

Kentucky: Using a Continuous Improvement Model to Address Virtual Learning Challenges

Introduction

Districts and schools constantly troubleshoot and mitigate new and ongoing challenges. Rather than addressing each challenge ad hoc, they are looking to adopt a systematic, repeatable process proven to diagnose and respond to challenges efficiently and effectively. One such approach with wide application and use in education is a [Networked Improvement Community \(NIC\)](#). A NIC is a model of continuous improvement that brings together a group of professionals who work to solve a well-specified problem. In collaboration with the [Region 5 Comprehensive Center \(R5CC\)](#), the [Kentucky Department of Education](#) (KDE) is helping 10 virtual schools implement a NIC to address common challenges with providing online and virtual learning.

KDE and [Kentucky Educational Television](#) (KET) have partnered to create the [Kentucky Online Learning Experience Collaborative](#) (KyOLXC) workgroups, which aims to provide support for Kentucky's online K-12 programs and full-time, online students by piloting a NIC to address challenges in administering virtual learning. By piloting a NIC approach using materials and trainings developed by the R5CC, participating schools hope to achieve two goals: 1) to mitigate or solve an active virtual learning challenge, and 2) to learn the NIC model and institutionalize it as their organization's approach to diagnosing and solving future problems across all educational topics. For KyOLXC-participating schools, the NIC model is particularly helpful in increasing communication among virtual educators and in solving their reported challenges. To help address the ultimate goal of ensuring full-time enrolled students participate in a high-quality online learning experience, the KyOLXC workgroup meets monthly to learn about each step of the NIC and to pilot the use of the model to address current distance learning challenges and develop capacity to reapply a NIC model as future challenges arise.

“Virtual Problem Solvers”

The NIC approach changes the way educators address challenges. When asked how the participants thought the NIC model was helpful, participants said it helped them narrow their focus into solving one problem at a time and encouraged them to dig deeper into the problem to find the root cause.

For example, a counselor for Jessamine County's Virtual Learning Academy stated, “I felt like I could have picked a number of things, but we only had one. To be able to focus on that and say ‘yeah, there are lots of them but this one we're going to focus on and we're going to improve it.’” Virtual

educators encounter a myriad of problems, and it is difficult to not to try and address them all at once. By narrowing down to one problem to address, participants can develop a high-quality problem statement that is SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely), high-leverage, and user-centered. The KyOLXC workgroup also noted they are often not able to solve a problem because they didn't identify the root cause of said problem. The NIC approach stresses the importance of root cause analysis and addresses issues at the core rather than the symptoms.

“The refocus on the asking of “why” in order to get down to the actual “what is the real problem.” I think sometimes we don't dig enough. We start to solve a problem...and we become frustrated when it doesn't solve anything. It's because we didn't get to the root. We are too busy hanging around up around the top.”

– Marci Smith, Head Principal for the Jessamine County Virtual Learning Department

“Alone No More”

Educators in virtual schools face unique challenges that can't usually be answered from educators working in in-person settings. The KyOLXC workgroup helped with the isolation that comes with teaching virtually. Many participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to talk about the problems they're facing and to share solutions with one another, especially with people who have faced similar challenges. Marci Smith states that fellow KyOLXC workgroup members “maybe don't have any more answers than us, and maybe do. But at least [there is] someone that I can sit with and have the same conversation instead of just look, someone looking at me with a blind stare going ‘I have no idea, figure it out.’” Ms. Smith's comment was validated by other participants; they spoke of the challenge of trying to get relevant advice from their district regarding virtual education challenges.

“We're very isolated, I think, across the state, and this was an opportunity for us to be able to have a like-minded group where we can share stories. I think a lot of our administration in our school district . . . sort of know what we do, but they really don't know what we do.”

– Mark Daniels, director of Innovative Programs and principal of Corbin Innovative Schools

“Answers Without Judgment”

The initiative's work in Kentucky was valuable and worthwhile as the participants noted benefits from their involvement. Other than learning the NIC approach and providing a professional community for virtual educators, the KyOLXC workgroup became a safe and welcoming space for participants to solve problems of distance learning in a judgement-free way, to learn from others with years of experience, and to provide validation to the work they do. A coordinator of the virtual program at Fleming County noted that the KyOLXC workgroup is “a place that you can be comfortable enough to go in and be honest with questions and not feel judged . . . where you can be



real.” NICs foster a culture of trust and respect among its participants, which is essential in building strong relationships to achieve the group’s goals. Participants need to establish a set of norms and rules for sharing and listening that allows them to create a safe environment and respect for each other’s contributions (LeMahieu 2015).

The R5CC provided capacity building technical assistance to KDE and the KyOLXC workgroup through tailored content to support implementation at the program level, including the development of templates and process documents to capture the thought process for the problem of practice. Each KyOLXC workgroup team is using the resources to engage in the specific tasks for each of the 8 steps in the NIC model. For example, after presenting the purpose and components of a logic model, the workgroup teams spent time identifying strategies and subsequent activities to address the problem of practice and root causes. They used the logic model template to align those strategies to short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes. These resources are used by teams to document their work and to reference during off-cycle coaching sessions and during breakout learning sessions.

After each content session, R5CC provided reflection opportunities to build capacity within the NIC to leverage the teams’ experience in solving similar problems. During the most recent learning session, one participant even stated that she is now seeing this process not as something that needs to be checked off upon completion, but something that should be continually revisited and improved.

Further, R5CC provided a communications assessment to the KyOLXC workgroup participants at the start of the initiative and they found the information to be helpful as they initiated their team and began working to refine problem statements and determine strategies for addressing the root causes.

“For me, [the KyOLXC workgroup] help[s] build confidence in a new and unexpected role this year that I had not planned to be doing. It sort of helped give me a standard which to work towards with my own program and what I do and sort of a way to measure what I’m doing against other programs in the state. It sort of helps you validate what I’m doing in regards to this next position based on people who’ve been doing it, maybe for several years.”

– Mitch Justice, Pike County Virtual Academy K-5 Facilitator

Next Steps to Support KyOLXC

The R5CC continues to provide support during the monthly KyOLXC workgroup meetings. Teams are implementing initial activities that support long-term outcomes for providing high-quality online learning experiences for full-time students. Learning sessions in the next few months are focused on PDSA cycles and supporting teams through each phase of the cycle to determine next



steps in the iterative process. Participants will have an opportunity to reflect on the NIC process and plan for the continued use of the model to establish and sustain a culture of continuous improvement.

In addition, R5CC will work with several schools to provide students with an opportunity to participate in a college and career readiness assessment to support the [Kentucky Graduate Profile](#) focused on effective communication.

Reference

LeMahieu, P. (2015). *Why a NIC?* Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Retrieved on March 7, 2023 from <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/why-a-nic/>.

