



Systems for Approving Professional Development Providers

An Introduction

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This report introduces systems for approving professional development providers as they currently operate in two State education agencies (SEAs) and two professions outside of education. It derives from a request that officials with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) made to the Reform Support Network (RSN) for assistance in examining provider approval systems in other States, as a step toward strengthening the Massachusetts system for K-12 educators. Specifically, DESE officials asked for help collecting information about policies and practices in other States as well as provider approval systems in other professions.

The RSN team searched for information about this topic on the public Websites of the 18 Race to the Top grantee SEAs and several sources for the nursing and legal professions. The team then conducted short, informal interviews with staff members of several SEAs, the American Nurse Credentialing Center and the American Bar Association.

This report examines the current practices of two SEAs—Delaware and Pennsylvania—and two organizations representing the professions of nursing and law. It does not offer a lengthy or rigorous research survey of the entire field. K-12 policies and practices are changing so rapidly that our goal here is mainly to introduce the topic and to guide readers toward more detailed information.

Provider Approval in Race to the Top States

This review focuses on the provider approval processes in Delaware and Pennsylvania. Other Race to the Top grantees either do not approve professional development providers or have suspended their provider approval processes. SEAs in several Race to the Top States maintain lists of providers but do not appear to vet the lists.

Invitations to apply for approval as K-12 professional development providers set expectations for the quality of professional development by asking applicants to indicate how the activities for which they seek approval meet State standards for educator performance, align with content standards and meet standards for high-quality professional development and adult learning. They vary in the detail and depth of description that they ask of applicants in explaining their activities.

Delaware's Cluster Approach

Delaware lists institutions of higher education, local educational agencies (LEAs), charter schools and professional organizations as eligible providers. Until recently, Delaware had maintained a "professional development cluster" approval system. *A Manual for Cluster Developers* defines a cluster as "a focused group of professional development experiences that lead to new knowledge and skills...held to the same intellectual rigor as graduate level courses... [with] the potential to impact student learning by being based on current research on effective best practice."¹

The Reform Support Network, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, supports the Race to the Top grantees as they implement reforms in education policy and practice, learn from each other, and build their capacity to sustain these reforms, while sharing these promising practices and lessons learned with other States attempting to implement similarly bold education reform initiatives.

Under this approval system, applicants were instructed to submit details about how their proposed activities would align with various standards. The Delaware system established a four-point rubric for rating six key elements of the cluster design. Applicants were encouraged to revise their cluster proposals as necessary, and were permitted to resubmit their applications up to two times.

Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) officials report that they have suspended the professional development cluster approval system as they revise their program. Officials expect the Professional Standards Board to revisit the cluster approval process, but it is too soon to speculate on steps that the board might take.

Despite the suspension of new approvals, the DDOE Website maintains links to several professional development cluster documents, including profiles of all approved clusters (about 100 clusters in 13 subject areas).² DDOE officials view these documents as a resource for districts and universities interested either in using a cluster or developing new ones.

Pennsylvania's Front-Loaded Process

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has established a process for approving providers of professional development for K-12 educators. As PDE officials emphasize, the Commonwealth provides “front-loaded” quality control in the application and review process for continuing education.³ PDE leaders view this review process as rigorous, and in many cases there is considerable back and forth between the PDE and applicants before a provider achieves approval. Applicants whose initial applications are rejected may resubmit their applications two times.

Eligible providers include institutions of higher education, LEAs, professional organizations, individuals and out-of-State entities. Approval applies to the provider as an organization, even though the application asks for detailed information about specific activities. Once approved, organizations can develop and implement new content to offer during the three-year term of their approval. Providers who wish to offer professional development to school

and district leaders must seek separate approval from PDE. Approved providers are allowed to employ educators, agencies or other staff without additional PDE approval.

In 2013, the State updated its original guidance for providers, detailing how applicants must address eight standards for professional development. For example, under a standard that calls for alignment of professional development content to at least one component of one domain in Charlotte Danielson's “Framework for Teaching,” applicants must specify the component and the domain the professional development will address. Applicants must then specify how the activity will address the component with “an amplifying explanation of how the offering promotes or increases the educator’s understanding of the professional practice component.”⁴

State Education Agency Review of Provider Performance

Delaware and Pennsylvania require providers to retain records of educator participation and completion of professional development activities for three years or longer. Delaware requires providers to administer standard end-of-activity surveys and to submit the surveys to the DDOE's Professional Standards Board. Both States require applicants to submit plans for rigorous evaluations of the impact of professional development on practice and student learning. Both States also have provisions for using the results of the evaluations to inform decisions about approving applications from providers for renewal.

Provider Approval Outside of Education

In nursing and law, like many fields (such as other health-related professions, accountancy, architecture and insurance), practitioners are expected to engage in continued learning in the interest of providing better service to their patients, clients and customers. Many States require nurses and lawyers to engage in professional development as a condition of retaining their licenses to practice.

Approval processes are needed because the public and the State governments that license professionals expect these professionals to continually improve their knowledge and practice to more effectively meet the needs of their clients. This expectation for ongoing professional growth cuts across most professions, and with it comes the demand for additional training or development. To ensure the quality of that continuing education, most State governments issue regulations that codify the expectations for ongoing professional development. The actual monitoring and approval of professional development, however, is often the province of professional organizations, and their approval processes and approaches vary considerably.

In contrast to common practice in education, the approval processes for continuing education in nursing and law focus on provider capacity as well as the quality of the offerings. Announcements and invitations to apply for approval as professional development providers set expectations for the quality of professional development.

In nursing, the American Nurse Credentialing Center (ANCC), a subsidiary of the American Nurses Association, has established and administers comprehensive procedures for approving providers of continuing nursing education (CNE) as well as accrediting approvers of providers. The ANCC provider approval processes are national in scope.

In law, State supreme court systems—often in partnership with State bar associations—have established systems to approve providers of continuing legal education (CLE). For example, New York State’s Mandatory CLE (MCLE) program is well developed and typical of CLE provider approval in 42 other States.

Depending on how much support is offered to providers during the approval processes (such as guidance, application manuals and forms, and technical assistance), these processes also vary in terms of the investment of staff time required. The ANCC sets an especially high bar in this area by providing comprehensive guidance to applicants, offering a review of draft applications and requiring both full documentation of provider capacity and extensive recordkeeping.

A Model From the Nursing Profession

Most States require registered and licensed practical nurses to complete a certain number of hours of CNE to maintain their licenses, and some States identify required CNE content. State nursing boards issue and renew licenses, and nurses are responsible for submitting records of CNE completed in their relicensure applications. States have the authority to determine whether the activities that nurses report for licensure meet quality standards, although they do not necessarily require nurses to participate in CNE offered by approved providers. States do, however, have the authority to determine whether the activities that nurses submit to meet licensure requirements meet quality standards.

The ANCC has taken a leading role in developing and administering comprehensive processes for accrediting providers of CNE activities and for accrediting “approvers”—other organizations that approve CNE providers. Nationally, ANCC has accredited 314 CNE providers and 51 approvers. The ANCC Website includes a comprehensive list of resources to guide applicants for approver and provider status.⁵ Resources include self-study guides (for applicants to use in preparing for the formal application process), application manuals and technical support from ANCC accreditation staff.

The ANCC has established three criteria for accrediting CNE providers and approvers: structural capacity, the educational design process and quality outcomes. Applicants must provide detailed information about how they will meet these criteria and, as providers, must keep extensive records. In short, the ANCC process underscores the importance of accountability for creating and sustaining both organizational capacity and CNE quality.

Central to the ANCC’s approach is the leadership role of nurses in all phases of CNE, including planning, design, facilitation and evaluation.⁶ For example, provider organizations must assign nurses to key planning and leadership roles and grant them the authority to ensure compliance with standards for quality CNE.

A Model From the Legal Profession

In contrast to nursing, mandatory CLE is a State-by-State operation typically managed by the State supreme court system, often in partnership with the State bar association. The Continuing Legal Education Regulators Association serves as a national clearinghouse for detailed information about CLE policies and practices in the 50 States, Puerto Rico and several Canadian provinces.⁷

Forty-three States require lawyers admitted to the bar to complete a certain number of hours of CLE to maintain their licenses. Most also specify the content of at least some of the CLE hours, and 32 States have special requirements for attorneys newly admitted to the bar. Like nurses, lawyers are expected to maintain personal records of their CLE participation and submit those records with their re-licensure applications.

According to the American Bar Association, CLE providers are accredited by individual States. More than 40 States have requirements for applying to be a CLE provider. The administration of CLE varies somewhat across the States, but there are considerable similarities in basic policies and procedures.

New York's approach is typical of other States. Although not as extensive as ANCC guidance and requirements, New York's MCLE regulations set quality standards for MCLE programs and courses as well as for providers in the State. The State's Continuing Legal Education Board administers provider approval as part of its oversight of the MCLE program.⁸

The MCLE board also issues detailed directions for applicants seeking approval of individual activities and accreditation as an approved provider. The quality standards set faculty qualifications, including a requirement that at least one member of the faculty be a practicing attorney. The standards also emphasize the quality of course materials. Accredited providers must maintain records of course attendance, completed evaluation surveys, copies of course agendas, brochures and course materials for all activities for four years.

The State's MCLE approval process also distinguishes between traditional (live, face-to-face activities, like workshops and lectures) and nontraditional formats (audio and video recordings, broadcasts, teleconferences, video conferences and online courses). The nontraditional activities must meet the same quality standards as the traditional ones.

Conclusion: Why Approval Matters

Looking across the provider approval processes of SEAs in Delaware and Pennsylvania and in nursing and law, four common elements emerge:

- An explicit focus on improving professional practice
- Criteria to determine eligibility to be an approved provider
- Reliance on professional development standards to set clear expectations for provider performance
- Extensive requirements for recordkeeping and reporting to assure quality and monitor provider performance

There are also significant differences among the approval processes. The SEA processes emphasize approval of professional development activities and services and devote relatively little attention to provider qualifications, experience and capacity. In contrast, the approval processes for CNE and CLE focus on provider capacity as well as the quality of specific activities and services. These processes also vary in terms of the investments of staff time and other resources. The ANCC sets an especially high bar.

As States seek to improve outcomes for students, they are looking to elevate expectations for the professional development of teachers, principals and other educators. To support these higher expectations, SEAs are considering changes in the ways they approve professional development providers. The examples in this report, drawn from two SEAs and a pair of professions, suggest what other SEAs can do to help groom a new generation of effective educators, as well as the advantages and limitations of these approaches.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Professional Development Clusters: A Manual for Cluster Developers*, Delaware Professional Standards Board, August 2007. <http://www.doe.k12.de.us/csa/profstds/profdevclusters>.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ See the Pennsylvania Department of Education Website for information about current provider approval requirements and guidelines. http://www.pde.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/act_48_-_continuing_professional_education/8622. The 2013 Act 48 Approved Provider Guidelines are available on the Website.
- ⁴ 2013 Act 48 Approved Provider Guidelines, 14.
- ⁵ See the American Nurses Credentialing Center Website. <http://www.nursecredentialing.org>.
- ⁶ *Standards of Nursing Professional Development Practice*, American Nurses Association, *Standards of Nursing Professional Development Practice*, 2010.
- ⁷ For information about the Continuing Legal Education Regulators Association as well as an overview of CLE requirements, policies and practices in the 50 States, visit <https://www.clereg.org>.
- ⁸ For more information, visit the New York CLE program Website <http://nycourts.gov/attorneys/cle>.

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