

WY After-Action Review

Executive Summary

Members from the National Comprehensive Center (NCC) and the Director of Region Center 11 met with the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) senior staff to conduct an After-Action Review (AAR) on September 29th and 30th, 2021. WDE staff chose to focus on three pandemic-related topics using the AAR process: **Smart Start Guide**, **Policy Adaption**, and **Nutrition Services**. Each topic was addressed with participants who were involved throughout the trajectory of each process. The AAR sessions were conducted in **4-hour segments divided into the following focus areas:**

- » How do we understand what happened?
- » What did we do and how did we do it?
- » What were the outcomes of our actions?
- » How do we best use and transfer our knowledge?

NCC staff and the RC 11 Director, Joe Simpson, found the WDE participants to be a high-functioning team that were used to collaborating and relatively familiar with processes used during the AAR, such as populating a logic model. Participant feedback from each session was that the teams enjoyed reflecting back on their work through the AAR process and were proud of seeing their accomplishments and actions out in front of them through the process maps. One WDE staff member stated, “It’s kind of amazing when you look at the different points in time,” remarking at all the activities that were accomplished in a short period of time. Several participants mentioned that they felt the AAR was “time well spent.”

When asked to document existing assets that helped each team succeed in accomplishing their work during the pandemic, all teams came up with similar cultural assets. Those assets included:

- » State education agency (SEA) leadership had previously focused on flexibility and mobile work;
- » Empowerment and distributed leadership are important WDE values, as well as leadership, innovation, customer service, and trust;
- » Collaboration is common, and everyone is aware of the skills of others; and
- » Staff members operate with collective accountability; no one needs credit or recognition.

Other session highlights are found below.



Smart Start Guide

Session Purpose: Document and understand the process of creating, disseminating, and implementing the *Smart Start Guide* to meet state and local school information needs.

In addition to the above-mentioned cultural assets, the *Smart Start Guide* process benefited from:

- » Strong internal and external partnerships;
- » Skills and expertise existing within WDE staff; and
- » Existing processes like the Accreditation Framework.

Outcomes from creating, disseminating, and implementing the guide included:

- » Creation of clear and customized plans from local education agencies (LEAs);
- » Gratitude from LEA leaders for having clear guidance; and
- » Collaboration across LEAs on creating plans, which created alignment as well as a reduction in COVID-19 surges.

Impacts from the *Smart Start Guide* included:

- » Ability for schools to safely provide continuous learning under changing and atypical conditions;
- » Economic stability for communities due to schools being open; and
- » Community understanding of how schools were safely educating their children.

Smart Start session participants highlighted a number of lessons they felt they learned from the reflective AAR process about things that helped them succeed with turning around the *Smart Start Guide* in such a short time period. Those lessons included:

- » Cross-division collaborative practices helped the leadership team work well together. They knew each other's strengths and capabilities.
- » Collective accountability and trust were important.
- » Strong internal and external relationships were critical for garnering buy-in and support.
- » The State Superintendent's prior investment in creating a positive and flexible SEA culture made the transition to remote work easier.
- » The leadership team felt empowered to act due to the agency's culture of distributed leadership.
- » Prior investments in facilities, technology, purposeful practices, culture, and relationships paid off.

Policy Adaption

Session Purpose: Document and understand the process of adapting policies to meet the current education context, particularly pertaining to assessment and accountability.



In addition to cultural assets, the policy adaptation participants cited a number of assets that helped them efficiently and effectively adapt assessment and accountability policies during the pandemic, which included:

- » The Technical Advisory Committee;
- » Partnership with two assessment and accountability consultants;
- » Strong relationships with legislators;
- » Existing communication channels; and
- » The shift to online adaptive assessments in 2017–18.

Outcomes from the policies that were adapted included:

- » Assessment parameters were held steady;
- » Spring 2021 assessments were implemented to assess performance but were not used for accountability purposes;
- » LEAs felt calm, supported, and trusted; and
- » Having the regular spring tests brought a sense of “normal” for students.

Impacts of the policies that were adapted were:

- » WY schools assessed over 96 percent of all students; and
- » Educators were able to focus on teaching and learning rather than accountability.

Lessons learned highlighted by the Policy Adaptation session participants included:

- » It is important to have the right expertise, which included the Technical Advisory Committee, the external consultants, and the WY leadership team;
- » Customer service and listening to stakeholders is critical in building trust;
- » Honor/take advantage of informal networks and relationships (e.g., former principals, SEA policy officer, etc.);
- » Balance rigidity (e.g., accountability framework) with flexibility or limits to the system (i.e., with 50 states, Dept. of Ed. overwhelmed) to take a path forward and avoid paralysis; and
- » Use existing evidence/knowledge to do scenario-planning (what-ifs).

Nutrition

Session Purpose: Document and understand how the WY Nutrition Department met state nutritional needs during the pandemic.

The nutrition team had to overcome a number of obstacles to ensure that infants to 18-year-olds had nutritional needs equitably met. Variance in local nutrition policies across counties, challenges with small under-sourced rural communities, truck driver shortages, and restrictive federal policies that didn’t allow students to be fed outside of school was just a small number of challenges the



nutrition team overcame to help LEAs feed their communities. In addition to the skilled and knowledgeable WDE nutrition staff, the team highlighted a number of assets that helped them support LEAs to meet community nutritional needs. Those assets included:

- » Strong partnerships with WY Dept. of Health, the Governor’s Office, the First Lady and the Secretary of Agriculture;
- » Support from “No Kid Hungry” (Arby’s Foundation);
- » External agency partnerships: CO Daycare home office, Mountain Plains Regional Office, Montana Dept. of ED on procurement, etc.;
- » National School Lunch Program (funding stream);
- » Strong existing relationships between the SEA Nutrition team and LEA nutrition staff;
- » High-functioning childcare organizations; and
- » Existing infrastructure for feeding families.

Outcomes from the Nutrition department’s process of writing waivers and providing information and support to LEAs included:

- » A potential process for the next state-wide emergency nutrition need;
- » More flexible local nutrition policies; and
- » Updated waiver deadlines.

The impact of the Nutrition department’s work was that:

- » LEAs were able to equitably serve kids meals when schools were closed;
- » LEA nutrition staff felt they could communicate confidently and accurately to their community; and
- » SEA and LEA nutrition staff was able to operate effectively and compliantly in a highly regulated context.

Similar to the *Smart Start Guide* and Policy Adaptation teams, the nutrition staff attributed much of their success to culture of the agency and their team. In addition, the team pointed to a number of lessons that came out of their reflection in their work, which included:

- » Leverage relationships (e.g., The First Lady);
- » Match commitment and effort with ongoing support, communication with a sense of joy/humor (don’t take yourself too seriously);
- » Focus on North Star and sustaining efforts (outcomes under changing conditions);
- » Demonstrate approachability by making first communication and through listening and understanding others’ perspectives;
- » Have humility and service orientation; and
- » Remember we need each other.

Next Steps

To ensure this information can be shared internally in the agency and externally with other stakeholders identified by WDE leadership, the National Center and Region 11 Director will hold a call with members of the WDE leadership team on late October. The purpose of that meeting is to learn what audiences would benefit from hearing about the processes and lessons learned from the three AAR sessions, and identify potential products that could be shared with those stakeholders.

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