



# Insight into Contemporary Professional Growth Needs for North Carolina Educators

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the suspension of face-to-face instruction in schools around the globe, requiring schools and educators to begin teaching online with little to no time for professional development to aid them in the transition. Literature nationwide reveals that while educators transitioned quickly from traditional face-to-face learning to digital platforms for remote teaching, many were ill-prepared, and in too many instances educational experiences were deficient in best practices for online learning (Foulger et al., 2020). This study (Insight Study), an exploratory qualitative study, was conducted to better understand the classroom, school and district-level challenges North Carolina educators were facing one year into the pandemic. A total of 18 educators participated in the study, including classroom educators across nine disciplines, representing seven of the eight educational districts in North Carolina. Data were collected from 60-minute semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups facilitated virtually via Zoom during fall 2021. Overwhelmingly, study participants wanted more support for themselves and their colleagues concerning engaging with their students given their “new normal” of COVID-19. They shared their current areas of growth, ways in which they believe the current political landscape is impacting these areas of growth, and which online professional development design features they feel are most impactful to their growth and development.





## Executive Summary

Educator professional development is a longstanding strategy to improve teaching and learning practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). According to Wayne et al. (2008), “it is generally accepted that intensive, sustained, job-embedded [educator professional development] focused on the content of the subject that teachers teach is more likely to improve [educator] knowledge, classroom instruction, and student achievement” (p. 470). However, exploring impactful elements of online professional development for educators during the pandemic is a new area of inquiry. As a research-based and data-informed designer of online professional development for educators, the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation (FI) has a fervent interest in understanding the contemporary needs of educators. Researchers from the FI conducted the *Insight into Contemporary Professional Growth Needs for North Carolina Educators*, an exploratory qualitative study, to better understand the classroom-, school- and district-level challenges North Carolina educators were facing one year into the pandemic.

Three research questions guided this work:

- RQ1a: What are the **current areas** of growth for North Carolina educators?
- RQ1b: In what ways does the **political landscape** impact current areas of growth for North Carolina educators?
- RQ2: What online professional development **design features** are most impactful for North Carolina educators?

A total of 18 educators participated in the study, including classroom educators across nine disciplines; instructional coaches supporting all disciplines; two administrators with experience supervising grades K-6; and two administrators with experience supervising K-12. Participants hailed from seven of the eight educational districts in North Carolina. Data were collected from 60-minute semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups facilitated virtually via Zoom during fall 2021.

## Current Areas of Growth

Overwhelmingly, educators in the sample wanted more support for themselves and their colleagues concerning engaging with their students given their “new normal” of COVID-19. Participants specifically discussed three areas they would like to better engage students: (1) integrating technology to foster student learning, (2) supporting student and educator social-emotional learning needs and (3) establishing and nurturing inclusive learning communities.

## Impact of Political Landscape

Educators in the sample agreed that the political climate could be a barrier to their professional development, particularly if they wanted to learn about topics deemed as “politically charged,” such as social-emotional learning and diversity, equity, and inclusion-related concepts. However, their instructional leader moderated how political tension increased or decreased in their school or district. Moreover, these educators reported a desire to educate their entire school communities about such “politically charged” concepts, including caregivers and community members.

## Impactful Online Professional Development Design Features

Educators in the sample affirmed that online professional learning opportunities were most impactful for them if they were (1) integrated into their broader professional growth strategy, (2) provided opportunities for intentional reflection with their peers and (3) offered multiple types of content to maximize engagement. These design features are well supported in the literature and demonstrate how some best practices of online professional development for educators are consistent even during unprecedented times.

This research report closes with several poignant recommendations for instructional designers, instructional leaders and educational researchers.





## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and exacerbated a number of challenges in education as educators, students and families alike grappled with the unknown (Garbe et al., 2020). Among those challenges were issues central to equity and inclusion of all learners, such as access to remote learning options, the ability to differentiate instruction to meet diverse learner needs and the ability to measure student learning (Daniel, 2020). The pandemic required schools and educators to begin teaching online with little to no time for professional development to aid them in the transition. Literature nationwide reveals that while educators transitioned quickly from traditional face-to-face learning to digital platforms for remote teaching, many were ill-prepared, and in too many instances, educational experiences were deficient in best practices for online learning (Foulger et al., 2020).



Classroom teachers, many with little experience in online learning, found themselves balancing the instruction of their students with their own learning. To address these challenges, schools and educators sought out tools and resources and targeted professional development to aid them not only in teaching remotely but also in supporting their students during unprecedented times. Given the shift to online learning as a result of the pandemic, effective professional development for educators that assisted them with designing and delivering high-quality online education was critical to continuing educational provision for students (Reimers et al., 2020).

Efforts continue to be made to address students' academic and social-emotional needs, in addition to making up for learning loss and continuing to prepare both students and educators for future combinations of distance learning, blended learning and face-to-face instruction (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). However, with the full scale of the virus and its impacts still unknown, much is yet to be discovered about how the pandemic has impacted North Carolina educators, students and families (Bragg et al., 2021).

Deeply rooted in innovative teaching and learning with a lens toward equity-mindedness, researchers from the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation (FI) remain acutely aware of the evolving nature of education and the corresponding competencies educators need to adapt to shifting environments. This keen awareness serves as the foundation for the intentional, evidence-based design of professional development offerings that meet current educator needs. In an effort to better understand the classroom-, school- and district-level challenges North Carolina educators were facing one year into the pandemic, the FI launched an exploratory qualitative investigation entitled *Insight into Contemporary Professional Growth Needs for North Carolina Educators* study (Insight Study).

## Study Purpose and Research Questions

Considering educators' perspectives and opinions on professional development design is critical for its effectiveness (e.g., Hochberg & Desimone, 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009). To develop actionable recommendations for instructional designers, instructional leaders and educational researchers, the purpose of this study was to generate new knowledge about what K-12 educators in North Carolina saw as their key professional development needs one year into the pandemic. North Carolina was selected as the site for this study due to the infancy of research conducted in this area (Huck & Zhang, 2021) and the research and land-grant outreach mission of NC State University and its College of Education.

Three research questions guided this work:

- RQ1a: What are the current areas of growth for North Carolina educators?
- RQ1b: In what ways does the political landscape impact current areas of growth for North Carolina educators?
- RQ2: What online professional development design features are most impactful for North Carolina educators?

This research report highlights the methodology, findings and implications of that investigation.





## Methodology

### Research Approach

The research team employed a qualitative approach to answer the research questions. Qualitative research strives to understand the meaning individuals have constructed about their world and their experiences (Bogden & Biklen, 2002; Merriam & Champagne, 2005; Tracy, 2019) with the ultimate goal of making sense of a particular phenomenon from a participant's perspective. Put another way, qualitative research does not attempt to predict what could happen but strives to understand the setting and what it means for the participants involved in that particular setting. The goal is to describe the meaning of events and to gain a greater depth of understanding (Patton, 1985 as cited in Merriam & Champagne, 2005). A qualitative approach was well suited for this study because it enabled researchers to understand North Carolina educators' lived realities from their perspectives, unearthing educators' rich, descriptive and dynamic conceptualizations and experiences one year into the pandemic. This research approach also fulfills a gap in the literature, as much scholarship prioritizes quantitative data about educators' experiences in professional development (Hill et al., 2013).

The sections that follow will explain how participants were recruited and how data were collected and analyzed. Special attention will be given to the researchers' positionality as Martin et al., (2022) encourage researchers to "be even more intentional about acknowledging [their] position within the research and the impact it has on disrupting privilege and bias to achieve the goal of inclusion" (p. 2).

### Participant Recruitment

All North Carolina educators were eligible to participate in the Insight Study. The researchers employed a thoughtful two-phase recruitment strategy to minimize any undue burden on educators during the pandemic and to ensure diverse representation in terms of racial and gender identity, professional role, years of

experience, district and discipline taught, if applicable. Anticipating that participants' professional roles might influence their perceptions of research questions, researchers targeted three sample subgroups for inclusion: administrators, classroom teachers and education partners (i.e., professionals not in a classroom role). Interested educators were asked to indicate their willingness to participate in the Insights Study via an online interest survey hosted by Qualtrics (see [Appendix A](#)). At the conclusion of phases 1 and 2, 18 participants consented to participate in the study.

### **Phase 1**

In Phase 1, researchers populated a list of public school partners with whom the FI had conducted previous research or provided online and face-to-face professional development offerings. Once the list was created, researchers sent direct invitation emails to 22 identified current FI partners, deliberately contacting stakeholders from all eight educational districts across North Carolina. This effort yielded one educator who consented to participate in the study.

### **Phase 2**

Due to the low response in phase 1, researchers discussed alternative ways to identify additional study participants and decided to actively recruit educators enrolled during fall 2021 in courses with the FI. This sample was selected because their participation in current FI courses suggested they had the bandwidth to engage, unlike educators contacted in phase 1. As such, the team sent direct invitation emails to current FI course participants within each of the eight educational districts in North Carolina. This effort yielded a much larger pool of potential participants, and ultimately, 17 of these educators consented to participate in the study.

## **Data Collection**

The data sources in this study were 60-minute, semi-structured virtual interviews and focus groups facilitated via Zoom during fall 2021. A combination of interviews and focus groups was employed to accommodate educators' schedules. A total of seven individual interviews and three focus groups were facilitated, with focus group attendance ranging from two to four participants. A copy of the interview protocol is provided in [Appendix B](#). After establishing informed consent interviews and focus groups were audio and video recorded and transcribed for analysis. A total of 18 educators participated in the study, and all were provided a \$100 e-gift card for their participation.

## **Positionality**

Scholars have found that positionality impacts several fundamental aspects of research, including but not limited to the research topic they choose to explore, how they make methodological choices, how they relate to research participants and how they share findings with external audiences (Secules et al., 2020). In this section, the research team will make explicit their position within the research with the goal of establishing authenticity, transparency and inclusion.

The research team consisted of four researchers: three researchers were involved in data collection and analysis processes, and one researcher participated in the literature review process. The research team included members with diverse racial and gender identities, members with varied current and former professional roles, and members with different levels of experience and disciplines taught. The first researcher and principal investigator identifies as a Black female who has prior college teaching experience and currently serves as an adjunct faculty member in a college of education. This researcher was educated in North

Carolina public schools and serves as a facilitator for several research-practice partnerships in North Carolina. The second researcher identifies as a White male and is a former North Carolina classroom educator. This researcher has a background in English education for grades 9-12 and has facilitated numerous graduate-level courses relating to instructional design. The third researcher is a Middle Eastern international female who has a background in elementary education and instructional design. The fourth researcher identifies as a White female and has a background in both education policy and as an administrator for a distance education program that served students across North Carolina. Two of the researchers have earned their doctorates in educational research and policy analysis and learning design and technology, respectively; one is a doctoral candidate in learning design and technology, and one is a doctoral student in education evaluation and policy analysis.

Collectively, the research team has a deep respect for the work of North Carolina educators that is informed by their prior experiences as students, educators, instructional designers, administrators, policy analysts and researchers of the system. Acknowledging their positionality, the researchers iteratively refined their interpretations and employed member checking as a data verification strategy.

## Data Analysis

The research team employed analytical memoing techniques as well as a two-cycle, multi-coder approach (Saldaña, 2021) to analyze the data using Atlas.ti. *A priori* codes, informed by the literature as well as the Standards I-IV of the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers (see [Appendix C](#)), as well as emergent codes, were assigned to the data. To synthesize the data, the researchers used the constant comparative technique (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

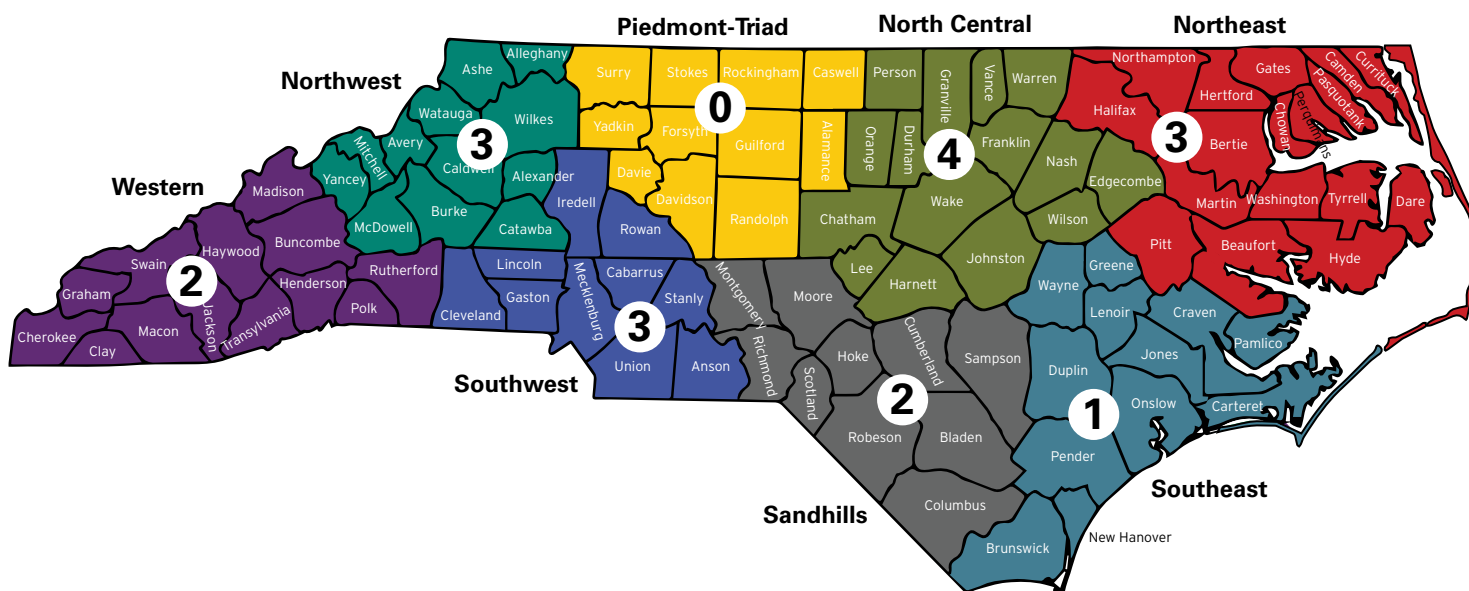
To ensure a high degree of credibility of findings, all transcripts were coded by at least two researchers. Researchers also kept individual research journals throughout the study to document processes and house individual memos. These journals helped to inform data analysis discussions when members met to justify their conclusions and represent them to other members. Data analysis discussions were also recorded and transcribed to streamline documentation.

## Limitations

All research studies have limitations. It is important to note how the challenges with participant recruitment impacted the study. While the sample is geographically representative with participants from seven of the eight educational districts, the sample is skewed more heavily towards educators who are generally in favor of professional development as demonstrated by their participation in a professional development course hosted by the FI.

## Participants

The sample ( $n=18$ ) included educators from seven of the eight [educational districts](#) across North Carolina, provided below with the number of participants included in a white circle on top of each district:



## The Sample

The sample contained classroom educators from nine disciplines; instructional coaches supporting all disciplines, including electives; two administrators with experience supervising grades K-6; and two administrators with experience supervising K-12.

## 7 Classroom Educators



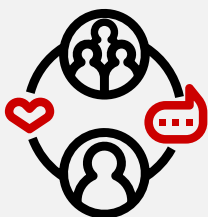
## 5 Instructional Coaches



## 1 School Counselor



## 1 Family Liaison



## 4 Administrators

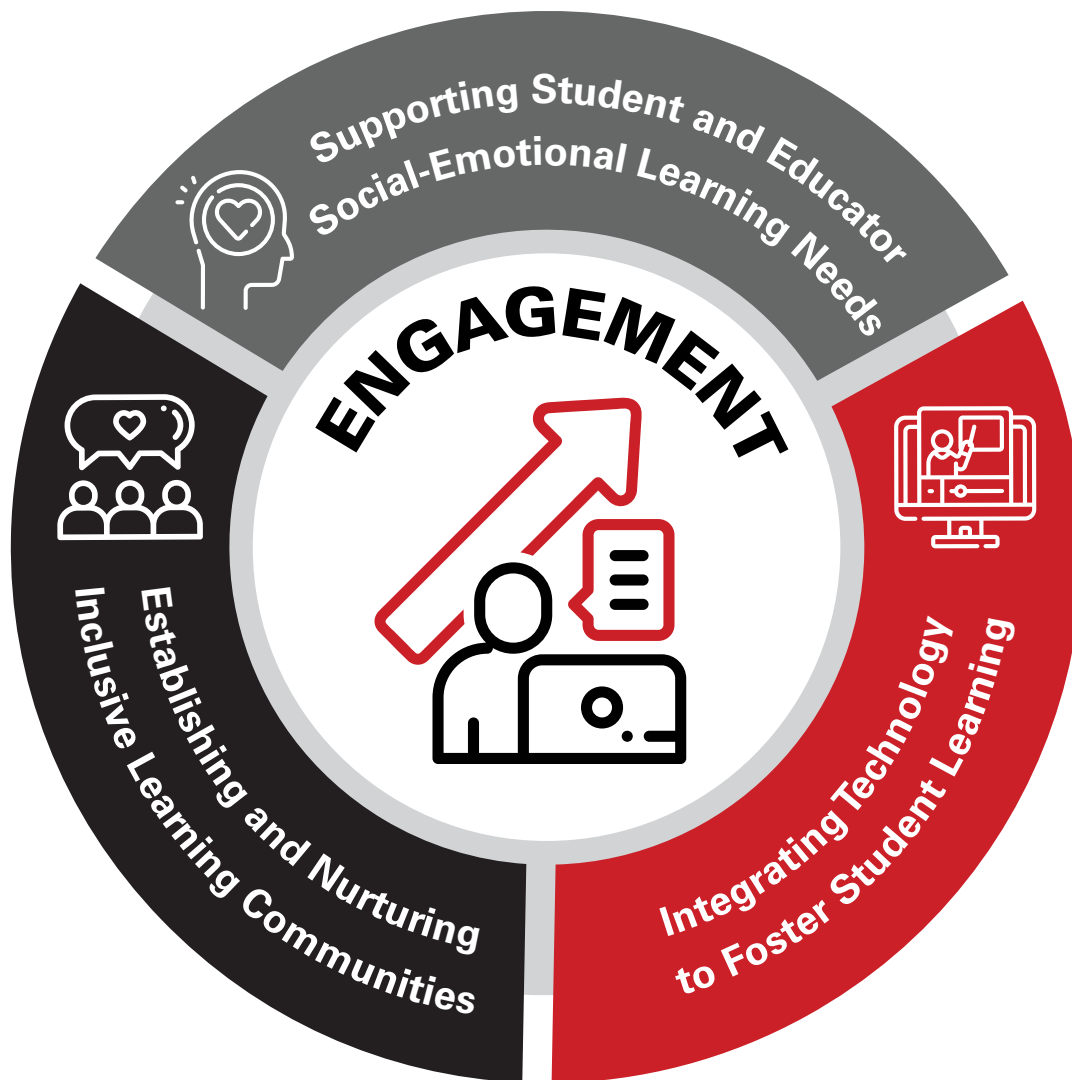


A group of professionals with experience levels ranging from six to 26 years in education.



## Findings

### Current Areas of Growth



#### RQ1a: What are the current areas for growth for North Carolina educators?

As highlighted in the [research approach](#) section, one of the hallmarks of qualitative research is the ability to explore a topic from the perspective of the participants—gaining a deep understanding of lived realities from their point of view. The research team was curious about what educators needed professionally one year into the pandemic, and this research question was designed to identify firsthand from North Carolina educators in which areas they or their colleagues needed to grow.

In response to this question, educators in the sample by and large expressed one major area: engagement. These educators wanted to know how they, their colleagues and their students could better engage with each other given their “new normal” of COVID-19. For example, a secondary English educator noted that during remote instruction, students “were present and possibly compliant, but they were definitely not engaged.” This educator went on to share that “part of the problem is getting back to that engagement piece with students,” and another educator echoed them, citing the difficulty of “not having a real school year for two years.”

Additionally, an instructional coach supporting seventh and eighth-grade educators across multiple disciplines clarified that these engagement concerns were not confined to just students, stating:

“The biggest problem that I see is a lot of our teachers are struggling coming out of Zoom meetings and hybrid meetings. [...] They’ve forgotten how to do engaging activities in the classroom. They got so used to sitting, staring at a screen that they’re just transferring virtual learning to in-person learning, still doing it virtually though. [...] I think reengaging post-COVID is where a lot of our teachers struggle.”

When unpacking the root of what they specifically meant by *engagement*, three overarching themes emerged: (1) integrating technology to foster student learning, (2) supporting student and educator social-emotional learning needs and (3) establishing and nurturing inclusive learning communities. The following section explains each of these themes in greater detail.

**Integrating technology to foster student learning.** North Carolina educators in the sample expressed a need to better integrate technology to foster student learning, a competency that the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare. Educators affirmed a desire to use technology more intentionally to both enhance student engagement with relevant tasks and to develop higher-order thinking skills. Participants indicated that during the pandemic, technology use became more frequent but at times was overwhelming because of its rapid changes. For example, a counselor noted that “the devices schools are using and the applications that we purchase are quickly evolving,” and centered her professional growth needs around staying up-to-date with current technologies and keeping both her outward-facing Canvas page and her computer properly updated.

Educators also shared how new technological tools were not always coupled with effective training and how technology training without content-specific strategies to support its deep integration within discipline areas is of little value. Moreover, educators discussed how they would benefit from concentrated strategies to efficiently differentiate instruction with technology. A secondary English and theatre arts educator also expanded on this sentiment when she noted:

“And there’s so much technology out there and there are so many individual needs with students, that being able to read the class and differentiate instruction so that each student is truly getting what they’re needing, I think teachers are really tired and anything that feels like it’s just one more thing on the plate, one more check box on the to-do list, it’s not getting the attention that maybe it needs.”

Furthermore, educators recognized the role technology could play to support learners in wholly virtual contexts but also elevated a need for training to meet challenges with supporting lessons in hybrid formats. For instance, an instructional coach supporting math and English Language Arts educators from birth to pre-kindergarten clarified these challenges this way: “How do I present a lesson to a child if they’re hybrid? Everybody has very different resources that they may be working with at home.”

**Supporting student and educator social-emotional learning needs.** Acknowledging the heightened levels of anxiety, stress and transition catalyzed by the pandemic, North Carolina educators in the sample also indicated a need for more training to support the social and emotional needs of their students as well as themselves and their peers. In terms of student needs, educators articulated needing to build their competence in recognizing the underlying causal factors of “what’s going [on] behind that [student] behavior,” such as trauma and well-being.

Armed with this understanding, educators could provide resources and accommodations to better serve their students. Additionally, the pandemic does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it continues to impact all in the school community. A common refrain among study participants related to the emotional impact of supporting students during the COVID-19 pandemic while also recognizing that “so many other personal things are more important: surviving, staying engaged in school, not quitting.” Accordingly, educators also affirmed their desire for a safe, supportive means to voice their emotional needs without fear of reprisal for their honesty.

**Establishing and nurturing inclusive learning communities.** North Carolina educators in the sample also surfaced their desire for tools and strategies that would help them both establish and nurture inclusive learning communities amongst their students and their families. For these educators, equity issues were top of mind during the pandemic and creating classroom and school communities in which every learner felt a sense of belonging was important to them. For instance, an instructional coach in global studies elevated a growth area for her staff related to unpacking the complexity of diversity and equity concerns and developing knowledge and dispositions to relate more appropriately to diverse learner groups. She stated, in part,

“ I’m on the equity team at my school and there’s desire at least in that team for an easy fix [...] I don’t think I have any staff members that are against it, but they are just kind of blinded and don’t see it. Like they don’t see how they treat kids or the words that they use to describe kids. ”

In a recent study of more than 2,000 employees from a variety of organizations worldwide, more than 60% of LGBTQ+ respondents reported having to correct colleagues’ assumptions about their personal lives (Bailinson et al., 2020). Similar misconceptions among colleagues and the larger educational community were noted by the instructional coach cited above. She explained her desire for professional development targeted to issues of equity and inclusion this way: “[It’s important] for me as a member of the LGBTQ community [to provide] opportunities for staff members, for educators across the country to learn specifics about that community, about vocabulary that relates to that community and how to make those students feel safe.” She also referenced the scarcity of training for educators, particularly in the elementary grades, noting “[sexual orientation] is a huge part of equity that’s not being covered as much as it should. Yes, race is a huge thing, but I think gender and gender expression and the LGBTQ community, they need that support, too.”

More specifically, educators in the sample wanted support in crafting messages that elevated the importance of inclusive instructional practices without alienating stakeholders, such as peer colleagues and caregivers, with differing opinions of the value of said inclusive approaches. Administrator training was cited as a strategy to build the capacity of leaders to effectively manage the needs of caregivers, staff and children while simultaneously advocating for inclusive schools. Albeit challenging, educators acknowledged the paramount importance for building-level leaders to embrace the work.

**Table 1:** Sample Reported Current Areas for Growth for North Carolina Educators

Themes	Illustrative Quotes
<b>Integrating technology to foster student learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“From a professional growth standpoint, it is the whole concept of virtual teaching, of understanding the skills needed for that, for the work, the technology, to make sure we’re covering the content. But, the other piece is just being able to understand the connection and showing the relevance and importance of the content to the students... <b>Teaching virtually on a consistent basis, it takes a certain skill and a certain level of training.</b> But, I don’t think [teachers] know exactly what they need to ask for because we are in a new world.” [K-12 Administrator, North Central District, virtual school].</li> <li>“Our district is one-on-one, so we have a ton of technology and the <b>teachers are almost [getting] overwhelmed with the amount of programs</b> and which ones to choose and a lot of them try to do a smorgasbord of a variety of programs. [O]ur kids are adapted with their iPads and it fills a lot of time, but the content is missing.” [K-6 Administrator, Southwest District]</li> <li>“I’m noticing that because of the need to increase technology [use] within the classroom, teachers are encouraged to participate in professional development; however, those programs are at your own discretion, meaning it’s not a professional development that is geared toward a group of teachers. <b>We have to individually go out on our own time and access what we feel is important to learn in order to be efficient [and] proficient in the classroom with this new technology.</b>” [7-8 Math Teacher, Sandhills District]</li> </ul>
<b>Supporting student and educator social-emotional learning needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Classroom management and inclusion are two very important areas that teachers need PD on. I believe that [classroom management] should be more focused on differentiating academics from behavior. We tend to think about classroom management just in terms of behavior like they have to behave so they can learn, <b>but we don’t wonder what’s behind [the behavior]. So, like, worrying about trauma and emotions and what’s going behind that behavior.</b>” [Family Liaison, Northwest District]</li> <li>“I think social and emotional learning [is critical] for the students and <b>how we help them kind of cope with what’s going on in the world right now</b> and especially for our black and brown students.” [K-6 Instructional Coach, North Central District]</li> <li>“I really see a need for social and emotional learning in the classroom and I want to figure out a way to do that and really utilize my time best, without, if I’m giving Sally attention, I’m neglecting Tommy. <b>There’s one of me and I have 60 students a day, so how do I do that equitably?</b>” [9-12 ELA/Theater Arts Teacher, Northwest District]</li> </ul>



Themes	Illustrative Quotes
<b>Supporting student and educator social-emotional learning needs</b> (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“And teachers are crying in the afternoons and there’s such an underlying stress to the environment.</b> And it’s one of those strange things: you look around and everything looks fine. It doesn’t look wrong other than children in masks, but the feeling [of teaching face-to-face classes during the COVID-19 pandemic] is indescribable. And you can’t be honest and you can’t really discuss what’s going on.” [K-8 Visual Arts teacher, Western District]</li> </ul>
<b>Nurturing inclusive learning communities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “So even if there’s some kind of professional development for administrators as well on how to handle or not at all discuss different issues that are happening. How does an administrator handle this with parents? <b>How does an administrator handle these things appropriately with the staff to make the staff and children feel inclusive rather than exclusive?</b>” [B-PreK Instructional Coach, Southwest District]</li> <li>• “[O]ur community is not the most inclusive, and our parents are not the most inclusive as well. So they’re not as open to things like that in our content. So I think that’s a need as well to <b>[better] understand what [strategies] we need to spread out to our families and to our communities</b> and how we can do that [more effectively].” [K-6 Instructional Coach, North Central District]</li> <li>• “And I think [teachers need] a lot of work on how to communicate with parents [...] and even refreshers for more veteran staff, because we pointed out communities have changed [...] dramatically. And I think an update on how to interact with people in a professional manner but be able to <b>convey what’s going on at school in a respectful way without offending people and their beliefs and values.</b>” [K-6 Counselor, Southwest District]</li> <li>• “I work in a very rural area and I can definitely see a lot of racial issues. I don’t want to use the word racism because it’s a strong word, but specifically I feel like ESL students, like the Hispanic community, and I’m talking about my place of work, they don’t receive enough attention. Sometimes they’re just taken for granted. Like, they’re not going to make it because they don’t know the language, [...] I feel maybe that <b>area of professional development [could address that mindset] [...] [I]t’s like how teachers don’t even try to reach [the ESL students] at their level.</b>” [Family Liaison, Northwest District].</li> </ul>

## Impact of Political Landscape

### RQ1b: In what ways does the political landscape impact current areas of growth for North Carolina educators?

Given the increasingly politicized nature of education in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hartney & Finger, 2021), this research question was designed to understand how, if at all, North Carolina educators see their political climate as a support or barrier for the areas in which they themselves or their colleagues needed to grow. In response to this question, two interrelated themes emerged: (1) instructional leaders moderate political impact and (2) training on “politically charged” initiatives is needed for the entire school community—including caregivers and community members. The following section describes both of these themes in more detail.

**Instructional leaders moderate political impact.** Educators in the sample agreed that the political climate could be a barrier to their professional development, particularly if they wanted to learn about topics deemed “politically charged,” such as social-emotional learning and diversity, equity and inclusion-related topics. For example, one educator noted,

“In our school...we were greatly limited in what we could talk about [in our social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons]. We got a lot of pushback about doing anything about accepting differences, anything that would remotely link to race or people not getting the recognition they should versus other people that might be getting too much...So we really were narrowed [to] focus on what we could do SEL lessons on.” [K-6 Counselor, Southwest District]

However, the defining factor regarding whether educators experienced the political climate as a barrier for their professional development was their instructional leader, such as their principal or superintendent. This leader essentially “set the tone” or “steadied the ship,” moderating how political tension increased or decreased in their school or district. For example, among those who did not see the political climate as a barrier, educators saw their instructional leader as an “advocate” and their school community as “supportive.” On the contrary, among those who did see the political climate as a barrier, one educator described their instructional leader as someone with “very, very strong political views” that made their staff “uncomfortable.”

**Training on “politically charged” initiatives is needed for the entire school community.** Educators in the sample also noted that professional development on the aforementioned “politically charged” topics (e.g., social-emotional learning and diversity, equity and inclusion) was needed by everyone in the school community. While participation in such training efforts is traditionally encouraged among administrators and classroom educators, educators in the sample were clear that caregivers and community members were an essential part of the school community that also needed training. These educators valued the perceptions of caregivers and community members highly, but some acknowledged that those parties were not always well informed about the topics at hand. For instance, one educator noted, “We have people voting on things that they can’t articulate what they are, they just know they’re against it.” In short, these educators affirmed how professional development should extend beyond the school context to educate other key stakeholders regarding the actual impact that training initiatives within the school environment might have on students and the larger school community.

**Table 2:** Sample Reported Impact of Political Landscape for North Carolina Educators

Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Instructional leaders moderate political impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“We have a very supportive school board. So anything that we need, <b>our superintendent will go and he will advocate for us and present the case based on our data. So politically, no, we are not running into barriers.</b> It’s opinions more than politics of should they have to wear a mask, should they not wear a mask? ... So not really the politics, it’s more of opinions.” [K-6 Administrator, Northwest District]</li> <li>“<b>I feel like [the political climate] completely changed the tone of our school, the dynamic between the teachers, there was a little more divide.</b> [My] administrator has some very, very strong political views and things... And it had gotten to the point where I even had to go in and ask her to please stop talking about politics with the staff members, because I had teachers coming up to me saying they felt uncomfortable. What it may be [is] just overall talking about what is an appropriate way to talk? What are appropriate topics to talk about with your staff? What are not appropriate topics? And even to dive deeper, just what are good strategies?” [B-PreK Instructional Coach, Southwest District]</li> <li>“<b>Do I feel that the political climate encourages peers for professional growth? No.</b> I don’t think the political climate does, I think that the personal feelings that teachers have to try to help our students still move forward is what’s a motivator to go in and seek professional development.” [7-8 Math teacher, Sandhills District]</li> </ul>
Training on “politically charged” initiatives is needed for the entire school community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“[We need to make] sure that our content is inclusive to every student, no matter what color they are, no matter what disability or ability they have, but then I think also it goes into our community and our parents as well. I know at least where I am at in <b>our community is not the most inclusive, and our parents are not the most inclusive</b> as well. So they’re not as open to things like that in our content. So I think that’s a need as well, [...] [to] understand what [training] we need to spread out to our families and to our communities and how we can do that.” [K-6 Instructional Coach, Northeast District]</li> <li>“What [the professional development] may be [is] just overall talking about what is an appropriate way to talk? What are appropriate topics to talk about with your staff? What are not appropriate topics? And even to dive deeper, just what are good strategies?” [B-PreK Instructional Coach, Southwest District]</li> <li>“We have some community members that are not as open. They’re more closed off about learning about those types of things [inclusivity] equity-wise. So, yeah, resources for how to go about that and maybe possibly <b>resources for how to train parents and train the community</b> to understand more of that [would be helpful].” [K-6 Instructional Coach, Northeast District]</li> </ul>



## Impactful Online Professional Development Design Features

### **RQ2: What online professional development design features are most impactful for North Carolina educators?**

The literature underscores several professional development design features, or elements of the “look and feel” of professional development, that are impactful for educators both generally and in an online context. From a broad perspective, Bates and Morgan (2018) identified seven design features of effective educator professional development: (1) a focus on content, (2) active learning, (3) support for collaboration, (4) models of effective practice, (5) coaching and expert support, (6) feedback and reflection and (7) sustained duration. Additionally, across studies, educators have expressed that relevance and usefulness to their individual goals, collaboration and opportunities for reflection are increasingly important to them when engaging in online professional development efforts (Powell & Bodur, 2019).

Building on the literature, this research question was designed to identify any specific desirable usability features for online professional development from the perspective of North Carolina educators one year into the pandemic, thus providing more contemporary strategies. In response to this question, educators in the sample surprisingly did not pinpoint any brand new design features, but rather reiterated the salience of three central themes aligned with the experiences discussed in the literature. First, educators in the sample affirmed that online professional learning opportunities were most impactful for them if they were integrated into their *broad professional growth strategy*. In other words, educators desired a customized plan for their overall professional learning that was personalized to their unique goals. Second, educators in the sample outlined the importance of *intentional reflection with peers* both during and following professional development activities. Finally, educators in the sample emphasized the importance of *multiple types of content* to meet a variety of adult learners and schedules. While these three themes are well supported in the literature, this study does offer a new contribution; namely, it demonstrates how some best practices of online professional development for educators are consistent even during unprecedented times. Based on the educators in the sample, it is clear that a high degree of relevance and flexibility are key aspects to keeping educators deeply engaged in professional growth opportunities, regardless of a pandemic.



**Broader Professional Growth Strategy.** Overwhelmingly, educators in the sample articulated a hunger for professional development that can be personalized to their individual needs and professional growth goals, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. They emphatically supported that training topics should be relevant for their contexts and able to be implemented quickly and easily within their practice. These educators were eager to learn, and their foremost question was, “Is it making an impact in our schools?” The sentiments of the educators in the sample are echoed in the literature, as Darling-Hammond et al., (2017) found “meaningful professional learning [for educators] that translates to changes in practice cannot be accomplished in short, one-off workshops” (p. 15).

**Intentional Reflection with Peers.** When asked how online professional development could be best designed to meet their needs, educators in the sample consistently cited a desire for structured opportunities for continued reflection with colleagues. These educators expressed the value of connecting with peers “who are facing similar challenges to me and have new ideas” to “share struggles, share challenges” in ways that foster novel solutions both during and after professional development. In terms of during the professional development, educators discussed how meaningful it would be to “have a live time with other people that are in the course” during training in order to “ask questions and bounce ideas off of each other,” to enhance the user experience and to summarize “things you should be taking away.” They recommended that this real-time reflection could take place in the form of monthly optional live check-ins offered during and after educators’ typical work hours. Additionally, educators wanted the option to engage in synchronous follow-up opportunities with their peers during and after training to judge progress toward implementation of learning outcomes. Such experiences of educators in the sample are on par with what other scholars have found concerning the importance of collaboration, feedback and reflection in online professional development opportunities for educators (Powell & Bodur, 2019).

**Multiple Content Types.** Designing for flexibility was a paramount consideration for the educators in the sample. Citing a variety of learning preferences and ways to empower engagement, these educators preferred content that could be reviewed in audio, video and textual formats; however, they emphasized that the same information be included regardless of which format was used to relay it to the learner. A preference for audio formats emerged frequently to address the time constraints of educators. For instance, one 9-12 instructional coach in the Northeast District acknowledged there are “great articles out there [to] help us in our courses, but the reading portion is a part that some of us don’t like to do [...] but if it’s an audio [file] while I’m driving, I’ll be able to listen to it.” Additionally, in lieu of listening to audio or watching videos, other educators preferred the availability of text-based content as a means to enhance understanding and synthesis of material. It is important to note that there is no “one way” to present information that will work for all educators; thus, providing multiple ways for educators to engage with the content will increase its accessibility. Moreover, building on the first theme—broader professional growth strategy—participants agreed that relevance to their professional goals should be the most important consideration to course developers. An instructional coach from the Northeast District summed up that prevailing attitude this way:

“ But to me, those are the basic three things or four things, actually: Is [the content] relevant to me? Is it relevant to my students? Is it going to have an impact on my school? And can I listen to it? That’s what’s relevant to me. ”

**Table 3:** Sample Reported Impactful Design Features for North Carolina Educators

Themes	Illustrative Quotes
<b>Broader professional growth strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “A couple of things that we’ve done over the last couple of years, which I think our teachers have given us good feedback on, is the <b>personalization of PD [professional development], where we take their goals and try to fit them into workshops or training that help develop their personal growth plan.</b>” [K-6 Administrator, Southwest District]</li> <li>• “There’s <b>nothing worse than having to sit through a professional development session about something that you already feel comfortable with</b> and feel like you have some competency in, because that’s kind of insulting and with the limited amount of time that we have, it can be counterproductive. It can really piss people off.” [Associate Superintendent, North Central District]</li> <li>• “You may have people that know a lot of what you’re already presenting. You may have people that have it where it’s brand new. <b>So giving the options of which road to go down or which type of activity to choose from</b> really makes that nicely tailored to people’s both experience and learning styles.” [B-PreK Instructional Coach, Southwest District]</li> </ul>
<b>Intentional reflection with peers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think a [quality] professional development would make me want to have a follow-up. <b>How did we do after that professional development? Be able to have a time where we can come back and discuss...</b> I think having a professional development and going away is good and you can go and apply it, but then come back and just revisit each other and see how we did. I think that would be a great ending to a professional development.” [7-8 Math teacher, Sandhills District]</li> <li>• “And I do think there are benefits too and a live either kind of a <b>monthly check-in with option[al] times</b>, so people could get either during the day or after school—in the evening, for a check-in that kind of goes over some of the stuff you’ve been working on and maybe preview of the stuff coming on. So you have a live time with other people that are in the course. You can ask questions and bounce ideas off of each other. And that just kind of summarizes things you should be taking away.” [K-6 Math Instructional Coach, Southeast District]</li> <li>• “All the professional development that I’ve had that’s been very meaningful, always occurs when I have a chance to <b>collaborate with other people who are facing similar challenges to me and have new ideas</b>, and we can discuss and sort of bounce off each other what we’re learning, share struggles, share challenges, but then also work towards solutions. I think you [have] got to make it collaborative, and you need to have it with people who are doing the same work that you are.” [Associate Superintendent, North Central District]</li> </ul>

Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Multiple content types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“I might not have the space to sit down and watch a video. So a lot of times, like, I’ll click on the ‘read it as a text [button]’ so I can just read it instead.</b> [...] I like to take notes, and if it’s in a video, I have to pause it and take notes and then play it again and take notes, when that way I can just read it, read through at my own pace.” [K-6 Instructional Coach, North Central District]</li> <li>• <b>“One thing I feel like has been most beneficial [is when participants] had materials in front of them like an actual manual to go through [during] online training.</b> [While] the videos are playing or the facilitator is talking, they have those same materials in front of them that they can highlight...instead of just a sit and get with no materials there to help them process.” [K-6 Administrator, Northwest District]</li> <li>• <b>“I don’t like a lot of the articles per se [in a professional development course], but I know that I do like to listen to audio.</b> For example, if I want to read a book, I don’t want to spend time reading it, but I will listen to [the] audio version of it. And the same thing, that’s the one thing that I noticed that I don’t have [access to in most professional development courses] and I would like to have.” [9-12 Instructional Coach, Northeast District]</li> </ul>



## Recommendations

This research report chronicled the self-reported current areas of professional growth, impact of the political landscape and most impactful online professional development design features for a sample of 18 North Carolina educators one year into the pandemic. As evidenced by their responses, educators in the sample had complex roles, and their professional development needs were oriented toward improving their abilities to meaningfully integrate technology into the classroom, provide social-emotional support for their students and peers and champion inclusive environments. Moreover, educators dealt with the daily realities of politics and its influence on their professional development. They also described struggles with communicating about “politically charged” topics with caregivers and community members who supported their students. In terms of designing online professional learning experiences, educators in the sample reiterated several themes in the literature, specifically elevating relevance, collaboration and multiple ways to engage. The findings lead to several poignant recommendations for instructional designers, instructional leaders and educational researchers. Each is described below.

### For Instructional Designers

***Develop social-emotional and equity-focused professional development for the entire school community.*** Educators in the sample articulated a hunger to learn more about social-emotional learning and equity-related topics for themselves and their students. They indicated how caregivers and community members were important members of the school ecosystem and recommended that those stakeholder groups also be included in professional development efforts. Thus, instructional designers at both the Friday Institute and elsewhere can use this information to inform the design of online instruction for diverse users and target course offerings in the most relevant way possible. Designers are encouraged to develop and refine social-emotional learning opportunities and equity-focused initiatives that meaningfully bring caregivers and community members into the fold.



**Consider ways to enable perpetual access to training content.** Educators in the sample praised growth opportunities that allow “you to go and apply it, but then come back and just revisit each other and see how we did,” a shortcoming that may result if access to content ceases when training ends. For instance, in her role as a trainer for school staff, a K-6 counselor explained how perpetual access to online resources can significantly enhance her ability to support her own understanding and that of colleagues:

“And also I have to train staff and to be able to go back and be able to credit a resource and say, ‘Okay, this is exactly what I meant to say. And they’re saying it much better than I did.’ So I would like to be able to have the ability to go back and look at [course content], rewatch it, maybe, or redo it.” [K-6 Counselor, Southwest District]

Designers can consider ways to enable long term access to bite-sized information that educators can easily refer back to following the conclusion of professional development activities.

**Allow interested educators to opt in to synchronous activities.** Educators in the sample expressed a desire to participate in synchronous activities (e.g., monthly optional live check-ins during/after typical work hours) during initial engagement with professional development, namely to enhance their ability to reflect with and learn from peers facing similar instructional challenges. Educators noted that reflecting asynchronously (e.g., discussion posts) offered little opportunity for iterative discussions that could lead to new solutions, both during and after training. Thus, instructional designers are encouraged to develop online professional development offerings that allow participants to interact with one another and with course facilitators in synchronous ways.

## For Instructional Leaders

**Identify ways to deescalate the centrality of politics for educators.** Educators in the sample expressed how their principals and superintendents were instrumental in how the political landscape affected their professional development needs. Participants reiterated the importance of having leaders who can separate opinions and politics from how data is used to support instructional planning and described how such leaders supported their training needs, which can positively impact outcomes. Thus, instructional leaders are encouraged to identify ways they can separate opinions and politics from data in their scopes of influence.

## For Educational Researchers

**Continue to research North Carolina educator content needs.** The research team did not reach saturation on any content-specific professional development needs for educators, which may suggest that the top of mind issues for educators are not necessarily related to content but to the climate of their classrooms. One rationale the research team offers for this phenomena is Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). The need for belonging and safety is foundational in the hierarchy and was paramount within the data in this study; however, once those needs are met/established, then perhaps educators will shift their focus to higher level needs. The team recommends future researchers further explore the content-specific professional development needs of North Carolina educators.

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# Appendix A: Participant Interest Survey

## Participant Interest survey will be delivered via Qualtrics

Thank you for being a partner as we envision what the future of online professional development can be!

True to our mission to educate, innovate, and inspire, we here at the Friday Institute (<https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/>) are seeking to discover how we can design online professional learning to better meet your specific needs.

We thank you so much for joining us!

Required (\*)

**Q1: First and Last Name \***

**Q2: Email\***

**Q3: What is your gender?**

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

**Q4: How do you identify yourself?**

Mark all that apply

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ My group is not on the list (Please specify)
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

**Q5: What role best describes the bulk of your professional work?\***

- ☐ Administrator
- ☐ Classroom educator
- ☐ District-level leadership
- ☐ Instructional Coach
- ☐ Other (please specify)

**Q6: In which grade level(s) do you accomplish the MAJORITY of your professional practice?\***

- ☐ Birth to PreK
- ☐ K-6
- ☐ 7-8
- ☐ 9-12
- ☐ My role is not within a school (please specify)

**Q7: In which academic discipline do you accomplish the bulk of your professional duties?**  
(Leave blank if not applicable to you)

**Q8: How long have you been in education?\***

**Q9: Please tell us if you have participated in professional development with the Friday Institute before.**

- ☐ Yes - online
- ☐ Yes - Face-to-face at my school
- ☐ Yes - Face-to-face at the Friday Institute or outside my school location
- ☐ No

**Q10: Is there someone you would recommend take part in our quest to reimagine online professional learning?**

\*Please give us their names and email addresses and we will take care of reaching out.

**Note:** Please don't forget to inform them that we might contact them!

Electronic consent form will follow.



## Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

Purpose of focus groups: The research team wants to gain insight into the current context in K-12 schools so that we can design online course offerings to better meet stakeholder needs (in LA, SEL, LD, etc)

**Introduction:** Thank you for meeting with us! The purpose of our conversation is to gain insight into the current context in K-12 schools. This information will help us build better online course offerings to meet the needs of educators across our state and beyond.

We would like to begin by briefly explaining some basic features of the focus group and laying out some ground rules.

### Disclosures

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time.
- The session will be recorded in order to have a complete record of our discussion. The discussion will be kept completely confidential. Recordings will be erased at the completion of the study.
- I will begin the discussion by asking the group a question.
  - Anyone may respond to the question. We would like to hear from everyone.
  - You may ask clarifying questions at any time.
- We expect our discussion to last approximately 60 minutes.

Again, thank you so much for your time today. Your responses will provide an invaluable service to assist the research team. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

- Do I have your permission to begin recording our session today?
  - You may give me a thumbs-up or type into the chat.

Research Question	Classroom Educators	School-wide Admin	District Admin	Other Partners
<b>RQ1: What are the current areas of growth for educators?</b>	<b>What are the most important areas of growth for the educators you know?</b>	<b>What are the most important areas of growth for the educators you support?</b>	<b>What are the most important areas of growth for the educators in your district?</b>	<b>What are the most important areas of growth for the educators you support in your work?</b>
<b>RQ1a: Does the political landscape impact current areas of growth for educators?</b>	Is there anything happening politically that might influence the areas identified for potential growth? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In other words, does the political climate or the context of your workplace make you more or less likely to focus on certain growth areas? Please explain?</li><li>• Do you believe the political climate might encourage your peers' professional growth areas?</li></ul>			

Research Question	Classroom Educators	School-wide Admin	District Admin	Other Partners
RQ2: What professional development design-features are most impactful for educators?	<p>What is the most rewarding professional development (PD) experience you have had?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What made it so rewarding?</li> </ul>	<p>What is the most rewarding professional development (PD) initiative you have supported? What made it so rewarding?</p>	<p>What is the most rewarding professional development (PD) initiative your district has supported? What made it so rewarding?</p>	<p>What is the most rewarding professional development (PD) initiative you have supported in your work? What made it so rewarding?</p>
<b>Now let's think about what the PERFECT online PD might look like. We have all the money we need to build and support it, and we have visionary designers to create it for us. Think as big as you can here. Let your imagination be your guide!</b>				
	<p>In this PERFECT online PD, who is with you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are you alone? With grade level teams? District level teams? With others across the world? Why?</li> </ul>	<p>In this PERFECT online PD, how should educators engage it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are they alone? With grade level teams? District level teams? With others across the world? Why?</li> </ul>	<p>In this PERFECT online PD, how should educators in your district engage it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are they alone? With grade level teams? District level teams? With others across the world? Why?</li> </ul>	<p>In this PERFECT online PD, how should educators you support engage it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are they alone? With grade level teams? District level teams? With others across the world? Why?</li> </ul>
	<p>What features should this PERFECT online PD have?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What types of content (videos, articles, etc.) should it contain to keep you interested?</li> <li>How should the content be presented to keep you engaged and excited to participate?</li> <li>How should it be designed to help you impact student learning?</li> </ul>	<p>What features should this PERFECT online PD have?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What types of content should it contain to keep your teachers interested?</li> <li>How should the content be presented to keep your teachers engaged and excited to participate?</li> <li>How should it be designed to help your teachers impact student learning?</li> </ul>	<p>What features should this PERFECT online PD have?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What types of content should it contain to keep teachers in your district interested?</li> <li>How should the content be presented to keep teachers in your district engaged and excited to participate?</li> <li>How should it be designed to help teachers in your district impact student learning?</li> </ul>	<p>What features should this PERFECT online PD have?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What types of content should it contain to keep the educators you support interested?</li> <li>How should the content be presented to keep the educators you support engaged and excited to participate?</li> <li>How should it be designed to help the educators you support impact student learning?</li> </ul>

Research Question	Classroom Educators	School-wide Admin	District Admin	Other Partners
	What should this PERFECT online PD never do?  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What barriers would deter you from engaging deeply?</li> </ul>	What should this PERFECT online PD never do?  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What barriers would deter your teachers from engaging deeply?</li> </ul>	What should this PERFECT online PD never do?  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What barriers would deter teachers in your district from engaging deeply?</li> </ul>	What should this PERFECT online PD never do?  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What barriers would deter the educators you support from engaging deeply?</li> </ul>
<b>Now let's brainstorm some really important topics you would like to see professional development around. Think about what YOU need to thrive in your work, right now and in the future, in any area you see a need.</b>				
<b>RQ1: What are the current areas of growth for educators?</b>	As we think about the themes these topics represent, is there any additional advice you would give us to design the best online PD to support them?	As we think about the themes these topics represent, is there any additional advice you would give us to design the best online PD to support them?	As we think about the themes these topics represent, is there any additional advice you would give us to design the best online PD to support them?	As we think about the themes these topics represent, is there any additional advice you would give us to design the best online PD to support them?
<b>Is there something else you would like to share with us about anything we have discussed today?</b>				

## Appendix C: Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers

[Rubric](#) for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers. The rubric starts on page 21.





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