

Train the Trainer: Investigation of LEAP Leaders' Capacity on Influencing Mandated School-Based Professional Development for Teachers in District of Columbia Public Schools

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RATIONALE

The push to improve student achievement outcomes in K-12 education has led to an emphasis on improving teaching quality. LEarning together to Advance our Practice (LEAP) is the District of Columbia Public Schools mandated school-based professional development for teachers. “LEAP is based on the principle that teacher effectiveness increases when teachers have frequent access to school embedded professional learning connected to quality curricular materials [and] is designed to surround teachers with layers of support by building the leadership capacity of high-performing teacher leaders, instructional coaches, and assistant principals who are content experts” (Learning Forward, 2019). In a previous study, the Investigation of the Role of LEAP, data from secondary math teachers suggested implementation inconsistencies district-wide and noted, if optional, the program would not be their primary source of development (Kearney, 2020). The purpose of this paper is to determine whether, and to what extent, the site-based professional development leaders’ capacity, relating to experience, content knowledge, school-site program structure, and program knowledge influence the implementation of the district’s intended model of the reform-oriented professional development initiative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2010 blueprint for revising the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) teacher-specific proposal acknowledged the compelling research regarding long-term consecutive learning experiences’ significant positive impact on student achievement when led by top-performing teachers (ESEA, 2010). Consequently, an emphasis is placed on professional development and the need for metrics as evidence of educator effectiveness. According to Woodland and Mazur (2015) educator evaluations and professional learning communities lead the charge. However, school structures often do not offer the culture and climate necessary to ensure collaborative experiences where teachers can share expertise and learn from one another (ESEA, 2010).

The U.S Department of Education’s Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) program provides financial support to districts for the development and implementation systems and professional development proven to increase teacher knowledge and skills in high needs schools (*Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program*, 2020). In 2012, the District of Columbia Public Schools partnered with Leading Educators, a professional learning non-profit that partners with school systems to build and sustain conditions, teaching, and leadership, to launch its Teacher Leader Innovation (TLI) Project. The \$62 million, five-year federal Teacher Incentive Fund granted, project represented an innovative intersection of educator evaluation and professional learning communities and was designed to ensure that by the end of 2016-2017, at least 90% of teacher and principals were highly effective or effective, as determined by the district’s evaluation system (Learning Forward, 2019).

According to Dastgeer and Iqbal (2017), the desire of organizations to maximize the benefits of large investments in training must be met with providing employees supporting environments that enhance their self-efficacy and retention capabilities. Before launching in all DCPS schools, the initial TIF funding amount (approx. \$23.7mil) covered two years of providing significant customized supports, including designing effective roles for teachers, “working with principals to elevate teacher leaders’ strengths to address the most pressing priorities in their schools” through intensive training on adult learning and development of teacher leaders for all intended school-based LEAP leaders, and providing “ongoing counsel and technical assistance” (Learning Forward, 2019).

Coherence and alignment in the system support programmatic success. For LEAP, gradual release from Leading Educators to the district and from the district to school leaders continued and came with increased principal flexibility and increased LEAP leader autonomy, including sequencing adult learning modules based on school needs. The annual LEAP Team Design Guides, accompanied by an online LEAP design tool, provides school leaders with non-negotiables, processes, policies, examples of successful models, sample schedules, and support with designing the initial phase of their school-based approach for a given school year based on content expertise and aspects of principal leadership self-reflection (DC Public Schools, 2020).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

Sixteen LEAP leaders, identifying as instructional coaches, teacher leader innovators, and department chairs, across three grade bands and five of the eight wards, were surveyed. 88 percent of participants reported having five or more years of teaching experience. Although 60 percent reported having no prior instructional coaching experience, 69 percent of participants reported two or more years of LEAP leader experience; the Majority four or more years leading and 88 percent leading in the same school for at least two years. Participants represented LEAP leadership for all core contents, inner core, special education, and “other,” with only 50 percent self-

identifying as a content expert for their supported areas. Content development was in the bottom two of LEAP professional development components, with 33 percent of math LEAP leaders reporting zero content development as part of their LEAP professional development compared to data analysis (highest) component reported by over 87 percent of all leaders as part of their professional development. Mostly all participants reported having more than five teachers on their caseload, with 44 percent coaching eight or more teachers.

63 percent of respondents indicated 50 percent or less release time for dedicated teacher support. Still, all participating LEAP leaders reported having differentiated teacher support. Moreover, 31 percent of leaders reported being unfamiliar with LEAP design guides and 56 percent reported not having teacher support differentiated based on the design guide. When it came to seminar-specific questioning, 29 percent stated having LEAP seminars tailored to teacher needs and 34 percent stated seminars are tailored to student needs. Simultaneously, half of all survey participants reported having either no term-specific plan or lack of plan availability for teachers to view each term. When asked about school structures, 63 percent reported common planning, but only 43 percent common lesson plan structures and 57 percent common data protocol tools. Yet, seventy-five percent of touchpoints occur weekly to bi-weekly with weekly co-planning touchpoints occurring two and half times more than observations during the same period. It was reported that modeling touchpoints either happened monthly or not at all.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Data overwhelmingly showed the system is flawed. The vast disparity in implementation indicates a need for a deeper dive into analyzing the readiness of principals and instructional superintendents to meet the varying needs of schools, data transparency, recurring foundational program training for Teacher Leaders to improve knowledge of resources and supports for improving shared leadership capacity of school-based staff. It is recommended that the principal self-reflection portion of the LEAP Team Design Guide include reflections based on previous year's principal effectiveness data with additional emphasis placed on aligning comprehensive school plan goals and rationale for LEAP team compositions in Part 1 and supporting LEAP leader reflection and documentation (i.e. LEAP term plans with LEAP leader reflections and teacher seminar or teacher growth tool reflections) regarding Part 2 of Phase 1 planning. For non-LEAP leading assistant principals, effectiveness should be considered in the planning phase regarding skills and contributions to culture and climate of instructional supports. In Part 3 of Phase 1 planning, as it pertains to assessing adult leadership skills, a reference with detailed evidence-based criteria should be provided as additional support. This could mirror or serve the same role as the Teacher Leader Innovative Project's reported, successful models.

With high-stakes evaluation, transparency and teacher empowerment should be prioritized. Districts should ensure that LEAP plans are made public via snapshots and rated based on the extent to which the contents address the school's instructional and academic needs of teachers and students. With the important role human capital plays in ensuring positive outcomes, instructors should be notified of ineffective leaders and provided an opportunity for appropriate restoration. In-house promotion for teacher leadership positions should be prioritized and in cases where it is not possible, leaders should demonstrate a commitment to growth by providing rationale and a plan for improving the leadership capability of the school's staff. Collaboratively, the district and union could support personnel teams by equipping schools with streamlined guidance in hiring tools for considering candidates against the corresponding culture of achievement factors and health of the instructional leadership team (i.e. sample rubric).

In addition, low-cost and mandatory online foundational LEAP leader orientation modules can be developed and shared for consistent and ongoing training of program policies, procedures, resources, etc. Instructor step levels should be monitored for potential modified use of TLI project's future use in differentiated professional development to meet levels of content expertise. A project analysis should be completed to inform future or newly expanded project considerations, including criteria for involvement in the selection of project advisory boards. Due to the limitations and brief nature of this study, further research is needed.

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