

## STUDY OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW AND TRAINING (ART) GRANTS IN THE USDA NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH AND BREAKFAST PROGRAMS (SUMMARY)

### Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) established the current Administrative Review (AR) process in response to the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) (P.L. 111-296). State agencies (SAs) must review all Local Educational Authorities' (LEA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP) operations at least once during the 3-year review cycle. The USDA Food and Nutrition Service has made Administrative Review and Training (ART) grant funds available on a competitive basis to the 57 SAs that administer the NSLP and School Breakfast Program (SBP). Grants are awarded for the purpose of identifying, reviewing, monitoring, and training LEAs and school sites that demonstrated a high level of, or a high risk for, program administrative errors. Uses for ART grant funds include, but are not limited to, developing and delivering training to LEA administrative personnel, and improving State-level technologies to enhance State-level monitoring capabilities to identify and address program administrative errors in error-prone LEAs.

The formative research ART grant study had three objectives: (1) describe how interventions supported by ART grants improved grantee administrative processes; (2) examine how ART grantees sustain their activities after their FNS funding has ended; and (3) describe challenges to implementation and sustainability of ART grant interventions and how those challenges may be overcome.

### Methods

The study used a qualitative approach to address the three objectives. The approach included telephone interviews with SA and LEA staff from the 20 States that completed 22 ART grants by the end of Fiscal Year 2017 (two States received two grants during the period). Additionally, follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with State administrative review staff in 10 States to gather more detail about their administrative review processes. Grant applications, financial information, and grantee reports submitted to FNS were reviewed systematically both to inform the interviews and the analysis.

All qualitative information was entered into NVivo and systematically analyzed for themes based on the research questions.

### Study Findings

***ART grant projects helped grantees improve their administrative review processes, rendering them more efficient and more likely to reduce administrative error.*** Many grantees described their post-grant administrative review process as more streamlined, more concise, simpler, or faster than their processes in place prior to implementing the new systems and receiving their ART grants. For example, one grantee estimated a time savings of 85 percent when producing summaries of review results. Grantees also viewed improvements to the administrative review process as improving the quality of the reviews. Grantees identified improvements in communication between the SA and LEAs as a sometimes unexpected benefit of organizing and streamlining policies, procedures, and data collection. For example, several grantees reported the new system made it easier for reviewers and LEAs to understand what was expected of them and to document progress throughout the review.

Overall, 11 grantees reported their ART grant projects reduced error rates, whereas 7 said there were too many variables involved to comment on the impact on error rates. Grantees specifically mentioned having better controls in place and a more accurate nutrient analysis contributed to the reductions. Improvements to direct certification were reported among the greatest successes of the ART grants, as many grantees highlighted how much easier it is to identify eligible families in the direct certification process as a result of the improvements funded through the grants.

***ART Grant projects helped some States reduce administrative costs and burden.*** Six grantees reported their grant projects reduced administrative costs by reducing paperwork and the time and effort required to conduct administrative reviews. Following implementation of their ART projects, 14 grantees reported that staff spend less time on the administrative review process. Several grantees mentioned the time savings is partly due to a new system with centralized data entry, which reduces the time of both submission and review.

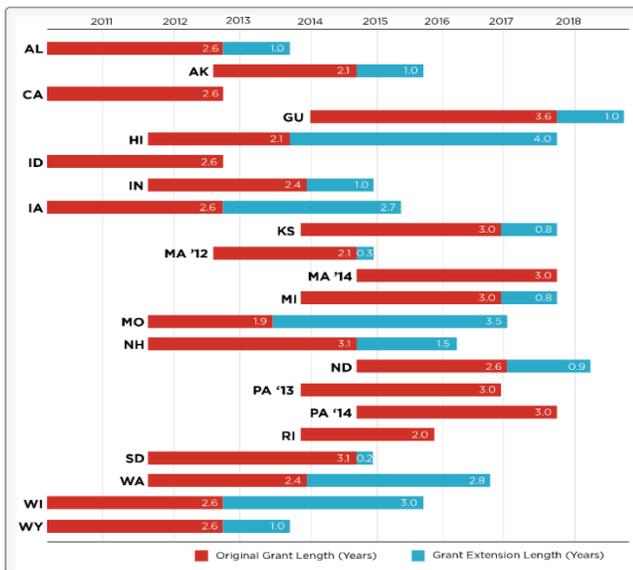
***Grantees learned lessons about the challenges they faced during their ART grant project that will inform future projects and grant proposals.*** Among the most important and commonly cited challenges were staff turnover and loss of subject-matter expertise over the grant period, lack of technical expertise for Information

Technology (IT) projects available in SAs, difficulties in the procurement process and dealing with vendors, and lack of dedicated project management capacity in the SA. Early grantees struggled with implementing the new administrative review process during their projects, requiring major course corrections to their grant projects midstream.

Several grantees reported they had underestimated how extensive, lengthy, and cost-intensive testing would be for implementing a technology project. Two grantees reported they had not factored in how expensive maintenance costs would be for a vendor to continually update the system once it was in place. One grantee recommended doing research ahead of time, asking other grantees specific questions about their experiences with vendors related to costs, challenges, and maintenance.

**Grant periods generally lasted longer than initially expected, requiring no-cost extensions in order to complete projects.** As proposed, grant periods ranged from 1 to 3 years, as required by the ART grant application. However, *actual* grant periods ultimately ranged from 2 to 6 years. Six grantees completed their projects during their intended grant period, but 16 required 1 or more no-cost extensions in order to complete their projects. See Figure 1. Common reasons for requesting no-cost extensions were delays in implementation, changes in scope of work, changes in partners, project management challenges, and staff turnover. Also cited was USDA’s implementation of the new administrative review process mid-grant, which affected grantees’ implementation plans.

**Figure 1. Administrative Review and Training (ART) grantee timelines showing initial and actual grant periods.**

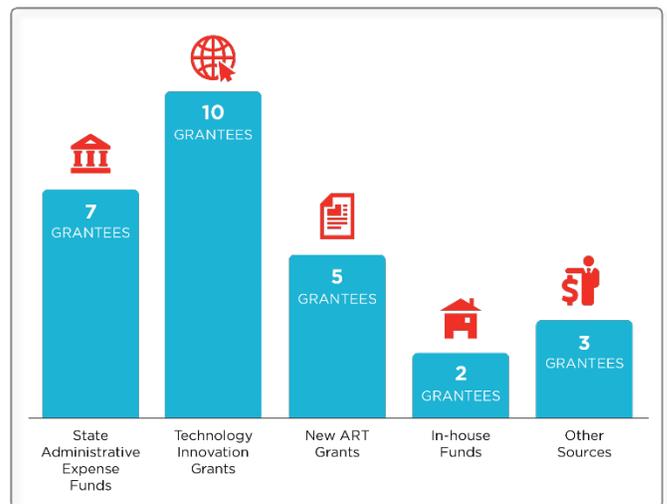


**Almost 10 percent of all money awarded was returned, as several States returned significant portions of their ART grant funds.** While the majority of grantees used all of their grant funding, some returned substantial portions

of their grant. Five grantees returned more than 30 percent of their grant money. In total, \$2,127,274.11 (9.1%) of all money awarded under the 22 grants was returned. The reasons for returning funds varied, but many grantees attributed it to changes in their implementation plans. For example, one SA originally proposed to contract with an outside vendor to develop a new automated system. However, once awarded, the State decided to develop the system in-house to save costs and ultimately returned over \$750,000, or more than half of their total grant.

**Grantees differ in how they have sustained and expanded their projects after the grant ended.** Many reported relying heavily on State Administrative Expense funds, another ART grant, FNS Technology Innovation grants, their own in-house operating budgets, or in-kind resources to maintain and update their IT systems, training modules, and other activities developed under the ART grant (Figure 2). Several grantees continued to enhance and expand activities originally funded by the ART grants. For example, one grantee plans to add a function that allows LEAs to enter their corrective actions within the online review tool.

**Figure 2. Means employed by ART grantees to sustain their grant projects after the end of their ART grant.**



ART=Administrative Review and Training

**For More Information**

Nutter et al. (2020). *Administrative Review & Training Grants, Final Study Report*. Prepared by Abt Associates, Contract No. AG-3198-K-16-0042. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Conor McGovern. Available online at: [the FNS research and analysis page](#).

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