

An Interview with ARCC Director, Sharon Harsh



Dr. Sharon Harsh

In February 2013, I sat down with the director of the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center (ARCC), Sharon Harsh, to talk about how she became interested in capacity building and what issues she anticipates state education agencies (SEAs) will face in the next five years. Although I have known Sharon for years, her insights about education organizations and how technical assistance can support and accelerate their efforts continue to astonish me. In this interview, she revealed how the significance of capacity building first came to her attention, as well as several principles that guide her work with SEAs.

Tell us a little about your career, including your role in the ARCC.

My paternal grandparents and a maternal great grandfather were teachers. However, I never planned to have a career in education.

I wanted to become an astronomer and spend my adult life analyzing the radio waves in deep space. When I started college, I enjoyed biology and psychology courses but when I completed the required courses for my degree and started taking education courses, I knew I had found my career path.

For more than thirty years, I worked in education as a teacher, school psychologist, director of special education and assistant superintendent of schools in three districts. In 2005, I was offered the opportunity to work with the ARCC, first as associate director and then as director of the ARCC. Currently, I serve as director of the ARCC at ICF, International.

How did you first become interested in capacity building?

I am not certain that I can pinpoint the exact date on the calendar, but I do know that I can describe the events, conversations and questions that occurred on the day I realized the need for capacity building.

I was serving as assistant superintendent and had conducted a series of curriculum alignment and unit design training sessions in all the schools. Several weeks after the training, I received inquiries from each of the schools regarding various needs related to implementing the alignment and design process. The inquiries ranged from logistical questions to fundamental issues spurred on by a lack of understanding of the alignment purpose.

For years, I recognized that teachers in the same school and schools within the same district could be functioning at different levels on any single issue, but in the current case, the variances were extreme and unexpected given the fact that each school received the same training from the same messenger—me. For several hours, I reread the inquiries and planned various methods of support with each inadequate to resolve the identified needs. In the middle of the afternoon, it struck me that the reason the schools and teachers were at different places was that each had different levels of capacity to do the work.

The realization of the need for capacity building as part of the support provided to the schools was a turning point in my career.

What are some important lessons you've learned as you've conducted Comprehensive Center work?

When I conduct training sessions, I usually cite 12 to 15 lessons learned on conducting capacity-building technical assistance. But two of the lessons learned seem to consistently emerge as important factors to address.

First, technical assistance must be customized to meet the needs of the client. While some interventions and support processes are standard in form or process, they have to be applied or used in ways that will address the context in which the client is conducting the work.

Second, technical assistance providers have to recognize and respect what the client has accomplished and design the support services to address the point where they need help. When services are inserted at the wrong point, the work is slowed. Conversely, inserting services into the point where the client is functioning creates momentum and high levels of client engagement.

What do you think are some of the big issues SEAs will confront over the next five years?

SEAs have an incredible amount of work to conduct in seven key priority areas identified by the U.S. Department of Education. The priority areas address numerous changes such as teacher and leader performance standards, learning standards for students at all levels of the system, improving low performing schools, and implementing assessments that will guide instruction and gauge student progress. The key priority areas will impact almost every area of SEA work and will require support for the next five years in order to attain full implementation of the desired practices.

How do you expect that the ARCC will be able to assist SEAs as they face these issues?

The ARCC not only uses a full array of technical assistance processes in its work, but uses a multiple dimension capacity building approach to supporting and collaborating with the SEA. The capacity building approach identifies the incremental steps involved in completing a targeted initiative and strategically designs and inserts capacity building steps into the process to ensure that the SEA has the capacity to complete and sustain the work. In addition, the ARCC has a cadre of highly trained and experienced staff to conduct technical assistance in each key priority area.