

PATHWAY SEVEN: TEACHER SUPPORTS AND ADULT LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Ready Schools are designed to support the ongoing learning and development of school teachers, staff, and administrators. Ready Schools leaders:

- ▶ Ensure that space, time, tools, and resources are purposely designed to support all school personnel's capacity to work effectively with children.
- ▶ Promote and foster professional learning communities and high-quality sustained professional development. They value and support opportunities for educators to:
 - » Work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. In order to promote and insure seamless social and academic experiences for children, professional learning communities work within and across grade levels, between homes and the school, and between the school and the community.
 - » Partner with family and community members to align school, family, and community knowledge and to design goals to meet the needs of all children.



Key Understandings

The school and district leadership support adult learning when (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001):

- ▶ There is a shared vision of teachers as leaders and learners.
- ▶ Family and community members are regularly part of a process of collective inquiry and problem solving.
- ▶ The school culture supports adult learning communities that are designed to meet a variety of needs and are comprised of those who can best meet the identified goals.
- ▶ Teacher support is a top priority, as evidenced by time allocation and both financial and human resources.
- ▶ Educators spend time in the classrooms of others and offer concrete and constructive help and support.
- ▶ Educators are encouraged to participate in professional organizations.
- ▶ There are multiple and ongoing opportunities to participate in meaningful professional development.

Creating Collaborative Learning Communities

It is important that adult learning communities in schools include family and community members to ensure:

- ▶ Meaningful and intentional engagement opportunities for family and community members;
- ▶ Shared decision making on behalf of children; and
- ▶ Community conversations that address the following questions (Ritchie, et al., 2009):
 - » In what ways is education a shared responsibility between schools and families?
 - » What does it mean for families to be involved in their children's education?
 - » How do schools and families work together to create a positive school experience that honors all students and their families?
 - » How can families and communities support school personnel to provide an enriching and learning opportunity for all children?



Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

Schools and communities may wish to reflect on the following questions as they engage in the Ready Schools Assessment Process. These questions, along with the suggested tools, may help further the collaborative work of schools, families, and communities:

- ▶ What collaborative structures are in place to ensure regular communication? (Professional Learning Communities, School Improvement Plan Teams, vertical teams, Ready Schools teams, etc.)
- ▶ Does the time allotted for collaboration match the priority and value placed on communication?
- ▶ Who participates in decision-making processes in our school?
- ▶ Does our current professional development program meet our real needs?

Professional Development Assessment Tools

A planning checklist based on the North Carolina Professional Development Standards provides educators with a framework for developing individual professional development plans.

The McREL Professional Learning Community Checklist provides the opportunity for school staff to rate the school's professional learning community on four characteristics: Shared Sense of Purpose, Collaborative Activity and De-privatized Practice, Supportive Staff and Cooperation, and Shared Decision Making.

Dialogue is a vital factor in any genuine effort to evaluate school practices and policies. Real change will be sustained by a regular and honest exchange of ideas within a collaborative team.



Taking Action

The following information, guiding questions, and activities can help schools, districts, and communities to begin or further their work supporting adult learning communities.

Teacher-focused Professional Development

Teacher-focused professional development should support one or more of the following objectives (Ritchie, et al., 2009):

- ▶ To enhance or strengthen teacher/child (student) relationships: research concludes that when a child has a positive relationship with the teacher, the child is more likely to be successful in the classroom and have positive peer relationships.
- ▶ To improve relationships between school and home: research indicates that schools that view education as a partnership requiring a collaborative effort produce strong connections between home and school.
- ▶ To define and reinforce high academic expectations for all children: research shows that high expectations paired with positive emotional classroom and school climate are essential for students' success.

- ▶ To use research to guide practice.
- ▶ To use data to guide and monitor progress and change.
- ▶ To focus on intentional and balanced curriculum and instruction.
- ▶ To focus on instructional practices that have been most successful in helping all students achieve at high levels.
- ▶ To help teachers value and utilize multiple knowledge sources, including formative assessments, family input, and culturally responsive practices.

Types of Teacher Supports

In order to be meaningful, professional development opportunities should 1) be long-term and reinforced by mentoring or coaching; 2) prioritize time for teams of teachers to work together to plan lessons, review student work, and use data to inform curriculum practices.

Job-embedded Professional Development:

Job-embedded professional development opportunities occur during the course of the work day. Many of these opportunities may lead to college credit or licensure (continuing education credits or teacher induction programs). These opportunities may be offered in a variety of settings: within the school, district, county, or through the higher education system.



Action Research:

Children benefit from educators who know how to determine important questions and look for systematic ways to gather evidence that helps them make decisions about effective ways to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. Key features include:

- ▶ Action research is practical and grounded in the day-to-day work of the teacher/researcher.
- ▶ The teacher/researcher is not removed from what is being studied, but rather is a part of it.
- ▶ The research is modest, manageable, and directly related to daily adult and student work.
- ▶ By using careful research procedures, teachers/researchers can resolve their own teaching challenges. They learn how to ask focused questions, define terms, collect relevant evidence, analyze data, and obtain meaningful results. The findings become immediately applicable to individual situations, even if the data suggest more exploratory research needs to be done or several possible options for action.



Ready Schools in Action: Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools: Teachers Engage in Collaborative Learning

Chapel Hill-Carrboro school district invited Dr. Sharon Ritchie to present her research data focusing on teacher behaviors towards boys (PreK-3rd grade) of color. After the presentation, the kindergarten teachers designed their own action research projects specifically targeting boys of color.

Study Groups:

Study groups work well for small groups of people who share an interest in a topic or issue. The group meets on a regular schedule and looks into the topic using books, articles, or research to add to their understanding.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs):

DuFours (2002) defines a PLC as a "collaboration of teachers, administrators, parents, and students who work together to seek best practices, test them in the classroom, and continuously improve processes, and focuses on results." Their three "big ideas" include a focus on learning, collaboration, and results.

Mentoring:

Teacher mentoring programs are designed to pair more experienced teachers with novice teachers with the aim of reducing teacher turnover and increasing teacher effectiveness. Key features include:

- ▶ Mentoring should not be tied to supervision and evaluation. When it is, mentee teachers may be less likely to ask important questions or take risks.
- ▶ Ideally the mentor and mentee work at same grade level.
- ▶ Mentors should be selected because of their belief in supportive relationships, not because they believe that they can "fix" someone.
- ▶ Mentors themselves should receive quality training and support.
- ▶ Mentors should be paid, given release time, or be rewarded through status and recognition for their participation.
- ▶ Mentoring programs should receive administrative support, including adequate funding and allotted times for mentors and mentees to meet on a regular basis.
- ▶ This mentoring relationship should be publically acknowledged as an important aspect in the school.

Coaching:

Coaches provide one-on-one support, feedback, or assistance. Research has identified several benefits for those who are coached, including improved implementation of teaching strategies, increased sense of belonging, and a contribution to a positive school climate. There are three models of coaching (MLRN, n.d.):

1. Mirror coaching: The teacher requests that the coach observe a particular event in the classroom. The coach only observes that event and provides written feedback. Once the coach has submitted the feedback the coaching relationship is over.
2. Collaborative coaching: As with mirror coaching, the coach only observes the requested event but the feedback is discussed in person.
3. Expert coaching: The coach is considered a "master teacher." The coach's observations are not limited to teacher requests. The coach directs and guides the discussions during the post-conference.