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Executive Summary of

Race to the Top Online Professional Development Evaluation

Year 1 Report

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RACE TO THE TOP ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EVALUATION: YEAR 1 REPORT

Executive Summary

The North Carolina Race to the Top (RttT) proposal (North Carolina Office of the Governor, 2010) specifies that the state's Professional Development Initiative will focus on the "use of e-learning tools to meet the professional development needs of teachers, schools, and districts" (p. 191). It points to research demonstrating that "well-designed and -implemented online professional development programs are not only valued by teachers but also positively impact classroom practices and student learning." It then states that:

[North Carolina will leverage technology to] strengthen professional development offerings in many ways, such as:

- Ensuring that professional development that addresses priority content is available statewide;
- Providing alternatives for educators who prefer the flexibility, pacing, and learning styles possible through online learning;
- Providing opportunities for teachers to interact with mentors and content experts when face-to-face meetings are not possible;
- Engaging educators in virtual learning as students, thereby providing them with first-hand experiences that will help them understand and employ the potential of e-learning with their students; and
- Extending and enhancing on-site workshops, professional learning communities, coaching, mentoring, classroom observations, and other components of local professional development programs through the use of online communications and resources. (p. 191)

This first annual report on the State's progress to date on designing and implementing online professional development addresses the following general evaluation questions that guide the overall evaluation of all RttT professional development efforts:

1. *State Strategies*: To what extent did the state implement and support proposed RttT professional development efforts?
2. *Short-Term Outcomes*: What were direct outcomes of state-level RttT professional development efforts?

As a supplement to the previously-submitted baseline evaluation report on the Professional Development Initiative, *Building LEA and Regional Professional Development Capacity*, the purpose of this report is to evaluate the extent to which the state has implemented and supported the proposed RttT online professional development, as well as the direct outcomes of those efforts (outlined in Appendix A). It focuses exclusively on progress made through June 30, 2012 (the first year of implementation) toward meeting the goals for online professional development (OPD) as set out in the state's RttT proposal and scope of work; all progress after that date will be addressed in future reports. It is primarily intended to provide formative feedback about the

state's approach to and progress to date in using online (also called e-learning) technologies to extend opportunities for professional learning for K-12 teachers and administrators. As such, the report focuses on professional development efforts in which online formats were the primary method for delivering content or facilitating activities (e.g. webinars, online learning modules, and content repositories).

Overview of NC RttT Online Professional Development Activities

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) is responsible for leading and managing the Professional Development Initiative. One of the primary goals of this initiative is to “expand the online professional development infrastructure to provide accessible and high-quality online professional development for all educators throughout North Carolina” (North Carolina Office of the Governor, 2010, p. 10).

NCDPI's primary approach to addressing the state's RttT OPD goals has been to provide LEAs with access to self-paced online modules that present to educators instructional content related to RttT priority areas via text, graphics, and audio and video components, along with some embedded questions and offline activities (the latter implemented locally) to check for understanding or to suggest further reflection and discussion. NCDPI also has provided a series of real-time webinars in which NCDPI staff present information and provide opportunities for questions to be addressed. Finally, NCDPI has provided various online resources (for example, crosswalks of the current and new standards) to support professional development activities.

NCDPI created a RttT Facilitator's Guide¹ (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2011) for LEA professional development teams. The plan outlined in this Guide conveys that each LEA is responsible for providing effective professional development for local educators, and that the NCDPI online resources should be used as a part of those LEA-level programs. The systemic, blended approach to providing online and offline components outlined in the Facilitator's Guide defines effective professional development as job-embedded, research-driven, data-informed, professional community-based, and aligned to RttT initiatives. The Facilitator's Guide also articulates seven specific responsibilities of the RttT Regional Professional Development Leads in supporting Local Education Agency (LEA) and charter professional development efforts, including establishing and supporting professional learning communities (PLCs).²

Through June 2012, the primary online resources provided by NCDPI were 90-minute modules provided via the NC Education Moodle Learning Management System. To date, the Phase I and Phase II modules, including NC FALCON, have addressed the following key RttT-related priority areas: (a) successful transition to the new Common Core and Essential Standards; (b) implementation of formative and summative assessment; (c) use of data to support instruction;

¹ <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/acre/resources/facilitator-guide.pdf>

² One such model recommended by NCDPI for PLCs is the DuFour framework, which emphasizes a culture of collaboration and a focus on results:
<http://www.allthingsplc.info/pdf/articles/DuFourWhatIsAProfessionalLearningCommunity.pdf>

- (d) effective utilization of the new North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES); and
- (e) use of technology for teaching and learning.

NCDPI also has provided a series of webinars, or “chats,” that address RttT priority areas. These are 60- to 90-minute live online sessions with NCDPI leaders and content experts, intended for LEA professional development leaders and other educators. The webinars are archived online so that educators can continue to access them after the live event. They have covered a range of RttT-relevant topics, such as the new standards and assessments, the planned Instructional Improvement System, the Educator Evaluation System, resources to help schools meet the state’s STEM strategic plan, planning professional development, and curriculum mapping.

In addition, NCDPI has provided a set of web-based resources that can be used in local professional development programs. These include materials from RttT-funded regional summer institutes for LEA-level professional development teams, the Facilitator’s Guide to assist LEA and charter school teams that are planning local professional development initiatives, resources that unpack the new standards and provide crosswalks showing how they differ from the previous standards, resources supporting formative assessment processes, information about changes in writing instruction, and a variety of other information about RttT-related plans and activities. Additional modules and resources were released beginning in June 2012, including six new RttT Phase II modules and a cohort-based, facilitator-led version of the *North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards* module (which became available on September 17, 2012); an additional NC FALCON module will be released in Fall 2012. In addition, an online tutorial on the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES) was developed for administrators and made available through the NCEES Wiki. These additional modules and resources will be discussed in future evaluation reports.

Evaluation Findings

The evaluation findings are based upon data collected from NCDPI web analytics, surveys of the users of the online resources, reviews of the online modules and resources, observations of webinars, and detailed data (via surveys, interviews, and focus groups) from schools participating in the RttT Professional Development Evaluation longitudinal descriptive study. Major findings are summarized below.

Overall Relevance, Interest, and Access

- Online modules, webinars, and resources were aligned to the RttT professional development priorities and directly addressed the standards for teaching adopted by North Carolina.
- Website analytics show that, since July 2011, there has been considerable interest in and access to the RttT online materials. Approximately one-half of the state’s educators had completed at least one module as of June 30, 2012, with an average of about 2.1 modules per educator. Between August 2011 and March 2012, approximately 1,800 educators participated in the webinars, with those on mathematics attracting the most interest by far. There were more than 27,000 visitors to the NC Essential Standards webpage in January alone.
- Educators reported difficulty finding specific RttT resources, since they are distributed across multiple online locations.

*Online Modules*³

- Evaluator reviews and educator feedback revealed that the online modules provided a concise overview, objectives were clearly described, and directions for activities were easy to follow. The online modules and webinars were aligned to the RttT professional development priority areas and directly addressed the North Carolina standards for teaching.
- The state's original RttT Detailed Scope of Work (DSW) (pp. 52-53) specified that 16 modules to support the transition to the new standards and assessments would be available by the end of 2011. In July, 2012, USED approved an amendment asking for an extension to the original timeline for development in response to delays in the state hiring process for online developers, with new target dates of November 2011 for the first seven modules and June 2012 for the remaining nine. As of June 30, 2012, 13 of the 16 modules specified in the revised timeline were developed and made available to educators, with two additional modules planned for release later in the year. Within the original timeframe proposed by the DSW, however, only one module was released on schedule; several LEA Professional Development Coordinators stated that these delays negatively impacted local professional development plans to incorporate the modules.
- Approximately 76% of educators agreed that the modules were easily accessible. Of those who indicated difficulties with access, teachers reported more issues than did school administrators. Access issues included difficulty locating the modules, outdated software, unreliable or slow Internet access, and incorrect log-in information.
- Overall, 78% of module participants agreed that the modules were relevant to their professional development needs. Two major weaknesses educators reported that limited the value of the modules were that they were (a) redundant with prior professional development activities and (b) not sufficiently tailored to specific content and grade-level needs for teachers.
- When asked whether the modules were of high quality, 78% of educators agreed or strongly agreed. Administrators were more likely to agree that the modules were of high quality than were teachers, and, among them, elementary and middle school teachers were more likely to do so than were high school teachers.
- On more specific survey items, 83% of participants rated the modules as well-organized, but only 71% agreed that the modules provided meaningful opportunities for collaboration and/or social interaction. While 79% agreed that the modules increased their understanding of the material, 70% agreed that the modules provided constructive feedback and were free of technical issues.
- A review of the online modules using a rubric aligned to the Learning Forward/NSDC (2011) professional development standards (Appendix B), in addition to participant data, suggest

³ The evaluation findings are limited to the Phase I Online Learning Modules, including NC FALCON (detailed in Section I), webinars, and additional online resources made available to LEAs during the 2011-12 school year. The Phase II modules released in June 2012 are included for the purpose of addressing the scheduled timeline for module development proposed in the state's detailed scope of work through June 2012, but are not reflected in the findings throughout this report. These modules will be addressed in the September 2013 Annual Report.

that many of these standards are not being fully addressed. Areas in which the modules could better align include: learning community approaches; prioritization and coordination of professional development resources and activities by local leadership; use of data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning; effective adult learning designs; support for long-term professional development implementations; and a focus on specific student learning outcomes.

Webinars

- Almost 83% of webinar participants agreed that the webinars were relevant to their professional development needs, while 78% agreed they were of high quality.
- More recent webinars were highly rated for accessibility, with 92% of survey participants agreeing that they were easily accessible.
- Members of the Evaluation Team who observed webinars selected “*listening to a formal presentation by the facilitator*” as a primary activity in 95% of observations. Evaluators also indicated that opportunities for meaningful collaboration and/or interaction were present in only 30% of the session periods observed (protocol, Appendix C; results, Appendix D).

Local Use and Capacity

- While the NCDPI Facilitator’s Guide recommends that participants complete the modules in PLCs, the actual context for their use varied widely. Only 27% of survey participants reported that they completed the online module activities in a PLC setting, as recommended. Approximately 74% of participants reported that they completed the module activities independently, with only some of those indicating that they had opportunities for follow-up discussions. More detailed information from 18 LEAs participating in the RttT PD Evaluation’s longitudinal study revealed that, of the 14 LEAs that reported having accessed the modules, six used the modules in PLCs. Two schools reported that they completed the modules in a large-group face-to-face setting with a facilitator and six LEAs directed educators to use the modules independently, with three of those facilitating some follow-up discussions. One LEA provided opportunities for educators to have online discussions related to the content of the modules. Overall, these results suggest that local professional development leaders may need additional support to ensure that they are able to incorporate the modules into their local professional development programs as intended.
- Educators have interest in using technology tools (such as threaded discussions, shared content repositories with social networking features, collaborative wikis, synchronous chat, messaging, and blogs) to enhance professional development, but many LEAs do not have the technology resources and/or expertise to support the effective use of these tools. While tools exist within the NC Education Moodle Learning Management System and across the Internet to support the kinds of online communication and collaboration described in the RttT proposal, by June 2012, NCDPI and LEAs had not yet made full use of these tools to support implementation of the modules. Many LEAs may lack both the models and the tools to provide the kinds of high-quality online professional development envisioned by the RttT proposal.

Summary of Findings

NCDPI has created and utilized a substantial set of online resources, conducted dozens of webinars, and developed online learning modules to support local PLCs. To date, the online resources provided by NCDPI have been designed and used primarily to disseminate information to educators statewide; LEAs have been primarily responsible for providing the collegial interactions, connections with practice, opportunities for reflection, and differentiation to meet varied professional needs required for effective professional development.

While NCDPI's efforts have positively impacted thousands of educators throughout the state, and the majority of educators have indicated their satisfaction with these resources, the current collection of OPD activities and resources does not yet fully leverage all of the potential benefits of technology to extend and enhance professional development. The findings suggest that the use of these resources at both the state and local level is not yet wholly consistent with national standards for online professional development. Many LEAs likely will need additional guidance, training, support, technology tools, and/or content resources to ensure that local efforts contribute to the quality of the experiences for educators and that the vision for online professional development outlined in the state's RttT proposal is realized and can be sustained beyond RttT.

As detailed below, NCDPI already has recognized the steep learning curve resulting from a project of this scale, has learned from many of the challenges encountered during the first implementation year, and is working to address these issues during the second year of implementation.

Recent Developments in RttT-Related Online Professional Development

After review of a preliminary draft of this report, NCDPI staff noted that several developments already were underway to ensure that NCDPI can continue to build its internal capacity for developing and delivering online instructional resources and activities, and for supporting local implementation. To that end:

- Since the completion of the Phase I online learning modules, NCDPI has expanded its instructional design team to five members;
- NCDPI has established a new development process for the next phase of online professional development modules scheduled for release after June 2012; NCDPI has developed a plan for implementation of the new modules, outlined in its *Phase II Online Module Implementation Guide*.⁴ This supplemental guide provides guidance to LEA and charter school teams in the implementation of the Phase II online modules for professional development developed by NCDPI for the 2012-2013 school year. It also details six different models for implementation at the LEA level, including best practices and strategies for facilitation and incorporation of PLCs;

⁴ http://www.rt3nc.org/pubs/implementation_guide_2012.pdf

- NCDPI has partnered with the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation’s Education Workforce Development team⁵ to provide their staff with training and support for technology-enabled learning, including training related to online professional development; NCDPI also now hosts a central online location for all professional development resources⁶;
- NCDPI will continue to explore ways to provide participants with online opportunities to interact with peers and participate in facilitated online professional development experiences, including the use of a cohort-based, facilitator-led online course; and
- NCDPI also will continue to provide targeted support to LEAs to ensure that online modules and resources are integrated successfully into local professional development plans.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this evaluation, the following recommendations are provided for consideration as NCDPI seeks to achieve the goals for OPD outlined in the RttT proposal, build statewide capacity, and better align future efforts to standards for high-quality online professional development.

1. Ensure LEAs have the guidance and support needed to implement the new strategic plan outlined in the *Phase II Online Module Implementation Guide* to further the use of effective online and blended professional development statewide.
2. To improve alignment to the state’s RttT proposal and to national standards for online professional development, expand statewide OPD activities and/or support local initiatives to: (1) provide educators with access to a greater variety of online learning experiences (e.g., online communities, workshops, peer mentoring); (2) increase opportunities for online peer interaction across LEAs and across all online professional development offerings; and (3) further differentiate professional development activities to meet the specific needs of teachers of different content areas, grades, and levels of expertise.
3. Where possible, leverage existing online professional development workshops and resources available through the national e-Learning for Educators Consortium, other RttT states, local providers like LEARN NC, and others.
4. Focus on building statewide capacity for effective implementation and facilitation of OPD in order to ensure sustainability beyond the period of RttT funding. To do so, build upon multi-LEA and regional coalitions that will share expertise and resources to develop OPD programs throughout the State.
5. Leverage the additional tools available via the NC Education Moodle Learning Management System to support both state and local professional development initiatives with asynchronous and synchronous discussions, content repositories, and wikis.
6. Continue to focus on organizing all online resources into a centralized, searchable content repository, to make them more easily accessible.

⁵ A unit of the Friday Institute separate and distinct from the Evaluation Team

⁶ <http://wikicentral.ncdpi.wikispaces.net/NCDPI+WikiCentral+Page>

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