



DEVELOPING TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN IOWA

Saydel and Central Decatur Schools

NIET

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING





“The biggest impact that I have noticed at CD since we began to implement TAP is how intentional the staff is about using strategies that we know work for our students, especially in our STEM classrooms. There have always been good things happening in our classrooms, now there is more of an emphasis on sharing these good ideas among teachers.” – Rudy Evertsen, Secondary Principal, Central Decatur

INTRODUCTION

Iowa is working to provide teachers with more effective and relevant professional development that measurably increases their instructional skills and their students' learning growth. This is particularly important as new Iowa Core Standards with higher expectations for student learning are put in place. While the Iowa Core focuses on what students need to learn, an equally important question is: how do teachers adjust their instruction to support new, more challenging standards for learning? One important district initiative to support strong classroom instruction is TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement (TAP) which is being implemented with the support of a federal Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant. The TIF project in Iowa has an emphasis on the development of teacher leadership and effectiveness across all subjects, with a particular emphasis in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). TAP enables schools to improve instruction in every classroom. Implementation of TAP in Saydel and Central Decatur School Districts is supported by a partnership with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), developer of TAP.

Saydel and Central Decatur seek to better attract and retain effective educators at their schools, thereby increasing student learning growth and closing achievement gaps. The districts offer comprehensive school-based, job embedded professional development supported by instructional leaders in the school building. This innovation will provide important lessons for other Iowa districts developing new teacher leadership roles and responsibilities to drive more effective classroom instruction in their schools.

The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching works with districts to implement the TAP System, or other reforms to support teacher and principal effectiveness. NIET's Best Practices Center supports districts in developing new teacher leadership roles and responsibilities; job embedded professional development; and classroom observation training and tools to provide more relevant, timely and actionable feedback on instructional practice.

SUMMARY

Two recent studies by Biancarosa et al¹ and by Saunders et al², have demonstrated that “job-embedded, sustained professional development” can significantly improve student achievement. But there's a catch. In both studies, effective professional development (PD) strategies were successful only under certain circumstances or only in some schools and classrooms. The determining factor was not the quality of the PD itself, but rather the conditions under which it was delivered. It turns out that job-embedded PD can be highly effective, but only when there is sufficient infrastructure in place to support it.

NIET works with districts to incorporate both of the strategies that the research studies have found to be potentially effective — collaborative learning teams and instructional coaching. But NIET also takes the next critical step by helping schools create an infrastructure that supports high-quality PD and ensures the activities ultimately deliver positive results, both for teachers and for their students. Building on recent research, this paper describes how NIET works with schools to support, oversee, and reinforce job-embedded PD so that teachers and students consistently benefit from it. This paper also describes how effective PD can be aligned with teacher classroom observations to better ensure that teachers receive specific feedback to support improvements in their practice. A broad new consensus has emerged about the best approach to professional development. Instead of attending one-shot workshops or journeying to conferences, experts say that teachers should be able to learn on the job with plenty of opportunities for collaboration and individualized support. Nearly every report on PD now dutifully lists core features of effective PD, including a focus on curriculum and shared instructional challenges; collective participation; opportunities for active learning; sustained duration; and coherence with student achievement goals. The insights from NIET's work with districts can be applied by districts in Iowa that are putting in place reforms to build teacher leadership and opportunities for professional growth.



No Child Left Behind endorsed that vision by emphasizing that PD should be “high-quality, sustained, intensive and classroom-focused” and “not one-day or short-term workshops or conferences.”³ Since then, many districts and schools have shifted considerable resources toward various forms of job-embedded PD that fit the new mold, such as providing teachers with time to meet in collaborative teams or opportunities to work with instructional coaches.

Yet until very recently, researchers had produced almost no strong evidence that job-embedded PD can significantly improve student learning. Moreover, among the oft-cited attributes of effective professional development, only one feature on the list — sustained duration — has reasonably solid research to back it.⁴

Fortunately, that has changed. In 2010 Gina Biancarosa, Anthony Bryk, and Emily Dexter published the results of a four-year longitudinal study providing solid evidence that instructional coaching can improve student learning. During the third year of implementation, instructional coaching contributed to a 32 percent increase in value-added student learning gains — a huge impact in the realm of PD research.

Similarly, a study published in December 2009 showed that providing teachers with time to participate in collaborative teams also can improve student achievement. (Such strategies go by many different names, including “professional learning communities,” “grade-level teams,” or “cluster groups.”)

At the classroom level, “The vast majority of teachers in most of the participating schools showed substantial value-added effects by the end of the study.”

However, both studies included an important catch: While generally effective, the strategies were successful only under certain circumstances or only in some schools and classrooms. For decision makers, that catch is just as important as the positive overall findings. Job-embedded PD can be very expensive. According to Education Resource Strategies, “The investment in teacher time for collaborating with colleagues represents the largest single item of professional development spending at the school level.”⁵ High-quality instructional coaching requires a significant investment as well.⁶

Especially in tough budget times, the challenge for education leaders and policymakers is not just to invest in “what works,” but also to take steps to ensure that what can work does work. When potentially effective PD achieves only limited success or uneven results, scarce dollars are wasted and students who could have benefited do not. Fortunately, both recent studies were among a new generation of results-based PD research to, as Education Week put it, “. . . offer solid clues not only to what works but also when, under what conditions, and to some extent, why.”⁷



According to the study’s authors, William Saunders, Claude Goldenberg, and Ronald Gallimore, “This might be one of the first quasi-experimental investigations demonstrating increased average achievement over time in schools that implemented teacher teams focused on improving student learning.”

USING TEACHER LEADERS TO ENSURE PD IS EFFECTIVE

In the study by Biancarosa et al., the impact of the coaching program varied significantly across schools and even across classrooms in the same school. The biggest reason: Some teachers received no coaching while others enjoyed as many as 43 sessions. Not surprisingly, schools whose teachers received the most coaching experienced much bigger increases in value-added student learning gains. Uneven amounts of coaching contributed to lower overall implementation than planned: On average, teachers received only about half of the coaching sessions that the program’s developers recommend.⁸

The researchers analyzed various factors that might have inhibited or facilitated one-on-one coaching. The biggest inhibitor was the teacher-per-coach ratio, which varied from school to school. When the ratio grew too large, coaches found themselves spread too thinly.⁹

But other factors turned out to be important too. In a presentation for the federal Institute of Education Sciences, the researchers compared two schools with the same teacher-to-coach ratio but with a wide gap in the number of coaching sessions teachers received. Unequal amounts of coaching had a stunning impact on student outcomes. In the “high-coaching” school, although value-added scores started out below average, they increased during the study. In the “low-coaching” school, school-level value-added scores were above average at the beginning but subsequently declined.¹⁰

Why did coaching vary so much even in schools where coaches carried the same workload? The answers had to do with school leadership, support, and buy-in. Coaches who perceived greater support from school principals and faculty provided nearly one additional coaching session on average per teacher per semester. And teachers who expressed stronger commitment to school improvement efforts and greater comfort initiating professional interactions tended to receive more coaching.¹¹ As one researcher summed up the problem for Education Week, “. . . in some ways, coaching is a voluntary activity.”¹²

In the study by Saunders et al., the driver turned out to be how teams spent their time when they met, and ensuring the right kind of “quality time” was no easy matter. Researchers concluded that collaborative teams have a positive impact on student achievement when they, “. . . focus on a specific



student learning need over a period of time and shift to an emphasis on figuring out an instructional solution that produces a detectable improvement in learning, not just trying out a variety of instructional activities.”¹³ When that happens, teachers literally see the impact of new teaching strategies on student learning and become invested in changing classroom practices to get better results.

But teams in the study only worked that way when certain supports were in place. At first, the program trained principals to bring together and facilitate the collaborative teams, but that approach failed to support vigorous implementation and to yield improvements in student learning. During the next phase, the program shifted toward a “distributed leadership” approach wherein school leadership teams — including teacher-leaders as well as principals — received intensive training and support. Additionally the training included explicit protocols for planning and structuring collaborative teacher meetings so that critical shift from “trying out strategies” to “figuring out solutions” occurred reliably across collaborative teams. The new approach worked. Over the final three years, student achievement improved faster than average and at a faster rate than in comparison schools.¹⁴

Digging deeper, researchers identified several specific features that seemed critical for collaborative team success, including the following:

- While principal support was crucial, collaborative teams were more successful when facilitated by teacher-leaders who implemented the new strategies in classrooms themselves and could show evidence of improved student learning.
- Teams were more successful when teacher-leaders were trained to use explicit protocols to guide teams through a process of identifying student learning problems, selecting instructional strategies, analyzing student work for evidence of impact, and honing strategies until they achieved results.
- Finally, to persist in focused problem-solving long enough to achieve success, teams needed regular time to meet, and school leadership teams needed to protect that time from competing demands.¹⁵

Clearly, it is not enough for professional development merely to be job-embedded or to exhibit the broad features recommended by experts — or even to be of “high-quality.” Investments in potentially effective strategies such as instructional coaching or collaborative meeting time will not pay off unless they are facilitated in deliberate ways to ensure consistent results. Specifically, schools must have an infrastructure in place that guarantees a “yes” on each of the four questions researchers typically ask when they evaluate professional development.

1. Do all teachers experience high-quality PD?
2. Does the PD increase teachers’ knowledge and skills?
3. Does the new knowledge and skills translate into new classroom practices?
4. Do the new classroom practices improve student learning?¹⁶

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SAYDEL AND CENTRAL DECATUR SCHOOLS

Working with NIET, the districts incorporate key elements identified by research as resulting in effective professional development.

Step 1. Targeting Specific Student Needs

Before groups of teachers led by a master teacher (cluster groups) meet, members of the school’s Leadership Team (administrators, master and mentor teachers) analyze student achievement results and begin to develop a schoolwide plan for improving learning. Identifying specific goals and measures up-front lets cluster groups focus on solving real problems in student learning rather than simply try new teaching activities that might not align well with student needs. Identifying progressively more focused goals allows cluster groups to zero in on very specific aspects of student work during each cycle. That’s a level of detail that standardized state tests simply cannot provide. Throughout the year, cluster groups know exactly what they are aiming for and possess the right tools to monitor whether they are hitting the mark.

Step 2. Selecting and Field-Testing Classroom Strategies

After the leadership team identifies student learning goals, master teachers select research-based strategies that cluster groups can use to address those objectives. However, before master teachers introduce any new strategy in cluster groups, they first rigorously “field test” the strategy themselves to make certain it will work as intended. In addition to enabling master teachers to “engineer” strategies to work with their own colleagues and students, field testing also provides them with hard evidence that a given strategy can work for students of high, medium, and low initial proficiency. Consequently, teachers enjoy a rare guarantee that the techniques they master not only can but will deliver results with their students. Finally, field testing allows master teachers to plan how they will help teachers learn the new instructional strategies during cluster group meetings. They identify an explicit set of “critical attributes” necessary to obtain the student learning generated during field testing, and they decide how to sequence and segment cluster group topics into manageable weekly chunks.



“We are ready and open to explore what works and what doesn’t. We are going beyond the surface and diving deep into what we can do to have better student achievement,” says Dia Fenton, Saydel High School.

Step 3. Learning New Strategies in Cluster Group Meetings

Master teachers begin by referencing the school plan and discussing the particular goal, or “student learning need,” the strategy addresses. They describe student achievement gains that the strategy produced during field testing. They share examples of student work that clearly illustrate increases in proficiency among students with high, medium and low skills. At this point teachers literally can see the impact of the strategy on specific students, not just anonymous groups of students in a far-flung research study. The master teacher then shares the “critical attributes” identified during field testing, reminding teachers to watch for them during the modeling to follow.

Next, the master teacher or another cluster member models the new strategy for the group.¹⁷ The master teacher steps into the role of “classroom teacher” and asks the cluster group members to step into the role of “students.” The master teacher “teaches” the strategy just as he or she would with a classroom of students. At key points during the modeling, the master teacher steps out

of the teacher role and back into the role of cluster leader in order to explain an aspect of the strategy or to help teachers make a connection to the student need or critical attribute.

Then cluster members spend time practicing the strategy themselves and developing a plan to apply it in an upcoming lesson. Such a development stage is generally missing from professional development. The development time during cluster group is critical because it ensures that each teacher has a plan for using the new strategy in an actual lesson she has planned.

Step 4. Providing Follow-Up Coaching to Every Teacher

Master and mentor teachers follow up after cluster meetings to provide every teacher with one-on-one coaching. Master and mentor teachers learn to employ a wide range of coaching techniques that can be adapted to suit teachers’ individual needs. NIET also works to address another common gap in instructional coaching — following up with teachers after the initial coaching session to be sure they have sufficiently understood everything. Master and mentor teachers also can and often do provide additional kinds of one-on-one assistance. “We make it very clear to master teachers that it’s not their job just to observe teachers. It’s their job to roll up their sleeves and jump right in,” Jason Culbertson, Chief Learning Officer at NIET says.



Step 5. Collecting and Analyzing Student Results

Teachers return to the next cluster meeting with scored student work representing various proficiency levels. They present them and the group identifies common characteristics of student work at high, medium and low levels of proficiency. As a result of the analysis, the strategy might be further adapted or the group might move on to a new strategy altogether. Critically, the process for examining student work during cluster meetings begins well before master teachers even introduce a new strategy during cluster. The school leadership team already has determined in advance what type of assessment will be used during each cluster cycle as well as the scoring criteria for judging student achievement. And because master teachers rely on the same formative assessments and scoring criteria during field testing, the assessments have more or less been “field tested” as well. So, many of the kinks already have been worked out. Teachers are learning about, administering, scoring and collaboratively analyzing formative assessments every week.

BUILDING TEACHER LEADERSHIP FOR SUCCESSFUL PD

NIET works with districts to ensure that master and mentor teachers are not simply “coaches” and “team facilitators,” although they do perform both functions, but true instructional

leaders in their schools. They are active members of a schoolwide Leadership Team that includes the principal and other administrators and provides general oversight so that all aspects of the system, including cluster groups and coaching, work effectively.

OVERSEEING PD TO MONITOR PROGRESS AND ENSURE SUCCESS

First, NIET carves out a robust, yet realistic, role for principals to play in ensuring effective PD. Second, TAP establishes a schoolwide leadership team where the principal, master teachers, and mentor teachers can all work together, week by week, to guide and monitor PD and to make course corrections where necessary. The TAP System emphasizes that principals are the primary instructional leader in a school and gives them tangible and feasible responsibilities for overseeing the execution and impact of job-embedded PD. “TAP has provided us with an extraordinary framework for us to grow as individuals and as a system. The high quantity and high quality of feedback for teacher improvement has never been experienced before at Saydel. This has resulted in measurable teacher growth and in turn has proven to improve our student learning.” explains Kevin Schulte, Principal of Saydel High School.



OVERVIEW OF PD

LEADERSHIP TEAM

Principal, Assistant Principals, Master Teachers, Mentor Teachers

CLUSTER GROUP

Master Teachers, Mentor Teachers, Career Teachers

CLASSROOM

Students, Career Teachers, Leadership Team members as needed

REINFORCING PD BY ALIGNING IT WITH STANDARDS AND EXPECTATIONS FOR CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

Saydel and Central Decatur schools work with NIET to align professional support and feedback with expectations for classroom practice. Using NIET's Teaching Standards, districts facilitate a richer and more targeted conversation among faculty about what good teaching looks like. The same descriptors of effective teaching practice are used in classroom observations and feedback, and in weekly professional development and ongoing coaching. Weekly cluster groups offer master and mentor teachers many opportunities to reinforce skills from the teaching standards or rubrics, and to build on these skills to ensure effective implementation of field tested strategies. Master and mentor teachers also embed modeling of instructional skills into their one-on-one coaching sessions with teachers. Teacher leaders on the faculty play a key role with administrators in creating a conversation about instructional goals and the specific support necessary for each teacher to succeed. They connect the goals with concrete strategies and support to achieve them in classrooms. As a result, professional development and coaching directly support individual teacher and student needs.

CONCLUSION

Because the cluster cycle relies on formative and benchmark assessments carefully aligned with state tests, teachers know that hitting yearly cluster goals and cluster cycle goals should translate into gains on state tests and higher student learning growth scores. As a result, teachers know that the field-tested strategies they are learning in cluster groups will result in higher learning gains for students.

As districts and schools work to support students in reaching higher levels of academic achievement and mastery, it is essential that they support teachers to continually improve their instruction. Districts and schools are gradually shifting resources toward better models of "sustained, job-embedded professional development." That is a positive trend. New research has proven that job-embedded PD can indeed improve teacher instruction and student learning. But "can" is not good enough. Policymakers and education leaders must ensure that PD does improve teaching and learning, consistently and reliably. Research tells us that even the best-designed PD will not work consistently and reliably unless schools find ways to create a structure and assign specific authority and responsibility to those charged with supporting it, overseeing it, and reinforcing it at every turn. As Iowa districts develop new teacher leadership roles and structures, the reforms in Saydel and Central Decatur offer powerful lessons of how teacher leaders can play a central role in instructional improvement.

FOOTNOTES

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- For ease of explanation, this description assumes the master teacher leads all aspects of the cluster group meeting. However, that is not always the case. Other cluster group members such as mentor or career teachers might model the strategy if they participated in the field testing and mastered the strategy sufficiently.

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