

From astute coordination to a statewide listening tour: How the NCCC helped Wyoming make digital learning a reality

About the North Central Comprehensive Center (NCCC)

- One of 15 regional centers that provide assistance to state departments of education as they implement federal education initiatives and programs
- Serves Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming
- Operated by McREL International, under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education

NCCC helps the Wyoming Department of Education create a 5-year statewide Digital Learning Plan



NCCC services provided:

- ✓ Strategic planning and support
- ✓ Facilitation of stakeholder surveys and focus groups
- ✓ Facilitation of statewide listening tour
- ✓ Synthesis of feedback and preparation of reports

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— Dr. Adena Miller, NCCC associate director, McREL



North Central Comprehensive Center ignites digital learning in Wyoming



The Challenge

The Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) didn't just want to turn the Equality State into a world-leading hub of digital learning for public school students. It *had* to by statute. With their far-flung, largely rural populations, districts had long viewed distance learning as a tantalizing solution to share content and expertise. But an earlier effort fizzled 10 years earlier due to such obstacles as the difficulty of delivering classes by real-time video to schools with different bell schedules. Digital learning specialists in the WDE felt like they could see the future of learning . . . but to reach it, they'd need a helping hand.

Strategic Solution

Such a helping hand exists: The North Central Comprehensive Center (NCCC), operated by McREL International, is part of a national network of federally funded sources of technical assistance to state education agencies.

Like many great partnerships, the idea of using the NCCC to bring Wyoming's digital-learning aspirations to life originated with a casual conversation at a conference between WDE and McREL staff. From there it blossomed into a close working relationship that likely will enhance Wyomingites' learning opportunities for years to come.

Dr. Adena Miller, a McREL consultant and associate director of the NCCC, played a key role in helping the WDE develop the five-year Digital Learning Plan that's now in force.

"The NCCC facilitated a process that involved many organizations," Miller says. "The innovative work of identifying the need for digital learning and finding ways to fulfill it happened in the legislature, at the education department, in the schools, and among the public. The NCCC tied it all together, made sure stakeholders were in agreement, and helped make sure the implementation plan was on track."

The NCCC's facilitation work is largely behind-the-scenes in nature, coordinating lots of stakeholder meetings and synthesizing, composing, and refining documents so that educators, policymakers, and the public can use them to improve student services. For the WDE's Digital Learning Plan, it also involved arranging a statewide listening tour in January 2016

to meet local educators, parents, students, officials, education professors, and business owners.

"The best thing about NCCC staff facilitating the meetings was that it allowed the WDE folks to participate in their own meetings and really engage in meaningful dialogue with the public, rather than getting bogged down with logistics," Miller says.

Among the themes that emerged during the listening tour, and in surveys designed by NCCC:

- A vast majority of Wyoming educators believed new digital learning guidelines and recommendations would be helpful.
- Teachers believed digital learning is important for student success, and were concerned about unequal access by students from differing backgrounds.
- Students felt confident in their own technology skills but said teachers incorporated technology into assignments inconsistently.

Results

Using input from the surveys, listening tour, and focus groups, WDE finalized its Digital Learning Plan and published it in October 2016. The plan contains a highly detailed implementation timeline and makes reference to dozens of resources that schools can access, such as professional development that is specifically geared toward teaching online, and coding camps for students.

Through the NCCC team's assistance, Wyoming was also able to build consensus needed to become the first state in the nation to fully adopt the Future Ready Framework, a project of the Washington, DC-based Alliance for Excellent Education, to guide the development of digital learning.

Perhaps best of all, "We've already implemented several of the major initiatives in the plan," according to Laurel Ballard, supervisor of the WDE's Student and Teacher Resources Team—including a K–20 learning management system that all districts in the state can opt into for seamless educator and student learning experiences, and major enhancements to connectivity in schools by building upon the existing Wyoming Unified Network.

