According to the Tri-County Regional Vocational Technical High School (Tri-County) Student Handbook,

Tri-County Regional students experience an education that blends academic and vocational/technical instruction. To facilitate this integration, vocational/technical educators include academic instruction in their vocational/technical training and academic educators use vocational contexts to frame classroom instruction as well. As a result, students who wish to pursue higher education are able to meet the admissions criteria for state and private colleges and universities. Students who intend to pursue full time employment have competitive job skills in addition to the mathematics and communications skills that the modern workplace requires.

As a Race to the Top (RTTT) district, Tri-County was able to leverage its existing school-management structure to integrate and align DDM identification and selection as a component of the district’s ongoing educational reform agenda. As a result, Tri-County has adopted a labor-management team-led approach to DDM selection and implementation, allowing CVTE educators to partner with academic-department peers to work on piloting instruments to measure employability and writing to text at the high school level.

**Shared Focus on Communications and Employability Skills**

From various stakeholder interactions, district educators learned that employers, co-op partners, and community members were placing a much higher premium on effective communication skills and a strong work ethic than on the demonstrated attainment of technical skills alone. Industry and local business stakeholders also see attitude and emotional intelligence as desirable traits for future CVTE graduates. Guided by input from industry and district focus committees, Tri-County administrators embarked on a project to infuse workplace and technology literacy into all aspects of the district’s academic and CVTE curricula. This became even more important as instruction across the district transitioned to instruction based on the new curriculum frameworks and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments. The high expectations of this transition energized district administrators to bring before their faculty and staff the challenge to help integrate the dual imperatives of the DDM initiative—to measure student growth and to measure educator impact—while also continuing to focus on developing their students’ knowledge and skills.
The district had already been exploring opportunities to address long-standing gaps, identified by MCAS scores and CVTE educators, in soft (employability) and hard (writing) skills, so the district undertook the DDM effort as its vehicle to further strengthen literacy and career readiness across all CVTE courses. District staff were able to leverage work already underway for other initiatives and to integrate DDM piloting and fine-tuning as additional steps in their existing efforts to prepare the district to serve as a PARCC field test site in the spring of 2014.

District administrators charged all departments with identifying measures that held promise for use as DDMs, while remaining mindful of the need to prioritize instruction focused on communications and employability skills. While departmental consultations proceeded during the school year, district administrators took the lead in formulating a framework for the district’s DDM efforts. Each department would serve as a laboratory of practice that would contribute CVTE and academic elements to the district’s DDM framework. This joint activity across the district enabled administrators and educators to take stock of what was already being taught, measured, and reported by CVTE programs. Tri-County educators rely on three sources of information to help guide their DDM action research: their own past instructional practice, their students’ performance data (e.g., patterns and trends), and their community’s opportunity structure and economy.

In September 2013, Tri-County responded to Commissioner Chester’s call for piloting of promising DDMs with two submissions designed to provide Tri-County educators with robust assessment options during the 2015 school year. These two measures are designed to measure student learning and growth in two critical competencies: writing to text and employability. While district educators hope that authentic, locally developed DDMs will be developed in the years ahead, they are united in their commitment to pilot existing tools that focus on communications and employability skills.

According to Jean George, CTE Director,

> When I served on the CVTE Frameworks drafting review committee in 2012, all of us shared a vision for crafting the CVTE frameworks in such a way that they called for the integration of academic skills, employability skills, and technical skills across our entire CTE curriculum. Our educators have been doing a great job of embedding formative and benchmark assessments into instruction as a result of continuing work under a RTTT grant.
In fact, we have even started trying our hand at using CEPAs, or curriculum-embedded performance assessments, that we have borrowed and modified from the Model Curriculum Units (MCUs) for Culinary Arts on Food Safety and Sanitation, provided by ESE. During future professional development days, we hope to guide educators toward refining instruments that will share common protocols for administering, scoring, interpreting, and reporting across the district for all Chapter 74 programs. But for our maiden voyage with DDMs, we have chosen two measures that address previously identified achievement gaps across our student body in the domains of career readiness, specifically employability skills, and literacy, more generally.

**DDM #1: A Measure of Communications Skills**

DDM #1 is a holistic evaluation that makes use of a writing rubric developed by [Collins Education Associates](https://www.collinseq.com) to evaluate growth in writing and argumentation abilities among all of Tri-County’s grade 10 students (approximately 210 students).

Ms. George’s preferred approach to moving DDM efforts forward is to engage faculty in deep thinking during professional learning opportunities and to leverage the meetings that she currently has with CVTE administrators and educators across the Commonwealth as opportunities to discuss DDM development and implementation options. Her recent efforts have been focused on research-based strategies for teaching and assessing writing, with the goal of preparing educators for DDMs that measure students’ growth in literacy. The approach has been a boon to shop educators who are strong technical educators but often lack the educational background to feel fully comfortable and confident in teaching embedded writing skills as part of technical skills attainment.

The standardized approach to writing instruction and evaluation provided by the Collins Writing Program, Ms. George discovered, has offered CVTE educators the scaffolding, tools, and supports that they need to foster greater communication fluency among their students. Educators in the academic content areas initially expressed reservations about the prescriptive, “process-focused” techniques that Collins recommends, but after working with the new rubric, they have come to appreciate the shared vocabulary and holistic approach to evaluating writing. In addition, now that dialogue among academic and CVTE educators is more focused and directed toward improving literacy skills as a shared responsibility, these educators have moved toward exploring a collaboration in the rating and scoring process. Now, in many instances, both an academic educator and a CVTE educator rate writing assignments using a set of common holistic rubrics that establish performance levels at every grade and competency level.
**DDM #2: A Measure of Employability Skills**

DDM #2 is the SkillsUSA Employability assessment by [Trainworks](#), a pre-test/post-test measure that is administered annually in September and May to all Tri-County grade 11 students (approximately 230 students).

According to Ms. George, one of the benefits of using SkillsUSA is that it promotes good teaching practice. She says that faculty frequently come to her asking if they may update the CVTE competency lists by adding new items or deleting those that are now dated, and that faculty really want the competency lists to reflect what the students did and how well they did it. In the past, the competency lists had been updated only every few years; now this is done on an ongoing basis. She credits SkillsUSA as having provided educators with the information they need in order to keep the competency lists up to date with industry needs and expectations.

Since its introduction in Tri-County more than a decade ago, SkillsUSA has provided the district with a comprehensive, easy-to-use, Web-based solution for maintaining, tracking, and reporting skills-based CVTE curricula and tracking the progress of students as they attempt to achieve levels of competency. Augmenting the SkillsUSA assessment data, Tri-County also leverages the SkillsPlus system by Trainworks to allow vocational educators to more easily manage skills and student data, record competency achievement and earned hours, and set up and manage individual competency lists based on Individualized Education Program (IEP) plans. In Tri-County, as in many other CVTE districts, students who require IEP plans routinely comprise 40 percent or more of the student body. Common tools, technologies, and processes lessen administrative burdens.

Tri-County’s goal over time is to collect sufficient data to provide robust impact ratings for CVTE educators that reflect their work around employability. This effort will capitalize on common tools and processes, such as those offered in the district’s learning management system. During the last year, Ms. George reports that she and her team “have embedded DDM implementation into our overall management strategy, and have decided to try out two measures that capture what we’re already doing and will be doing to support literacy and soft-skills development.”

**Focus on Professional Development**

The district’s CVTE team pursued a plan of action that will allow a cadre of lead educators from a variety of programs to provide scaffolding and tools, along with direction and guidance, to classroom educators during the DDM roll-out process. Following small-scale tryouts, these lead educators will work directly with classroom educators to take on the task of refining selected common assessments and tailoring them to fit the specific needs of their vocational or technical areas. By building on lessons learned from RTTT implementation, Tri-County administrators have been able to quickly and efficiently mobilize this group of lead educators around the DDM.
work. Ms. George plans to use the next scheduled professional development release day to prepare a second cadre of educators to engage in DDM improvement work using a train-the-trainer approach. Her goal is to build the assessment literacy capacity of a variety of Tri-County educators, who will, in turn, provide training and support on DDM development and implementation to classroom educators in other programs and courses.

Role of Technology

Technology has been an integral part of the Tri-County culture. Historically, educator training in technology use has been provided during four regularly scheduled, required professional development half-days offered to faculty each year. Since the district adopted Itslearning and SkillsPlus over a decade ago, each software program has long enabled educators to provide the necessary assessment feedback to students and parents, using an online learning management system. Students are also trained in the use of these technology platforms, allowing them to become accustomed to the electronic submission and tracking of assignments and assessments. Moreover, students are required to use technology throughout their programs of study, and especially within a performance-based capstone project at the end of the senior year of high school, in which students have to present a visual articulation of their research and findings to a panel of judges. All of these logistics take place online. According to Ms. George, Itslearning helps CVTE educators to record and capture what their students are learning, while providing them with robust tools to analyze and report student growth metrics to students and parents. This platform allows educators to use curriculum-embedded performance assessments (CEPAs) that they develop and upload into the system for each course and student. By the end of next year we hope to have trained the entire CVTE department.

Ms. George speaks for her faculty when she reports that “we have worked very hard under [No Child Left Behind] to align and integrate instruction around strong ELA and mathematics measures for which we provide our students and educators the necessary scaffolding, instruction, and assessment infrastructure, employing Itslearning.” This online toolkit offers Tri-County educators and students an online K–12 learning management system that enables CVTE educators to better facilitate instructional delivery and engage today’s digitally “wired” students. All district academic educators have adopted itslearning, and many educators have been using it for more than five years. Only about half of the 44 CVTE educators are currently using itslearning. Plans are underway to require its use across all CVTE programs.

Experience with itslearning over the last decade has enabled district educators to gauge the level of student engagement by the number and frequency of homework submissions throughout the CVTE course of study. Because these students are “digital natives” who are comfortable using technology, they have readily adopted the itslearning system as a means of submitting their homework assignments on time. They can work online, submit assignments
online, and use the system to communicate with their educators, all from the comfort and safety of their home computers, tablets, and other devices.