

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT EXTERNAL TEAM REPORT

FOR

NEBRASKA EDUCATIONAL SERVICE UNITS



ESU #9 Hastings, Nebraska

ESU Administrator: Drew Harris

External Visitation Dates: March 17-19, 2024



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Introduction

A. Purpose of the External Visitation

As noted within the Nebraska ESU Coordinating Council External Visitation Guidebook, “the guiding principle behind an external visit is to provide an outside, objective, perspective regarding the ESU’s efforts to exemplify the qualities and expectations of the ESU Standards of Performance and Practice.”

The ESU Standards of Performance and Practice are organized into four domains: Purpose and Leadership, Programs and Services, Stakeholder Relationships and Communication, and Resource Capacity. Within each domain, additional indicators provide both clarity and context as to the intent, focus, and expectations set forth within the ESU Standards of Performance and Practice.

In preparation for the ESU #9 External Visit, the following activities were completed in a timely manner in order to provide both the External Team and the ESU #9 Steering Committee opportunities to engage in this important aspect of the Continuous Improvement Process.

1. Initial Meeting between the ESU #9 Steering Committee and the External Team Leader.
2. Check-In Conversations between the ESU #9 Steering Committee and the External Team Leader to continue the development of the External Visit Agenda and format for communicating ESU #9’s Continuous Improvement Processes.
3. Orientation and Follow-Up Meeting with the External Team in order to begin to build team chemistry and share information relating to the External Visit.
4. ESU #9 Steering Committee providing access to information, artifacts, and evidence relating to the ESU Standards of Performance and Practice with the External Team.
5. Final meeting between the ESU #9 Steering Committee and the External Team Leader to address remaining questions relating to the approaching External Visit.



B. Process for Preparing the External Team Report

To assist with the review of the established Continuous Improvement Process and development of both the Oral Exit Report and External Team Report, ESU #9 provided the following information to guide the focus of the external visitation:

1. A Google Site which included the following: CIP Structure, Data Profile, Improvement Goals, Action Plan, Evaluation of Progress, ESU Standards of Performance and Practice, and information relating to their 2019 External Visit.

The External Team, composed of peer professionals, met on two occasions via Zoom prior to facilitating ESU #9's External Visit and met in-person throughout the duration of the External Visit. An External Team Roster (e.g. Names, Positions, and Contact Information) has been provided in this report.

Throughout the visit, the External Team had an opportunity to meet with various stakeholder groups to gain additional insight into and understanding of ESU #9's continuous improvement processes and provided services. A summary of stakeholder groups and number of participants is included below:

- ESU #9 Steering Committee = 11
- ESU #9 Staff = 15
- Superintendents = 6
- Community Partners = 6
- Elementary Principals = 6
- Secondary Principals = 6
- ESU #9 Leadership Team = 5
- Teachers = 9
- Member District Staff = 9
- ESU #9 Board = 8
- Total = 81

The External Team Report for ESU #9 was drafted in a collaborative manner in which all External Team Members provided input relating to ESU #9's Continuous Improvement Process and on the ESU Standards of Performance and Practice. The External Team Leader (Kellen Conroy) finalized the report, based on input from the External Team and submitted the report in a timely manner to both ESU #9 Administrator Drew Harris and the Nebraska Department of Education.



The Oral Exit Report for ESU #9 was facilitated by the External Team on Tuesday March 19th at 1:15 pm. A link to the [ESU #9 Oral Exit Report](#) (via Google Slides) has been shared with the ESU #9 Administrator Drew Harris and is included.

C. Background Information

ESU #9 was formerly accredited through AdvancED and hosted its previous Engagement Review April 1-3, 2019. Within the former AdvancED (now Cognia) Model of Continuous Improvement, the included domains consist of Leadership Capacity, Learning Capacity, & Resource Capacity.

From the former Engagement Review, ESU #9 scored well above average on the Index of Educational Quality (IEQ) and many Effective Practices were noted. In addition, the External Team identified five themes aligned to the continuous improvement process: Formalization of Processes, Communication, Use of Data, Distributed Leadership, and Promotion of a Positive Culture.

D. Findings

The External Team believes it was provided with meaningful information through artifacts and stakeholder interviews in order to provide ESU #9 with actionable feedback.

As a result of the External Team's observations and analysis of evidence, 3 commendations and 2 recommendations were identified for the continuous improvement process.

In addition, 4 commendations and 2 recommendations were identified for the ESU Standards of Performance and Practice.

Additional commentary has been provided within this report relating to ESU #9's Continuous Improvement Processes and the ESU Standards of Performance and Practice.



External Team Roster

- **Kellen Conroy, Team Leader**
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Visitation Agenda

The Agenda was developed as a joint effort between the External Team Leader and the ESU #9 Steering Committee.

Sunday March 17, 2024

6:30 pm External Team Orientation Meeting and Supper

Monday March 18, 2024

7:30 am Arrival of External Team at ESU #9
8:00 am Opening Presentation/Interview with ESU #9 Steering Committee
9:30 am ESU #9 Facilities Tour and Break
10:00 am Interview: ESU #9 Staff (A) & Superintendents
11:00 am Interview: ESU #9 Staff (B) & Community Partners

11:45 am Lunch

12:30 pm External Team Work Time
1:00 pm Interview: Elementary Principals & High School Principals
2:00 pm Interview: ESU #9 Leadership Team
3:30 pm Interview: Teachers & Member District Staff
4:15 pm External Team Work Time
5:00 pm Interview & Meal: ESU #9 Board
6:00 pm Return to hotel & External Team Work Time

Tuesday March 19, 2024

7:30 am Arrival of External Team at ESU #9
8:00 am External Team Work Time
10:00 am Interview: ESU #9 Steering Committee
10:30 am External Team Work Time
12:00 pm Lunch with ESU #9 Leadership Team & Prepare for Oral Exit Presentation
1:15 pm Oral Exit Presentation



Mission & Vision

ESU #9 Mission: Educate, Empower, & Support

ESU #9 Vision: Serving our school communities by providing excellence, inspiration, and innovation.

Agency Goals

Goal 1: Establish and maintain effective systems to demonstrate credibility and build relationships with school communities and staff.

Action Plans

ESU #9's [Action Plan](#) can be located on the following page of their Continuous Improvement Google Site.

Action Steps:

ESU #9 has identified the following strategies to support the agency improvement goals:

- Identification of Systems and Processes
 - Identify and document systems and processes for communication, data collection and analysis, distributed leadership, building relationships, and demonstrating credibility.
- Formalization of Systems and Processes
 - Establish, maintain, build, and/or implement systems of high need.
- Evaluation of Systems and Processes
 - Evaluate the current and potential systems.
- Data Collection of Impact
 - Collect evidence of impact (e.g. How, Where, What, etc.)



Continuous Improvement Process Commendations & Recommendations

Commendation 1

- ESU #9 engaged in a concerted effort to develop continuous improvement processes based upon feedback from multiple sources.
 - A thoughtful approach was taken by ESU #9 to incorporate feedback from their 2019 AdvancED Ed Engagement Review into the current cycle of continuous improvement. In addition, ESU #9 collected, analyzed, and implemented feedback from staff and stakeholders to support the development of systems and structures in order to review and update their mission and vision.

Commendation 2

- ESU #9 has established committee structures that have led to the involvement of all staff, connectivity among programs, and shared leadership.
 - Through the purposeful development of continuous improvement committee structures that align to the mission, vision, and goal, ESU #9 has successfully established a system that promotes and provides all staff with an opportunity to be involved, heard, and to embrace meaningful collaboration. Ultimately, these efforts have resulted in building a shared leadership approach that can be built upon in the next continuous improvement cycle.
 - To assist with the communication, ESU #9 has developed a visual that provides concrete connectivity between programs and committees within the Service Unit. This graphic served as a foundational touchstone for continuous improvement conversations and work.

Commendation 3

- ESU #9 has effectively developed, communicated, and prioritized their continuous improvement goal.
 - Remaining focused on a goal throughout a continuous improvement cycle can, at times, be a challenge for organizations. ESU #9 clearly



demonstrated that this is not the case for their organization as they never lost sight of what their goal was. Numerous stakeholders, both inside and outside of ESU #9 could speak to the goal, describe ESU #9 using words associated with their continuous improvement goal, and share examples of how they (ESU #9) are working tirelessly to meet their identified goal.

Recommendation 1

- Establish a clear, on-going reflective process to analyze the sustainability and efficiency of programs and services provided to member school districts.
 - ESU #9 provides many high-quality programs and services to member school districts as was clearly demonstrated and communicated by both ESU #9 Staff and Stakeholders.
 - As a means to strengthen existing structures, it will be important for ESU #9 to establish processes that provide all departments within the Service Unit an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate programs and services to ensure sustainability, effectiveness, and efficiency of those provided programs and services.

Recommendation 2

- Continue to operationalize processes and procedures that increase the shared knowledge and leadership within the ESU.
 - Moving forward within the continuous improvement process, ESU #9 has the opportunity to continue to mobilize knowledge (“de-silo”) within the Service Unit through the use and completion of department manuals and the review/continuation of the committee structures which will increase collaboration and support ongoing development of shared leadership.

Findings of the External Team

The findings of the external team, based on stakeholder interviews and a review of the evidence provided, were determined using the ESU Standards Rubric. The rationale for standards identified as **Beginning** or **Exemplary** is included.

Domain 1: Purpose and Leadership			
ESU Standard Indicator	Beginning	Evident	Exemplary
1A: The ESU commits to a vision, purpose, and a core set of beliefs about providing programs and services that meet the expectations of the ESU and its member districts.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1B: The ESU engages in a continuous improvement process that improves professional practice, effectiveness, and results.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1C: ESU leadership establishes a strategic plan, as well as processes, procedures and conditions to support agency effectiveness.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1D: The ESU establishes conditions to support the development of individual and collective knowledge, skills and professionalism.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1E: The ESU provides professional growth opportunities for internal and district staff in leadership positions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1F: The ESU uses a comprehensive process for staff evaluation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1G: The ESU demonstrates actions that ensure the achievement of the ESUCC's purpose .	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1H: The ESU Board, through board policies, understands and practices its defined roles and responsibilities to maintain an effective agency.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1I: ESU programming and services fulfill the requirements of Rule 84.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Rationale:

- *1A - Mission, Vision & Purpose*
 - The Mission, Vision and Purpose of ESU #9 clearly guides the direction of programs and services provided to member districts. As evidenced through numerous stakeholders that were interviewed, positive commentary relating to ESU #9's innovation, inspiration and support prevailed within the conversations. When asked about one word to describe ESU #9, many stakeholders shared words such as, but not limited to: Supportive, Dynamic, Innovative, Connected, Relationships, and Inspiring.

In addition, ESU #9 has clearly established and engaged in a process for reviewing their Mission, Vision and Purpose. This process was completed collaboratively through the thoughtful gathering and analysis of feedback, and when finished, was clearly communicated to ESU #9 Staff and Stakeholders. The vision and mission can be seen and felt throughout the interactions and relationships that ESU 9 has established.

- *1B - Continuous Improvement*
 - ESU #9 has clearly engaged in continuous improvement processes that improves professional practice, effectiveness, and results. This is evident through numerous data points such as but not limited to: Incorporation of Feedback from the 2019 AdvancED Engagement Review, ESU #9 Staff Commentary, Stakeholder Interviews, and Established Continuous Improvement Committee Structures & Leadership.
- *1G - ESUCC Purpose & 1I - Rule 84*
 - Through their Mission (*Educate, Empower, & Support*) and Vision (*Serving our school communities by providing excellence, inspiration, and innovation*) and provided programs and services, ESU #9 has demonstrated exemplary actions that ensure the achievement of the ESUCC's Purpose and outcomes identified within Rule 84.

Domain 2: Programs and Services			
ESU Standard Indicator	Beginning	Evident	Exemplary
2A: The ESU uses a data-driven process to systematically identify the needs of districts to develop an agency service plan.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2B: The ESU ensures its services are developed and delivered, have clear and measurable outcomes, and are aligned with evidence-based practices.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2C: The ESU has established a process to assess implementation of targeted programs and services.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2D: Learning opportunities are provided to ESU staff in order to develop and enhance the skills necessary for delivering the agency service plan.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2E: The ESU fosters an innovative and collaborative culture to optimize program and service delivery.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Rationale:

- *2A - Service Planning*
 - Service planning with schools done by PD is excellent. Less evidence for other departments. Could this be expanded to include Technology and Special Services to provide a more comprehensive plan?
- *2B - Services*
 - Schools overwhelmingly appreciate the programs and services offered by ESU #9. Evidence shows that programs are carefully developed and planned. Staff are prepared to provide quality services.
- *2D - Learning Opportunities*
 - ESU #9 encourages professional development to advance staff expertise. Internal and itinerant staff are supported and encouraged to develop as professionals and are given access to quality professional development.
- *2E - Collaboration*
 - Collaboration is evident within each department, across departments, and with member school staff. The focus to break down silos at ESU #9 has been successful and evidence shows that leadership at ESU #9 not only values collaboration, but has developed systems that prioritize it.

Domain 3: Stakeholder Relationships and Communication			
ESU Standard Indicator	Beginning	Evident	Exemplary
3A: ESU staff provide internal and external stakeholders with opportunities to collaborate and inform the development of the agency's purpose, programs and services.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3B: ESU staff communicate efficiently and effectively with internal and external stakeholders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3C: The ESU provides an induction process to their service agency for new district leadership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3D: The ESU is an active partner in activities and initiatives of the ESUCC, and formally engages with and collaborates with the Nebraska Department of Education.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Rationale:

- **3A - Agency's Purpose, Programs, & Services**
 - The board members and leaders have increased community visibility and district relationships by visiting district school board meetings.
 - Leadership meets regularly and frequently to ensure departments' efforts are aligned and moving forward.
 - The continuous improvement committee structure involves all staff in agency goals. Staff have a choice regarding which committee they join. Effort to increase staff survey response rate was intentional and successful. Multiple staff mentioned appreciation for input in revision of mission and vision and timing of committee meetings.
 - District staff have multiple opportunities to inform agency purpose and services (i.e., superintendent meetings, Empowering Leaders, content/role specific cadres.)
- **3B - Communication**
 - District personnel consistently reported that ESU staff--across departments and roles--are trustworthy and responsive to needs and feedback (e.g., business manager support, meeting logistics, professional development topics/styles.)

- **3C - Induction Processes**
 - Induction processes for service agency staff are evident (i.e., New Hire Day, family financial night, internal mentoring.) *This could be an area of opportunity for ESU #9 to expand.*
 - Induction opportunities for new district leadership are available through Empowering Leaders, superintendents’ meetings, and personal visits.
- **3D - Partnerships**
 - Internal and external stakeholders across interview groups consistently reported feeling welcome and valued.
 - Community involvement is intentional and exceptional (e.g., Roadside Rallies, Meals on Wheels.)

Domain 4: Resource Capacity			
ESU Standard Indicator	Beginning	Evident	Exemplary
4A: The ESU utilizes strategic planning to align human, material, and fiscal resources to meet the short and long term goals of the agency.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4B: The ESU allocates human, material, and fiscal resources to optimize agency efficiency and effectiveness.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4C: The ESU recruits, employs and retains highly qualified staff.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4D: The ESU provides induction, mentoring, professional learning opportunities for staff to grow and improve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Rationale:

- **4A - Strategic Planning**
 - From the Opening Presentation and throughout the visit the External Team was able to visualize the strategic plan and how the ESU #9 staff contributes to the short and long term goals of the agency. Purposeful efforts included time with a representative from NCSA to solidify common goals and additional internal staff time to ensure all are included and see



themselves in the goals.

- *4B - Allocation of Resources*
 - Purposeful planning is evident and as mentioned in this External Report, ESU #9 is encouraged to continue to maintain the high quality systems in place and to add a routine analysis loop that provides immediate reflection on efficiency and effectiveness.

- *4C - Staffing*
 - The External Team very much enjoyed hearing about the high quality staff at ESU #9 during Stakeholder Interviews. Here are some examples of stakeholder responses that celebrate the work of ESU #9 staff.
 - “The support we received when we changed Student Information Systems (SIS) was priceless.”
 - “ESU 9 has amazing people. It is evident they love what they do. They hire high quality people at all levels”
 - “ESU #9 has helped us a lot with our instructional model. They also helped us adopt reading and math standards. They are always willing to share everything that is provided.”

- *4D - Induction & Mentoring*
 - As part of their own internal processes, ESU #9 has developed appropriate induction and mentoring activities. Staff are able to pursue a wide variety of professional development opportunities to improve their skill set and ultimately, their work with schools, which can trickle down to students.



ESU Standards of Performance & Practice Commendations

Based on the findings, the external team is providing ESU #9 with the following commendations. Each commendation is associated with an ESU Standard; if applicable, supporting standards that also connect with the commendation are cited.

Commendation 1

- Domain 1 - Purpose & Leadership
 - *1A - The ESU commits to a vision, purpose, and a core set of beliefs about providing programs and services that meet expectations of the ESU and its member districts.*
 - The Mission, Vision, and Purpose of ESU #9 clearly guides the direction of programs and services provided to member districts.
 - The Mission and Vision of ESU #9 can clearly be seen and felt throughout the interactions and relationships that have been established within and outside of the Service Unit and with member school districts.

Commendation 2

- Domain 2 - Programs & Services
 - *2E - The ESU fosters an innovative and collaborative culture to optimize program and service delivery.*
 - ESU #9 has made significant efforts to break down existing silos and has embraced a collaborative culture to support the planning, development and implementation of programs and services to member school districts. Throughout many stakeholder interviews, it was evident to the External Team that the programs and services provided to member schools are highly valued and respected.



Commendation 3

- **Domain 3 - Stakeholder Relationships & Communication**
 - *3B - ESU Staff communicate efficiently and effectively with internal and external stakeholders.*
 - Communication and community engagement are two of the many strengths ESU #9 possesses. Throughout the External Visit, it was clearly evident through stakeholder interviews, data provided, etc. that ESU #9 takes great pride in community outreach efforts (e.g. Meals on Wheels and Roadside Rallies) and connecting with member school district boards, staff, and communities. In addition, it was noted several times that both ESU #9 Staff and Stakeholders always feel welcomed and valued when onsite and/or interacting with ESU #9 Staff.

Commendation 4

- **Domain 4 - Resource Capacity**
 - *4C - The ESU recruits, employs, and retains high quality staff.*
 - One quote shared with the External Team that directly aligns to Domain 4 of the ESU Standards of Performance and Practice was, *"ESU 9 has amazing people. It is evident they love what they do. They hire high quality people at all levels."*
 - Throughout the visit, ESU #9 staff shared that they are able to pursue a wide variety of professional development opportunities to improve their skill set and ultimately, their work with schools, which has the opportunity to significantly impact teaching and learning in member school districts.
 - A consideration for ESU #9 relating to professional development for staff would be to explore how staff can demonstrate, systematize, and distribute new learning within departments and the Service Unit.



ESU Standards of Performance & Practice Recommendations

Based on the findings, the external team is providing ESU #9 with the following considerations for improvement. Each recommendation is associated with an ESU Standard; if applicable, supporting standards that also connect with the recommendation are cited.

Recommendation 1

- Domain 1 - Staff Evaluation
 - *1F - The ESU uses a comprehensive process for staff evaluation.*

 - Explore strategies to engage in meaningful evaluation that supports the growth and development of staff. Throughout interviews with ESU #9 Staff, commentary was offered that highlighted evaluation processes and the desire to more closely align evaluation processes with roles and jobs performed within ESU #9 and member school districts.

Recommendation 2

- Domain 2 - Service Planning with Districts (2c)
 - *2A - ESUs use a data-driven process to systematically identify the needs of districts to develop an agency service plan.*

 - As ESU #9 continue to plan for and review programs and services provided to member schools districts, there is an opportunity to expand consistency of the service planning processes with districts to include all ESU departments (e.g. Leadership, Professional Development, Technology, and Special Services).



Next Steps

Submission of the Report and Improvement/Action Plan:

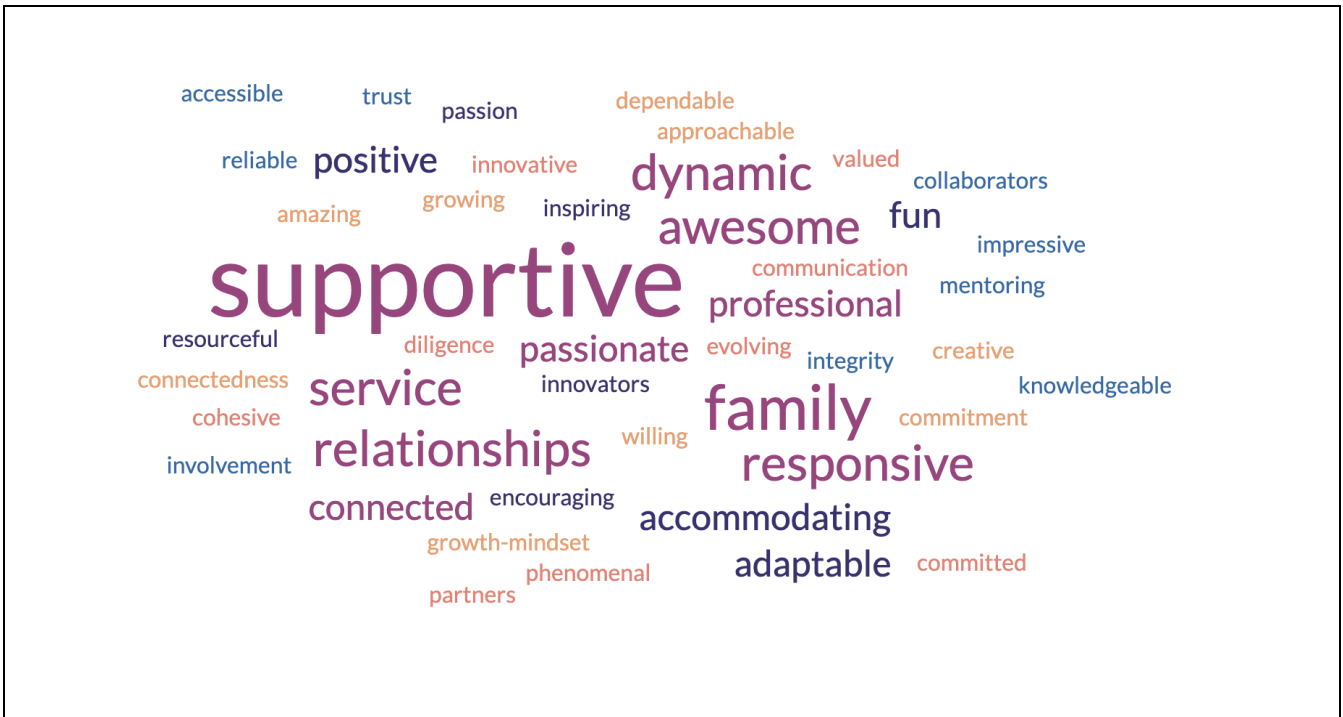
The Exit Report will be finalized and submitted to Educational Service Unit #9 and the Nebraska Department of Education within two weeks of the conclusion of the External Visit.

Additional Commentary

Over the course of the External Visit, many conversations with ESU #9 Staff and Stakeholders took place and the External Review Team wanted to highlight some of the powerful comments that were shared with us relating to ESU #9.

- "Working together to achieve a common goals"
- "Random acts of improvement are not good enough for us"
- "Feels like a family atmosphere"
- "I can see a change that there is more of an effort to include staff that aren't always in the office"
- "I love the support that you get here. You can tell the minute you walk into a building what the people are like. This is where I want to be"
- "We work hard here and we have fun"
- "All office assistants are rockstars"
- "You can feel the culture in all parts of the building"
- "I think people really feel valued here. I feel valued and my work feels valued"
- "I feel valued and listened to"
- "The staff that we have in our building are great and very professional"
- "The number one thing I felt at ESU 9 was valued"
- "I love coming to work everyday because of the people I work with"
- "Whatever their position at ESU 9, they know it forward, backward, upside down"
- "Definitely want to make sure we are all successful on our end and give us the tools to do that"
- "Drew does an amazing job of making people feel welcome and he makes a point of this. This is where I want to be."

When asked to describe ESU #9 with one word, staff and stakeholders shared the following...





Thank You

On behalf of the External Visitation Team, we would like to extend our sincere thanks and gratitude to Educational Service Unit #9, their staff, member school districts, and community partners for the tremendous support, hospitality, organization, and communication leading up to and throughout the External Visit.

For questions and or additional information, please contact...

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