reports. Grantees can take steps to anticipate what is likely to become a story and provide information to increase the likelihood that the story is accurate and appropriate, but ultimately they cannot control what becomes public information. Thus, TIF grantees must have a media strategy that is nimble enough both to anticipate issues that might arise and deal with crises as they emerge.

The Indispensable Essential: A Comprehensive Communications Plan

A relatively small number of TIF grantees have made communication a priority from the outset of their projects. Most, however, put communication on the backburner, developing communication strategies on an as-needed basis in response to unanticipated stakeholder and program implementation issues.

TIF grantees have learned, sometimes through difficult experiences, that a well thought out communication plan is essential to an effective pay program. Comprehensive communication plans, which provide a kind of action outline, have helped grantees successfully face multiple communication challenges.

South Carolina led the way with the first comprehensive communication plan. A number of TIF grantees have used South Carolina's plan as a model. The state designed its plan to serve a number of important purposes:

1. Establish a regular and timely communication corridor between the state TIF office and each participating school,
2. Raise awareness of the program among teachers, principals, and community members,
3. Use positive publicity to promote the TIF program and increase prospects of sustained funding for it,
4. Garner support for the program from state-level policymakers and education organizations, and,
5. Use media outlets to effectively promote the program.

The South Carolina plan, then, is not a simple assemblage of random communication activities. Rather, it is carefully constructed around this set of well-considered communication goals, all of which are critical to building support for and sustaining the TIF program.

A number of TIF grantees, some taking their cues from South Carolina, also have designed comprehensive communication plans that include targeted strategies to build continuing understanding of and support for their programs. Among these grantees are Texas (TAP); Prince George's County, Maryland; Weld; Guilford County; and Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

A review of comprehensive communication plans shows they have a number of elements in common. They include a *timeline* that lays out anticipated communication activities over the course of the grant or at least over a full school year. Communication activities are linked to

communication goals. In other words, they answer the questions, Why is this activity important? and What is it meant to accomplish?

Comprehensive communication plans detail the *content* of individual communication activities. What is the focus of each piece of communication? The plans describe the *audience* (or audiences) for whom each communication is intended. Is a particular communication for internal or external stakeholders? Is it targeted to some particular subset of a stakeholder group, such as teachers, principals, parents, or the media?

Plans that effectively guide communications efforts set *target dates* for each activity. When is this activity to be completed? How often is the activity to be repeated, or is it to be one-time only?

Specifying the *method* of communication is a critical part of a well thought out plan. How will the information be conveyed—through written material, at meetings, electronically?

Deciding in advance who has *responsibility* for communication in general and for each communication activity is also key. Most TIF grantees make communication part of the general responsibility of the TIF program director who then parcels out responsibility for particular communication tasks to other staff members within or outside the TIF program. Knowing whose job it is to both oversee communications and to accomplish each communications task makes it that much more likely that a comprehensive plan will guide communications work.

Finally, comprehensive communication plans include a *feedback mechanism*. They embed a means periodically to check on the reach and effectiveness of communications activities and make mid-course alterations as necessary.

A well-designed and executed communications plan is an important tool for building and sustaining support for grantees' TIF programs. The absence of such a plan can create a yawning information gap that may jeopardize the pay program's ability to continue.

Seeking and Securing Help

This paper has highlighted some of the principal engagement and communication challenges TIF grantees have faced, and the strategies they have used to meet these challenges. Among those grantees that have sought technical assistance for engagement or communication challenges, some grantees have come to CECR for help. Others have relied on colleague grantees. Still others have sought assistance from outside organizations with expertise in engagement and communication issues.

Technical assistance for TIF grantees has taken a number of forms. Web-based informational resources offer an ever-growing, experience-based library of ideas and answers to frequently asked questions. On-the-ground meetings and telephone conversations have targeted specific engagement and communication challenges, such as ensuring the local union and association are onboard or designing and implementing a communications plan. Technical assistance also has provided emergency help to grantees during unexpected situations, such as unflattering media stories or inaccurate payouts.

Technical Assistance Through CECR

CECR has provided several forms of stakeholder engagement and communications assistance to grantees, including formal and informal in-person and telephone meetings, problem-solving visits to grantee sites, and web-based information.

The CECR website offers a rich source of information for grantees. Though there are no data to quantify the number of grantees who have sought stakeholder engagement and communications information from the CECR website, anecdotal reports suggest this electronic resource is widely used.

Among the CECR web-based resources available to grantees is the CECR-created guidebook on planning and implementation; grantee profiles and emerging issues papers; materials from CECR conferences, webinars, and podcasts; an electronic library with an online searchable database about educator compensation reform; research syntheses that respond in plain language to engagement, design, and implementation questions; a monthly newsletter; and, annotated bibliographies of publications on compensation reform. While these resources span a wide range of topics related to educator pay, CECR makes guidance on stakeholder engagement and communication available in each section of the website.

In terms of in-person assistance, grantees have turned to CECR for specific assistance in a number of engagement and communication areas. Below is an illustrative list of topics and the grantees that have sought help:

- *Building internal stakeholder support for a new compensation system*—Chugach (Alaska), Chicago, Eagle County, National Charter School Consortium, Northern New Mexico, and District of Columbia;
- *Working with teacher and administrator organizations*—Chicago, Denver, Eagle County, Houston, Memphis, Ohio, Philadelphia, and Weld;
- *Explaining value added*—Chugach, Chicago, Eagle County, and Houston;

- *Designing an effective communications plan*—Chugach, Chicago, Dallas, Eagle County, Guilford County, Houston, Memphis, National Charter School Consortium, Philadelphia, South Carolina, District of Columbia, Weld, and Ohio; and,
- *Developing local media contacts*—Beggs (Oklahoma).

Help From Colleague Grantees

Some grantees have taken their cues from colleague grantees. As previously mentioned, South Carolina's communications plan became a national TIF model. Other grantees used the architecture and content of the South Carolina plan as they developed their own plans.

Grantees also have used time at the annual national TIF meetings, sponsored by CECR, to learn from their colleague grantees. As grantees have gained experience with and insight about their programs, the yearly Washington, D.C., meetings increasingly have become opportunities for a kind of informal grantee-to-grantee technical assistance.

Help From Outside Organizations

Some grantees found that their stakeholder engagement and communications challenges required assistance that CECR or colleague grantees could not provide. These grantees sought help from other organizations better positioned to provide fresh perspectives and good ideas.

Chicago, for example, acting on early CECR advice, hired a local firm that specialized in communications to assist the district with its communication challenges. Houston offers a particularly compelling example about how important outside assistance can be.

A Special Case: The Houston Independent School District

Houston's TIF program offers bonus dollars to teachers based on value-added student test scores. The district completed significant planning in advance of what it hoped would be a smooth initial payout. That was when matters began to go awry.

With the first payout, Houston faced two challenges that threatened the program: 1) the day before the first awards were to be announced, the local newspaper, the *Houston Chronicle*, published the names and schools of the teachers who were to receive the bonus dollars, and 2) when payout checks were issued, many were inaccurate.

This combination of events triggered strong emotions among district educators. Teachers (and their principals) were dismayed that the newspaper had the pay results before they did, angered that some of the checks were wrong, and frustrated that some eligible teachers did not receive checks at all. Teachers, school administrators, and others began to call the program's credibility into question.

The district knew it needed to act quickly. Houston turned to Battelle for Kids.

Battelle for Kids is a national not-for-profit organization that specializes in providing strategic assistance to school districts striving to improve measures of teacher effectiveness. In the last several years, Battelle has focused much of its organizational energy on working with districts that are implementing value-added-based compensation systems.

Houston secured funding from the Gates and Broad Foundations to hire Battelle to help beginning with the second year of the TIF grant.

The early newspaper article and incorrect checks were symptoms of deeper problems Houston's TIF program faced. According to Carla Stevens, the

district's Assistant Superintendent for Research and Accountability, Houston had underestimated the "degree of mind shift that was required to move from a student attainment model to a value-added model."

For many years, Houston's accountability system was based on straight student attainment on state tests. The district wanted to change to value added and base teacher pay on the value-added scores. "There wasn't much communication in the first year [of TIF] about what 'growth' meant in value-added terms," said Stevens. "The district did not adequately prepare teachers and principals for the new pay system. Our challenge was [to have a] communication infrastructure in place and know how to use it effectively."

From Battelle's perspective, the immediate challenges were to "quell the anger from the first year [the initial payouts] and help people understand value-added and see its relative fairness," according to John Hussey, Battelle's Chief Strategy Officer. Battelle began its work in Houston with what it called a "discovery session" designed to unpack the district's communication problems.⁵ Then Battelle set about developing and helping the district implement a new communications strategy.

Battelle's communication approach involved using various modes (print, web, and video) to distribute targeted communications to specific stakeholders—principals, teachers, parents and community members, and the media. Battelle provided a great deal of information to principals, including FAQs (frequently asked questions) about value added, information in the form of easy-to-read PowerPoints about the pay system and about value added, and information about differentiated compensation.

⁵ Battelle also worked with Houston in the areas of change management and data systems. These topics are beyond the scope of this paper.

The organization built a web-based portal system for teachers with information about the TIF program and supports for teachers seeking to earn the incentive dollars.⁶ Among the features of the portal is an “award module.” An individual teacher can use an assigned password to log onto the portal for information about award eligibility, the data that were used to determine that eligibility, and the amount of the award. The system is set up so that teachers can ask questions and, in essence, have a dialog with district TIF officials.

To ensure that the problem with inaccurate payouts does not recur, the portal system allows teachers to log on well *in advance* of checks being issued, giving them the opportunity to make sure that data such as who their students are and what classes they are teaching (all part of the pay calculation), are accurate. “Now,” says Houston’s Carla Stevens, “there’s lots of work done before the checks go out.”

In order to build additional buy-in and broadcast Houston’s pay program more widely, Battelle initiated community engagement sessions in each building and began distributing a quarterly newsletter about the program to parents.

The organization established mechanisms for communicating with the local business community, local foundations, and the Houston community at large. The plan extended Houston’s communication reach with activities designed to inform state and federal legislators and other policymakers focused on education issues about the TIF program. Battelle also helped the district leverage existing relationships with long-time HISD partners, including the Houston Federation of Teachers and the Texas Education Association.

In addition, Battelle helped Houston craft a much-needed media relations strategy. The strategy included activities to communicate about the pay program and generate buy-in among key Houston area English and Spanish-speaking print, electronic, and television media outlets.

Battelle’s ultimate goal in its work with Houston was, according to John Hussey, “to build the capacity of the district and work ourselves out of a job.” That goal is now being realized. The district has a functioning and effective communications plan. Battelle is transitioning many of the TIF communications functions originally assumed by Battelle to the school district. Battelle is, indeed, working itself out of a job.

Summing up Technical Assistance

Grantees have multiple sources to which they can turn for assistance when stakeholder engagement and communications challenges arise. Among these sources are CECR, other grantees, and outside organizations.

Somewhat surprisingly, few pre-2010 TIF grantees sought any engagement or communications assistance at all, though many say that they know, in retrospect, that they needed it. One thing seems clear: Engagement and communication challenges grantees have faced might have been more easily resolved or even avoided altogether if they had sought assistance early on. As Weld’s Carol Ruckel advises, “Yell for help when you need it.”

⁶ With the assistance of Battelle for Kids, Houston “rebranded” its TIF program, integrated the pay plan with other elements of the district’s reform program, and renamed the combined effort ASPIRE (Accelerating Student Progress Increasing Results and Expectations).

Lessons Learned

What have we learned from the experiences of TIF grantees? What lessons can be drawn about stakeholder engagement and communication that might make the TIF lives of new grantees easier?⁷

1. *Identify the stakeholders* who need to be engaged and those with whom communication is essential to building buy-in for and support of the program. These audiences include internal stakeholders, such as teachers and principals, and external audiences, including parents and the media.
2. *Engage internal stakeholders*, including unions and associations, at the beginning of the work. Educators who are most directly affected by new pay programs need to feel they are a part of the programs. This sense of ownership, which contributes to buy-in and support, depends in part on educator engagement in the developmental stages of the program.
3. *Develop a comprehensive communications plan* that can serve as a project-long road map. The plan, which should include strategies to communicate with multiple audiences and in multiple modes, should be structured as a living document, subject to mid-course changes as events dictate.
4. *Seek help when you need it.* Grantees should ask for assistance as soon as they become aware of an engagement or communication challenge. Waiting until other challenges are resolved can serve to exacerbate engagement and communication dilemmas.

⁷ Some of the lessons learned around stakeholder engagement and communications from the first cohorts of grantees were reflected in the revised TIF regulations. Educator buy-in and a communications plan are now proposal prerequisites.

For some grantees, the four tasks above broadly compose the engagement and communication portions of the TIF project director's job description. To be sure, no single person can or should be responsible for the totality of these tasks. Stakeholder engagement, for example, is both a technical and a political task, requiring continuing involvement of key district level decisionmakers and local union officials. As noted, many grantees have used advisory boards or TIF task forces to make some of the significant engagement and communication decisions and provide direction to the TIF director.

Each grantee needs to determine how best to accomplish the goals of engagement and communication. Who is responsible for specific tasks? What is the scope of these tasks? What is the best way to make sure they get done? However, having one person, such as the project director, as the center of gravity for stakeholder engagement and communication increases the likelihood that essential work will be completed.

Drawing on the experiences of TIF grantees, this paper has offered ideas and advice for incorporating stakeholder engagement and communication as key components in new pay-for-performance programs. Perhaps the most important lesson to be taken is that effectively engaging stakeholders and communicating with them is an ongoing task. The challenges may change over time, but they never disappear entirely.

Data Sources

Implementation Checklist in *Guide to implementation:*

Resources for applied practice, found at

<http://cecr.ed.gov/pdfs/guide/CECRchecklist.pdf>

Participation, cooperation, and buy-in: New forms of teacher compensation, CECR webinar, April 1, 2010.

Koppich, J., and C. Prince, Stakeholder engagement and communication in *Guide to implementation: Resources for applied practice*, found at <http://cecr.ed.gov/pdfs/guide/CECRStakeholderEngagement.pdf>

Max, J., and J. Koppich, Engaging stakeholders in teacher pay reform CECR, found at <http://cecr.ed.gov/pdfs/EmergingIssuesReport1.pdf>

Milanowski, A. Harvesting lessons on educator incentive plan design from technical assistance provided to Teacher Incentive Fund grants, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Finance Association, March 2010, Richmond, Virginia.

Rowland, C., and A. Potemski, Alternative compensation terminology: Considerations for stakeholders, policymakers, and the media, CECR, found at http://cecr.ed.gov/pdfs/EmergingIssuesReport2_8-21-09.pdf

Documents found at <https://workspace.wcer.wisc.edu> (VARCnet, Value Added Research Center proprietary website):

- TIF grantee local evaluations
- TIF grantee self-evaluations

Documents found at <https://www.workplacecentral.com/eroom> (CECR proprietary website):

- CECR technical assistance reports
- “Harvesting” project case studies
- TIF monitoring reports

Communications plans for the following TIF grantees (available on CECR website and from TIF grantees):

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg (North Carolina) Public Schools
- Dallas (Texas) Independent School District
- Florence County (South Carolina) School District 3
- Hillsborough County (Florida) Public Schools
- Miami-Dade (Florida) Public Schools
- Orange County (Florida) Public Schools
- Prince George’s County (Maryland) Public Schools
- South Carolina Teacher Advancement Program
- University of Texas System Teacher Advancement Program
- Weld Re-8 (Colorado) Public Schools

Telephone interviews with TIF grantees:

- Jason Culbertson, formerly South Carolina Department of Education, August 13, 2010
- Joe Hauge, South Dakota, July 30, 2010
- John Hussey, Battelle for Kids, August 2, 2010
- Carol Ruckel, Weld Re-8 (Colorado), August 5, 2010
- Carla Stevens, Houston Independent School District, July 29, 2010
- Maureen Yoder, Ohio State Department of Education, July 29, 2010

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