In the nearly five years that Robert Hammond has had a leadership role with the Colorado Department of Education, first as its deputy commissioner and now as commissioner, he says that he cannot recall "a single significant policy change that did not involve the Southwest Comprehensive Center" (SWCC) at WestEd. Whether helping to bring consistency to the department’s budgeting and hiring procedures or to align Colorado’s new assessment system to the Common Core standards, the SWCC has been a valued partner in transforming the state agency.

"It’s real simple: without [SWCC’s] support we would not be where we are today," Hammond says. "I’ve dealt with other groups around the country, and it pains me sometimes because my expectations are so high now. But I realize that what [SWCC] does is unique; it’s a whole different level of support."

Established in 2005 to help state education agencies implement the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the SWCC is one of 16 Comprehensive Centers around the country, each one serving either a single state or a cluster of states. The SWCC guides state agencies in Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah with state and federal education policy and reform efforts. Because the federal government supports the center’s work, the state agencies are able to receive assistance and logistical support whenever they need it.

Those cost benefits are crucial. All five states in the SWCC region have among the lowest-funded education departments in the nation. They have very limited staff and large geographic areas to cover, making it especially difficult to both monitor and support school districts. In addition to having limited state education budgets, the five members of the SWCC share a history of local school control. Districts often resent and resist state interference, which challenges efforts to create uniform systems of teacher evaluation and school accountability. As an outside partner with recognized expertise and credibility, the SWCC has helped repair these relationships as well as improve the overall quality of education.

"They serve almost as external staff members. They know our state context, they’re deep into the work with us so they know our needs, and they’re able to prioritize what we need to do," explains Rorie Fitzpatrick, deputy commissioner of the Nevada Department of Education.

"Because of our long-standing relationship with individual staff members at the Southwest Comprehensive Center and knowledge of them across Nevada, it helps to immediately gain buy-in from the field. If it comes with WestEd and the Southwest Comprehensive Center, people in Nevada are trustful of it."

Center Gathers State Education Agencies to Tackle Common Issues

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Although the center’s services can filter down to schools and school districts if state agencies request such help, its primary role is providing resources and training so state education officials can meet federal goals for raising student achievement. The center has addressed a variety of needs within the five state agencies, including:

- Guiding the design of statewide evaluation systems for teachers and principals, which include student achievement data as a measure of performance;
- Adapting a WestEd software system to automate record-keeping so states can spend more time monitoring the impact of federal grants and less time inspecting voluminous compliance records;
- Providing research about best practices—such as serving English language learners and raising achievement in persistently failing schools, and
- Coaching state leaders as they seek to improve communications with legislators, board members, school districts, the public, and even their own staff members.

Cross-State Collaboration to Grapple with Common Issues

“These states share many of the same challenges, so bringing them together to discuss these issues and share information has been an essential part of our center’s strategy,” explained Paul Koehler, director of the SWCC and the Policy Center at WestEd.

Building on these similarities, Koehler orchestrated a collaborative approach to working with the state education leaders, who, in turn, have formed professional learning networks with each other. The SWCC brings together commissioners and deputy commissioners from each state at least twice a year. Outside these facilitated sessions, the leaders regularly confer with each other and with the SWCC staff by phone and email.

Additionally, leadership teams from the five states gather together for quarterly meetings, which the SWCC organizes. The center brings in experts and research on key topics and acts as a sounding board for policy suggestions. After sharing questions and solutions across state agencies, the state teams get time to work as a unit, figuring out how the recommended strategies could be adapted back home.

The cross-fertilization of ideas has hatched important discoveries and alliances. For example, Nevada Deputy Commissioner Fitzpatrick recalls attending a session where Colorado officials shared their success in obtaining a waiver from some of No Child Left Behind’s requirements. Ten states, including Colorado, are now free to evaluate student performance by their own methods instead of relying on standardized test scores in reading and math. Fitzpatrick says the information helped her understand how Nevada might classify schools differently to qualify for a similar exemption. When she learned the name of the technical specialist who had prepared Colorado’s application, she shared the contact with a counterpart in Nevada.

“Those two had a dialogue and it helped us resolve a challenge,” she says. “Not that we couldn’t find that out ourselves, but I’m not sure it would have occurred to me. Certainly this was much more efficient.”
Interactive Approach to Problem Solving

John Stollar, Chief of Programs and Policy for the Arizona Department of Education, says his state agency also has leveraged information from the SWCC strategy sessions, such as learning better methods of managing grants and how to write proposals with one voice while still reflecting contributions from multiple people within the department.

“You learn first of all that the trials and tribulations of your state are not much different than what others are going through,” Stollar says. “You then learn there are vast resources to answer the questions you have that help you solve those problems. The Southwest Comprehensive Center provides you with a vehicle to brainstorm potential solutions, and then you get to evaluate whether those solutions would work within your context.”

Stollar says the SWCC’s guidance has been valuable at both theoretical and practical levels. For example, in helping Arizona leaders analyze why they initially failed to obtain a federal Race to the Top grant to pay for school reforms, the SWCC also inspired them to refine the scope and purpose of their application. The result: In the first competition cycle, Arizona had one of the lowest-scoring proposals in the nation. By the third cycle, the state had secured a $25 million allotment from Washington.

“What I find really fascinating is that the staff of the Southwest Comprehensive Center don’t come in and say, ‘Here’s what you’re doing right and wrong and here are the solutions; just follow our prescriptions and you will be on the right path,’” Stollar says. “They engage us in an interactive process where probing questions are asked in terms of state goals and resources. Many times they have helped reshape our thinking, as a result of this kind of respectful dialogue.”

"Stick with Basic Work and Go Deep”

Koehler and state leaders believe that one of the strengths of their partnership has been continually aiming at a few targeted goals instead of frequently shifting focus. As they identify each state’s needs and forge distinctive plans to address the gaps, they keep refining their work by evaluating long-term progress.

"I think the tendency for technical assistance is to jump from thing to thing," Koehler says. "I think one lesson learned from our work is that we need to stick with basic issues, where we know we can make a difference. We tend to stay with the work and to go deep."

Another important lesson is the power of collaboration. The willingness of SWCC participants to share ideas, nurture professional relationships, and listen to feedback has helped them contribute to the region’s collective educational improvement. All five states now have educator evaluation policies in place. No state is still running afoul of the federal government for missing compliance checkpoints. All have systems in place to support their lowest-performing schools; implementing transition plans to the Common Core standards and developing aligned state assessments.

"Collaboration and collective ideas of a group are always superior to one person’s idea," Stollar of Arizona says. "Our work with the Southwest Comprehensive Center has validated that issue over and over. It is so valuable to present ideas to an audience of colleagues who will be fair and
understanding but who will also provide critique to help you hone your plans and point out possible pitfalls to implementation. As the saying goes, the devil is in the details. It really makes your chances for success much greater.

For more information about the Southwest Comprehensive Center’s work, contact Paul Koehler at pkoehle@wested.org or 602.322.7004.