Capacity-Building for Sustainability: A Cooperative K-12 Regional Education Service Provider Case Study

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ABSTRACT

An American K-12 cooperative educational services provider (“The Agency”) has an issue: partner school districts are saving money by building internal capacity for professional development, rather than fully utilizing expertise from the Agency. The aim of this evidence-based case study is to inform the Agency on capacity-building for innovation. The researchers performed three separate rapid evidence assessments, followed by a standard systematic review process to synthesize findings across 31 studies. Key findings identified from the research include (1) organizational capacity and program evaluation lead to organizational sustainability, (2) agency leadership should guide strategic organizational change in order to establish a shared vision for evaluation and feedback, and (3) organizations benefit from practicing continuous and ongoing learning through feedback loops. The findings of this study may be generalizable to other similar educational service providers or non-profits looking to strengthen organizational capacity and partnerships.

KEYWORDS
Assessment, Capacity-Building, Education, Evaluation, Feedback Loops, Innovation, Rapid Evidence Assessment, Support, Sustainability, Systematic Review
INTRODUCTION

Partnerships between school districts and regional educational service and support providers are common but can be fraught when partner schools develop their own internal capacity and begin providing their own support services. How can cooperative educational service providers adapt, innovate, become sustainable and continue to provide needed services for partner schools? This case study outlines the organizational assessment and background of a non-profit education sector organization (“The Agency”) experiencing a decline in its school partnerships and utilization of its services. Focusing on the organization’s situation, a case study is an appropriate method for analyzing the current organization’s situation and answering the research question (Yin, 2012). The researchers define the organizational problem and research questions regarding evaluation capacity building, feedback loops, and leadership strategies. The study documents the research methodology and provides findings, recommendations, implementation plans, risks, and implications for management.

Background

The Agency is a regional educational service center (RESC) for twenty-five school districts in the Northeastern United States. RESCs are non-profit, fee-for-service, public education service providers that exist to improve public education through high quality, cost-effective programs and services by developing solutions to the most pressing needs of member school districts. As of the 2016 - 2017 fiscal year, the board of directors and extensive programs of the Agency involve more than 980 staff members in 19 facilities working with a budget of $87,000,000. The Agency generates most of its income in two ways: (a) fees paid for services by member school districts (75%), and (b) from State, Federal and foundation grants (19%). The Institute is a division of the Agency that provides specific services including professional development and school improvement services, is responsible for the Agency’s data team, grants management, program development, and talent development. This study is the culmination of research and a systematic review of scholarly literature to help answer the research question and formulate practical recommendations for the Agency.

Organizational Assessment

Kong (2008) states that strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (SWOT) analysis supports management’s strategic framework when used as a tool (p. 283). Table 1 represents the SWOT analysis of the Agency.

What makes the Agency unique is its professional services and connection with its community. This is one of the areas in which the Agency has strength, as evidenced by a client interview and a survey conducted to gain insight into customer preferences of their services (Hanover Research, 2019). The findings of this study suggest that the community is happy with the professional services but are not satisfied with the cost of professional services provided by the Agency.
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