# AFTER ACTION REVIEWS FOR SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAMS

## Identifying Lessons Learned to Accelerate Learning

Allison Layland

Julie Corbett

**CC**NETWORK
**National** Center

# After Action Reviews for Summer Learning Programs: Identifying Lessons Learned to Accelerate Learning

## The National Comprehensive Center

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# After Action Reviews for Summer Learning Programs: Identifying Lessons Learned to Accelerate Learning

Districts and schools are receiving once in a life-time funding through the American Recovery Plan (ARP) to address the learning needs of students over the next few years, especially those who have been most impacted by a year of remote or hybrid learning. State education agencies (SEAs) including the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, outlying areas, freely associated states, and Tribal sovereign nations, and local education agencies (LEAs) across the country should be strategic in their use of funds to make a meaningful, real impact on accelerating student learning. This is especially important for those experiencing larger gaps as compared to their peers due to disrupted learning during the pandemic.

After-Action Reviews (AARs) on summer learning programs, led by SEAs, LEAs, schools, or partnering organizations who provide summer learning services, can help users identify and apply lessons learned from this year's summer recovery programs to accelerate learning in the future. Partners or vendors can hold their own AARs to improve their practice for future years and contracts as well. The AAR can be extremely helpful in identifying lessons learned from summer recovery and acceleration programs, which then inform strategic decisions for future school year and summer learning opportunities.

What follows is an adaptation of an [After-Action Review Guide](#) and an [After Action Review Guide for Learning Recovery](#) that focuses specifically on key questions and data that SEAs and LEAs, including Tribes, can use to reflect on this summer's learning recovery and acceleration programs. The findings can then be used by leaders to plan for school-year programs and subsequent summers. Applying lessons learned also helps guide the use of American Recovery Funds, so they are used strategically to achieve intended results.

## What is an AAR?

An AAR is a method for extracting lessons from one action, event, or project, and applying the lessons learned to others. It enables a team to analyze for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how to use learnings to sustain strengths and improve weaknesses. The AAR cycle is a four-step process, as displayed in figure 1.

**Figure 1. The AAR cycle**
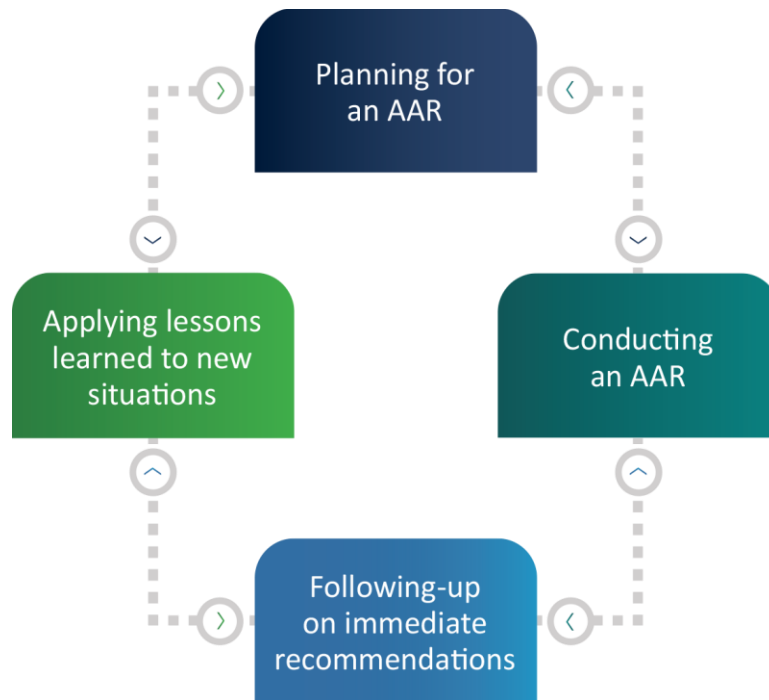


Critical elements of an effective AAR include

» engaging in candid discussions without blame or judgment;
» including specific examples with evidence; and
» identifying specific actions to apply lessons learned in a different context or situation.

## Step 1. Preparation

Ideally, an AAR might include stakeholders that represent the SEA, LEA, school, and/or external vendor(s) to complete a more comprehensive review of the programs and to identify areas for improvement.

Preparing for an AAR is just as important as conducting the review. Ideally, the review should be conducted in person whenever local health and safety conditions allow, however, it could be accomplished virtually as well. Keep in mind, the context of SEAs, LEAs, and schools differ and so should the some of the components of preparation. Table 1 provides suggestions for an SEA, LEA, and school to effectively plan for a facilitated AAR.

**Table 1. After-Action Review preparation**

| Components | SEA | LEA | School or Service Provider |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Logistics[1]** | » Select a room or location that is conducive to face-to-face discussions, or if virtual, breakout rooms for small group discussions followed by whole group sharing<br>» Arrange for technology to capture discussions and decisions in real time so that all can view<br>» Identify a date and time that allows for all designated participants to attend<br>» Prepare an agenda that allows adequate time for full and inclusive discussion among all participants and incorporates breaks<br>» Share the agenda and any relevant data or information prior to the scheduled meeting | | |

| Components | SEA | LEA | School or Service Provider |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Participants**[2] | » SEA leaders and staff including:<br>› Chief State School Officer<br>› Chief Operating Officer<br>› Chief Academic Officer<br>› Student Services<br>› Staff overseeing federal grants<br>› Program or project leaders<br>» Partners (e.g., other agencies, businesses) who assisted in service delivery<br>» Superintendent and school representatives | » LEA leaders and staff including:<br>› Superintendent<br>› Director of Finance, including procurement staff<br>› Director of Special Education<br>› Director of Student Services<br>› Director of Transportation<br>› Director of Food Services<br>› Director of Facilities<br>» Community Representatives<br>» School representatives<br>» Key administrative and program staff from partner organizations, other agencies, or businesses | » School and provider leaders and staff including:<br>› School administrators<br>› Teacher representatives (e.g., grade level, subject, or department)<br>› Support staff<br>› Facilities staff<br>› Nutrition staff<br>› Transportation staff<br>» Community Representatives<br>» Student representatives, as age appropriate<br>» Provider or vendor representatives and staff, if applicable<br>» Key administrative and program staff from partner organizations, other agencies, or businesses |
| **Roles** (see Role Descriptions below) | » Facilitator<br>» Notetaker<br>» Timekeeper | | |
| **Data** | » Policy changes made and impact of changes<br>» Cost effectiveness of programs and services provided by the school or district, as well as vendors or partners[3]<br>» Staffing or recruitment data related to summer programming<br>» Professional development programs implemented to support the program<br>» Indicators of outcomes tied to program goals<br>» Enrollment data related to summer programming<br>» Infrastructure improvements made with funds, maintenance costs associated with the improvements, current assessment of infrastructure improvements as well as use (e.g., funds used to expand internet access, past and current usage data) | | |

1. Logistics include time, location, materials, and methods.

2. Participants are those who were involved in the use of funds, including development of policies or program decisions, use of funds, provision of services, and evaluation of impact.

3. *Strategic Budgeting: Using Evidence to Mitigate the "COVID slide" and Move Toward Improvement* by Bi Vuong for the National Comprehensive Center provides a definition and example of cost effectiveness analysis.

## Role Descriptions

A designated **facilitator** allows all participants involved in the event to be present and engaged throughout the process. The facilitator keeps the conversations and the process flowing. The facilitator strikes a balance of preventing unproductive digressions, while allowing for productive conversation that is not explicitly planned. A **notetaker** captures notes on the discussions and documents key decisions. If the meeting is more than 1-hour, multiple notetakers are recommended. A **timekeeper** keeps the process flowing based on approximate time allotted for each question and works with the facilitator to make sure all agenda items are covered.

## Ground Rules

Ground rules should be established to ensure discussions are honest, respectful, and productive. Organizations can use their existing norms, or a set that the team agrees upon at the beginning of the review. Possible ground rules include

» Participate actively
» Value all points of view
» Use "Yes…and," rather than either/or thinking
» Use consensus building to arrive at decisions
» Focus on issues that can be addressed, not on issues outside the organization's sphere of influence
» Focus on improving performance, not placing blame
» Acknowledge one's own errors or mistakes

# Step 2. Conducting the AAR

The AAR questions[1] in table 2 focus on critical areas of planning to provide equitable, effective programs and services. The services should focus on accelerating student learning and assist in recovery from the impact of disrupted learning caused by COVID-19. The questions are designed to guide discussion to identify lessons learned from this summer's learning recovery efforts so that the information can then be used in Step 3 to address immediate recommendations and applied to other projects to improve performance and results. Actions that worked well can be applied to current planning for the school year and subsequent summer learning recovery and acceleration programs. For example, if following an established flow of communication was identified as having a positive effect on team performance, then the

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[1] Questions were adapted from the *After-Action Review Guide* (Layland et al., 2020)

same communication flow can be applied to planning subsequent summer learning recovery and acceleration planning. However, if there were missteps in the procurement process for external providers, then the missteps are identified and avoided in future planning.

**Table 2. Summer learning AAR questions**

| Focus Areas | SEA | LEA | School | Service Provider |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Overall/General | » What was the expected outcome for use of state and federal funds for summer learning and acceleration? <br>    ❯ What were the purpose, objectives, targeted audience, time frame, and intended outputs and outcomes? <br>    ❯ What were the anticipated barriers or challenges and how did you plan for them? <br> » What actually happened as a result of the funding and summer learning programming? <br> » What went well and what did not work (i.e., What caused our results?)? <br>    ❯ What were our successes and what made them successful? <br>    ❯ What didn't work well and what caused those missteps? <br>    ❯ What did or can we learn from these successes and missteps? <br> » What will we do to adapt or refine our executions for a better outcome for future school year and summer learning programs? <br>    ❯ Given the information and knowledge we had at the time, what did we do or should have done to sustain the success experienced? <br>    ❯ Given the information we have now, what do we need to do to sustain our successes moving forward? <br>    ❯ Given the information and knowledge we had at the time, what could have been done better? <br>    ❯ Given the information we have now, what can we do differently moving forward? <br>    ❯ What advice could be given to a leader based on the experiences and discussions we have had? | | | |

| Focus Areas | SEA | LEA | School | Service Provider |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policy | » What policy changes were made as a result of the focus of and the need for summer learning and acceleration?<br>» Are those changes still in place?<br>» What impact did or do the policies have on student learning? Did the results match expectations? Why or why not?<br>» Were there additional policy barriers that we should have addressed?<br>» How could policies be revised or added to better support summer learning and acceleration? | » What district policies or procedures changes were made as a result of the focus of and the need for summer learning and acceleration?<br>» Are those changes still in place?<br>» What impact did or do the policies have on student learning? Did the results match expectations? Why or why not?<br>» Were there additional policy barriers that we should have addressed?<br>» How could policies be revised or added to better support summer learning and acceleration? | » What school procedural changes were made as a result of the focus of and the need for summer learning and acceleration?<br>» Are those changes still in place?<br>» What impact did or do the school procedures have on student learning? Did the results match expectations? Why or why not?<br>» Were there additional practice barriers that we should have addressed?<br>» How could procedures or practice be revised or added to better support summer learning and acceleration? | » What provider procedural changes were made to partner and provider services to address the need for summer learning and acceleration?<br>» How could request for proposal (RFP) and contract procedures be improved to reduce the number of changes needed and to better support the partnership and provision of programs or services? |

| Focus Areas | SEA | LEA | School | Service Provider |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Finance** | » What role did the SEA take in providing guidance to LEAs about use of state and federal funding for summer learning programs?<br>» What supports did the SEA provide to LEAs about the procurement of external vendors?<br>» Did the SEA use lessons learned from prior large federal funding pools to plan guidance for the current efforts?<br>» Did local efforts meet our expected outcomes? Why or why not?<br>» What lessons were learned about using federal relief funding to provide targeted student supports?<br>» How could the lessons be used to improve finance policies and procedures to better support summer learning and acceleration? | » How were state and federal funds utilized to support summer learning programming?<br>» How have budget decisions/priorities targeted equitable summer learning services for the most impacted students?<br>» Were summer learning programs funded sufficiently to address student needs?<br>» What lessons were learned about using federal funding to provide targeted student supports?<br>» How can we use lessons learned from this summer to plan for next summer's and the next school year's learning recovery programs? | » Does the school manage its own budget for summer learning programming?<br>» How was funding used to lessen the short-term impact on instruction? Long-term impact? What actions were successful in mitigating the impact? What actions were ineffective? How did you know?<br>» What lessons were learned about using federal funding to provide targeted student supports?<br>» How can we use lessons learned from this summer to plan for next summer's and the next school year's learning recovery programs? | » Were there any contractual challenges or changes due to the focus on providing summer learning?<br>» How could the contract process be improved to better support program or service delivery and effectiveness? |

| Focus Areas | SEA | LEA | School | Service Provider |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Infrastructure/ Capital** | » What infrastructure improvements or changes were made to support summer learning programming and why?<br>» What was the anticipated impact of the improvements? What was the actual immediate and long-term impact of the improvements? Have any additional costs occurred because of the improvements (e.g., upgrades, maintenance)?<br>» Are additional infrastructure improvements needed to address barriers to implementation of effective summer learning programs?<br>» How can we use the lessons to address current infrastructure concerns in a sustainable way? | » What infrastructure improvements or changes were made to support summer learning programming and why?<br>» What was the anticipated impact of the improvements? What was the actual immediate and long-term impact of the improvements? Have any additional costs occurred because of the improvements (e.g., upgrades, maintenance)?<br>» Are additional infrastructure improvements needed to address barriers to implementation of effective summer learning programs?<br>» How can we use the lessons to address current infrastructure concerns in a sustainable way? | » What infrastructure improvements or changes were made to support summer learning programming and why?<br>» What was the anticipated impact of the improvements? What was the actual immediate and long-term impact of the improvements? Have any additional costs occurred because of the improvements (e.g., upgrades, maintenance)?<br>» Are additional infrastructure improvements needed to address barriers to implementation of effective summer learning programs?<br>» How can we use the lessons to address current infrastructure concerns in a sustainable way? | » What infrastructure improvements or changes were needed to support summer learning programming and why?<br>» What infrastructure changes were needed to better support the program or service delivery?<br>» What could be changed in the vendor process and partnership that would avoid any infrastructure issues in future program partnerships? |

| Focus Areas | SEA | LEA | School | Service Provider |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Partnerships** | » What partnerships have been used in the past to provide summer learning programs? What partnerships were used this year?<br>» Are there community organizations already providing accelerated learning (e.g., high dosage tutoring or summer camps)? How effective are those programs? How could partnerships be formed to leverage these services and existing providers?<br>» How efficient were the contracting/bid processes? How could these be improved to facilitate strong partnerships for summer learning?<br>» How did the members of a partnership communicate with each other to coordinate services for students?<br>» How were partnerships routinely monitored to make mid-course corrections, as data and implementation indicated?<br>» How were partnerships evaluated for effectiveness, including breakdowns by student subgroups?<br>» What components need to be in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of each partnership as well as any services provided by the partners? | | | |
| **Staffing and Roles** | » What role did the SEA play in allocating and using funds for summer learning programming?<br>» What role did the SEA play in improving the quality of summer learning services offered (e.g., developing preferred provider lists creating selection criteria or sample RFPs, etc.)?<br>» Did the SEA have the staffing capacity to support LEAs develop and implement summer programming?<br>» How did the SEA reorganize staffing to support this work?<br>» How were funds used to address staffing capacity | » What role did the LEA play in allocating and using funds for summer learning programming?<br>» What role did the LEA play in improving the quality of summer learning services offered (e.g., running an RFP process, monitoring and evaluating vendors, etc.)?<br>» Did the LEA have the staffing capacity to support schools and vendors develop and implement summer programming?<br>» How did the LEA reorganize staffing to support this work?<br>» How were funds used to address staffing capacity for summer learning?<br>» How can we use the lessons from staffing for summer | » What was school staffing before the pandemic?<br>» How was staffing impacted by the pandemic?<br>» How were funds used to address staffing capacity for summer learning?<br>» What was learned about using relief funds to address staffing capacity to provide summer learning?<br>» How can we use the lessons to address current staffing capacity and improve diverse and equitable staffing plans for continued expanded learning opportunities in the future?<br>» How were families or caregivers engaged in the program or service? | » How was the partnership structured in a way that would lead to success?<br>» How was the program staffed to deliver needed services?<br>» Were there any staffing barriers that impacted service delivery? If so, how could they be addressed in the future?<br>» What structural barriers or challenges were experienced that impacted delivery and effectiveness of provided services?<br>» How could the partnership be better structured to be more effective in providing services and get better results? |

| Focus Areas | SEA | LEA | School | Service Provider |
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| | to assist districts and schools in providing summer learning?<br>» What was learned about using relief funds to address staffing capacity to support districts and schools in providing summer learning?<br>» How can we use the lessons to address current staffing capacity and improve diverse and equitable staffing for the future? | learning to address current staffing capacity and improve diverse and equitable staffing as the district plans for continued expanded learning opportunities in the future? | » How did the service providers communicate with families or caregivers? How effective was the communication?<br>» How could the role of parents or caregivers be strengthened to better support attendance, participation, and learning? | » How were families or caregivers engaged in the program or service?<br>» How did the service providers communicate with families or caregivers? How effective was the communication?<br>» How could the role of parents or caregivers be strengthened to better support attendance, participation, and learning?<br>» How could communication between the providers, parents, families, and schools and districts be strengthened? |
| **Services or Programs** | » How were decisions made related to the delivery of summer learning programs and services?<br>» What data were used to inform decisions? What considerations were given to equity?<br>» What additional services or programs were added to support summer learning? How impactful were those programs on | » How were decisions made related to the delivery of summer learning programs and services?<br>» What data were used to inform decisions? What considerations were given to equity?<br>» What additional services or programs were added to support summer learning? How impactful were those programs on instruction and student learning? | » How were decisions made related to the delivery of summer learning programs and services?<br>» What data were used to inform decisions? What considerations were given to equity?<br>» Was the program or service equitable in access and delivery?<br>» What additional services or programs were added to support summer learning? How impactful were those | » What were the academic or curricular components of the program or services? How did these align to student needs?<br>» How effective were the academic or curricular components in addressing learning or acceleration needs?<br>» What questions or information did you not ask/not have that would have enabled you to |

| Focus Areas | SEA | LEA | School | Service Provider |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | instruction and student learning?<br>» What data do you wish you had had to make programmatic decisions? How did you correct that data void?<br>» What data are available to make decisions related to summer learning?<br>» How are programmatic priorities established? How are programs and services selected to address priorities?<br>» What guidance was provided to districts and schools on use of funds for summer learning programs and services and the evaluation of those services and programs?<br>» What lessons learned could assist in selecting, implementing, and evaluating programs and services to recover and accelerate learning for students most in need? | » What data do you wish you had had to make programmatic decisions? How did you correct that data void?<br>» What data are available now to make decisions related to summer learning?<br>» How are programmatic priorities established? How are programs and services selected to address priorities?<br>» What guidance was provided to districts on the use of funds for summer learning programs and services and the evaluation of those services and programs? Was the guidance useful? What additional guidance or support would have been helpful?<br>» What lessons learned could assist in selecting, implementing, and evaluating programs and services to accelerate learning for students most in need? | programs on instruction and student learning?<br>» Were any components of the program designed to address attendance, behavioral, or social emotional learning needs? If yes, how effective were the components?<br>» What data do you wish you had had to make programmatic decisions? How did you correct that data void?<br>» What data are available now to make decisions related to summer learning?<br>» How are programmatic priorities established? How are programs and services selected to address priorities?<br>» What guidance was provided to schools on the use of funds for summer learning programs and services and the evaluation of those services and programs? Was the guidance useful? What additional guidance or support would have been helpful? | develop an even stronger program?<br>» Was the program or service equitable in access and delivery?<br>» Were any components of the program designed to address attendance, behavioral, or social emotional learning needs? If yes, how effective were the components?<br>» How could the program or service be improved for next summer or school year? |

| Focus Areas | SEA | LEA | School | Service Provider |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | » What lessons learned could assist in selecting, implementing, and evaluating programs and services to accelerate learning for students most in need? | |
| **Vendors or Providers** | » Did the SEA use or partner with any providers or vendors to support districts and schools in providing summer learning? How were they used?<br>» What guidance was provided to districts and schools related to using vendors or providers to deliver summer learning or additional learning opportunities?<br>» How was the guidance evaluated?<br>» How were the partnership or services provided by the vendor or provider evaluated?<br>» What lessons learned could be applied to guidance and planning for continued expanded learning opportunities? | » What guidance was provided to schools related to using vendors or providers for summer learning? How was the guidance evaluated?<br>» What guidance was received by the state related to using vendors or providers for summer learning? How was the guidance used to plan and provide summer learning?<br>» Were vendors or providers used to deliver summer learning opportunities? How were they used?<br>» How were the partnership or services provided by the vendor or provider evaluated?<br>» What lessons learned could be applied to guidance and planning for continued expanded learning opportunities? | » What guidance did the district provide to the schools related to using vendors or providers for summer learning? How was the guidance used to plan and provide summer learning?<br>» Were vendors or providers used to deliver summer learning opportunities? How were they used?<br>» How were the partnership or services provided by the vendor or provider evaluated?<br>» What lessons learned could be applied to guidance and planning for continued expanded learning opportunities? | » How did the LEA coordinate and communicate with any and all vendors/providers on an ongoing basis?<br>» Did the LEA meet any vendor-specified non-negotiables outlined in the contract or a memorandum of understanding (MOU)? |

| Focus Areas | SEA | LEA | School | Service Provider |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Monitoring and Evaluation** | » How were the use of funds for summer learning and effectiveness tracked and evaluated?<br><br>» What data would you like to have had to make decisions on use of stimulus funds?<br><br>» What data would assist in making planning decisions now? What actions can be taken now to ensure the right data are available to inform future decisions to address impact of disruptions in learning?<br><br>» Have you remedied any data voids? Why or why not?<br><br>» What lessons learned could assist in improving evaluation of actions taken to provide programs and services to accelerate learning for students most in need? | » How were the use of funds for summer learning and effectiveness tracked and evaluated?<br><br>» How were the effectiveness of summer learning programs tracked and evaluated?<br><br>» How was equity of service delivery and outcomes evaluated?<br><br>» What data would you like to have had to make decisions on use of stimulus funds?<br><br>» Have you remedied any data voids? Why or why not?<br><br>» What data would assist in making planning decisions now? What actions can be taken now to ensure the right data are available to inform future decisions to address impact of disruptions in learning?<br><br>» What lessons learned could assist in improving evaluation of actions taken to provide programs and services to accelerate learning for students most in need? | » How were the use of funds for summer learning and effectiveness tracked and evaluated?<br><br>» How was the impact of the summer learning programs on individual students assessed and analyzed?<br><br>» How was equity of service delivery and outcomes evaluated?<br><br>» What data would you like to have had to make decisions on use of stimulus funds?<br><br>» Have you remedied any data voids? Why or why not?<br><br>» What data would assist in making planning decisions now? What actions can be taken now to ensure the right data are available to inform future decisions to address impact of disruptions in learning?<br><br>» What lessons learned could assist in improving evaluation of actions taken to provide programs and services to accelerate learning for students most in need? | » What was used to measure implementation effectiveness? Did the measure provide timely results so adjustments could be made? Were the adjustments effective?<br><br>» How was implementation measured? How effective was the measure in identifying implementation issues in a timely manner?<br><br>» How was student impact measured? Was evidence of impact examined across demographic and subgroups of students?<br><br>» How aligned were the measures to the expectations set by the state, district, or school?<br><br>» How were results shared with the state, district, or school? Was the format accessible and user friendly?<br><br>» How could implementation and impact measures be improved?<br><br>» How could communication of implementation and student results be more effective? |

## Step 3. Using AAR Results for Planning to Accelerate Learning

Documenting the lessons learned is just that—documentation. Learning has not really occurred unless there is a change in behavior. We must apply the lessons learned and continually adapt to improve actions and sustain the practices that work. AAR teams can use the information gathered through the AAR to build possible scenarios for learning recovery and acceleration. More information on Scenario Planning for Learning Recovery is available here or information on Scenario Planning in general is available here.

**Table 3. Lessons learned**

| Focus Areas | Successes | Missteps | Implications for Current Planning |
|---|---|---|---|
| Overall/General | | | |
| Policy | | | |
| Finance | | | |
| Infrastructure/Capital | | | |
| Partnerships | | | |
| Staffing | | | |
| Services or Programs | | | |
| Monitoring and Evaluation | | | |