

LEARNING FROM DISTRICTS SERIES BRIEF 3

Professional Learning for Better Instruction

THREE LESSONS

When and how does professional learning lead to more effective instruction? Our recent work with the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL) sheds light on how professional learning might be designed to achieve more-effective teaching. While C-SAIL's work focused on the implementation of college- and career-readiness standards, **we believe the lessons we learned apply to most any professional learning aimed at improving instruction.**

Lesson 1: Bringing together principals, general education teachers, and teachers of special populations for professional learning benefits both teachers and students.

Traditionally, professional learning experiences have targeted specific groups of teachers: general education teachers, special education teachers, and teachers of English Learners (ELs). Such an approach often results in siloed experiences and limited learning about how to attend to the needs of *all* children.

The C-SAIL Study. From 2015–2020, C-SAIL conducted surveys of 84 district officials, 439 principals, and 1,760 teachers from more than 170 districts in five states—California, Massachusetts, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas; 36 interviews with state officials and 54 district interviews across nine districts within those states; and in-depth teacher interviews, classroom observations, and focus groups with students in three districts. This brief summarizes what we learned from the data gathered during the study.

C-SAIL teacher and school-leader interviews revealed that including all teachers and school leaders in professional learning communities and other collaborative opportunities may improve the effectiveness of professional learning. Several districts in our study designed such professional learning opportunities and also included principals in the learning experience.

This approach offered two key benefits:

- **It helped strengthen implementation** because it encouraged “more information sharing, stronger networks, and calibration of instructional expectations, helping to combat potential feelings of isolation for [students with disabilities] or EL teachers who may be alone at their school sites,” as we reported in a 2020 article. And because principals were trained in the very instructional practices their teachers were expected to implement, they were better equipped to support teachers.
- **It focused teachers’ attention on strategies for differentiated instruction.** Learning collectively gave teachers insights into how to integrate general education strategies with instructional strategies designed to support students with disabilities and ELs.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Set up professional learning so school leaders, general education teachers, and teachers of special populations can participate in professional learning activities together.

Lesson 2: Teachers are better equipped to change classroom instruction when they have the opportunity to critically analyze the alignment between the desired change, the resources available to support that change, and their students’ needs.

Districts and schools often lack the capacity to develop their own resources for implementing instructional changes and must rely on externally developed resources, which are rarely perfectly aligned to the needs of a particular district or school. This misalignment can result in gaps between the desired change, instructional resources, student needs, and teacher context. For example, a district may want students to engage in classroom discussions in mathematics to deepen their content knowledge but may select a curriculum that leaves little time for discussion within its pacing guide. If

this misalignment goes unnoticed, it could result in a failure to change instruction and improve student learning.

In our C-SAIL teacher interviews, we learned the importance of providing teachers with opportunities to critically analyze the gaps between the change they are expected to make, the resources designed to facilitate that change, and what they are currently doing in their classrooms. Our study suggests that, without such opportunities, teachers may assume that a resource is completely aligned to the expected instructional change when it is not. Such an assumption could result in an inability to adequately meet student needs or effectively shift instructional practices. (For example, the principal at one school noted that “even if teachers implement the math curriculum with fidelity, they will still be teaching only 50 percent of the standards.”)

Providing teachers with opportunities to think about alignment also equips them with the capacity to make sense of the changes, plan how they will use new resources, and identify where and how they will need to supplement those resources.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Give teachers the time and support to deeply analyze the connections and disconnections between the expected instructional changes and the resources available to support those changes—and allow teachers to weigh in on how to address the gaps.

Lesson 3: Balancing detailed guidance with flexibility for teachers to adapt the guidance can lead to better implementation of the desired change.

In the C-SAIL study, we found that it is crucial to individualize professional learning to meet the needs of each teacher—meeting teachers where they are and adapting professional learning to account for variations in their content knowledge, experience, and classroom context. Our findings suggest that achieving balance between specific guidance and on-the-ground adaptation can be critical to shaping implementation. Several districts in our study achieved that balance by using an approach we call *flexible specificity*.

These districts fostered flexible specificity in two key ways:

- **Shaping professional learning with the aid of teacher input.** Including teachers in the development of the professional learning helped to ensure it met their

specific needs. Districts collected data to better understand teachers' needs, invited teacher representatives to join district committees, and then developed supports that were responsive to the needs teachers identified.

- **Articulating clear processes for how teachers could adapt instruction or instructional resources to meet their own needs or the needs of their students.** Districts often do not account for teachers' need for individualization in ways that keep the integrity of the policies or interventions intact. Flexible specificity gives teachers the leeway to make adaptations while maintaining alignment with the changes being implemented.

Flexible specificity is highly collaborative. As one of our teacher respondents said, educators “worked closely together to analyze what their students needed, how to meet those needs in dynamic fashion, and how to decide whether those adaptations were appropriately aligned.”

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Provide enough information for teachers to implement the new idea with sufficient fidelity, but enough leeway for them to adapt and refine the process to play to their own strengths and meet the needs of their own students.

In Sum

Collaboration, sensemaking, and flexible specificity can motivate teachers and lead to instructional change.

Teachers' enthusiasm for professional learning activities is critical for meaningful change in the classroom, yet there is little research on how to cultivate such interest. As we have described here, C-SAIL found that districts and schools succeeded in fostering teachers' belief in instructional change when they:

- provided collaborative learning opportunities with teachers of diverse learners;
- provided opportunities for teachers to identify and address the gaps in how a new reform intersected with their current way of teaching; and
- struck the right balance between clear guidance and adaptability.

Professional learning that includes these elements can play a crucial role in building teacher buy-in for school-improvement efforts and in shaping better classroom implementation.