



Educational Program Evaluation

Alabama IMPACT Pioneers – New Processes for Local System Technology Evaluation

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Executive Summary

The 2007 – 2012 update of Alabama’s State Technology Plan offers a new and significantly enhanced strategy for evaluating instructional technology. Moving beyond a reliance on quantitative data and surveys, the latest IMPACT plan details a two pronged approach to evaluation aimed at meeting the data needs of both state and local constituents. The state’s need for quantitative data to report on the progress of state initiatives is served through the deployment of standardized state surveys. Local needs for qualitative data which supports a reflective examination of progress toward meeting local technology implementation goals are served through the rollout of a new local evaluation process called the “Pioneer process”.

Five systems – Autauga, Baldwin, Cherokee, Madison and Mobile – started training in the Pioneer process in 2006. This work was facilitated by ALSDE Technology Initiatives staff and external consultants. All five systems – the Cohort 1 Pioneers – finished their work by the end of the 2006/2007 school year. The outcomes from this work included detailed technology impact performance indicators, data collection tools and processes, and detailed evaluation reports. Some Cohort 1 Pioneers have already realized specific, positive, benefits from this initial year’s work. These benefits include detailed insight into how and why certain system initiatives work better than others; greater understanding of teacher and administrator opinions and attitudes toward technology; and dramatic support for local technology funding initiatives.

The Cohort 1 Pioneer process training has also informed the development of a second Pioneer cohort during the 2007/2008 school year. In this second cohort, 14 systems will be learning how to develop a local technology plan that has the benefits specified in the latest update of IMPACT. The state’s intention is to continue Pioneer cohorts in ensuing years – building a growing and ever stronger body of local expertise in the tools and techniques of educational program evaluation.

While the new IMPACT evaluation process will take several years to fully impact all Alabama systems, even the initial, minimal, deployment has benefits. By increasing the attention paid to evaluation, accountability, and reflection upon the actual *impact* of technology, the new evaluation framework can help systems take a more strategic approach to technology planning. Systems can use meaningful local evaluation data to guide the annual development of action plans that actually build upon documented (by data) accomplishments and address identified (through data) needs. In this way, plans become more than pro-forma documents and instead become true roadmaps toward achieving educational impact via instructional technology tools.

The Pioneer Process – Year 1 Overview

Background

In August 2005, the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) contracted with Sun Associates an educational technology planning and evaluation firm based in North Chelmsford, MA to:

- Revise Alabama IMPACT, the state’s current five-year strategic plan for K-12 technology
- Develop and pilot state-wide teacher and administrator technology survey instruments
- Develop and conduct a state-wide pilot for district-level (local) technology plan evaluation

Taken together, these three strands of activity were designed to bring value to ALSDE and to benefit Alabama’s teachers and students throughout the subsequent five year planning cycle.

Revising the IMPACT Plan

ALSDE contracted with Sun Associates to facilitate a statewide stakeholders group review of the state’s K-12 Technology Plan (IMPACT) in preparation for the creation of a revised plan. This stakeholder work started in September 2005 and ran through March 2006, resulting in a considerably revised and updated version of the state technology plan. Key among these revisions was the movement from a single goal (with six related objectives) to a set of four planning goals tied to an overarching statewide vision for technology’s role in teaching and learning. This reorganization allowed the plan to map more closely to then-current U.S. Department of Education guidance for state technology plans.

After accumulation of the input and feedback from the state-wide stakeholders group, ALSDE staff worked throughout the spring of 2006 with Sun Associates to craft the final 2007 – 2012 IMPACT plan. This plan was successfully submitted to the Alabama State Board of Education for approval in September, 2006

Evaluating IMPACT

One of the additions to the 2007 – 2012 IMPACT update was the creation of a new procedure for evaluating the progress of system technology plans *at the local level*. This systemic, rigorous, and highly formative evaluation process is aimed at the generation of continual improvement in how technology is used in Alabama schools. The evaluation process has been designed as an integral part of the state’s plan and works to coordinate the efforts of educators at all levels.

Statewide Surveys

A central component of the IMPACT evaluation plan is a uniform, quantitative data collection process based on a Technology Use Survey tool specifically mapped to the IMPACT goals and objectives. ALSDE contracted with Sun Associates to develop this instrument, designed to collect data annually to determine the state’s progress toward meeting its target benchmarks. Data from this survey form the basis for the annual progress report submitted to the U.S. Department of Education as part of Alabama’s NCLB Consolidated Performance Report.

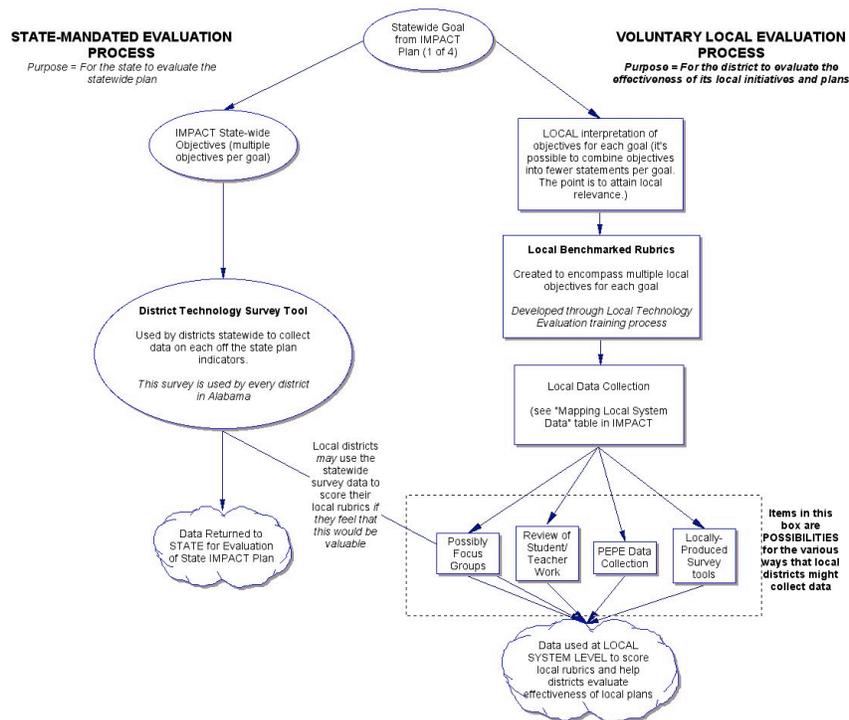
As of the 2007-2008 planning year, all Alabama system have access to two statewide surveys – one for teachers and another for administrators. Both instruments were field tested with a selection of pilot districts and were released for statewide use in April, 2007.

Local Evaluation Process

One of the most significant additions to IMPACT in its latest revision is the explication of a formal process for local system technology evaluation. The central feature of IMPACT’s new local evaluation is a process whereby systems establish an evaluation framework within which they identify unique benchmark indicators to measure progress toward successful implementation of their *local* technology plans. This evaluation approach is grounded in the understanding that for real change and improvement to occur at the district level, local educators must engage in meaningful reflection on the impact of technology *within the context of their unique educational needs and aspirations*. Specifically, systems need actual data that addresses the question, “Of what value is technology to our students’ learning, and to what extent is our district realizing this value?”.

To facilitate the collection of relevant data, and ultimately to answer this critical question, ALSDE consulted with Sun Associates to design a local plan evaluation process aligned with the goals and objectives of IMPACT, yet responsive to local priorities. As such, the process incorporates broad measures (the statewide survey) as just one facet of a much richer process of local indicator development, data collection, and structured reflection on technology’s value within individual schools and classrooms. This local data, much of which is highly qualitative, includes teacher/student/parent interviews, assessment of student and teacher work, and local classroom observations of the variety of ways that technology is impacting student learning.

The following chart illustrates the relationship between the elements of IMPACT’s evaluation.



The Pioneer Process - Local Evaluation Training and Piloting

In order to pilot the new local evaluation process, ALSDE developed five Alabama “Pioneer Districts”. These districts were Autauga County, Baldwin County, Cherokee County, Madison City, and Mobile. During 2006 – 2007, work with these five systems included face-to-face training as well as off-site support to the Pioneers using a variety of communication modes. The work and training focused on the development of local evaluation questions, indicator rubrics (aligned with the evaluation questions) to assess district technology progress, local data collection strategies, and review/use of the assessment data.

Information gathered from this Pioneer District pilot work was used to fine-tune training materials that will ultimately be used to support systems across the state in implementing the Local Technology Evaluation process as part of their local technology planning work.

The method piloted by the Pioneer group includes the following five basic steps:

- Development of evaluation questions.
- Creation of performance indicators for each evaluation question/ goal
- Organization of indicators into assessment rubrics
- Collection of data to score rubrics
- Creation of an evaluation report /recommendations for planning

The Cohort 1 Experience

The Cohort 1 Pioneer group was comprised of five teams from across Alabama. Systems were selected for participation by ALSDE for a demonstrated commitment to broad based strategic planning and were generally representative of statewide demographics. To ensure adequate stakeholder input, participating teams were required to include district-level technology coordinators and other district level administrators responsible for curriculum or professional development.

The Pioneer group was first convened in June, 2006 at the conclusion of the AETC conference in Birmingham. This session was used to familiarize teams with the newly revised state IMPACT plan and to introduce the two strands of evaluation presented in the plan. (see diagram above) Teams were oriented to the local technology plan evaluation process and took the initial steps to create the basis for their own evaluations.

Using IMPACT’s four state goals as a starting point, teams worked in this first session to develop evaluation questions which would serve to focus evaluation efforts within each system. Questions were intended to probe into the current state of technology use in each system, and to help develop a clear picture of this within each of the four goal areas of IMPACT.

Following the development of evaluation questions, teams began the process of crafting a set of highly descriptive performance indicators responsive to each of IMPACT’s four goals. Eventually fleshed out into four-level rubrics, these performance indicators were written to describe, in terms unique and specific to each system, the conditions present when each plan goal has been attained. Teams received training and support from Sun Associates during the June session in the writing of the highest level

indicator for each goal. Further, teams were charged over the summer with completing all four levels of their performance rubrics, and were supported by Sun Associates throughout.

When the Pioneer group convened again in September, 2006, the task was for each system to develop a data collection strategy responsive to each of the plan's four evaluation questions. Sun Associates supported systems individually by developing a set of unique focusing questions rooted in each system's indicators. These focusing questions guided teams to identify issues and specific elements of technology use that would need to be explored if the plan's evaluation questions were to be answered to the fullest extent possible.

Sun Associates provided guidance to teams in the development and wording of questions, and in the organization of those questions into discreet instruments. Teams learned to assemble data collection questions into focus group, interview, survey, and observation protocols, and received pointers on collecting data in their systems. Print and web resources were provided to Pioneers to assist in the creation of data collection instruments and in the process of data collection itself. Ongoing email and phone support from Sun Associates served to guide teams to the completion of data collection tools by early November, 2006.

Teams were convened again in early December for a mid-point check-in during the data collection process. This meeting was used for teams to share tips, strategies, and reflections with one another, and to begin to organize data according to evaluation questions and indicators. Sun Associates provided teams with a final report template to be used to help organize and present findings at the completion of the evaluation process.

The final meeting of the first group of Pioneers was held in February, 2007. At that time, teams had completed the collection and analysis of their data, and were beginning the process of assembling findings in report form. By this time, the Pioneer teams had also been able to attain statewide survey data, and were working to synthesize that with the qualitative data yielded by their Pioneer work. This final session was also used as an opportunity for Sun Associates to obtain feedback for further refinement of the Pioneer process.

Benefits of the Pioneer Process

Benefits to Systems

Since June 2006, five Alabama system systems have participated in a pilot program for developing detailed evaluations of their local technology implementation. These systems - called Pioneer Districts - have been engaged in an exploration of what it means to create evaluation plans that fully comply with the intent of the voluntary local technology evaluation process described in IMPACT 2007 - 2012. The five systems - Autauga County, Baldwin County, Cherokee County, Madison City, and Mobile - have all reported that their experience has enriched their technology planning work. The more detailed evaluation performed via the Pioneer Process has provided a solid base of data that serves to inform decision-making in technology. This in turn allows the Pioneers to make more informed and better decisions in the creation of plan objectives and actions.

Time to Collaboratively Plan and Reflect

Not surprisingly, Pioneer 1 teams report that one of the greatest benefits to their work accruing from the Pioneer work is simply the *time* that the process provided for them to work as a team. As one team member noted:

One big factor in all of this was the fact that there was time dedicated to doing this. If we had not spent the time away from our home office, it would not have been possible to undertake such a task. Most of us wear many hats and spend a great deal of time ensuring the operation of our systems. A majority of paperwork, reports, etc. are usually done at home and on the weekends.

A key element of the Pioneer process was that it brought together a *team* to plan and then *focused that team on the goals and intended outcomes* of the system technology plan. Simply put, teams learned that in technology planning (as with so many other things) is about the journey and not the destination. Historically, systems have had to create plans and usually the planning effort ends up being all about the delivery of a final “document” that can be used for eRate and to fulfill various state mandates. The Pioneer work, with its required reflection on planning outcomes and the definition of impact of technology on teaching and learning, took teams away from a focus on the document. A byproduct of this change in focus was that plans cannot be created by a single person “at home” on the weekend.

Of course, the point of engaging a whole team of stakeholders is to spread ownership of the plan, its outcomes, and the work that is required to reach these outcomes. This re-enforces the concept that a “technology plan” is about much more than technology infrastructure.

More In-depth Understanding of the Current Status of Technology Integration

Systems have long used surveys as a data collection tool for technology planning. These surveys provided a wealth of important data that documented statewide progress in meeting IMPACT objectives, and this in turn was the cornerstone of the state’s documentation of technology plan progress to the U.S. Department of Education.

The advent of IMPACT's updated approach to technology plan assessment (see Background, above) allowed ALSDE to create clarity as to its own data reporting needs separate from local needs. ALSDE's evaluation data needs – as articulated through a standardized, state-wide, survey keyed to the IMPACT objectives – could be focused on collecting state data. Building upon that data, local systems, then, could devise unique qualitative data collection measures aimed at assessing planning impacts at the local level. Within this, systems have begun an exploration and reflective discussion of what constitutes *local impact* of technology, as driven by local goals and locally articulated indicators.

From the Pioneer perspective, the development of local indicators has been challenging and sometimes confusing. Most difficult has been the drive to create qualitative indicators. Years of surveys with primarily multiple-choice responses have created the impression that “data” is primarily something that can be counted and numerically tabulated. One of the most revealing aspects of the new local evaluation process has been the open acceptance the new process has for observation, opinions, and impressions. The process has honored qualitative data, even if the ultimate goal is to discern and track trends in this data. In the first go-round of the Pioneer process, teams have created a framework for analyzing these trends (i.e., the indicator rubrics) and a process for collecting the data which will populate and support this framework. As the process runs over time, and data points begin to multiply, trends will emerge.

In the meantime, even the first step of this journey has had payoff. Much of the Pioneer training related to the processes and procedures involved in data collection. Participating teams learned how to create questions that illuminated their indicators, and how to ask these questions within the context of focus groups, interviews, observations, and surveys. As a result, a number of teams found immediate payoff in creating the data collection training. As one participant noted:

Focus Groups. Wow! Listening, what a novel concept! Now, if we can get stakeholders to take the time to tell us what they think...

Specifically, several teams noted that simply “walking around” and asking teachers and administrators what they thought about the issues related to technology integration shed considerable light on the successes and challenges of technology integration within their systems. Cohort 1 Pioneers stated that many teachers and administrators had become inured to the standard survey questions and that they really opened up when participating in the new, qualitative, data collection work. Outcomes from this work included fresh insights into not only what is and is not working, but more importantly information on *why* system initiatives work (or do not). Once again, the theme that has developed through the Pioneer process is that technology integration is not a “yes it is” or “no it isn't” situation; and likewise insight into the work of integration shows that integration is not a simple, linear, process. Rather, there are many inter-related factors at play in whether or not teachers/students/administrators can benefit from technology. Through the Pioneer process' data collection work, systems now have a better lens with which to examine the cause and effect of this benefit.

Improved Basis for Updating Plans in Subsequent Planning Years

Pioneer Cohort 1 teams did not start their evaluation training with an existing (up-to-date) technology plan. This first wave of Pioneers were creating evaluation plans simultaneous to action plans, local goals, and local visions. Part way through the Pioneer training, a number of teams realized that their first year of evaluation and data collection would in fact provide more of a “current status” background piece to their new five-year plans rather than a real assessment of progress made toward meeting (as yet unpublicized) new five-year goals. As one team stated:

I didn't have trouble with the new plan concept but many of my group did. It seemed hard for them to get the big picture and, therefore, to see the value of what we were doing. I think it is very important to see what you are trying to achieve before planning the details and I am not sure this came in the right order for us. However, I think we know where we want to go now and, hopefully, we will get there eventually. Continuing to stress that this is an ON-GOING process

Still, the relationship between technology plans and data collection is one that is highlighted through the Pioneer work with its emphasis on measuring the impact of plans and the work that is required to achieve this impact. In other words, the evaluation data collected through the Pioneer process is expected to inform the review and revision of the Action Steps component of system plans. Actions are now grounded in locally meaningful goals in that these action plans are conceived of as “steps” necessary to ultimately achieve goals. Systems have incorporated this understanding (of actions leading to goals) in their evaluation indicators and can thus understand benchmarked progress toward achieving indicators as a function of successfully completing action steps/plans. As progress toward goals is made, actions are completed, revised, or reprioritized. All of this progress is measured via the evaluation and it is this evaluation and the subsequent changes in action plans/steps that are the purpose and product of the annual plan update. Evaluation leads to, and is a product of, annual technology plan revision.

Increased Awareness of and Attention to System Technology Efforts

Finally, the collaborative nature of the new technology evaluation and planning work – the fact that it cannot be done by one person “at home” or “on the weekend” – means that there is broader engagement with the entire planning effort. This in turn translates into a broader engagement with the meaning of technology integration and the work of making technology “work” as an educational intervention.

One of the Cohort 1 Pioneers has already experienced such impact. At the end of the 2006/2007 school year, Madison City Public Schools used the evaluation report it created from its Pioneer work to garner support for a significant system-wide technology investment starting in the 2007/2008 school year. This \$1.2 million initiative is intended to finance the system’s “NExT Classroom Project.” In this initiative, 150 classrooms will receive interactive whiteboards, projectors, digital presenters, and audio systems. The initiative also funds a laptop lab and student response system for every six teachers in the district. NExT is a direct result of Madison City’s evaluation work in that the equipment supported by the initiative is that which the evaluation data showed was most urgently needed by teachers.

Interestingly, the NExT initiative was not the first technology initiative considered for funding in the current Madison City budget. In fact, the district superintendent had initially promoted a student 1-1 computing/laptop initiative. Only when the DTC was able to demonstrate through *actual evaluation data* that teachers would rather have increased access to presentation systems and laptop labs (the equipment

ultimately funded by NExT) was the initiative turned into something that closely fit teacher requests and needs. It is also noted that the way the district is handling professional development for NExT results from the Pioneer evaluation report. NExT requires teachers to participate in the project in role-alike groups. This reflects findings from Madison's evaluation that highlighted the fact that teachers desired training that focused on peer-to-peer and role-alike (subject or grade) collaboration.

Madison City could not have substantiated the need to make this investment without both the data (findings) in its 2007 evaluation report as well as the implied commitment to accountable strategic technology planning that is evidenced by the new "Right Side" local evaluation work. Herein lies the Pioneer process's greatest benefit to systems. By showing that they are making a serious effort to hold themselves accountable for documenting technology's impact on teaching and learning, and for making sustained strategic progress toward this impact, systems can highlight their technology work as central to the primary work of a school system. This is where technology integration needs to be if it is indeed to be central and if districts are ultimately to achieve the vision of technology as a tool for educational change.

Benefits to ALSDE

The benefits accruing from the Pioneer process to ALSDE closely match those found for local systems. Primarily, these benefits are about promoting a richer understanding of technology integration and improving data collection efforts.

Improved Understanding of State versus System Outcomes/Impacts

The impetus for the Pioneer process came from an ALSDE Technology Initiatives (TI) planning retreat in April 2006. At this time, the concept of state data needs as separate from local evaluation needs was cemented through a commitment made to standardize the collection of data on the state's IMPACT objectives (at the system level) while at the same time encouraging systems to individualize their local data collection efforts as a way of increasing the relevance of technology planning and assessment.

Increased Awareness of the Value and Importance of Local Planning Efforts

Over time, it is certainly to ALSDE's benefit that systems take ownership of local plans and develop their own understanding of the value of technology as a tool for teaching and learning. Technology is a tool for implementing broader educational change. It enables new ways of teaching and learning, but it is that teaching and learning that is the true goal of a local system. When a state supports local system implementation of technology, it is in fact supporting the selective/strategic application of technology to achieve the educational goals and priorities of the individual district. Therefore, it makes little sense for the state to focus efforts on technology per se since in most case technology use is not an end in itself. By allowing systems to choose how they will focus their technology efforts, ALSDE is encouraging systems to consider the true educational outcomes for technology and not the specific, technical, details. In turn, the state can focus its own efforts on developing the technology-infused supports and systems – e.g., distance learning networks, funding programs, digital resource collections, demonstration projects, etc. - necessary to support and inspire systems throughout the state. These are the real objectives of the IMPACT state plan.

In short, the state plan is about enabling system plans; and system plans are about leveraging technology as a tool for achieving broader learning objectives. Evaluation and assessment of each of these types of plans (state vs. system) can be and should be unique. The unique local process is what is being implemented via the Pioneer work.

Summary - Highlights of the Pioneer Process

- Builds upon the “minimum basic” requirements for technology evaluation that now apply to all AL systems (Ideal Performance Statements and Data Collection plans)
- Supports the creation of detailed, benchmarked performance indicator rubrics for each of a local technology plan’s four goals
- Promotes the use of a variety of local data sources, well beyond the use of the statewide teacher/administrator survey data
- Provides systems with training and assistance in the development of data collection instruments such as focus groups, observations, interviews, surveys, etc.
- Creates a rich data basis for making informed technology decisions and detailed technology plans
- Creates a detailed evaluation report that can be used to inform teachers, administrators, parents, system committees, and the entire stakeholder community on progress made in using technology as a tool for teaching and learning
- Grows each year, with additional AL systems engaging with the process; aiming for 100% system participation by 2012.

The Future of the Pioneer Process

Starting in June 2007, an additional 14 systems were chosen to constitute a second cohort of Pioneers. This new cohort is composed of Athens City, Chilton County, Dekalb County, Elmore County, Huntsville City, Jefferson County, Lee County, Lowndes County, Madison County, Marengo County, Montgomery County, Perry County, Piedmont City, and Troy City. Through support provided by ALSDE and Sun Associates, this second cohort will complete an evaluation of their system technology plans by Spring 2008. As the years go by, more systems will join the Pioneers via successive cohorts, thereby building capacity across the state to conduct these more rigorous, in-depth, technology evaluations.

Cohort 2 Pioneers will have the benefit of beginning their evaluation work with an updated technology plan already in place. This will eliminate some of the “cart before the horse” effect experienced by Cohort 1 Pioneers. Also, the 2007 – 2008 Pioneers are benefiting from the new IMPACT local plan requirement for “Ideal Performance Statements” to be developed for each planning goal. These Ideal Performance Statements are in fact short basic indicators. Cohort 2 Pioneers therefore already have the stems of what can be developed into full performance indicators.

Most importantly, Cohort 2 Pioneers will benefit from the learning and experience of the first cohort. This is indeed the point of having successive waves of Pioneers. Each cohort (and there will be at least one more during the 2008 – 2009 school year) helps refine the process through its application in the unique environments of local systems throughout the state of Alabama. Each cohort will generate its own success stories in the mode initiated by Cohort 1’s Madison City. As these stories and experiences are shared, it is hoped that momentum will build for adopting the concepts, procedures, and tools of authentic assessment of technology planning and implementation.