

Cross-State Learning Groups: Promoting Innovation and Collaboration

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The Priority

The CEEDAR (Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform) Center believes that every student deserves an equitable opportunity to succeed. The Center's mission is to support students with disabilities in achieving college- and career-ready standards by building the capacity of state personnel preparation systems to prepare teachers and leaders to implement evidence-based practices (EBPs) within multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). CEEDAR establishes technical assistance (TA) partnerships with state education agencies (SEAs), educator preparation programs (EPPs), and local districts and supports state-level leadership teams in developing a state blueprint for policy and practice reform. Since 2013, CEEDAR's network has grown to include hundreds of partner organizations across 26 states.

WHAT ARE CROSS-STATE LEARNING GROUPS?

Cross-state learning groups (CSLGs) engage participants across CEEDAR state teams in virtual communities of policy and practice reform on educator preparation. The groups provide states with opportunities to share successes and challenges and learn from other states and national partners.

Collaboration is not just the first word in the Center's name; it is a central tenet of CEEDAR support, both within and across states. One vehicle for collaboration is the CEEDAR annual cross-state convening, an in-person gathering where participating CEEDAR state leadership teams send representatives to share best practices, problem solve around common areas of challenge, disseminate resources, and celebrate accomplishments. Participants in past convenings have reported the value of cross-state discussion and expressed a desire for more ongoing opportunities for cross-state collaboration.

In response to this request, CEEDAR developed a model for cross-state learning groups (CSLGs) to provide ongoing opportunities for virtual collaboration between states. CSLGs provide a structure to leverage the collective knowledge and resources of the CEEDAR network while building relationships between state-level leadership teams, partner organizations, and individual team members. CSLGs complement CEEDAR's universally available resources, as well as the customized TA supports provided to individual state teams in creating aligned systems in educator policy and practice.

CEEDAR's Cross-State Learning Group Model

CEEDAR centered its CSLG model on participant-centered learning opportunities. The model is differentiated to provide varying levels of engagement opportunities based on states' readiness to engage in policy and practice reform. The following chart summarizes the three levels of engagement within CEEDAR's model.

Table 1. Levels of Cross-State Learning Group Engagement

Group	Purpose	Audience	Form	Example Topics
Affinity Groups	Respond to common needs across states with an introduction or exploration of topics pertinent to the CEEDAR goals .	Open to all individual CEEDAR state team members. No required attendance commitment.	Monthly meetings for approximately six months. Meetings typically feature a combination of knowledge-building activities, state exemplars, and discussion.	-Dyslexia -Strategic communication -Licensure/certification -Remote instruction strategies in higher education -Diversifying the educator workforce
Topical Action Groups	Provide a deeper dive into shared CEEDAR goal topics with an expectation of action.	Open to CEEDAR state teams by invitation with CEEDAR goals in the selected topic area. Teams with a minimum of two members per state, at least one SEA participant and one EPP participant, commit to consistent attendance.	Monthly meetings for 12-24 months. Teams are expected to complete action items and conduct follow-up with their state leadership teams related to the goals.	-Special education teacher shortages -Culturally and linguistically relevant education -Inclusive principal leadership -High-leverage practices (HLPs) in clinical practice
Collaboratories	Create a small team with an inquiry focus on common topics of implementation or problems of practice.	Open to CEEDAR state teams by invitation. Teams of three to six members per state/EPP commit to consistent attendance and follow-up between meetings.	Monthly meetings for 12-24 months. Teams are expected to engage in rapid cycles of improvement for program reform.	-Preparing candidates to teach in virtual/hybrid classroom environments

Essential Components of Effective Cross-State Learning Groups

CEEDAR’s CSLG model is influenced by research on networked improvement communities (NICs). Like CSLGs, NICs provide a structure to organize collaborative efforts to tackle shared problems of practice (Russell et al., 2017). Successful NICs share five essential components that, when combined, drive the collective action of the team (McKay, 2017). The following chart summarizes how CEEDAR CSLGs operationalize many of these essential components within a flexible, multi-level model of engagement.

Table 2. Five Essential Components of Cross-State Learning Groups

Essential Components	Actions	Examples
Understanding the problem	Group members work together to explore the local and national context for their topic. Based on this exploration, group members define their goal and specify the action steps they will take to address it.	In the inclusive principal leadership topical action group, each state established a goal for their work to prepare inclusive principal leaders based on local and national context and then specified the strategies that they would undertake to achieve their goal. The group’s work was anchored in the resource from CCSSO and CEEDAR, Supporting Inclusive Schools for the Success of Each Child .
Learning the method	Group members examine their needs and identify tools, resources, processes, and professional learning opportunities to address these needs.	CEEDAR launched an affinity group for effective remote instruction strategies in higher education to address the sudden shift to virtual learning caused by COVID-19. Group members meet to share strategies and resources for virtual instruction of teacher and leader candidates.
Building the infrastructure	Group members design a system for measuring their effect on their reform efforts, including setting goals, identifying measures of progress, and establishing data-collection procedures.	The educator shortages topical action group used data collection and analysis tools from CEEDAR’s shortage toolkit to examine trends in their state-level shortage data and identify metrics for improvement.
Crafting the narrative	Group members coalesce around a shared mission, beliefs, identity, and set of norms. Group members work together to build a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement.	Members of the culturally and linguistically relevant education topical action group have collaborated on the development of mission-aligned resources.
Sustaining the work	Group members establish conditions for the continued success of their work through activities that build capacity in the areas of leadership, organization, and operations.	The HLP topical action group and the clinical practice topical action group merged after determining that they shared a similar problem of practice related to improving teacher candidates’ practice opportunities. The joint group is developing an HLP observation tool that will be used during clinical experiences that all states can use to sustain and scale work to strengthen teacher candidates’ practice.

Tips for Facilitating Effective Cross-State Learning Groups

Since 2018, CEEDAR has operated multiple rounds of CSLGs. Each round provided state leadership teams with opportunities for reflection and improvement across a variety of topic areas related to the preparation of teachers and leaders to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The following tips summarize lessons learned and best practices facilitating CSLGs.

- **Tip #1: Define the purpose of the group.** CSLGs need a clearly defined purpose that aligns with the goals of the participants. For example, affinity-group members seek to learn from and with one another about a shared topic of interest, such as teacher shortages. In contrast, topical action group members seek to collaborate on and leverage common goals or outcomes, such as piloting retention initiatives to reduce teacher shortages or furthering inclusive principal leadership across the principal pipeline. Carefully consider which type of CSLG structure will best support the goals of the participants.
- **Tip #2: Identify the level of commitment.** Consider the level of engagement and commitment necessary for participants to achieve their goals. For example, monthly meetings may be sufficient for some groups while other groups will need substantial follow-up between meetings. Consider whether the group has consistent, committed membership or whether membership should be flexible and open to a broader audience. Clearly define the commitment required to participate in the group and proactively communicate these expectations to potential participants.
- **Tip #3: Develop a scope and sequence.** The scope and sequence serve as a roadmap to ensure the group is on track to meet its goals and should include clearly defined learning objectives or action outcomes for each meeting but be flexible to allow for contextual needs that may arise. Plan topics or agenda items for each meeting based on the professional learning needs of group members and solicit members' feedback after each meeting to inform development of future content.
- **Tip #4: Leverage group member expertise.** Members are the greatest asset of CSLGs, as they have a wealth of experience and expertise to share with colleagues. Structure meetings so that members take center stage. Strategies to encourage members to share their expertise include rotating state spotlights, break-outs for - discussion time, and peer-to-peer problem-solving protocols.
- **Tip #5: Include ample discussion time.** CEEDAR participants report valuing discussion with colleagues in CSLGs. While presenting new content is important, the *majority of group meeting time* should be devoted to structured and unstructured opportunities for team discussion. Make sure to include plenty of opportunities for group members to connect with their colleagues.
- **Tip #6: Designate a virtual engagement specialist.** Each CEEDAR CSLG is assigned a virtual engagement specialist who collaborates with the facilitator to ensure that group members have frequent opportunities for active engagement. The virtual engagement specialist is equipped with a toolbox of synchronous and asynchronous strategies to keep group - members engaged before, during, and after virtual meetings.
- **Tip #7: Build sustainability.** Help members identify ways to continue their work after the group has ended, which might mean connecting with other initiatives or disseminating resources created by the group. Encourage group members to share their sustainability strategies with one another.

VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Synchronous:

- Interactive whiteboards
- Breakout discussions
- Polling
- Chat pod

Asynchronous:

- Resource repositories
- Discussion forums
- Progress logs
- Success stories
- e-blasts

The Impact and Value of Cross-State Learning Groups

Participants in CEEDAR’s CSLGs report many benefits. First, CSLGs deliver timely information about important topics, for example, information about emerging legislation that influences educator preparation and practice. Approximately 94% of affinity group participants reported that participating in the group increased their knowledge of the designated topic and 96% reported learning about new strategies or approaches to the work. Second, CSLGs help spur collaborative action. Participants in the topical action groups reported using information from their groups to revise educator preparation courses, redesign educator preparation programs, enhance clinical and field experiences, improve partnership with local school districts, and increase alignment between preservice and inservice supports. Finally, CSLGs are an opportunity for participants to make valuable connections with colleagues across a variety of roles, organizations, and geographic locations. Over 96% of affinity group participants agreed or strongly agreed they had increased opportunities to engage with their colleagues during meetings, including asking questions, discussing the topics, and sharing ideas. One CSLG participant shared that the meetings “provide a framework and opportunity to collaborate with other professionals and learn from people with a variety of expertise.”

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Conclusion

CSLGs are a strategy for increasing collaboration across CEEDAR states. Differentiated levels of engagement allow CEEDAR network members to participate at their level of readiness while forming meaningful connections with colleagues across the country. CEEDAR will continue to refine and expand this model with a focus on long-term, sustainable reform.

References

- McKay, S. (2017, May 4). Five essential building blocks for a successful networked improvement community. *Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*. <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/five-essential-building-blocks-for-a-successful-networked-improvement-community/>
- Russell, J. L., Bryk, A. S., Dolle, J., Gomez, L. M., LeMahieu, P., & Grunow, A. (2017). A framework for the initiation of networked improvement communities. *Teachers College Record*, 119(7), 1-36.

Note:

Materials and resources from Cross-State Learning Groups are made into PD Packs that are universally accessible and can be found here: cedar.education.ufl.edu/pd-packs/