

# Insights Brief

## Knowledge Sharing through Organizational Partnerships Insights from the SEED Partnership Project

*Federal education policy has expanded the focus on evidence-based strategies for improving student outcomes. A key challenge for educators and policymakers is identifying evidence-based strategies and adapting them to fit their local context and needs. One way to support the spread of evidence-based strategies is to facilitate knowledge sharing between education organizations that have experience developing and implementing these strategies, and organizations seeking to use the strategies. This brief shares lessons learned from a three-year project to develop partnerships between national non-profits implementing evidence-based strategies to prepare and develop effective educators, and educational organizations interested in applying the lessons learned from their work.*

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) has awarded more than \$400 million in grants to improve the effectiveness of educators in high-need schools through the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program. The program provides grants to national non-profits and universities that implement evidence based strategies to prepare and support effective teachers and principals. A key goal of the SEED program is to share grantees' lessons learned with the broader field. To that end, ED sponsored a project to disseminate lessons learned from the SEED grantees' evidence-based strategies.

To share the insights gained from SEED grants, ED established one-on-one partnerships between SEED grantees and organizations actively working to improve educator effectiveness (referred to as partner organizations). The partnerships lasted 6 to 12 months and focused on the partner organization's efforts to design or implement an educator preparation or development initiative. The SEED grantees served as thought partners—sharing tools and techniques that informed their work, the lessons learned from their grants, and feedback and guidance to inform the partner organizations' efforts.

The partnerships consisted of an in-person kickoff meeting to establish relationships between the partners and a goal for the partnership, followed by monthly calls to support the partner organization's work. An external facilitator established the partnership, led the partnership sessions, and maintained the work's focus on the partnership's goals.

### About this series

The U.S. Department of Education's Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants fund evidence-based programs that prepare and develop effective educators. As SEED grantees implement, adapt, and grow their programs, they gain valuable insights that can inform the work of districts, states, and organizations working to improve educator effectiveness. This series of briefs is designed to share these insights with the broader field. While other briefs in this series describe grantees' insights from implementing their grants, this final brief describes lessons learned from the creation of partnerships between SEED grantees and other education organizations. The briefs are part of a broader project for the U.S. Department of Education to disseminate lessons learned from SEED grants. Mathematica Policy Research is leading the project in partnership with AEM and Knowledge Design Partners.

September 2019

## INSIGHTS ON KNOWLEDGE SHARING THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

The SEED Partnerships provide valuable insight into how organizations can establish partnerships for knowledge sharing, with the ultimate goal of strengthening education programs. We share lessons learned from the experience of developing and implementing partnerships focused on knowledge sharing.

### What are the conditions for an effective partnership?

The success of a partnership depends, in part, on selecting organizations that are good match for each other and a good fit for a partnership. We describe several aspects of the partnering organizations that affect the quality of the match and the organizations' readiness for a partnership.

- ❖ **The partner organization is actively designing or implementing an initiative.** Partnerships often focus on supporting an organization's efforts to design and implement a policy or program. Experience from SEED partnerships suggests that the amount and quality of knowledge sharing that occurs is affected by (1) whether the initiating organization has a concrete initiative underway or in development, (2) the strength of the organization's commitment to moving the initiative forward, (3) the amount of time and effort the organization has already invested in developing or implementing the initiative, and (4) the organization's focus on thoughtfully processing feedback from the thought partner to inform and improve its work (rather than using the partnership to passively obtain resources from the thought partner or expecting the thought partner to solve their challenges for them).

Sharing knowledge can be difficult when an organization seeks to address a broadly defined challenge (for example, new teacher retention) and has not examined the root causes of the challenge and considered or developed a potential solution to address the root causes. SEED partnerships that

focused on high-level challenges struggled to gain traction because the partner organizations could not identify a clear focus for the knowledge sharing. These partners needed a more intensive effort aimed at helping them unpack the challenge and its root causes to prepare for sharing knowledge.

- ❖ **The initiative the partner is working on is well-aligned with the knowledge and experience of the organization the partner will work with.** A partnership provides a valuable opportunity to inform an initiative with the insights and lessons learned from the thought partner. Alignment between the organization's initiative and the thought partner's knowledge and experience is critical for the partnership's success. This alignment contributes to greater buy-in from both participants, more valuable knowledge sharing, and a mutually beneficial partnership.

An initiative can align with a thought partner's expertise in different ways. The thought partner might have implemented the same type of initiative for a similar purpose (for example, one SEED partnership matched an organization that was designing a new networked improvement community with another that had spent the last several years implementing one). The partnering organizations might also be pursuing similar initiatives in the same environment or context but at different stages of implementation (for example, one SEED partnership matched an educator preparation program that was preparing to redesign its curriculum with another preparation program that recently completed a redesign of its curriculum). Alignment could also occur if a thought partner has deep expertise in a particular topic area that is the primary focus of the partnering organization's initiative (for example, a national accrediting organization focused on teacher diversity partnered with a national nonprofit that had deep knowledge and direct experience addressing teacher diversity issues).

- ❖ **The organization offering its expertise has a strong commitment to openly share knowledge.** Knowledge sharing can put the thought partner in a vulnerable position-especially if the organization is asked to share knowledge and expertise that it

developed over time through experiences implementing its own program. Difficult questions might arise about sharing proprietary knowledge or resources that a thought partner might typically sell to the districts it serves.

Because of this vulnerability, it is critical that key decision makers from the thought partner are invested and involved in the partnership. The support of these leaders is necessary to (1) ensure that participants in the partnership are empowered to share knowledge and resources, (2) provide clarity on the level of detail and types of information and resources that can be shared through the partnership, and (3) demonstrate the thought partner's commitment to using its lessons learned to improve the work of others. In addition to buy-in from the thought partner's leaders, it is also important to have the buy-in of staff who are involved in day-to-day implementation of the thought partner's program. These staff often bring the concrete lessons learned that are most valuable for the partnering organizations.

**A commitment to sharing knowledge:  
Texas Tech University (TTU) and Central Michigan University (CMU)**

TTU and the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching received a SEED grant to implement a job-embedded principal preparation program focused on preparing principals to serve as instructional leaders. In 2019, TTU was matched with CMU for a SEED partnership focused on supporting CMU's efforts to redesign its principal preparation curriculum. CMU's work aligned well with Texas Tech University's expertise because a key goal of the university's curriculum redesign was to provide more job embedded learning experiences for candidates. In addition, the TTU and CMU were a good match because both had experience designing and implementing online programs to prepare principals. Two key factors that contributed to the partnership's success were (1) the ability of TTU to synthesize and discuss lessons learned from its experience and apply those insights to CMU's context, and (2) TTU's strong commitment to sharing information and resources from its experience.

A partner that is unwilling to change its approach or try a new approach is not going to benefit from knowledge shared by the thought partner. Although the facilitator's role is to help manage the process of understanding and learning from a new perspective, the partner must demonstrate a readiness to change. For the SEED partnerships, this lesson was particularly important, because we often matched innovative, fast-moving nonprofit education organizations with school districts that had deep bureaucracies and required time to shift and change. SEED partnerships struggled when partnering organizations were quick to assume that a new approach could not work in their context. The partnerships were more successful when partnering organizations believed they could grow and adopt new approaches, and when SEED grantees thought carefully about how to develop buy-in for new approaches and provided feedback on how to adapt an approach to meet the partnering organizations' needs.

- ❖ **The partner is ready for change and open to new perspectives and approaches.** Knowledge sharing requires a willingness by the partner to acknowledge when an existing approach is not working, to view a topic or challenge from a different perspective, and to consider new or different approaches to address a challenge. The partner must be open to the knowledge and lessons learned the thought partner shares and willing to apply that information in its own setting.

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- ❖ **The partnership match is mutually beneficial.** Although knowledge sharing can clearly benefit the organization seeking support, successful partnerships are ones in which both organizations benefit from their time together. A mutually beneficial partnership strengthens the thought partners' commitment and willingness to share knowledge through the partnership (noted above). The thought partner can benefit from knowledge sharing in a few ways. First, the experience can help the thought partner think through and synthesize the lessons learned from its experience. Second, the partnering organization might raise questions or issues that the thought partner had not considered before that help improve its thinking or approach. Third, the thought partner can see how its lessons learned apply in a different context and whether the insights transfer to different settings.

Finally, the partnering organization might produce its own lessons learned when taking and applying the knowledge shared by the thought partner. Although identifying a mutually beneficial

partnership ahead of time can be challenging, having upfront discussions about how the partnership will benefit both participants is important for the partnership's success.

### What strategies support meaningful knowledge sharing?

The SEED partnerships enabled national nonprofits to share their lessons learned from implementing evidence-based strategies to develop effective educators. The purpose of this knowledge sharing was to support the efforts of partner organizations that were implementing similar types of educator development initiatives. But translating SEED grantees' knowledge and experience to the partner's context was often challenging. Grantees had to frame their knowledge and experience in a way that fit the partner organization's context and acknowledged the partner's strengths and limitations. We describe here approaches that helped SEED grantees and their partners share knowledge:

- ❖ **Take time to reflect on implementation experiences and lessons learned.** Although SEED grantees could share knowledge spontaneously in response to specific questions or challenges raised by their partner, the most valuable knowledge sharing occurred when SEED grantees could reflect on their own experiences and distill the lessons learned from them. Grantees often lack the time necessary for this type of reflection because of the day-to-day demands of implementing a grant and the need to address challenges that arise along the way. Therefore, the SEED partnership often offered grantees a unique opportunity to reflect on what they had learned and synthesize the key takeaways. Knowledge sharing was less productive when grantees had not consolidated their own understanding of what made their program effective.

The partnerships also encouraged grantees to adapt their lessons learned so that they were relevant for other organizations and settings. The ability to frame lessons learned so that they apply beyond the grantee's context is challenging—especially when a grantee matched with a partner that had a different organizational context or a partner that viewed



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educator development through a different lens. But this translation and adaption of lessons learned to different contexts is critical for facilitating a strong partnership.

- ❖ **Gain a deep understanding of the partner's context and challenge.** The SEED partnerships provided an initial opportunity for the SEED grantee to learn about the partner organization. During a kickoff meeting, the grantee developed a deep understanding of the partner's local context, key stakeholders, core challenge, past and current educator development efforts, and headwinds and tailwinds that affected the work (including time constraints, political dynamics, competing demands, and policy mandates). By grounding the partnership in the partner's local context at the beginning, it focused SEED grantees on thinking about how to apply their knowledge and experience to the partner's work. This step also played a role in strengthening the partnership between the two organizations—with the SEED grantee becoming more invested in the partner's work and becoming positioned as a thought partner.

The kickoff meeting also provided an opportunity to facilitate a discussion about how the partner's needs aligned with the SEED grantee's knowledge and experience. Although a partner might have a variety of needs for its work, a critical first step is narrowing the partnership down to the specific topic areas in which the partner's work and SEED grantee's expertise overlap. The partner organization must prioritize the aspects of its work that require support, and the SEED grantee must reflect on which of these areas they can best support.

- ❖ **Share concrete strategies and approaches that can inform the partner's work.** As noted, a key factor in a partnership's success is the ability to generate lessons that apply across different contexts. These lessons, however, also needed to be clarified with specific strategies and examples. When broad lessons were framed at a high level, partners had difficulty understanding how to apply the lesson in practice to their own context. The most useful guidance involved a high-level articulation of strategy and concrete illustration of those strategies in action. Hearing how a SEED grantee implemented

a particular technique or strategy enabled the partner to consider how it might adapt the strategy to its own context. The partner organizations also appreciated when grantees shared frameworks that helped to organize their thinking or understand the links between different aspects of the work.

Given the value of these concrete practices and strategies, knowledge sharing required that the SEED grantees were willing to share these aspects of their work. This can be challenging when the partner is interested in practices or strategies that are part of the SEED grantee's core education service or product. Grantees are not expected to share all of their internal resources, and partner organizations had to understand some materials could not be shared for proprietary reasons. But, the key to a successful partnership is to (1) have the grantee be clear about the types of materials and strategies that can be shared upfront and (2) focus the partnership on areas in which the grantee can provide concrete strategies and examples with the partner.

- ❖ **Recognize the value of sharing implementation experiences.** Educational improvement is rarely a straightforward process—it requires an understanding of how change occurs in complex systems, and it often entails making mid-course corrections, overcoming roadblocks, and addressing unforeseen consequences. Hearing another organization's implementation experiences can be extremely valuable to an organization that is designing or implementing a similar initiative. As partner organizations developed or refined their initiatives over the course of the partnership, they could hear from grantees about pitfalls to avoid, understand how different design features affect implementation, and consider potential roadblocks for implementation. Many of the most valuable insights came from SEED grantees' descriptions of how they designed their initiative and their experiences implementing them in different settings.

### **A Mutually Beneficial Partnership: National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)**

NBPTS received a SEED grant to support a network of states and districts that were actively working to expand the number of NBPTS-certified teachers and provide career ladder opportunities for these teachers. The national non-profit established a Networked Improvement Community (NIC) based on the approach established by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In 2019, NBPTS joined a partnership to support AACTE's effort to create a NIC focused on supporting districts' efforts to recruit and retain special education teachers. While the partnership was valuable in supporting the design and implementation of AACTE's NIC, NBPTS found that the partnership provided an opportunity to think through its own lessons learned and consider how they could be applied in other contexts. Because NBPTS's experience closely aligned with AACTE's work, the grantee was able to provide concrete strategies for supporting AACTE's NIC. The partnership's kickoff meeting provided a strong grounding in AACTE's context that allowed NBPTS to tailor its feedback to help inform the organization's NIC.

### **How can facilitators support productive partnerships?**

An organizational partnership requires a facilitator to establish the partnership, structure partnership conversations, maintain a focus on the partnership's goals, and lead productive partnership sessions. The SEED partnerships had external facilitator play this role, but partnerships could also rely on staff from one of the partnering organizations to serve as a facilitator. Here, we share strategies that facilitators can use to support and strengthen productive partnerships.

- ❖ **Clarify roles and responsibilities.** When developing a partnership to promote knowledge sharing, a critical first step is establishing a clear set of roles and responsibilities for each participant. For example, it was important for SEED grantees to

know that they were expected to serve as a thought partner and share lessons learned, offer strategies and insights, and provide feedback to help improve the partner organization's initiative. In addition, partner organizations had to understand the role of the SEED grantee was an ongoing thought partner—not a problem solver. Partnerships were stronger when both the SEED grantee and partner organization understood that the partnership was not about intensive technical assistance but rather an opportunity for lighter-touch support to help design or refine the partner's initiative.

- ❖ **Collaboratively create a coherent set of learning objectives for the partnership and maintain flexibility to make adjustments when required.** Because organizations involved in a partnership often have limited time together—90 minutes each month for SEED partnerships—partnership sessions need to focus on a narrowly defined objective. It is critical to establish these learning objectives upfront to ensure a coherent plan across the sessions and to align expectations for what will be accomplished in each session. This plan enables participants to better prepare for each partnership session and see how the conversations build on one another to achieve the partnership's overall goal. A key aspect of the facilitator's role is collaborating with the SEED grantee and partner to co-create each aspect of the partnership, including the roles and responsibilities, the overall partnership plan, and the agendas for each session.

Facilitators also required the flexibility to allow participants to adapt these plans in response to changing circumstances and shifts in the partner organization's learning needs. Over the course of the partnership, participants will naturally surface unanticipated questions and implementation issues. Facilitators also can help participants determine whether a change in plans is warranted based on whether the change would advance the partnership's overall objective.

- ❖ **Conduct a mid-partnership pulse check.** Partnerships require feedback from participants to ensure they were responsive to the needs of partner organizations and mutually beneficial to all participants. For the SEED partnerships, an effective

method to accomplish this was having participants reflect on the partnership's progress midway through the project, serving as a valuable pulse check. The facilitator would speak separately to the partner organization and the SEED grantee to obtain feedback and ask about each participant's experience, the aspects of the collaboration that were working well, and ways that the work could be improved. In some cases, this activity surfaced issues in process and participation that the facilitator could address. In others, it confirmed that the process was working and enabled participants to articulate how the partnership was adding value to their work.

### About this brief

For more details on how to design and structure SEED partnerships, review the SEED Partnership Blueprint that you can find here: <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-focus-areas/human-services/education/additionaltopics/insights-briefs>. We list a few additional resources related to organizational partnerships and knowledge sharing below:

Eddy, Pamela, Marilyn Amey, and Debra Bragg. *Creating Strategic Partnerships: A Guide for Educational Institutions and Their Partners*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2014.

Bryk, Anthony, Louis Gomez, and Alicia Grunow. *Getting Ideas into Action: Building Networked Improvement Communities in Education*. Stanford, CA: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2011.

Thayer-Hart, Nancy. "A Facilitator Toolkit." Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison. Accessed from: <https://www.nj.gov/education/AchieveNJ/teams/strat14/FacilitatorToolKit.pdf>.

This series of briefs has been funded with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number GS-10F-0050L. The content of this brief does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.