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Contact: Aimee Erdman
aimee.erdman@k12.nd.us
701-228-2090



NCEC Educational Hub Makes Professional Learning More Accessible to Educators

Bottineau, ND—Educators now have the option to continue their professional learning without disrupting their classroom time.

“Educators are required to get a certain number of hours of continuing education to keep their teaching license current. In the past, this meant leaving the classroom for a day or more to attend a training or doing it in the summer when they are off contract,” said Debby Marshall, Executive Director for North Central Education Cooperative (NCEC).

“Often, the cost of travel and missing a day in the classroom made that a difficult choice. For many educators in our region, they are the sole teacher for a grade or department, and leaving severely disrupts the learning momentum,” she shared.

“NCEC was feeling the same pressure—we are a very small staff and our schools are spread out across hundreds of miles. We needed to find a way to serve the needs of our teachers and not stretch our own resources thin.”

To reach that goal, NCEC created an online forum to provide educators professional development called the NCEC Educational Hub (www.nceceducationalhub.com).

But it didn’t happen overnight.

From 2013 to 2017, NCEC, along with the other regional education associations in the state, was the recipient of an education grant from Hess. Among other initiatives, this grant helped fund NCEC’s work to get professional learning communities (PLCs) up and running in the region.

“Under the Succeed2020 grant, we were able to really gain some momentum with PLCs in our region. PLCs are groups of teachers in like content or grade levels discussing how they will meet learning standards in their classroom and troubleshooting with colleagues how to address challenges,” explains Aimee Erdman, former NCEC Succeed2020 Director.

“The groups began meeting face to face on a regular basis throughout the year. It took time, but they found their rhythm and really started making progress as a cohesive support for each other. And it showed in their school data.”

One larger school who had been doing PLC work for several years saw a 2.57 point increase in their composite ACT score and increases in all core academic scores across the board. They attributed this in part to the consistent PLC work they had done.

But many other NCEC schools had only one staff member in a grade or subject area. Unlike larger schools, there was no one nearby to discuss and collaborate with. This was where holding regional PLCs really impacted educators.

“They were able to regularly meet with colleagues and discuss their similar challenges and successes,” said Erdman. “Unfortunately, when the Succeed2020 funding ended, we were faced with how to continue the progress these teachers had made. The money to pay for travel and subs was now gone, so how do we keep the momentum going with no money to pay for face-to-face meetings?”

That’s when the idea to try meeting virtually was born.

“Accessibility is our primary motivation for creating this option for our educators,” said Shelly Hoerer, Professional Development Director for NCEC.

In the fall of 2017, NCEC piloted an online forum to house PLCs.

“Our NCEC Governing Board, superintendents and principals knew we had limited funding and a problem to solve. When presented with the virtual idea they were extremely supportive. They had great vision and have provided fantastic support as we have expanded our initial ideas. We weren’t exactly sure at the time how it would work or looking back now how it would morph in a variety of ways into something really wonderful,” said Hoerer

NCEC researched options within the state and with other state entities. With collaboration and help from many people including Dakota College at Bottineau, Bismarck Public schools and Montana Office of Public Instruction; NCEC eventually landed on an online learning management system called Moodle.

The trial showed promise.

Initially, 35 participants from eight districts met in seven PLC groups. The next year it grew to 106 participants from 10 districts meeting in 18 PLC groups. The groups developed priority standards for their content and grade level as well as proficiency scales for those standards.

“What we could see from the growth was that the option to work virtually was needed for more than just the PLCs. So, we decided to try other avenues,” said Hoerer.

In the fall of 2018, four book reads were offered to NCEC educators. Participants read portions of the selected book weekly and contributed to online discussions with colleagues about the material and how

it impacted their teaching practice. In all, 47 educators from five districts were able to meet and discuss educational books on a weekly basis.

"After the launch of the initial book read in September of 2018, we could see the need for additional online professional development. We could visit our schools and see the impact the PD was having on educators and students. We could see the virtual forum was allowing our educators access to each other and to high quality PD. We were breaking down the silos and limited opportunities! So why not offer them accessibility to more options?" said Hoerer.

In the spring of 2019, NCEC began developing an expanded course catalog to serve not only classroom educators, but administrators, counselors, librarians, athletic coaches and paraprofessional school staff as well.

"From our conversations with Montana, we could see the possibilities opening up to serve not only the educators in our region, but statewide or beyond," said Hoerer. "Many trainings offered statewide required our educators to drive great distances and many times stay overnight. Maybe that travel could be reduced if some of the work could be done virtually."

By the fall of 2019, the Educational Hub was rolled out to anyone interested in participating in a class.

"We are considering this our pilot year, and for that reason all classes are free to any educator interested in participating regardless of what school they come from," said Debby Marshall, NCEC Executive Director. "We are working on a viable model for sustaining the initiative into the future, but for now we are encouraging anyone interested to check out the Hub."

Courses available include various book reads, *Classroom Management, Integrating Technology, Motivating and Inspiring Students, Standards-Based Grading, Fostering Positive Relationships* and many more.

Topics developed for administrators include AdvancED (now Cognia) planning, mental health, and standards. Each course has a facilitator guide, course outline, videos, and other materials enabling any educator to present the material to their colleagues.

"We are a small staff of only three and needed to find a way to provide the services our schools have come to depend on us for without stretching us all too thin. Facilitating training online enables us to serve all of our schools and saves our tight budget by reducing our staff travel," shared Hoerer.

Most recently, a counselor professional development series was created in partnership with NDCA, ND DPI, ND CTE, NDCDA, NDSU, UND, University of Mary, and the ND School Counseling Association. "Counselors from across the state are able to listen to and discuss with a professional on a variety of topics throughout the year and apply for a credit toward their licensure at the end," said Erdman.

These are the types of partnerships NCEC would like to continue to grow.

“From this point, our hope is to partner with the other regional education cooperatives across the state to expand options for educators further,” said Marshall. “After all, that’s who this is for—the educators. We want to provide as many opportunities as we can to support their work in whatever way we can.”

Visit [NCEC Educational Hub](http://www.nceceducationalhub.com) (www.nceceducationalhub.com) to check out all the free professional learning available.

North Central Education Cooperative is based in Bottineau and serves surrounding regional schools to provide educational services through a collaborative culture that creates successful learning environments.

For questions, please contact NCEC at 701-228-2090 or email Debby Marshall at debby_marshall@k12.nd.us or Shelly Hoerer at shelly.hoerer@k12.nd.us.

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