

How Public Television Stations and State Departments of Education Collaborate to Provide Online Professional Development Opportunities for K-12 Educators

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Abstract

To meet increasing demands for highly qualified public school educators, eight state public television stations and their respective state departments of education have joined together to provide educators high quality online professional development opportunities. The five year initiative is funded by a Ready to Teach grant from the US Department of Education (USDOE) and is administered by Alabama Public Television (APT). In the first eighteen months, more than 12,000 educators have been served by the e-Learning for Educators collaboration and a growing state system of Online Professional Development (OPD) has been established.

The initiative has three overarching goals: to provide quality online professional development to educators in each of the participating states, to create a sustainable collaborative model in each state to serve the future online professional development needs of educators, and to provide rigorous, groundbreaking research into the effects of online professional development on teacher practice and student learning. To achieve these ambitious goals, e-Learning for Educators has developed a multi-state, cross-agency collaboration that defines common standards, shares resources and expertise, and supports the individual state programs. This report seeks to present the implementation, development, and impact of this collaborative model across the project. Implications exist for state and national educational policy, public broadcasting stations, state departments of education and future collaborative efforts across agencies.

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Introduction

According to Dede (2006), professional development opportunities for teachers are important and expensive yet essential for meeting the requirements of federal mandates such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and No Child Left Behind. The need for developing and maintaining high quality teacher professional development initiatives establishes the case and provides the framework for the e-Learning for Educators initiative.

The relationship and importance of teacher quality to student success is well documented (Rice, 2003). Costs associated with providing and retaining an adequate supply of highly qualified teachers in grades K-12 exceed \$200 billion each year (Snyder, Tan and Hoffman, 2004). Low retention rates of beginning teachers and projections of substantial numbers of teachers that will retire within the next ten years present a strong need to provide effective professional development for existing teachers and teacher preparation programs that prepare teachers to meet the requirements of state and federal legislation for highly qualified teachers (USDOE, 2003; NCTAF, 2003). This need is especially great in low achieving areas where many classrooms are staffed by under prepared teachers (CCTC 2004).

Many teachers lack access to high quality professional development programs that fit their specific content area needs, prepare them to meet state quality standards, and are available when and where they can participate. For some teachers, the necessary professional development is simply not available while others find that professional development programs are not offered at times and in locations that are feasible. Barrier free, readily accessible effective professional development that targets specific needs is very valuable (Dede, 2006).

Research has led to agreement on a number of key principles of successful professional development practices for K-12 educators. In a summary of these principles, Sparks and Hirsh (1997) describe the need for a “paradigm shift” in professional development, away from one-day in-service presentations to more intensive professional development that is an integral part of teachers' lives. Major research studies and syntheses by Shulman (1987), Stigler and Stevenson (1991), the National Staff Development Council (2001), Borasi and Fonzi (2002), and others consistently point to a set of principles of effective professional development that are researched based and that are reflected in the NCLB legislation.

These research-based principles in general, as well as the emerging research findings about effective online professional development, are the foundation of the e-Learning for Educators initiative. The collaborative relationship of the public television station and the state education agency within each state and the purposeful alignment with state-identified training needs distinguish e-Learning for Educators from other online professional development (OPD) models.

The project is based on three pillars: collaboration, capacity-building, and evaluation/research. These three pillars are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Collaboration

The primary goal of the e-Learning for Educators (eFE) initiative is to collaboratively create a scalable, replicable, sustainable system of OPD that will lead to improved teacher content knowledge, improved pedagogy and student academic achievement. The initiative collaborative effort involves the public broadcasting stations and state departments of education

in the following states: Alabama, Mississippi, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Missouri, West Virginia, and New Hampshire. Cross-state collaboration enables state teams to learn from each other, share ideas and resources, and to serve as “critical friends” to conduct peer reviews of plans, courses and dissemination materials. Project partners define common standards, set priorities, share resources across the states, and establish work committees to define technical and design standards as well as core content requirements for courses. Online, web-based workspaces are provided through an online platform for state program leaders, course developers, and course instructors to communicate and share resources. These workspaces also provide archives of the resources that are developed and shared. As the project progresses, each state director has a readily available group who mentor and support each other with resourceful solutions to challenges and creative suggestions for almost any issue.

In the early stages of the project, the Initiative Management Group (IMG) led a series of virtual and face-to-face meetings to make decisions based on common needs. The IMG is composed of project leaders from APT, EDC, and the Boston College (BC) project evaluation/research team.

Subcommittees with cross-project membership address additional elements of the initiative. These elements include common technical and content standards decisions, addressing Section 508 compliance, and course management system decisions.

There are certain content areas and grade levels for which professional development is a high priority across all participating states. These include early reading, reading comprehension in the upper elementary and middle school grades, writing instruction, and upper-elementary and middle school mathematics. These areas were of particular concern in Title I schools, since poor student performance directly impacts adequate yearly progress status. The first twelve courses designed by the project target these subjects and grade levels. These twelve courses serve as exemplars to inform the development process of state-level courses in Year 2 of the project and are those used for the research study.

Throughout the course design process, a Content Review Committee examined courses regularly and advised course designers. As these model courses neared completion, they were given a final appraisal by content experts, public television station production specialists, and peer reviewers. These model courses, developed at the project level, were aligned to national and state content standards so they could serve as models to inform the development of courses when teams of state designers created additional state courses. In July 2007, a sample of two of these twelve model courses were reviewed by a panel of experts chosen by the U.S. Department of Education in accordance with standards established under the Government and Performance Results Act assessment of the Ready to Teach program. Both courses were deemed to be of “high quality” by the expert reviewers.

The focus of the e-Learning for Educators is not just to deliver quality OPD to teachers; the more important focus is to help states build the capacity to deliver OPD that is aligned with state teacher quality initiatives and student achievement goals. The structure used to build this capacity is the collaborative state leadership team. State leadership team members are drawn from among each state’s educational agency, the public television station, and other relevant organizations such as, school districts, universities, or regional education service providers and important state training initiative staff. State leadership team members receive intensive training designed to help them understand and perform their duties, the teams. Each state team is assisted by a full-time state project coordinator. Together the team and the coordinator focus on developing their state’s unique plan.

Over the first two years, the PTV-SDE collaboration has strengthened so that it is adaptable for changing demands within each state. As the project has progressed, the PTV role has changed substantially. In the first year of the project, publicity and marketing assistance were the typical PTV contributions. In the second year, PTV's provide a range of services and complementary activities such as training teachers to create their own digital media for classroom use, providing web workspaces to archive digital assets, and adapting existing content or creating custom video that will enhance newly created OPD courses. Some PTV staffers are facilitating courses, participating in the creation of courses, and serving on state level and cross-initiative advisory committees. Contributions of the PTV's to the development of new state OPD courses is so highly regarded that approximately 15-20% of the annual state funding will be directed toward these efforts in Year 3. Although the PTV partners in this grant have a history of providing educational services to the educators of their states, the development of custom digital media assets that will be embedded into OPD courses is an innovation for these partner stations.

Each state project is developing an extensive intra-state network of partnerships and alliances to identify and meet state training priorities. Some ways in which the eFE project is meeting specialized, hard-to-meet needs through OPD include: training English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers; training school counselors to recognize and prevent abuse; partnering with a school district to train a cadre of new administrators in the use of technology across the curriculum; partnering with higher education institutions to create a new credential for online instruction and partnering with a local university to train classroom teachers to meet needs of hearing impaired students. There is emerging evidence in program documents that the eFE project is not only reaching teachers in high needs schools (55+% of enrolled teachers are in high needs schools) but the project is also reaching teachers in rural areas where traditional, face-to-face professional development programs are not readily available or accessible.

Capacity Building

Before eFE, the participating states offered online courses but capacity for a comprehensive delivery system of OPD to supplement existing important state training initiatives and address state needs was minimal. Extensive training was necessary to establish a systematic delivery of OPD. Training unfolded in three phases beginning in February 2006. The phases were training of a cadre of facilitators, training of a cadre of course developers, and development of new courses. In Year 1, 24 educators from each state participated in the eFE facilitator training program. An additional 12 educators from each state were trained in the second year for a total of more than 270 course facilitators across the project. It is anticipated that by the end of the five-year initiative a total of 72 per state and 576 across all 8 states will have been trained to facilitate online courses. In the first year, the project benchmarks were to deliver 24 online courses in each state to approximately 480 teachers. In the second year, states were expected to deliver 36 online courses to 720 teachers. Although the implementation pace has varied considerably across states in the first two years, program records show that more than 12,000 teachers have enrolled in e-Learning for Educators courses. This is an exceedingly rapid delivery pace that far exceeds benchmarks and expectations.

In the initial phase of training toward the goal of capacity building, states leased courses from Education Development Center's EdTEch Leaders Online (ETLO) catalog of courses. However, in the second training phase in Year 2, more than 185 course designers have been trained across the project. The cadre of course designers enables the states to design their own high quality online professional development courses. Like the ETLO courses, all newly created

courses are designed to create a learning community in the online environment . The ability to create new courses is vital to the state capacity to deliver and sustain future delivery of fresh OPD courses. In Year 2, the expectation was that a total of approximately 48-72 courses (6-9 courses per state) would be developed. According to program records, more than 75 courses have been completed or are nearing completion. By prior agreement, the state developed courses may be shared without cost among the states in the collaboration; such sharing increases capacity and broadens the range of courses available to each state. This sharing multiplies the benefits to each state.

To assure that each state has the requisite systems and processes needed for success, each state leadership team (LT) is staffed by key leaders and decision makers from important state initiatives. Each year of the project, the state LT convenes for week-long meetings to make annual plans, conduct the work of the project, engage in training provided by leaders in the field of OPD and make adjustments to the project based on the project Advisory Board recommendations, evaluation results and emerging opportunities. The project utilizes an academy model for training the state LT. The Authentic Task Approach (Phlegar and Hurley, 1999) serves as the framework and model for identifying tasks and creating the distinctive systems that support the development of the state project toward the goal of sustainability.

At mid-year a smaller group of three key LT decision-makers (public television station key decision maker, the state department lead decision maker, and the project coordinator) meet to discuss common concerns and address difficult issues. This meeting has proven very productive in identifying new, creative ways to deepen and broaden collaboration between the two organizations and in problem-solving. At times, collaboration between these two agencies has proven challenging. However, when the two organizations approach a hurdle in the relationship, new ways to collaborate emerge and the relationship is ultimately stronger. The development of original content to be used in courses, training, marketing, and resource sharing are among the more common means of collaboration but both entities are committed to discovering ways in which greater collaborations may emerge. The commitment to these meetings and collaborative efforts are evidenced by the time and funding dedicated to them.

Evaluation and Research

Extensive formative and summative evaluation is conducted by BC. An annual evaluation on the effectiveness and quality of the eFE components is being conducted. The initiative evaluation is a mixed-methods study. Project evaluators are collecting data about effective methods of recruiting participants, online professional development course participant retention and the implications of various actions in relation to successfully establishing a system of OPD. Qualitative data are gathered from interviews, phone conversations, surveys, program data, monthly reports, meeting notes, and other artifacts. Quantitative data are collected by surveys; training records including participation and enrollment data; learning management systems; project activities; product counts; and program reports.

Evaluation results and new developments in the field of OPD are informing the project in various ways. One example in which the online courses reflect these changes is that courses have been revised to include Web 2.0 skills such as blogs, wikis and podcasts. These were not commonly included in courses developed as recently as eighteen months ago but now are included in most eLearning for Educators courses.

The e-Learning project includes a groundbreaking, randomized research study. The study, conducted by Boston College's Technology and Assessment Study Collaborative

(inTASC), will assess the impact of the initiative on teacher quality and student achievement. The unprecedented, three-term longitudinal study is the first large-scale study to determine whether OPD courses are effective in producing improvements in teacher content knowledge, improvements in teacher pedagogy and practices, and most importantly, student academic performance. The research study will include both quantitative and qualitative measures and will include surveys six-months after the course is completed to measure the long-term affect on teacher practice.

Findings, Lessons Learned, and Implications for the Future of OPD

The evaluation results from the first year of the program (AETFPA, 2007) shows that more than 75% of the participants in eFE OPD courses said they had never had a course that focused on the subject matter of the courses. This is a strong indication that the project is reaching teachers with new content and pedagogy.

Among OPD course participants who completed pre- and post- surveys, more than 98% reported that they found the course content to be easily transferable to their classroom and that they intended to do so. Subsequently, these participants are surveyed six-months after they complete the OPD courses to determine whether they actually did incorporate what they learned into their classroom and to determine whether students report any changes in the teacher's teaching practices. The first six-month post-course survey data will be available in late fall 2007.

The composition of the state leadership team is critical to the success of the effort to establish a state system of OPD. Maintaining and carefully filling vacancies on the team is important. According to program records, team memberships and vacancies impact collaboration and progress. Across the project, state directors report that people who have been trained through eFE are receiving promotions and state leaders are tapped for other responsibilities. Promotions account for many vacancies on state leadership teams.

The link to state training priorities is a key to the rapid success of the initiative. In each state, eFE is linked to a high-priority need such as: certification needs related to NCLB; important state training initiatives; special emphases such as technology integration, and pay raises.

Evaluation results document a remarkable effect in new levels of cooperation and collaboration among PTVs and SDEs across the eight participating states. The collaborative efforts are multifaceted and are expected to have long-lasting impact upon PTV/SDE relationships. The shared effort toward a common goal of collaboratively developing OPD programs has had a multiplier effect that has sparked ideas for the development of new PTV educational resources to support state educational needs. Because of this collaborative approach to common educational goals, collaborative decision-making, leadership training for teams of key leaders, resource-sharing, and development of digital assets are taking place in new ways.

Presently, dissemination of the eFE project is primarily by demonstration and presentations. In Years 4 and 5 the model will be disseminated to other states by invitation to attend the annual leadership academy and in special dissemination academies and meetings. The models and strategies used by each state, the lessons learned by the partner stations and states, the technical and design standards, management systems and processes, and the evaluation and research reports, will be available to dissemination states. The goal, shared by all the project partners, is to support replication of the models that were most successful in the original partner states.

Conclusions

In the three years since its inception, e-Learning for Educators has developed a model collaborative effort among eight states to help meet the OPD needs of teachers and school leaders. As the project matures, the training, the development model, and the system being established within each state is being informed by the project evaluation. Groundbreaking research is underway that has the potential to inform the future direction of OPD. Unprecedented collaboration at the state level among public broadcasting stations and state departments of education has resulted in plans for scalable, sustainable models based on the unique needs of each participating state. This ambitious initiative is charting new ground in educational improvement efforts while looking toward the horizon for additional ways that public broadcasting stations and state departments of education might collaborate to meet the professional development needs of educators across the country.

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