



Spotlight: Clayton Burch Discusses West Virginia's Early Learning Initiative

Spotlight on the States explores innovative practices through the eyes of state leaders. For this Spotlight, we spoke with Clayton Burch, Associate Superintendent of Schools for the West Virginia Department of Education, to learn more about West Virginia's early learning initiative, and the state's work with ARCC.

The West Virginia Office of Early Learning, of which Clayton Burch was formerly director, has created a comprehensive system of support for early learning in West Virginia through a process that stretched from 2012 through 2017. The Office of Early Learning adopted a logic model as an organizing principle that has continued to guide the work and managed a collaborative process that has involved hundreds of people.

As Mr. Burch recalls the beginning of the current initiative:

Several years ago we decided to partner and collaborate with the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center in what originally started out as facilitation for some meetings we wanted to have to expand our early childhood network and some ideas around literacy. We've been successful in early childhood and universal pre-K for years—continually ranked in the top five in the nation. And lo and behold, we had a governor who really wanted to push the envelope and expand that universal pre-K system and really look at the impact it was making on the state and, in particular, third-grade literacy. We know that's not the end-all of a target, but it is a major milestone. And in order to do that, we had to devise a plan that brought all the players together, just like we'd done for early childhood.

It was the necessity of engaging the entire state in the initiative that coincided with the beginning of the partnership with the ARCC:

With 55 districts doing 55 different things for early literacy and third-grade reading, state partners and national partners, we really had to think about how do we get everybody pointed in the right direction, singing from the same hymn book, and I think that's where the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center came in. They started off facilitating meetings for us, but we soon found that we needed a little more than facilitation. We needed to really think about a true long-term logic model, and how do we bring all the players together, how do we organize the work and do it in a way that was efficient for everybody, but actually moved the needle and got us moving in the direction of not meeting for the sake of meeting.... the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center ... really sat down as a collaborative partner. But I think what ARCC was able to do for us was to take it beyond facilitation to true collaboration and coordination.

What came out of the collaborative partnership between the WVDE Office of Early Learning and the ARCC was national recognition for excellence, according to Mr. Burch:

Because of that, we ended up with a plan, a comprehensive plan that is now recognized nationally. It is a plan that has garnered a lot of accolades from across the nation. It's one of the only comprehensive plans in the nation that includes all 55 districts as well as the governor's office, legislature, and the department of education. In fact, the National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading just recognized us. Two weeks ago, they came and recognized us as being the only state in the nation to pull off such a plan. So it's been quite a feat, and I think the reason it was so successful was, if you go back to the beginning, the way the ARCC helped us organize the work and really bring people together so that it was meaningful for all stakeholders.

Our conversation concluded with some observations from Mr. Burch about the differences between the technical assistance from the ARCC and from other entities:

The technical assistance we receive from the ARCC is quite different. Everybody wants to give you technical assistance. We do receive technical assistance from a lot of organizations, but oftentimes that technical assistance is simply resources that may or may not align to the outcomes you're looking for. We had others who tried to give us technical assistance on third-grade literacy, and it usually ended up being what other states are doing or resources that were far-removed from a state capacity organization. Having resources for our educators is very important, but when you're trying to make systemic changes throughout the entire state, you need the expertise to really be—how to move state agencies and how to move state policy and legislation—and I think that's where the expertise from ARCC came in. When we built the logic model, that logic model really allowed us to create a blueprint if you will, a path of how to take current practices at a state level to future practices, and I think that is the difference in the expertise. So instead of coming in and thinking, "This is what you need," it was a true collaboration of having ARCC come in and sit down and say "how can we help you" and "how can we get from Point A to Point B," and that's the space that we really fell short in with prior initiatives, is having somebody help us organize that pathway.