

California Statewide Evaluation Coherence and Communication: Introduction to the Project

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Contents

Key Takeaways	1
Introduction	2
Professional Learning Design and Evaluation.....	2
Project Aims	4
Descriptions of Professional Learning Projects and Evaluations	5
High-Quality Online Instructional Materials Initiative	5
Learning Acceleration System Grant Program	6
Reading Instruction and Intervention Grant Program	7
Progress and Next Steps.....	8
References.....	9

Key Takeaways

- ▶ California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) contracted RTI International to facilitate coherence and communication across external evaluations of three statewide professional learning projects.
- ▶ The external evaluations are led by WestEd (High-Quality Online Instructional Materials Initiative); Education Northwest (Learning Acceleration System Grant Program); and American Institutes for Research (Reading Instruction and Intervention Grant Program).
- ▶ **Coherence** refers to coordinated efforts with a focused direction across evaluations (e.g., opportunities to use common language and metrics). **Communication**, in this project, is how evaluation descriptions and findings are disseminated to multiple audiences with understandable information. **Equity** is central to coherence and communication work, defined as evaluation considerations around local needs and contextual factors associated with student outcomes.
- ▶ One element of determining coherence is looking for commonalities in how evaluations explore questions about the features and quality of the professional learning, as well as impacts of the initiatives. This framework is informed by literature on design principles of high-quality professional learning and approaches to evaluating professional development both locally and systemwide at state and regional levels.
- ▶ The designs of the professional learning initiatives themselves are varied—respectively, they involve resources and training related to high-quality, open-access instructional materials; capacity-building to accelerate learning in math, literacy, and language development; and literacy-based professional learning to enhance reading instruction. Evaluation approaches are distinct, given differences in the design, aims, scope, and contexts of each project. Therefore, there are commonalities that can be defined across evaluations for coherence but they also need both differentiated and equity-related considerations.
- ▶ RTI has convened evaluation teams, documented the professional learning projects and initial evaluation plans, and reviewed relevant literature. Year 1 (2023–2024) activities include gathering and organizing evaluation questions within specific question categories, synthesizing common protocol questions, drafting an evaluation logic model, preparing for impact evaluation coherence, and developing longer-term plans for dissemination.

Introduction

California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) funded three new professional learning external evaluations in 2022-2023: the High-Quality Online Instructional Materials Initiative Evaluation, led by WestEd; the Learning Acceleration System Grant Program Evaluation, led by Education Northwest; and the Reading Instruction and Intervention Grant Program Evaluation, led by the American Institutes for Research (AIR). CCEE requested RTI International's facilitation of the evaluators to determine coherence of and communication about the professional learning evaluations.

RTI's evaluation coherence and communication project is informed by both RTI's experience with evaluations of System of Support programs (Community Engagement, Geographic Leads, Special Education Resource Leads, 21st Century California School Leadership Academies) and the need for cross-team integration. Coherence across evaluations can facilitate greater efficiency (e.g., of data collection) and deeper understandings of change in complex systems (Bugler, 2022).

For this project, a working definition of **coherence** is how evaluations work in a coordinated manner with a focused direction (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The tasks for coordination and a focused direction involve the identification of common language and metrics across evaluations. **Communication**, in this project, is how evaluation descriptions and findings are disseminated to multiple audiences, with an intent for coordinated and understandable information. All professional learning projects and evaluations are different with varied purposes leading to targeted student outcomes, necessitating **equity** as central to the work of this project, defined as evaluation considerations around local needs and contextual factors associated with student outcomes.

This evaluation coherence and communication project introduction shares principles of professional learning design and evaluation, including equity considerations, information from the start-up period of the three new professional learning evaluations (April–June 2023), as well as progress in Year 1 (August 2023–June 2024) and next steps for evaluation coherence and communication.

Professional Learning Design and Evaluation

High-quality professional development is characterized by a number of key design principles. Overall, principles include professional learning that is of sustained duration and involves collaboration among professionals, application of content in daily practice, and alignment with associated policies. Literature relevant to professional learning in California includes:

- **integration of teacher active learning, application of PD content** to the classroom context, and **collaboration** (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Mezirow, 2000)
- collaboration tied with **continuous improvement**, which enhances capacity building, implementation, and sustainability of improvements in teaching (Goddard et al., 2007; Knapp-Philo et al., 2006);

bolsters teacher confidence in working together, or “collective efficacy,” which has a strong positive relationship with student achievement (Eells, 2011; Hattie & Zierer, 2018)

- collaboration tied with **networked** teams within and across organizations (Hernández, et al, 2022; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016).
- **use of models and modeling, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration** (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)
- for equity-focused PD, **supports for school leaders** in areas like dialogue (e.g., about cultural issues, sociohistorical contexts), resources, and shared leadership (Poekert et al., 2020).

- foundation in student and educator needs demonstrated through **data**; focus on **content and pedagogy**; designed to ensure **equitable** outcomes; designed and structured to be **ongoing, intensive, and embedded** in practice; **collaborative** with an emphasis on **shared accountability**; supported by **adequate resources**; **coherent and aligned** with other standards, policies, and programs (California’s Quality Professional Learning Standards, CDE, 2015)

A leading evaluation framework is Guskey’s five levels of evaluation of professional development: **participant reactions, participant learning, organization support and change, participant use of knowledge and skills, and student learning outcomes** (Guskey, 2000).

Guskey’s five levels of professional development have been researched and validated—and used by many evaluators of professional learning (e.g., Nordengren, 2020). However, missing from the evaluation levels is the question: *What is the professional development?* As we know from the professional development research synthesized above, effective professional development is not a one-time workshop; it incorporates content, resources, collaboration, and practice for a sufficient duration, with formats that support these elements; aligns with needs and other initiatives; and should be based on data for continuous improvement.

Therefore, first steps are to understand professional learning **features** so that an evaluation can also provide information about fidelity and adaptability, all to foster logical connections from professional development to impact.

Evaluations of professional learning that target state and regional levels may also need to take into account additional complexities related to design and implementation. Professional development provided to participants across a state may be characterized by variations in design (e.g., with multiple levels such as district, regional); type (e.g., communities of practice, coaching, resource development); spread (e.g., participants who are staff in varied roles and contexts); and aims (e.g., training other leaders and teachers or direct classroom implementation). These variations may be addressed through questions about whether and how professional learning features are differentiated within and across evaluation contexts.

Other evaluation questions will relate to **quality** of and **satisfaction** with professional learning experiences, as well as professional development **outcomes**. To assess quality and satisfaction, evaluations often explore questions about participant reactions, including whether participants liked the professional development, whether the leader was knowledgeable, and whether time was well spent, as well as whether they anticipate that the information will be useful.

Professional learning outcomes range from changes in participant knowledge and skills to changes in organization (e.g., school climate); participant actions in their work; and student learning outcomes.

Specific to professional learning in California, many of the programs focus on capacity building of leaders or teachers who will, in turn, train their peers or staff. Mapp and Kuttner’s (2013) “4 C’s” of capacity-building can offer a framework to understand potential participant outcomes of capabilities, or skills and knowledge; connections, or networks; cognition, or shifts in beliefs and values; and confidence, or self-efficacy. Defining participant outcomes leads to understanding what participants do in practice and how these actions influence schools and students.

As described above, we divide the statewide evaluation of professional learning into three categories: the features or components of the professional learning program or activities themselves, the professional learning quality and participant satisfaction, and the impact of professional learning, from the participants to the students. However, the variations of offerings and participants necessitate a focus on equity as does the fact that multiple social contextual factors —such as differential access to financial resources across the geographic regions each project serves – impact education outcomes (Committee on Developing Indicators of Educational Equity, 2019). Therefore, we will ask adapted questions from the Equitable Evaluation Framework (Equitable Evaluation Initiative, 2023) to consider equity across evaluations with the aim of understanding how evaluations address historical inequities and local needs, center local communities and contexts, and use equity principles in measure development and contextualizing results.

Project Aims

Evaluations of professional learning have common elements, and when the evaluations are in a similar state context, these elements can be linked with metrics that have a common language. The common language will help meet goals, which generally are to identify the effective features of the professional learning and the impact that professional learning has on participants, and the organizations (districts, schools) and individuals (teachers, students) affected by the participants' learning.

The three professional learning evaluation teams have an opportunity to gather and report on data about features and impact in ways that align to research with common messaging.

To this end, the start-up period of RTI's evaluation coherence and communication project (April to June 2023) determined five aims:

- define common features of professional learning programs (e.g., continuous improvement);
- link common features to a common research base;
- determine what impact data are being collected as outlined in the logic models (short-term, mid-, and long-term effects);
- discuss potential ways to measure common features and perceptions of impact; and
- decide on common metrics to measure, starting with a measure of a common feature across all projects.

To address these aims, RTI held meetings with the CCEE team and the individual evaluation teams with these objectives:

- gather information about evaluations from records and from evaluators;
- develop relationships with evaluators and understand perspectives on professional learning evaluations;
- incorporate perspectives into the framing of professional learning evaluation;
- facilitate the first coherence team meeting;
- document the information gathered and decisions made; and
- plan for Year 1 for follow-on coherence meetings.

RTI and CCEE discussed projects being evaluated and the CCEE collaboration and support of evaluators. Questions asked of the evaluators addressed the key aspects of the evaluation plans, particularly related to the differentiation between the external and internal evaluations when applicable. Evaluators were asked to describe their processes in developing formative and summative evaluation plans and questions, define the language or criteria used to identify and evaluate professional learning features, describe initial considerations and anticipated challenges for measuring impact of professional learning, and identify any common measures or questions that could be utilized across the evaluation ecosystem to establish coherence. RTI also framed discussions with evaluators as a peer facilitation, which will allow us to become better evaluators and to positively influence the investigation of and communication about the California Statewide System of Support.

Descriptions of Professional Learning Projects and Evaluations

This section presents overviews of the High-Quality Online Instructional Materials Initiative, the Learning Acceleration System Grant Program, and the Reading Instruction and Intervention Grant Program, compiled through a review of documents and meeting notes during the start-up period. It also includes summaries of the initial evaluation plans as they were described during that same period (April–June 2023).

HIGH-QUALITY ONLINE INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS INITIATIVE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Pursuant to Section 41 of Assembly Bill 167, CCEE and the California Department of Education (CDE) received approval from the Executive Director of the State Board of Education to develop a repository of curated high-quality, open-access instructional materials. Kern County Office of Education (Kern COE) was designated to lead efforts to support the *California Educators Together* online portal by developing a vetting a process for high-quality, standards-aligned instructional resources and materials for educators; maintaining a repository of the resources and materials; and providing professional learning for the implementation and use of the materials.

This professional learning includes training teachers on how to use the repository, as well as hosting lesson plan institutes that help teachers develop their own high-quality instructional materials to include in the repository. The initiative is housed within the CCEE’s Center for Innovation, Instruction, & Impact, which is charged with “develop[ing], curat[ing], and deliver[ing] synchronous and asynchronous digital professional learning opportunities to support educators with authentic problems of practice” (CCEE, 2023a, para 4).

During the start-up period of RTT’s evaluation coherence and communication project, Kern COE was in the early stages of implementation, which included developing a rubric for judging quality, curating and producing high-quality materials, and establishing professional learning processes to support the lesson plan institutes.

EVALUATION DESCRIPTION

WestEd conducts the external evaluation. Prior to the start of the project, the WestEd team developed an evaluation plan using needs assessment data and other materials collected by Kern COE. Evaluation activities have focused on gathering stakeholders’ perspectives on the goals of the project and the strengths and challenges of the project, as well as advice regarding project implementation. Partners include Kern COE, the initiative project manager, the advisory committee, the technical subcontractor of the California Educators Together online portal, and CCEE. Evaluation activities have also included focus groups with teachers who have participated in the lesson plan institutes; the aim of the focus groups was to understand whether teachers felt capable of writing a high-quality lesson plan, what additional supports are needed to do so, and their satisfaction with the institutes’ professional learning activities. The evaluation team has also provided technical assistance to Kern COE on strategic plan development.

LEARNING ACCELERATION SYSTEM GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In 2022, with funds appropriated according to Section 152 of Assembly Bill 130, CCEE awarded three 5-year Learning Acceleration System grants to the Lake County Office of Education, the San Diego County Office of Education, and the Santa Clara County Office of Education. Each county office partners with external entities to provide professional learning resources and capacity-building to educators accelerating learning in math, literacy, and language development.

- The Lake County Office of Education co-leads the **Rural Math Collective** with the Butte County Office of Education. It partners with several other county offices of education, as well as the Chico Math Project at California State University, Chico, and the California Mathematics Project: North Coast at Sonoma State University.
- The San Diego County Office of Education partners with the Lake and Merced County Offices of Education and the Comprehensive Literacy Center at Saint Mary’s College of California to lead **Project CLEAR: California Literacy Elevation by Accelerating Reading**.
- The Santa Clara County Office of Education leads the California Collaborative for Learning Acceleration (**CCLA**), partnering with seven county offices of education which serve as regional hubs as well as with the Center to Support Excellence in Teaching at Stanford University, the Connie L. Lurie College of Education at San Jose State University, and the California Partnership for Math and Science Education.

The CCEE Learning Acceleration System Team oversees the Rural Math Collective, Project CLEAR, and CCLA. The initiative is housed within CCEE’s Center for Teaching, Learning, & Leading, which is charged with building “a statewide professional learning infrastructure focused on learning acceleration through Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs) in Literacy, Mathematics, and Language Development” (CCEE 2023b, para 4).

EVALUATION DESCRIPTION

Each of the three learning acceleration projects are evaluated using an internal and external evaluation. Evaluation activities are supported by the Learning Acceleration System Grant logic model developed by external evaluators and refined iteratively in conjunction with CCEE, the project grantees, and the internal evaluators. The evaluations are driven by overarching questions:

- Are Learning Acceleration Grant professional learning activities of sufficient relevance, quality, and usability?
- Are professional learning activities impactful for educators and students?

Each internal evaluation differs, but each is responsible for tracking grant activities, professional learning attendance, and engagement for their respective projects. The external evaluation is led by Education Northwest. The external evaluation team provides mentoring to the internal evaluators and conducts both formative and summative evaluations to gather data about (1) structures and processes that support professional learning, (2) how professional learning is designed to address the needs of students, and (3) project alignment with the Learning Acceleration System grants. Formative and summative evaluations include focus groups, surveys, document review, and observations.

CCEE maintains oversight of the initiative, serving as a connector across the project grantees and evaluation teams with an aim toward alignment across projects. CCEE meets quarterly with the internal and external evaluation teams and project grantees to oversee project and evaluation activities and to provide support and feedback. CCEE also plays an active role in communications and highlights grantees and resources in newsletters and on the Learning Acceleration System grant website.

READING INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTION GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Established pursuant to Section 145 of the Education Omnibus Trailer Bill to the 2021 State Budget Act, Assembly Bill 130, the Reading Instruction and Intervention Grant program—designated as Project ARISE—aims to provide literacy-based professional learning to K-12 teachers to enhance reading instruction. Contra Costa County Office of Education was designated as the lead agency for disseminating professional learning opportunities around evidence-based literacy instruction, screening and intervention strategies, and support for enhancing the development of students' executive functioning skills. Regional partners include San Diego County Office of Education (San Diego COE) and Glenn County Office of Education; other partners include Turnaround for Children, The New Teacher Project, the National Center on Intensive Intervention, University of La Verne, and the University of California San Francisco. The program is considered a focus area within the Center for Transformative Systems for Equitable Educational Outcomes, which aims to facilitate “a common integrated vision for the Statewide System of Support for the development of coordinated, equitable, educational student outcomes” (CCEE, 2023c, para 1).

The program is designed to provide tiered support:

- Tier 1: Online professional learning modules on the science of reading and executive functioning for educators; workshops and office hours for school leaders
- Tier 2: Expert coaching and tailored support for school leaders
- Tier 3: Expert coaching, tailored support, and experiential learning for school leaders

EVALUATION DESCRIPTION

The program is evaluated internally by the San Diego COE and externally by AIR. During the start-up period, the program was in the process of recruiting local education agencies to participate. CCEE was working to align internal and external evaluations through an evaluation crosswalk that aims to provide a full snapshot of the evaluation activities and to improve internal and external evaluation coherence. AIR's initial evaluation aims include (1) gathering systems-level data about how the program supports reading instruction, which includes data about the key components of the program; (2) documenting the frequency with which participants engage in tiered support; and (3) gathering participants' perceptions of the program. San Diego COE aims to gather school-level data during site visits, interviews, and focus groups with educators. Data collected will include teacher enrollment in the program and individual school literacy screening reports, among others.

Progress and Next Steps

A review of the evaluations during the start-up period showed that the evaluation teams had plans for understanding professional learning features, an initial impact plan, and communication with evaluators internal to their projects and with CCEE for continuous improvement.

For example, to understand professional learning features, evaluations planned to examine the content, components, formats, structures, and/or processes involved in the professional learning—in one case, using a rubric to evaluate learning elements that are part of the professional development, and in another, assessing whether trainings and resources offer access to best practices to support diverse learners.

Initial impact plans included intentions to measure the reach of professional learning (e.g., the number of educators accessing professional learning resources); perceived impacts of professional development on participants' behaviors, knowledge, and skills; changes in district-level policies and practices; and perceptions and other evidence of student-level impacts.

Building on learnings from the start-up period, RTI collaborated with CCEE to determine short-term activities to facilitate evaluation coherence and communication in Year 1, which began in August 2023. These activities include:

- conducting a complete review of evaluation questions and organizing them into categories (professional learning features, quality and satisfaction, and impact);
- gathering protocol questions for assessing professional learning components and associated reflective or formative areas related to defining the professional learning and alignment of professional learning with research and other initiatives;
- analyzing and organizing protocol questions;
- co-creating at least one common protocol question with adaptation and options;
- reviewing logic models to develop a draft coherence logic model with common language to build from for moving to evaluation outcomes;
- reviewing and revising protocol questions related to features prior to starting outcome questions; and
- drafting ways that evaluators organize impact, including impact-related questions discussed throughout the year and timing of impact data collection and measures used.

RTI and CCEE have also proposed longer-term aims for the coherence and communication project which may include determining concrete examples and talking points that could be used by all teams and the larger system (including system-level evaluations), as well as creating guidance for other evaluators or state departments on how to initiate and achieve statewide evaluation and coherence.

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