

Michigan's District Focus Gets Traction

Partnership with Comprehensive Centers Provides Momentum

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Introduction

Hitching a ride on an automotive metaphor comes easily when Michigan is at the center of the story. After the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) spent a couple years noodling in the design shop about the optimum drivers of school improvement, its education engineers were convinced that the local school district was positioned to shift the process into high gear. How, then, did MDE provide the right fuel and a reliable road map? How did the concept become a test car, and the refined prototype move to mass production? Michigan needed a functional design, and the districts needed an owner's manual.

Fortunately, MDE was connected to a trustworthy supply chain for transforming good ideas into practical production. The Great Lakes East Comprehensive Center (GLECC) had been at MDE's side through the noodling, and its affiliated Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII) had injected ideas and possible solutions.

MDE realized that the district is pivotal in driving school improvement, but MDE needed the right approach to engage districts in this important work. MDE's partnership with the GLECC (Michigan's regional comprehensive center) provided consistent support, guidance, and expertise as MDE considered the best way to strengthen its relationship with its districts to support school improvement. GLECC's affiliation with CII, a content center in the comprehensive center system, brought further expertise to MDE as well as a connection with State Education Agencies (SEA) across the country that were also re-engineering their systems of support for district and school improvement. This alliance of MDE, GLECC, and CII exemplifies the U. S. Department of Education's intentions in establishing a network of regional comprehensive centers and national content centers to provide technical assistance to SEAs.

In 2009, MDE joined the Academy of Pacesetting States, a consortium of nine SEAs (later expanded to 16) organized by CII and facilitated by GLECC. Over the next two years, the Academy provided MDE with a proving ground to test its school improvement efforts, bounce ideas off other States, and envision more productive models for accelerating student learning. In 2010, at a meeting



“The Academy of Pacesetting Districts has been instrumental in our school improvement efforts by providing collaboration time with district leaders across the state, as well as the Michigan Department of Education Office of Education Improvement and Innovation, the Great Lakes East Regional Comprehensive Center, and Kent Intermediate School District staff. This experience has provided excellent opportunities to share and reflect on our decision-making processes, curriculum and instruction, professional development, and student supports. Creating the district manual as part of the Academy expectations has allowed us to capture the procedures that are currently in place and has been a springboard for school improvement goal refinement and focus.”

of the original nine SEA teams in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, the teams put forth the idea of developing an SEA initiative focused on the district’s role as an engine for change.

In 2011, Michigan and six other states formed the Academy of Pacesetting Districts, with a design created by CII and with the persistent guidance of GLECC’s staff. The purpose of this new Academy was to engage the SEA team with district teams to ramp up the district’s support for the improvement of its schools. Meeting in Philadelphia in October, the state teams studied the design and planned to implement a pilot project in a small number of districts.

Part I: Academy Background

Over the past seven years, CII has developed a number of programs and publications fostering school reform and improved student outcomes. Each is premised on the firm belief that school improvement is best accomplished when directed by the people closest to the students, applying their own ingenuity to achieve the results desired for their students—students they know and care about. Placing this high level of confidence in the ability of school personnel to chart their own course also requires that the school is given convenient access to tools, resources, and effective practice to get the job done. The district can provide that support for its schools, and the SEA can help the district.

CII designed the Academy of Pacesetting Districts (APD) to assist SEAs in building district capacity to effectively support their schools’ improvement. APD is derived from CII’s previous work with the Academy of Pacesetting States, a collaboration between CII, Regional Comprehensive Centers (RCC), and 16 SEAs from 2009 to 2011. At the conclusion of the Academy of Pacesetting States, participants requested that a similar Academy experience be designed for the SEA to help district leadership teams address the increasing expectations and responsibilities being placed on them to provide meaningful and differentiated supports to their schools.

A critical feature of APD is the use of a set of indicators of effective district practice distilled from educational research, the experience of exemplary practitioners, as well as research on successful reform from non-education sectors. These indicators illustrate ideal operations against which districts assess their current operations. Following that self-assessment, the indicators are the markers against which plans for reform are developed, implemented, and are ultimately measured.

The theory and events comprising the APD are outlined in a detailed *SEA Field Guide*, which provides guidance and all the tools necessary for an SEA to conduct the Academy with districts in its state. While many districts and schools are already engaged in

improvement processes guided by indicators of effective practice, participation in APD elevates their level of reform, deepens their understanding of effective practice, and enables them to build from and share their previous work.

CII found with the Academy of Pacesetter States that when a group of state teams commits to high standards of improvement and unites in a common process, they learn from each other, challenge each other, and benefit greatly from their association with each other. The same principles and outcomes are expected for District Academy Teams, including those participating in Michigan.

Academy Theory of Action

A three-part theory of action guided the development of APD, informed by CII's own understanding of how to achieve effective and sustained change as reflected in its work over the past seven years.

Part One: Indicators of effective practice provide behavioral guideposts for focused improvement. In 2007, CII published the *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement* (Walberg, 2007) which included 38 indicators related to district support for school improvement. A subset of these indicators was selected for APD.

Part Two: The district's leadership is critical to school improvement and is a leverage point for SEA support. When Local Education Agencies (LEAs) improve their own operations through strong leadership, they can provide more effective assistance to their schools. The SEA is distant from the school but can effectively assist districts in building strong district support systems for their schools.

Part Three: Procedural knowledge is necessary to convert good research and good ideas to sound practice. Procedural knowledge moves beyond the acquisition of information to a level of understanding necessary to act effectively. Simply put, procedural knowledge is "knowing how." APD's objective is to inculcate knowledge of effective district practices for assisting schools' improvement efforts sufficiently to enable Academy participants to know how to put that knowledge to work.

Academy Content Framework

APD's structure centers around an understanding of the mission of SEAs, LEAs, and schools: educating children to enable them to reach their full potential. This is why schools whose students are underperforming need to change what is going on within the school and within each classroom. It is up to educators to rise to the challenge of making that happen. To support this work, APD structured sequential events designed to increase the capacity of those working in school districts to envision and enact a set of



“This opportunity has opened the doors for wonderful opportunities for our district. Thank you for choosing Saginaw Public School District to participate in this initiative.”

“I like the opportunity to collaborate with other members of my district.”

district-level operations to facilitate school improvement, reaching to the classroom. The four topical areas of APD are:

1. High Standards and Expectations
2. Teaching and Learning
3. Information for Decision Making
4. Rapid Improvement Support

Not coincidentally, this framework bears a resemblance to the United States Department of Education’s Blueprint for Reform related to the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Blueprint’s four basic principles are:

1. Teaching and Learning: Improving teacher and principal effectiveness to ensure that every classroom has a great teacher and every school has a great leader
2. Information for Decision Making: Providing information to families to help them evaluate and improve their children’s schools and to educators to help them improve their students’ learning
3. High Standards: Implementing college- and career-ready standards and developing improved assessments aligned with those standards
4. Rapid Improvement: Improving student learning and achievement in America’s lowest performing schools by providing intensive support and effective interventions

The driving force of APD is the indicators of effective practice, at both the district and school levels. The indicators are put into place and strengthened over the course of the Academy, during the District Team Kickoff Meeting and the Distance Learning Sessions, and in the district teams’ working sessions.

Finally, there is the district’s guiding document. In APD, the participating district teams design a District Operations Manual for a District System of Support to guide the district’s approach to operations and outreach related to school improvement.

Academy Partners

APD was intentionally designed to be a project of several entities working in conjunction—like a well-oiled engine. CII developed the curriculum and process; GLECC’s Bersheril Bailey, Gary Appel, and director Barbara Youngren provided support and technical assistance for the training and execution; and the SEA assumed the ultimate responsibility of delivering the content and structure to its participating districts. Each individual role is important, but when working together, the engine hums with success.

Another critical group of partners in APD are staff provided by the SEA to serve in the role of Academy Mentors. The Academy

Mentors are selected, trained, and assigned by the SEA to support districts participating in the Academy. Academy Mentors fill what some refer to as a coaching role for District Academy Teams.

Finally, the LEAs identified by the SEA for participation determine their District Academy Teams, adhering to guidelines provided by the SEA, but always including the superintendent or a senior level designee (such as an assistant superintendent). District Academy Teams are required to attend all Academy activities (a kickoff meeting, Distance Learning sessions throughout the year, and a summative meeting) and must set aside time for monthly working sessions. The working sessions include time to address action plans related to the indicators of effective practice and create a District Operations Manual for their District System of Support.

In the initial training that CII delivered to the SEAs, SEAs were encouraged to limit the number of districts participating in the Academy in the first year in order to ensure that participating districts received the necessary attention to make the experience valuable and productive. The SEA determines the number of districts it is prepared to support in the Academy. Michigan elected to serve five districts from across the state in its first cohort.

Effective Leadership

The Academy design places responsibility for execution on inspired SEA leadership. Credit for the success of the Michigan Academy of Pacesetting Districts goes to the leadership of Mark Coscarella and the outstanding team he assembled to carry forth this effort. The team’s enthusiasm and passion for continuous improvement and the belief that every district and school can serve ALL students to be college and career ready is contagious. Rather than viewing the Academy as “one more thing” to add to an already full plate, MDE’s team has utilized APD to drive their own state improvement efforts to support LEAs in a meaningful and engaging way. SEA leadership is paramount to Michigan’s success with APD, and support from GLECC is substantial, consistent, and of high quality.

Part II: GLECC’s Role in Michigan’s Planning and Implementation of APD

The Great Lakes East Comprehensive Center (GLECC) at Learning Point, an affiliate of the American Institutes for Research, is funded by the U.S. Department of Education as part of the network of sixteen regional comprehensive centers and five national content centers. Each content center has a specific focus. GLECC provides technical assistance to Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio in various roles such as partner, facilitator, problem solver, strategist, coach, technical expert, and influencer. This story details the close collaboration between a national content center (CII), regional



“I am learning from reviewing the many reading materials provided.”

“It is helpful to address our concerns and issues properly with helpful feedback from our partners.”

comprehensive center (GLECC), state education agency (MDE), Intermediate School districts (ISDs), and local education agencies (LEAs). This multi-level collaboration is a perfect example of how the comprehensive center system is intended to function.

Building from Existing Systems

In 2005, GLECC began the journey with MDE to address its NCLB responsibility to provide an effective system of support for districts and schools in the improvement process. MDE built a comprehensive statewide system of support that provided direct support to schools not making adequate yearly progress (AYP). The number of years a school did not make AYP determined the services of support the school would receive. The components of Michigan’s statewide system of support (SSOS) consisted of:

- ▶ **Audits.** Auditors reviewed data to help schools identify reasons why they did not make AYP.
- ▶ **Process mentors.** A three-member team provided technical assistance that helped schools understand the data and provided feedback on how to use the data to develop or revise school improvement plans. They also helped to facilitate change by removing barriers at the district and state levels, coordinated services at the district and state levels, and monitored progress on the implementation of the school improvement plan.
- ▶ **Michigan Principals Fellowship and Coaches Institute.** In collaboration with MDE, Michigan State University (MSU) provided training and ongoing support focused on building leadership coaches to assist principals who participated in the Fellowship. The leadership coaches focused on building the capacity of school leaders to lead the systematic instructional improvements needed to raise student achievement. Title I schools identified as not making AYP for three or more years selected a leadership coach from a cadre of coaches trained by MSU.
- ▶ **Instructional Coach Support.** Title I schools in year 3 and above could receive support in literacy and mathematics from instructional coaches, trained by the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA), who helped schools select and implement evidence-based intervention(s) with fidelity.
- ▶ **Data Support.** Title I schools in years 0–2 could participate in Data-Driven Decision Making training. They could also request a data coach to work more closely with them to analyze the data, engage staff in identifying areas in need of improvement, align strategies and interventions to the school improvement plan, and to determine professional

development needs. Principals of Title I schools in Phases 3 and above who participated in the Michigan Principals Fellowship also received training on how to examine and use data.

Districts with schools identified for statewide system of support services were expected and encouraged to appoint a central office staff person to be a part of the Process Mentor teams; central office staff participation varied from district to district. In January 2009, GLECC planned and facilitated a meeting between MDE, MAISA, and AdvancEd (an MDE school improvement partner) to look at how two other states were working with districts to improve schools and increase student achievement. During this meeting, CII presented on the district-level work of the Kentucky and Virginia Departments of Education. Information was later shared with the SSOS Core team, but no action was taken at that time.

Building Capacity at the State Level

In June 2009, MDE and GLECC became part of a consortium of nine states (later expanded to 16 states) to participate in CII's Academy of Pacesetting States with the purpose of building a stronger system of support. Each participating SEA was expected to complete a Statewide System of Support Operations Manual to document the system of support, guide the school improvement work of the many offices across the SEA, and show districts and schools the school improvement services available to them.

During participation in the Academy of Pacesetting States, GLECC guided MDE's team through a self-assessment of the statewide system of support, which was based on CII's *Handbook on Statewide Systems of Support* (Redding & Walberg, 2007a) and an accompanying manual, *Strengthening the Statewide System of Support: A Manual for the Comprehensive Center and State Education Agency* (Redding & Walberg, 2007b). GLECC also facilitated sessions where MDE completed an evaluation using CII's *Evaluating the Statewide System of Support* (Hanes, Kerins, Perlman, Redding, & Ross, 2009, 2012). GLECC reviewed and analyzed data from MDE's assessment and provided MDE with an assessment report in May 2010. MDE began the work of redesigning the SSOS to provide a more differentiated system of support.

The content center (CII), regional comprehensive center (GLECC), and SEA (MDE) worked side by side as the redesigned SSOS emerged. In February 2011, GLECC invited Lisa Kinnaman (working for Idaho's State Department of Education at that time) to MDE to share the Idaho State Department of Education Instructional Core Focus Visit process and manual, which was modeled after *Patterns of Practice: A School Review Process* (Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center & CII, 2009). MDE and GLECC reviewed and modified the Idaho process and developed Michigan's School



“I enjoy sharing ideas with MDE and other districts. The conversations are thought provoking.”

“I have been very enlightened through this process.”

Improvement Review Visit (SIRV), which was piloted in schools that were in the first year of not making AYP. GLECC analyzed survey data after each SIRV to assist MDE with refining the system. The new system eliminated the audits; however, Michigan’s SSOS still focused on direct service to schools not making AYP. Concerns over MDE’s capacity to serve a large number of schools loomed in the background.

Working with the State to Build Capacity at the District Level

With this backdrop of capacity concerns for MDE, it seemed very timely that CII introduced the Academy of Pacesetting Districts to RCCs in January, 2011 and encouraged RCC liaisons to share the information with their respective SEAs. Since GLECC had been gently encouraging MDE to look at how some states were focusing on district support, GLECC was excited to share the information about APD with MDE. GLECC facilitated a conference call with Lisa Kinnaman (now working with CII) and Sam Redding to provide MDE with a map of the District Pacesetters path to district and school improvement. CII required a Memorandum of Understanding, which spelled out the roles and responsibilities for CII, GLECC, and MDE. Once all parties signed on the dotted line, the trip began. MDE’s prior participation in the Academy of Pacesetting States provided a great road map for their journey to the Academy of Pacesetting Districts.

GLECC was part of a four-member team that participated in APD training in October 2011. Michigan’s team was led by the Assistant Director of the Office of Education Improvement and Innovation (OEII) at MDE, Mark Coscarella. After two days of intensive training in Philadelphia, Mark’s forward thinking led to the inclusion of additional team members from other offices at MDE, as well as team members from two of Michigan’s Intermediate School Districts (ISD) to ensure sustainability. In addition to Mark, the initial Michigan team members included Anne Hansen, Karen Ruple, Piper Farrell-Singleton, Diane Joslin-Gould, Diane Fleming, OEII; Fred Williams, Office of Field Services; John VanWagoner, Office of Professional Preparation; Ben Boerkoel, Kent ISD; Elizabeth Brophy, Calhoun ISD; Bersheril Bailey, GLECC.

GLECC supported MDE by coordinating and facilitating meetings to review and synthesize for Michigan the extensive amount of material provided by CII to guide the team through the journey. GLECC also assisted MDE with:

- ▶ Planning and conducting the kickoff meeting that took place on December 5 – 6, 2011
- ▶ Planning and conducting onsite monthly learning sessions with individual districts
- ▶ Conducting Academy evaluations

- Providing resources needed to support the Academy of Pacesetter Districts

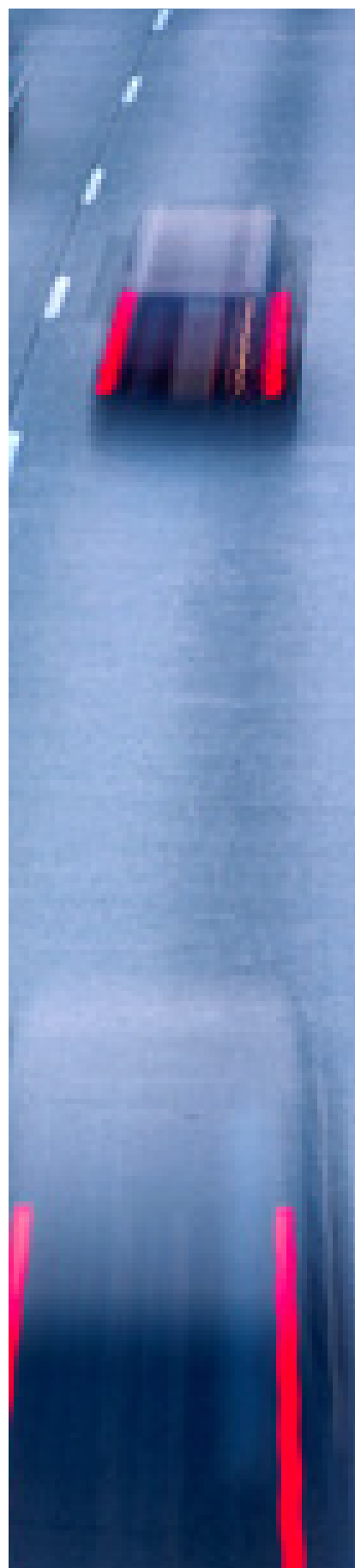
GLECC also participated in monthly regional comprehensive center liaison calls organized by CII to discuss progress, successes, and challenges of the Academy. With GLECC's support and guidance, the training provided by CII took root and grew in MDE's already fertile soil. MDE was ready for change.

Part III: Seeing the Need

The Michigan team quickly saw the power and numerous possibilities of working with districts through the APD framework. So, it was important for Michigan to get off to a great start with local school districts in the inaugural year of APD. For a number of years, Michigan had worked closely with schools in the Statewide System of Support (SSOS) and had been noticeably successful in getting schools to meet AYP targets and therefore able to exit the system. Michigan realized that missing from the SSOS was the support provided to school districts. In many cases, schools improved but lost momentum when state support was withdrawn. In some cases, the schools did not improve because of barriers that were in place at the district level. Michigan was creating islands of excellence. The approach of working with just schools was not getting the results necessary for systemic and lasting change.

Michigan realized that to get substantive and sustainable improvement in schools, district intervention was required. The APD provided the avenue to begin working more closely with districts on how they support their schools. The districts that Michigan chose to work with were selected by MDE through a process that considered a number of criteria including: (1) well-run school districts, (2) districts with a positive working relationship with MDE, (3) districts that would provide a heterogeneous mix of small and large districts, as well as urban and more suburban districts, and (4) districts that were actively supporting their schools. Godfrey Lee Public Schools, Kentwood Public Schools, Romulus Community Schools, Saginaw Public Schools, and Ypsilanti Public Schools met the criteria and were selected to participate in the APD. With support from Great Lakes East Regional Comprehensive Center, MDE's Office of Education Improvement and Innovation and the Intermediate School District's staff set out on the road to gain the districts' participation.

MDE staff met with the five superintendents of the selected districts. The APD materials, including a memorandum of understanding (MOU) were shared with the superintendents in an initial meeting. The MOU established working guidelines for MDE and the school district and promoted the working relationship between the two entities. It was important to build trust and relationships right from the start, so the initial meetings took place in each of



“Our thought partners were very helpful at addressing our weaknesses and providing us with situations to strengthen them. Their assistance resulted in a valuable solution to address our data and analysis system.”

the local school districts rather than at MDE offices. Convening the meetings at each of the district’s offices offered a sense of security and support. It sent a message that the APD is a voluntary opportunity for improvement and support for the district. It was important for the districts to know that the APD indicators of effective school districts were aligned with Michigan’s district and school improvement planning process. This alignment meant that the work was not something that was extra or in place of other work, rather it was work that was aligned for districts in support of their schools. Another factor that led the superintendents to participate in the APD was the creation of an Operations Manual. Many of the superintendents had pieces of a district system of support for schools, but not all of them had an articulated, documented, systemic, and implemented way of supporting the schools. The five superintendents agreed to become voluntary members of the first cohort of APD in Michigan.

Implementing APD

From the beginning, MDE was dedicated to building its own internal capacity to work with districts. Members from several MDE offices were invited to participate in the Academy. MDE also collaborated with GLECC and Intermediate School District (ISD) staff members to form its team. Through collaboration and resources, ISDs provide specialized services to students that would not be affordable or otherwise feasible and can be shared across regional districts for the success of every learner. With a total of 12 members on the team, the MDE set off on the Academy experience.

Michigan planned to recruit districts in late fall for a December kickoff. It was an ambitious agenda, and staff was determined to make the Academy happen in 2011. MDE felt the work of district support was so important it could not wait another year. The kick-off meeting was held December 5th and 6th with Roger Quarles and Lisa Kinnaman from CII supporting the MDE/GLECC team. The participating district teams included superintendents, school board members, union leadership, business managers, and other central office staff. During the kickoff meeting the rest of the calendar was set with the input of the five district teams. The district teams committed to a goal of June 6 for the completion of the district Operations Manual in draft form. The MDE made two adjustments to the Academy design:

- ▶ The first was to hold three District Learning sessions at the local districts—learning sessions that were not at a distance. These three meetings were intended in the APD design to be online sessions. The MDE felt it was important for the five districts to build a learning community—to learn with each other and to provide support to each other. It was important to have the meetings in each of the school

districts to form that learning community, and the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. The learning sessions were opportunities for the school districts to collaborate with each other.

- ▶ The second adjustment was to instill a sense of partnership between MDE and the districts. Based on the understanding that the districts have much expertise and experience, MDE decided to call the staff working with each school district a “thought partner” rather than a “mentor.” The thought partners were responsible for asking tough questions, prompting good discussion, refocusing the teams back to the indicators or research, and working with the school districts.

MDE wanted to leverage the expertise of the Academy members—the district teams. The Academy members would be the holders of the research and best practice, facilitated by MDE and guided by the APD framework. The thought partners and the school districts would see how to make it work in their given context. The MDE was adamant that the work belonged to the school districts and not the State. MDE would help facilitate, but not dictate, and made it a point to ensure the Operations Manuals would not be approved by MDE. Rather, the district team would critique its Operations Manual with a rubric provided in CII’s *District Field Guide*. The goal was for the school districts to do the work, hold each other accountable, and MDE to support and guide.

Building Capacity and Scaling Up in Michigan

MDE plans to expand APD to other districts in the coming years. Since Michigan intentionally focused on building its own capacity to a team of twelve, it will have the ability to expand the scope of school districts that it works with. The plan for next year is to have each team member take on one or two more team members from other offices, ISDs, and professional organizations. Then, each team member will select a district or two to work with next year. The goal for next year is to scale up to working with at least 25 school districts. A similar plan would be in place for the third year. MDE would continue to build its own capacity and team and expand the number of school districts. The goal after three years is to have 100 school districts engaged in the APD.

Suggested Next Steps for APD

APD seems to work with small and middle size districts very well. These school districts have staff that can come together and form a manageable team. Michigan wonders how the APD works in large school districts that have many layers and levels. While the principles of APD have merit and potential, the logistics of working with a large school district seem challenging. Michigan’s idea



is to have a regional, multi-state APD. Surrounding states could organize an APD experience for large school districts. So Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland, for example, would participate in a collaborative regional APD.

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Great Lakes East Comprehensive Center

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The Center on Innovation & Improvement is administered by the Academic Development Institute (Lincoln, IL) in partnership with the Temple University Institute for Schools and Society (Philadelphia, PA), Center for School Improvement & Policy Studies at Boise State University (Boise, ID), and Little Planet Learning (Nashville, TN).

*A national content center supported by the
U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.*

Award #S283B050057

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Design: Pam Sheley

Editing: Sam Redding, Lori Thomas, Pam Sheley