Professional Development via Distance Technology

On almost every Tuesday this past spring, educational leaders from across the state gathered via distance technology to learn, network and problem-solve thanks to UW ECHO in Educational Leadership, a partnership between the Wyoming Center for Educational Leadership (WyCEL) and UW Project ECHO.

ECHO stands for Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes, and UW is pioneering the technology for the education sector, reaching about 100 administrators this past year—with plans to greatly expand in coming years.

“The innovative part of this project is taking something that’s been very successful in medicine and transferring it to education,” says WyCEL Director Mark Stock. “The ECHO project’s philosophy is to de-monopolize knowledge—the notion of bringing the knowledge to the people instead of people to the experts.”

The training is done via video-conferencing, with two large screens able to accommodate up to 100 people and their images simultaneously. The first 30-minutes period is a didactic training—a presentation by a local or national expert followed by a specific strategy. Then, a case presentation by one of the Wyoming participants opens the floor to discussion and brainstorming solutions, and members of the project staff follow up with the presenter afterward.

Among other things, the project’s goals are to increase capacity of superintendents to implement best practices and to establish an effective platform for distance educational leadership training, mentoring and management.

Dan Espeland, superintendent in Converse County School District 1, served on the original committee that helped establish the project and has attended the weekly trainings. “We have very few opportunities statewide for staff development for our principals and superintendents,” he says. “I think this online format has worked really well. It’s offered a good opportunity for people to discuss and ask questions about current educational issues.”

Espeland says he’s already in the process of implementing some of the things he’s learned through the trainings and discussions, and he looks forward to next year’s topics.

The Wyoming Accountability in Education Act demands accountability on the part of schools and also stipulates providing a system of support—a need that ECHO fulfills. Funded by the Wyoming Department of Education, the ECHO project serves as a premier support system for school administrators, Stock says. The efficacy of the program is being tested via set metrics, and Stock is confident of positive outcomes.

For schools that aren’t meeting state expectations, WyCEL also offers an Executive Leadership Coaching project that assigns experts to mentor personnel at the schools. The pilot program served seven schools this past spring, and Stock hopes the number of schools will double next year.

In addition, WyCEL’s Principal Academy currently serves 20 principals with in-person and distance training over a yearlong period. Stock hopes to offer an ECHO project for principals, assistant principals and instructional facilitators in the future, saying: “We are currently the only ECHO Project for Educational Leadership.”

In addition to leading the field in ECHO projects for the education sector, Stock sees WyCEL’s programs as an important part of UW’s presence across the state and says that the networking that takes place during trainings serves as another benefit for participants.

“Our state is a widespread state with a lot of things going on, and I think this has been a great opportunity for many of our administrators and facilitators,” Espeland says. “Any time we have discussions on educational topics with other administrators around the state, I pick up new ideas and new programs that are being successful.”