

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA): Communication Strategies for State Education Agencies

Summary of the Web Conference Held on May 28, 2009

June 2009

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This work was originally produced in whole or in part by the Great Lakes East Comprehensive Center and the Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center with funds from the U.S. Department of Education under cooperative agreement numbers S283B050012 and S283B060001, respectively. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention or visual representation of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the federal government.

Great Lakes East and Great Lakes West are two of the 16 regional comprehensive centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education, and their work is administered by Learning Point Associates.

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ARRA Web Conference Summary

On May 28, 2009, the Great Lakes East Comprehensive Center and the Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center at Learning Point Associates hosted the first of a series of four Web conferences. The conference was titled “American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA): Communication Strategies for State Education Agencies.” Following is a summary of the key discussion points on district and state perspectives regarding ARRA communication. Also included are effective communication strategies, with links to specific examples or resources.

District Perspectives Regarding ARRA Communication

Mary Kusler, assistant director for advocacy and policy at the American Association of School Administrators, provided participants with an overview of the district perspective regarding ARRA communication strategies.

Through her conversations with district and school administrators around the country, Kusler identified three main areas where district administrators are requesting additional information: conflicting goals within ARRA, district reporting requirements and expectations, and eligibility for maintenance-of-effort reduction. Kusler shared the frustration of district administrators at the lack of information, and she underscored their awareness that much of the information they are seeking needs to come from the federal government—not from state education agencies (SEAs). She suggested that better communication between districts and states can help foster more trust and a sense of cooperation.

Conflicting Goals Within ARRA

- District administrators are confused over the conflict between the first two goals of ARRA: (1) spending stimulus dollars quickly to save and create jobs, and (2) spending stimulus dollars to foster lasting school reform initiatives.
- Districts are looking to their SEAs to help them navigate the gap between the immediate goals and the long-term goals of ARRA.

District Reporting Requirements (i.e., Policies, Procedures) and Expectations

- District administrators are keenly aware of the lack of clear information and guidelines on the reporting requirements and expectations regarding ARRA funds. Most districts fear that current systems of reporting will not allow them to collect and report on the kinds of data that they anticipate will be necessary to meet federal requirements.
- Districts are looking to their SEAs for information, guidance, and assistance in meeting the reporting requirements.

Eligibility for Maintenance of Effort (MOE) Reduction (Waivers)

- District administrators are concerned about the policy and procedures for determining whether districts are or are not eligible for a reduction in the MOE requirements for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) stimulus funding. The

IDEA dollars for ARRA are a challenge due to concerns about sustainability of program expansions after the stimulus funding is gone.

- Districts are looking to their SEAs for information, guidance, and clarification on MOE eligibility and waiver processes and are looking to the U.S Department of Education to release specific guidance.

One common theme that emerged from Kusler's conversations was the concern by some districts that SEAs are holding back information or not sharing the most recent updates in full. To help address potential mistrust and growing apprehension in the field, Kusler shared the following four strategies and approaches, which those in the field have requested or found especially helpful:

State Education Agency ARRA Websites

- States that leverage their SEA recovery websites are having more success reaching district administrators than those states who do not utilize their websites. Many state recovery websites contain information on all uses of recovery funds, making it more difficult and time consuming for district administrators to identify the education-related information they are seeking.

Weekly E-Mails From the SEA or Chief State School Officer to District Administrators

- There is often a misperception in the field that SEAs are holding back information they receive from the federal government. Sending weekly e-mails from the SEA to district administrators—even if it is just to say there is nothing new to report—increases the level of trust between districts and their SEA.

State-Specific Guidance and Information

- SEAs that connect the guidance released by the U.S. Department of Education to issues or circumstances that exist within their state have a greater impact on district administrators.

Webinars and Conference Presentations in Collaboration With Professional Associations

- SEAs that partner with the professional associations to participate in webinars or conference presentations have a great impact on the confidence level between states and districts.

State Perspectives Regarding ARRA Communication

Jann Jencka, educational advisor with the Michigan Economic Recovery Office, provided participants with some information on this newly formed office. She gave some general information on the creation of the office and its specific purposes. She also answered questions relating to its communication strategies. In addition, she looked at the challenges that the office and the state has faced so far.

Creation of the Office and Its Specific Purposes

- The newly created Michigan Economic Recovery Office was formed by Governor Jennifer Granholm. This office has the responsibility of coordinating with the SEAs to make sure that the recovery funds available are used successfully and transparently.
- Part of its work is developing priorities for the allocation of the funds, working on strategies for oversight and tracking, ensuring compliance, and disseminating information that leads into the overall goals and principles of the statute.

ARRA Communications Handled by the Michigan Economic Recovery Office

- The Michigan Economic Recovery Office has a small team of people who focus on all areas of ARRA.
- Staff are assigned to Workforce Development and Youth Programs, Education, and the Department of Human Services.
- Jencka's main focus is on education. Her work is closely coordinated with the Michigan Department of Education, and she also has direct contact with the field.

Examples of Specific Methods That Michigan is Finding Helpful for Effective Communication of ARRA Information

- Michigan is continually assessing its communication strategy to ensure up-to-date information and responsiveness to questions and concerns.
- They have been doing updates, in conjunction with MDE staff, with the Michigan State Board of Education every month at their monthly meetings.
- They are using official communications from the Michigan Department of Education, to school districts, to make sure that there is a consistent and reliable point where the districts are going to be able to get their information.
- They are participants in podcasts and webinars.
- Due to limited staff, they are focusing on statewide events...leveraging resources to reach the broadest audiences
- A new feature on the Michigan Recovery website allows anyone who visits the site to see a list of local funding recipients by county---which includes approximately 800 school districts

Challenges That Michigan Is Addressing

- Everyone is very appreciative of the recovery funding. Everyone is aware that with this type of law, some implementation challenges are likely to arise. Some of the challenges that have been recognized are as follows:
 - **Built-In Tensions.** There seems to be some mixed messages to the field. States are supposed to restore, yet reform; spend quickly, but spend wisely; and create jobs, but make sure that the jobs are sustainable beyond 2011.

- **Essential Message.** Michigan is trying to create a mentality that facing and working around these tensions is doable. Rather than “either/or” thinking, the “and” thinking needs to be focused on for “restore and reform.”
- **Managing Expectations.** Publicity erroneously has suggested that the ARRA money is a windfall and that districts are going to be flush with cash. That situation is not the case, however, and Michigan is trying to make sure that information is presented in context and understood.
- **What Information Is Needed.** Districts are at a point where they are beyond needing the awareness information. Instead, they are saying, “We need to know what the deadlines are and what the allocations and applications are going to look like.”

Effective Communication Strategies

The featured guests and SEA participants in the Great Lakes region highlighted a number of effective communication strategies during the Web conference. Those strategies are listed as follows, along with links to examples or additional resources:

SEA Recovery Websites

- **Strategy:** Have a central location on the SEA website where district staff can access all recovery-related information. State recovery sites administered by the governors’ offices contain information on all recovery initiatives making it more difficult and time-consuming to find the information that district staff are seeking.
- **Strategy:** Make it easy for users to find the link to the SEA recovery pages.
 - Example: [Colorado Department of Education](#) (text link at top of “Latest News and Updates” section, at the right side of the home page)
 - Example: [Oregon Department of Education](#) (graphic link in the middle of the home page)
- **Strategy:** Allow users to sign up for e-mail updates that indicate when additional information has been posted to the SEA recovery pages. Many state recovery sites—but not the SEAs themselves—offer this option. If SEAs are going to offer this option, they should be sure to push out new information when it is posted.
 - Example: [California Department of Education](#) (see the link titled “Join ARRA Electronic Mailing List”)

Technology

- **Strategy:** Use webinars and videoconferences to reach a large number of people at one time. Afterward, post the archives—including the PowerPoint presentation and speakers’ notes for other users to view.
 - Example: [Illinois State Board of Education](#)
 - Example: [Indiana Department of Education](#) (under “Documents” section at the right side of the page)

- Example: [Maine Department of Education](#)
- **Strategy:** Create short podcasts where key staff share ideas and guidance to the field in a more informal manner.
 - Example: [Michigan Department of Education](#)
- **Strategy:** Leverage mobile phone technology
 - Example: [Arkansas Department of Education ARRA iPhone Application](#) (under “Transparency & Accountability” section at the right side of the page)

Face-to-Face Meetings

- **Strategy:** Provide SEA representation at community meetings. The ideal situation is to send SEA staff into the field to meet with members of the community to share the information that is available and learn about the challenges that community members are facing.
- **Strategy:** Conduct trainings. Some states are sponsoring community trainings to educate districts and others in the education community about the application process for formula and competitive stimulus funds.
- **Strategy:** Make conference presentations. Because SEAs have limited staff, it may be impossible to send SEA staff to every community. Every state has organizations that represent and serve as a conduit of information for their local members, however, and SEAs can work through these organizations. Many of these organizations host frequent meetings and would welcome the participation of SEA staff.

Consistent and Frequent Communication From the State Superintendent

- **Strategy:** The state superintendent can conduct large-scale communications that individuals can access directly.
 - Example: [Illinois State Board of Education Superintendent’s Weekly Message](#)

Next Steps

In the discussion at the end of the Web conference regarding next steps, SEA staff echoed Kusler’s point about the need for additional information and guidance on waivers and the ARRA.

In response, Great Lakes East and Great Lakes West hosted the June 16, 2009, ARRA Web conference on the topic of waivers. A summary document of that Web conference will soon be available on the [Great Lakes East](#) and [Great Lakes West](#) websites. In addition, a background piece on waivers and ARRA will be shared with participants and also will be available on the two websites.