Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education After-Action Review Summary Report

The National Comprehensive Center

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Introduction

The NCC first became engaged with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) through its *Education Stories from the Field* project. The project explores how state education agency (SEA) chiefs and district leaders in Missouri, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Wyoming responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. It contains an interactive timeline from March 2020, when schools suddenly closed, through April 2021, when vaccines were available and schools were finishing their first full school year in the pandemic. As a follow-up to the project, the NCC designed an After-Action Review (AAR) process to help the four SEAs reflect upon their actions and use what they learned during that time to plan future work and lift common lessons, bright spots, and ongoing challenges.

In late fall 2021, DESE leaders, NCC staff and two state co-leads from R12CC began the AAR planning process for a meeting to be held at DESE on **May 24, 2022** with the senior staff team. Between August 2021 and May 2022, the NCC team held two planning calls with DESE's Commissioner, Margie Vandeven, four planning calls with DESE senior leadership, and four information gathering calls with different DESE senior staff members. Through those calls, DESE leadership chose to focus on the creation and implementation of their pandemic-related school re-opening plan, the Alternative Methods of Instruction X (AMI-X) policy. DESE's desired outcomes for the AAR meeting were to:

» document and understand the process of creating, rolling out, and enacting the AMI-X policy;

» identify how lessons learned could shape future options for alternative learning in Missouri;

» provide time for cross-departmental reflection, communication, and future planning; and

» provide a potential reflection and planning process for MO DESE leaders to use in the future.

Description of Meeting Process

There were several important contextual factors that influenced how the NCC and R12CC teams designed the AAR. First, the agency experienced a fair amount of staff turnover since the creation and implementation of the AMI-X policy, which occurred between June 2020 and July 31, 2021, when the policy ended. Thus, meeting participants fell into three groups: those who were not involved in the policy at all, those who were in different and unrelated positions at the time, or (only a handful) those who had been involved with the policy the entire time. In addition to accounting for staff involvement with the policy, we learned through our planning calls that the policy had two different work streams: (1) *Creation and translation of the AMI-X policy* (primary internal SEA work), and (2) *AMI-X implementation support* (supports designed for local education agencies [LEAs]). In response to those factors, we divided participants into a "policy creation" group and a "policy implementation" group. From there, DESE leaders suggested members for each group, and staff who did not easily (or at all) fall into a group selected which group they felt best suited to join. DESE positions represented within the AAR participants included Assistant and Deputy Commissioners and Chiefs of Government Relations—Communications, Data, and Counsel.

Commissioner Vandeven joined the first and last portions of the meeting to help focus the meeting's purpose and goals and to hear outcomes from the meeting at its conclusion.

On May 24, 2022, the AAR meeting took place at DESE's office with members of the NCC and R12CC. To help level-set the varied experiences of the participants, the first section of the agenda provided background on the AMI-X policy along with some preliminary student outcome data related to it. After setting the context, the agenda was divided into three reflective segments and one forward-planning segment. Participants documented and unpacked how the AMI-X policy was created through the following session activities:

1. Understanding "why" AMI-X was needed (identifying external conditions, assumptions, and assets)

2. Unpacking "how" AMI-X was implemented (mapping activities, timelines, and actors)

3. Generating insights on "what actually happened" through AMI-X (examining outcomes and impacts)

4. Considering "now what" since AMI-X is expired (identifying lessons learned and potential next steps)

Through the above sessions, each group strategically created sections of a logic model that would allow them to reflect on the policy's intended impact and goals, sequence of activities, outcomes of those activities, potential lessons learned, and next steps related to supporting future alternative methods of instruction in the state. Below are highlights and outcomes from the four sessions.

Session 1: Understanding "why" AMI-X was needed

To understand *why* DESE created the AMI-X policy, both the "policy creation" and "policy implementation" groups documented the external conditions the policy was attempting to address. Each group agreed upon the same basic conditions, with some variance in each group relating either to policy creation or policy implementation. Collectively, the groups identified the following existing conditions that created a need for the AMI-X policy:

» An unprecedented pandemic hit the U.S. in early March.

» Schools needed to safely and effectively provide continuous learning under changing and atypical conditions.

» A new Alternative Methods of Instruction (AMI) policy had recently passed that would allow schools to implement short-term (up to 36 hours) distanced (away from school) learning while still receiving attendance payments. However, many LEAs

› lacked awareness of the policy;

› had not experienced distanced or remote instruction; or

› had varying IT resources, broadband, and devices.

» The trajectory of the pandemic far exceeded the 36 hours of short-term distanced learning allowed by the current AMI policy.

» Educational decision-making in MO was decentralized, and LEAs chose their methods of instruction based on their local health metrics and perceived needs.

» Many LEAs voluntarily closed around the second week of March 2020.

Additionally, the pandemic brought about other new challenges for both the SEA and LEAs:

» People were very afraid of the "unknowns" spawned from the pandemic.

» For many, health, safety, and welfare took precedence over education.

» Conditions and information about the pandemic were constantly changing.

A second step to understanding *why* MO DESE chose the AMI-X policy as a response to the pandemic was to document the assumptions influencing that decision at that time. The **policy creation** group, assumed:

» A long-term strategy was needed for continuity of education as well as a method for LEAs to receive Average Daily Attendance (ADA) payments.

» The solution must acknowledge local control and have faith in the LEAs' capacity to address their challenges.

» The supply chain for personal protective equipment (PPE) and other needs would be there.

» Local health conditions were variable and somewhat embedded in politics.

» DESE staff would need to be prepared to pivot.

» Teachers would need professional development.

The **policy implementation** group, who were addressing LEA implementation issues, documented the following assumptions:

» LEAs had the capacity to develop a long-range plan for educating students remotely.

» LEA leaders would know how to support plan implementation.

» LEAs had the capacity to find/support disengaged students.

» Teachers could adequately engage students through distanced learning.

» Teachers would be okay dealing with the pandemic and the additional workload.

» Teachers could transition what they know from in-person learning to distanced or hybrid learning.

» Families would understand and be able to support the AMI-X plan.

» Community partners would be able to provide safe locations for students in distanced/hybrid learning.

» Students could self-direct and monitor their own learning.

» Education would be a priority for students and staff despite competing priorities and challenges like jobs, daycare, food, and technology.

» COVID would end quickly, and alternative methods of instruction would be short-term.

The final part of considering *why* the AMI-X policy was created and implemented was to have each group identify the existing assets at DESE's disposal that would support the policy. Both groups agreed that grouping assets into human, organizational, and resource assets would result in comprehensive lists. The final combined list of assets from both groups included:

Human

» Collaborative SEA staff who often used a team approach

» Support from DESE Area Supervisors

» Support from organizations outside of DESE:

› Department of Health and Safety and their Fusion Cell Updates

› Governor's Office

› National Guard for food assistance

› Council of Chief State School Officers

› Education associations

› Education Preparation Programs

› General Council/Public Information Officer/Legislative teams?

› Commissioners Advisory Council

› Missouri State Emergency Management Agency and Regional Professional Development Center for masks

» Hold Daily meetings with Executive Leadership Team and Area Supervisors

» Hold Monthly town hall meetings

» Support from medical experts such as the Department of Health and Senior Services and Dr. Rachel Orschein, Washington University

Organizational

» Area supervisors

» Strong communication infrastructure

» Clear expectations from top-level leadership

» Team commitment

Resources

» Existing policy that allowed for creation of AMI and other pandemic-related policies

» AMI policy and its existing structures

» Student Information System Data Collection

» Capacity of the Office of Data System Management to create maps and dashboards

» Online training for substitute teachers

Session 2: Unpacking "How" AMI-X Was Implemented

The purpose of Session 2 was to move from understanding *why* DESE chose the AMI-X policy to *how* it was created and implemented. Each group documented their approaches by creating process maps that were anchored by major strategies delineated by "swim lanes." Each swim lane would detail the activities within the strategy arranged chronologically by date.

The **policy creation** group organized their process map around one major strategy—create and translate the AMI-X policy.

Create and Translate the AMI-X Policy

Activities chronologically identified for creating and translating the AMI-X Policy included:

» July 2020: Create AMI-X work group

» July 7, 2020: Draft AMI-X regulation, which received SBE approval

   › Create AMI-X guide for attendance claiming

   › Write AMI-X memo

» July 17, 2020: Adopt emergency rule

» July 23, 2020: Translate AMI-X policy

   › Provide introductory webinar

   › Expand policy guidance

» August–September 2020: Translate policy

   › Publish tech-support FAQs

   › Revise policy guidance

» October 2020–May 2021: Create AMI-X exit strategy (plan for policy expiration)

» July 31, 2021: AMI-X rule expired

The **policy implementation group** identified four AMI-X implementation strategies, which they further divided into four swim lanes with chronological activities:

Strategy 1. *Create the AMI-X Policy Application*

AMI-X policy application activities included:

» June 2020: Develop the application

» June 2020: Create an approval document

» July 2020: Create and distribute implementation guidance to LEAs

» July 2020: Final application due date

» July 2020: Review and approve LEAs' AMI-X applications

» July 2020: Create the Task Force for Learning Acceleration

» July 2020: Create Teacher of the Year professional development modules

Strategy 2. *Review and Approve AMI-X Applications*

Activities identified for reviewing and approving applications included:

» July 2020: Begin application approval process

» July 2020–August 2020: Provide feedback to LEAs:

   › Provide plan development assistance to LEAs

   › Review and approve or deny applications

   › Communicate application outcomes to LEAs

   › Review and approve or decline revisions

Strategy 3. *Create the Learning Acceleration Task Force*

Swim lane 3 delineated activities associated with creating the Task Force for Learning Acceleration. This was an important part of providing LEAs support to implement their AMI-X plans. Activities associated with creating and utilizing the taskforce included:

» May 2020: Create instructional programming guidance plans

» June 2020: Recruit and establish topical work groups, which included:

   › Participants: Teachers of the Year, superintendents, principals, and instructional leaders

   › Topics: Assessment of Learning Loss, Learning Acceleration, & Reaching All Students

» June 2020: Work groups meet and identify recommendations

» July 2020: Work groups provide recommendations to DESE

» August 2020: DESE provides recommendations to the State Board of Education

» August 2020: Focus recommendations are identified

Strategy 4. *Create Professional Development Modules*

The final strategy was to create **Professional Development Modules** to support teachers with implementation support. To gain buy-in from teachers, DESE selected a committee of Teachers of the Year to create the modules. Activities documented for the modules included:

» May 2020: Identify 10 module topics

» May 2020: Select 40 Teachers of the Year to create modules

- » June 2020: Develop module structure through templates
- » June 2020: Create 10 teacher teams
- » July 2020: Record initial content
- » July 2020: Revise and edit modules
- » August 2020: Post modules on the DESE public site
- » August 2020: Pay teachers for the project
- » August–December 2020: Monitor module usage
  - › Received over 50,000 web hits
  - › Module content scaled through teacher-to-teacher contacts

Session 3: Generating Insights On "What Actually Happened" Through AMI-X

General data outcomes from the AMI-X policy were shared during the context-setting portion of the meeting prior to Session 1. In addition to those outcomes, other summary findings from data collected by DESE were shared as handouts at the start of Session 3. Those findings from school year 2020–21 included:

- » **Findings by Subject and Grade:** Students received a combination of onsite, hybrid, virtual, and distance instruction in 2020–21. Across grades and subjects, student achievement was **lower in math** than ELA and **lower in early grades** (5th-6th) than higher grades (7th, 8th, and Algebra I and English II).

- » **Findings by Mode of Instruction, Grade and Subject:** Students in **distanced and virtual learning** environments **performed worse than expected** in comparison to those in onsite or hybrid instruction. Students in the **lower grades**, in ELA and math, fared particularly **worse in distanced and virtual learning environments.**

- » **Findings by Race/Ethnicity:** Students across race/ethnicity groups in **distanced and virtual learning performed worse than expected** compared to students in onsite or hybrid instruction. In all learning models except virtual, **Black students performed less well** than other student groups, and **Pacific Islander students performed less well in virtual learning models**. Only **Asian students performed better than expected** in the two learning models they appeared in—**hybrid and onsite learning.**

- » **Student Attendance:** Attendance was lower in distanced learning models than other models in 2019, 2020, and 2021. Although attendance declined in 2021 for all learning models, it declined the most in distanced learning, with virtual learning following in a close second.

Because some of the AAR participants were not familiar with the report or the meaning of effect size, part of the discussion was led by Assistant Commissioner Neale. In the end, the group felt they wanted to know more directly from LEAs about their successes and challenges during implementation of AMI-X.

Session 4: Considering "Now What" Since AMI-X is Expired

Participants were provided with a series of questions to reflect upon to determine **what worked and did not work** regarding the AMI-X policy based on the data they reviewed in Session 3. Additionally, participants were provided a chart to consider how they might map backwards starting from "ideal student outcomes" from AMI-X and moving up through the school, district, and SEA levels.

The group concluded that they did not feel they had enough information about the impact and outcomes of the policy on districts and schools. The group felt there was more to understand about the AMI-X policy, particularly how it was implemented and how it impacted LEAs, before they could identify lessons learned. **Questions** participants felt they would want answered through the acquisition of additional data included:

» Are there districts and/or schools who did better than others using distance learning methods of instruction? If so, what did they do?

» What was the impact of the professional development modules developed by the Teachers of the Year? How often were they used and how useful were they for providing distanced learning instruction? Were they sufficient for what teachers needed?

» How can we build an effective Index of Teacher Quality? What else would we want to include aside from years of experience?

» How can Education Preparation Programs help with increasing teacher quality? How can they help with issues like delivering alternative methods of instruction? How can leader preparation programs better prepare leaders to develop, implement, evaluate, and adjust plans?

Next Steps

We recommend that the first step in utilizing what was discussed and learned during the MO AAR would be for participants to read this report and discuss its contents as a group. The NCC, potentially with our R12CC partners, would be happy to either provide questions for such a meeting or even facilitate an online meeting. It is important for DESE to identify lessons learned from the AMI-X policy to understand how to plan for future major or even minor educational disruptions.

Additionally, we believe DESE would benefit from collecting additional data about how AMI-X impacted schools. The data in the report, *Impact of Lost Instructional Time* is useful, but the team alluded that they would like to know more about the implementation successes and challenges experienced by districts and school leaders. One option to do that would be to conduct interviews

with leaders based on the type of information DESE leaders want to collect. Having interview data from school leaders would help identify district "success stories" that might merit closer study as well as identify challenges and support needs from districts and schools. Such information would help answer the above preliminary questions identified by the group and to better understand if issues with distanced and hybrid learning were due to a lack of technology access and resources, inexperience with implementing distanced learning models, or challenges related to creating and implementing strong AMI-X plans. Finally, interview data might help provide more insight to DESE leaders on the types of supports that might improve alternative learning outcomes for students.

We do know from other AARs and unrelated evaluations of LEAs implementing technology-based instructional programs that LEAs and SEAs, who had a clearly articulated commitment and approach toward integrating technology instruction in classrooms, seemed to fair better in some cases in comparison to similar peer districts in other states and jurisdictions. This might be an area to consider for further discussion as DESE leaders plan for potential future educational disruptions or just access to additional learning opportunities outside of school buildings and hours. Not only would this address issues like buildings closed for bad weather but also for tutoring, accelerated learning, or even for students' ability to complete homework. Based on feedback provided in one of the AAR planning meetings, some rural educators, who largely remained in-person during 2020–21, felt remiss that they did not receive the same technology supports (devices, hotspots, professional development) as other schools that implemented distanced learning methods. This suggests there may be some appetite for considering the state's overall plan regarding technology integration in education. Considering where and how technology might be integrated into Missouri's overall instructional approaches and the outcomes of Missouri graduates would address some of the above issues.