

Northeast SARE State Programs: A Model for Outcome-focused Professional Development

SARE PROJECT

Regional Professional Development Program

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Challenge

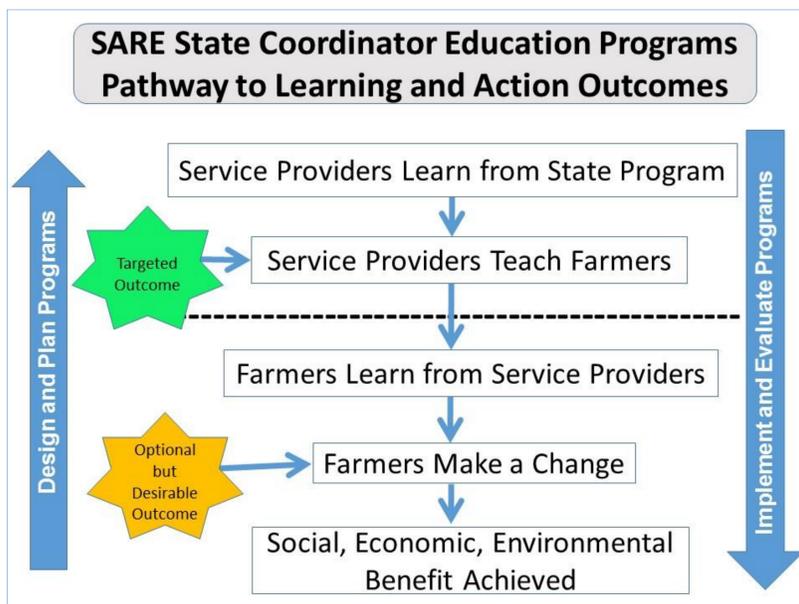
How could the Northeast SARE Professional Development Program (PDP) help state coordinators move from primarily activity-oriented projects to outcome-focused projects?

Northeast SARE, like Extension, desires measurable outcomes in learning and action as a result of the educational efforts it supports.

Northeast SARE state coordinators are Extension educators and specialists (one at each land grant university) that SARE funds to conduct train-the-trainer education about sustainable agriculture for agricultural service providers (Extension, NRCS, non-profits, consultants, etc.).

State coordinators, like most Extension personnel, have education and work experience in agricultural content areas, but little to no training in design, implementation and evaluation of education projects, especially outcome-focused education projects.

The diagram below depicts desired outcomes in learning and action for state coordinator programs and the pathway to achievement



It is difficult to achieve and report measurable outcomes, as shown above if:

- Projects are not designed from the beginning with defined outcome goals
- Projects are not carried out in ways conducive to achieving these outcomes
- Educators lack the knowledge and skills necessary to measure the outcomes.

Solution

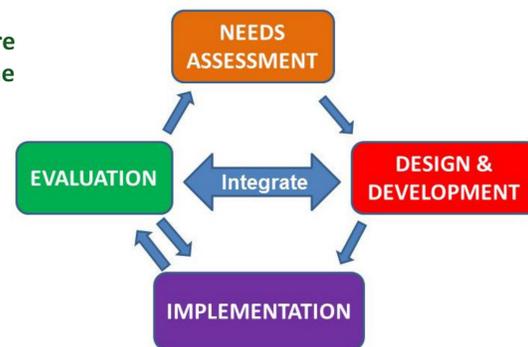
Northeast SARE PDP staff provided workshops about how to obtain outcomes from educational programs at bi-annual meetings from 2010-2014.

The workshops, facilitated by specialists in adult learning, educational program design and program evaluation, included a mix of presentations, small group discussions, skill-building exercises and direct application assignments. Coordinators received instructional guides, resource compilations, planning templates and checklists.

Since 2014, key concepts have been reinforced with workshop exercises that emphasize application of best practices in state coordinator projects, sharing examples of successes, and discussing and troubleshooting project challenges within the state coordinator group.

Project Life Cycle

The workshops were designed around the Project Life Cycle shown at right.



Workshop Topics

NEEDS ASSESSMENT	Information sources, methods and tools for needs assessment Tools: Needs Assessment Plan Template; Example questions to assess learning needs, format preferences
DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT	Backwards design – from desired behavior changes → learning objectives → curriculum and activities to accomplish learning Tools: Examples of outcome statements and learning objectives; Backwards-design project planning template
IMPLEMENTATION	Best practices for facilitating adult learning, sustaining learning after/between events, motivating participants to learn and act Tools: Adult Learning Guide including examples of application strategies in multiple contexts; Reviews on special topics, e.g., motivating learners and storytelling.
EVALUATION	Designing evaluation plans – identifying outcome indicators to measure; data collection methods and questions Integrating evaluation throughout planning and implementation; Setting up evaluation systems Tools: Evaluation Plan Template; Example questions to assess learning and action; Exchange of coordinator-developed tools

Results

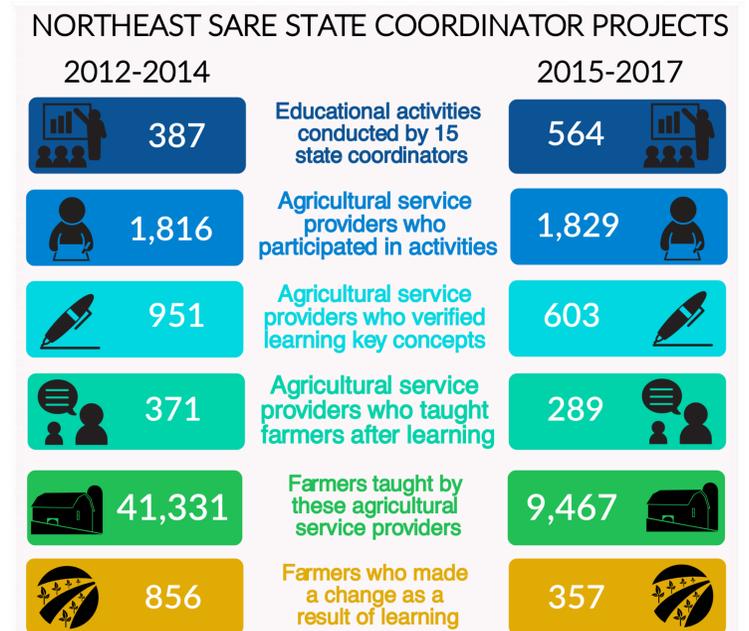
State coordinators conducted 15 education projects between 2012-2014 and again between 2015-2017 on a range of sustainable agriculture topics that included: soil health and cover crops, beginning farmer education and support, season extension, native pollinators, marketing, farm business management, urban agriculture, social sustainability on farms, agritourism, farm energy, and more.

Projects plans exhibited compelling needs justifications; logical, clearly articulated learning and action outcome goals; engaging educational approaches; and robust evaluation plans.

Each project lasted 3 years – a timeframe that allows for the in-depth learning necessary for service provider participants to develop competencies and confidence. This timeframe also allows time for service providers to apply what they learn teaching/advising farmers and to report their results. In some projects, where service providers worked intensively with farmers during the project, service providers were able to also report changes made by farmers.

Yes, we still keep track of activities and participation numbers – those provide a measure of effort and interest, but by helping state coordinators move beyond an activities-oriented mindset to an outcomes-focused mindset, they and SARE are able to report more meaningful results from their efforts.

The graphic below summarizes activities, participation and outcomes of learning and action from the 30 state coordinator projects.



The training provided helped state coordinators improve their abilities to achieve and report outcomes from their education projects. This is important not just to Northeast SARE, but also to the state coordinators who rightly take pride in the documented benefits their projects are having on sustainable agriculture.