



Research Report

Executive Summary: Online Professional Development Program

November 24, 2009

The Legislature passed Act 2318 of 2005, creating the Arkansas Online Professional Development Initiative. The statute requires the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) to identify statewide teacher professional development needs and work with school districts and the Arkansas Educational Television Network (AETN) to develop a statewide online professional development program. The ADE program was allocated up to \$4 million annually (about \$9 per ADM) to develop and implement a statewide professional development support system. Though the districts were losing \$9 per student in PD funding, legislators hoped the statewide program would offer an efficient online delivery system for PD courses that would be free to district educators. Currently the Online PD program receives about \$4 million of the total \$23 million professional development categorical funding.

This report examined how the funding in the Online PD program was distributed and spent. However, obtaining a meaningful understanding of what the state got for its money proved challenging due to inadequate and unspecific record-keeping. ADE's documentation awarding money for program operations included only short descriptions of the purpose of the grant. It described no specific expectations of grantees and defined few parameters within which the money should be spent. ADE's records also included little documentation indicating how the grantees justified the amount of funding they needed or how they planned to use it.

The Department of Education has used the majority of the program's money to provide grant funding to AETN for managing the online professional development program. Over the last five years, AETN has received annual grant payments ranging from about \$2.9 million to \$3.8 million. The department also provided smaller amounts of funding to other organizations supporting the system and providing other types of professional development, including the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators, the Education Service Cooperatives and the Arkansas Leadership Academy.

AETN used its funding to develop the central element of the Online PD program, Arkansas IDEAS, the statewide program of online courses and teaching resources for educators. The program is offered through an online portal, where teachers can access vendor-created online courses, locally created courses that have been adapted for online use, and other reading materials and resources. The portal offers more than 1,000 PD credit-earning courses, and AETN said there are nearly 17,000 registered portal users. AETN tracks the use of each online course, but neither AETN nor ADE has conducted any formal cost-benefit analysis of the course offerings. Act 2318 of 2005, which established the Online PD program, calls for ADE to create a method of annually examining the effectiveness of the program. ADE has never completed an annual program review, but the agency is currently working on one.

In addition to the online courses, the program's funding was used to pay for a variety of other types of professional development. The funding has paid for traditionally delivered PD (e.g., the SMART Leadership Symposium at the Peabody Hotel), and it is used to provide administrators with CDs of national speakers. It funds streaming video segments designed to be used for classroom instruction and paid for a DeWitt School District teacher's trip to the Smithsonian Exhibit Learning Project in Washington D.C. While state law limits how professional development categorical funding in general can be spent and state rules establish the requirements for courses offered through the portal, ADE has no written policies describing what types of professional development or services qualify for the Online PD funding and what types do not.

Based on a review of AASIS records, additional issues to consider include:

- 1.) Grant requirements and monitoring of grantee activities and expenditures.
- 2.) Coding methodology for both the receipt and disbursement of the ADE grant funds.

BUREAU OF LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH