

SKILLRISE CASE STUDY: Kentucky Skills U

Prioritizing Professional Learning to Bolster Student Success

By [Sam Peterson](#) | EdSurge Solutions Studio

Approximately 350,000 working-age Kentuckians do not have a high school or GED diploma. Ever mindful of this concern, [Kentucky Skills U](#) provides free adult education services—reading, math and communications skills—to residents in all 120 counties across the state. [KYSU's mission](#) is to help adult learners obtain a GED and improve their quality of life through education, training and employment.

We spoke with Lori Looney, Director of College and Career Prep, and Emily Bosley, Senior Coordinator, to learn about the challenges that adult educators are experiencing, how the state agency is supporting local providers—during the pandemic and beyond—and how SkillRise helped KYSU turn a number of challenges into opportunities for success.

EdSurge: What inspired you to take the SkillRise course? What challenges were you facing at the time?

Looney: We took the winter 2020 SkillRise course. At that time, we were facing the first full-year implementation of a new professional learning community (PLC)-based model and assisting programs

with the launch of KYSU innovation proposals. Our agency requested innovation proposals from all programs to jumpstart provider-based innovations in edtech, distance learning and connection points, among other areas.

Bosley: Our former Executive Director, Reecie Stagnolia, asked our team in the fall of 2019 to develop an initiative to bolster our digital distance learning options and integrate digital literacy.



What's the most significant change you've made in your work with educators since then?

Looney: The course caused me to think about how we collect and use data to inform technology-focused professional learning. It challenged us to reverse design by considering what observable changes would constitute success and what quantifiable measures could be set as goals. We developed our [What's Working infographic](#) and related rubric as a result.

Bosley: For the course, we focused our work on researching and implementing a specific technology tool; however, the course content and activities were relevant to our planning and rollout of the greater initiative. I believe our work in the course led us to be more intentional about gathering input from key stakeholders more broadly and earlier in the planning and implementation process. This has helped us align our professional learning (PL) efforts with what programs need, as well as anticipate and work to address potential pain points along the way. Over time, this is fostering a more collaborative atmosphere within our network of providers.

What changed for you in 2020 due to the pandemic? How did your team adapt to that change?



Looney: 100 percent of state office staff moved to 100 percent telecommute status mid-March 2020 to present. Our provider network also encountered a variety of pandemic-impacted status changes: full closures, 100 percent telecommute, hybrid, or full re-opening. This volatility necessitated the implementation of creative strategies to maintain continuity of service to students.

Our team accelerated our professional learning focus on edtech upskilling with an array of virtual PL opportunities, including the implementation of Microlearning Mondays, Workshop Wednesdays and Virtual Boot Camps.

Bosley: Microlearning Mondays are short, targeted PL sessions that the KYSU professional learning team began as a response to the sudden transition to remote instruction due to COVID-19. We needed to offer training and support for KYSU providers during a time when they felt overwhelmed by the changes and needed to find ways to continue serving students.

We were actually taking the SkillRise course at the time and had just conducted a technology survey with all directors and instructors through our work in the course. This provided very useful information about where programs

were in their practice and comfort level with using technology tools to support learning. We had recently completed the SkillRise communication module, so being strategic about our communications and messaging was on our radar.

Through the survey, we knew that one of our programs was already using Zoom for instruction. So, we collaborated with them to develop our first webinar on how programs could use video conferencing to hold remote classes. We had great attendance (200+), and many programs offered to collaborate on sessions to share what was working well.

Workshop Wednesdays are follow-up sessions to Microlearning Mondays, offering scaffolding and informal practice with topics, tools or resources introduced previously. Again, the survey gave us a better idea of skills gaps in our educator population. Almost 30 percent didn't feel confident using Google tools, which are our primary platform for professional learning, and which many were using to

Looney: As a result of taking the SkillRise course, reviewing the SkillRise framework and considering the research on 21st-Century workplace skills contained in the course, our agency has placed greater emphasis on what we now call [the \(DL\)² Initiative](#), a dual focus on improving the quality of KYSU distance learning and increasing the digital literacy of our providers and students.

“The Microlearning Monday sessions have been an excellent platform for KYSU and programs throughout the state to share best practices. CCSU would continue to benefit from these webinars should they remain ongoing!”

Nichole Braun, Program Director

connect with students remotely. Both the need for and the success of this program was evident in the attendance and the willingness of participants to join in, ask questions and share their own experiences.

Bosley: The series worked really well to keep our network of providers connected and learning during those first months of so much change and uncertainty. Although we hold them less frequently now, they continue to be a great platform for sharing timely information, resources and strategies with providers. They also give everyone opportunities to ask questions and take time to think through problems in the workshop sessions. Programs have consistently expressed appreciation and positive feedback about the sessions—so this one big change that will stick!

How will the lessons you learned in 2020 carry you into the future? Are there plans you're making now as a result of your experience in the SkillRise course?

Bosley: We've also established communication channels that reach everyone and encourage responses and feedback. The SkillRise module on communication walked us through ways to be more thoughtful about our messaging, considering the goal, the audience and the available tools.

I appreciated the specific feedback I received from the facilitators in the activity workbook. They all did an excellent job of connecting us with useful resources to support our work. ■