Texas Literacy Initiative Teacher Focus Group Summary
Spring 2015

Purpose

In Spring 2015, a group of researchers in the Austin Independent School District (AISD) Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) conducted focus group sessions with teachers at nine AISD schools that were participating in the Texas Literacy Initiative (TLI) grant. From a list of 26 TLI campuses, 12 were selected to represent each vertical team and grade band. Principals were contacted at those 12 campuses and invited to participate; two declined participation. At elementary campuses, all prekindergarten (pre-K) through grade 2 teachers were invited to participate. At middle and high school campuses, teachers were invited to participate only if they had received direct services from TLI staff. Overall, 173 teachers were invited, of which 37% ($n = 65$) attended the focus groups.

Focus group sessions took place after school during April and May. Two researchers facilitated each session; one led the discussion while the other took notes and audio recorded. Transcripts and recordings were reviewed, and responses for each question were organized into themes (see Appendix for focus group protocol). The following report presents major emerging themes within responses for each question. Reported themes emerged in at least three schools, unless noted.

Report Highlights

By and large, teachers were very satisfied with TLI and the resources provided to them through the grant. The following are key takeaways from the focus group discussions:

- On campus coaches are critical.
- Campuses need assistance with determining how to sustain themselves when TLI grant funding is gone by
  - creating a system for capturing how TLI strategies and resources are used on their campus, and
  - retaining campus coaches for pre-K through grade 2.
- Teachers thought TLI resources and strategies were useful, but need more time to implement and use all of them.
- Professional development opportunity needs include
  - refresher trainings, especially for teachers who are new to the campus;

- incorporation of technology;
- project-based learning;
- observation of peers; and
- Spanish resources (trainings for teachers and materials for students).

Professional Development Opportunities

Teachers were asked what professional development opportunity provided by TLI was most influential to their teaching. In some cases, teachers were unsure of the source of the professional development opportunity, so they were prompted with examples provided to DRE staff by TLI program staff. At each elementary campus, teachers said their data meetings were very beneficial because they "helped guide instruction and give ideas for how to work with students," and because they provided teachers with the time to review their data. Teachers noted that because their days were usually filled with so many other priorities, it was difficult to find time to review data and make instructional decisions based on said data. Teachers also said that phonemic/phonological awareness and vocabulary trainings were influential because they taught teachers the appropriate structure of those core reading components.

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At the secondary campuses, teachers focused more on the professional development opportunities they received to use various software programs (e.g., iLit and Language Live) that TLI provided. These programs were a core component of instruction, and in addition to learning how to use these programs, teachers spent time in their professional learning community (PLC) discussing how to best implement the programs, based on student data. Staff from other secondary campuses said that professional development opportunities regarding resources to use with students (e.g., graphic organizers and State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness [STAAR] reading passages) influenced their teaching. However, again, they emphasized that reviewing data was the most important type of professional development opportunity because the data review showed them "how to process it and break it down for use."

Teachers at each level stated that coaches coming to their classroom and working with them directly to model instruction or suggest methods was very helpful because it showed them not only what to do but how to do it effectively. At the high schools, teachers said a TLI district staff member came to provide professional development

opportunities not only for them but for all teachers on campus. Because TLI support was directed to only a few teachers at the high school level, the teachers appreciated having someone to advocate the need to incorporate English and language arts into the entire curriculum.

Professional Development Opportunity Needs

Teachers were asked to share any professional development opportunities they still needed. Elementary school teachers said that due to teacher turnover, it is important for new teachers to receive training that was provided in prior years. Other elementary teachers stated that they needed assistance with guided reading, "not just telling [teachers] how it looks," but showing them what guided reading should look like. Elementary teachers also said they would like the opportunity to visit other classrooms and see how teachers structure and implement literacy instruction.

One elementary campus discussed a study group that was started by their TLI-funded coach. The group gave them the opportunity to discuss teaching strategies they had tried and to brainstorm with their colleagues about ways to improve their instruction and students' learning. Although the teachers at this campus felt this was a great idea, they also lamented that due to their other required campus meetings, study groups did not always happen. Thus, it appears that although this professional development opportunity might be useful, it is unclear how often it can occur, due to competing priorities.

Elementary and high school teachers stated they needed more professional development opportunities on how to incorporate technology into lessons. For the elementary teachers, this meant integrating technology to help their students become adept at using digital resources as they learn. Teachers at one high school stated that they needed more assistance with using Language Live, a software program they used. They said they needed more training on how to use it better and take it further by possibly including secondary writing resources and data management.

Secondary teachers said they needed professional development opportunities on how to create project-based learning units that align with their curriculum and are related to STAAR. Other secondary teachers stressed the importance of school-wide professional development opportunities (provided by TLI staff) to inform teachers in curriculum areas other than English/language arts about what TLI is, how teachers are incorporating literacy strategies in their instruction, and what teachers can do to help with literacy in their classrooms.

Resources

Teachers discussed the classroom resources they received, the usefulness of these resources, and which resources were still needed. At all levels, teachers said books were most useful. Whether they were leveled readers, classroom libraries, or take home books, books were one of the most valued resources. White boards, dramatic play centers, and manipulatives were also listed as beneficial resources. Teachers at the elementary level stated they needed more books in Spanish. They also needed a replacement of various materials (e.g., pens that read to students) that had worn out due to repeated use. Middle school teachers stated that they needed more writing resources, as well as software that looked age appropriate. They said a lot of software was childish in appearance and students did not want to use it. High school teachers needed more time with students and better-functioning technology. Regarding the technology, teachers said the technology person (funded by TLI) assigned to their campus was "great" about fixing problems and answering questions, but felt some of the issues should be addressed at the start of the school year.

Teachers listed a variety of resources they did not find useful, so it was difficult to identify themes, especially since most were due to individual teachers' preferences. However, one teacher suggested that TLI program staff consider asking teachers what resources they need, to make sure resources were actually used.

Implementation Challenges

When teachers were asked to discuss challenges they had faced implementing literacy strategies acquired from TLI, one word was mentioned frequently: time. Teachers stated that while the professional development opportunities and strategies they learned were useful, they had trouble finding the time to incorporate them. To remedy this, elementary teachers suggested having more "make and take" days (i.e., days set aside for them to make the materials they need for their lessons).

Middle school teachers stated that it was difficult for students to take strategies they learned using pencil and paper and apply them to assessments online. So teachers said they needed support about how to teach students to implement strategies in a variety of test-taking contexts. They also requested additional resources for special education students. Another implementation challenge that secondary teachers faced was technology. Throughout the school year, their resources sometimes did not work or needed constant updating. Although TLI has a person assigned to provide technical support, one person cannot easily address all needs, for each campus.

Successful Literacy Practices

Teachers listed the following examples of successful campus-based literacy practices they would share with other campuses: thinking maps, keys to literacy, iLit (software), short-answer response practice tracked and shared with campus administrators, Heggerty training, explicit vocabulary instruction, explicit phonics instruction, and reading workshops. It should be noted that although some of these practices were campus-specific, others (e.g., Heggerty training and iLit) were introduced due to TLI.

TLI and Other District Initiatives

TLI is not intended to replace campus or district initiatives and processes. Instead, it is intended to supplement them. Thus, teachers were asked to share how TLI helped them implement other district initiatives. Teachers at all levels stated that looking at their data helped them place students in Response to Intervention (RtI) groups based on their specific skills, work through the district's Curriculum Road Maps (CRMs), and focus on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS).

Sustainability

Because 2015-2016 is the final year of the grant, teachers were asked to list ways program staff can support sustainability, in the absence of grant funds. At elementary campuses, teachers stated that although the materials provided by TLI were useful, having someone to provide support was most important. One teacher said, "We will need someone in pre-

K through 2nd grade that is helping us like they are now. This is a main concern, we are normally forgotten." This sentiment was echoed by many teachers, who felt grade levels where students do not take the STAAR are overlooked. Thus, they appreciated the fact that TLI placed so much emphasis on the primary grades by providing a dedicated staff member to assist them. Many of the teachers expressed concern that they will lose their support after TLI funds are gone.

Elementary and secondary teachers stated that another way to sustain the grant is to create resources (e.g., binders and PowerPoint slides) so that strategies can be shared with new staff members. Many worried that the knowledge and progress they have attained will be lost due to staff turnover.

Grant Impact on Students

Teachers were asked to discuss the impact the TLI grant has had on their students. The following are some comments made by teachers:

> "I spend a lot of time with students on writing, and their stubbornness with writing has been reduced and increased motivation."

> "Because students understand data, they know what they need to work on."

> "Sometimes kids feel intimidated going upstairs to [the school] library… they like checking [books] out [in our classroom]."

> "We've always had gaps. Background knowledge wasn't there for most of our kids. So, TLI has helped fill the gap."

> "The school overall has improved. There's more accountability."

These statements demonstrate that the TLI grant has helped students by providing them with resources, empowering them with knowledge about how they can improve, and increasing accountability among all groups on campus.

Campus Coach Benefits

At nearly every elementary campus, participants made it clear that their coach was critical to their development and success as teachers. Their support covered areas such as:

- facilitating data days
- modeling instructional practices
- working with small groups of children
- providing resources
- being a consistence presence to help when needed

The only exceptions were campuses where pre-K teachers felt they did not receive enough support, either because a coach simply had not been assigned to work with pre-K or because the assigned coach was pulled in other directions

(i.e., supporting other grade levels). Three TLI district staff members were assigned to pre-K classrooms, but they had to divide their time between all TLI campuses. Teachers appreciated the help from these specialists, but wished the coaches could be on their campus more often. It is clear that pre-K teachers felt a more consistently available coach was needed.

At the secondary level, coaches were provided to middle school teachers, and high school teachers received support from TLI district staff. In both cases, teachers reported that having additional support was beneficial because of their coaches' responsiveness, high level of professionalism, coordination of resources, training, and role as a supportive liaison between themselves and campus administration. According to these teachers, TLI staff embodied the definition of a coach: someone who has been where they are and is doing everything possible to ensure their success.

Additional Coach Support

Teachers at each level said their TLI coaches did a phenomenal job of supporting them. Thus, most said they could not think of how the coach could be more supportive. Areas in which teachers needed more assistance were:

- classroom observations

- training in Spanish

- PLCs focused on TLI topics

- small-group instruction

- pre-K specific coaching

Teachers noted that, in most cases, additional coach support meant coaches had less available time for each teacher, given the coaches' other responsibilities.

Participants' Final Comments

Focus group participants were asked to share any other thoughts not mentioned earlier in the discussion. Participants reiterated how much they appreciated the TLI grant and the resources it provided them. They also expressed concern about what would happen after TLI funding was gone. Participants were particularly concerned about losing their coach and the impact that loss would have on the campus. They asked that principals be made aware of just how critical it is to have a support person on staff.

Conclusions

It is clear that the TLI grant is having a positive impact on campuses. Teachers are more focused on making data-based decisions and using research-based strategies to improve literacy instruction, and they perceive that students' academic performance has improved as a result of TLI efforts.

As TLI comes to a close, program staff should focus on how to support campuses in sustaining their efforts after the grant ends. In addition, campus administrators should pay careful attention to ensuring that staff are available to support teachers. In the absence of physical resources, on-campus knowledge and support are most important for continued success.

Appendix—Focus Group Protocol

1. What grades do you teach?

2. What professional development (PD) activities offered by TLI have influenced your teaching? (For example, data meetings, oral language and vocabulary, phonological awareness, writing.) What other types of PD would you like to have?

3. What have been the most (least) useful materials and resources you've received? Explain.

4. What additional resources or supports are needed?

5. What challenges have you faced implementing techniques and strategies learned through TLI professional development?

6. Are there any literacy practices that you or your school has implemented that you feel have been particularly successful and you'd like to share with other teachers, schools or districts? What are they and why do you think they have been successful?

7. Explain how, if at all, TLI has improved your ability to implement other district initiatives? (For example, Dual Language, Response to Intervention, CRMs.)

8. What will sustain you once the grant is no longer funded, and how can we facilitate independence in the absence of grant funds?

9. Have you seen any changes in student learning or behavior as a result of TLI initiatives, PD or support?

10. What are the benefits of having a campus literacy coach?

11. What additional ways could the coach have supported your teaching?

High school staff only:

1. Have you reviewed your student data, and if so, have your students grown as much as you'd like?

2. What about compared with last years' growth? What factors may be influencing student growth (e.g., class size, discipline, program implementation fidelity)?

3. What factors may be influencing your ability to implement the program with fidelity?

4. Does student behavior, student engagement, or discipline influence student performance?