The Meadows Center
FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK

STRIVE

Delivering Professional Development That Sticks: A Guide for School Leaders

Elizabeth Swanson, Ph.D., *The University of Texas at Austin*

Alicia A. Stewart, *Central Connecticut State University*

Delivering Professional Development That Sticks: A Guide for School Leaders

Most educators think of professional development (PD) as a way to influence the uptake of evidence-based practices.[1,2,3] However, PD can also play an important role in sustaining the practices over time—a critical ingredient for improving outcomes for all students. A number of studies have identified key features of PD that support both the long-term use of practices after support has dissipated[4,5] and the spread of practices across settings.[6]

Recently, researchers examined the efficacy of the **Strategies for Reading Information and Vocabulary Effectively (STRIVE)** PD model, which includes four key features to encourage sustainability—deep understanding of instructional practices, transfer of ownership, social networks, and critical mass—and teaches educators evidence-based literacy practices infused into social studies classes.[7] Those practices are described in Table 1.

Table 1. STRIVE Instructional Practices

Practice	Description
Before Reading	
Background knowledge building	Students are provided illustrations of the text content and engage in teacher-led discussions about the illustrations to make connections between prior knowledge and new content.
Vocabulary instruction	Each lesson includes two high-utility vocabulary words important to social studies understanding. Students complete the first half of a semantic map. Teachers introduce the word using a student-friendly definition, lead a discussion guided by a visual representation of the word, and provide examples of the word in the appropriate context.
During Reading	
Questions to prompt text-based discussion	Teachers lead a text-based discussion framed by various question types to encourage literal and inferential thinking.
Get the gist	Students create and use gist statements—main idea statements that support content comprehension.[8] The strategy includes two steps: (a) Who or what is this about? and (b) What is the most important idea about the "who" or "what"? Teachers model the strategy and then guide students to compose brief gist statements after each major section of reading.
After Reading	
Vocabulary instruction	Students return to the semantic maps. Provided a list of four words, students chose two related to the target word. Students write a sentence using the word to demonstrate understanding. In a "turn-and-talk" activity, students apply their understanding of words in a way that connects to their lives (e.g., If you could go on an **expedition**, where would you go and why?). In a word-building activity, students add prefixes or suffixes to the target word to create new words.
Summary writing	Students use gist statements from sections of the text to write a summary of the entire passage.

After the study, researchers examined the persistence and spread (i.e., sustainability) of the instructional practices 1, 2, and 3 years after participation in STRIVE PD.[9] Findings from these two studies indicate that students of teachers who participated in the STRIVE PD model outperformed their "business-as-usual" peers on measures of vocabulary, content knowledge, and informational text comprehension. Effect sizes were medium to large on most measures.[7] In addition, 100% of teachers who received STRIVE PD reported using two or more of the instructional practices 1, 2, and 3 years after STRIVE PD and support dissipated.[9] On the following pages, we highlight three features of sustainability used in the PD model and how they can be infused into any PD program.

Deep Understanding of Instructional Practices

Most PD is a "one stop shop," where teachers receive isolated training and are expected to return to their classroom and deliver the new instructional practices with expertise. These methods may lead to an increase in teacher knowledge but typically do not result in a sustained change in class-room practice[10,11] or a boost in student outcomes.[12,13] When teachers thoroughly understand a set of instructional practices, teachers are more likely to deliver the practices as designed. A deep under-standing also allows teachers to make adjustments in ways that maintain the integrity of the instruc-tional practices, increasing the probability of spread to a new group of students or another subject matter.[6,14]

STRIVE PD was distributed over time (see Table 2) to encourage a deep understanding of evi-dence-based vocabulary and reading comprehension practices infused into fourth-grade social studies. Teachers participated in an initial workshop-style session that lasted 6 hours. During the session, teachers learned about the evidence base supporting the instructional practices, watched high-quality models of implementation via video and live demonstration, planned for implemen-tation with their own students, and practiced using the instructional practices. This intensive work-shop provided a solid understanding of multiple aspects of the instructional practices.[15,16]

Then, every 6 weeks, teachers met in small teams of four to six. These teacher study teams allowed teachers to reflect on prior implementation and learn new instructional practices to implement during the next unit of study. Through STRIVE PD, teachers learned how to implement a series of 36 lessons that contained vocabulary and reading comprehension practices infused into social studies.

Table 2. Distribution of STRIVE PD Over Time

STRIVE Practice	Initial PD	Unit 1	Teacher Study Team Meeting	Unit 2	Teacher Study Team Meeting	Unit 3
Background Knowledge						
Explicit Vocabulary Instruction						
Questions to Prompt Text-Based Discussion						
Gist Statements						
Summaries						
Context Clue Strategy						

Teachers did a great job and implemented the lessons as they were written. As a result, effects on student outcomes were statistically significant (see Table 3). Schools may read about these effects and wish to replicate them. The only way to replicate the results is to replicate the implementa-tion—in this case, delivering the 36 lessons as they were designed. The key to achieving this goal with a different group of students is to ensure that teachers have a deep understanding of the in-structional practices developed through a PD model distributed over time.

Table 3. STRIVE PD Effect Sizes on Student Outcomes

Student Outcomes	Researcher-Supported PD Versus BAU	School-Supported PD Versus BAU
Social studies knowledge	0.55*	0.51*
Social studies vocabulary	0.49*	0.49*
Informational text comprehension	0.32	0.26*
General vocabulary	0.03	0.07*
General reading comprehension	0.06	0.04

Note: Effect sizes were calculated using Hedges's g. See Swanson et al. (in press) for more information about student outcomes. PD = professional development; BAU = business as usual.
*Statistically significant.

Transfer of Ownership Through Social Networks

Typically, when a school or district adopts a new set of practices, outside experts (e.g., researchers, publishers, PD providers) come in and teach the teachers, who return to their classrooms to implement the new practices. One feature of PD that can improve the sustainability of such programming is a shift in ownership from the external group of PD providers to the internal authority of teachers.[6] When ownership shifts, the practices become "self-generative." That is, teachers can train newly hired teachers, support one another as implementation issues arise, and encourage the continued use of the instructional practices. A transfer of ownership requires careful planning. One way to plan ahead for transfer of ownership is to facilitate social networks. Teachers report that social networks provide ongoing access to knowledge, feedback, and social support to deepen understanding and practice new approaches. Social networks also prevent feelings of isolation[14,17] and facilitate the maintenance or persistence of the practices as teachers navigate shifting school demands.[18]

The STRIVE PD study[7] was designed to examine efficacy on student outcomes when ownership of PD was transferred to school leaders. We did this by randomly assigning schools to one of three conditions: researcher-supported PD, school-supported PD, or business as usual. All teachers in all schools took part in the 6-hour researcher-led workshop. Then, teacher study team meetings were led by either the researchers (i.e., researcher-supported PD) or school leaders (i.e., school-support-ed PD). The final group conducted business as usual and did not receive STRIVE PD. This design allowed us to determine whether transferring PD ownership to school leaders was as effective as PD led by researchers. We learned that regardless of whether teachers received PD support from researchers or school leaders, effects were statistically significant on student measures of social studies vocabulary, social studies knowledge, and informational reading comprehension (see Table 1). These findings suggest that transferring ownership by enabling social networks through teacher study teams is efficacious.

Critical Mass

Next is the issue of "critical mass." According to prior studies with thousands of schools,[15,19] teachers and schools starting within a larger cohort were more likely to sustain practices after initial training and supports ended. This means that initiatives taken up by all schools in a district or all teach-ers in a school are more likely to persist and spread than initiatives taken up by a smaller group of teachers or schools. In one large-scale study,[19] the number of other schools in the district using the same program was a strong predictor of sustainability over time. Although researchers have not yet uncovered the precise critical mass threshold or whether this critical mass is equally potent at the classroom or school level, it seems that community matters.

For this reason, we recruited large numbers of schools and school districts: 79 schools across five school districts. In one district, all fourth-grade teachers in all schools participated. These teachers indicated that they were eager to continue using the instructional practices after the study ended, and many teachers reported that they used the practices in other subject areas. In addition, word spread throughout the district that the fourth-grade teachers were involved in something new and interesting. As a result, fifth-grade teachers requested training in the same practices. In this district, critical mass encouraged teachers to continue the practices, spread them to other subject areas, and spread them to other grade levels.

Meeting Teachers' Needs and Improving Student Outcomes

Findings from an examination of STRIVE PD provide evidence that important student outcomes can be affected by PD.[7] The model itself serves as an example to educational leaders as they plan for PD that influences sustainability of classroom practices over time on their own campuses.[9] Information about STRIVE PD and the accompanying lessons can be found on the website of The Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk: https://bit.ly/STRIVE_UT. When effective PD models meet teachers' needs by developing deep knowledge of new practices, transferring ownership of the PD and practices, and promoting social networking, practices persist over time and students benefit.

References

1. Lockwood, M. (2018). Making teacher teams work. *Educational Leadership, 76*(3), 64–70.

2. Rodman, A. (2018). Learning together, learning on their own. *Educational Leadership, 76*(3), 12–18.

3. Sprick, R., & Knight, J. (2018). Involving teachers in schoolwide behavior policy. *Educational Leadership, 76*(1), 48–53.

4. Coburn, C. E., Russell, J. L., Kaufman, J. H., & Stein, M. K. (2012). Supporting sustainability: Teachers' advice networks and ambitious instructional reform. *American Journal of Education, 119*(1), 137–182.

5. McIntosh, K., Horner, R. H., & Sugai, G. (2009). Sustainability of systems-level evidence-based practices in schools: Current knowledge and future directions. In W. Sailor, G. Dunlap, G. Sugai, & R. Horner (Eds.), *Handbook of positive behavior support* (pp. 327–352). Springer.

6. Coburn, C. E. (2003). Rethinking scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher, 32*(6), 3–12.

7. Swanson, E., Stewart, A., Stevens, E. A., Scammacca, N., Capin, P., Hamilton, B. J., Roberts, G., & Vaughn, S. (in press). Investigating the role of professional development in impacting upper elementary student reading outcomes. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness.*

8. Klingner, J. K., Vaughn, S., Boardman, A. G., & Swanson, E. (2012). *Now we get it! Boosting comprehension with collaborative strategic reading.* Jossey-Bass.

9. Swanson, E., & Stewart, A. A. (in press). Examining sustainability one, two, and three years after receiving professional development on evidence-based literacy practices. *Teacher Education and Special Education.*

10. Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development.* Learning Policy Institute.

11. Richardson, V. (2003). The dilemmas of professional development. *The Phi Delta Kappan, 84*(5), 401–406. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170308400515

12. Basma, B., & Savage, R. (2018). Teacher professional development and student literacy growth: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review, 30*(2), 457–481. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-017-9416-4

13. Wasik, B. A., & Hindman, A. H. (2011). Improving vocabulary and pre-literacy skills of at-risk preschoolers through teacher professional development. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 103*(2), 455–469. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023067

14. McLaughlin, J. W., & Mitra, D. (2001). Theory-based change and change-based theory: Going deeper and going broader. *Journal of Educational Change, 2*(4), 301–323.

15. McIntosh, K., Mercer, S. H., Nese, R. N., Strickland-Cohen, M. K., & Hoselton, R. (2016). Predictors of sustained implementation of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 18*(4), 209–218.

16. Moore, J. E., Mascarenhas, A., Bain, J., & Straus, S. E. (2017). Developing a comprehensive definition of sustainability. *Implementation Science, 12*(110).

17. Klingner, J. K., Vaughn, S., Tejero Hughes, M., & Arguelles, M.-E. (1999). Sustaining research-based practices in reading: A 3-year follow-up. *Remedial and Special Education, 20*(5), 263–274, 287.

18. Hargreaves, A., & Goodson, I. (2006). Educational change over time? The sustainability and non-sustainability of three decades of secondary school change and continuity. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 42*(1), 3–41.

19. McIntosh, K., Mercer, S. H., Nese, R. N., Strickland-Cohen, M. K., Kittelman, A., Hoselton, R., & Horner, R. H. (2018). Factors predicting sustained implementation of a universal behavior support framework. *Educational Researcher, 47*(5), 307–316.

Suggested Citation

Swanson, E., & Stewart, A. (2021). *Delivering professional development that sticks: A guide for school leaders.* The Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk.

STRIVE