



GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Collaboration with Stakeholders Across Multiple Districts and Settings

Sam Jordan of the Alaska Staff Development Network (ASDN) and Joann Taylor of the Texas Center for Educator Excellence (TxCEE), both Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Program grantees, are uniquely challenged to engage stakeholder groups across multiple school systems to approach their grant work with fidelity, with a shared sense of impact, and in the spirit of collaboration.

They achieve this through a lot of hard work and by leveraging key strategies:

- **FLEXIBILITY**
- **OVERCOMMUNICATING**
- **PRIORITIZING RELATIONSHIPS**
- **UTILIZING EXISTING STRUCTURES**



Meet the Grantees

Sam Jordan

Outreach Director of the Alaska Staff Development Network/Alaska Council of School Administrators

The Alaska Council of School Administrators is a 2020 Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Program grantee. Its project, Increasing Performance and Retention in Alaska's Rural Schools, was designed and is managed by the Alaska Staff Development Network (ASDN), the professional learning and grants management arm of the organization. The project is designed to review and upgrade human capital management systems, implement a performance-based compensation system for teachers, and build educator capacity to leverage visible learning strategies to improve outcomes for students. Jordan works closely with four districts, all being severely impacted by the national and state crisis in educator shortage. These districts run the gamut in size and context: a district larger than 30 U.S. states, a one-school district with a large cyber school, a district with 10 village school sites inaccessible except by small airplane and a district that experiences temperature changes from -71 to +99 degrees each year.

One-fifth the size of the United States, Alaska faces unique challenges related to educator recruitment and retention. "There are degrees of rural in Alaska that don't exist in the lower 48," Jordan noted. As a result, it can be tough to attract educators to work in Alaskan communities. Close to two-thirds of Alaska's teachers are recruited from the lower 48 states. Recruited educators arrive excited, but more than a few turn around and head back on the plane that brought them. Others stick it out until they get lonely, want to return to something familiar, or get tired of the lack of amenities and of the weather.

There have been efforts over time to address recruitment and retention, with not a lot of good long-term success and not enough to meet the workforce needs. When the state's economy was more robust, pay and benefits for educators were higher but that hasn't been sustained. University programs expanded to support grow-your-own initiatives, but their footprint has been shrinking throughout the state.

"We have amazing communities and instructional opportunities in Alaska. We simply just need to attract and retain more committed educators to those opportunities," Jordan explained.



"There are degrees of rural in Alaska that don't exist in the lower 48."

Meet the Grantees

Joann Taylor

Chief Officer of the Texas Center for Educator Excellence (TxCEE)

The Texas Center for Educator Excellence (TxCEE) is a 2017 Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Program recipient. TxCEE is an Austin-based satellite office of the Region 18 Education Service Center and provides leadership and technical assistance to improve educator excellence. Its project, Texas Teacher and School Leader Project, seeks to advance the state's human capital reforms and build upon existing models for effective human capital management systems in three Texas districts (Anderson-Shiro CISD, Galveston ISD, and Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD).

TxCEE has experience managing and implementing Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grants and had already been working with districts to align systems. They knew that on some of the campuses they serve students were achieving below the state average in reading, writing, and math. Simultaneously, the State of Texas started looking at statewide levers, and teachers and principals became more growth-oriented. However, there was still more work to be done aligning systems to impact recruitment and retention – and ultimately student outcomes – more powerfully. As well, Taylor noted ongoing recruitment challenges, especially in the more isolated districts: “In really rural spaces in Texas it is difficult to recruit teachers – there are a lot of places where there are no amenities, where there is a lot of beauty but also a lot of isolation,” she explained.

Taylor works closely with three school districts to refine their evaluation systems to ensure fairness, validity, and rigor, and to modify their performance-based compensation systems to ensure they can identify and reward top talent as well as be sustainable. To this end, TxCEE also provides instructional and leadership development strategies and job-embedded professional development to continuously improve the educators already in the system. At the same time, TxCEE also provides rigorous screening and selection tools to recruit the right educators from the start.

The districts TxCEE partners with are diverse, ranging from an urban district, where pay incentives and supports have strengthened recruitment and retention efforts, to a rural school district, in which job-embedded PD, incentives, and a teacher career pathway have reduced the number of new teacher recruits each year from as many as 20 to as few as 3. Another district is located on an island, where the sun and beach draw interested candidates, but the high cost of living makes retention difficult.



“In really rural spaces in Texas it is difficult to recruit teachers – there are a lot of places where ... there is a lot of beauty but also a lot of isolation.”

KEY STRATEGY Flexibility

Texas Center for Educator Excellence

Joann Taylor talked about the need to remain flexible throughout the life of the grant. While there are aspects of continuity – connecting weekly with stakeholders and checking in quarterly with district offices, for example – some parts of the grant management process have had to change over time.

Taylor described a large project advisory group in the first year of the grant, explaining, “Early on we were building consensus.” But by the middle of the second year, smaller groups were needed to specifically address residencies and data management systems. By reconfiguring the groups, she was able to run ideas and issues by these smaller groups in a much more feedback-oriented way.

“We refined aspects of programs by asking questions of these groups throughout the year, getting feedback along the way instead of afterward,” she explained.

Taylor also faces the major challenge of finding ways to look at growth that are not based on state assessment scores and planning for long-term sustainability. She and the partner district are considering different reading assessments, but COVID has caused the data to be spotty in places. Overall, they are trying to find commonalities across the school districts, but that remains a challenge.

Alaska Staff Development Network

ASDN’s TSL grant involves four school systems who had never worked together before. Each came to the table with different contexts and decision-making structures in place. Jordan has been able to work to develop global understandings of the grant priorities and then to use monthly meetings to talk through how the grant strategies filter down and translate at each local level.

He referred to this process as “unfolding” and described it as a mindset in which partners are simultaneously in the work at hand and constantly previewing the work ahead to determine how it translates in their settings. “It’s a great mechanism for being strategic,” he noted. As well, it allows for everyone to refine as they go along: reflecting on what’s collectively working, giving room to consider how the work plays out in each district, and seeking feedback to continuously improve.



What is the Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Program?

The TSL program supports entities in implementing, improving, or expanding their overall Human Capital Management System, which by definition must include a Performance-Based Compensation System. The TSL programs primarily serve educators in High-Need Schools who raise student academic achievement and close the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students.

KEY STRATEGY Communication

Texas Center for Educator Excellence

Joann Taylor insisted, “There’s no such thing as communicating too much.” She emphasized the fact that her organization can’t afford to assume that everyone knows and thinks what they know and think.

“If you’re tempted to start slowing down communication in year three, don’t do that,” she explained.

Taylor described how the Center connects weekly with each district, in addition to formal quarterly check-ins. As well, the field staff long ago established strategic touchpoints in each district and maintains regular contact with those stakeholders.

Alaska Staff Development Network

Sam Jordan is especially pleased with communication and with the amount of time he’s been able to spend with the stakeholders. “They’ve been working hard thinking through the implications of this work.” Educators have been engaged with professional development already. They’re excited to learn something new to bring to their craft of instruction and about the impact visible learning strategies will have in their classrooms

At present, Sam Jordan is focusing on consistency to keep momentum moving forward and acknowledges Alaska’s need and desire to engage in the national conversation about teaching and learning. He wants to ensure Alaskan schools have access to the dialogue through grants such as TSL. “As a geographically isolated state, Alaska doesn’t always have the benefit easily accessible thought partners,” he explained. He described the need “create spaces in which our educators can build capacity and reflect on what will be most effective in our unique context.”

KEY STRATEGY Prioritizing Relationships

Texas Center for Educator Excellence

Taylor described long-standing relationships with two of the districts, which were part of TIF 3 and TIF 4 grants, and explained how they wanted to continue the partnership and the work. A third district had their own TIF 3 grant and were doing work around student growth measures with TxCEE, which opened the door for their participation in TSL. In the early years of the grant, TxCEE convened its four school districts in a physical location for summer institutes that focused on cross-district activities, forming relationships with stakeholders, and helping stakeholders understand the systems TxCEE was setting up.

For years four and five of the grant, they intended to shift to virtual strategies to stay connected. COVID sped up that timeline. Taylor described how they shifted to using a virtual collaborative learning community structure – similar in concept to professional learning communities.

“Everyone’s a little more eager to get online and eager to engage. In particular, the new teacher mentoring program benefits from this set-up and there is a heightened sense of community,” Taylor explained.

TxCEE’s field staff have also built relationships with campus administrators and teachers. They connect with districts weekly and provide ongoing coaching, support, and professional development. These relationships are “the cornerstone of all of the work we are doing at every level,” explained Taylor.

Alaska Staff Development Network

The Alaska Staff Development Network has successfully managed several education grants and provided professional development to all of Alaska’s school districts for over 35 years. ASDN is a division of the Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA) which serves superintendents, principals, and business administrators. This level of familiarity with district, school and teacher leaders across Alaska allowed them to advance TSL efforts as a familiar partner. “It’s all about relationships and supporting and amplifying the work of districts,” according to Jordan.

As a result, Jordan was able to hit the ground running. And because the use of distance learning technologies was already the norm in Alaska, practices were already in place throughout the state to begin collaborative planning right away. A project management team meets every two weeks, while an implementation team meets monthly.

KEY STRATEGY Utilizing Existing Structures

Texas Center for Educator Excellence

Taylor described rich, in-depth support for the implementation of job-embedded professional development. The model, known as SEED (System for Effective Educator Development), allows staff to provide coaching and training on topics such as calibration and educator evaluation rubrics. The model also utilizes collaborative learning communities and collaborative learning leaders to strengthen educators’ use of data and student-growth measures, with an eye toward slowly releasing the responsibility for these processes to the school districts while also ensuring fidelity of implementation.

TxCEE is shifting how it supports the school districts and is currently spending time identifying what other grantees are using that they can leverage to keep the school districts on track when the grant is gone. As well, Taylor identified a state-directed teacher incentive allotment, which provides five years of funding to pay additional compensation to teachers. She has encouraged all three districts to apply, explaining, “There is value in having these ratings for teacher placement and decision making.”

Taylor is also thinking through sustainability in terms of the costs associated with evaluation systems for school districts. One of the school districts TxCEE works with pays for its evaluation system. “We are helping them think about moving over to the state system, which is free. They can free up funds by taking advantage of what’s available to them now at no cost.”

Alaska Staff Development Network

Jordan recognized early on that there was no need to create totally new structures to support the grant work. “There were already existing ones we were able to refine to suit our purposes and the needs of the districts,” he explained.

His organization hosts an annual effective instruction conference and an annual leadership conference into which they’ve been able to include strands of the grant work. Jordan reported a good response from the districts: “It’s helpful to frame the work so that people aren’t spending time thinking about what’s been added to their plates so much as what value has been added and how it enhances what they’re already doing.”

Curious to learn more about the work of TSL grantees? You can read profiles of 2017 grantees using the [Communities360 grantees profile map](#).