Session 2C: Root Cause Analysis and Continuous Improvement (Part 1)

Panelists: *Andrew Hinkle, Sheryl Lazarus, Cary Rogers, Wendy Stoica, Robin Stripling, Kathy Strunk*

Mr. Hinkle began this session with a discussion on how Ohio began to tackle the 1.0 percent cap for alternate assessment. Noting some of the participants' remarks about collaboration during the previous session, Mr. Hinkle recalled the difficulties of leading a small assessment shop and trying to get administrators to focus on the waiver. During the first portion of this session, panelists took a look back to answer the following questions:

How did you choose where to start?
In Arkansas, the director of special education gave Ms. Stripling the task of learning about the 1.0 percent cap. Ms. Stripling read information from NCEO and reached out to special education directors across the state who would be honest and forthright. These directors requested solid guidance for local IEP teams.

Going back to Ohio's story, Ms. Stoica said assessment staffs began looking more closely at the data after getting the administrators' attention. The alternate assessment rate was around 2 percent. Ms. Stoica and Mr. Hinkle worked with a small team of people to establish a plan to meet the 1.0 percent cap.

Ms. Rogers joined the Kansas State Department of Education in June 2018 and attended a meeting in Boston in October to learn about the 1.0 percent cap. Kansas did not want to do a waiver, but administrators were interested in getting more information about least dangerous assumption. The state also had no definition for most significant cognitive disability, said Ms. Rogers.

What was your access point?
Ms. Stripling also attended the Boston meeting, along with Arkansas representatives from accountability, assessment, special education, and other departments. That event helped all the state representatives come to the table to share how the 1.0 percent cap was affecting different areas across Arkansas. Staff members from across the Arkansas Department of Education began working together after that event, said Ms. Stripling.

Ohio did not have the full team represented at the Boston meeting, said Ms. Stoica. Although only a few people attended, staff members used the information that came out of that event. In addition, the outgoing data manager, who was set to retire, brought staff members together to review the numbers of students in disability categories taking state assessments. These efforts highlighted misconceptions and led to training opportunities as the state worked for two years on participation guidelines.

Ms. Rogers developed an action plan during the Boston meeting and worked to put that plan in action upon returning to Kansas. Staff members also began looking at state data to examine

math writing levels, reading level with comprehension, and other areas. This effort began the process of identifying students correctly.

What did you do first? Where did that lead you next?
The process in Kansas identified red flags, so Ms. Rogers communicated concerns to state superintendents, special education directors, and test coordinators. The state also looked at adding the definition of "most significant cognitive disability" to participation guidelines. Kansas made small changes every year until 2021. The state also divided its guidance into two pieces to help teams look at most significant cognitive disability and most significant deficits in adaptive behavior.

Ohio also thought adaptive behavior was the missing link. Everyone was looking at IQ scores, but no one considered the impact on adaptive behavior, said Ms. Stoica. LEAs also made decisions on the basis of minimal data. After conducting a data sort, Ohio found that most students were taking the alternate assessment with the "other health impaired" disability category or they were chronically absent.

Arkansas started with a definition for "most significant cognitive disability." The state had no guidance on which students should take the alternate assessment, said Ms. Stripling. She worked with administrative assistants to identify other states' definitions. Once this information was complete, Ms. Stripling pulled in other stakeholder groups. Arkansas teamed up with parents, special education directors, and representatives from higher education and early childhood to develop guidelines for Arkansas. The state has begun to repeat this process to update its definition of "most significant cognitive disability."

How did you dig into the data?
Arkansas began by looking at eligibility categories closely. Many students had specific learning disabilities, health impairments, and speech language issues. Differences among the districts also sparked lots of questions: How were the IEP teams making decisions? What kind of training is available? The state examined all these issues, said Ms. Stripling.

Ohio focused on instruction. Even though the state had developed extended standards for the updated alternate assessment, no one seemed to be using them, said Ms. Stoica. Overall, teachers seemed to be babysitting students and relying on the tried and true. They were not instructing academically. After reviewing participation guidelines, Ohio set out to show teachers curriculum instruction and assessment. That led to a rubric. After five years, the process continues to evolve, said Ms. Stoica.

Kansas decided that its districts should be looking at the same data. At that time, the state was in the process of moving the alternate assessment justification into its integrated accountability system. Ms. Rogers worked with a vendor to get certain data points included in the justifications. The state can now give the districts data on specific students. Ms. Rogers also relies on a three-year data display template. Last, the state undergoes a deep data dive with those districts identified for targeted or intensive technical assistance. Ms. Rogers noted that as

districts received data, administrators and district leaders wanted more tools and concrete information.

With whom did you need to collaborate throughout this process?
Arkansas needed to collaborate with teachers, said Ms. Stripling. Special education directors who wanted to make changes typically did not participate in IEP meetings. And some teachers were providing a functional curriculum that was not tied to academics. The teachers did not believe that the alternate assessment students were capable of much. Ohio began conducting Zoom meetings with teachers in early 2020. Through these conversations, teachers learned about alternate academic achievement standards, how those standards connected to state standards, why every student should have instruction based on state standards, and how to measure the students who have the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Ohio also wanted to impact teachers, but from the state level. Ohio worked closely with its 16 state support teams across the state to bring in two or three people from each of those regions for monthly meetings. During the test window, these small groups met weekly for 60 to 90 minutes to discuss local issues and struggles, said Ms. Stoica. With 1,200 districts, state staff members had no capacity to get on the ground. Instead, the state built up its regional teams.

During the past year's test window, the small teams met with the state every other week. For the spring 2024 test period, the small teams will meet at the beginning, once in the middle, and once at the end, said Ms. Stoica. This process has been in place for the past five years.

Ms. Rogers began by collaborating with other state colleagues. Ms. Rogers, who had been in the classroom for 28 years, needed state and federal guidance. Within the state, she collaborated with the information technology (IT) team and vendors to gather and calculate data. Ms. Rogers also worked closely with special education teams, as well as local teachers and administrators. Webinars attracted 80 to 100 people. The webinars were recorded to assist those who could not attend.

Questions and Comments

After the panel presentations, session participants asked questions about collaboration, parent resources, and supports for students who come off the alternate assessments. Ms. Stoica highlighted the role of liaisons between special education and assessment. Ms. Stripling said videos helped some stakeholders understand students with significant disabilities. Dr. Strunk said some states benefit by sharing information about special education in newsletters or housing assessment and disability staff members in nearby offices. The COVID-19 pandemic, with the popularity hybrid work schedules, has hindered some of that incidental communication, said Ms. Stoica.

States also highlighted such barriers as having a student who took alternate assessments in one LEA be identified differently after moving to another LEA. Teachers also may not realize that they are teaching the same standards to students with complex support needs. The students

are being assessed on an alternate standard. Other states noted that accommodation manuals can serve as a bridge to help students transition from the alternate assessment to the general assessment.

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Definitions and Participation Criteria

Ms. Rogers began with an example of Kansas's participation guidelines (Slide 12). The state has five criteria. The answer to all questions must be "yes," and the districts must share supporting evidence. The last page of the participation guidelines includes definitions, learning characteristics, and educational considerations for students who take alternate assessments. As noted previously, Kansas added the word "typically" to "functioning at 2.5 or more standard deviations below the mean" for both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. The largest Kansas district recommended that teachers wanted more concrete information to make decisions. The fifth Kansas criterion is a parent notification.

Ohio took two years to revise its participation guidelines (Slide 13). The state went from broad guidelines to a prescriptive rubric, said Ms. Stoica. The state also focused on the definition of "most significant cognitive disability." Ohio further determined that students with a specific learning disability and speech and language disability cannot qualify for the alternate assessment. The team that developed the tool did not believe that students with emotional disabilities had cognitive disabilities; however, the state definition left that door open, said Ms. Stoica.

Part B of the tool examines the factors that go into adaptive behavior. The tool also identifies conditions that do not qualify a student for the alternate assessment, such as being an English language learner or reading below grade level. The tool requires signatures from parents and the IEP team.

The chart from Arkansas looks simple but contains a lot of information, said Ms. Stripling. The first part of each column asks a question. For example: Does the student have a disability that significantly impacts intellectual functioning? The bottom half of the column is an explanation. For example: Intellectual functioning well below average (IQ typically below 55 or 3.0 or more standard deviations below the mean). Each column includes a space to mark "yes." The chart also notes that a significant cognitive disability is pervasive, affecting student functioning across all academic, social, and community settings. The student is expected to require intensive and ongoing supports after graduation and throughout life. The state provided this chart with a lot of trainings, including recorded trainings about adaptive behavior, said Ms. Stripling.

Training

Ms. Rogers provides six DLM trainings each year (Slide 16). The first webinar focuses on who is a student with a most significant cognitive disability. The training also highlights the state's participation guidelines and least dangerous assumption. The seminars are recorded and available on the Kansas State Department of Education's website. Districts can request in-person

training. As part of the state's focus on early literacy, Ms. Rogers also has provided trainings on early literacy instruction for students with most significant cognitive disabilities. Slide 17 featured a video on least dangerous assumption.

After a large number of students moved off the alternate assessment, Ohio remained concerned about instruction quality. The state created a free 10-part video series that explores strategies grounded in research to help all learners access the general curriculum (Slide 18). The series focuses on literacy and communication, said Ms. Stoica.

Arkansas provides training for teachers and administrators, such as principals, assistant principals, and superintendents (Slide 19). Ms. Stripling also met with administrator groups to discuss upcoming changes in alternate assessment. This was an interested audience once audience members learned that these changes were important to them, their communities, and the families they serve, said Ms. Stripling. Ms. Stripling also shared a video for administrators on least dangerous assumption.

Three-Tiered Support

Ohio has three tiers, as many states do, but Ohio wants to be more intentional, said Ms. Stoica. Tier 1 schools are under the 1.0 percent cap (Slide 22). Activities for Tier 1 schools occur from February to June, and the activities focus on district justifications. All districts/schools must submit assurances. LEAs that test more than 1.0 percent must submit justifications. These districts have access to decision-making tools, FAQs, and a district self-reflection guide that helps districts look at the data.

Tier 2 gets more focused attention. These districts have an alternative assessment participation rate of 1.1.0 percent to 3.4 percent. As of last year, Ohio had 250 districts in Tier 2. Back in 2017–18, Ohio had 700 districts in this tier. The state plans to focus more specifically on this group by looking at practices. Ohio wants to ensure these districts use the resources and give feedback, said Ms. Stoica.

Ohio works with Tier 3 from December to October. These districts have participation rates of 3.5 percent or more. Ohio identifies and notifies these districts as Tier 3 LEAs in the release of Ohio's Special Education Profiles. This information gets the LEAs' attention and initiates improvement activities.

Kansas identifies its tiers as universal, targeted, and intensive (Slide 23). Through universal support, the state provides online training and tools. Districts must provide justifications and assurances. The state will provide additional help upon request. Targeted technical assistance includes data dives, DLM training modules, and the development of a plan to assist a district in identifying the correct students for the DLM. Districts must provide justifications and assurances.

The state requires a few extra steps for intensive districts, including an on-site folder review by Kansas State Department of Education staff members during DLM test observations. The state

canceled this requirement because of COVID-19. Districts must provide justifications and assurances. Ms. Rogers noted that Kansas still identified some districts that tested under 1.0 percent as targeted. That is because the state placed a higher emphasis on the number and percentage of red flags. It is more important for the right student to take the right test, said Ms. Rogers.

In Arkansas, districts in the first tier provide information on the students who participate (Slide 24). For Tier 2 districts, the state requires a student information sheet (Slide 25). Tier 3 requires an on-site file review (Slide 26).

Monitoring

Kansas monitors through its DLM justifications, a three-year data display, and red-flag data (Slide 28). Red-flag data include disability levels, reading levels with comprehension, and writing skills. The state also conducts DLM test observations for districts over 1.0 percent and high rates of red flags. These observations are an opportunity for the state to support teachers, said Ms. Rogers. Slide 29 provided Kansas data displays within justifications.

Ms. Stoica provided a sample of Ohio's Alternate Assessment Participation Indicator Improvement Plan (Slide 30). Tier 3 districts use this plan as part of a structured improvement process. As part of this effort, a district must review its data for accuracy. Districts also must account for students attending a separate school for the blind. Back in 2017–18, Ohio had 284 districts selected as Tier 3. Ohio had 12 during the past year, said Ms. Stoica, but now the Tier 2 districts are increasing.

Arkansas has embedded its monitoring within its tiered system of support (Slide 31). The Office of Special Education also considers assessing more than 1.0 percent of a district's students on the alternate assessment a risk factor in its monitoring system.

Continuous Improvement

Ms. Stoica shared Ohio's Alternate Assessment Self-Reflection Guide (Slide 33). Districts use this document to begin looking at data internally as a district or building-level team. Tier 3 districts must use this guide with state support. The next slide featured a video on continuous improvement (Slide 34).

Questions and Comments

Participants wrapped up this session with a question on LETRS training. Ms. Rogers said LETRS did not include modifications for students who take alternate assessments. Other research and guidance that Ms. Rogers has used follow the LETRS training and the science of reading. Other session participants recommended the early childhood LETRS. Ms. Stripling noted that Arkansas legislation requires that all K–6 teachers and all special educators in K–12 must have training in the science of reading.