Evaluation of the High-Quality Online Instructional Materials Initiative

Key Findings and Recommendations

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Introduction

> "[I] taught for just over nine years; I was always in a situation [where]… I need to… find additional resources… But having a teacher do that on their own… takes additional time and effort [and] there is also an unequal vetting process."
>
> -Advisory Team Member

WestEd is pleased to offer this report on our year two Evaluation of the High-Quality Online Instructional Materials (HQOIM) initiative to the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE). For the past year, our team has worked with the Kern County Superintendent of Schools (KCSOS) implementation team to provide formative evaluation information that they could use to plan and refine their implementation efforts. This report presents WestEd's findings and recommendations derived from our data analysis collected and analyzed from July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024.

The original request for proposals (RFP) called for "external evaluation services to provide planning (to identify the needs the program will address), formative (to support effective implementation through how programs can be improved) and summative (to understand outcomes and overall impact to determine the value of a program through strengthened instructional practices and improved student performance) evaluations."

The current scope of WestEd's year two evaluation focuses on the formative work.is designed to align with the KCSOS theory of action (Figure 1), which states, "California Educators Together will be a community of practice designed to provide educators, administrators, specialists, and state program leads a common space to communicate, share strategies, and access resources."

The KCSOS team's work on the High-Quality Online Instructional Materials initiative, as outlined in Section 41 of Assembly Bill 167 (Chapter 252, Statutes of 2021), includes four major activities: (1) define and apply an understanding of what qualifies as high-quality online instructional materials, (2) increase the number of lessons and resources that meet this definition, (3) establish the CaET platform as a go-to hub for educators working to meet student instructional needs across the state, and (4) oversee the continued development and improvement of the California Educators Together (CaET) platform. Our evaluation efforts address these strategies, focusing on how high quality is instantiated across all activities.

Figure 1 KCSOS HQOIM Theory of Action

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the evaluation are as follows:

1. How does the KCSOS team define and communicate to the CaET community members what constitutes High-Quality Online Instructional Materials (HQOIM)?
   a. Is the definition of High-Quality flexible enough to guide the work?
   b. How do individuals, teachers, and curriculum developers interested in creating materials for the platform learn about and then understand CaET's vision for HQOIM?
2. Do the activities the KCSOS team is designing and implementing increase the depth and breadth of *high-quality* lessons and resources available on the CaET platform?
   a. What strategies and activities are KCSOS's team engaging in to increase the breadth and depth of HQOIM?
   b. Do teachers, site-based, district, and state-level administrators, curriculum developers, and other potential sources for HQOIM engage with these activities?
3. How is KCSOS promoting the CaET platform within California, and who are they reaching?
   a. What actions is KCSOS taking to increase awareness of the platform?
   b. Who are the educators that use the platform? Is there equity in usage across educator demographics?
   c. What materials or capacities do educators wish were on the platform?
4. How are educators engaging with the CaET platform? Does it support their access to the materials they need to support instruction?
   a. Can interested teachers find, use, modify, upload, and create lessons on the site?
   b. Can CaET monitor the quality of lessons curriculum developers post on the site?

Evaluation Activities

Under our current contract, WestEd designed the evaluation activities to help our team understand the KCSOS strategies and participants' perspectives on the HQOIM initiative. These evaluation activities included:

- Participated in monthly CaET and advisory committee meetings.

- Monitored changes in KCSOS strategies for the HQOIMI implementation,

- Attended the July 2023 and January 2024 Lesson Design Institutes (LDI)

- Met with the KCSOS team to develop surveys for a new workshop format.

- Conducted focus groups with seventeen teachers.

- Analyzed responses from LDI end-of-day participant surveys.

- Analyzed responses from platform usability testing with the Advisory Committee

- Interviewed seven advisory committee members, including two external subject matter specialists and five California Department of Education (CDE) staff.

- Analyzed 2023 platform data.

- Provided formative reports in December 2023, February 2024, and April 2024.

KCSOS Milestones and Accomplishments

> "It appears to me that they have a cycle of continuous improvement, and they are constantly revisiting what they have accomplished…and then making changes and adaptions based on the information and data they have. So, I have been very impressed with the process so far."
>
> – Advisory Team Member

KCSOS had a productive year implementing key elements of its HQOIM strategy. The HQOIM team reports progress since 2022 in all requirements under Section 41 of Assembly Bill 167 (Chapter 252, Statutes of 2021) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: KCSOS Stated Achievements
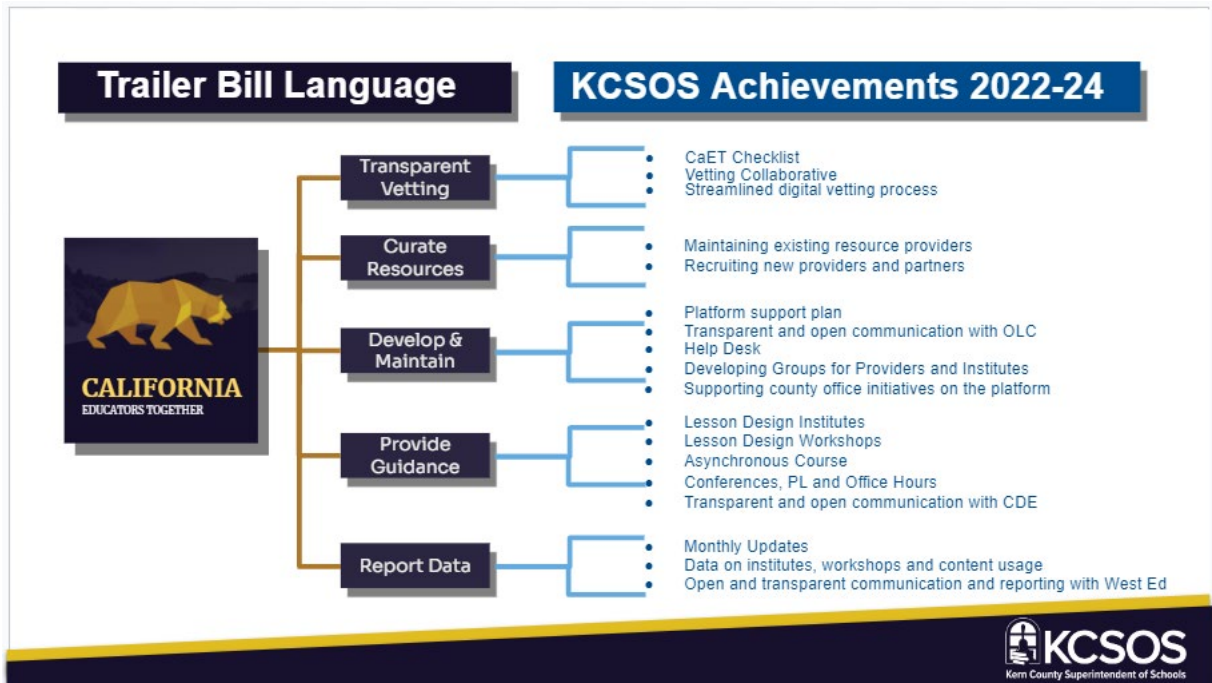
In the fall of 2023, it announced a new leader to oversee the HQOIM work. In one of its first monthly meetings, the KCSOS team developed a checklist of key strategies to guide its work. They spent the remainder of the year implementing that strategy (see Table 1).

During the 2022-2023 school year, KCSOS designed a Lesson Plan Rubric to guide lesson design. Subsequent feedback from users and the advisory team encouraged them to develop a more straightforward format. So, in the fall of 2024, they developed the Create Lesson Checklist. KCSOS also developed additional templates to help teachers design lessons. They continued planning and running Lesson Design Institutes, but with each iteration, they added new materials and support based on the feedback they received in prior LDIs. WestEd witnessed an example of changing strategies for LDIs in the July 2023 LDI and the January 2024 LDI. In the July Institute, the primary facilitator led whole-group instruction with small-group breakout sessions to refine the work. The January Institute had multiple facilitators working with small groups in separate rooms.

During the Winter of 2023-2024, the HQOIM team designed new courses to give teachers other ways to learn about quality lesson design. The new learning modes offered teachers more flexibility than the 12 hours of instruction over two days in the full LDI model. First, they designed lesson design workshops that allowed teachers to learn through a mix of asynchronous content to engage with at home, followed by eight hours of in-person support from the HQOIM facilitators.

Second, they designed a fully asynchronous course to provide teachers with professional

learning they could take on their own. To support the workshops and the asynchronous course, the HQOIM team developed a series of videos covering the content of a typical LDI. These videos include an introduction to lesson design, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), English Language Development Standards (ELD), California state standards, student assessment, unit planning, and uploading to the CaET platform.

Table 1: Key Activities by the KCSOS team 2023-2024

Fall 2024
• New leadership
• Create Lesson Checklist and Templates
• Refine LDI
Winter 2023-2024
• Design lesson design workshops
• Create Videos for Asynchronous workshops (Intro, UDL, ELD, Standards, Assessment, Unit Planning, CaET Platform Upload)
• Create a Structure to Cover All Standard/Content/Grade Level Coverage
• Access to Standards on CaET
• Develop a System for Tracking Lessons by Standards
• Develop a System to Create Lessons for all Standards for Each Subject and Each Grade Level
Spring 2024
• Create Professional Learning Opportunities (institutes, workshops, asynchronous)
• Create Lesson Design Opportunities (Notable Contributor, CaET Vetter, CaET Facilitator, Workshop Leader)
• Created CaET podcast
• Began creating Subject Specific Guide

As the number of lessons vetted through the CaET process increased, the HQOIM team began monitoring standard/content/grade level coverage by the vetted lessons. They created tools to monitor the coverage. Toward the end of the 2023-2024 school year, they announced plans to incentivize teachers to design lessons for standard/content/grade levels that lacked lessons.

The team added new resources to the CaET site, including the California State Standards. They developed a system for tracking lessons by standards. The team created a new user interface for the site in the form of Subject-Specific Guides—PDF documents focused on a specific subject with live links to the CaET site that allow teachers to follow the link directly to the specific lesson or resources cited in the guide.

In April 2024, the team created new promotional materials outlining the professional learning opportunities (institutes, workshops, asynchronous courses) available to teachers that offer three ways for teachers to receive training on crafting high-quality lessons that are standards-based and include integrated ELD and UDL. They also created new promotional materials

inviting California educators who have already participated in an LDI or workshop to continue working on lesson design in several capacities (i.e., as a Notable Contributor, CaET Vetter, CaET Facilitator, Workshop Leader).

Finally, the team continues to work on a social media strategy to reach educators via other platforms. For example, they produced podcasts by and about educators participating in the lesson design process or using the vetted lessons in their classrooms.

KCSOS Key accomplishments

In its Year 2 Report, KCSOS announced that it has created 1,577 Lessons through the work of its team and 390 workshop and institute participants (see Figure 3). Additional materials are available on the CaET website through the partner organizations that have made their curricular materials available on CaET.

Figure 3: LDIs and Workshops held in California

The year 2 Report also indicates that the HQOIM team has fourteen events planned for next year. They anticipate that up to 1,300 participants will learn about high-quality lesson design LDIs, workshops, and asynchronous courses.

Advisory Team Assessment of the KCSOS team's work

> "…they have a cycle of continuous improvement, and they're constantly revisiting what they've accomplished, what their goal was, where they want to go, and then making changes and adaptions based on the information."
>
> – Advisory Team Member

Overall, advisory team members (advisors) described the KCSOS team as highly collaborative and responsive in curating resources, building educator capacity, and developing curriculum materials. Advisory team members say KCSOS has "gone above and beyond" to provide technical assistance, improve the platform, and work closely with CDE departments AND OTHER partners.

At the end of year one, WestEd recommended that the KCSOS team work closely with CDE members on the HQOIM initiative. In response, the advisory committee included five additional CDE members, bringing the total to six. This supported greater visibility for the project and alignment with the CDE goals.

The advisors have had overwhelmingly positive experiences, praising the KCSOS team's effective leadership, purposeful operation of the advisory committee, and transparent feedback mechanisms. One advisor stated, "I just really had a positive experience. [I] think Kern's been doing a great job with the leadership on it." Another advisor appreciated how the team actively gathered and applied feedback for improvement, including selecting better presenters and facilitators for their institutes.

The advisors praised the KCSOS team's efforts to create A system with high-quality resources. One advisor noted the team's outreach efforts through conference booths and roadshows to promote their institutes and asynchronous courses. Another offered that while the first year focused on building the foundation, the second year focused on refining and polishing the work's existing components. Another advisor highlighted a similar sentiment: "I've seen a lot of the things that seemed really clunky and not user-friendly become much more refined."

Finding 1: KCSOS has made progress toward the goals in Section 41 of Assembly Bill 167 (Chapter 252, Statutes of 2021) Trailer Bill.

Implications:

1.   KCSOS has developed strategies, resources, and tools to reach more educators across California and build their capacity to create high-quality lessons.

2.   The KCSOS team worked closely with an expanded advisory committee, creating productive meetings and consistently implementing recommendations.

3. They have developed over 1,500 vetted lessons, with 390 Lesson Design Institute (LDI), workshops, and course participants. They plan fourteen events next year with the potential for 1,300 participants. If they hit their target participation and the participants produce lessons at similar rates to this year, KCSOS may double or more the number of vetted lessons available to teachers in California.

4. As KCSOS develops more partnerships, the number of resources available by standard/content/grade level coverage may also increase significantly. By this time next year, there is the potential to have over 3,000 vetted lessons plus lessons vetted and posted to CaET by partner organizations.

5. The Subject Specific Guides offer a potential roadmap for developers to create a teacher-centric user interface for CaET. However, changes to the underlying web links in the guides may make the current set of guides unsustainable.

Teachers' Experience with the Platform

> "It is a real deep dive into crafting a really good lesson... I totally appreciate the foundation that it creates for any teacher... [A]nd they have these amazing lessons."
>
> - Teacher

WestEd followed teachers' experiences navigating and using the CaET platform. This exploration included capturing teachers' feedback through interviews, focus groups, and evaluation forms provided at the end of Lesson Design Institutes. Though both the website and lesson creation platform have evolved, three core themes remain consistent in teachers' feedback on the Initiative and the platform:

1) Teachers value the platform's aim to provide vetted, high-quality lessons, which many felt was a more targeted effort than the Teachers Pay Teachers model.

2) Many teachers appreciate the tools and materials the KCSOS team has created, such as the Lesson Checklist, to support and guide lesson creation and upload processes.

3) Teachers underscore difficulty navigating and understanding the platform's organization. Their chief concerns emphasize challenges in searching for and understanding the types and scope of lessons provided on the platform (e.g., tagging, range of subjects, grades covered, breadth of lessons, and resources).

Valuing a Platform that Aims to Provide High-Quality and Vetted Lessons: In general, teachers we spoke with expressed excitement about finding a site with teacher-developed materials that aims to provide high-quality lessons and that includes a vetting process. For some, the site represented a new opportunity for teachers to provide resources for other teachers through a

different model than Teachers Pay Teachers. Those we spoke to also thought it was important that lessons on the platform attempted to address multiple standards.

Appreciating CaET Tools and Resources: The KCSOS team has created resources to help teachers produce lessons for the platform and to guide upload processes, which teachers appreciate. This includes the Lesson Plan Template and current Lesson Checklist that the team refined from the original rubric they created at the start of the project. Teachers noted that such supportive materials were essential and helped them integrate strategies into lessons that met diverse learners' needs. While some teachers noted inconsistencies with guidance provided, for example, incongruities with the template elements and descriptions of how to upload lessons, these have not resulted in significant obstacles.

Challenges with Navigating the Platform and Lessons: While teachers appreciate the CaET website and platform, they underscored persistent challenges they experienced with usability, such as functionality and design. Teachers have difficulty following the platform's organization, navigating the site, and understanding the scope and range of lessons.

> "I did not really feel like it was intuitive...I am like, wait, did I just come from this tab? Is this a different tab? Is this a different area? I was lost on where I was at...every page essentially looked the same in terms of the same theme."
> – Teacher

Teachers we spoke to mentioned that the site needed work to make it more user-friendly. They found it challenging, for example, to find lessons and to target their search for their needs. Concerns with search functionality have been ongoing as the KCSOS team tries to work alongside website developers to troubleshoot tagging issues and increase search capabilities. Tagging issues include the misalignment of legacy materials, resources tagged incorrectly for content and grade level, or subjects and grades not tagged. Early in the evaluation, the team noticed that lessons and resources had some tagging but no substantive content. These issues cause more difficulties when teachers conduct search queries based on tagged materials, which then fall short of their needs and targets (e.g., for subject or grade-specific materials).

Scope and Range of Lessons: Teachers expressed confusion about the scope and range of lessons provided on the CaET site. Many felt that the breadth and scope of lessons were unclear. Teachers also noted difficulty finding lessons for all content areas and grades. Many lessons exist as stand-alone plans with a block time of less than an hour. Some teachers taking part in institutes pointed out that 50-minute lessons did not speak to longer teaching times or the sequence of teaching and learning that occurs within units and curriculum.

Organization: Many teachers we spoke to felt overwhelmed by the number of resources on the

platform and the organization of those materials. They also mentioned the substantial number of user groups on the site, which made it difficult for them to know which groups to join (or to which they had already been added). Many teachers had difficulty with the site architecture, noting they would get lost in the numerous tabs open in their browsers.

Advisory Team Members' Experience with the Platform

Most of the California Department of Education (CDE) advisors we spoke with felt compelled to explain the history of the CaET platform. It seemed important to understand two things: The CaET site has many heritage materials and relationships. Partners, vendors, and different departments and initiatives in the CDE have historically posted materials on the CaET platform. The platform also serves as an important venue for web publishing for the CDE when they have materials that they wish to make widely available. Because of this history, the platform has inherited a complex set of resources.

> "There's a little bit of a learning curve to the platform that I think the average user probably isn't prepared for."
>
> – Advisory Team Member

The Platform Functionality: Much of the advisory team's time this year has been spent exploring the platform's features and providing feedback for improvement. As such, the members we spoke to were well-informed on the platform.

Complexity and Learning Curve: While advisory team members describe the CaET platform as "very powerful and robust," there are concerns about its complexity and steep learning curve. One advisory team member noted, "It takes too many clicks to get something done. It does not quite work as intuitively as you would expect."

User Interface and Experience: Multiple advisors highlighted the need for an improved user interface and experience. One advisory team member said, "We need to enhance some of the features. We need to have a better search tool. Things need to be done in fewer steps." Another recalled, "I remember looking on the website and wondering if I were in a classroom and somebody said, 'Here's a website, check this out.' When I went there, I did not know who did this. Why would I use it?" However, the advisor acknowledged recent improvements, saying, "Now there are all these little pop-ups and boxes and things that sort of explain that."

Search and Filtering: Advisory team members think the search functionality and filtering options need improvement. One advisory team member said, "I think that we continue to work on refining the search or Kerns continuing to work on the search and targeting." Another expressed frustration with the search capabilities, noting, "I did not know because the things that I kept asking is that I want to tag by performance expectation. I want to be able to search

fourth-grade life science strength one dash two, and I want to see which lesson comes up with that."

Another advisory team member acknowledged improvements in filtering. Still, they found it overwhelming, saying, "I think filtering… sometimes… a lot of stuff came up. I do not want to look through all of this. But now you can say that you only want to see lessons, and that was not there."

Content Management and Organization: Two advisory team members emphasized the need for better content vetting, tagging, and organization. One suggested "Partnering with organizations like the California Subject Matter Project… where we are uploading to the platform resources that would be useful to the professional learning at our sites." Another stated, "I think they need to manage the professional learning side or the resource side of the site a little more directly and with more vetting for what's there."

Continuous Improvement and Partnerships: While acknowledging the platform's evolution, one advisory team member highlighted the need for ongoing refinement, saying, "On the platform side, just continuing the evolution to make it more and more so that we have a streamlined protocol [for]… issue[s] a user is experiencing." Another advocated for strategic partnerships, suggesting, "Let's enter into partnerships, and… create resources that are tagged with CSMP, and also the high-quality education together tag."

> "The more user-friendly we make it, the more word of mouth we're going to get, and the more likely we'll have teachers want to adopt using this as a resource."
> – Advisory Team Member

Overall, the advisory team members provided constructive feedback, emphasizing the need for a more intuitive user experience, enhanced search and filtering capabilities, improved content management and organization, and strategic partnerships to enhance the platform's effectiveness in supporting educators' professional learning needs.

Finding 2: Both teachers and advisory team members recognize the value of the CaET site and want to see it thrive. However, both groups want a more intuitive user interface, better resource organization, improved key-term tagging and search functionality, and a full range of coverage by standard/content/grade level.

Implications:

1. Teachers value having access to teacher-created, vetted lessons and materials for use in their classrooms.

2. Both teachers and advisory team members see the need to ensure CaET has full coverage by standard/content/grade level, allowing a teacher anywhere in the state to access relevant materials that meet the needs of the students in their classrooms, regardless of their ELD, or special education status, across all of subjects, grades, and standards.

3. The current user interface is not intuitive and requires user training to understand all the site's features. Both teachers and advisory team members want an improved user interface and better organization of the materials on the site so they can navigate easily. They also want to see better tagging of resources to improve the search functionality and better ability to search for materials that a teacher would find applicable to their classroom.

Advisory Team Views on the Purpose and Future of HQOIM

> *"I'm not sure there's a shared vision at the state level, at the highest levels about what this can do."*
>
> *Advisory Team member*

We asked each advisor what they believed was the project's purpose. Of all our questions, this yielded the broadest range of answers. One advisory team member said, "…the biggest goal, long-term, is to not just have one-off lessons and one-off units, but ultimately… the goal is to replace the need for textbooks."

Other advisors believe the HQOIM initiative has powerful potential but needs tighter vetting of materials, material creators, and content providers featured on the site. One advisor recognized this tension and observed, "The people who have been attending this institute might not have been the best people to create this high-quality lesson…two days is so fast to really build expertise in lesson [development]."

Finally, the advisors were sensitive to the fact that teachers' needs should guide the work's mission. Teacher interviews reinforce this sentiment. Teachers told WestEd that they trust

materials and lessons created by other teachers.

The future

The advisors provide a comprehensive and multifaceted view of the project's future, emphasizing sustainability, collaboration, and evolution. Advisors see the project's future as a dynamic and evolving endeavor. Advisory team members emphasized the need for sustainability and continuous funding to ensure the project's longevity.

> "We have to find some sustainability money. Cannot just turn the lights out. Needs to be a resource available going forward."
>
> *- Advisory Team member*

Teachers like the fact that CaET offers free, open resources. "Teachers are using it, so it is impacting students and is free. It is an open resource for teachers," said one advisory team member. This highlights the project's current success and potential to become a central hub for educational resources, especially in areas lacking textbooks.

However, the advisors recognize that the project must evolve to stay relevant. One team member said, "We're going to have to evolve our vision and scope of work as we go." This evolution may involve partnering with other Open Educational Resources (OER) providers and reworking the scope of work to include… modules and complete courses. They see this as a significant but achievable task, which one advisory team member saw as "not a decade away, but I think it's at least probably a five-year project."

The advisors also stress the importance of having a clear plan and timeline. One advisory team member asked, "We know what the vision is, but what is the plan? How many years do we have that we can count on beyond this year or next year?" These questions highlight the need for strategic planning and long-term commitments.

> "Maybe include the platform in legislative analysis so that instead of having a bunch of different separate platforms, we'll just use one tool statewide."
>
> *Advisory Team member*

Another advisory team member emphasized the need to update and adapt to technological changes. That member said, "The future of this platform would be to not just provide additional resources for educators, districts, and schools, but also to update and change as technology changes."

Another advisory team member wants more collaboration across divisions and more programs

posting resources on CaET. They said, "I think, ideally, we need to onboard a lot more programs." This includes working with divisions like Career College and Transition and Early Education to curate resources and define their space.

There is a recognition that simply having resources is not enough; the process of professional development and resource utilization needs improvement. One team member said, "Just having the lesson there is not enough. You need the other process with which educators are receiving professional development, using, searching, and even looking at these resources."

> "It needs some high-level attention to be clear about its goals and mission...it would be useful to have...the chief deputies engaged in some higher-level visioning around what it ought to be doing."
>
> *Advisory Team member*

Finally, the advisors emphasize the need for the platform to be a living, breathing resource rather than a static artifact. One team member said, "We are at the point now I feel that we have to decide whether or not this lesson-sharing site is going to be sort of a static kind of artifact or if it's going to be a living, breathing sort of resource."

Finding 3: Advisory Team Members have differing views on the vision for the HQOIM initiative. They see the need for CDE to give this high-level attention to guide the creation of a sustainability plan and timeline. They also recognize the need for legislative action to create a statewide tool rather than one-off projects that use the platform.

Implications:

1. High-level CDE support is critical to the long-term sustainability of the HQOIM initiative.

2. With funding ending next year, the need for a sustainability plan is paramount.

3. Initiative leaders may need to consider working with the legislature to define the long-term vision for the platform as a tool to support teachers statewide.

Recommendations

Platform

1. Create a user-friendly, intuitive interface that allows teachers to find the necessary resources.

2. Implement long-requested changes to search and navigation.

3. Conduct additional end-user testing of the CaET site to improve teacher perceptions of ease of use and usefulness.

4. Create clear visual delineation for the types of materials hosted on the platform to improve navigation.

5. Improve the ability to track users and site use. Create a public dashboard of this data.

HQOIM Initiative

1. Continue focusing on high-quality materials.

2. Continue adding lessons to cover all grades, subjects, and standards.

3. Define and publicize the process and criteria for including partnership resources.

4. Develop a plan to dramatically expand outreach to increase teacher use and support for CaET across California.

5. Offer Lesson Design Institutes for experienced teacher-lesson designers who can work with their teachers at their school or district.

6. Create additional "lesson learning" institutes as opportunities for teachers to learn about and engage with the site's materials so they can effectively use them in their classrooms.

7. Develop a sustainability plan that addresses the vision for CaET, long-term funding, teacher support, and high-level CDE support.