

Redefine professional education to increase adults' capacity to assess and support children's language and reading development.

One's professional success and impact depends directly upon training and continuing education. Adults in our early education and care settings, our communities and our schools have the potential to powerfully influence our children's language and reading development. After all, knowledge is not institutionalized, and excellence resides in the individuals rather than the organization. These individuals are the key mechanisms through which services, supports, and interventions promote development and learning. However, many Massachusetts professionals are not provided with sufficient or effective training opportunities to deliver on this promise. For some, there is no training at all;⁴² for others, the professional education lacks sufficient intensity and relevance to gain

Matching Student Needs with Instruction: A Professional Learning Community at Work

The kindergarten teachers gathered around a table in the staff lounge, each looking through the information book on weather they would share in class the next day through a read-aloud. This was their fifth grade-level team meeting devoted to vocabulary instruction since the fall, when vocabulary was identified as a crucial area of student need across the school. For this particular session, they were focused on making read-alouds more accessible to struggling students, and using the text to teach new words. Along with their teacher guides and materials, each had brought the vocabulary assessment results for a few of their struggling students.

They were working to use error patterns from the assessment to inform the way they presented the book on weather in class.

"I don't think Martin knows the word 'snow'" shared Ms. Vindal, referring to a student who had recently moved to the school from a warmer climate. Her paraprofessional nodded in agreement.

"Probably not," agreed Ms. Johnson, the principal. "But I think you could convey the idea of snow pretty quickly, especially now that it is winter, and with the pictures. But what would you do when you reach the word 'plow?' It has so many meanings." As a group, the teachers shared their ideas and discussed how words with multiple meanings confused students. Before they wrapped up the meeting, they talked over the words they thought were critical for the kindergartners to learn before the year was up.

traction in the practice setting.⁴³ Our current professional-development paradigm favors periodic training sessions that are relatively brief, one-size-fits-all, and disconnected from daily practice. Moreover, if we are to improve all children's language and reading skills—raising the bar and transforming the curve—adult participation must extend beyond our K-12 teachers. Professional development focused on children's language and reading is crucial for all adults who influence children's language and reading skills.

The following action steps focus on the ways in which we need to bolster educators' knowledge and practice. To some extent the critique underlying our suggested steps is meant to provide the ongoing support and training that is part of any professional service. However, it also illuminates a greater problem of inadequate teacher and administrator training and preparation in how children learn to read. Effectively supporting reading, a complex developmental process, is arguably the most essential task to ensuring children's long-term academic and career success in the current economy. However, too many administrators and teachers, especially new teachers, are unable to translate knowledge of reading and language development to effective instruction. This, despite hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours devoted to training—resources representing a tremendous investment by individuals and the state in both pre-service and continuing education. In fact, it is common for our graduate students in education to openly express their lack of preparedness as a major barrier to effective teaching and a feeling of competence in the classroom. Ultimately, much training becomes retroactive and corrective, taking place after children receive instruction. While pre-service training and licensing is beyond the scope of this report, it remains an important agenda item for the Office of the Secretary of Education, which includes the Commissioner of Early Education and Care, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Commissioner of Higher Education.

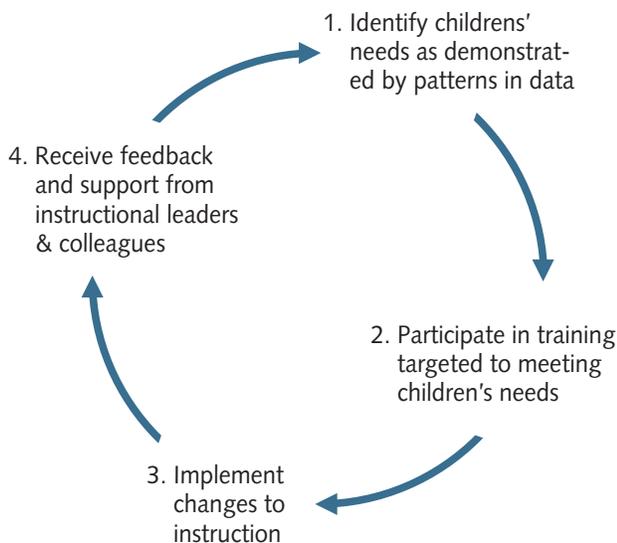
ACTION STEP

Provide early education and care providers, paraprofessionals, and health care professionals with training focused on supporting children's

language and reading development.

Presently, some of the adults who work most closely with our young children, and who have multiple points of contact with families of babies and young children, are those with the least formal training in how to assess and support children's language and reading development. Our early education and care providers receive minimal opportunities to develop their instructional skills, and while there are new plans underway, family child care providers are currently largely excluded from capacity-building endeavors.⁴⁴ Likewise, although nearly all children visit the doctor and language growth could be assessed and discussed during the appointment, community health professionals receive little or no professional education in the domains of children's language and reading development. Missed opportunities to educate adults in the service of children's academic success are also inherent in many of our elementary schools. Regrettably, paraprofessionals, often the very people charged with providing daily support for our students most at-risk for reading failure, are regularly left out of professional development efforts.⁴⁵ These important individuals, who can be powerful influences in a reader's life, should be included in professional development aimed at improving practice. As long as there is a significant divide between the person who is charged with caring for young children and the person who holds knowledge about detecting risk and cultivating reading development, efforts toward improvement will be impeded.

Professional Development for Early Educators, Teachers and their Instructional Leaders



ACTION STEP

Develop administrators' knowledge about children's language and reading to strengthen instructional leadership

Improvements will occur at scale only when site-level leaders appreciate the complexity of reading development, correctly interpret student data on language and reading, and can translate their understanding into corresponding instructional practice. Research has shown us an important solution to the problems of improving practice and retaining teachers in early education and care settings and elementary schools: Guidance and supervision from knowledgeable administrators and school leaders should be a staple of daily professional life.⁴⁶ These leaders must also work with incoming staff, making sure that new teachers and paraprofessionals are fully aware of programs and resources and feel supported moving forward. However, we have historically focused our professional development about language and reading on teachers. Our administrators tend to lack training in efforts directed at supporting instructional improvement; their focus is often removed from the day-to-day learning that goes on in the early education and care or primary grade classroom.⁴⁷ Elevated student achievement is linked to instructional leadership—results improve when administrators spend significant time reviewing student data with teachers, monitoring and supporting curricular implementation, understanding instructional strategies tailored to the population at hand, and supporting problem-solving, troubleshooting, and mid-course corrections in response to patterns in student data. Increasing the time leaders spend directly supporting instruction, and creating a culture of reflection and professional expertise are key steps toward data-driven reading instruction.

ACTION STEP

Establish site-level professional development that is data-driven and continuous

Finally, to gain a valuable return we must make the necessary investment. Increasing the impact of professional development on practice requires a change in the way we approach and develop training opportunities.⁴⁸ As it stands, traditional models of professional development actually have minimal impact on reforming practice.⁴⁹ This means, for example, that regardless of the number of professional development points any given teacher accumulates, her instructional approaches tend not to

change and her students' opportunities to learn tend to remain static. This professional development model is often ineffective because it is conducted outside of meaningful contexts, guided by topics and approaches that often reflect educational fad. The trainings are also typically extremely short in duration (e.g., a half-day), maintain teacher isolation, and consequently lack intensity as well as authenticity. This paradigm must be turned on its head: Professional development should be embedded in day-to-day practice, guided by a study of patterns in

student data, sustained over time, and fueled by teacher collaboration. One-off, external workshops and meetings may be excellent starting places or mid-point opportunities for further discussion and learning, but all professional development implemented must be tied to a larger, data-driven agenda for school improvement. For positive, lasting change, it is vital that educators receive continuous feedback as well as work collaboratively through team meetings and joint planning time.⁵⁰

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