

**To Support and Assist:
Excerpt from an Interview with Sharon Harsh**

In May of 2013, Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center (ARCC) Kentucky State Coordinator Tony Marchese interviewed ARCC Director Sharon Harsh for a segment of ICF Insights. ARCC staff will appear on ICF Insights throughout to year to discuss education issues in the Appalachian region and various strategies for addressing them. You can watch excerpts from the first episode featuring Sharon on the [ARCC YouTube channel](#).

During their conversation, Sharon discussed her interest in capacity, the difference between capability and capacity, and the importance of ongoing capacity building for even high performers. The following is an excerpt from their dialogue.

Tony: *How did you get interested in capacity and capacity building?*

Sharon: This started a long time ago. I was assistant superintendent in three different districts for 24 years. The first district where I was superintendent was a very rural, high poverty district with few resources—so we really had to work extra hard to get folks where they needed to be to work. The second district was one that was also rural but much larger and had many more resources, and I was surprised that the same issues that I saw in a resource-poor district were also the same issues that I was seeing in a rural, but resource-rich district. Then I went to a third district just south of Pittsburgh in West Virginia that had lots of resources and staff to do things. It was more suburban and had less rurality than the other two. In this district where I worked I wanted to help the staff and help them align their curriculum...I came to work in October and there was a deluge of questions on my desk from the 25 schools where I conducted workshops. It finally hit me that they all had varying capacity needs and the ability to implement them. It was the “a-ha” moment that changed the way totally that I work with teachers and administrators. It was born out of my work with schools and districts.

Tony: *We frequently see the word “capacity” in articles and reports on school improvement. What is capacity?*

Harsh: Having and being able to use a set of mechanisms. It is being able to use them to perform a task.

Tony: *Sometimes the word “capacity” is used interchangeably with the word “capability.” Is “capability” the same as “capacity”? If not, how are they different?*

Sharon: No, they are different. When you read articles, the terms are often used interchangeably—but they are very different. Capability is actually an amalgamation of the two words “ability and capacity.” The first part of that is having the capacity to do whatever the task is and having that ability. Ability is really what you are born with. You can modify your ability but

only to a certain extent. Capability is taking that ability and experience and putting it into action. I've encountered lots of people with very modest ability over the years, but [who] have tremendous capacity because of their will and interest to learn and do their jobs. The converse, unfortunately, is also true. I've encountered lots of schools where there are highly talented people but they either have not had the opportunity to have their capacity built or they are satisfied with only a moderate level of capacity and, as a result, all of their capabilities stay low. These are what I call "gray area schools" because the capacity is so uneven among staff. It is because people have very different capacities and use them in different ways.

Tony: *Oh, I see. Capacity is the "what" or the skills we need to perform at a higher level. Capacity building is the process of developing the capacities.*

Sharon: That is correct. Capacity building in education is to support and assist. It is not negative in any way. In fact some of the capacity building that I have done is with really high flying people who want to refine and enhance their work. It may include low level performers who need to improve but is for anyone who wants to broaden their capacities to do things. It is also four levels: the individual, the group, the organization, or at the system levels—the state department of education all the way to districts and all the way down to the classrooms. What we really are doing in capacity building is looking at four things: whether the person needs information, skills, structures, or processes to do the work. And when you pinpoint where their needs are to build their capacity in that area, it is unbelievable the difference in performance in terms of what they are able to do. Not only should they be able to solve an issue or work on a task, but if we do our job correctly in the schools, districts, and states, they are going to be able to solve and identify problems over time. So capacity building is not building dependency at all. It is actually helping the people feel more efficacious, more able and willing to do not only that task but other tasks. So capacity building is actually taking a person no matter where they are and helping them to move forward.