

Lessons Learned from the REL West Educator Effectiveness Alliance’s Work with the Arizona and Utah SEAs Piloting New Measures of Educator Effectiveness

Dr. Reino Makkonen
REL West at WestEd

Background on REL Alliances

The federal Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) provide research and development services to ten U.S. regions. The REL mission is to increase the use of data and evidence in educational decision making, and in the current REL contract (2012-2017) this is primarily achieved through the work of research alliances — groups of researchers, education practitioners, policymakers and others who work over time to apply data and research to a particular education concern. Alliance work is seen as a way to better integrate research with the real needs of practitioners, and often takes place via repeated use of the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle, that is, small scale (pilot/field) tests, followed by fine-tuning, followed by wider-scale tests and ultimately, implementation at scale. REL researchers provide alliance partners with analytic technical assistance; for example, helping develop research questions and designs, refining measures, identifying indicators, and conducting applied research studies.

The REL West Educator Effectiveness Alliance working closely with Arizona and Utah

REL West serves California, Arizona, Nevada and Utah. State and local education officials from the latter three states (with Colorado) began meeting together in early 2011 to discuss their states’ new regulations related to educator evaluation that required, for example, multiple measures and the incorporation of student test results. Despite some variation in states’ contexts, this group was a natural fit for alliance work. The REL West Educator Effectiveness (EE) Alliance has now spent several years working closely with both the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) and the Utah State Office of Education (USOE) to research the initial pilot implementation of their new teacher effectiveness measures/systems.

Arizona context. State law requires that Arizona local education agencies (LEAs) evaluate individual teachers annually according to the requirements established by the 2011 State Board-approved Arizona Framework for Measuring Educator Effectiveness, which consists of (a) teaching performance results, (b) classroom-level academic progress results, and (c) school-level results. (The specific data elements within each of these components may vary.) In 2012, ADE designed a more specific, Framework-aligned teacher evaluation model, comprised of the Danielson Framework for Teaching (teaching performance results); surveys of students, parents, and peer teachers (school-level results); and measures of student academic progress (classroom-level results).¹ Five Arizona LEAs volunteered to pilot test the ADE teacher evaluation model in 2012/13 and 2013/14, and REL West has worked with ADE to study pilot implementation and initial results.

Utah context. The state’s Public Educator Evaluation Requirements (PEER) require Utah’s LEAs to provide (by 2016/17) a summative yearly rating of educator performance derived from (a) observations of instructional quality, (b) evidence of student growth, and (c) parent and student input, and USOE is incrementally piloting model measures in each of these areas. Statewide working groups spent several years developing the Utah Teaching Observation Tool (UTOT) and the Utah Measurement of Educational Leadership (UMEL) from the state’s teaching and educational leadership standards adopted in 2011.²

¹ ADE’s model teacher evaluation process for 2013/14 is available online at <http://www.azed.gov/teacherprincipal-evaluation/files/2012/07/teacher-eval-instrument.pdf>.

² Utah’s observation instruments for teachers (UTOT) and school leaders (UMEL) are available online at <http://www.schools.utah.gov/CURR/educatoreffectiveness/Observation-Tools.aspx>.

REL West has worked closely with USOE to study the 2012/13 and 2013/14 implementations of UTOT and UMEL across 12 pilot LEAs, in particular exploring the technical properties of the instruments.

The goal of REL West’s analytic technical assistance to ADE and USOE has been to guide refinements to both the state model instruments/systems as well as to the training and guidance provided to evaluators.

Key REL West EE Alliance research questions

- How were scores distributed?
- What types of associations were evident between the results of the different measures?
- What challenges and/or unintended consequences were reported by participants?
- Were results perceived as clear, credible, and pedagogically useful (i.e., relevant)?
- Was feedback seen as helpful for targeting subsequent professional development?

Key implications for data collection and management

Answering these research questions required pilot LEAs to collect and manage new data in a systematic way, from a set of new assessment instruments and processes. New data elements included item-level and aggregated ratings from observations of teachers and surveys of parents and students, plus students’ scores on state and/or local tests aggregated to the teacher level. These new data were collected and managed in various ways.

- As part of Utah’s two-year pilot, the state paid for a vendor-developed platform to house and manage UTOT/UMEL observation data from the 12 pilot LEAs. Moving forward, online tools for data collection and management will be a local responsibility, with LEAs choosing from a handful of available online platforms. Although the state won’t endorse any particular product, USOE is now developing a list of technical requirements that vendors must meet in order to support UTOT/UMEL content online.
- In Arizona, multiple new teacher measures were piloted simultaneously, and data collection/management proved quite labor intensive.
 - As in Utah, a state-funded vendor provided online data management/reporting tools for pilot observation results, but the system was not linked to survey or student test data.
 - ADE provided significant support to the pilot LEAs, developing a set of over 40 different teacher rating tables (Excel workbooks with built-in formulas and autofills) to define and calculate scores for pilot teachers at various subjects and grade levels.³ Certain state data were pre-populated in the tables provided to the LEAs, and teachers’ local data were then entered into the tables by LEA staff (with training and oversight from ADE).
 - Moving forward, to lessen the substantial data burden (and reduce reporting errors), ADE is developing an (optional) online interface for LEAs to use to enter local results (with state data already imported).⁴
 - ADE is also working to produce a technical guidance document (with recommended data checks and safeguards) to shape local data collection practices around teacher evaluation.

For Discussion

If new state regulations require that multiple new measures be used in educators’ evaluations, whose responsibility is it to ensure that the results of those new measures are properly collected, managed/tabulated, combined and reported? What should be the role of the SEA in this area?

³ ADE’s teacher rating tables are online at <http://www.azed.gov/teacherprincipal-evaluation/teacher-rating-tables/>.

⁴ This is part of a larger ADE initiative now in progress, known as the Arizona Education Learning and Accountability System (AELAS), a new statewide system of data collection, analysis and access tools (<http://www.azed.gov/aelas/>).