

Education Renewal Zones: Increasing Partnerships and Sharing Resources for School Improvement

Zena Rudo, Ph.D.
Sarah Caverly, Ph.D.
SEDL

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. All ERZs are funded through this initiative 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. SEDL conducted a statewide evaluation of the eight ERZs established over a 2-year time frame. The purpose of this presentation is to provide a summary of evaluation activities and findings related to SEDL's assessment of the ERZ's initiative in Year 2 (2006-2007) and document progress made from Year 1.

Evaluation Process

A longitudinal cluster evaluation (Sanders, 1997) was conducted to assess progress and identify promising practices across the cluster of eight ERZs statewide. The evaluation placed emphasis on examining the formation, maintenance and depth of partnerships formed through the ERZ initiative, as well as the individualization of each ERZ based upon regional and partnering school needs. During the first year of implementation, the evaluation documented ERZ strategies and identified preliminary promising practices. The Year 2 ERZ evaluation included a similar approach and methods used in Year 1; however, a stronger emphasis was placed on the progress ERZs made longitudinally.

Both years of the evaluation addressed questions on the ability of ERZs to engage all partners (including IHEs, ESCs, schools/districts, parents and community partners) in activities and programs related to school improvement. Evaluation questions included:

- What are the needs and desired outcomes of the ERZ partners?
- To what extent did the IHEs and ESCs increase their connection to the public schools and community?
- To what extent did the schools take advantage of those resources?
- What changes do the ERZ partners perceive to have occurred as a result of the ERZ grants in relation to partner collaboration?
- What changes do the ERZ partners percent to have occurred to pre-service and in-service training or professional development programs as a result of the ERZ collaborations?

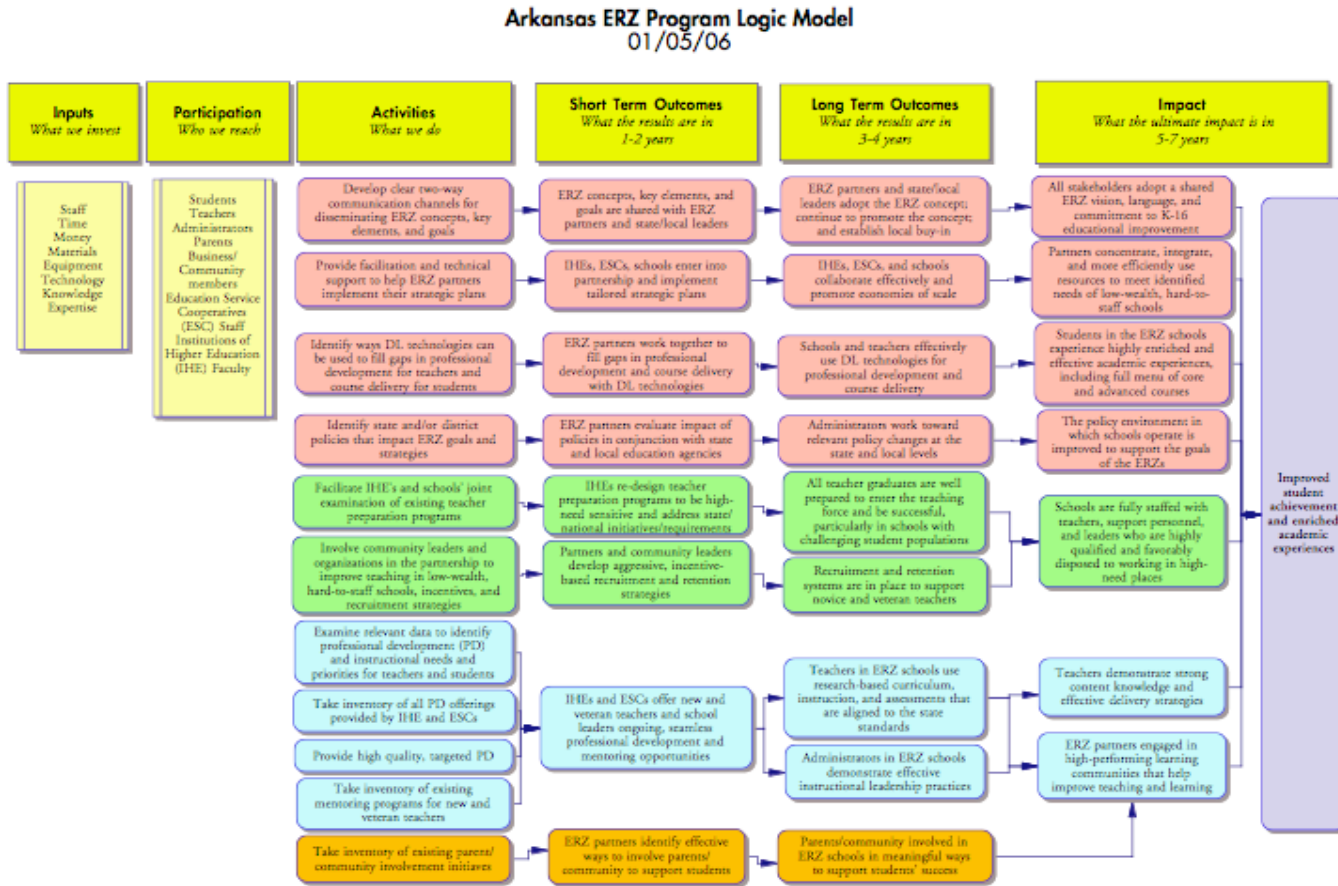
Multiple evaluation methods were used to collect data from a variety of sources, including interviews and focus groups, surveys, observations, reviewing documentation and evaluation network meetings with ERZ staff. Across both years, site visits were conducted at the eight ERZ sites. Evaluators worked with ERZ directors to establish a site visit schedule, which included at least seven interviews (district superintendents, school principal, IHE Dean, ESC director or teacher coordinator and the ERZ director) and at least four focus groups (IHE faculty, teachers from partnering schools and advisory board members). Interview and focus group protocols were tailored to ERZ partners' specific roles in the initiative. During site visits two partnering schools' district superintendents, principals and teachers participating in interviews and focus groups each year. Selected schools were identified by the ERZ director.

During the first year of implementation, the evaluators, in collaboration with ADE and ERZ directors developed a logic model identifying activities, outcomes (short- and long-term) and desired impacts of the initiative. The logic model addressed the following program components:

- Communicating and implementing ERZ vision
- Preparing and recruiting future teachers
- Supporting and retaining existing teachers
- Involving families and community members
- Improving student achievement and enriching academic experiences

The logic model guided the implementation of the initiative, strategic planning and evaluation activities.

Figure 1: ERZ Logic Model



Evaluation Methods

SEDL used multiple evaluation methods to collect data from specific sources in order to answer the evaluation questions. These methods included interviews and focus groups, surveys, observations, reviewing documentation/web sites, and evaluation networking meetings with ERZ staff. The majority of data were collected during site visits to the eight ERZs and via surveys completed by ERZ partners.

Site Visits

An important element of the evaluation was collecting data from site visits to the eight ERZs. The site visits provided a rich understanding of the areas of emphasis in each of the ERZ's strategic plans, the implementation of the various strategies and activities, perceptions regarding the outcomes of the ERZ partnerships, and the factors that contribute to, or detract from, the implementation of various interventions. The site visits included meetings, interviews, and focus groups with ERZ staff and others affiliated with the individual education renewal zones. SEDL provided training for all members of the evaluation team conducting site visits to ensure reliability in data collection and understanding of the design and process. SEDL also conducted debrief meetings with all of the site visit evaluators to share insights across the ERZs that was used to strengthen the evaluation report on the statewide ERZ activities, progress, and challenges. Each ERZ director identified individuals, (i.e., Dean of Education and IHE Faculty) to participate in their evaluation site visit and also selected his or her two partnering schools to participate in the Year 2 evaluation. The site visits concluded with a debriefing meeting between the evaluator and ERZ director. Table 4 depicts the individuals interviewed by the evaluation team members during the site visits.

Table 4. Site Visit Interviews

ERZ	ERZ 1	ERZ 2	ERZ 3	ERZ 4	ERZ 5	ERZ 6	ERZ 7	ERZ 8	Total
ERZ Director	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Deans (and Associate Deans)	1	1	1	1 ^a	2 ^b	1	1	1	9
Faculty Focus Groups	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	12
ESC Directors/Staff	1	1 ^a	1	1	1 ^b	1	1	1	8
Superintendents (and assistants)	1	2	2	2 ^a	2 ^b	3	2 ^a	2 ^c	15
Other School District Representatives	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	3	6
Principals (and assistants)	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	14
Other Schools Representatives	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Teachers (Focus Group)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
Advisory Committee (Focus Group)	1	-	1	1 ^a	1	1	2	-	7

^a These interviews were conducted via telephone.

^b In one of these interviews, the Dean/Director/Superintendent was joined by another staff member.

^c One of the two interviews was conducted via telephone.

Surveys

SEDL administered surveys to the partners for each ERZ. This included school principals and teachers, district superintendents, higher education administration and faculty, Education Service Center staff, and family and community members participating on ERZ advisory committees.

Teacher paper survey. SEDL asked each ERZ director to ensure that 120 teachers complete the paper survey from partnering schools that were not visited by the evaluation team in Year 2. It should be noted that within a few ERZs, partnering schools were included in both the site visit sample, as well as the survey sample. SEDL sent the ERZ directors the online version of the survey to be copied and distributed to their self-selected sample. Teacher surveys were returned to SEDL using two methods. One method was for schools to directly return their completed surveys to SEDL. The second method was the ERZ director collected the surveys from the schools, compiled them and then sent the packet to SEDL.

ERZ partner online survey. SEDL requested ERZ directors provide a contact database for distributing surveys to partners other than teachers. SEDL sent e-mail announcements inviting the partners to complete the survey online through SEDL's Web site. The partners included IHE deans/associate deans and faculty working with the ERZ, ESC directors and staff, school principals, district superintendents or other district representatives, and family and community members working with the ERZ.

Final survey sample. The final survey sample for both the online and paper surveys consisted of 756 respondents, representing various positions within the ERZ partnership. SEDL received paper survey responses from 600 teachers out of the target sample of 960 teachers. Additionally, SEDL received 67 paper survey responses from partners other than teachers. Since the paper surveys were anonymous, SEDL was unable to determine the possible duplication of these responses with online survey responses. However, SEDL did make the decision to include all paper survey responses in the final sample of 756. The majority of survey respondents (80%) were teachers from the partnering ERZ schools. Since teachers comprised such a huge portion of survey responses, the presentation of findings will clarify the type of respondent to help distinguish perceptions..

Document Review of ERZ Strategic Plans and Annual Reports

The evaluation included a systematic review of ERZ documents to ERZ adherence to the guidelines and principles of the initiative and the progress made from Year 1 to Year 2. SEDL developed a matrix that was used to examine each ERZ's Year 2 strategic plan based on the established logic model and ADE guidelines for the ERZ statewide initiative to identify common activities and unique practices. Two evaluators reviewed each of the seven plans individually.

Findings were categorized into the following activities central to the ERZ initiative: communication and collaboration, professional development, curriculum (including use

of technology), faculty sharing, recruitment and retention, mentoring, student achievement and school performance, and community and parent involvement.

Data Analysis

SEDL used both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the data collected. Qualitative data analysis methods were used to summarize and interpret the information gathered through the site visits (including interviews, focus groups, and observations), open-ended items included on surveys, and document reviews. Data was coded based on themes related to the five areas of the logic model: (1) Communication and Collaboration; (2) Preparation and Retention of Future Teachers; (3) Support and Retention of Existing Teachers; (4) Distance Learning Technologies; and (5) Family and Community Involvement.

Quantitative data collected with the surveys were entered into a standard database, analyzed and summarized using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, ranges and percentages, as well as comparison statistics, such as mean differences, were computed and analyzed. Data from all sources were triangulated to best answer the research questions.

Findings

Findings were synthesized across the eight ERZ sites related to ERZ accomplishments and progress made in Year 2 as well as opportunities for strengthening the ERZ initiative. SEDL placed a strong emphasis on the site visit data with findings from the partner survey, strategic plan review, Web site review and Year 1 annual report review supporting those findings. Integrated within each section is the triangulation of findings unless otherwise noted for a specific data source, (e.g., “survey responses indicated...”, “strategic plans indicated...”, “based on site interviews...” , etc.). This second year of ERZ statewide evaluation targeted the implementation of strategies related to each area of the logic model.

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. Based upon the ERZ program logic model, communication and collaboration should remain a priority throughout the project. ERZs recognized the importance of communication and collaboration and continually focus 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 indicated in their Year 2 strategic plans. ERZ partners also noted communication and collaboration was a main focus in their survey responses (see Table 6) and on-site

interviews. As one district superintendent described, “The ERZ created a network of collaboration and enhanced the relationship with school districts nearby.”

Rating the amount of focus on a scale from 1 meaning “all of focus” to 5 meaning “none of the focus”, the greatest extent of the ERZ focus on communication and collaboration was seen by IHE deans (N=10, Average = 2.10) and least by school principals (N=28, Average = 2.82). About half of the teachers who responded to surveys felt they could not determine the amount of focus the ERZs place in this area.

Generally, survey respondents indicated on a scale from 1 meanly “strongly disagreed” to 4 meaning “strongly agreed” that they were kept well informed about ERZ activities and developments (N = 475, Average = 2.89) and had regular communication with ERZ partners (N = 469, Average = 2.77).

Methods of Communication and Collaboration

Various approaches and techniques for communication were identified during site visits. The most common approaches to communicating with partners occurred via email, phone discussions, personal interactions and web sites. A few sites provided written updates and/or newsletters to inform partners about ERZ supported activities. Two of the ERZs reported developing list serves to ease communication, while another had expanded a previous support network of group meetings. Several district and school administrators appreciated receiving emails from ERZ directors. However, they expressed a preference for phone calls and scheduled site visits as they often were overwhelmed by the amount of email they received daily and at times had been unable to read emails from ERZ directors. In addition, teachers requested that ERZ director classroom observations be scheduled ahead of time to prevent conflicts with field trips or special events. As the ERZ directors gained experience and strengthened their partnerships more formal processes for communication and collaboration formed.

Another means to facilitate communication between ERZ partners was ERZ web sites. Six of the eight ERZs had fully functional web sites available, which 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 have been through their advisory committees, and strategic plans. As recommended by the ERZ guidelines, each ERZ indicated in their strategic plan that it has established an advisory committee with regularly scheduled meetings. During site visits, partners commented that a number of ERZs have reconstructed their advisory committees to include sub-committees related to specific tasks, events, and topics. Based upon survey responses, the majority of IHE Deans, ESC staff and District Superintendents indicated they were a member of their

ERZ's advisory committee (90%, 75% and 73%, respectively). School staff and IHE faculty were less likely to report being a member of their ERZ's advisory committee. Respondents who indicated they were on an advisory committee reported they an average of 3.74 times during the second year of implementation.

During site visits partners 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. Forty-two percent of survey respondents also indicated they were familiar with the 2006-2007 strategic plans.

Communication and Collaboration on ERZ Goals and Activities

Communication and collaboration around ERZ goals and activities has improved. The partners' understanding of those goals varied, yet the goals are viewed as concrete and attainable. Based upon interviews and focus groups, the highest level of understanding was found for partnering principals and IHE administration and faculty. According to survey responses, IHE Deans and district staff indicated they had the most understanding of ERZ goals and purposes on a scale of 1 meaning "strongly disagreed" to 4 meaning "strongly agree" (Average = 3.50 and 3.41, respectively). During site visits, a majority of ERZ teachers were unable to identify specific goals and activities initiated by their ERZ during site visits. While on the survey, 63 percent of the teachers surveyed felt they had a clear understanding of their ERZ's goals and activities while another 37% indicated they did not know.

Activities identified during site visits followed the logic model but were unique to each ERZ based upon their needs assessment results found in Year 1. Survey questions related to the implementation of these activities asked partners how they felt about the amount and pace of the activities. On a scale from 1 meaning, "strongly disagree" to 4 meaning, "strongly agree" respondents agreed, on average, that they were not overburdened with their ERZ activities. Respondents also indicated the ERZ implementation has not been too slow.

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 is a necessary component of the ERZ initiative. The ERZ director plays 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. According to survey responses on a scale from 1 being "strongly disagree" to 4 being "strongly agree", partners strongly agreed that their ERZ director has good skills for working with partnerships (Average = 3.54).

ERZ partners agreed, on average, they have a clear sense of their own ERZ roles and responsibilities (see Table 13). They also perceived that other partners have a clear sense

of their own roles and responsibilities (see Table 14). In interviews, partners noted specific roles they played and changing responsibilities they have taken on during the second year of implementation. These 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. Forty-three percent of the partners responding to the survey indicated they see some change in the IHE faculty working more with teachers over the past year, with 22 percent seeing no change. 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. In one ERZ they described the ESC partnership as being "very open." Forty-six percent of the partners indicated on the survey some change in the IHE faculty working more with ESCs over the past year with 22 percent saying no change occurred (see Table 15). 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. Forty-six percent of survey respondents indicated that some change had occurred over the past year related to new collaborations developing by the ERZ with community partners and 22 percent seeing no change (see Table 16).

Preparation and Recruitment of Future Teachers

A challenge commonly faced throughout schools and school districts is the recruitment of highly qualified teachers. A goal established for the ERZs was to build capacity within each partner school to identify and recruit qualified teachers. Several of the ERZs are looking to their IHE partner for assistance in this area. The ERZ initiative offers the opportunity for schools and school districts to have an impact on their IHE partner's teacher preparation program and recruit IHE graduates. The following section describes Year 2 initiatives focused on teacher preparation programs and future teacher recruitment.

Preparation of Future Teachers

Based upon Year 2 strategic plans, preparing future teachers was a focus, but not the main focus for the ERZs. District staff saw the preparation of future teachers as more of a focus than other partners. A greater number of partners responding to the survey (17%)

saw preparation of future teachers as a prior focus for the ERZs rather than a future focus (10%).

During site visits, ERZs identified a number of approaches being taken to reconsider how IHEs are preparing future teachers, including Professional Development Schools, courses focusing on community and family involvement, and support for pre-service teachers. In several ERZs, partners were dialoguing about teacher preparation program redesign. According to survey responses, almost half of the partners perceived some change had occurred in the revision of teacher preparation courses and requirements for field experiences of pre-service teachers. However, based upon site visit interviews, the partners in most of the ERZs reported they had little to no impact on the teacher preparation program.

Recruitment of Future Teachers

Across all ERZs, partnering schools have identified teacher recruitment as an area of high need. In an effort to address this area of need, several ERZs emphasized increasing activities focused on teacher recruitment during the 2nd year of implementation. A greater number of partners responding to the survey (16%) saw teacher recruitment as a prior focus for the ERZs rather than a future focus (10%).

In site visit interviews, ERZ directors could identify partnering schools' staffing needs based on needs assessments and/or informal discussions with district and school administration. Based on survey results, forty-seven percent of the partners perceived some change in the ERZs identifying current teacher staffing needs in partnering schools while 23 percent saw no change.

The needs identified for hard-to-recruit teaching positions are in the following content areas: special education, math, science, and English. In particular regions of the state there is also a high need for bilingual teachers. The ERZ directors were attempting to assist their partnering schools and districts by sponsoring teacher recruitment fairs, providing a directory of education graduates, identifying recruitment strategies and incentives, and writing recruitment plans for the IHE. Forty-five percent of partners responding to the survey indicated there had been some change in designing new recruitment strategies to target high-need staffing levels or content areas and 24 percent perceived no change.

Several ERZs proposed approaching recruitment and retention from a grass roots perspective within their strategic plans. Based upon data gathered during site visits, the ERZ directors have vested a large amount of time in reestablishing grass root efforts to recruit high school students into the teaching field. The majority of district superintendents indicated during site visits that they appreciated the teacher recruitment assistance provided by ERZ directors in Year 2; however, IHE partners did not report an increase in their number of education majors during interviews or focus groups. Partners responses on the survey related to the ERZ designing new recruitment strategies to increase pre-service teacher applicants was similar to their perceptions about strategies for high-need staffing levels or content areas.

Support and Retention of Existing Teachers in Partnering ERZ Schools

The support and retention of existing teachers, particularly in hard-to-staff schools, can be a monumental challenge. ERZs have established a goal to help partnering schools build their capacity to retain highly qualified teachers. Teacher retention has been a focus for several of the ERZs. Based upon partners' perceptions on the survey, retention of existing teachers had been some of the focus across all ERZs. According to 15 percent of the sample, teacher retention was a focus during the first year of ERZ implementation and approximately 8 percent indicated that teacher retention would become a focus of the ERZs during their third year of implementation.

Several district and school administrators noted a challenge was losing teachers to school districts offering higher salaries and better benefits. A few of the ERZs have been working with partnering schools to identify incentives to offer current teachers, as well as retention information. Several ERZs have co-sponsored teacher fairs as a means to retain teachers and a few others have provided teacher retention workshops for school administrators. While partners reported these activities were helpful, several district and school administrators felt the ERZs have provided minimum support in this area.

The ERZ partners are expected to offer new and veteran teachers and school leaders' ongoing, seamless professional development opportunities. These opportunities, through the regional ESC, the IHE, and/or partnering districts and schools, are seen as one strategy of retaining existing teachers. Another means is the mentoring of teachers. ERZs approaches to supporting and retaining existing teachers vary based upon partner needs.

Professional Development Support

ERZs help to build partner schools' capacities to identify and fill gaps in professional development. Site visit data indicated that all ERZ directors have conducted need assessments with their partnering schools to identify common professional development opportunities and specific partner needs. Identifying common professional development needs had facilitated resource pooling to cover the cost of training, minimize transportation and staff leave issues, and provide high quality content and delivery. The collaboration on professional development efforts was the best illustration of economies of scale occurring at the ERZ sites.

According to their strategic plans, five of the ERZs provided support to teachers through professional development opportunities over the past year in an effort to improve student outcomes. On average, partners saw professional development as the area most focused upon by ERZs in Year 2.

During site visits, the majority of teachers reported no change to the amount and type of professional development they received. One teacher indicated she did not know the difference from trainings supported by the ERZ and those already offered at the ESC. Other teachers felt the ESC was already meeting their professional development needs. The site visit data is supported by survey responses in regard to partners' perceptions of

change in professional development opportunities. In the areas of identifying and providing professional development to teachers there was some to little perceived change from the first year of implementation. In addition, partners perceived some to little change in the amount of coordination between IHE faculty and ESC staff to provide professional development opportunities.

Focus of professional development. One focus of the ERZs for professional development had been in the provision of training and workshops in the following areas: substitute training, classroom management, curriculum alignment, science and math activities/strategies, and special education. In interviews, school and district administrators provided positive feedback on these professional development opportunities facilitated/provided by the ERZ director and other partners.

Newly hired teachers have become the focus for a few of the ERZ sites. In one ERZ, additional funding was received to support a weeklong new teacher institute. During the institute, teachers received professional development on classroom management, and Arkansas state benchmarks. One principal interviewed indicated the institute offered an opportunity for his new teachers to build stronger links to other new teachers and receive trainings that could not be offered during the school's in-service. Teachers in this ERZ indicated the training was beneficial and better prepared them for the classroom experience.

Two ERZs have developed trainings for substitute teachers. Both ERZs have incorporated classroom management, curriculum alignment, and state benchmarks into their substitute teacher trainings. District and school administrators and teachers described the substitute training as beneficial to substitute teachers and expressed their desire for it to occur more frequently. One school district adopted the ERZ's substitute training as a requirement for all substitutes working in their district.

At least 2 ERZs have partnered with their IHE, ESC and school partners and been awarded grants to support professional development in the areas of science and math. The additional grants received by some ERZ directors for professional development endeavors have enhanced the offerings they are able to provide to schools and districts. Several ERZ directors have directly provided professional development to reduce the cost of hiring an outside consultant. In addition to providing trainings and workshops, the ERZs have supported existing teachers through direct links to the IHE and community. Only a few ERZs have a formalized assessment tool for professional development offered through the ERZ. More commonly, the training assessments were informal and relied upon attendees to provide verbal feedback.

Professional development resources. An initial requirement established for all ERZ sites was the construction of a comprehensive professional development catalogue for partnering schools. The comprehensive catalogue was meant to identify all professional development opportunities through the IHE, partnering ESC and community agencies available to schools. To date, only one ERZ reported the completion of their

comprehensive catalogue. Several ERZ sites have begun working towards developing a directory.

The most common strategy to increase resources related to professional development ERZs offered to partnering schools was increasing awareness of IHE programs and events. Several of the IHEs have state funded Math and Science centers, which offer professional development and classroom resource kits to schools at no cost. ERZ directors have facilitated relationships between partner schools and these centers. Teachers and principals indicated they did not realize the availability of resources from the IHE until the ERZ director informed them. IHE faculty and administrators were pleased that the ERZ director increased awareness of their existing math and science programs and other outreach efforts so that partnering schools were receiving services they had not before utilized. ERZs were also providing additional resources through their web sites.

Mentoring

A goal, in Year 2, for the ERZs was to move forward from identifying mentoring programs to matching novice teachers with strong mentors. The statewide ERZ initiative focuses on mentoring for teachers with three or fewer years of teaching as a priority. A second mentoring priority identified was for “career teachers whose performance indicates the need for such help.” Several ERZs identified strategies to increase or assess mentoring efforts within their strategic plans; however, based upon site visit interviews and focus groups, mentoring had not been a focus during the second year of implementation. Partners responding to the survey generally reported some change in mentoring programs offered (see Table 24).

The majority of ERZs continued activities initiated in Year 1 related to mentoring in Year 2. For instance, IHE faculty received training on the Pathwise mentor program during Year 1 and then were able to provide that training during the 2nd year. Other ERZs were only at the point where they were examining the current Pathwise mentor program and determining partnering schools’ Pathwise needs.

One ERZ had approached mentoring by matching teachers in partnering schools with an IHE faculty mentor based on content area. For instance, math teachers were matched with the IHE math faculty to strengthen classroom content and activities. Content mentors conducted classroom visits and provided resources to teachers they mentored. Teachers reported having a content mentor as being helpful.

Distance Learning and Technology

In an effort to increase professional development offerings to teachers and curriculum options for students, ERZ partners were tasked with increasing the availability and use of distance learning technology (e.g., Compressed Interactive Video) at partnering schools. At this point in time, partners have identified that distance learning had not been a main focus for the ERZs. However, one initiative that several ERZs have increased their investment in this second year is the Arkansas Early College High School program. This had been the focus of much of these ERZ’s distance learning and technology efforts.

Teachers and school administration reported using Compressed Interactive Video (CIV) technology, sometimes within their own schools, through their ESC and/or in conjunction with other resources. The majority of IHE administrators and faculty indicated their campus had CIV capabilities; however, it was not frequently utilized for ERZ events due to cost and scheduling conflicts. In an effort to reduce the cost of CIV, ERZ directors frequently collaborated with their ESC partners to support CIV events.

Partner survey responses indicated distance learning and technology had received some to little of the focus (see Table 25). A greater number of partners responding to the survey (15%) saw distance learning as a prior focus for the ERZs rather than a future focus (8%). The majority of partners indicated, during interviews, that they were “very happy” with the distance learning options already available through the ESCs and that the ERZ did not need to focus on this area.

ERZ directors reported utilizing technology slightly more in Year 2 to conduct ERZ related meetings and to increase the number of schools able to participate in trainings/workshops. Thirty-nine percent of partners responding to the survey perceived some change in the use of CIV labs for professional development for teachers (see Table 26). Thirty-eight percent of partners responding to the survey perceived some change in use of CIV labs for course offerings to students. Slightly over one-fourth of survey respondents saw no change in the use of CIV labs. However, in interviews ERZ district and school partners noted a slight increase in courses offered through AECHS for their students.

Community and Parent Involvement

Broadening the ERZ network of resources to include community members and parents would help to further enhance support to school administrators and educators. As ERZs moved into their second year, it was anticipated they have identified effective strategies to increase community and parent involvement to achieve the ERZ goals. According to the logic model, ERZs were to begin making strides towards 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. Partners indicated family and community involvement had been some of the focus across. According to 15 percent of the sample, family and community member involvement was a focus during the first year of implementation and 9 percent indicated it would be a focus the following year.

Parent outreach efforts during the second year included: working with the parent coordinators to identify strategies to increase parent involvement, increasing parent member 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 included additional professional development in Arkansas history, field trips offered to partnering schools, participation in educational forums, and co-sponsoring events. Community members interviewed indicated there were several community resources that “were not being utilized fully” by the ERZ sites. Identifying current levels of family and community involvement and designing new strategies to increase family and community involvement were also reported by slightly less than half of the partners on the survey as having some change.

Student Achievement and School Performance

Based upon the Year 2 strategic plans only three of the seven ERZs have identified strategies to focus on student achievement and school performance. It is recognized that the ERZs have knowledge of their partner schools performance needs as they used this data in developing their strategic plans in Year 1. During site visits, ERZ directors and partners provided limited information on specific efforts targeting or measuring student achievement and school performance. Several ERZ directors felt all of their efforts have the final outcome of increasing student achievement and school performance; however, no direct measures had been put into place.

Several of the ERZs are in the formative stage, such as developing rubrics for skills and processes of student development, and prioritizing and sequencing curriculum. One ERZ appeared to be moving more in the direction of targeting specific student outcomes by developing a Hispanic Literacy Initiative. This initiative offers direct support for increasing literacy among Hispanic students and their families.

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 occurred during the second year of implementation. It is assumed that as the partnerships continue to strengthen, more collaborative initiatives will occur.

Participants completing the surveys attributed the greatest accomplishments of the ERZs in the area of support and retention of existing teachers. Of respondents identifying accomplishments, approximately 24% identified topics related to professional development, such as increasing the number of professional development opportunities, substitute teacher trainings, and meeting with other schools to share classroom practices. Additionally, respondents felt gains had been made in the areas of communication and collaboration. One respondent felt the ERZ director had “brought partners together” and another described it as “getting everyone on the same page.” In regards to collaboration, one respondent indicated that, “IHE faculty are working more with students and teachers

due to the ERZ.” Another respondent felt the ERZ had “created a learning community to share challenges and strategies.” Table 29 provides the frequency of areas of accomplishments for Year 2 implementation.

Table 29. Frequency of Responses for Areas of Greatest Accomplishments

	Frequency	N
Communication	14%	39
Collaboration	14%	41
Preparation of Future Teachers	3%	10
Recruitment of Future Teachers	1%	4
Support & Retention of Existing Teachers	21%	61
Distance Learning	1%	3
Family/Community Involvement	2%	5
Student Related	5%	14
Resources	2%	5
Other	7%	21
None	5%	13
Didn't know enough about ERZ to comment	14%	40
Don't know	11%	33
Total	100%	289

Opportunities for Improvement.

During their second year of implementation, the ERZs worked with their partners to strengthen relationships and increase the amount and quality of professional development available to pre-service and existing teachers, strengthened partnerships and began focusing on new teacher recruitment strategies. Information was gathered during site visits and through surveys to determine opportunities for strengthening the ERZ initiative. The most common suggestion (across all ERZ sites) for improvement was stronger communication. Suggestions ranged from continuing to increase communication with various partners to scheduling ERZ advisory meetings after school hours to increase teacher attendance. One respondent indicated a desire for “more opportunities for staff and faculty to collaborate

The second most common category of opportunities was more general concerns. For example, several teachers indicated ERZ activities were too time consuming and that only effective programs/trainings should be continued. One respondent noted, “If you really want us [teachers] to use the program, make it relevant, user-friendly, and highly publicized.” Another respondent recommended, “Greater latitude in implementation of strategic plans.” Additional recommendations included individualizing ERZ events to meet the needs of partners, more rigorous evaluation processes around ERZ activities, and a stronger focus on family and community involvement.

Limitations

As indicated previously, this second-year evaluation examined the collaboration across ERZ partners to coordinate resources directed towards strategies for improving school

performance and student achievement across the state. The focus was on which resources, (e.g., pre-service and in-service teacher professional development, teacher recruitment and distance learning technologies) were being offered throughout the ERZ districts and schools, particularly in low-wealth and hard-to-staff schools. The evaluation was not able to fully assess the impact and effectiveness of the implementation of these resources statewide.

This evaluation was intended to provide important information about the implementation and progress of the ERZ initiative. Determining causal links between the ERZ activities and student outcomes is important. However, the second year of implementation of the ERZ initiative is too early a timeframe upon which to fully assess this type of long-term outcome. In addition more resources would be necessary to implement a rigorous study design to document gains in student performance in schools receiving ERZ services compared to schools not involved in the initiative.

Another limitation of this evaluation, as mentioned earlier, was sampling bias for both the survey and site visits. Because ERZ directors selected samples for the site visits and surveys, generalization of the results to all ERZ partners is severely limited. Additional survey bias may have occurred when some surveys were amended prior to SEDL receiving them, as described earlier in this report.

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.

Much effort was spent on communication and collaboration, teacher recruitment and professional development in Year 2, with less emphasis on other content areas identified in the logic model. ERZs are expected to engage in all legislatively mandated areas represented in the logic model. Across the state, the ERZ initiative pooled resources in a few of these areas and now need to ensure they extend this approach to all mandated areas.

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.

For additional information, please contact:

Dr. Zena H. Rudo
Project Director
SEDL
4700 Mueller Blvd.
Austin, TX 78723
512-391-6554