Indiana Evaluation Focus Group Report

January 23, 2015

Summary of Project

TNTP held a series of focus groups in December 2014 and January 2015 with various stakeholders represented in the state of Indiana, including teachers, principals, superintendents, other system-level administrators, external stakeholders, and Department of Education staff. The goals of the focus groups were to engage with stakeholders in order to gather high-level information about the current state of evaluation systems in Indiana and to identify areas where we should focus further research and analysis. The information gathered from the focus groups along with the information from various sources will collectively be used to inform a set of recommendations for changes to Indiana's Evaluation System.

Topics covered in the focus groups included:

1. The current state of Indiana evaluation systems
2. The confidence level of various stakeholders in the system and its components
3. The strengths of the system over the past two years
4. Where there are room for improvements moving forward

Engagement Strategy

In late Spring/early Fall 2014, the Center on Education and Lifelong Learning (CELL) conducted an extensive survey across the state to gauge educators' perceptions and beliefs about the State's evaluation policies and practice. This survey gathered information on various topics and revealed some key gaps in the perception and beliefs of individual stakeholder groups. In total, the survey sampled 2,427 teachers, 374 principals, and 218 superintendents.[1] TNTP felt that it would be important to follow up with targeted stakeholders, and engage with them through focus groups and individual conversations, where appropriate. This approach allowed us to build off of the State's previous stakeholder engagement efforts, including CELL's survey, and delve deeper into stakeholder beliefs and experiences in ways that are possible only through in-person discussions.

In order move forward with the work, TNTP reached out to the authors of the survey, Dr. Hardy Murphy and Dr. Cassandra Cole, to better understand methodology and survey results. Once we had an opportunity to discuss the survey findings, TNTP proceeded to develop targeted focus group questions to further understand stakeholders' experiences regarding the state evaluation systems.

Gathering input from a variety of stakeholders is essential to identifying both the pain points and possible solutions to implementation challenges. Therefore, we have worked closely with the State Board of Education (SBOE) staff to identify key stakeholders. It was our goal for the following types of stakeholders to have the opportunity to share their experiences, perspectives and expertise:

- Teachers
- Principals
- Superintendents or other System-level Administrators
- Department of Education Staff who specialize in teacher evaluation
- External Partners with expertise in teacher evaluation

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[1] Indiana Teacher Appraisal and Support System survey results, retrieved from http://www.in.gov/sboe/files/2014-09-26_INTASS_PPT.pdf.

Additionally, to ensure we connected with the maximum number of teachers, principals and superintendents possible in our short timeframe, we coordinated with the following groups:

- Indiana Association of Public Schools Superintendents
- Indiana Association of School Principals
- Teacher Ambassadors

Our goal was to hold six to eight focus groups of 10-12 participants each in the months of December 2014 and January 2015. That would have allowed us to connect with between 60 and 96 individuals. In total, we reached out to 115 individuals either directly or with the help of key personnel within each of the associations. Our hope was to be able to use the groups' regular meetings to host focus group discussions when possible. Leveraging these regular meetings provided two advantages. First, we were able to reach a significant number of educators who are already engaged in education policy through their membership to these associations. Second, we would be able to tailor the discussion topics in these forums to the participants' particular interests, expertise and experiences. Because of the importance of teacher input, we strove to connect with as many Teacher Ambassadors as possible as they already work closely with the State Board of Education and are highly engaged in policy at the state level. Nearly half of the stakeholders invited for this effort were teachers. In addition, multiple sessions and opportunities were offered for teachers to share their perspectives and experiences.

Focus Groups

Formal focus group discussions began on December 17, 2014 and concluded on January 20, 2015. In total, TNTP offered eight scheduled focus groups at various locations, days, and times. Each session was scheduled for one and a half hours. Six sessions were attended with a total of 34 participants. In addition, in order to accommodate scheduling conflicts, TNTP conducted six individual conversations. The total number of participants engaged directly through this process was 40 individuals, which is between 42 and 67 percent of our target goal and is generally considered a successful participation rate for an engagement effort of this scale and timeline. Regrettably, participation was lowest amongst teachers despite our efforts to provide flexible scheduling and alternative opportunities for input. This could be due to a number of factors including the challenges in scheduling during December/January holiday schedule, lead time, or transportation and logistical concerns.

Below is a summary of the outreach effort made including the total number of participants engaged during this process and a summary of the sessions held with attendance.

Categories	Contacted	Total Participation	Participation Rate
Teachers	55	3	5.5%
Principals	14	10	71.4%
Superintendent or Administrator	29	17	58.6%
Department of Education Leadership and Staff	6	6	100.0%
External Stakeholders	11	4	36.4%
TOTAL	**115**	**40**	**34.8%**

	Session Title	Participants
1	Evansville Focus Group	4
2	Indiana External Stakeholders (Indianapolis - Session 1)	5
3	Indiana External Stakeholders (Indianapolis - Session 2)	3
4	Indiana Association of Public Schools Superintendents Focus Group	11
5	Teacher Focus Group	2
6	Indiana Association of School Principals Focus Group	9
	Other participants (individual contributions/comments)	6
	Total	40

Summary of Findings

What follows is a brief summary of the relevant findings from information gathered during focus group discussions.

Major Themes
Qualitative data analysis revealed seven overarching themes across the focus group sessions and conversations.

Theme 1: Communications

In all focus groups, there was discussion surrounding the role of RISE or other evaluation models. Across the board, participants felt that there was no clear objective of the evaluation system, nor was there clear alignment with what the system actually achieves. While many participants felt that as a whole, things have been going well, there was a general consensus that there are opportunities for further refinement and improvements to various components. Many participants reported a number of negative experiences with how the system was presented to educators in the state. These individuals noted they felt mistrusted, disrespected, or dismissed by the system. In more than one focus group, the phrase, "this was a system that was done to teachers" was noted.

Further, participants clearly expressed a need and desire for consistent, quality and targeted information at the state level for various stakeholders, specifically information for school leaders and teachers. This was particularly important to many participants especially where it concerned upcoming changes, modifications, or other elements which would require time to manage and communicate at the local level.

Theme 2: Evolution of Evaluations

Across many focus groups, when asked to describe the current state of evaluations, there was a common theme of the system as an evolving or transitioning system. Most participants expressed that the first few years of implementation were the most challenging and created anxiety among many individuals, but as corporations and schools have progressed further along in the process, there was marked improvement in implementation. Participants who come from corporations newer to the process often discussed how they have benefited from the trial and errors made from other corporations who have been undergoing and making changes to the model for some time. Many participants from various corporations discussed how they have benefited from trainings as well as collaboration within the local community among teachers, principals, administrators and community members and externally with other corporations. Participants noted that as implementation continues, there is a desire to be able to share best practices among the educator community.

Theme 3: Flexibility at the Local Level

In all focus groups, participants expressed the desire for local control. Participants noted how important it was for educators within a particular corporation to be able to modify or create a plan that meets their specific needs. This includes the ability to determine the right process, which tools to use (rubrics), what kind of objective measures should be used, and the weights these objective measures should hold in determining a teacher's overall rating. Many participants currently achieve this through a systematic process of trial and modification. Many participants noted that their corporation used RISE as a base plan and developed a committee of stakeholders to review and modify the plan based on local needs before implementing it for year one. The committee would continually monitor the strengths and weaknesses during this first implementation year before making additional edits and adjustments to further improve the system for subsequent year. While this process has fared well, there was an express concern over the time and resources required to develop a deep understanding of the system, conduct research or gather resources necessary to make changes to the process, make the necessary change, and roll out for adoption.

Theme 4: Improved Feedback and Consistent/Common Language for Teacher Quality

In most focus groups, participants noted that over the past few years, as corporations implemented RISE (RISE Modified) or other evaluation plans, one of the greatest improvements has been the conversations between educators across the teaching community, but especially between teachers and their evaluators regarding teacher quality. Many participants cited the RISE Teacher Effectiveness Rubric (TER), or variants of the TER, as a critical element to this positive change. Participants noted that the TER was a valuable tool in helping create a common, intentional language for discussing teacher quality and it enabled teachers and evaluators alike to discuss clear expectations regarding what good teaching looks like. This includes a baseline around what is most important and valuable, and

what is not. Most agreed that this tool was better than previous tools they have used in the past, in part because it was structured and was utilized statewide.

However, there were a number of individuals who expressed that while the structure of the TER was helpful, it was also an area of concern in that it was too rigid and/or too detailed and complex. Many felt that they lacked proper training on the TER or that additional time for training and adoption was necessary.

Theme 5: Need for Consistent Levels of Trainings for Various Stakeholders, Particularly Teachers
In all focus groups, participants expressed the need to have access to additional trainings and support for practitioners, especially for teachers earlier on in the process. Some training topics includes an overview of the evaluation model (or system) used by the corporation, training on the specific observation that would be used and training on what effective teaching looks like as it pertains to the rubric. A number of participants recommended cross-training teachers on evaluation methodologies so that there is a deeper understanding of how they will be evaluated in the classroom.

For principals, evaluators and other administrators, it was recommended that there be more consistent trainings across corporations. Some participants expressed their concerns based on personal experience of the varying availability, frequency and/or quality or training and resources across corporations. A number of participants were familiar with individuals who were part of the RISE Pilot noted that pilot corporations benefited from the extensive training provided during the pilot phase and recommended that similar training should be provided for all corporations.

Theme 6: Need for Resources
The need for additional resources was a point that was discussed in all focus groups. This includes time, monetary resources, and human capital needs. At the systems level, participants felt that there was a lack of resources readily available in order to make informed decisions. For instance, one participant noted that their corporation wanted to modify the TER, however, they did not have access to tools, experts, or samples and therefore opted not to modify it. Another echoed a similar sentiment about modifying the RISE model plan. Many participants who did make changes and modified the plan noted that their corporation made concerted efforts to research their own tools and created their own trainings and resources, but that they would have liked more access to materials. This includes communication materials that can be shared with corporations, schools, teachers, and the community.

Almost all participants agreed that the time it takes to adopt a new evaluation model is extensive. Many expressed concern that there was not enough time allocated to train educators and transition into their corporation's plan. A number of participants noted that they have begun to collaborate with other corporations in order to share resources and develop tools such as assessments for use in the Student Learning Objectives process. Often these cohorts and collaborations were self-created/self-directed by corporations that have experienced lack of access to resources.

Lastly, while almost every participant expressed that the conversations around teacher quality has improved, there is agreement that in many corporations and schools, there is simply not enough time for evaluators to provide the consistent feedback to teachers on a regular basis. Some participants noted that the formal observations and feedback opportunities was a good start to supporting teachers improve their practice, but they expressed a desire for more informal touch points in order to provide/receive the professional development support.

Theme 7: Change Management
Across many focus groups, participants discussed frustrations and difficulties regarding the pace and amount of changes corporations, schools, and teachers have had to sustain in such a short period of time. In addition, there was great concern of more changes to come. Some participants noted that they would like to be able to see a "pause" or slower, more methodical roll out of the system, including a "buffer" or "test-year" for new elements.

Other Targeted Discussion Topics:
Confidence level of various stakeholders in the system and its components
- Teacher Effectiveness Rubrics (TER)

- o Many stakeholders felt that the Teacher Effectiveness Rubrics have been a useful tool in helping set clear expectations on what good teaching looks like.
- o Participants noted that the tool, used in conjunction with other elements of an evaluation plan, helps set a common language for discussing teacher quality within a school community as well as with other corporations.
    - One participant noted that the involvement of the community has resulted in a more positive perception of the evaluation process
- o Rubrics have helped evaluators and teachers identify areas of need and support.
- o While most thought the rubrics have been helpful, most people agreed that it was very lengthy and took a lot of time to properly train and adopt to the rubrics.
    - A number of participants specifically noted overlaps in coverage of some of the domains and suggested a simplification of the rubric (domains 1 and 3 which both examine teacher "inputs" like planning and collaboration with peers, which are often assessed using the same evidence – like the quality of unit plans).
- o A number of individuals from various sessions noted that they would like to see iterations of the rubrics available on the State's resource website. (It was noted that there is "no access to old rubrics".)
- Student Learning Objectives (SLO)
    - o Most participants did not feel that the SLO model was useful in practice.
        - Some individuals thought that the SLO model was designed to be a "one-size-fits-all" model, but that there are not enough resources to be able to modify and tailor to each teacher in a meaningful way.
        - Some individuals cited the model as being too lengthy or cumbersome to be able to implement fully during a school year.
        - One individual described it as "busy work."
    - o Many of these individuals did not feel that the model was a fair model nor did they feel there a good or consistent mechanism in place to ensuring quality measures for student growth.
        - Some thought that teachers who had ISTEP or End of Course Assessments (ECAs) were disadvantaged since they did not have prior access to the assessments while educators who used other measures, including self-created assessments may have "easier" assessments.
    - o A number of participants noted that they did not feel the model was set up to help teachers improve in their practice.
- Assessments/Objective Data
    - o Upcoming changes in assessments over the next few years was an area of concern for many participants.
    - o In a number of sessions, many individuals expressed the desire to see a "pause" on the evaluations in order to determine how best to incorporate new assessments into the process.
    - o Many participants expressed concern regarding the availability and access to reliable assessments.
    - o Many participants appreciated the flexibility be able to create their own assessment.
        - However, a number of participants noted their concern regarding the ability of teachers to create fair and valid assessments.
    - o Participants noted that the current system focuses too much on formative, not summative, assessments, which limits the ongoing support and development that educators desire throughout the year.
- Use of Data
    - o While most participants agreed that data should be used, in part, to inform evaluations, most participants noted a concern about the current use of data in the system.
        - The primary concern heard was the timing of the release of the data. Infrequent and late access to data was a concern expressed each time the topic was covered.
        - Reliability of data across grades and subjects was another concern expressed. Many participants felt that the system was not fair between teachers with students who take ISTEP or had access to ECAs vs. teachers without those assessments.

- Observation and Feedback
  - The TER has helped by creating a common language for evaluators and teachers to discuss teacher quality.
  - Quality of observation and feedback is dependent on the evaluator.
  - The RISE Model does not drive at professional development – there is limited time, training, and resources for evaluators to provide the targeted professional development growth desired by educators.
- Trainings
  - Principal (Evaluator) and Administrator Trainings
    - Some participants agreed that corporations received the same level of baseline training from their corporation's resource center and felt that the principal and administrator has been sufficient during these initial years.
    - Many participants felt that there should be additional trainings on how to have meaningful feedback conversations in order to support educator growth and development.
    - Depending on the resources available, some corporations provided more in-depth trainings to their staff.
      - There was an expressed desire to be able to have access to more in-depth training materials (that can be modified or tailored to the specific needs of the corporations).
    - Depending on the plan used or the Education Service Center (ESC) the corporation belonged to, some corporations had access to more training materials than others.
  - Teacher Trainings
    - Many participants did not feel that there was sufficient training for teachers to fully understand how they were going to be evaluated when the system rolled out.
    - Some participants indicated that they felt teachers should receive evaluator trainings to best understand the model and system used in their corporations. One teacher specifically noted that they felt much more positively about the system when they were trained as an evaluator.
- Compensation
  - There is a lot of consensus among stakeholders that the current compensation incentives do not help motivate teachers. Many felt that this may be due, in part, to lack of monetary resources.
  - There was agreement among some individuals that by linking compensation to evaluations, the system is dis-incentivizing collaboration.
  - Many felt that the current compensation model is one key factor that is deterring individuals from entering the profession.
    - A number of participants noted that during the first few years of entering the profession, many teachers are developing and refining skills in the classroom. During this time, teachers are unlikely to receive the ratings necessary to earn an increase.
    - Others noted that not having a steady increase over time may deter individuals who are looking for a stable/steady earning potential.
- Overall Rollout Strategy
  - Most participants felt that while progress is being made, they wanted more time to train and/or iron out the process at the local level.
  - Most participants expressed concerns regarding upcoming changes and how it may disrupt progress made to date.

Strengths of the system over the past two years
- In all focus groups, participants felt that the flexibility and autonomy at the local corporation level was a key strength.
- This flexibility allows corporations to create a system that best meets their individual needs.
- Most participants felt that the trainings for principals and administrators has been an area of strength.

Where there are room for improvements moving forward
- Resources
  - o Most participants felt that there was a need for access to more resources. Some wanted some sort of "resource/knowledge-hub" or "toolbox" where they can get access to information regarding the following topics:
    - Research based information on various components of the model
    - Guidebooks and examples (access to other's modified plans, rubrics, SLO models, roll-out plans/timelines)
    - Training materials that can be adapted by the local level for principals, evaluators, teachers, and teacher leaders
    - Professional development support/teacher improvement plan support tools
      - Materials to help guide discussion/action plan on what happens after an evaluation. How can a principal use the information to support their teachers in improving their own practice? How to work on developing benchmarks, goals, outcomes for teachers as part of a teacher improvement plan.
- Communications
  - o Many participants felt that communication and engagement needs to improve, especially with and for teachers and the local community.
  - o Many expressed the desire to have more opportunities for participation in the design, development and feedback process.

Conclusion

Through these targeted focus group discussions, we sought input from a variety of highly-engaged stakeholders to further understand the current state of evaluations in Indiana and ultimately help us further focus our research and analysis. The discussion, in conjunction with other research and analysis, informed recommendations for changes in the Indiana's Evaluation System.

The findings discussed in this report highlight the complex and dynamic role of key stakeholders in the ongoing evolution of evaluations in the state. The themes highlighted summarize a range of positive as well as negative experiences within the current system. These themes speak to the accomplishments and hard work from all stakeholders over the past two years in building a system that meets the goals of supporting Indiana educators and recognizing excellent teaching.

Appendix A: Topics & Sample Questions

Introduction (5-10 minutes)

- Introductions: Please tell the group your name, your role, how long you have been in your current role and the evaluation plan your corporation uses or the plan you are most familiar with.
- In one word or a short phrase - Can you describe how things are going with teacher evaluation in Indiana or more specifically your school or school corporation?
  - *What gives you confidence with teacher evaluation (word or phrase)?*
  - *What is your greatest concern with teacher evaluation (word or phrase)?*
- What is your hope for teacher evaluations in Indiana?
- What do you know about the program now that you wished you'd known over the past two years?

Teacher / School Leader Trainings

- What was your experience with training for the new teacher evaluation system?
  - Who provided you with your training?
- Which trainings were most useful to your role? Which trainings were not useful to your role?
  - In what ways were the trainings useful or not useful? *Be sure to identify the training.*
  - Are there particular techniques, tools and resources that you have found to be particularly effective in helping teachers with implementing components of the evaluation system?
- Are there components of the evaluation plan or processes that you would have liked more training on?
- Are there particular techniques, tools, and resources that you have found to be particularly effective in helping you understand and navigate the various components of the evaluation system?
- What additional trainings would you recommend for 2015-16?
- Are there professional development opportunities you are aware of to help improve your understanding and use of the evaluation system?
- What's the best way to communicate resources or opportunities to you?
- In general, do you feel your preparation for being a teacher and the state's licensure requirements prepared you for the expectations established in the state's evaluation system?

[EXTERNAL PARTNERS]

- What was your experience or familiarity with trainings for new teacher evaluation systems or processes?
- Based on your experience, were the trainings provided in the state consistent with best practices in the field?
  - In what ways can the trainings be improved?
- Based on your experience, are there any gaps you observed in the trainings provided (to principals, evaluators, and teachers)?

Teacher Evaluation Process

Practice/Student Growth

- What is your role in implementation of the new evaluation system in your corporation?
  - Can you describe the experience with how the plan has been implemented in your corporation?
- How has corporation plan impacted the instructional practice of your teachers (classroom teaching and learning)?
  - Have you seen an impact on student growth?
  - What are some of the most helpful components of the evaluation?
  - Which one need improvement? How should they be improved?
- In your experience, what has been the most effective way to identify teacher impact on student learning?

- o How should these objective measures be used to determine a teacher's evaluation? What is the appropriate weight?

[EXTERNAL PARTNERS]

- In your experience, what has been the most effective way to identify teachers' impact on student learning?

Rubrics

- For those of you who are familiar with the RISE plan, what are the strengths of the Teacher Effectiveness Rubric?
    - o Is it easy to use?
    - o How can it be improved to help drive teacher practice and student growth?
- For those who use a different plan, what are the pros and cons of the observation rubric used in your corporation?

Student Learning Objectives

- For those of you whose plans have an SLO component, what are the strengths of the Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) process?
    - o Is the process streamlined and easy to understand?
    - o Is the SLOs process valuable or does it help you improve your own teaching practice?
    - o Are there adequate assessment coverage or guidance for objective measures of student learning?
    - o Do you have access to quality assessments?
    - o How can the SLO process be improved to further support teaching practice?

Assessments/Objective Measures

- What types of objectives measures are useful in gauging teachers' impact on student learning?
    - o Are there adequate assessment coverage or guidance for objective measures of student learning?
    - o Do you have access to quality assessments?
- What role should objective measures play in the overall evaluation rating?
- Do you feel that you have received sufficient communication from the state regarding the measures of student learning?
    - o How can the state improve communications to ensure you have the information on measures of student learning?
- Do you have any concerns with the assessment changes this year?

Administrator Support – Observation & Feedback

- How do principals/evaluators use the evaluation tools to provide feedback to teachers after observation?
    - o What steps do you take to follow up with your principal/evaluator or teachers after an observation?
    - o How would you rate quality of feedback?
- In your opinion, do teachers have a clear understanding of what they are being observed on? Rubrics? Data points?
    - o What evidence/sources of data do your teachers use?
- Are there specific instances where you have received helpful feedback? What made these instances successful?
- What happened in the instances where you did not receive helpful feedback?
- As an evaluator, do you feel well prepared and/or equipped to provide feedback to teachers and/or help them understand how rubrics and data points are being used?
- Did the trainings help you and your evaluators better understand how to identifying teacher quality?

- • What resources and/or training would you recommend for school leaders in order to best prepare them for consistent observations/feedback?
- • Does the current system build in enough opportunities for you to have performance discussions with your teachers?
- • School leaders and evaluators can clearly communicate assessment results and information regarding the evaluation process and help teachers develop measureable and achievable student learning goals. Agree or disagree.
  When have you seen this? Why do you were successful (or not) in their communications?

[EXTERNAL PARTNERS]

- • What is the appropriate use of evaluation?
- • To your knowledge does the system capture these best practices seen in the field?

Compensation
- • What's your understanding of your corporation's compensation model or the state's compensation model requirements?
- • How has the compensation model impacted teacher performance, evaluator feedback and school culture?
- • In your experience, what are the benefits and disadvantages of using performance ratings to inform compensation decisions?
  - o In what ways can the system be improved?
  - o In what should evaluation ratings be used to determine compensation?

Communications

- o In what ways do you receive information on evaluation guidance?
  - o As a corporation/school leader, do you feel the information is sufficient?
  - o As a teacher do you feel the information is sufficient?
  - o Is the information helpful?
  - o What can be improved?

What can the State do to make sure you have the tools and resources necessary to meet the goal of supporting your colleagues and students?

Program Improvements

- • Show of hands – who is working with, or have had experience with a locally-created or modified plan?
- • What role do teachers currently play in the design of locally-created/modified plans?
  - o Is this the right role?
  - o Should teachers be more or less involved?

[EXTERNAL PARTNERS]

- • What should the role of the State be in teacher evaluation process?
  - o What level of engagement or role should the state play in reviewing and ensuring of consistency across all plan and implemented?
  - o What is the role of the state in reviewing and approval locally-created or modified plans and all plan implementation?

Conclusion

- If there was one thing that you can do immediately to improve teacher evaluations in Indiana, what would that one thing be?
- Are there any additional thoughts or questions you have about the state's evaluation system?