BRIEF 3: DISTRICT-WIDE PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES (SLO) PROCESS IN 2015-2016

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Key highlights from brief:

• A majority of principals (74 percent) and teacher leaders (70 percent) responding to the mid-year LEAP survey agreed that the SLO process can inform instruction.

• Although over 94 percent of teachers indicated that they use formative assessment data to inform instruction, only 59 percent of teachers agreed that the SLO process "provides valuable information about what my students know and can do."

• Only about half of all principals responding to the mid-year LEAP survey and the Data Culture Survey indicated that they understood each part of the SLO process and that they had received quality SLO training in network meetings.

GATHERING TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATIVE PERCEPTIONS ON THE SLO PROCESS

District-wide perceptions about the Student Learning Objectives (SLO) process were gathered through two surveys: the mid-year Leading Educators Academic Practice (LEAP) Survey administered in February 2016 to teachers, teacher leaders, and administrators, and the Data Culture Survey administered in May 2016 to teachers and administrators. In 2014-2015, approximately 30 percent of teachers, teacher leaders and principals responded to the LEAP survey. In 2015-2016, the percentage of respondents in each group increased for the mid-year LEAP survey. For the mid-year LEAP survey, 43 percent of teachers (1,955 of 4,549 teachers), 59 percent of teacher leaders (139 of 236 teacher leaders), and 44 percent of principals (178 of 406 principals) responded. The Data Culture Survey was administered to teachers and principals, and no information was collected to identify teacher leaders. In 2015-2016, 58 percent of teachers and teacher leaders (2,824 of 4,811) and 50 percent of principals (181 of 360 who received the survey) responded to the Data Culture Survey.

The SLO questions inserted into each survey served a different purpose. For the 2015-2016 mid-year LEAP survey, the SLO questions were designed to find out the extent to which respondents:

• Believed they have a good understanding (i.e., they indicate that they know the different parts of the SLO process *well* or *very well*) of the SLO process;

• Viewed the SLOs as an instructionally useful process; and,

• Engaged with the SLO process in data teams and had sufficient time to get their work done.

For the first and third points above, we compare the results from 2015-2016 with results from LEAP surveys in 2014-2015. However, since each survey involves a self-selected sample, inferences about observed changes are somewhat equivocal.

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The new SLO-specific questions in the Data Culture Survey were developed by the SLO team charged with overseeing the implementation of the SLO process in the district. This team is based in the district's Accountability, Research and Evaluation (ARE) department. Those questions were designed to learn the extent to which respondents:

- Viewed the SLO supports provided to them through their network meetings in 2015-2016 as useful.

- Discussed SLOs during data team meetings scheduled throughout the school year.

- Viewed the SLO resources (e.g., protocols and guides) provided to them by ARE's SLO team as useful.

Since the mid-year LEAP and the Data Culture Surveys targeted different areas of inquiry, the results across surveys cannot be compared.

SLO HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE MID-YEAR LEAP SURVEY

Understanding the SLO Process

- Compared to teacher leaders and teachers, principals appeared to have a mixed understanding of all parts of the SLO process, with less than 52 percent of principals indicating that they understood each of the nine[1] different parts of the SLO process *well* and *very well*.

- Over 77 percent of all teacher leaders indicated they understood eight of the nine parts of the SLO process *well* or *very well*.

- The percentage of teachers who indicated that they understood the different parts of the SLO process *well* or *very well* ranged from 50 percent (developing the learning progression rubric) to 70 percent (making instructional shifts in response to student progress). For the most part, the level of understanding about each part of the SLO process reported by teachers in the 2015-2016 end-of-year survey were similar to the percentages found in the 2014-2015 mid-year survey.

Since teacher leaders are expected to guide teachers through the SLO process, it is not surprising that they expressed the highest levels of understanding with the process relative to other groups. But the fact that only slightly over half of all principal respondents indicated that they understood the process *well* or *very well* by February 2016 is troubling.

As discussed in Brief 1, principals in 2015-2016 were expected to lead the SLO implementation work at their school. Although principals had received little to no training on the SLO process during the 2014-15 school year, by 2015-16 they should have had ample opportunity to participate in SLO training. Further, as discussed in Brief 1, in 2014-2015, principals received little to no training on the SLO process during the school year. In contrast, for 2015-2016, principals should have participated in several trainings in the fall to increase their level of understanding during network trainings held throughout the school year. Due to this new charge for principals to lead the SLO process in 2015-2016 and the fact that the principals should have received training on this process through their networks during the fall, this group should have ideally indicated higher levels of understanding with all parts of the process by February 2016.
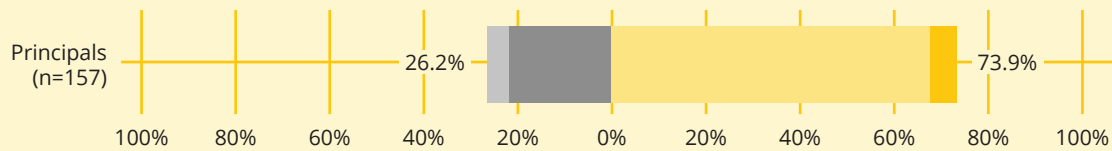
Using SLOs to Inform Instruction

Compared to teacher leaders and principals, teachers appeared to have less favorable views about the SLO process as a means of informing instruction. Figure 1 compares the responses across the three groups on whether the SLO provides value about what students know and can do.
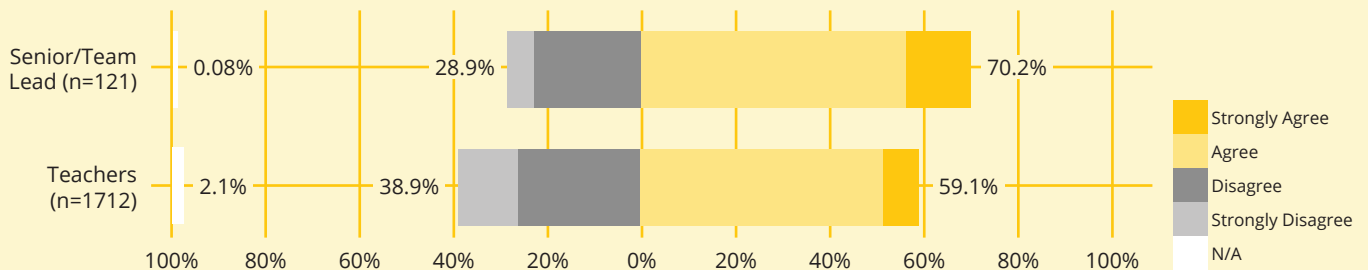
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[1] The nine parts of the SLO process specified in the survey are: identifying priority standards for the SLO, writing an objective statement, determining the performance criteria, developing the learning progression rubric, determining students' baseline preparedness, planning for and collecting a body of evidence, monitoring student progress, making instruction shifts in response to student progress, and determining students' end-of-course command levels.

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FIGURE 1. COMPARISON OF RESPONSES ACROSS GROUPS ON VALUE OF INFORMATION FROM SLOs

SLOs provide my teachers valuable information about what their students know and can do.

Principals (n=157): 26.2% — 73.9%

SLOs provide me valuable information about what my students know and can do.

Senior/Team Lead (n=121): 0.08%, 28.9% — 70.2%

Teachers (n=1712): 2.1%, 38.9% — 59.1%

Legend: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, N/A
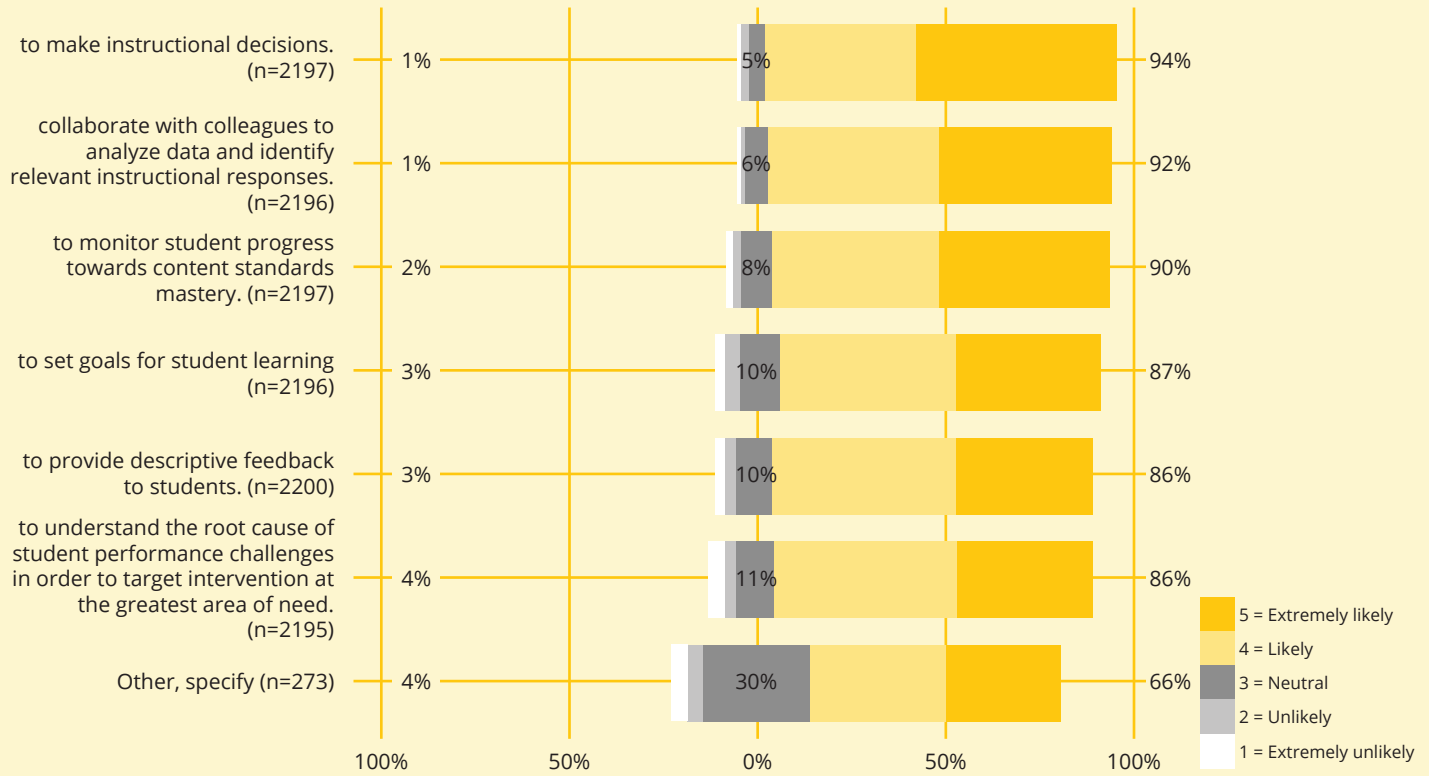
Although these percentages fall short of the 80 percent goal that ARE was hoping to reach with all groups on this particular theme (i.e., the value of SLOs for informing instruction), the favorable outlook expressed for this process by principals in 2015-2016 is remarkable considering this group's position with the process in 2014-2015. As described in Brief 1, in 2014-2015, this group encouraged the district to shut down the process mid-year, and also received little to no training on SLOs.

Based on a comparison of responses from the data culture and the mid-year LEAP surveys, practices that should ideally complement one another or be considered as synonymous (DDI, formative assessment practices and engagement in the SLO process) appear to be disconnected. As indicated earlier in this brief (see pg. 3), in the mid-year LEAP survey, 59 percent of teachers indicated that the SLO process informed them about what their students know and can do. However, when reviewing questions associated with how teachers use formative data for DDI, well over 80 percent of teachers indicated that they were extremely likely and likely to use those data to inform their instructional practices as indicated in Figure 2.

Since the SLO process should ideally foster formative assessment practices, the very high levels of engagement with formative data in DDI to inform instructional practices should also be seen with SLOs.

Findings from the case study sites (see Brief 2) illuminate two possibilities for this disconnect. First, in some schools using ANet data that were classified by the district as "formative," teachers were not allowed to use these assessments for their SLOs. Second, the dual purpose of the SLO process as one meeting formative purposes and as supporting educator evaluations was found to raise concerns with the principals and generate confusion among the teachers at the case study sites. This dual-purpose framing may be contributing to both principal and teacher perceptions that the SLOs should be considered separately from the formative assessment practices taking place using DDI approaches in data teams across sites.

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FIGURE 2. HOW TEACHERS USE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT DATA

Statement	1% / % Neutral	% Likely
to make instructional decisions. (n=2197)	1% — 5%	94%
collaborate with colleagues to analyze data and identify relevant instructional responses. (n=2196)	1% — 6%	92%
to monitor student progress towards content standards mastery. (n=2197)	2% — 8%	90%
to set goals for student learning (n=2196)	3% — 10%	87%
to provide descriptive feedback to students. (n=2200)	3% — 10%	86%
to understand the root cause of student performance challenges in order to target intervention at the greatest area of need. (n=2195)	4% — 11%	86%
Other, specify (n=273)	4% — 30%	66%

Legend:
- 5 = Extremely likely
- 4 = Likely
- 3 = Neutral
- 2 = Unlikely
- 1 = Extremely unlikely

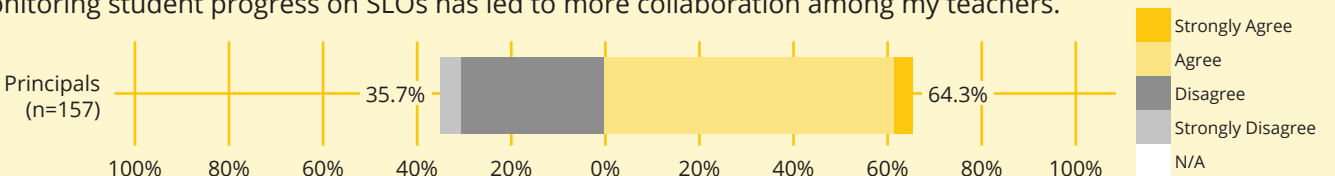### Engagement with the SLO Process through Collaboration

As indicated in Brief 1, a critical feature for implementing the SLO process was to ensure that teachers engaged collaboratively in this process with other teachers. Most guidebooks released by states and districts on the SLO process emphasize the importance of such collaboration. For example, the Rhode Island Department of Education notes in their guidance to teachers, "Identify grade-level or content-alike colleagues to discuss ideas for SLOs. Writing collaboratively in teacher teams allows you to share your drafts with others for feedback." (p. 2).

FIGURE 3. COMPARISON OF RESPONSES ON COLLABORATION

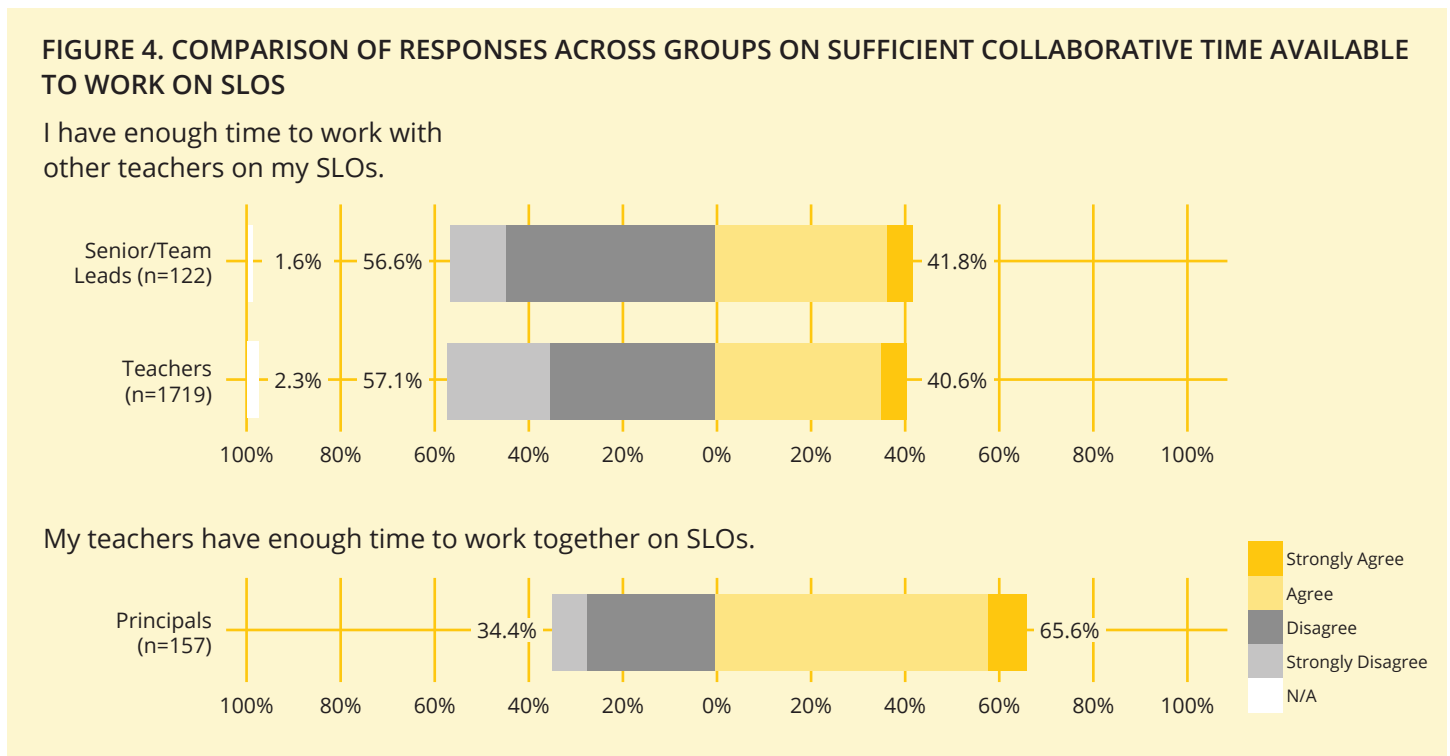I collaborate with other teachers to assess student progress on SLOs.

Senior/Team Leads (n=122)	1.6% — 31.1%	67.2%
Teachers (n=1715)	2.9% — 36.3%	60.8%
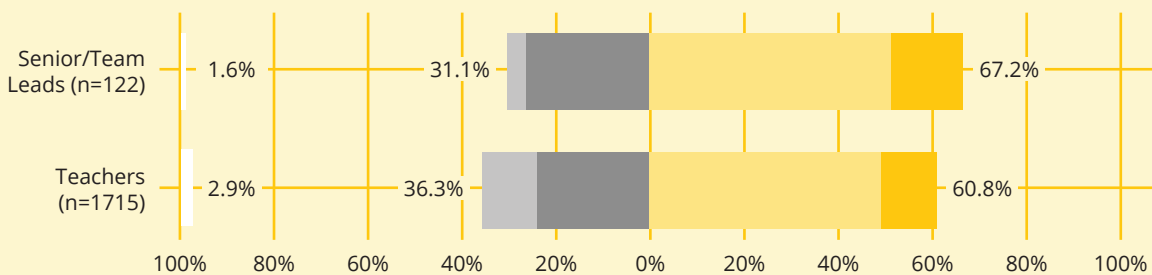
Monitoring student progress on SLOs has led to more collaboration among my teachers.

Principals (n=157)	35.7%	64.3%

Legend:
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- N/A

The percentages shown in Figure 3 for each group reporting *strongly agree* or *agree* in 2015-2016 were notably higher than those found around the same time in 2014-2015. Similar questions about collaboration on SLOs were asked on the 2014-2015 mid-year LEAP survey to just principals and teachers. On that survey, only 31 percent of principals *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that the SLO process fostered collaboration among teachers in the school, and approximately the same percentage of teachers indicated that the process helped them collaborate with other teachers.

Different findings emerged with regards to whether sufficient time was available for collaborating with other teachers on SLOs. Although most schools in DPS run regular data team meetings (e.g., weekly to bi-weekly meetings), the results in Figure 4 indicate that a larger proportion (just under 60 percent) of teachers and teacher leaders do not agree that they have sufficient time to spend working on SLOs with other teachers. In contrast, 67 percent of principals agreed or strongly agreed that their teachers have enough time to work together on their SLOs.
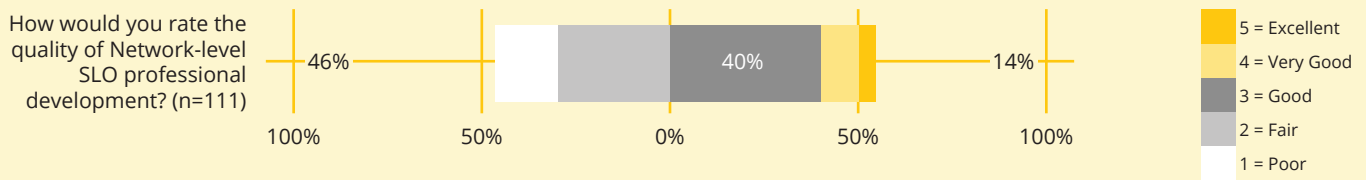
FIGURE 4. COMPARISON OF RESPONSES ACROSS GROUPS ON SUFFICIENT COLLABORATIVE TIME AVAILABLE TO WORK ON SLOS

I have enough time to work with other teachers on my SLOs.

My teachers have enough time to work together on SLOs.

FINDINGS FROM THE DATA CULTURE SURVEY

Quality of SLO Training Supports Provided to Principals

Since principals were expected to lead the SLO process at their schools and to directly train the DRs and TLs leading data teams on this process, a question was asked on the Data Culture Survey to learn how principals deemed the quality of SLO trainings received from their networks. Although network leaders and partners were now charged with delivering SLO content to principals (see Brief 1), the SLO team hypothesized in the first month of the school year that the frequency and delivery of SLO content would most likely vary in quality across networks. Figure 5 presents the distribution of ratings given by principals to the quality of network-level SLO professional development received during the 2015-2016 school year.
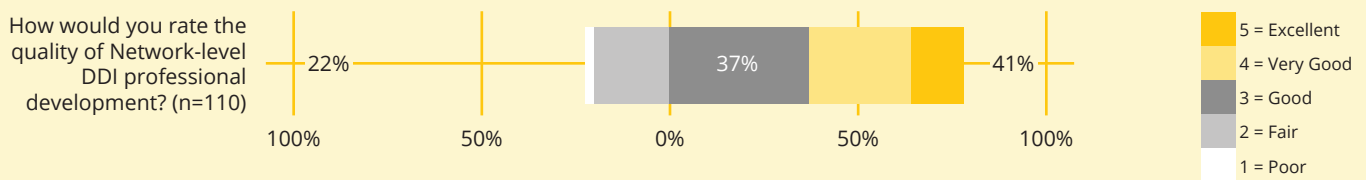
FIGURE 5. PRINCIPAL RATINGS OF NETWORK-LEVEL SLO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROVIDED

How would you rate the quality of Network-level SLO professional development? (n=111)

46%   40%   14%

100%   50%   0%   50%   100%

5 = Excellent
4 = Very Good
3 = Good
2 = Fair
1 = Poor

As indicated by Figure 5, just over half (54 percent) of all principals rated the quality of network-level SLO professional development as *good* or higher. The distribution of responses that are almost equally split between the lower two and the upper three response categories in Figure 5 appears to support the SLO Team's earlier hypothesis regarding the expected variability to be seen in the quality of trainings provided by networks.

However, it is interesting to compare how the same group of principals rated the quality of network-training provided on a shorter-cycle process that resembles the SLO process: data driven instruction or DDI. When asked about the quality of DDI-focused professional development offered, 78 percent of principals rated the quality of those trainings as *good* or higher. Figure 6 presents the distribution of responses given by principals to the quality of network-level DDI professional development received during the school year. In contrast to Figure 5, the distribution of responses shown in Figure 6 are skewed to the right or towards more favorable ratings. Further, there are considerably fewer respondents that rated the DDI trainings as *poor* relative to the SLO trainings provided across networks.

FIGURE 6. PRINCIPAL RATINGS OF NETWORK-LEVEL DDI PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROVIDED

How would you rate the quality of Network-level DDI professional development? (n=110)

22%   37%   41%

100%   50%   0%   50%   100%

5 = Excellent
4 = Very Good
3 = Good
2 = Fair
1 = Poor

Frequency of SLO-based Discussions in Data Teams

For the set of graphs presented below in Figures 7 and 8, the first two graphs in Figure 7 reflect teacher responses and Figure 8 reflects principal responses. As indicated by the graphs, principals perceived that they met more frequently with teachers to discuss data or student work related to SLOs in data teams relative to teachers. In the second graph under Figure 7, approximately 60 percent of teachers indicated that they met 0 to 4 times during the entire school year to discuss data or student work related to SLOs, with approximately 15 percent of those respondents indicating that they never focused their data analysis work in data teams on SLOs.

In sharp contrast to teachers, 67 percent of all principals indicated that they met at least 5 to 10 times to discuss SLO related data with teachers in data teams. As indicated in Figure 8, all principals indicated that they met with the data teams at least once during the school year to discuss data/student work related to SLOs.

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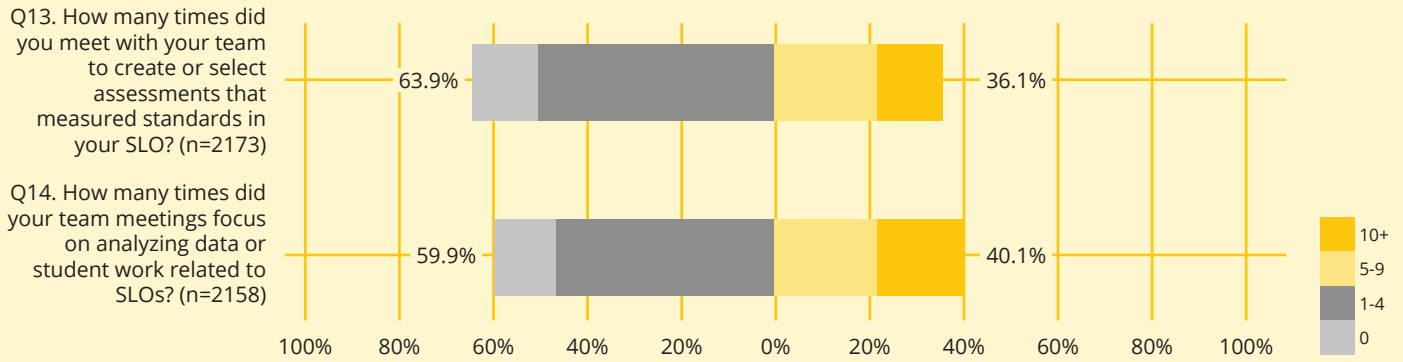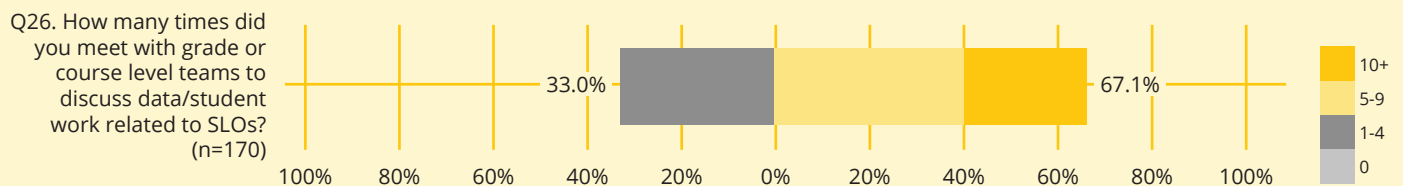**FIGURE 7. FREQUENCY OF SLO RELATED ACTIVITIES IN DATA TEAMS FOR TEACHERS**

Q13. How many times did you meet with your team to create or select assessments that measured standards in your SLO? (n=2173): 63.9% / 36.1%

Q14. How many times did your team meetings focus on analyzing data or student work related to SLOs? (n=2158): 59.9% / 40.1%

Legend: 10+, 5-9, 1-4, 0

FIGURE 8. FREQUENCY OF PRINCIPALS MEETING WITH DATA TEAMS TO DISCUSS SLOS

Q26. How many times did you meet with grade or course level teams to discuss data/student work related to SLOs? (n=170): 33.0% / 67.1%

Legend: 10+, 5-9, 1-4, 0

Usefulness of SLO Resources

Since ARE invested considerable time to provide SLO resources on-line for both principals and teachers, both groups were asked to indicate whether the SLO resources provided were deemed to be useful this year. The results from both groups were as follows:

- 71 percent of principals and 67 percent of teachers found the SLO district models or pre-populated templates to be *somewhat* to *very useful*

- 70 percent of principals and 63 percent of teachers found the SLO guidance and protocols to be *somewhat* to *very useful*

Overall the majority of both groups appeared to find SLO resources provided by ARE to be useful to varying degrees. This finding appears to be similar to the positive views expressed by principals and teachers at the case study sites (see Brief 2) who mentioned that the district templates saved them time and helped them better understand what was required to complete the SLO template.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Three recommendations are made based on findings from the surveys:

1. Provide more coaching to show how formative assessment practices and data-driven instruction are embedded in the SLO process.

2. Revisit training format and structure provided to the principals to ensure high quality training and coaching model is implemented.

3. Investigate how best to effectively and efficiently meet the collaborative needs of teacher leaders and teachers in data teams.

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Regarding the first recommendation, as indicated by Figure 2 (see pg. 3), approximately 40 percent of all teachers are not connecting formative assessment practices with the SLO process. Based on this finding, this indicates that more coaching is needed in data teams to help teachers better understand how DDI, SLOs and formative assessment practices are related and should support one another.

In reference to the second recommendation, 2015-2016 marks the second year in a row where about half of all principals appear to understand the SLO process well. This finding is problematic due to the role that principals are expected to play in leading the SLO process at their schools. This finding points to the need to re-examine the format and structure of the SLO training sessions taking place in networks to ensure that quality trainings are being provided to this group.

Regarding the third recommendation, as indicated earlier (see pg. 4), different findings emerged with regards to whether sufficient time was dedicated to collaborating with other teachers on SLOs. Compared to principals, fewer than half of all teacher leader and teacher respondents indicated that they had enough time to work on SLOs during data team meetings.

A group supporting many states with educator evaluations, Education First, noted that, "SLOs require a significant amount of money, time, training and human capacity to implement well. Without sufficient investment, states and districts may water down the SLO experience. Teachers need enough time to analyze data, write objectives and think through the right instructional strategies for a particular group of students" (p. 4, 2014). Although most school in DPS run regular data team meetings (e.g., weekly to bi-weekly meetings), the results presented earlier in Figure 3 may suggest that a larger proportion (just under 60 percent) of teachers and teacher leaders do not agree that they have sufficient time to spend working on SLOs with other teachers. However, it is unclear whether other issues may be impacting these perceptions, such as:

- Data teams are not using allotted time effectively and efficiently to discuss SLOs.

- There could be a general disconnect between the perspectives shared on what constitutes adequate time by principals versus teachers and teacher leaders.

Next year, the SLO team may want to investigate whether insufficient time is being allotted to teachers and teacher leaders at schools to collaborate on SLOs, or if data teams need to be better organized to help use collaborative time more efficiently.

REFERENCES

Education First. (2014) Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) Measuring Student Growth and Supporting Great Teaching. Retrieved from: http://education-first.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/03-Gates_Eval-and-Support-Strategies-for-Success_Student-Learning-Objectives.pdf

Rhode Island Department of Education (2015). The Process for Writing a Student Learning Objective. Retrieved from: http://www.ride.ri.gov/TeachersAdministrators/EducatorEvaluation/StudentLearningOutcomesObjectives.aspx

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