

NORTH CAROLINA RACE TO THE TOP CLOSEOUT REPORT 2015

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

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NORTH CAROLINA'S VISION

North Carolina is driven to ensure that all of its children are able to achieve high academic standards; reaching this goal will provide North Carolina children with limitless options in life beyond school and should ensure that the State's workforce and economy remain strong. Since 2006, North Carolina has been striving to make this vision a reality by "remodeling" its educational system to increase student achievement, close achievement gaps, and increase graduation rates. The State's Race to the Top (RttT) grant program has aimed to accelerate this ambitious remodeling effort by focusing on the following two key ideas:

- ❖ **First**, every student should be held to high academic expectations, the achievement of which will enable him or her to graduate ready for life in the global economy.
- ❖ **Second**, the adults, specifically teachers and principals, in the school building are the most important factor in helping students grow academically and achieve.

All of the work streams supported by the RttT grant focus on ensuring that every child has a great teacher and every school has a great principal.¹ By implementing the projects in each of these work streams, the State has enhanced its capacity to support student achievement.² In keeping with the terms of the RttT grant, half of NC's \$399,465,769 in grant funds have been used to drive State-level work and the other half of its award has supported work aligned with the State's goals in participating local educational agencies (LEAs) and charter schools.

The State has upheld its original promise to implement comprehensive education reform while also remaining committed to continuous improvement, stakeholder engagement, and adaptability in a fluctuating political and economic environment. While remaining consistent with the original vision, the State has continuously worked to improve processes based on lessons learned and input from vital stakeholders (i.e., teachers, principals, superintendents, etc.). For example, the State adjusted how student growth would be calculated for teachers and principals, and the timeline for rolling out the enhanced evaluation system; and the State created new programs to solidify or extend the impact of others as the initiatives progressed (e.g., creating the Governor's Teacher Network to support professional development initiatives and supplement instructional resources for teachers provided through Home Base).³

This document highlights the State's overall progress across the four-year RttT grant period as well as specific successes and lessons learned within each of the RttT focus areas.⁴

¹ See Appendix A for an illustration of the State's "Theory of Action."

² See Appendix B for a diagram of each initiative aligned with the RttT assurance areas.

³ See section "Data Systems to Support Instruction (C)" for more information on Home Base.

⁴ The RttT focus areas include: 1) State Success Factors; 2) Standards and Assessments; 3) Data Systems to Support Instruction; 4) Great Teachers and Leaders; 5) Turning Around the Lowest Achieving Schools; and 6) STEM Priority.

OVERALL REFORM PROGRESS

As promised, North Carolina has indeed gone further and faster in its work to remodel its system of public schools than would have been possible without RttT funding. Beginning in 2006, the State began planning for a series of initiatives centered on the following focus areas:

- ❖ Great Teachers and Principals
- ❖ Learning Standards and Assessments that Align to 21st Century Demands
- ❖ Data and Technology Systems to Support Schools
- ❖ Turnaround Support for Lowest-Achieving Schools

Powered by the RttT funding, North Carolina made significant advances in each of these areas by school year (SY) 2012-13. These advances, packaged together as the “READY” initiative, are driving the State toward ensuring that every student graduates from high school prepared for college and/or career.⁵ In addition, NC has learned many lessons from this challenging implementation that will enable the State to provide services more efficiently and effectively to districts and schools in the future.

Progress

From the more rigorous content taught in classrooms to the technology making better information and resources more available to students, teachers, and parents, the North Carolina Public School System looks different than it did four years ago. With few exceptions, the State has been able to deliver on its RttT promises to upgrade important elements of the public schools infrastructure. As a result, students and educators are working to meet higher expectations; educators are refining their practices; district and school leaders are improving operations; policy makers are better informed; lowest-achieving schools are turning around; and stakeholders vital to a student’s success are better connected. The State has made this progress possible by accomplishing the following:

- ❖ Adopting more rigorous, high quality student learning standards and establishing a balanced assessment system designed to help teachers, students, and parents understand the extent to which students are mastering material and on-track to be prepared for college and career options

⁵ To highlight how the State’s READY initiative and Race to the Top implementation are being carried out in LEAs and schools, DPI developed and released a series of videos. The videos highlight how reform initiatives have positively impacted teaching and learning, supported improvement in the State’s lowest-achieving schools and districts, and encouraged the use of data to drive instruction. Twenty-three videos are available on DPI’s YouTube Channel and can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/ncpublicschools>.

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- ❖ Increasing teacher and principal instructional and leadership capacity through professional development (PD) aligned to professional teaching standards and research on educator effectiveness
- ❖ Establishing “Home Base,” an online, statewide, integrated suite of technology tools that includes a new Instructional Improvement System (IIS), the upgraded Student Information System (SIS), the NC Educator Evaluation System (NCEES), and a Professional Development system
- ❖ Enhancing the NCEES to include a component that provides teachers and principals with standardized annual measures of the extent to which they are facilitating student academic growth
- ❖ Connecting districts and schools to better and more cost-effective cloud technology solutions.

Through this and other RttT work, the State and districts have laid the groundwork for providing a higher quality education to *all* students going forward. While the effects of these reforms on the State’s ultimate goal – higher student achievement – may not be apparent for several years, the initiatives have made tangible impact on every level of the education system, from classrooms to the State Education Agency (SEA).⁶ The extent and depth of the changes at each level hold promise that the desired results will not be short-lived, but rather will be sustainable and far-reaching.

At the state level, internal North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) culture has evolved in ways that should enable the State to deliver future initiatives more effectively and efficiently; agency staff have developed project management habits that include enhanced collaboration (both internally and externally), commitment to continuous process improvement, and increased cross-division dialogue on how best to help schools improving instructional practices. State programs to develop local human capital have also been well received and early indicators suggest that they are helping teachers feel more prepared to promote student growth. Through targeted preparation, coaching, and professional development, the State has increased the number of individuals specially trained to lead transformation of persistently low achieving schools; districts and school receiving the most intensive State support have shown positive student results in just a short time.⁷ Finally, statewide investments in technology solutions are also beginning to yield significant benefits for the State. For example, cloud-based technology applications allow districts and schools to have increased access to State-, market-, and peer-provided instructional and professional development resources and to each other (i.e., for sharing ideas and support), while decreasing local costs and increasing service reliability.⁸ Furthermore,

⁶ Best practices and lessons learned from NC RttT implementation will potentially benefit education systems across the country as articles are published in peer-reviewed journals and presented at conferences.

⁷ 83% of the original 118 Turnaround of the Lowest Achieving Schools (TALAS) are now out of the bottom 5% of all NC schools. See section E: “Turnaround of the Lowest Achieving Schools” for more information.

⁸ An example of streamlined access and increased networking capabilities is highlighted by the fact that two-thirds of all NC LEAs currently have teachers using email through the cloud.

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the integration of student data with learning and formative assessment resources (i.e., in the Instructional Improvement tools located in Home Base) enable teachers and principals to be more efficient with their time and provide more individualized instruction.

At the local level, there are now increased expectations in place for all students, teachers and principals; and infrastructure in place to support a move toward more personalized student instruction and individualized educator improvement. To help meet higher expectations, local leaders have increased their capacity to provide high quality, targeted professional development to teachers and principals. Local professional development teams are much better prepared to support continuous improvement of teaching practices in all grades and subjects. In particular, districts and schools are better versed in how to access and use student performance data to drive personalized instruction. As a result of investing local RttT dollars in technology infrastructure, many more districts and schools are also able to ensure that all teachers and students have pervasive access to the State-provided (Home Base) and other digital tools and resources to support instruction.

Challenges

Not surprisingly, implementing a large scale reform agenda has involved many challenges. While each initiative has experienced its own unique set of obstacles, there are general themes that have emerged across the RttT effort. Some of these challenges have been internal to NCDPI, some may be inherent to working with an array of vendor partners, and others may have been more symptomatic of the State's economic and political environment than of any particular design or implementation practice. The section below highlights several of the most significant challenges and discusses them in more detail.

Over the course of implementation, the State experienced several delays. Some of these delays were intentional, purposeful, and informed by educator and other stakeholder groups (e.g., changes to the Educator Evaluation System; see callout box below). Other delays, however, were more problematic, such as the significant setbacks at the outset due to the slow hiring and State government contract and procurement processes. This latter form of delay was perhaps unavoidable at some level, given the scope and scale of the RttT grant and the relatively short timeline by which the State needed to quickly build its capacity for effective project management and implementation. Clearly, however, NCDPI did not have sufficient internal Human Resources Division staffing to efficiently process the high volume of hiring that came with RttT start-up. In addition, RttT project management schedules were overly ambitious, as they did not account for historically slow State IT procurement and contract approval processes.

CALLOUT BOX

Purposeful Delay: Educator Evaluation System

In July 2012, the United States Department of Education approved an amendment request to the State's Detailed Scope of Work (DSW) making school year 2014-15 the first year North Carolina educators would receive an overall "effectiveness status." This intentional delay was necessary so that the status could be based in part on three-years of student growth data, and amount required for statistical validity. The additional time before any educator would receive a status also allowed for the State to better explain to educators the student growth data component being added to the evaluation system, to pilot the inclusion of student surveys and weighting of team and individual value-added growth measures, and to ensure that many local stakeholders had opportunities to offer feedback regarding both the changes and the roll out process. This stakeholder engagement was critical to the State preparing LEAs for the implementation of the enhanced Evaluation System.

Another significant challenge the State faced throughout the grant period was general resistance to change, a problem that was often related to communication challenges and increased pressure on educators associated with State and local fiscal challenges. Some professionals at the district and school levels expressed clearly that they did not want to see various reforms put in place. A primary example was that many educators raised concerns about aspects of the enhanced NC Educator Evaluation System. Some educators stated they believed the changes were unfair and/or being made solely to enable the NCEES to be used as a tool to remove teachers, rather than as a means to improve educators' professional growth; others were frustrated that the State would increase teacher and principal accountability at a time when district and school budgets (and numbers of adults in the school buildings) were shrinking. While some of this skepticism and resistance was likely based on philosophical difference with the State Board's remodeling agenda, frustration with budgeting decisions made by the General Assembly, or differences of opinion regarding best practices for evaluation, in many cases, the specific concerns voiced were clearly based on incorrect information about the RttT initiatives. Where NCDPI was able to remedy these information gaps, constructive conversations between State and local personnel typically then helped move the initiatives forward with improved design and clarity.

One of the most significant and pervasive challenges for the State implementers has been ensuring that clear, correct information reached all stakeholders. Despite a multi-faceted State effort to target need-to-know information to every level of the schools hierarchy, there seemed to be a combination of too much information (some of it quite technical and/or complex), not enough time, and too many "filters" to ensure that all stakeholders were working from timely, accurate information. Adding to this logistical challenge has been the misinformation disseminated aggressively by some individuals who are opposed to aspects of the State's

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remodeling agenda. The most publicly visible example of this is misinformation about Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that has been promoted by various individuals within and outside of North Carolina.⁹ This misinformation has at times made it even harder to ensure that both education practitioners and parents have accurate and timely information about NC's updated Standard Course of Study.

A final challenge of note has involved holding vendors accountable for deliverables. While this challenge is no different than in standard agency relationships with contractors, the volume of contracts required by the RttT implementation in a brief period of time made this a significant RttT challenge. First, on the front end, is the challenge of making sure contracts clearly articulate deliverables, payment schedules, and requirements for reporting progress toward completion of deliverables. Unfortunately, in the flurry of activity required to get so many initiatives started simultaneously early in the grant period, several contracts were not written as clearly as they should have been, leading to confusion and disagreement later. A second, related challenge, was that some vendors resisted providing required monthly progress reports, which hampered RttT project management efforts and led to friction with some vendor partners.

Lessons Learned

Although the aforementioned challenges in some cases led some aspects of the RttT rollout to be delayed or altered, the challenges also produced valuable “lessons learned” that inform ongoing and future work.¹⁰ All of these valuable lessons learned will provide guidance and inform future decision making as the department continues to improve processes.

In overcoming stakeholder engagement challenges, NCDPI has learned the premium importance of using clear, memorable messages and explanations; building coalitions for change; and gathering frequent and specific stakeholder input.¹¹ In retrospect, the State could have gathered more feedback from stakeholders (primarily teachers and principals) earlier in the grant period to assist in developing implementation plans and policies. Furthermore, the establishment of a “Teacher Ambassador Program” to build grassroots support for reform could have mitigated some of the misunderstanding, apprehension, and resistance that some educators felt at times during the earlier years of the RttT implementation.

To improve communication, NCDPI has learned the importance of messaging through multiple mechanisms and types of media and at multiple layers of the education system. For example, sending communications directly to LEA and charter school leaders, principals, and teachers

⁹ Social media has added a new dynamic to communications that makes it challenging to control messaging. In order to combat public misperceptions about CCSS, NCDPI promoted various resources through email newsletters and other means across the State. These resources can be viewed at (<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/core-explained/>) and at (<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/core-explained/podcasts/>).

¹⁰ See Appendix C for an analysis of commonly cited lessons learned from DPI project coordinators.

¹¹ North Carolina was cited in February of 2013 by United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, as one of three states that have “overcome significant challenges and stayed right on track.”

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through various formats (e.g., email, social media, YouTube, television, etc.) has proven to be much more effective at reaching principals and teachers than waiting for top-down distribution by local central offices.¹² When possible, face-to-face communication still appears to be the most effective means for engaging stakeholders, sharing information, and gathering constructive feedback, particularly when the face to face meetings include NCDPI staff who have already developed strong working relationships with local personnel (as in the cases of the NCDPI Regional Leads, Professional Development Leads, and District and School Transformation coaches).

Regarding vendor management, NCDPI would have avoided a number of challenges (i.e., ensuring accountability for quality, cost, and timeliness of deliverables) if the agency had set clearer expectations for the vendors and/or more clearly identified roles and responsibilities from the outset through better request for proposal (RFP) processes and contract writing.

ASSURANCE AREA PROGRESS

The following sections in this report identify the NC RttT work in each grant assurance area and highlight the State's progress toward achieving its performance goals.

STATE SUCCESS FACTORS (A)

In order to ensure effective RttT management and implementation, the State used a three-pronged approach to enhance accountability, support local implementation, and make data-driven course corrections. To this end, the State established the:

- ❖ RttT Project Management Office (PMO)
- ❖ Program and Policy Evaluation Team
- ❖ North Carolina Education Cloud Infrastructure (NCEdCloud)¹³

Through effective management practices, rigorous and independent program and policy evaluation, and robust statewide IT infrastructure, the State has been able to build on its pre-RttT capacity to implement complex statewide reform initiatives and meet performance targets.

¹² Videos illustrating RttT impact were promoted through email newsletters and other means across the State. These videos can be seen at: <https://itunes.apple.com/itunes-u/ncs-race-to-the-top/id415314572>, and <https://www.youtube.com/user/ncpublicschools>.

¹³ See section "Data Systems to Support Instruction" (p.7) for more information on the NCEdCloud.

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Highlights of Progress

From the beginning of RttT, the State has been committed to thorough, independent, and rigorous policy and program evaluations. To that end, the State contracted with a consortium of North Carolina universities to provide on-going formative and summative evaluations of each RttT initiative.¹⁴ The evaluation reports, delivered at least annually, have helped to guide implementation of each initiative by providing data and feedback regarding fidelity to plan and, where feasible, early indicators of effectiveness. This information has been critical to informing mid-course corrections and design and management of new programs, and has also provided a body of knowledge that is accessible to the public as well as policy makers across the country. As RttT approaches its end, these evaluation reports are shifting to summative evaluations that intend to assess programs' 'cost versus benefit' and cost-effectiveness. This information will be valuable in informing future funding, policy, and management decisions. As of January 23, 2015, the NC RttT Evaluation initiative has released 51 reports; six more will be provided by the end of June, 2015.

The NCEdCloud initiative has established a number of cloud technology resources that are providing higher quality/lower cost service to LEAs and charter schools (see the Data Systems section below for more information).

STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS (B)

One of the cornerstones of NC's remodeling efforts was updating the entire statewide Standard Course of Study (SCOS; containing all grades, K-12, and subject areas) to reflect a new set of career- and college-ready expectations for all students. Having set the policy direction for new standards and completed most of the revision and/or adoption work well before RttT, much of the RttT implementation effort consisted of preparing LEAs and charter schools for the school year 2012-13 implementation of the new SCOS. The State has used a year-round calendar of face-to-face trainings for local professional development teams, and online modules on highest value topics, to build LEA and charter capacity to teach to and assess the new, more rigorous standards (see also the section on 'Professional Development (D)' below). Throughout the rollout, the State emphasized helping local educators share best practices and reflect on lessons learned.

Highlights of Progress

North Carolina's updated SCOS is now in its third year of statewide implementation, and the State has largely achieved its goals of having educators statewide invested in and becoming experts in using a new set of higher quality standards and associated assessments. The work of

¹⁴ These universities create the Consortium for Educational Research and Evaluation – North Carolina (CERE-NC). The Evaluation Team's formal reports can be viewed at: <http://cerenc.org/rttt-evaluation/executive-summaries/>. Formal presentations by the Evaluation Team to the SBE can be viewed at: <http://stateboard.ncpublicschools.gov/>.

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supporting continuous improvement in educator practices is ongoing, and thus cannot be considered complete; however, an unprecedented amount of progress has been made in just a short time. The breadth and depth of the State effort made possible by RttT funding has allowed the State to engage with LEAs around standards and assessments at a level of intensity that has not been possible in previous rollouts of standards; as a result, NC teachers are utilizing the new standards with gradually increasing confidence to guide daily instruction. Survey results from spring 2014 showed that 92% of 16,820 respondents felt prepared (“somewhat, well, and very well”) to teach the new standards.

Concurrent with new content standards being implemented in all grade levels and in all content areas has been significant change in instructional and assessment practices in classrooms across the State. For example, many teachers have shifted the way they deliver course content, utilizing more project-based learning. In addition, many teachers have shifted from ‘paper and pencil’ to online assessments, and are using assessments that focus on different types of information; for example, assessments are measuring more critical thinking and problem solving skills, and challenging students to provide open-ended responses rather than just multiple choice responses. Finally, as a result of the State providing the Home Base suite of technology tools statewide, many district and school personnel are availing themselves of new opportunities to support each other through cross-district sharing of resources.¹⁵

DATA SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT INSTRUCTION (C)

Prior to RttT, North Carolina had been a leader in collection, management, and use of *longitudinal* education data across the ‘P-20+’ education-to-workforce continuum for policy-making and research. Through RttT, the State has also been able to establish and increase the use of robust data systems that support daily *instructional* delivery. To meet these objectives, the State did each of the following:

- ❖ Fully implemented its Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS)
- ❖ Integrated the Instructional Improvement System (IIS) with the State’s Student Information System (SIS) to become one complete platform called “Home Base”
- ❖ Migrated various aspects of LEA-hosted server infrastructure to a Cloud-based (NCEdCloud) information technology (IT) infrastructure

These reforms ensure that North Carolina has the statewide technological systems and infrastructure in place to enable delivery of effective education services to every student in the State.

¹⁵ The Instructional Improvement System (IIS) integrates with NC’s Student Information System (SIS) to become one complete platform called “Home Base.” See *Data Systems to Support Instructions (C)* for more information about Home Base (p. 7).

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Highlights of Progress

In Home Base, the State now has a fully functioning, cloud-based, statewide suite of integrated technology tools for managing student information, instructional planning and delivery, educator evaluation, and professional development.¹⁶ Highlights of the Home Base functionality that is now available statewide include the following:

- ❖ Instructional tools, including a lesson planner and student grouping functionalities
- ❖ NC standards-aligned instructional resources that have been developed and/or vetted by content experts as well as state-created and purchased assessment items
- ❖ Assessment tools that can be used to diagnose student needs and track progress
- ❖ A course management and collaboration tool for students and teachers
- ❖ Tools to connect key data sources to give educators the information they need to improve their instructional practices
- ❖ Customizable or preformatted reports to show appropriate data for specific needs
- ❖ Integration with the state's student information system (i.e., PowerSchool)
- ❖ Tools to record and organize NC Educator Evaluation System observation and evaluation data
- ❖ Professional Development tools for cataloging professional development offerings, delivering online courses and recommending courses based on teacher evaluations
- ❖ Professional development modules

Some of these functionalities reflect a consolidation or streamlining of tools currently being used in districts and schools, while others reflect tools that were not otherwise available in all districts and schools prior to Home Base. Home Base brings these systems together in one place to allow users to link data and resources quickly.

As of mid-October, 2014, 100% of districts and 44% of charter schools had opted to use the Home Base tools, and all of these LEAs and charters now have access to all of the systems within Home Base. The remaining charter schools can opt in to use Home Base at any time, and are not restricted from using all of the tools and resources as well. In terms of practices and behaviors, many districts have relied on the tools and assessment content to build and deliver district benchmark assessments and to analyze the data from those and other local assessments. LEAs have built out curriculum using both their own resources that have been uploaded into the tools, as well as instructional resources available in the system. School leaders and teachers are able to create, upload, and find resources; build out courses; conduct educator evaluations; and complete professional development modules at their convenience. Educators have access to instructional resources, assessments and data aligned to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and can get a big-picture and connected view of standards mastery for students across

¹⁶ The State's website page for Home Base can be seen at: <http://dpi.state.nc.us/homebase>.

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classes, schools, and LEAs. Table 2 illustrates the number of new resources now available to educators across the State. NCDPI is currently working on shareable use cases regarding best practices and how Home Base has influenced and changed the way districts and schools approach and lead instruction and professional development.

Table 2: New Resources Available Through Home Base

	Instructional Resources	Classroom and Benchmark Assessments	Professional Development Courses
Number Created	Over 38,000	Over 80,000	Over 40

CALLOUT BOX

Home Base Partnerships: Sharing Best Practices

Home Base Partnership Coordinators are partnering with LEAs across NC to learn and share best practices, to connect districts that are facing similar issues or using similar implementation strategies, and to help create statewide Home Base educator networks. One current partnership is with Thomasville City Schools.

The staff at Liberty Drive Elementary School in Thomasville has embraced all aspects of the instructional improvement system (IIS) and is using it daily to shape instruction and improve student outcomes. Teachers use Schoolnet (part of the IIS) resources for daily instruction, assessment items to measure progress, data and reporting tools to track student growth, and previously unused resources to remediate and close gaps in student learning.

The experiences at Liberty Drive Elementary School are a great example of how to use Schoolnet to achieve learning goals. Teachers identify the instructional resources that best fit the needs of their students, assessments are created with standards-aligned items, and the data gathered from these assessments is used to shape future instruction.

Though a number of key NCEdCloud efforts have experienced delays resulting from inefficient State IT procurement processes, this initiative has facilitated significant migration from LEA-hosted server infrastructure to provider-hosted application and infrastructure services in order to promote world-class IT infrastructure as a foundational component of the State's education enterprise.¹⁷ The cloud-based model allows for the delivery of more reliable, more efficient, and more cost-effective common IT services – such as email, content filtering, and other school

¹⁷ The NC Cloud Plan and resources can be viewed at: <http://cloud.fi.ncsu.edu/>.

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business applications - across public schools in North Carolina. One of the most significant NCEdCloud accomplishments has been the establishment of a statewide Identity Access Management (IAM) solution for LEAs and charter schools that enables them to streamline management of user accounts and login information across multiple technology systems, including those in Home Base. Other significant projects that are currently in process, but that promise to affect the pervasiveness of digital learning statewide, are the procuring of additional Learning Management System (LMS) capabilities for LEAs and charter schools, the upgrading or establishing of wireless access in underserved school buildings, and the development of a comprehensive Digital Learning Plan for the State that includes a move away from textbooks to all digital content by 2017.

GREAT TEACHERS AND GREAT LEADERS (D)

As one might expect given North Carolina's RttT focus on ensuring that every child has a great teacher and every school has a great principal, the NC RttT plan contains a variety of important initiatives designed to improve both the supply and equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals, and to help every educator improve his or her practice. Through RttT funding, the State has been able to offer unprecedented levels of support to local education professionals. The key components of this work have involved enhancing the statewide NC Educator Evaluation System (NCEES), and providing a continuum of programs and services to ensure that well-prepared teachers and principals are in place across the State, particularly in the most challenged schools and districts.

The work in this area with the broadest and perhaps longest-lasting effect has been the State's statewide, intensive Professional Development Initiative (PDI) designed to accomplish the following:

- 1) Build school districts' and charters' capacity to prepare all of their teachers and principals for implementing the updated NC Standard Course of Study, new educator evaluation procedures, and new state assessments
- 2) Ensure that high quality professional development on topics of core instructional importance is available to all teachers at the local level during the Race to the Top grant period and for many years to come.

Highlights of Progress

North Carolina has completed an array of initiatives focused on ensuring that every student has an excellent teacher and that every school has an excellent principal:

The State has enhanced the statewide NCEES to now include standard, objective data regarding the extent to which each teacher and principal contributes to the academic growth of his or her students. The enhanced system makes it possible for every educator to receive a fair, rigorous, data-based evaluation of his or her effectiveness that includes specific feedback to fuel professional growth. Teachers and administrators can access their ratings on all standards of the

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NCEES (including the student growth standards) through the Educator Evaluation Dashboards housed in the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS), as well as reports housed in the online tool for the NCEES (in Home Base).

Teachers in performance-based content areas will use the Analysis of Student Work (ASW) Process to determine their student-growth standard rating. The ASW Process involves the collection and evaluation of student work to document student growth. NCDPI conducted an initial ASW pilot with 100 educators in the areas of Arts Education, Healthful Living, and World Languages in spring 2013, and a second, larger pilot involving approximately 1,000 educators, during the 2013-14 school year. Based on the results of the second pilot, the State is implementing the ASW Process statewide in January 2015. This process will allow for educators in content areas without a traditional growth measure to be assigned standardized, evidence-based evaluations to determine their value-add to student learning.

Most teachers and principals are employed in North Carolina after going through a university-based preparation program. Through RttT, NCDPI has collaborated with the State's Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) to develop a vision and early steps for improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs. Prior to RttT, the State had already linked student achievement and growth data to students' teachers and principals. In addition, the State had linked teachers and principals prepared for credentialing through the University of North Carolina (UNC) system and through NC Independent Colleges and Universities to their preparation programs, and used the linked data to evaluate the effectiveness of those preparation programs. Now, with the help of RttT funding, the State has established an IHE report card that rates the effectiveness of each educator preparation program using student growth data as one of the factors.

As one of the initiatives designed to provide special added support to the lowest-achieving districts and schools in North Carolina, the State has expanded its existing teacher recruitment and alternative licensure programs. Specifically, the State has increased the number of Teach For America (TFA) teachers in the State, established the North Carolina Teachers Corps (NCTC) program (modeled after TFA), and developed a new Induction Support Program ("New Teacher Support Program") for novice teachers. Together these initiatives have helped increase the supply of quality teachers to districts and schools that have experienced recruitment and retention challenges, and have provided targeted additional support and training for the newest teachers in the State's lowest-achieving districts and schools throughout the school year.

In order to increase the State's and each LEA's capacity to provide effective professional development, North Carolina launched a comprehensive Professional Development Initiative (PDI). In partnership with the State's Regional Education Service Alliances (RESAs), the PDI has provided a comprehensive, targeted, seamless, and flexible offering of face-to-face sessions for all educators. Throughout the life of the grant, the State's cadre of professional development leaders has delivered nearly 1,000 regionally-based face-to-face sessions spread across the State (Table 3). The PD session topics have progressed from a prescriptive list of sessions designed to acclimate local personnel to the Race to the Top (RttT) goals to a differentiated list of sessions based on the growth LEAs and charters have made over the last four years and the idiosyncratic needs each district has subsequently identified.

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Table 3: RESA Partnership PD Sessions

Grant Year	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	Total, 2011-2015
# of Sessions	125	250	325	249	949

To prepare more principals to lead transformation of low-achieving schools and to build overall capacity of sitting principals and assistant principals, the State has engaged with external partners and either bolstered or funded startup of a range of successful programs. The State supported three regional leadership academies (RLA; one existing, two new) to provide training and full-year administrative internships for participants who have been selected based on their potential to become effective school leaders. Participants earn credit toward a graduate degree and principal licensure, and agree to serve for three years in an LEA that partners with their RLA. Table 4 provides data on the number of RLA graduates prepared through the RttT grant period who had found employment as school leaders as of October 2014. This number will change as members of the most recent cohorts continue to interview for open positions.

Table 4: Positions Held by Graduates of the Regional Leadership Academies (October 2014)¹⁸

	Principals	Assistant Principals	Central Office Staff	Other	Total
Number of Positions Held	34	104	15	32	185

The Distinguished Leadership in Practice (DLP) program, administered by the North Carolina Principals & Assistant Principals’ Association (NCPAPA), employs a non-traditional, blended approach to professional development that allows participating current principals and assistant principals to critically examine the meaning and application of school leadership through a job-embedded, problem-based, real-world approach. NCPAPA has received multiple requests to replicate the program in other regional areas in connections with the Central Carolina Regional Education Service Alliance (RESA) and Sandhills RESA. Since the beginning of the RttT-funded program, DLP has graduated 811 participants; 408 more are scheduled to graduate at the end of the RttT funding period.

¹⁸ The three regional leadership academies include: Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA), Sandhills Leadership Academy (SLA), and Piedmont Triad Leadership Academy (PTLA).

CALLOUT BOX

Regional PD Delivery Framework

The State has implemented a comprehensive professional development initiative (PDI) that has engaged the State’s entire education workforce on high-value instructional and leadership topics through a regionally-based delivery framework. Kicked off annually by intensive regional Summer Institutes for district and charter school PD leadership teams of up to 18 people each, the PDI provided a year-round calendar of professional development offerings (see <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/profdev/calendar/>) to help the NC educator workforce upgrade their skills. In addition, the PDI provided regionally-based State PD consultants, and online modules and other online resources to support educators’ pursuit of practical, targeted, job-embedded professional growth.

Information collected on the quality of the PDI implementation to date has been generally positive. Participation rates, participants’ feedback, course surveys, etc., have all suggested a high level of satisfaction and confidence on the part of educators that these supports were (and still are) needed and have the potential to positively impact professional practices and instruction. One Summer Institutes 2014 participant stated, *“The most beneficial part was providing participants with the freedom to choose areas of interest that are aligned with professional and personal development. During lunch I was able to meet with members of the Moore County team attending the institute and it was so exciting to hear each of our team members talk so enthusiastically about their new learning. Thank you for the opportunity - I know it is a lot of work and a time commitment to put together these institutes throughout the state. We appreciate your dedication to professional learning!”*

Finally, in the spring of 2014, the State established the Governor's Teacher Network (GTN) to promote teacher leadership and further encourage the spread of effective teaching and learning practices across the state. From a pool of 1,297 applications, 446 outstanding teachers from across the State were selected to participate in the new initiative. These teachers are spending SY 2014-2015 developing resources created “for teachers by teachers” that support key RtT initiatives (professional development and digital instructional resources to be shared locally and/or regionally, and then made available for statewide use through Home Base). Each of the GTN teachers received two days of specialized training related to their proposed projects and are receiving ongoing professional support from DPI staff over the course of the year. The State will pay each GTN teacher \$10,000 for his or her completed work.

TURNING AROUND THE LOWEST ACHIEVING SCHOOLS (E)

North Carolina has used RttT funding to scale up support for the State’s lowest-achieving schools by significantly expanding the NCDPI team (i.e., District and School Transformation; DST) that has been guiding successful turnaround and transformation work across the state since 2006.¹⁹ DST has implemented a comprehensive program that provides targeted coaching support to low performing-schools in response to state and federal legislative requirements and state judicial and executive direction. RttT funding has enabled that team to expand support to additional schools (the lowest-achieving 5% of elementary, middle and high schools, and all high schools with graduation rates below 60%) and 12 districts (the lowest-achieving 10% of NC LEAs).

The goal of the RttT “Turning around the Lowest Achieving Schools” (TALAS) work has been to help these schools and districts develop their capacity to increase and sustain student achievement. The primary short-term objective of the TALAS work was to ensure that every school in the State has at least 60% of its students achieving academic proficiency and that every high school in the State has at least a 60% graduation rate. The long term aspiration was for the lowest-achieving 5% of schools to reach proficiency levels far exceeding 60% and for all high schools to have graduation rates approaching 100%.

Highlights of Progress

Early performance data demonstrates that DST has made excellent progress toward meeting its goals. Out of the original 118 schools in the bottom 5% that DST began working with at the start of RttT, only 20 of those schools still remain in the bottom 5%. In other words, 83% of the original 118 schools have been raised out of the bottom 5%, and 67% of these schools are no longer in the bottom 10%. Overall, schools supported by DST gained an average of 7.9 percentage points in proficiency during the first two years of the RttT grant. Table 5 illustrates this point by comparing schools served by DST to all schools statewide. Some schools that were targeted to receive DST support are now some of the higher performing schools in the State.²⁰

¹⁹ Schools are supported by implementing one of the four school intervention models (i.e., turnaround model, restart model, school closure, or transformation model).

²⁰ For example, Rock Rest Elementary school was in the bottom 5% in 2011 and is now performing around the top 30% of all schools in the State.

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Table 5: Average 2 Year Change in Proficiency²¹

	High School	Middle School	Elementary School
Avg. Increase of All Schools Statewide	0.7% pts.	1.2% pts.	1.2% pts
Average Increase of DST Schools	9.5% pts.	5.9% pts.	8.3% pts.
Difference (DST v. All)	+8.8%	+4.7%	+7.1%

Based on these results it appears that the lowest achieving schools in the State are “turning around” thereby reducing the variance between these schools and their more traditionally higher performing counterparts across the State. Crucial to the success of DST’s work has been their regionally structured coaching model.²² Feedback from the field has praised this approach to building educator and leader capacity at the school and district levels.

STEM PRIORITY (P)

The State has used RttT funds to support LEAs in establishing a system of 20 STEM-focused high schools (four Anchor Schools and sixteen Affinity Network Schools) across the state.²³ STEM high schools use a curriculum infused with STEM content to increase students’ abilities to meet current and expected North Carolina economic and workforce development requirements. Each STEM high school is a part of a cluster of schools organized around one of four STEM thematic areas (Health and Life Sciences; Aerospace, Security, and Advanced Manufacturing; Biotechnology and Agriscience; and Energy and Sustainability). Each cluster has an Anchor School that serves as a “hub” for professional development, curriculum development, technology use, and innovation for that thematic area. The other schools in the cluster are Affinity Network schools that participate in professional development and networking related to their aligned STEM area.²⁴ These unique school settings provide an engaging option

²¹ Comparing data from SY 2009-2010 to SY 2011-2012

²² TALAS coaches that work in the field share a wiki-link to professional development resources for school leaders. These resources can be viewed at: <http://dst.ncdpi.wikispaces.net/>.

²³ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI), with input from many stakeholders, developed the North Carolina Science, Technology, Education, and Mathematics STEM Education Strategic Plan <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/stem/overview/education-strategic-plan.pdf>, which serves as the basis of the work in STEM education.

²⁴ Communications and marketing occur frequently and throughout the year at state and national conference presentations and webinars. The NCSTEM Center Portal site is an awareness campaign that provides STEM

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for students, especially those in urban and rural low-income communities that are most often served by the lowest-achieving schools.

Highlights of Progress

The State was successful in establishing and supporting the implementation of STEM models in four Anchor and sixteen Affinity Network schools. In order to help the programs grow, the State partnered with *NC New Schools* to provide professional development and on-site coaching for the teachers and principals, and connected the schools to industry partners in the relevant STEM thematic areas. This work to develop the schools has included establishing a new classroom approach in which teachers act as facilitators of student-led project-based learning; this approach challenges students to learn through critical thinking and problem-solving as opposed to simply memorizing facts. Overall, the work to support the STEM School Anchor and Affinity Network has fostered an improved learning culture, increased awareness and understanding of STEM, and greater education-to-workforce connections in the areas served by the Network schools.

The State's STEM initiative also developed and implemented an NC STEM Recognition program that provides a standard definition for the "Attributes of STEM Education" and a comprehensive rubric that allows schools to assess their progress in implementing their STEM program. This rubric has become a model for other states across the country to use in defining and assessing STEM education at the school level.²⁵

Finally, with the help of RttT funding, the NCDPI partnered with the NC School of Science and Math and the NC Virtual Public School to create a robust set of STEM course content and materials for use in traditional, virtual, and blended courses that will be accessible to all schools going forward through the Home Base platform.²⁶

resources where people can connect, find, and share everything STEM. The portal can be accessed at: www.ncstemcenter.org

²⁵ The NC Stem Recognition Application can be viewed at: www.ncpublicschools.org/stem

²⁶ All 16 STEM courses are accessible through the LEARN NC Moodle site (<https://moodle.learnnc.org/login/index.php>), a snipurl (<http://snipurl.com/rtttstem>), and a dropbox address (<http://box.com/rttt>). The courses additionally are to be housed in Home Base, the State's online resource for schools and teachers. Currently, Health and Life Sciences I is available for teachers within Home Base/Schoolnet and is also being migrated into the Learning Object Repository (LOR), enabling all schools and school systems to access individual materials from the courses. Course codes have been assigned to these courses so that schools can access them as electives to complement student career pathways and Career and Technical Education Career Clusters.

NEXT STEPS

Year 5 No Cost Extension (through June 2015)

North Carolina will continue implementing many of the initiatives and projects described in the sections above throughout the Year 5 No-Cost Extension period.

First, the State intends to fully realize its NCEdCloud and Home Base plans, some of which have been delayed by IT procurement processes. The State will continue to help LEAs migrate to existing services, will make additional cloud-based systems and services available, and will provide funding to LEAs to support wireless technology infrastructure upgrades. In addition, North Carolina will continue to provide all Home Base components throughout SY 2014-2015. As LEAs enter the second year of Home Base implementation, NCDPI will provide ongoing training and support; a focus will be gathering and sharing best practices for integrating Home Base components into daily instructional routines.

As LEAs, charters, and individual educators continue to adjust to new standards and assessments as well as the enhanced NCEES, the State will continue to provide support through the ongoing development and dissemination of professional development materials and instructional resources. The State will continue initiatives such as the PDI and the Governor's Teacher Network in order to ensure that educators' and LEAs' needs for support are being met. North Carolina will also continue its efforts to strengthen LEA and school leaders through the DLP program. Following SY 2014-2015, North Carolina educators will receive educator effectiveness statuses for the first time.

RttT evaluation reports are beginning to shift toward focusing on outcomes rather than on formative feedback regarding implementation fidelity and other process measures. After releasing several more initiative-specific summative analyses, the Evaluation Team will be able to assemble a capstone report describing the overall effectiveness of RttT in the State. Since effects on student outcomes will in most cases take several more years to measure validly, and the direct impact attributable to any one program will be difficult to differentiate from other initiatives and outside factors, this "overall impact" report will attempt to offer the "best, most valid information available at this point in time" regarding RttT's effect on NC schools and student outcomes.

Post-Race to the Top

While North Carolina has made significant strides toward achieving its vision for a remodeled education system in the State, the need to continuously improve remains. There is still much work to be done to ensure *every* child in the State graduates high school ready for life in the global economy. All educators will require ongoing assistance in integrating digital tools into classrooms, refining instructional practices, and understanding how to help students reach new, more rigorous learning standards. Furthermore, the most challenged district and school leaders will require ongoing support in order to solidify gains made through district and school transformation interventions. Therefore, as reflected in the State Board of Education's updated strategic plan (<http://stateboard.ncpublicschools.gov/strategic-plan/strategic-plan-full.pdf>), the

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State's efforts to help districts and schools hold students to high academic expectations and provide great teachers and principals to every student will remain a central focus even after RttT comes to a close.

North Carolina's ability to sustain the progress made through RttT will largely depend on State funding priorities, as determined by the NC General Assembly. NCDPI, as a result of multiple legislative funding reductions over the RttT grant period, will not have sufficient State-funded staff to absorb the functions performed by RttT-funded staff and contractors, as was the plan when RttT work began.²⁷ For example, 78 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff in DST will lose funding for their positions at the end of the grant period.²⁸ In addition, there will be 43 fewer FTEs (including contractors) in the Educator Effectiveness division, leaving just 2 positions remaining.²⁹ This lower staffing level will significantly reduce the level of State outreach support to local districts and schools after RttT comes to a close. NCDPI is attempting to mitigate the effects of this dramatic change in resources available to support local districts and schools. In the final months of RttT implementation, the agency will continue to monitor implementation, track progress, and differentiate supports to districts and schools, with a primary focus being development of local capacity to sustain improvements and promising practices.

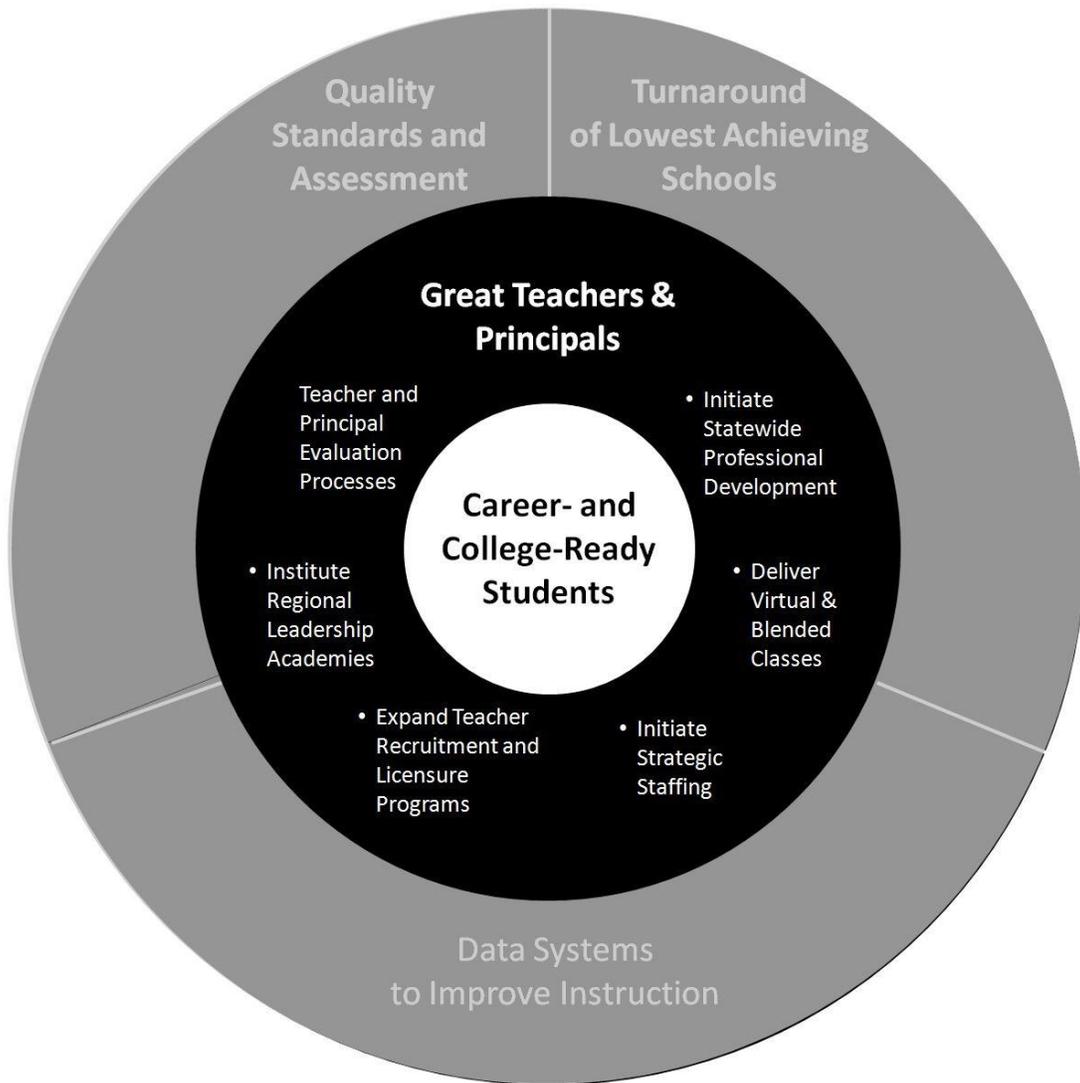
²⁷ NCDPI has lost over 150 State-funded positions since 2010; RttT has funded approximately 140 time-limited and contract positions that will no longer be available.

²⁸ This will mean a 62% reduction in workforce available to complete the work of DST.

²⁹ This will mean a 96% reduction in workforce available to complete the work of the Educator Effectiveness Division.

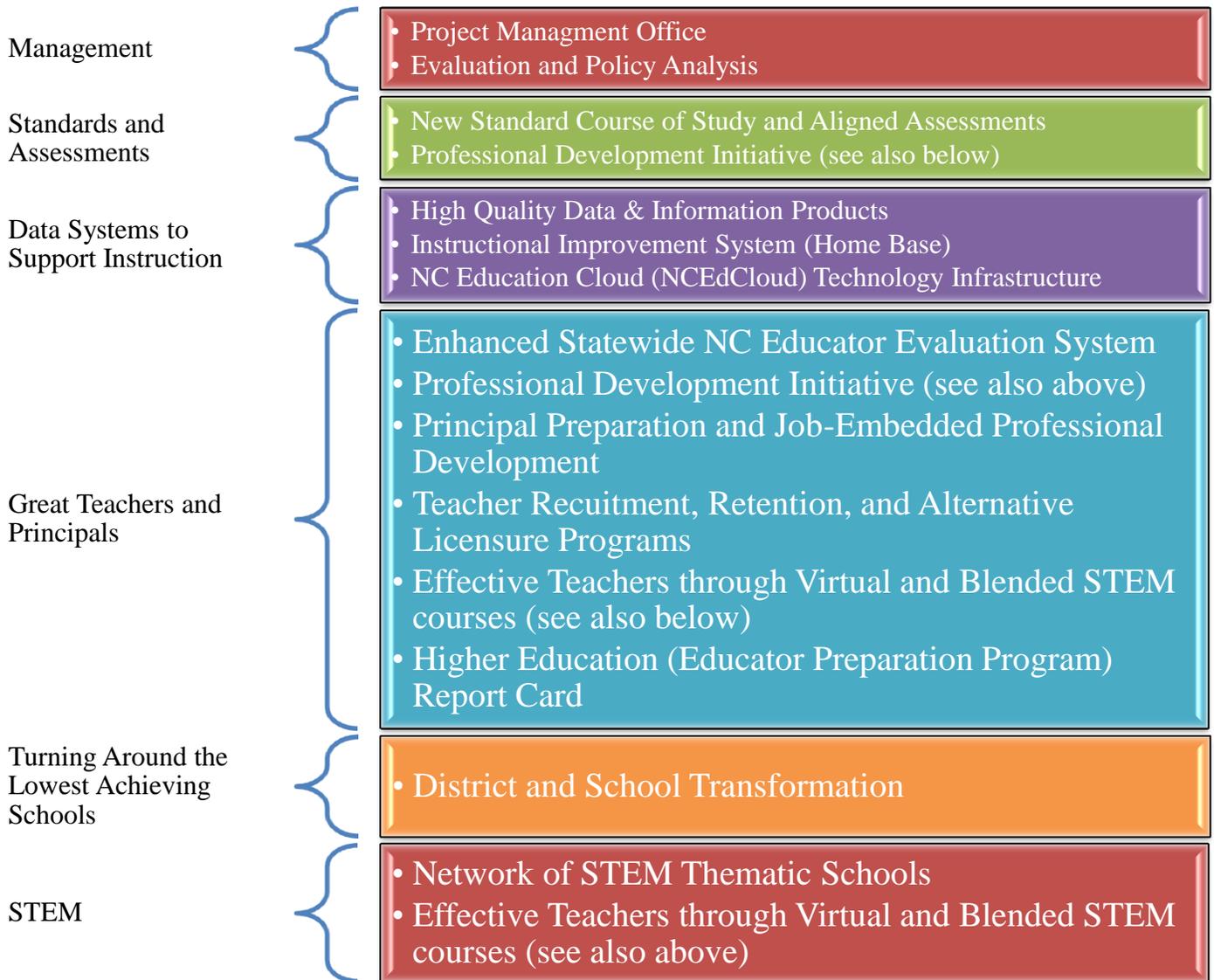
APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: STATE THEORY OF ACTION



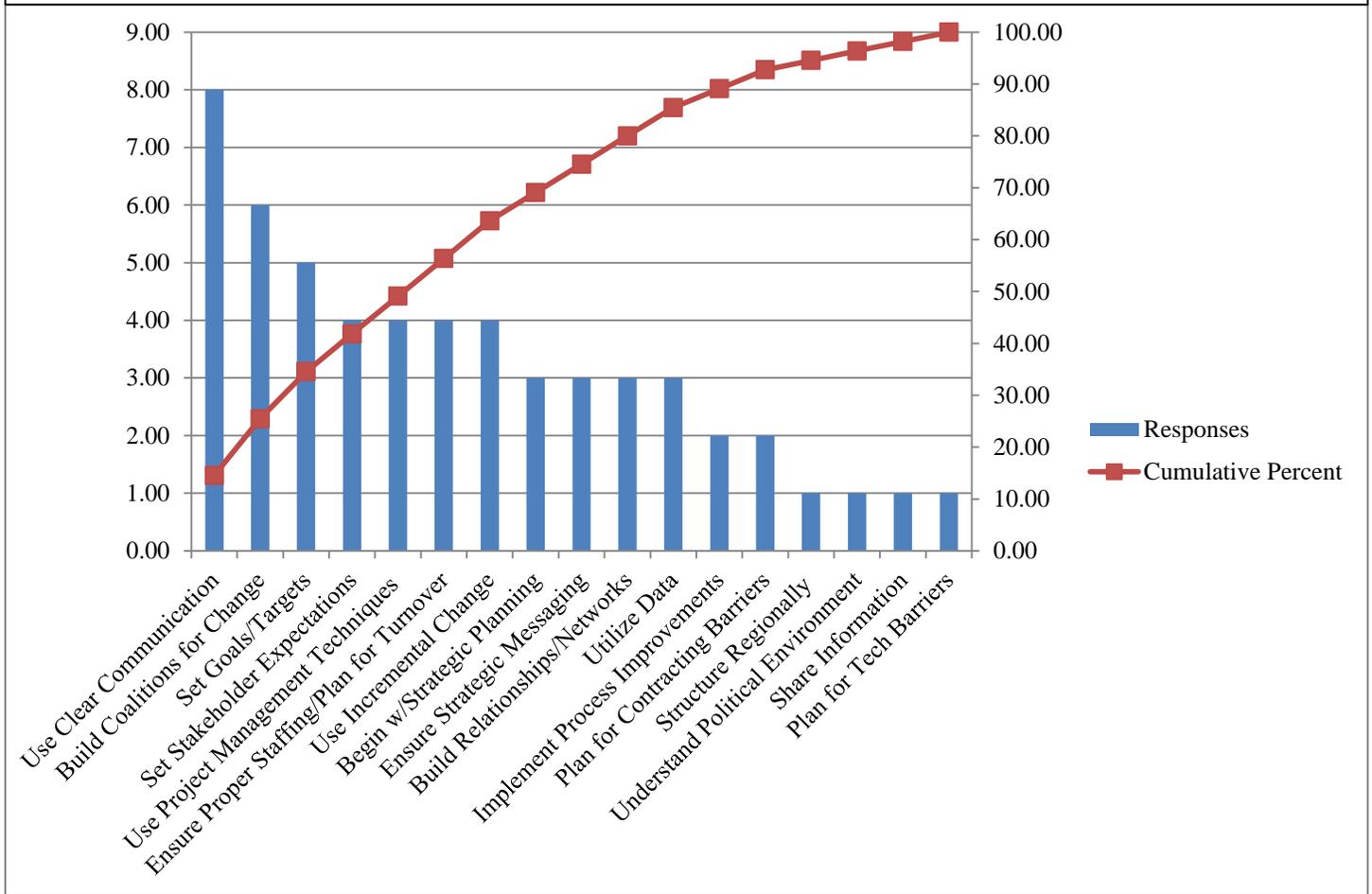
The State’s “theory of action” info-graphic illustrates how the work of RttT was developed with student outcomes at the core of the State’s efforts, and that the reform areas and initiatives comprise a coherent plan in which each component depends upon and reinforces the others. This graphic indicates how the initiatives described in each section of this report connect to the overarching vision and to each other.

APPENDIX B: INITIATIVES ALIGNED WITH RTTT ASSURANCE AREAS



APPENDIX C: LESSONS LEARNED ANALYSIS

Lessons Learned



This chart illustrates the lessons learned from implementation cited most commonly by NCDPI RttT Project Coordinators. As evidenced by the chart, the most commonly cited lesson learned was the need to “use clear communication;” this response accounted for nearly 15% of the cumulative lessons identified. The top 80% of lessons learned from implementation included: using clear communication, building coalitions for change, setting goals/targets, setting stakeholder expectations, using project management, ensuring proper staffing/planning for turnover, using incremental change, beginning with strategic planning, ensuring strategic messaging, building relationships/networks. It is important to note that when citing lessons learned, RttT Project Coordinators discussed things that the State did particularly well from the onset and also areas in which the State improved through mid-course corrections in response to stakeholder feedback and formative data, such as that presented by evaluation reports.