

Filling a Need

Professional Development for Charter School Teachers

Teachers and administrators in independent charter schools tend to wear multiple hats and have enormous workloads. Most independent charters are small. Many are geographically isolated. And a good number are struggling financially; just meeting the monthly payroll can be difficult. All too often, opportunities for high-quality professional development in this context are minimal or nonexistent.

WestEd's Charter School Teachers Online (CSTO) project is working to fill this gap. "We're interested in promoting high-quality charter schools, and we believe one of the keys is excellent instruction," says Sarah Feldman, a WestEd Senior Research Associate and CSTO's director. "Achieving excellent instruction," Feldman adds, "depends in large part on providing opportunities for teachers to engage in effective professional development."

CSTO was created in 2010 when WestEd was awarded a three-year, \$1.7-million contract from the U.S. Department of Education to develop online professional development specifically for charter school teachers. Funding came from the U.S. Charter Schools Program with an aim to support charter schools nationwide.

Building a Professional Development Structure Online

Moving professional development online is key to CSTO's approach to overcoming the geographic and cost constraints of reaching charter school teachers. CSTO builds on an extensive online library of educational resources from another WestEd project, Doing What Works (DWW). Nikola Filby, director of Innovation Studies at WestEd, describes DWW as a collection of "open education resources" that bridge research and practice. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education and developed by WestEd in partnership with American Institutes for Research and RMC Research Corporation, DWW offers professional development workshop packages. School districts can access the material free of charge at the DWW website (www.dww.ed.gov). However, as Filby points out, "DWW only takes people so far. It's great to see CSTO building on that base and putting these materials together in a more structured way."

CSTO is developing and facilitating eight online professional development courses, each spanning four to seven weeks. Five of the courses are designed to give charter school teachers strategies they can use to boost middle and high school students' reading comprehension. They cover topics ranging from ways to more effectively lead discussions on textbook material and teach new vocabulary in the classrooms, to strategies for teaching to the Common Core standards for reading.

► This article was first published in WestEd's *R&D Alert*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2012.



There are also two new courses coming on fractions and one on increasing reading comprehension in grades K–3. All the courses utilize material from the DWW website as well as additional resources such as surveys, checklists, and assessment tools.

Each course is divided into weekly sessions in which participating teachers engage in online activities such as viewing a short video or slideshow, completing a reading selection, and participating in online discussion forums. For example, the course on reading comprehension strategies features a video demonstrating a “thinkaloud,” a process of reading out loud while interjecting one’s own thoughts and questions about the material.

Explains the expert demonstrating the thinkaloud strategy, “It’s a way to make visible the invisible process of reading by verbalizing what’s going on in my head as I try to make sense of a task.” After viewing the video, the participating teachers study various questioning techniques as a way of monitoring their own reading comprehension and, ultimately, that of their students. Participants also learn how to use a range of questioning techniques when teaching in their specific content areas.

Other lessons highlight strategies such as scaffolding instruction; using graphic organizers; and teaching students to annotate the text. Participants also use a rubric to score sample student work, then discuss in an online forum what they would “infer about the strengths and weaknesses of the classroom instruction” based on the students’ efforts.

During the course, the materials ask teacher participants to “process your learning through the lens of a focus student, someone you currently teach [and] on whom you can center your observations and reflections of student learning and teacher practice.” To that end, teachers respond to questions such as “What do you notice about the types of questions your focus student asks?” and “What instructional strategies might be useful in supporting your student to improve in summarizing?”

Advantages and Challenges of Online Professional Development

According to Feldman, the courses are designed to be highly interactive and practical. In addition to engaging in small-group discussions with each other and their instructor, the charter school teachers regularly reflect on and write about their own classroom practice and collaboratively create WIKIs, web pages where they share and update lesson plans. They are asked to “check in” online daily, and to spend a minimum of two hours per week on course activities. As the participants complete assignments, they receive feedback from their online colleagues and WestEd facilitators.

One advantage of learning online: Teachers can do so at their convenience; all they need is a computer with Internet access. Another strength, Feldman says, is that “if you’re the only eighth-grade science teacher at your small charter school, it gives you a chance to connect to other eighth-grade science teachers facing similar challenges.”

To be sure, learning online isn’t for everyone. To succeed, participants must be thoughtful when sharing their ideas and experiences, comfortable doing so in writing, open-minded and respectful of others’ opinions, and self-disciplined and organized.

Yet, Filby notes, “clearly, online everything is the wave of the future.” Therefore, “understanding what it takes to provide good online professional development in general is important.” Beyond that, she notes often “it is possible to get deeper engagement and easier to respond to each oth-



ers' comments and build conversations in an online setting than in a class where people are tied together in real time."

Since CSTO began as a pilot in 2011, over 80 teachers in Michigan, Arizona, California, New York, and the District of Columbia completed CSTO courses, with plans to expand to more states. The teachers, recruited by charter school support organizations such as the Michigan Association of Public School Academies and the California Charter Schools Association, can receive continuing education credits for each course they complete. Arizona teachers receive a stipend to participate in the pilot.

Feldman is encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive feedback CSTO courses elicit. One participant, evaluating the overall value of a recent class, wrote, "I do not have much collaboration in my school and this type of experience allows me to 'see' what other teachers have to say." Yet another teacher praised the course's practicality, noting, "I, too, have never had a course or inservice that gave so much and created the excitement to put into effect what was learned as soon as I could."

Participants' responses to surveys and follow-up interviews by an external evaluator highlight the effectiveness and innovative qualities of their experiences with the CSTO modules. More than 90 percent of survey respondents agreed or highly agreed with the statements "This module was a highly effective learning experience" and "I learned new techniques by completing the module." Among the many posts by teachers at the end of modules, a teacher wrote: "I've started using both Thick & Thin questions and in-text notation in my literature classes, and I've already seen an improvement in depth of comprehension and retention."

Another commented on how the material was so useful "that I implemented with my students the day I learned it!" A follow-up survey found that 97 percent of respondents indicated classroom implementation of one or more skills lasting at least two semesters beyond when they took the CSTO module.

Typical of many respondents, a veteran middle school teacher from a charter school in Michigan asserted a strong connection between her CSTO coursework and her students' improved performance in reading, noting: "One-hundred percent of my students achieved at least a year of reading growth, and of students who were below grade level, 96 percent achieved at least two years of growth."

Next Steps

Feldman notes that although participation in CSTO is currently limited to teachers working at independent charter schools in the states participating in the pilot, she hopes that, when the grant period ends in 2014, the courses can become available to new and veteran teachers in other states and other contexts.

"This effort is all about how adults learn and how to engage and motivate busy teachers to continue improving their practice," she says. "Our goal is to provide high-quality professional development. And what's good for charter school teachers is good for all teachers."

For more information about WestEd's Charter School Teachers Online project, contact Nikola Filby at 415.615.3124 or nfilby@WestEd.org, or Sarah Feldman at 415.615.3372 or sfeldma@WestEd.org.