

# LEADING BY COLLABORATING

HOW ONE STATE STRENGTHENED ITS EDUCATOR-PREPARATION SYSTEM IN PARTNERSHIP WITH DEANS FOR IMPACT – AND WHAT OTHER STATES CAN DO



## WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO STRENGTHEN TEACHER PREPARATION SO THAT BEGINNING TEACHERS ARE BETTER PREPARED FOR THE REALITIES OF K-12 CLASSROOMS?

In 2014, the State of Louisiana launched an ambitious effort aimed at answering this question. The initiative, known as “Believe and Prepare,” was designed to improve the classroom readiness of beginning teachers.

Like many states, Louisiana had adopted new K-12 academic standards aimed at ensuring students possess a deeper conceptual understanding of complex ideas. Four years into the Believe and Prepare initiative, the state had introduced a yearlong clinical residency requirement and moved to enhance mentorship of aspiring teachers, but they now wanted to strengthen the capacity of Louisiana’s teacher education programs to train beginning teachers for the rigors of more ambitious academic content.

To do so, the Louisiana Department of Education partnered with Deans for Impact (a nonprofit organization that supports educator-preparation programs across the country) because of our experience working with diverse programs, our understanding of improvement processes, and our ability to help programs redesign teacher-candidate learning experiences to focus on ambitious content. This partnership resulted in a yearlong network, the Believe and Prepare Impact Collaborative, that had three goals:



### 1. SUPPORT TEACHER-EDUCATORS

Support teacher-educators in redesigning the experiences they provide to their teacher-candidates to prepare them to teach ambitious content in English Language Arts (ELA) and math, including the use of high-quality curriculum aligned to standards



### 2. IMPROVE DATA USE PRACTICE

Improve the processes the participating programs use to collect and analyze data for continuous improvement in those areas



### 3. FOSTER CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING

Foster cross-institutional learning among participating programs

Six programs participated in the network, starting their work together in the summer of 2018: the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, the Louisiana Resource Center for Educators, Louisiana Tech University, the University of Louisiana at Monroe, McNeese State University, and the University of New Orleans. Over the course of the academic year, Deans for Impact convened the network three times, provided independent team assignments, led monthly coaching calls, and hosted periodic webinars to share resources and know-how.

So what happened? In what follows, we will describe the learning journey of the Believe and Prepare Impact Collaborative participants, analyzed through the lens of network goals. We'll conclude by offering recommendations to policymakers who want to improve the effectiveness of educator-preparation programs within their state.

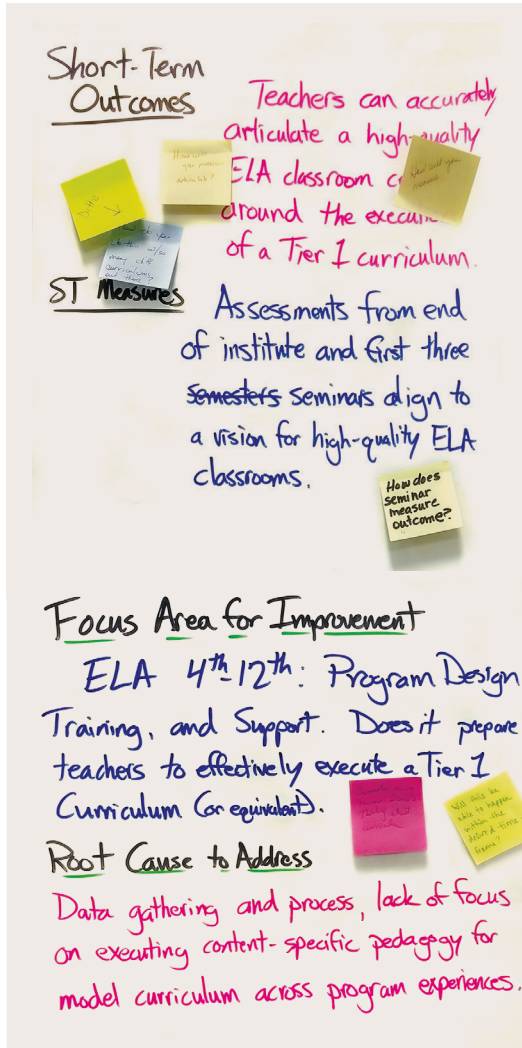


### 1. Redesigning teacher-candidate experiences to focus on ambitious content and the use of high-quality curriculum aligned to that content

Louisiana, like so many states, has adopted more ambitious academic content standards that require students, for example, to demonstrate conceptual understanding of complex ideas. It's one thing to know the procedure for dividing fractions – flip one and multiply! – but quite another to know why that algorithm produces the right answer. Shifting to such

standards often requires veteran educators, including teacher-educators, to rethink their own practice. This sort of change is hard, and can be threatening to professional confidence.

But it can be done, as we learned from the programs participating in the Believe and Prepare Impact Collaborative.



For example, the Louisiana Resource Center for Educators (LRCE) focused on improving the effectiveness of secondary teachers they work with to teach ELA content. LRCE began by observing effective ELA teachers. LRCE leaders also met with authors of the ELA curriculum being used to learn more about the intent underlying the standards. Through these exercises, they realized there were specific research-based ELA pedagogies they needed to better emphasize with their teacher-candidates, such as analyzing text complexity and surfacing implicit vocabulary.

“We’ve really concentrated and looked at our training trajectory of what an ELA teacher needs in order to be successful in the classroom,” said LRCE Director of Training and Instruction Teryn Bryant.

Louisiana Tech University, another network participant, decided to focus their work on ways to enhance math practicum experiences for teacher-candidates. “We wanted to use this opportunity to build a more collaborative environment [among faculty], because it is very difficult to brainstorm and implement program changes without the benefit of collective minds,” said Carrice Cummins, a professor in the department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Leadership. The team decided to pair a math methods professor with an experienced literacy practicum professor and a new faculty member with recent experience in a K-8 setting in order to reimagine the ways in which future teachers experience the conceptual shifts embedded in the state’s math standards.

As a result of the team’s efforts, teacher-candidates began engaging with K-5 students immediately upon placement into practicum. Candidates were expected to complete rigorous planning and teaching tasks daily. In addition, they were expected to participate in and complete the same assignments being given to the K-5 students in order to understand the rigors of the curriculum.

A common stereotype of educator-preparation programs is that they are unwilling to change, but as these examples demonstrate, change will happen when structures are in place to support it. Indeed, in our experience in Louisiana and around the country, we’ve seen educator-preparation programs enthusiastically embrace improvement work.

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– Molly Hill,

University of Louisiana at Monroe

And one reason for that is that the results of such efforts can directly impact student learning, which in turn motivates change. Consider Molly Hill, a math methods instructor at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. Although she was initially skeptical of the improvement methodologies introduced by Deans for Impact, she became motivated once she appreciated the impact such change could have on students.

“Once I realized where we were going holistically, it changed me as an instructor,” Hill said. “Because I’m going to impact the program and my students, and ultimately have an impact on K-12 learners as well.”

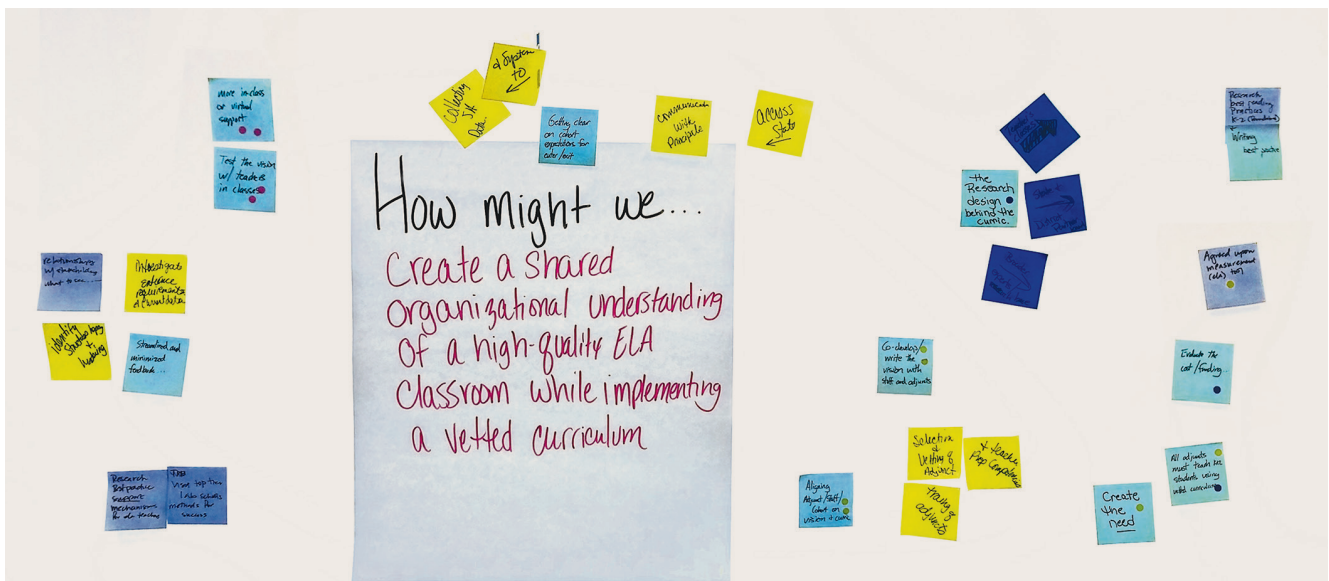
Shalanda Stanley, the associate director of the school of education at ULM, feels similarly. For Stanley, the collaborative’s structured improvement process “helped shape and scaffold our thinking, and that’s not something that we’ve had before.”

## 2. Building capacity to use data for improvement

A second goal of the Believe and Prepare Impact Collaborative was for programs to use data to inform their improvement processes as programs sought to strengthen teacher-candidate understanding of ELA and math content.

At McNeese State University, for example, program participants reviewed the VAM (value-added model) scores of their graduates, along with Praxis scores and scores on their instructional practice rubric. “We started with the same data as all the other universities, looking at VAM scores and first-time pass rates on Praxis, and we were appalled,” said Fara Seal, a math methods instructor at McNeese State. “I was really flabbergasted at how little my [teacher-candidates] knew in the area of basic math.”

While this data acted as a powerful motivator for change, it also underscored that different data are useful for different purposes. VAM scores and Praxis

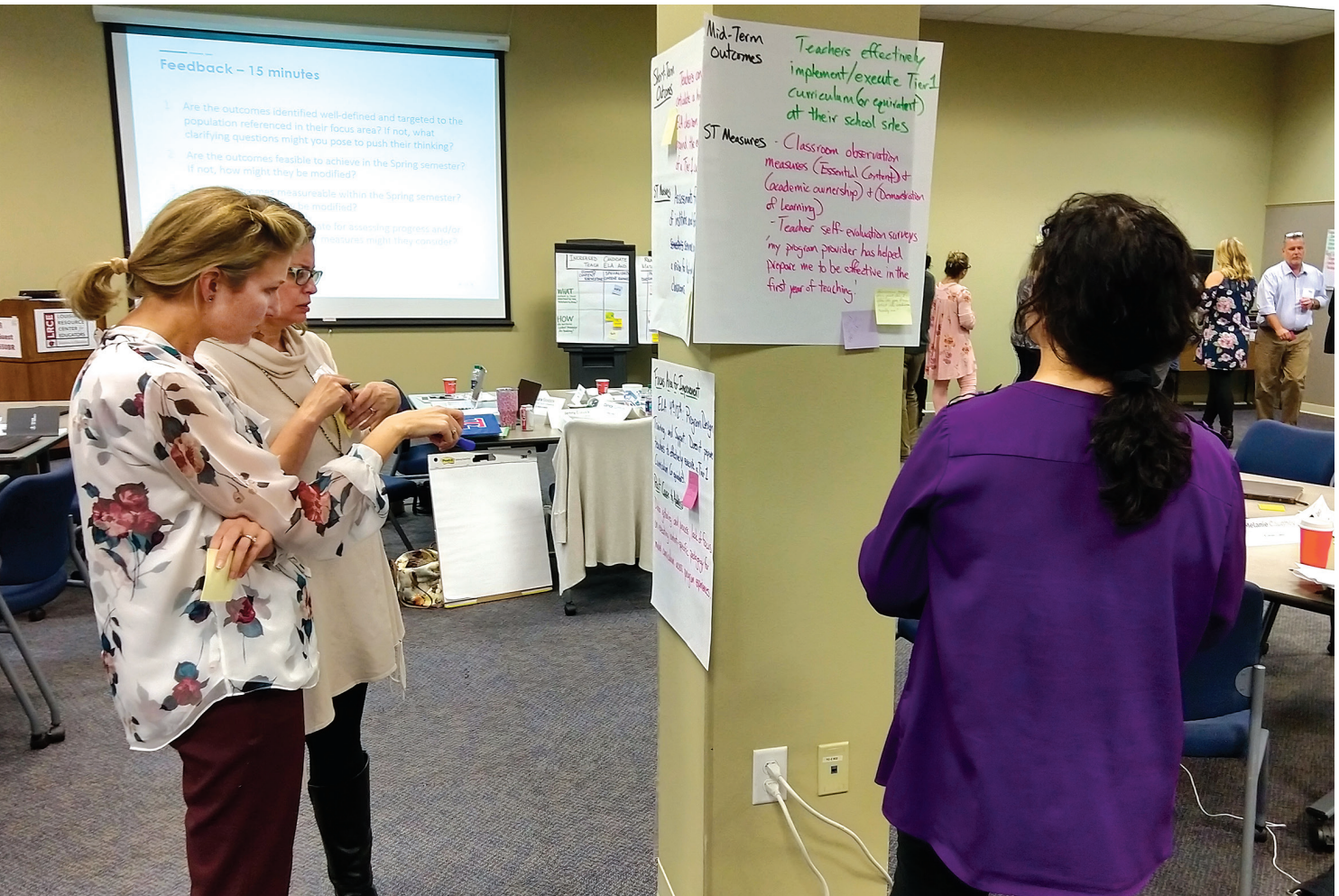


pass rates provide information on how effective a program is doing overall. In addition to these sources of evidence, programs need more granular information to inform the details of a change process.

Accordingly, the McNeese State team decided they needed more information about teacher-candidates' understanding of math content, and their ability to effectively teach this content. They decided to do a pre- and a post-test for all math and math methods courses, geared towards the curricular content for elementary learners.

What's more, they revamped their teacher-candidate observation rubrics to incorporate the specific Louisiana math teacher competencies as a metric for evaluation. The new framework now probes topics such as: Are candidates using relevant math vocabulary in their field experiences and practicum activities? Did the observer see the candidate illustrating specific math concepts as defined in the standards, or do they simply perform formulaic steps to get answers?

With this data in hand, the team from McNeese State has been able to use it to tailor math-content instruction they provide to teacher-candidates. In the words of Dean Angel Ogea, the new approach allows faculty to "examine the Louisiana student standards and teacher competency standards to determine



specific content areas our candidates are weakest in, and then use a course progression over a given semester to strengthen those.”

At Deans for Impact, we’ve seen this same situation play out with educator-preparation programs across the country. States can and should provide the data they have to programs, but they must also recognize that programs need time and support to collect data specific to program improvement.

### 3. Fostering cross-institutional learning among participating programs

The third priority of the Believe and Prepare Impact Collaborative was to foster cross-institutional learning among educator-preparation programs.

There are at least two non-trivial challenges facing any state that shares this goal. First, because state policy sets what is expected of educator-preparation programs, including program approval, state officials are often kept at arm’s length by program faculty and staff. Cross-institutional learning requires openness and trust on the part of programs, but given the oversight role of the state, program faculty and staff are sometimes reticent to share openly – warts and all – in the presence of state officials.

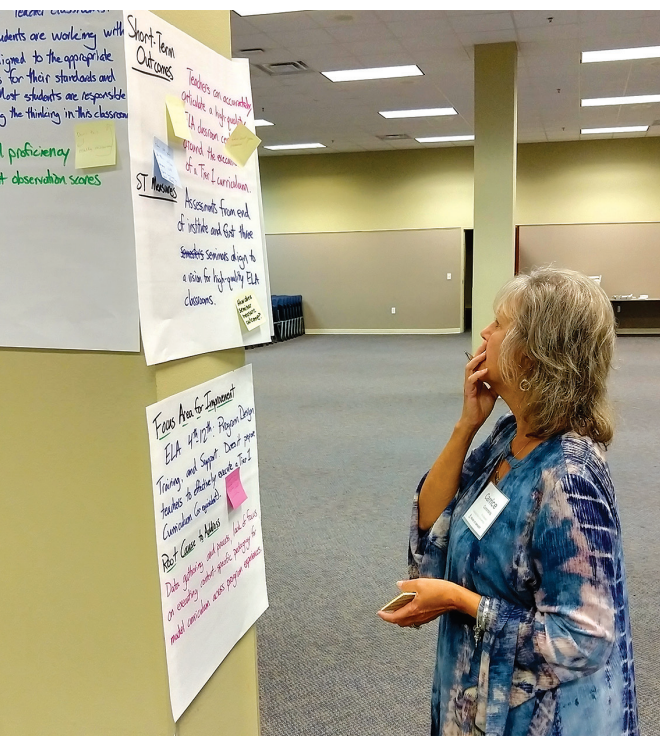
Second, educator-preparation programs are sometimes competitive with each other – for students, for philanthropic funding, and for the attention of district partners. This competition can in turn lead to reticence by programs to share effective strategies with each other.

Resolving these challenges is where an organization such as Deans for Impact can play a vital role. Having an external facilitator to foster conversations among educator-preparation programs can reduce posturing and cultivate norms that create the space for vulnerability and trust.

This is not easily or quickly done – building trust takes time. Deans for Impact launched the collaborative by grounding our conversations in the common challenge of preparing teachers who could effectively teach ambitious content to students. We also worked to develop norms of interaction that would enhance honesty and vulnerability. And we discussed the hopes and fears of all participants at the outset in order to surface the implicit assumptions people were bringing to this unique effort.

Did it succeed? We believe so. In less than a year, we witnessed barriers come down and saw evidence of programs starting to collaborate by sharing specific assignments and rubrics they used with their teacher-candidates.

Each participating program showed increases on multiple dimensions of a pre/post measure of programmatic practice, and two-thirds of programs saw demonstrable increases in teacher-candidates’ content readiness.



## SYSTEMATIC IMPROVEMENT OF EDUCATOR PREPARATION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The Louisiana Believe and Prepare Impact Collaborative spurred specific improvements across participating programs. In the course of one year, participating teams developed action plans to improve ELA and math content understanding, identified relevant data to collect, and started to make significant changes to the experiences they provide to future teachers. Each participating program showed increases on multiple dimensions of a pre/post measure of programmatic practice, and two-thirds of programs saw demonstrable increases in teacher-candidates' content readiness.

At Deans for Impact, we believe other states should prioritize supporting what might be called "improvement agendas" that follow a similar path. States should hold educator-preparation programs to high expectations. But just as importantly, states should provide support to programs willing to meet those expectations.

### SO WHAT ARE THE STEPS STATES SHOULD TAKE? WE RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING:



#### 1. Set specific goals.

States should resist the urge to demand sweeping, but not actionable, changes to educator preparation. They should instead focus on one or two priority areas at a time and make it clear what measures of success they will use to evaluate the effectiveness of programs. In Louisiana's case, the state focused on math and ELA content readiness.



#### 2. Provide time to implement change.

In our experience at Deans for Impact, educator-preparation programs need at least two years to plan and implement significant changes in their programs. While it can be tempting to demand immediate action, states need to take a longer view if they want true transformation to occur.



#### 3. Start with programs willing to lead.

Not every program is going to embrace change right away. States should identify and support those programs that are willing to pioneer the change process. Over time, with the right incentives, others will join.



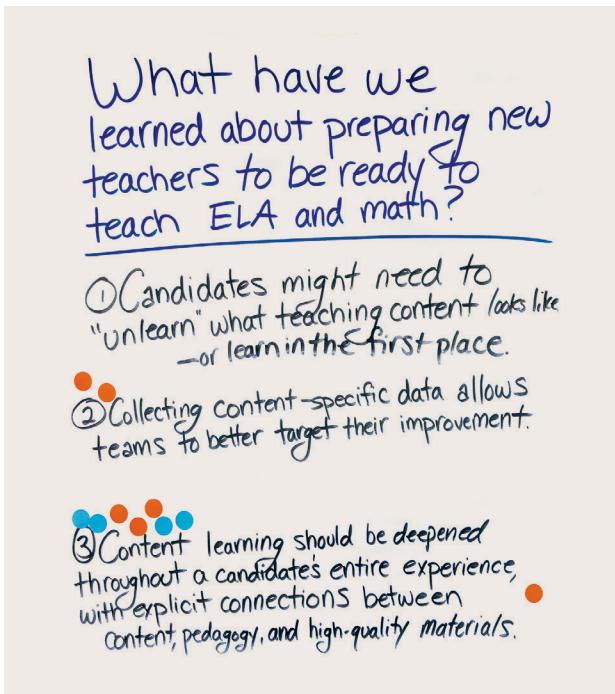
#### 4. Incentivize program engagement.

States should identify funding to support an initial network of programs to engage in collaborative, structured continuous improvement. By establishing pilots or proof points, states can elevate both expectations and opportunities to engage in this work.



#### 5. Find partners to support the change-management process.

It's not easy for complex organizations to change. And while states should play a pivotal role in setting expectations for programs, they are less well suited to actually support the change-management process. States should engage external partners who can support programs to make design changes, and guide them through an improvement cycle. Additionally, partners who have experience working with a varied group of providers often have good insight into how to tailor the approach for different programs.



## CONCLUSION

There are leaders throughout educator-preparation programs who want to improve how they prepare future teachers. What's needed is systematic support. As Nicole Bono, executive director of educator preparation for the Louisiana Department of Education, observed, "It's not that our preparation providers aren't always working and thinking about how to improve their program – they absolutely are – but oftentimes, they've done that in isolation, at their universities, by themselves."

No longer. States should work in partnership with their programs, and with organizations that can help support change, to transform how their teachers are prepared. Deans for Impact will continue to advocate for such policies and stands ready to support states and programs as they undertake the hard but vital work to ensure every child is taught by a well-prepared teacher.

