

# PATHWAY SEVEN: TEACHER SUPPORTS AND ADULT LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Critical to student and school success is the commitment of time and resources to support the on-going professional development and learning of administrators, teachers, and staff. The Teacher Supports and Adult Learning Communities Pathway helps to connect district, school, and community based efforts to support and develop the knowledge and skills of adults who are essential in the early learning process: early childhood professionals, service providers, family and community members, teachers, administrators, and staff. The Ready Schools Community-District Team addresses this challenge by providing advocacy, linkages, and resources to facilitate the professional development of key adults working across settings to prepare young children for early and on-going success.



## Key Understandings

- ▶ There should be a shared vision of teachers as leaders and learners.
- ▶ The work of early childhood professionals and of PreK-3rd grade teachers and staff is joined by common goals and must be linked by common understandings of child development and effective teaching and learning.
- ▶ Teacher support is a top district priority. Recruiting, developing, and retaining well-prepared educators is essential to develop, implement, and sustain the Ready Schools Initiative.
- ▶ Early childhood professionals and elementary educators must engage in shared professional development to address issues of curriculum alignment, assessment, planning, and transition practices.
- ▶ Family and community members are involved in intentional and meaningful ways. They are a regular part of collective inquiry and problem solving by joining teachers and other educators as part of Adult Learning Communities (ALCs) or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that support student success.



## The Work

The Community-District Team works to identify resources and facilitate communication and linkages to enable families, communities, early childhood educators, and elementary school and district staff to develop common understandings of ways in which they can work collaboratively and individually to support adult learning that enhances student learning and development.

A reciprocal process for shared learning and support among PreK-3rd grade teachers and other early care and education providers is ideal for alignment of curriculum and instruction across school and community educational settings. However, education professionals on the front lines often wear multiple hats and have limited time and resources to implement this type of comprehensive effort. In order to bridge the PreK-3rd grade divide, Community-District Team members must advocate for, initiate, and facilitate collaborative opportunities for PreK-3rd grade and early care and education professionals to develop the knowledge and skills to effectively support all children. The overall effort includes district and school administrator buy-in and support to allow for sufficient resources and time to make this vision a reality.



## Sign of the Times

Districts, schools, and communities that support each other by pooling resources and eliminating redundancy will have a better chance of sustaining initiatives.

Faced with severe budget cuts, many districts have been forced to cut teacher assistant positions. Teacher assistants are valuable school personnel as they lead small group instruction, help teachers with daily tasks, and support the overall operation of the school. Without teacher assistants, teachers are finding it difficult to leave their classes even for a brief restroom break. The Down East Partnership for Children has turned to community volunteers to fill this gap and help support teachers.



## Who is Involved: Why and What are Their Roles?

**Early Childhood Professionals:** Early childhood professionals play an essential role in educating and learning from families, communities, and Pre-K-3rd grade teachers and staff. Early childhood professionals benefit from identifying their own professional development needs, and seeking ways to improve these targeted areas. They should also participate in ALCs when possible. By creating a common language, early childhood and elementary teachers can better analyze and discuss situations surrounding core academic and social issues.

**Elementary Teachers:** Elementary teachers, administrators, and staff must collaborate within and across grade levels and with early childhood professionals to align curriculum, standards, and instruction across family, school, and community settings. Teachers spend time in other classrooms to provide feedback and support. They analyze their own classroom practices and identify areas for improvement. They participate in ALCs and take advantage of professional development offerings.

**Administrators:** Administrators make teacher support a top priority and allocate enough time, money, and human resources for this purpose. They encourage and facilitate ALCs, high quality professional development, and teacher participation in professional organizations.

**Families and the Community:** Families and community workers who can come in the classroom to provide support and contribute the resources of their time, experience, and expertise are critical partners. Their firsthand knowledge of child needs and interests can be used to influence and support teacher goals and practices. The "adopt a grandparent" model is a popular one where a retired community member helps in the classroom for a year.

**Higher Education Professionals:** Higher education professionals provide expertise and access to research-based effective practices, continued professional development, training, and technical assistance.





## Sustainability

District administrators, particularly superintendents, need to provide support both financially and philosophically to create a group of education professionals, with similar priorities and goals, to meet the needs of children and families from birth through 3rd grade and beyond. Systemic support is critical to sustainable success.

Families and communities can provide valuable resources beyond monetary contributions to sustain the Teacher Supports and Adult Learning Communities Pathway. For example, in Brunswick County Schools, the Communities in Schools Initiative has a strong presence. Communities in Schools communicates pertinent information to stakeholders, engages community members in educational work, and supports teachers and schools in their efforts to assure student success and family involvement. Community-District Team members should tap into agencies and organizations that are already engaged in work aligning with Ready Schools to increase the positive impact on early education.

Families and communities can provide tutoring and mentoring for students, especially those at-risk for school failure, which in turn helps teachers. Both Carteret County and the Down East Partnership for Children redefined family involvement to reflect work in the schools beyond simply attending end-of-year performances. Area businesses in Nash and Edgecombe counties provided gift cards in large denominations. The Community-District Team broke these large gifts up into \$25 and \$50 increments. When families volunteered in schools, as defined by the new definition of family involvement, their names were entered into a drawing for a gift card. This strategy helps recruit and involve stakeholders in order to gain buy-in and sustain efforts to support teachers.

Local institutions of higher education can provide on-going technical support and professional development. The University of North Carolina Wilmington, like several other universities and community colleges, is developing an online professional development model to serve teachers of children birth through 12th grade. Similar public school-university partnerships might also support the early childhood education community.



## Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

1. In what ways can the Community-District Team help support teachers and schools in educating their children?
2. Are there consistent, common district-wide professional development opportunities for early childhood professionals and PreK-3rd grade teachers, administrators, and staff?
3. How are teaching assistants and other paraprofessionals prepared to meet the needs of students?
4. What community resources are used to support the professional development and learning of the adults who teach and care for children?
5. To what extent does our Team focus on efforts and resources to improve compensation and reduce turnover among the early childhood and PreK-3 workforce?
6. Are there opportunities and resources to enable early childhood professionals to collaborate with and participate in training with elementary teachers and staff?



## Taking Action

### Key Strategies

#### Adult Learning Communities (ALCs)

Providing time, space, resources, and structure for continued professional growth is key to supporting the adults who support the children. Approaching adult learning and training in a shared, collaborative manner helps communicate that professional development opportunities are a part of everyday work rather than an unconnected activity. Shared professional development provides families, teachers, and early childhood professionals with an opportunity to learn together and exchange knowledge that comes from their own area of expertise.

Adult Learning Communities (ALCs) focus on what Astuto and colleagues (1993) label the professional community of learners, in which the teachers in a school and its administrators (or any other group of professionals) continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit. In ALCs, educators can share evidence of student learning and engage in inquiry, reflection, and dialogue that build shared understandings and experiences.

ALCs have proven to be a powerful tool for staff development and an effective means for school change and improvement. By participating in an ALC, teachers can become more effective and thus, student outcomes improve.

#### Mentoring and Coaching

In order to be meaningful, professional development opportunities should be long-term and reinforced by coaching or mentoring. These two strategies are key for strengthening learning as well as sustained, accurate implementation of new strategies and materials. Additionally, leaders must prioritize time for professional development and ALCs.

#### Job-Embedded Learning

Advocate for and/or provide resources to support other job-embedded learning such as book study groups where interested educators can meet to share and study professional literature or explore issues and factors that affect their students and their classrooms. The Community-District Team can help increase educator and early childhood professionals' participation by going through the process of securing continuing education units (CEUs) for successful completion of various professional development events and learning programs.

#### Technology and Online Learning

Advocate for the utilization of technology to support adult learning. It can be costly to take educators out of their workplace for additional training and professional development. Archiving videos and recordings of professional development and creating electronic resources for teachers can be a cost effective supplement to traditional training sessions and provide opportunities to reach individuals with limited flexibility in their schedules.



## Issues/Challenges/Barriers

The recurring barriers of limited time and money can affect Community-District Teams' progress in the Teacher Supports and Adult Learning Communities Pathway. For example, education and compensation levels for early childhood professionals and teacher paraprofessionals have been historically low, making it difficult to attract and retain highly qualified staff. Additionally, teachers and early childhood professionals have heavy workloads and many responsibilities. Finding time for teachers to participate in trainings, money for teachers to attend or develop trainings, and substitutes to cover classes so that teachers can leave the building can be very difficult. Consequently, there can be a lack of vision and programming for systemic, district-wide professional development.



### **Ready Schools in Action: The Effective Community-District Team**

#### **Acknowledges the Causes of Teachers' Stress**

Ask teachers to identify things that cause them daily stress. By categorizing responses into school stressors and personal stressors and reporting results to teachers and administrators, the Community-District Team can help identify root causes and work to ameliorate teacher stressors.

#### **Encourages Teacher Leaders**

Frequently survey teachers to determine their needs and interests and create trainings on the basis of their responses. Identify teachers' strengths, challenging them to serve as leaders in their groups.

#### **Embraces Differing Opinions**

With seemingly growing criticism of schools and educators, it is crucial that Community-District Teams listen, engage, and become part of the dialogue. Including naysayers on committees and engaging teachers in meaningful discussions and decisions on school policies, practices, and procedures is one way to encourage and embrace differing perspectives.

Adapted from: ASCD. (2001). How can we support the whole teacher? *Educational Leadership*, 68(8), p. 96.



## Strategies for Overcoming Issues/Challenges/Barriers

Few districts have provided a systemic district-wide professional development plan for early childhood educators and PreK-3 teachers. Some ways to increase support for and implementation of this type of plan and target professional development opportunities include:

- ▶ Raise awareness of the importance of early learning and education experiences;
- ▶ Raise awareness in the community of the importance of providing early childhood educator and teacher training and raising salaries;
- ▶ Articulate a PreK-3 vision and goals for professional development and teacher support;
- ▶ Create a district-level teacher professional development and support planning team;
- ▶ Provide sufficient resources so all teachers, regardless of where they work, can attend professional development opportunities offered across the district; and
- ▶ Provide mentors and/or coaches for early childhood professionals and teachers to enhance the implementation of best practices and lessons learned during training sessions.

Strategies for addressing limited time and financial resources include the following:

- ▶ Identify and secure community resources to facilitate professional development opportunities;
- ▶ Partner with higher education institutions for the development and delivery of focused trainings; and
- ▶ Locate resources to provide stipends for continuing education.

Early childhood professionals and PreK-3 educators often have limited knowledge about what happens in other settings. By removing barriers created by lack of common language and misunderstandings of effective practice at different developmental levels, Community-District Teams can enhance cross-setting communication and promote smooth transitions for students. Strategies include:

- ▶ Provide opportunities for PreK and Kindergarten teachers to have reciprocal classroom visits;
- ▶ Support ALCs that cross levels yet promote examination of similar issues; and
- ▶ Encourage curriculum alignment and facilitate a common PreK-3 language about learning.

Low literacy and educational levels are often barriers to families' willingness or ability to help with homework or provide other learning supports outside of school. They are often unaware of school and community resources that are available to assist them. Possible solutions include:

- ▶ Partner with civic, faith-based, or other community organizations, area employers, or community colleges to provide GED, adult basic literacy, or computer literacy classes for families;
- ▶ Provide parenting classes emphasizing developmental stages and child abilities; and
- ▶ Provide fun, educational activities for parents to do at home with their children.

**For more resources see Appendix H, Resources for the Pathway Seven: Teacher Supports and Adult Learning Communities at the end of the Toolkit.**