

Discovering and Implementing Best Practices to Strengthen SEAs:

Collaborative Benchmarking

This paper is written for SEA leaders who are considering the benefits of collaborative benchmarking, and it addresses the following questions:

- What does benchmarking of best practices entail?
- How does **collaborative benchmarking** enhance the process?
- How do SEAs control the process so that **their** needs remain the focus?
- What is the resource commitment required of SEAs?

A rich body of information, craft knowledge, and good practice exists within many organizations, and can benefit other organizations. The challenge is how to find those best practices, to make them known and adapted to other organizations, and to do so in an efficient manner. Addressing that challenge requires a careful, systematic, and proven approach.

To help SEAs learn about and adapt best practices that exist in other SEAs and other organizations, the Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP Center) will create multi-state groups, through a *Collaborative Benchmarking Best Practices Process* that allows SEAs, as critical stakeholders, to develop a deep understanding of best practices targeting matters of common interest. The BSCP Center has found Collaborative Benchmarking to be extremely effective in helping organizations to discover, learn about, adopt, and sustain best practices in a number of areas.

Based on the information gained from the collaborative benchmarking process, there are two key outcomes. The first is the rich experience of the SEA participants who garner more specific information pertaining to their own needs and feed it into a specific work plan outlining steps to improve their processes. A second, broader key outcome, *Benchmarking Best Practices Report*, is a summary of the best practices and related recommendations included in a report of project findings for broad dissemination.

What follows is a more detailed description of the collaborative benchmarking process, including an established set of steps and the related time and effort for each step.

Collaborative Benchmarking Best Practices Process

Benchmarking is the process of identifying, understanding, and adapting outstanding practices from organizations anywhere in the world to help your organization improve performance¹. Benchmarking can lead to breakthrough results when an organization's leaders prioritize and commit to learning about and implementing innovations in areas where they want to improve performance. When leaders of any organization undertake benchmarking on their own, they follow six steps to help them identify gaps in their own processes, learn from the best and then adapt, and implement what they learned. The basic steps are to:

1. Review their own practice and processes.
2. Identify organizations with better processes (i.e., more efficient, leading to better outcomes).
3. Learn how those organizations implement their processes.
4. Adapt the better process to their organization.
5. Design and implement the improved processes.
6. Continue to reflect and improve their processes.

The needs that you as an SEA leader have for process and performance improvement can be addressed oftentimes through benchmarking. Although you learn from your peers through the normal course of work (networking, attending conference presentations, etc.), the systematic identification and adoption of best practices from others generally is more effective and beneficial when external expertise is used.

Collaborative benchmarking is the process of working cooperatively with other SEAs with common needs. Working collaboratively enriches the process by bringing added perspectives about analyzing needs and developing solutions. Collaborative benchmarking also allows resources to be used more productively by addressing the interests of multiple states simultaneously.

Collaborative benchmarking projects are convened and facilitated by the BSCP Center, an organization with both expertise in benchmarking and innovations in process and productivity improvement. The BSCP Center will routinely survey RCCs and SEAs to learn what topics are of interest to them and team up SEAs with similar interests. By working with the BSCP Center, SEAs will systematically and efficiently learn about best practices from other organizations including across sectors. The BSCP Center will work closely with each participating SEA and its Regional Comprehensive Center to ensure that the state has the requisite support to learn from the project and implement process improvements to improve performance.

Selecting a Topic for Collaborative Benchmarking

To begin a collaborative benchmarking project, first one must consider if the topic is worthy of the benchmarking process. There are several factors to consider:

¹ American Productivity and Quality Center. (1997). *Benchmarking Pure and Simple: A Quick Reference Guide to Benchmarking*. Education and Training Division of the American Productivity and Quality Center, Inc.

- Is the topic a mission-critical process that must be improved within an SEA in order to significantly increase performance (i.e., using productivity indicators, increasing the pipeline of human capital within the SEA)?
- What research exists about the topic and organizations implementing best-practices to inform the benchmarking of this topic?
- Are there multiple SEAs interested in being project leaders in the benchmarking process who share an interest in learning, adapting, and implementing what is learned about this topic?
- Is this a topic where there is an opportunity for highly interactive structured and unstructured networking with peers and organizations implementing best-practices in the related process areas?

Recruiting Benchmarking Project Participants

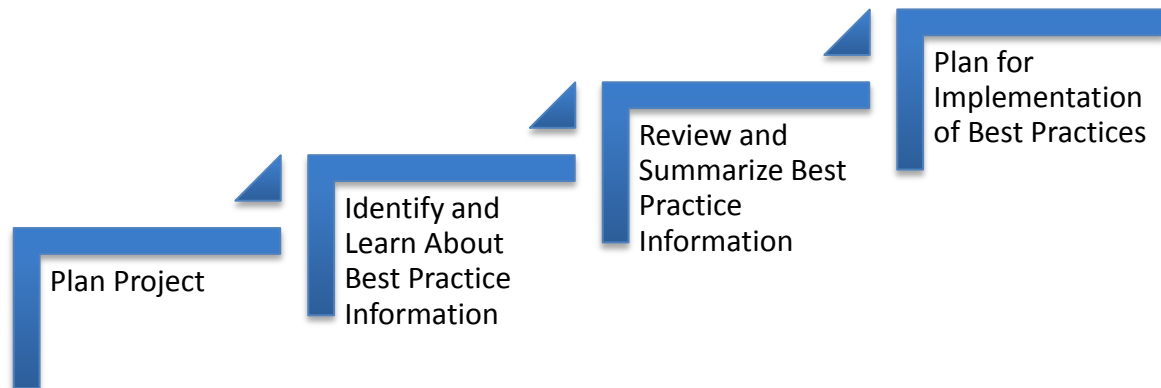
For the collaborative benchmarking process to be a success, it is important to bring the right organizations and leaders together. Each participant brings a different set of goals and expertise to the process, and there are several ways in which they can participate. What follows are the roles for interested participants:

- *SEA Project Leaders:* Staff within SEAs who participate consistently in the project. These leaders refine the learning objectives of the benchmarking effort, select potential best-practice organizations, participate in site visits, and work, with support from Regional Comprehensive Centers, to adapt and implement the identified best-practices. Each SEA will sign a letter of commitment that affirms its active engagement in the project.
- *Facilitator:* The Center plays a leadership role in recruiting SEA Project Leaders, conducting the background research on the topic, identifying best-practice organizations, facilitating site visits, and documenting key findings from the project.
- *SMEs:* Subject Matter Experts in the topic area provide key research and background to support the benchmarking as well as guidance to ensure that the goals are achieved.
- *Best-practice partners:* SEAs and other organizations (including organizations outside the education sector) identified as implementing innovative or “best” practices in the topic area share descriptions of their practices and artifacts or other information to aid understanding and application in the future. In addition to gaining public recognition for their best practices, these partners reflect on their own practices and network with and learn from other best-practice partners.
- *Other special advisors:* representatives from the U.S. Department of Education and others as needed who bring important information about federal initiatives and policy.

Steps in a Collaborative Benchmarking Project

Once the topic is selected and the participants have been recruited, the steps of the Collaborative Benchmarking Project can begin. Following is a high level overview of the key steps and a detailed description of each step, including the approximate time commitment for the participants.

Collaborative Benchmarking Supports SEA Implementation



Step 1: Plan Project

Over a one to two month period of time, the BSCP Center will conduct a *background review* to understand what research has already been conducted in the topic area and begin to *locate potential best-practice partners* to engage. A brief report of the information gathered from the research review and search for best practice partners will be shared with the SEA Project Leaders. Note that this review is not limited to the education sector, as there are many best-practices to be learned from non-education organizations. In one frequently cited example, Southwest Airlines wanted to improve its turnaround time at the gate; it learned about streamlining its process from NASCARs racing pit crews. Other examples include hospitals looking to Marriott to improve their admissions process and Apple looking to Ritz-Carlton to improve their customer service.^{2 3}

The BSCP Center staff works with the SEA Project Leaders to *assist each SEA to maximize the learning experience* from the benchmarking process by answering the following questions:

- What are your learning goal(s) for participating in the benchmarking process?
- What are your current practices in this area? (Includes completion of an activity to map out their own current practices/processes and completing the final screening survey)
- What are the resources currently used in the process?
- What is the current timeframe it takes to complete the process?
- What are the current outcomes and perceived deficiencies in the current process?

² Jones, F. (1999, March/April). *Public Roads*. Is Benchmarking in Your Future? U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration. Vol. 62, No. 5. Retrieved January 2, 2012, from <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/99marapr/benchmar.cfm>

³ Gallo, C. (2012, April 10). *Forbes*. How the Ritz-Carlton Inspired the Apple Store. Retrieved December 26, from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2012/04/10/how-the-ritz-carlton-inspired-the-apple-store-video/>

The SEA Project Leaders will work with BSCP Center project staff to *develop a draft screening survey* for best practice partners, to ensure that the partners have the necessary expertise and processes in place in order to learn from them on the topic of focus. This collaborative work will occur over 1 to 2 months through conference calls, e-mails, or other method of connecting the SEA Project Leaders and we expect the total SEA time to provide feedback will be about 4-8 hours.

This step of the benchmarking process is finalized with a project *kick-off meeting*, preferably one day face-to-face, where the full project team comes together to refine the survey, finalize the list of best-practice partners to survey, and finalize the goals of the benchmarking process.

Step 2. Identify and Learn About Best Practice Information

Once the Benchmarking Best Practices Project Plan is in place, the *administration of the screening survey* to the selected best-practice partners follows. The survey is typically administered during a 2-3 week window and takes up to 8 hours for the best-practice partners and the SEA Project Leaders to complete. The results of the screening survey are analyzed by the BSCP Center staff and presented in a *de-identified (blind) summary to the SEA Project Leaders* approximately one week following data collection. The BSCP Center staff work with SEA Project Leaders during a conference call to *determine which best-practice partners* (in the de-identified summary) to visit in the project. Once the determination has been made, the identities of the best-practice partners are shared.

Based on the data collected from the screening survey and the SEA Project Leaders stated learning goals and current practices, an *on-site data collection protocol and discussion guide* is collaboratively created over the next few weeks allowing time for review by interested participants. Over a two to three week period, site visits are scheduled with the selected best practice partners. Based on the identified partners, *three to five one-day site visits* are scheduled for SEA Project Leaders to visit the best practice partner organizations. *BSCP staff and SEA Project Leaders participate in the site visits* to collect data, participate in the discussions, and gather artifacts from the organization to refer to as examples.

Step 3. Review and Summarize Best Practice Information

The BSCP staff analyzes and summarizes the information from site visits along with the data from the initial screening survey to create case study summaries. These case study summaries are provided to the best-practice organizations for review and feedback within two weeks of the site visit. A final report of the best practice case studies is written and shared during a one-day face-to-face meeting of the SEA Project Leaders.

Step 4. Plan for Implementation of Best Practices

As a culminating activity, the SEA Project Leaders and other participants in the benchmarking process attend an Implementation Kick-off Meeting. At this meeting, it is vital that the appropriate Regional Comprehensive Centers and other Content Centers participate to hear how they can further support the SEAs in implementing what they have learned from the benchmarking process. This is a working session where the SEA Project Leaders revisit their initial learning goals and their current practices process maps to see where they can begin to make changes to implement improved processes and practices learned

from this benchmarking activities. The goal is for each SEA to leave the meeting with a plan for implementation of best practices that includes a plan for support from the Regional Centers and others.

Time Commitment for SEAs and Interested Participants

The BSCP Center staff will work with SEAs to accommodate given any time constraints for travel and availability. A critical factor for success in benchmarking is that the SEA can commit to fully participating in the process. If an SEA team cannot commit to participating fully, the benchmarking activity will be of little value to them or other teams. Priority for participation in the collaborative benchmarking project will be given to SEAs with interest as well as availability to participate fully in the activity.

The amount of time required for full participation to maximize benefit is approximately five to 10 full days (40-80 hours) over a 4 to 6-month time period. However much of this work is spread over time through review activities, conference calls, and e-mail exchanges. The out of office time will be limited to approximately 5 days (project kick off, 3 days of site visits, and the Implementation Kick-off Meeting) plus any required travel time. These activities typically occur over a four month period. The types of activities and related time commitments are provided below.

Time Commitments for Participating in Collaborative Benchmarking

Step of the Process	Activity	Approximate Time Commitment for SEA Project Leaders
Step 1. Plan the Project	Set Learning Goals	2 hours
	Identify Best Practice Partners (offer suggestions of high-performing organizations)	2-8 hours (e-mail, conference call)
	Provide feedback on Screening Survey (offer suggestions for items and revisions)	2-8 hours (e-mail, conference call)
	Map out Current Practices and Processes related to the topic (possibly with support from RCC)	Depends on availability of information (typically 8-12 hours)
	Attend Project Kick-off Meeting (discuss learning goals and gaps in current processes, finalize survey and partners)	1 day face-to-face
	Review results of screening survey	4-8 hours
Step 2. Identify and Learn	Determine best-practice partners	2 hours (conference call)
	Provide feedback for site visit discussion guide (offer	2-8 hours (e-mail,

Step of the Process	Activity	Approximate Time Commitment for SEA Project Leaders
About Best Practice Information	suggestions for items and revisions)	conference call)
	Participate in site-visits	3-5 single day visits
	Review final report and provide suggestions for additions and revisions	4-8 hours
Step 3. Review and Summarize Best Practice Information	Attend Implementation Kick-off Meeting	1 day face-to-face
Step 4. Plan for Implementation of Best Practices	Follow-up work with Regional Center or other support partners to improve implementation of best practices	To be determined

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