

Selected Findings Paper:

Rudo, Z., & Caverly, S. (2006). *Education Renewal Zones: Increasing Partnerships and Sharing Resources for School Improvement*. Austin, TX: SEDL.]

This paper summarizes findings related to strategic community engagement from a 2-year evaluation of Arkansas Education Renewal Zones (ERZs). The processes and collaborative efforts the ERZs implemented have general application to establishing community engagement with schools. The full paper is available at http://www.sedl.org/re/reports/AERA08_ERZ_paper.pdf.

Background:

The Arkansas Education Renewal Zone (ERZ) is a state initiative to identify and implement educational and management strategies to improve public school performance and student academic achievement. Eight ERZs were established across Arkansas, funded through this state initiative. Their purpose is to provide for collaboration among Arkansas' smaller schools and districts while helping to concentrate and coordinate resources of higher education institutions, regional education service cooperatives, and other service providers. Engaging families and community members is an essential element of the ERZ. SEDL conducted a statewide evaluation of the ERZs over a 2-year time frame. This paper focuses on the study findings related to community engagement.

Select Findings Related to Strategic Community Engagement

Interviews, surveys, focus groups, and site observations were conducted in all eight of the ERZs. Educators, family and community members, students, and other ERZ stakeholders participated in the evaluation.

Communication and Collaboration

A primary task for all ERZs was building a strong partnership with their partnering schools and districts, Institute of Higher Education (IHE), Education Service Cooperatives (ESC), parents, and community members. The key to any successful partnership is communication and collaboration and ERZs recognized this. They continually focused on increasing and enhancing the level of communication and collaboration among partners.

- **Emphasis on Communication and Collaboration.** All of the ERZs viewed communication and collaboration as their first priority. As one district superintendent described, "The ERZ created a network of collaboration and enhanced the relationship with school districts nearby."
- **Methods of Communication and Collaboration.** ERZs implemented various approaches and techniques for communication with partners. The most common were e-mail, phone discussions, personal interactions, and use of Web sites. A few sites provided written updates and/or newsletters to inform partners about ERZ supported activities. Two of the ERZs reported developing e-mail lists to ease communication, while another had expanded a previous support network of group meetings. Several district and school administrators appreciated receiving e-mails from ERZ directors. However, they expressed a preference for phone calls and scheduled site visits as they often were overwhelmed by the amount of e-mail they received daily and at times

had been unable to read e-mails from ERZ directors. As the ERZ directors gained experience and strengthened their partnerships more formal processes for communication and collaboration formed.

Six of the eight ERZs had fully functional Web sites available. Web sites included information such as previously scheduled ERZ activities, pictures of professional development sessions and/or meetings, and contact information for the director and other office staff for visitors to request additional information. All provided their vision/mission statement and/or a brief summary of the purposes of the ERZ on their sites. All of the ERZ Web sites provided information on their partners by linking to partnering schools' district Web sites. Links for the partnering ESC, math and science centers, community partners, and the ADE were found on a "resource" page.

Other means of communication and collaboration for the ERZs were through their advisory committees and strategic plans. As recommended by the ERZ guidelines, each ERZ indicated in their strategic plan that it had established an advisory committee with regularly scheduled meetings. Partners commented that a number of ERZs had reconstructed their advisory committees to include sub-committees related to specific tasks, events, and topics. Partners also demonstrated familiarity with their ERZ's strategic plan and many indicated they had assisted in developing and/or reviewing it. Considering the ERZ guidelines it was found that partners serving on the advisory committee or subcommittees reported the most direct involvement in strategic plan development, review, and implementation.

- **Communication and Collaboration on ERZ Goals and Activities.** Communication and collaboration around ERZ goals and activities improved over time. Partners' understanding of those goals varied, yet they viewed the goals as concrete and attainable. In regard to ERZ activities, they followed a project evaluation logic model developed by the ERZs and SEDL. Each ERZ based their activities upon individual needs assessment results found in Year 1 of operation. These were the activities they most communicated with their partners and upon which much of the collaboration occurred.
- **Communication and Collaboration among Partners.** Partnerships can be highly productive or detrimental often as a result of ambiguity of roles and responsibilities or institutional barriers. Strong communication around partner roles and responsibilities was a necessary component of the ERZ initiative. The ERZ director played a key role in developing, maintaining and enhancing the relationships among ERZ partners. ERZ partners described the ERZ director as a "facilitator" for brokering collaborative efforts and expanding existing programs. Partners strongly agreed that their ERZ director has good skills for working with partnerships.

ERZ partners agreed, on average, that they had a clear sense of their own ERZ roles and responsibilities and that other partners had a clear sense of their own roles and responsibilities. Partners noted their responsibilities often included moving from developing and beginning implementation of strategic plans to responsibilities for professional development and services directly in partner schools.

Most ERZ partners described partnerships as being stronger during the ERZ's second year. According to one IHE dean, "We talk to each other as colleagues, not separated by institutional lines." Although the majority of ERZ directors described the partnership with the IHE as highly collaborative, two ERZs faced challenges with the IHE involvement of their deans and some faculty. One challenge, however, was the geographical limitations faced by many of the ERZs. In general, partnering schools located at closer distances to the IHE had stronger partnerships with their ERZ sites in comparison to those further away. ERZ directors found it difficult to conduct

frequent visits to partnering schools located over an hour from their IHE. Additionally, the IHE faculty found it difficult to visit schools at greater distances.

Several ERZs reported more positive relationships with their ESC partner(s) in Year 2. ERZs saw partnerships with ESCs as critical to their mission; however, a number of ERZ directors and ESCs continued to struggle with their evolving relationship.

As the ERZs continued to increase the number of partners they had, communication and collaboration continue to be a priority. It is important to note the expectation that ERZs form new partnerships each year.

Community and Parent Involvement

Broadening the ERZ network of resources to include community members and parents was intended to further enhance support to school administrators and educators. As ERZs moved into their second year, it was anticipated that they would have identified effective strategies to increase community and parent involvement to achieve two of the ERZ goals: engaging community members and parents in school activities and professional development to increase students' success. ERZs highlighted increasing community awareness of schools within their strategic plans.

- **Parent outreach.** Efforts during the second year included working with parent coordinators to identify strategies to increase parent involvement, increasing active parents on advisory committees and sub-committees, co-sponsoring a Pre-K teleconference, developing a parent involvement DVD (English and Spanish) for parents, providing links to parent and community resources on Web sites, and providing professional development to parents. Based upon partner perceptions shared during site visits, there had been little change in the amount of parent involvement
- **Community partnerships.** Efforts included additional professional development in Arkansas history, field trips offered to partnering schools, participation in educational forums, and co-sponsoring events. Community members indicated there were several community resources that “were not being utilized fully” by the ERZ sites.

Areas of Overall Improvement During Year 2 Implementation

When considering all areas of progress from the first year of implementation, the most change was attributed to the level and amount of collaboration between the ERZ partners. Several school administrators noted an increase in the number of interactions between their teaching faculty and the partnering IHE. The collaborations varied from being matched with IHE faculty, to IHE staff presenting information on financial aid to students. The IHE administrators and faculty also identified increased collaboration and stronger partnerships as areas of progress during the second year at several sites. In addition, two of the ERZ sites reported more positive relationships with their ESCs during the second year of implementation. It is assumed that as the partnerships continue to strengthen, more collaborative initiatives will occur.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Across the state, the ERZ initiative provided a variety of activities supporting school improvement. However, not all ERZs progressed from Year 1 in the implementation of strategies and activities to meet individual partner needs. ERZ directors should continue to work with partnering schools to identify not only shared, but individual concerns to strengthen school improvement efforts.

Economies of scale were accomplished through some of the professional development activities ERZs offered and/or facilitated, but not in other areas. The ADE and ERZ directors need to extend their efforts related to economies of scale by pooling some of their funding and partner resources.

The ERZs made progress in their second year; however, there are few systematic and consistent indicators of progress to demonstrate the accomplishments of this initiative. Local and statewide evaluations of the ERZ initiative should be conducted at least annually to determine areas of progress and improvement, as well as assess the impact on student achievement and academic performance. ERZs should regularly collaborate with their partnering schools to obtain needed school-level data related to areas needing improvement. Additionally, templates for local evaluation plans and reporting processes would be beneficial to ERZs to ensure consistency in disseminating information about their efforts.

The intent of Arkansas' ERZ initiative is to strengthen both rural schools and schools classified as needing improvement. Through the current initiative, ERZ directors have impacted the amount and type of communication and collaboration between partners as well as the professional development offered to support teachers. While still in its formative stages, this initiative has the potential to increase the level of support through partnerships offered to schools facing improvement or geographical challenges.