

Online Professional Development: *Why SREB States Should Use It*

SREB

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“Every student is taught by qualified teachers.”

— One of SREB’s *Challenge to Lead Goals for Education*, which assert that SREB states can lead the nation in educational progress

Whether new to teaching or an experienced veteran, every teacher needs up-to-date, relevant and high-quality professional development. How can states provide effective, replicable and scalable professional development, given the more than one million teachers in more than 3,400 school districts in SREB states?

For many years, states attempted to meet this need with face-to-face professional development. More recently, many states added satellite broadcasts and video conferencing to bring together an instructor in one location with students in one or more classrooms elsewhere. Only in the last several years have some states and local schools begun using the Web to provide the critical training that teachers need.

There is a wealth of information available about what is required to provide quality professional development. There are many knowledgeable professionals who can demonstrate and explain step-by-step how to be successful in the classroom. Why then do far too many teachers report that their professional development experience is often of poor quality and does not meet their needs? Perhaps the answer is as simple as: States keep doing the same thing and expecting different (improved) results.

Why Don’t States Use Online Professional Development?

It is likely that in a few years this question will not be asked. Just as other forms of technology — such as cell phones and electronic banking — now are used by an overwhelming portion of the population, the use of the Web for professional development also will grow. Just as most colleges and universities provide online courses and many businesses use the Web to meet their staff-training needs so, too, will states and schools be encouraged to use online learning to improve the quality of teaching. By spring 2004, the SREB *Electronic Campus* had over 9,000 online courses listed from over 300 SREB states’ colleges and universities. Nestle, with its

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250,000 employees, currently provides over 900 online courses around the world. Best Western is able to keep staff up-to-date in spite of the dispersed nature of their work force. The Georgia Bankers Association indicates that the number of participants in online learning is going “up and up and up.” And the Air National Guard’s distance learning programs to train service members are recognized as “some of the most advanced.” *Online learning provides an alternative to traditional training that is not limited to time and place, and for these reasons it is important for states to use it whenever appropriate.*

Research on this topic, while limited due to the newness of the use of online professional development, indicates that *participant success is at least equal to and often better than participation in traditional professional development.* Key benefits include bringing together participants who would otherwise not be in touch with one another and providing opportunities for quality follow-up after the course is completed.

Lack of Understanding by Leaders

The most often cited reason for not moving to online learning is a lack of understanding among state leaders about how the Web can be used to provide professional development. It should not be a surprise that if state leaders do not understand online learning, they cannot provide the leadership to promote it. Rather than set an example and model the use of technology, too many leaders lack an understanding of how technology can support their work. Online professional development often gets pushed aside by other “more important” tasks and responsibilities. To quote one state department of education staff member who participated in the department’s online professional development course: “Nothing was taken off my plate. This was added to the rest of my responsibilities.” There appears to be a lack of recognition that taking an online course requires work and time — just like any other course.

Demands on Staff Time

Another state issue is the current demand on state staff imposed by *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) accountability requirements and other federal and state mandates. As one state agency representative said, “If the work is not directly connected to what needs to be done today, it is not important.” What’s important is defined by many as what needs to be done just to “survive.” Little or no time is available to learn, plan and use new approaches for old problems.

Cost and funding, while important, are too often given as the reasons for not using technology. While there are additional technology and training costs, especially during initial implementation of a new use of technology, cost reductions or containment in other areas — such as travel and lodging — should not be overlooked in budgetary planning for both initial implementation as well as ongoing use. One state reported that they estimated a cost savings for travel, time, hotels and food of nearly \$18,000 for one large-scale online professional development initiative.

Evidence from a national project, Technology Cost Methodology, found that initial development costs of online courses were higher than traditional course development, but over time online costs were lowered significantly because of reduced physical plant and traditional operating costs. Since so many schools, colleges and state education agencies have implemented online courses, there is substantial information now available regarding the creation of a state program to provide online learning and the costs associated with the development and offering of online courses.

An Alternative — Use the Web to Provide Professional Development

With advances in technology that give citizens nearly “anytime, anywhere” access to information and to one another, the use of the Web to provide quality professional development to teachers is here to stay. Online professional development helps states:

- *reach teachers regardless of where they live and work.* Physical barriers to access are removed, allowing “anytime, anywhere” and “just-in-time” learning to occur. This gives teachers access to information and resources when needed. Some teachers have referred to this as help only a “click” away.
- *eliminate or reduce travel time and expense.* Given declining budgets, limiting the cost and use of cars, hotels and meals holds considerable appeal. Because online learning provides teachers with the flexibility they need to engage in training when it fits their schedule, fewer days away from the classroom or office are necessary and therefore reduce the need for substitutes.
- *provide large numbers of teachers with quality professional development within a specified time period.* Scaling professional development to train many teachers in a timely manner presents states with enormous obstacles. These needs include training large numbers of teachers in short periods of time, repeating training to meet teacher turnover and schedule problems, and providing follow-up training.

- *create a learning community where teachers have contact with other teachers who share common experiences and goals.* Research tells us that teachers continue “to learn” within these sustained relationships even after courses are concluded. One of the major disadvantages of many traditional professional development courses is that they tend to be one-time contacts, with little or no opportunity for participants to follow up with the instructor or other participants. Online professional development provides access to content and instruction over time, and it allows contact with other participants before and after the course has been completed regardless of where they live.

While online professional development is still relatively new for schools and states, there is growing evidence that it can meet many teachers’ needs as well as or better than face-to-face instruction. An example comes from the results of a Baltimore County Public Schools survey of two groups of teachers who took the same Technology Integration Institute course — one online and one face-to-face. Teachers in the face-to-face course reported that it allowed participants to engage in “meaningful group activities.” The online participants, however, reported a much more positive overall reaction to the course because it was “logically organized and sequenced,” allowing them to “participate in meaningful activities.” They noted that they felt “comfortable contributing information and giving /receiving feedback from others.” Ninety-four percent of the online participants indicated that they gained more knowledge by taking the course online than in a traditional setting.

Baltimore County and Howard County Schools in Maryland have joined to provide 30 online professional development courses for teachers. This program began in Baltimore County in 1991 with 100 teachers and now provides courses for over 700 teachers. The courses, provided free by the counties, cover topics including special education, reading and literacy and several that are targeted at new teacher training.

SREB Supports States’ Use of Online Professional Development

For nearly a decade, many schools, colleges and state education agencies in SREB states have recognized the potential of the Web to meet student academic needs. This led to the creation of the SREB *Electronic Campus*, establishment of virtual schools in many SREB states, and implementation of the SREB Multi-State Online Professional Development (MOPD) initiative through collaboration with the SREB states’ departments of education.

Traditional face-to-face professional development has always been inadequate for many busy teachers since it did not meet their time requirements or was not available when needed. The **Louisiana Department of Education** is an example of a state education agency that understands this and is systematically moving forward to provide online professional development opportunities. Louisiana's successful experience can serve as a model for other SREB states as they begin to use online professional development.

MOPD offers support and assistance to SREB states and schools that use the Web to provide much-needed, quality professional development to teachers. During the 2002-2003 academic year, over 100 staff members from SREB states' departments of education were trained to be online instructors. In addition, hundreds of other instructors from local schools were trained through the efforts of the initiative. Concurrently, MOPD developed the Web-based *ToolKit* (See www.mopd.sreb.org.) to support and promote the use of the Web by schools and states' departments of education.

But not all online courses have to be created by states or schools. Many companies and other organizations provide online opportunities that meet state and school needs. MOPD has gathered information about many of these companies and shares information when SREB states have reported success with a company.

Through the work of the MOPD initiative, many issues have been identified that states need to address to provide quality online professional development. These needs include: providing program management, instructors and technical personnel; funding for online instructional software and services; developing courses and workshops; providing equipment and connection to the Internet; and training personnel to develop and provide online professional development. Support, planning and funding are keys to successful implementation.

The **Tennessee Department of Education** used *No Child Left Behind* Title IID funds to build local capacity for high-quality, ongoing online professional development courses in remote areas of Tennessee. The grant paid for the training of at least 17 online professional development instructors. In fall 2004, these instructors began to use this training — and courses available from the Education Development Center — to instruct teachers in rural Tennessee on integrating technology in the classroom.

While most teachers and schools are now connected to the Internet, the work of MOPD recognizes that states and schools need to:

- ensure that teachers have quality, reliable and supported Internet access wherever they are located when they take online professional development courses.
- provide training and support to help teachers learn how to use the online software.
- provide support and incentives, including release time, adequate time to participate, stipends and recognition of successful completion of courses in this new form of professional development.

Because decision-makers do not fully understand what it takes to be a successful online student, currently little or no attention is paid to making time available during the workday for staff to participate in online courses. While schools and states provide time for staff to engage in face-to-face professional development, similar time should be provided for online participants.

Where to Start?

Perhaps the best place for each state to start is to ask four important questions:

1. How successful are current state professional development efforts in meeting state training objectives to “reach out” to meet teacher needs across our state?
2. Does the state provide high-quality online professional development courses as part of a mentoring and networking support system to help stem the unacceptably high early-career attrition rate of first- and second-year teachers?
3. How do the state education agencies work with local school leaders to understand and use online professional development to help teachers improve?
4. Does the state have a plan to use online learning to improve the quality of professional development?

Asking these questions will help states set the tone and direction needed to effectively use online professional development. If online professional development is identified as important by leadership, persons at all levels will understand this message and place priority on its use. State use of online professional development also will likely lead to reduced travel, lodging and meal expenses associated with face-to-face meetings — often some of the most costly aspects of professional development.

Redirecting costs to funding the technology needed for online professional development may result in long-term cost benefits. If campuses and schools, most private sector companies, and much of the U.S. military use the Web to meet training needs, then isn't it time for states and schools to do the same with professional development?

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