

Professional Learning

Alabama

In 2014-15 and 2015-16, how has Alabama fostered effective professional learning statewide for all educators on its college- and career-readiness standards, K-12, in English language arts (ELA) and math?

SREB researchers gathered information on efforts in Alabama, particularly at the Alabama State Department of Education, to foster effective **professional learning on the state's college- and career-readiness standards, the Alabama College- & Career-Ready Standards (CCRS)**. In collaboration with SREB states and national experts, SREB identified a set of expected state actions — “look-fors” — in **four areas of state leadership in professional learning**. The researchers reviewed online sources and interviewed department leaders to assess the state's efforts.

State efforts in each area fell into one of three levels of implementation:

- **Minimal**, indicating state leadership addresses some of the look-fors
- **Essential**, indicating state leadership addresses the look-fors SREB considers necessary for providing leadership and supporting local efforts
- **Strong**, indicating that in addition to the necessary look-fors, state leadership offers substantial support to foster quality and consistency statewide

The *Project Overview and Look-Fors* document and state profile reports are available on the project [Web page](#).

Highlights for Alabama

- **Strong expectations for professional learning** through the use of robust standards for professional learning and a statewide definition of professional development requiring that professional development address the student academic standards
- **Strong guidance and tools**, such as the Guide for Professional Development/Transition Planning for Implementation of the College- & Career-Ready Standards, the College- & Career-Ready Standards Implementation – Progress and Capacity Rubric for assessing local implementation of the College- & Career-Ready Standards (CCRS), including professional learning, and teacher induction and principal mentoring guidance and support
- **Strong technical assistance**, including targeted support for all districts, developed by regional planning teams and provided by over 300 trained regional support staff, quarterly district implementation team meetings, and quarterly curriculum and instruction directors meetings
- **Strong professional learning offerings**. Through quarterly district implementation team meetings, teachers and leaders from all 136 districts develop knowledge of the CCRS and build local capacity to design and implement high-quality professional learning.

1 Establish Clear Expectations

Has the state established clear expectations for high-quality professional learning for all educators on the state college- and career-readiness standards through state professional learning standards or other policy documents?

Alabama provides strong support.

- In 2002, Alabama adopted the Alabama Standards for Effective Professional Development, which are based on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind) definition of professional development. In addition, the department's [Guide for Professional Development/Transition Planning for Implementation of the College- & Career-Ready Standards](#) encourages schools and districts to base their current professional learning systems on Learning Forward's 2011 Standards for Professional Learning, which are widely accepted as embodying expectations that are rigorous, research-based, comprehensive and outcomes-oriented for educators and students.
- Further, state law codifies the 2009 statewide definition of professional development, which requires professional development to address the state student academic standards.

2 Provide Guidance, Technical Assistance and Other Support

Does the state education agency provide information, guidance, tools, direct assistance and other support, such as technology and flexibility for innovation, to support local efforts to deliver high-quality, college- and career-readiness standards-aligned professional learning that meets the needs of all teachers in service of all students?

Guidance and tools

Alabama provides strong support.

- Tools for planning, implementing and evaluating professional learning
 - [College- & Career-Ready Standards Implementation – Progress and Capacity Rubric](#) to assess local implementation of the CCRS
 - [Guide for Professional Development/Transition Planning for Implementation of the College- & Career-Ready Standards](#) to support local planning, implementation and evaluation of professional learning
- Professional learning resources and exemplars
 - Extensive sets of materials from the department's quarterly district CCRS implementation team meetings, statewide professional learning conferences and its CCRS implementation trainings that began in 2011 and continue in 2015-16
 - A variety of other professional learning resources and tools
- Support for educator induction and mentoring programs
 - Per its 2004 Standards for Effective Teacher Induction & Mentoring Programs, the state board of education requires districts to provide an induction program for new teachers aligned to district and state goals. To support local planning and implementation efforts, the department provides the [Alabama Teacher Induction and Mentoring Manual](#).
 - The department requires all new school leaders to participate in its two-year Alabama New Principal Mentoring (ANPM) program, with professional learning aligned to the state leader evaluation standards and delivered by district liaisons. The department provides training and an [ANPM Program Guide](#) and evaluates local programs.

Technical assistance

Alabama provides strong support.

- District CCRS implementation teams from all 136 districts work with regional planning teams (RPTs) at quarterly meetings to develop their CCRS Professional Development/Transition Plans, monitor their progress on the College- & Career-Ready Standards Implementation — Progress and Capacity Rubric, and receive needed assistance. The RPTs include department field staff and experts from the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) and the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative (AMSTI), as well as staff at the state's Regional In-Service Centers (RICs) and representatives from higher

“We see districts using our College- & Career-Ready Standards Implementation – Progress and Capacity Rubric to move beyond just asking, ‘What is our plan for learning about the standards?’ to examining, ‘Now, what is happening with our implementation of the standards?’”

— Alabama State Department of Education staff member

education, early childhood education, and career and technical education. District CCRS implementation teams also participate in professional learning during these meetings.

- RPTs develop differentiated support plans for all districts to target support based on local needs. This support is then provided by over 300 regional support staff (RSS) trained by the department, including representatives from ARI, AMSTI and RICs.
- The department meets quarterly with curriculum and instruction directors from all districts to support implementation of the CCRS. The Guide for Professional Development/ Transition Planning for Implementing the CCRS serves as a key tool in this support.

Other support, such as technology and flexibility for innovation

Alabama provides *essential* support.

- Technology
 - Repositories offering extensive online, on-demand professional learning resources: the department’s CCRS Web page, the [Alabama Learning Exchange \(ALEX\)](#) platform, iTunes U courses, online professional learning communities, and eLearning Alabama Moodle courses
- Policies and opportunities to foster flexibility and innovation in professional learning
 - In response to the Alabama School Choice and Student Opportunity Act of 2015, Alabama expects to approve its first charter schools in fall 2016. Charter schools may be approved to waive certain state rules or regulations to improve professional learning.
 - Through state law, districts can apply to become innovation zones and waive certain state requirements to improve professional learning.

3 Offer Professional Learning

Does the state education agency offer coordinated professional learning opportunities that develop educators’ understanding of the state college- and career-readiness standards and skills to implement them — and that build local capacity to lead high-quality professional learning for all educators?

“The district implementation team model has been one of our biggest successes. The collaboration between the department’s design team and development teams and our regional folks in the field has been essential.”

— Alabama State Department of Education staff member

Context: Alabama’s RICs and the department’s regional staff of ARI and AMSTI program experts provide the majority of state-sponsored professional learning and technical assistance directly to teachers, schools and districts in Alabama.

Alabama provides *strong* support.

- Professional learning for teachers
 - Alabama’s quarterly district CCRS implementation team meetings provide educators long-term, comprehensive and coordinated support to build their knowledge and skills to implement the CCRS, and to build their capacity to lead high-quality professional learning in their local sites. Since 2011, all districts have designated an implementation team made up of teachers (ELA, math, science, social studies, career and technical education, special education and English language learner education), library and media specialists, and school and district leaders. Team members participate in quarterly learning sessions and receive ongoing technical assistance to support redelivery of the training and standards implementation at their local sites. In 2015-16, based on feedback from participants, the department shifted from statewide quarterly meetings based on uniform content to regional meetings based on differentiated content to meet local needs. In 2015-16, the department also strengthened the focus of the meetings on monitoring implementation.
 - The department’s quarterly curriculum and instruction meetings and annual boot camps provide all teachers with opportunities to learn about and receive tools to support implementing the CCRS.
 - In 2014-15, the department partnered with SREB to begin implementing Literacy Design Collaborative and Mathematics Design Collaborative tools and practices statewide. Initial training targeted teachers at schools in need of improvement.

Funding for professional learning in 2014-15 and 2015-16:

Alabama used or is using state and federal funds and a State Personnel Development Grant.

- Professional learning for school and district leaders
 - School and district leaders participate in their district CCRS implementation teams and attend role-specific sessions to enhance their leadership of the CCRS.
 - Principals can apply for the Alabama Leadership Academy, a cohort-based, two-year program that includes face-to-face and online sessions, site visits, book studies and coaching. The academy addresses curriculum, instruction and assessment for the CCRS.
 - Current and aspiring district superintendents can apply for the Alabama Superintendents Academy, an 18-month program. Face-to-face and online sessions address the CCRS, aligning curriculum, the Alabama Standards for Professional Development and the state leader evaluation standards.

4 Use Data and Accountability for Continuous Improvement

Does the state education agency use data to inform its planning and leadership of statewide professional learning, and does it provide feedback to local leaders and hold districts accountable for excellence in local professional learning?

Alabama undertakes strong work in this area.

- The department uses a systematic, centralized approach to data usage. Senior department leaders meet regularly to analyze data and ensure the alignment of professional learning efforts to identified needs. The department's CCRS design team, comprised of leaders from across the agency, analyzes data to inform and coordinate the state's initiatives. To monitor district progress on the goals in the state's strategic plan for college and career readiness, PLAN 2020, the state superintendent holds regular meetings with the RPTs and the five regional support coordinators who oversee them. A CCRS advisory panel comprised of district curriculum and instruction directors also advises the department.
- The department regularly uses various types of data to inform its work. However, it has not recently conducted comprehensive program evaluations that include rigorous examination of the impacts of professional learning on teacher knowledge and practice or student outcomes, a crucial step in understanding the effects of state efforts. (In 2012, the department participated in an evaluation on the impact of AMSTI teacher training on student outcomes on state assessments. The evaluation showed positive and significant effects from AMSTI.)
- In providing feedback to local leaders and accountability for excellence:
 - The department provides direct, real-time feedback to local leaders on their professional learning efforts through the quarterly district CCRS implementation team meetings. It also reviews district CCRS Professional Development/Transition Plans and conducts random, periodic district monitoring visits.
 - Department leaders expect schools and districts to leverage the support and funding they receive for professional learning to make continuous improvement on their professional learning systems.

MOVING FORWARD: Practices for Alabama to consider

- Continue and deepen the Alabama State Department of Education's **well-coordinated, comprehensive technical assistance and professional learning for district leadership teams**. This would support the long-term work of building deep and broad capacity in schools and districts to implement high-quality professional learning for all educators. See work with local leadership teams noted in the Delaware, Kentucky and Louisiana profiles.
- Undertake more **comprehensive program evaluations** to analyze the efficacy of professional learning initiatives — in particular, their impacts on teacher knowledge and practice as well as student outcomes — to help identify effective practices and weed out ineffective ones. For example, see efforts noted in the Kentucky, North Carolina and Tennessee profiles.

All related state profiles and reports are on the project [Web page](#).