

**Status of Online Professional Development
in Educational Service Agencies
of the United States**

An Exploratory Study

Executive Summary

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An evolution in providing teachers online professional development (pd) is occurring in this era of educational improvement and accountability, with numerous models and methods under exploration. New knowledge in social network theory and educational change also hold promise for rapidly expanding online professional development opportunities for teachers.

Research about online professional development for educators is evolving and much more investigation is necessary to guide future advancements in offerings and delivery practices. Generally, research thus far conducted finds that high-quality professional development and online professional development can have positive effects on teacher knowledge and can influence instructional practices.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine the status of online professional development in educational service agencies (ESAs) in the United States. Providing professional development for teachers is one of the most prominent functions of ESAs. Yet, little is known about how ESAs are responding to the evolving online professional development movement. Consequently, a national survey was conducted in collaboration with Dr. Brian Talbott, Executive Director of the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA), and with financial support from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) as part of AIR's work for the Intel Teach program.

Methods

The population for the study included all chief executive officers (CEOs) of ESAs in an e-mail listing compiled and maintained by the Association of Educational Service Agencies. A total of 553 ESAs located across the country were included in the listing. After a review of the literature, the researcher developed a survey instrument with the assistance of Dr. Brian Talbott, AESA executive director; Dr. E. Robert Stephens, nationally prominent researcher of ESAs; and Dr. Pamela Jacobs, Director of the Intel® Teach National Training Agency.

The web-based survey instrument included five parts: Part A. Demographics, Part B. Online PD Offerings, Part C. Delivery of Online PD for Teachers, Part D. Evaluation of Online PD, and Part E. Future Plans. The survey instrument was pilot tested by the CEO or professional development coordinator of an ESA in the states of Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Washington. Based on the pilot test, slight revisions were made in the survey, primarily to include or exclude types of online technology platforms and supportive technology tools. Also, survey instructions were clarified for potential respondents in an ESA that did not offer or make online pd available to teachers.

On February 24, 2011 Dr. Talbott sent an e-mail to the 553 names of CEOs in the AESA data base announcing the survey and inviting completion within 10 days. The Zoomerang survey closed on March 23, 2011. Only one person could respond on behalf of the ESA: the CEO, the professional development coordinator, or an appropriate person designated by the CEO. Follow-up efforts by Dr. Talbott and the researcher to encourage

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survey completion by ESAs resulted in 226 usable responses, or a response rate of 42.4 percent. A Windows version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to import the Excel data file from Zoomerang and analyze the data.

Findings: ESA Offering Online PD

E SAs across the U.S. are making online professional development opportunities available to educators. This section highlights a few of the many important findings for ESAs who offered or made available online pd during the last three years.

Demographics

Survey respondents who offered online pd (n=160; 70.8%) were located in 34 states. The states with the greatest percentage of respondents include Michigan (13.1%), Pennsylvania (10.6%), Ohio (8.1%), Illinois (7.5%), Minnesota (5%), and Nebraska (5%). Among the schools that respondents indicate the ESA serves, almost three-fourths (71.9%) of ESAs serve non-public schools and over half (55%) serve charter schools.

Online PD Offerings

Almost all (96.9%) ESAs that offer online pd target public school teachers as the primary audience. Almost two-thirds (64.4%) also target public school administrators. Less than half (43%) of the ESAs target central office administrators and less than three percent target parents of students in public schools.

Types of Teacher Online PD

Type of online pd offered by the greatest percentage (70%) of ESAs is “online courses

approved for continuing professional education and/or re-certification credit.” Table B reveals the type of online pd offered or made available by ESAs. More than two-thirds (76.5%) offer “online webinars on educational topics.” Half offer “online access to pedagogical and/or subject matter content,” with slightly less than half of the ESAs offering “Online courses offered for university graduate credit” (48.8%) and “Online access to videos of best teaching practices” (48.8%). Only about 16 percent of the ESAs offer an “online mentor teacher program for beginning teachers” or “online instructional coach for teachers.”

Source of Online PD

Almost two-thirds (62.7%) of 158 respondents indicate ESA staff designs the content of online pd offerings (see Figure A). Half of 148 ESA respondents indicate they use pd content that is obtained by the ESA at no cost. Slightly more than one-third (38.7%) of 150 respondents reveal the ESA purchases online content. Less than one-fourth (23.2%) of 155 respondents indicate the ESA does not directly offer online pd but negotiates with a third party to provide the pd to teachers and/or administrators.

Teacher Participation Incentives

Based on combined ratings of “great extent” and “very great extent,” the incentives selected by the highest percentage of respondents as most effective for increasing teacher participation in online pd were

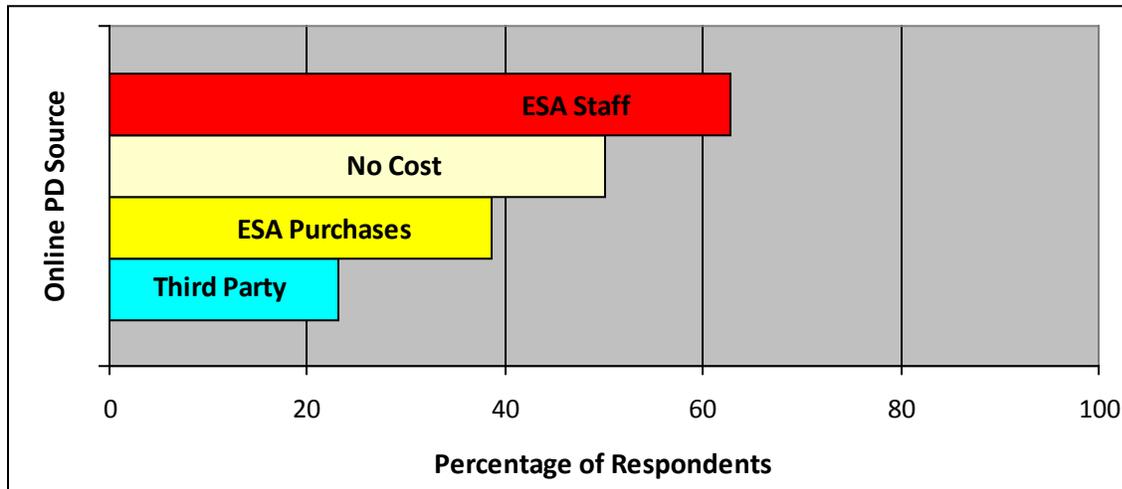
- “Teacher receives online pd that directly assists the teacher in his/her classroom practice” (67.3%)
- “Teacher receives free continuing education credits (CEUs) or professional development hours that count toward license/certification renewal” (53.6%)

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➤ “Teacher receives opportunity to network with role-alike peer teachers in online pd” (46.3%)

➤ “Teacher receives free materials related to online pd for use in classroom (35.1%).”

Figure A. How ESA Obtains Online PD Content



Delivery of Teacher Online PD

Two-thirds of the respondents indicate an online blended or hybrid approach is the most common delivery method of teacher online pd. Almost equal percentages of ESAs, more than half respectively, also indicate using online asynchronous that is facilitated and online asynchronous that is not facilitated.

Slightly more than one in ten ESAs use online synchronous with face-to-face interaction only.

Facilitator Acquisition

More than half of ESAs use a facilitator in the delivery of online pd. Two-thirds (66.9%) of the 160 ESAs train their own personnel as the facilitator (see Figure B).

Technology Platforms, Systems and Support Tools

Of the 160 respondents, half indicate that Moodle is used most often as the technology platform; slightly more than one-fifth (22.5%)

of the ESAs use Blackboard. Fifty-four, or one-third (33.8%) indicate using Skype as the technology tool to support online pd, followed by Elluminate (26.3%) and Adobe Connect (21.3%).

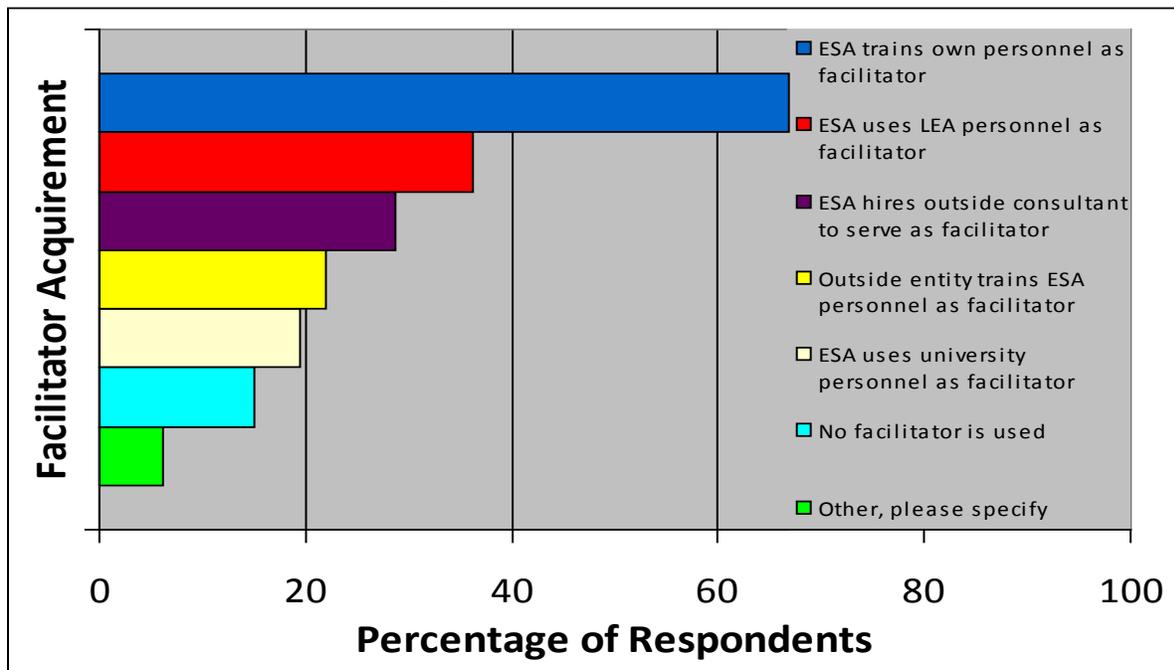
Funding Teacher Online PD

Based on the greatest percentage of the 160 respondents who indicated a funding source, ESAs fund teacher online pd offerings most often in the following ways:

- Individual teacher pays full fee for participation (41.9%)
- School district pays full fee for teacher participation (36.3%)
- ESA pays from operating funds and charges no fee for teacher participation (32.5%)
- Other entity pays full fee for teacher participation (e.g. state funding, federal grant, private business) (26.35%)

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Figure B. How ESA Routinely Acquires Facilitator for Online PD



Evaluation of Online PD

Slightly more than half (54.4%) of the 160 ESAs use degree of participant satisfaction as one of the measures to evaluate effectiveness of online pd offerings; half also use level of participation as one of the measures. On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), about one-fifth of 120 respondents rate their satisfaction with the quality of online pd opportunities currently offered or made available to teachers by the ESA as a 5; another fifth rate a 7.

The mean rating for the 120 respondents was 6.04 with a standard deviation of 1.84.

Barriers to Expanding Teacher Online PD

When combining “great extent” and “very great extent” ratings, “Attracting necessary funding” was selected by the greatest percentage of respondents (n=121; 62%) as a barrier to expanding online pd offerings for teachers, followed by “Overcoming teacher perceptions of no time to participate during school day” (n=119; 50.4%), and “Building

interest among teachers who want traditional pd (e.g., face-to-face workshop) (n=120; 49.2%).

Sustained Teacher Online PD

In addressing the issue of providing high quality pd that is embedded and “sustained” over a time period adequate for teachers to increase knowledge and skills, rather than simply being a one-shot event, 69 of the 160 respondents provided explanations. Five themes emerge from the analysis of comments: (1) direct follow-up assistance to participants, (2) technology applications, (3) extended time period, (4) teacher grouping, and (5) job-embedded improvements.

Offering sustained online pd for teachers is a great challenge for some ESAs, as one ESA respondent notes:

“This is a constant struggle, state initiatives change, and grant or federal funding used for the PD has specific guidelines on how to spend

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funds. We would benefit from any great insight on how to do this with fidelity and with low cost to the ESA.”

ESA Plans

Of the 160 ESA respondents who offer online pd, 98.3 percent of the 118 who answered the question indicate the ESA plans to offer or continue offering online pd to teachers.

Approximately two-thirds (65.3%) of the 118 ESA do not have a formal process for identifying what online pd to offer. Of the 160 ESAs who offer online pd, 112 indicate the best way they learn about a new online pd opportunity that is eventually offered to teachers. Analysis of respondent comments reveals seven themes: (1) ESA staff, (2) district requests, (3) networking, (4) state initiatives, (5) vendor communications, (6) formal needs assessments, and (7) conference attendance.

Viable Business Models

In explaining the most viable business model or strategy the ESA has found to sustain online pd offerings, comments of respondents reflect no one business model exist. Based on respondent comments, five themes reflect the models in use by ESAs: nonexistent or evolving, district cost-savings, shared capacity building, grant funding, and entrepreneurial marketing.

Findings: ESAs Not Offering Online PD

This section of the summary highlights findings for the respondents in ESAs who did not offer or make available online pd during the last three years. Of the 226 respondents, 66, or 29.2 percent indicate

that the ESA did not offer or make available any type of online professional development (pd) in the last three years. Respondents represent ESAs located in 20 states. One fifth (21.2%) of the respondents represent ESAs in Massachusetts and New York. Of the 66 ESAs, four in ten (43.9%) serve non-public schools; four in ten (40.9%) indicate serving charter schools.

Future Plans

More than half (57.7%) of the 45 respondents in ESAs that did not offer online pd in the last three years plan to offer online pd to teachers in the future. Ten of the 45 respondents, or about one-fifth (22.2%), indicate the ESA has a process to follow if they decide to offer online pd in the future. Comments of several respondents in ESAs who did not offer online pd reveal the ESA is supportive of offering online pd to teachers. Examples of comments include:

- This is an area we need to move in
- I think they're necessary and a good way to preserve scarce resources
- We are working on it; online pd offers a timely nature of information
- We are currently looking at online PD for future opportunities
- We are in the initial stages of developing online pd to offer to our districts
- We are still in the baby-stages of offerings...we are not even sure of the questions to ask, but are looking at 'Moodle' as a possible place to start

Comments of some respondents also reveal issues or limitations of the ESA in offering

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online pd for teachers that must be addressed, such as:

- Lack of stable connectivity with our districts is a very limiting factor. We do not have capacity to offer courses.
- We are a relatively small, rural ESA. Staff capacity to develop offerings is an issue.
- We need someone to manage any online PD we would offer.
- Many teachers aren't used to the technology.
- There are concerns about the delivery method and who is actually participating. It seems that any time discussion centers around on-line pd the general consensus is that participants still prefer face-to-face (pd).
- Our component districts have not yet indicated a need for it.
- We are not going to be looking into this until it is requested by our school districts.

Conclusions

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine the status of online professional development (pd) in educational service agencies (ESAs) across the United States. The response rate of 42.4 percent from the universe of all CEOs in a database compiled and maintained by the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESAs) is among the highest ever achieved for a national web-based survey of ESAs. The researcher draws 12 conclusions regarding the status of online professional development (pd) in ESAs.

1. Although ESAs may offer online professional development opportunities to administrators, teachers in public schools, charter schools, and non-public schools are the primary audience for online professional development currently offered by ESAs in the U.S.

2. ESAs offer a large variety of online professional development opportunities for teachers, which predominantly include online courses approved for continuing professional education and/or re-certification credit, online webinars on various educational topics, and online access to pedagogical and/or subject matter content and videos of best teaching practices.

3. Generally, ESAs obtain online professional development content from a variety of sources. Important sources include content designed by staff or free from providers such as state departments of education, public broadcasting, or other ESAs. Generally, no one private provider is common among ESAs who purchase online pd offerings for teachers.

4. ESAs commonly use a variety of incentives to encourage teacher participation in online professional development, particularly those that are perceived of value for enhancing teacher classroom practices and renewing the teaching license or certification.

5. ESAs commonly use the “online blended or hybrid approach” in delivering online pd. ESAs show no preference currently for facilitated online asynchronous versus non-facilitated online asynchronous delivery methods. Generally, ESAs train their own personnel for the facilitator role.

6. Most often ESAs prefer Moodle as the

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technology platform to offer online pd to school districts, used more than twice as often as Blackboard. Although ESAs may use a large variety of online technology tools to support online professional development offerings, common tools include Skype, Elluminate, and Adobe Connect.

7. Generally, ESAs use a large assortment of funding streams to make online professional development opportunities available. ESAs commonly fund online professional development opportunities by charging a participation fee that is paid in total or part by the teacher, the school district, or another entity (e.g. state funding, federal grant, private business). No one business model prevails in ESAs for supporting online pd offerings. More accurately, combinations of models may be at work in many ESAs, if a business model exists at all.

8. Generally, ESAs are somewhat satisfied with the online professional development opportunities they offer or make available for teachers. ESAs most typically rely on degree of participant satisfaction and level of participation as common evaluation measures.

9. ESAs face numerous barriers in expanding online professional development opportunities for teachers. Among the most common barriers are (1) attracting necessary funding, (2) overcoming teacher perceptions of no time to participate during school day, and (3) building interest among teachers who want traditional pd (e.g., face-to-face workshop).

10. Providing high quality online professional development that is embedded and “sustained” over a time period adequate for teachers to increase knowledge and skills is a major challenge for ESAs. Numerous strategies are used to address the issue, including (1)

direct follow-up assistance, (2) technology applications, (3) extended time period of online pd offering, (4) teacher grouping, and (5) online pd linked to job-embedded improvements.

11. ESAs that *provide online pd* generally view it as “the future” in offering teachers professional development, with many advantages over the traditional approaches. Comments of respondents indicate generally ESAs are in early stages in offering online pd and have numerous needs for capacity-building assistance to support this new ESA initiative, including how to identify, select and sustain quality online pd. Developing ESA personnel, networking with other ESAs, and forming partnerships are possible capacity-building practices.

12. ESAs that *did not provide online pd* in the last three years are generally supportive of online pd. Respondent comments indicate a major issue in numerous ESAs is limited organizational capacity to offer online pd. Lack of demand for online pd and inadequate teacher skills with technology may also be key issues.