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## **An Invitational Forum for State Education Agencies “Building Coherence Across ARRA Funds” Evaluation Summary December 2009**

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### **Introduction**

An invitational forum for state education agencies focused on building coherence across American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds was held in Rosemont, Illinois, on November 19, 2009. Organized at the behest of the U.S. Department of Education (ED), this one-day meeting was a joint endeavor among several regional entities: the Great Lakes East Comprehensive Center, the Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center, the North Central Comprehensive Center, REL Midwest, and REL Central. States from the Great Lakes and North Central regions were invited to attend.

The overall purpose of the meeting was to review the status and details of ARRA grants, including Race to the Top, State Fiscal Stabilization Fund Phase Two, and the Invest in Innovation Fund. Intended outcomes for participants were the following:

- Receive the latest information and guidance from the U.S. Department of Education.
- Discuss strategic planning for ARRA funds and reform priorities.
- Discuss ways to build coherence among all ARRA funding streams.
- Address participant questions on coordination and planning across ARRA funds.

### **Data Collection**

After the forum, attendees from state education agencies were invited to take an online survey that asked them to rate the extent to which outcomes were met as well as the overall quality, relevance, and usefulness of the event. Respondents were also given the opportunity on the survey to identify specific technical assistance needs based on what they learned and heard at the forum. Of the 20 participants contacted, 12 completed the survey, for a response rate of 60 percent. After forum attendees had received several invitations to take the survey and provide feedback, the survey was closed on December 1, 2009.

## Survey Results

Table 1 shows that the 12 participants who completed the online survey were from five states: Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Ohio, and South Dakota. Nearly 60 percent of respondents represented state education agencies in Missouri and Michigan.

**Table 1. Respondents by State**

Which state are you from?	N	%
Missouri	4	33%
Michigan	3	25%
Iowa	2	17%
Ohio	2	17%
South Dakota	1	8%
Total	12	100%

## Quantitative Results

As Table 2 shows, the majority of respondents reacted favorably to the forum. Most *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that the forum was well organized and informative, information was presented clearly and comprehensibly, and attending the forum was a good use of their time. Despite multiple opportunities to interact with officials from the U.S. Department of Education, however, a quarter of respondents indicated that their questions and concerns were not addressed.

**Table 2. General Forum Indicators**

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement.	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The forum was well organized.	12	42%	50%	0%	8%
The forum was informative.	12	33%	58%	0%	8%
Information was presented in a clear and comprehensible manner.	12	33%	58%	0%	8%
Attending the forum was a good use of my time.	12	25%	67%	0%	8%
My questions and concerns were addressed.	12	8%	67%	17%	8%

Respondents were next asked the extent to which the forum met its intended objectives. Table 3 shows that 75 percent of respondents believed that opportunities were provided to dialogue with officials from the U.S. Department of Education to a *great extent*. Nearly 60 percent also indicated that their thinking on relationships and interconnections between ARRA reform priorities and funding opportunities were stimulated to a *great extent*. As to providing useful guidance and giving the state teams time to share and discuss, half thought the forum achieved these objectives to a *moderate extent*, and 33 percent indicated to a *great extent*. Finally, three quarters of respondents reported that the forum improved their understanding of ARRA funding opportunities and priorities to a *moderate extent*. As one respondents observed, “USDE gave good information, but much if it has been covered many times.”

**Table 3. Forum Objectives**

In your opinion, to what extent did the forum achieve the following?	N	Great extent	Moderate extent	Minimum extent	Not at all
Provide opportunities for participants to dialogue with representatives from the U.S. Department of Education.	12	75%	25%	0%	0%
Stimulate your thinking regarding relationships and interconnections between ARRA reform priorities and funding opportunities.	12	58%	42%	0%	0%
Provide you with useful guidance regarding ARRA.	12	33%	50%	17%	0%
Give state teams time to share and discuss.	12	33%	50%	17%	0%
Increase your understanding of ARRA funding opportunities.	12	17%	75%	8%	0%
Increase your understanding of ARRA funding priorities.	12	17%	75%	8%	0%

The next set of survey questions asked participants to rate the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the forum. As Table 4 shows, all respondents were satisfied with the overall quality of the forum; half considered it to be *excellent*. All but one respondent were also pleased with the relevance and usefulness of the event to their work on ARRA.

**Table 4. Quality, Relevance, and Usefulness**

<b>Please rate the forum on the following indicators.</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Poor</b>
Quality	12	50%	50%	0%	0%
Relevance to your work on ARRA	12	33%	58%	8%	0%
Usefulness to your work on ARRA	12	33%	58%	8%	0%

### **Qualitative Results**

Respondents were asked several open-ended questions to elicit more detailed feedback. A summary of key findings from those questions follows.

#### ***1. What was the most important thing you learned or participated in during the forum?***

Ten respondents answered this question.

- Five indicated that learning about “the bigger picture” and the “coherence piece” was most important. Two, for example, answered “how to consider other pots of money available that could be connected to ARRA work” and “how to incorporate federal funds into the complete picture” were important information gained at the forum.
- Three participants reported that information about additional funding and different types of funding was valuable to them.
- Others cited as important knowledge about “the 5% lowest achieving,” the turnaround models, and “the need for common language and definitions.”

#### ***2. How could the forum have been improved?***

Eight respondents replied to this survey item.

- Three suggested that more time for states to debrief and plan would have been helpful.
- Three others thought the forum could have been better planned so that there was “a bit more flexibility with the timing of agenda items,” as well as more structure in the breakout sessions. One respondent would have liked “to hear each of the four areas breakouts.”
- Although appreciative of the information provided, one respondent indicated that it would have been more helpful “to get a bit deeper into what they [ED] will be looking for in their evaluation of the various applications.”
- Relaying that “travel is becoming increasingly difficult even when it is paid,” another respondent suggested “webinars or videoconferences if they include real time Q&A” in the future.

**3. Based on what you learned or heard at the forum, how could your regional comprehensive center best assist and support your state?**

Nine respondents from five states addressed this question; most identified specific technical assistance needs prompted by what they learned and heard at the forum. Their comments are presented verbatim in the table below by state.

**Table 5. Technical Assistance Requested by State**

State	Technical Assistance Requested
Iowa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “More contact.”</li> <li>▪ “Helping with communication to stakeholders.”</li> </ul>
Michigan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Keep us informed of changes.”</li> <li>▪ “Great Lakes East CC is already doing a great job of supporting us and is continuing to help us coordinate our efforts and think through the intricacies of our plans and application processes.”</li> </ul>
Missouri	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Research partner.”</li> <li>▪ “Help to research various questions that come up in terms of best practices or how other states are addressing various issues.”</li> <li>▪ “Provide resources and best practices.”</li> </ul>
Ohio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Potentially help in ensuring that those ARRA grants that do not go through the SEA are consistent with the state’s SFSF and RTT plan.”</li> </ul>
South Dakota	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Provide FAQs.”</li> </ul>