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Teaching Children Well

New Evidence-Based Approaches to Teacher Professional Development and Training

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Introduction and summary

We have a problem. Increasing teacher and teaching effectiveness is arguably the paramount challenge facing public elementary and secondary education, and we have too few proven-effective ways of getting this done. Federal funding is pouring into initiatives that emphasize measurement and improvement of teacher performance, including the Obama administration's signature education-reform initiatives like the Race to the Top program for states, the implementation of data systems that track student achievement, and funds dedicated to investments in innovative models of educational improvements in districts. Yet there is no stockpile of effective teacher professional development and training approaches from which states and districts can choose.

Further, the evidence suggests that most teacher professional development has little if any impact, anyway. The gaps between the stated aims of federal and state policy, the needs of the teacher workforce, and proven solutions that improve teacher and teaching effectiveness are a serious impediment to any effort to improve student achievement. In the clutter and clamor of claims and tools for improving teachers' impacts, it is critical that state and district superintendents, principals, school boards, and reform leaders grasp the importance of their choices and direct their attention to evidence-supported models.

It is a travesty that despite districts spending thousands of dollars per teacher each year on professional development, these dollars are most often spent on models that are *known to be ineffective*. These are predominantly one-time workshops that focus mostly on awareness or general knowledge rather than specific skills, or models that have little basis in what is known about effective instruction, curriculum, or classroom interactions. No wonder there is so little evidence of impact. Federal and state policymakers should take note—unless evidence standards and rigorous review are used to channel money well, most of the current investment in teacher professional development is unlikely to have its intended effect. With student achievement at an all-time low, particularly in comparison with other nations, with education such a critical piece of economic development, and with

state and local financial resources strained to the breaking point, it is imperative that education leaders use existing money wisely and efficiently.

We all agree teachers are the critical leverage point for improving a host of desired student-learning outcomes—achievement test scores, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, and life skills. So it seems only sensible to invest in teachers’ skills and knowledge, an argument the public also endorses. But unless those investments are targeted for and deliver proven results for students—real learning gains and skills that make them competitive in the workplace—opportunities both for the improvement of the public education system and for the millions of children it serves will be squandered.

The aim of this report is to illustrate features of new evidence-supported approaches to professional development that have promise for closing not only the evidence gap, but the achievement gap as well. The focus is on one web-based, scalable approach to professional development—MyTeachingPartner, or MTP—that illustrates how evidence-driven professional development can be designed and used to improve teacher effectiveness and student learning. MTP uses a standardized method of online, individualized coaching and a library of highly focused video clips showing effective teachers in action that are tightly coupled with a standardized metric for observing teacher practice in the classroom, called the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or CLASS.

CLASS and MTP are examples of recently developed models of teacher assessment and professional development funded by grants from a range of federal sources. They include models for observing teachers’ instruction in mathematics lessons that are useful in modeling feedback about instruction in the upper grades. There are now professional-development tools that show promise for improving instruction and children’s math skills in preschool.¹ In early literacy, there are now videos to provide teachers feedback with demonstrable gains for students’ skills as well as statewide models that connect individualized feedback, coursework, and assessment of students’ school-readiness skills in a program of teacher professional development.² And with the recent work of the Gates Foundation-funded Measures of Effective Teaching project—spurred by policies that require assessment of teachers’ performance, observations of teachers’ instruction, and the use of video examples of effective practice—all of these approaches will take on a much larger role in districts’ professional development approaches.

Together, CLASS and MTP reflect an emerging new wave of teacher-performance assessment and improvement systems that are embedded in and focused on the actual classroom practices of teachers (and not some distal awareness or background knowledge); that focus on skill development; and that closely link assessment with improvement.³

CLASS and MTP are not the only systems that reflect this new approach. The intent in this more detailed presentation of CLASS-MTP is to illustrate features of professional development that are linked to impact on teacher practice and student outcomes. Although the focus of the CLASS-MTP model is on teacher-child interaction, common features of effective professional development are also evident when the focus is on increasing teacher knowledge or on implementation of specific curricula.

Common among all these models of teacher professional development is a highly focused target for teacher behavior or knowledge that has a demonstrable link to student achievement. This behavior and knowledge can then be the target of professional-development activities for teachers and can be directly assessed for its impact on these very behaviors or knowledge. In this way, effective professional development, whether knowledge-, skill-, or curriculum-focused, reflects a very tight coupling, or alignment, between the activities in which teachers engage to improve their knowledge and skill and the actual student achievement and social behaviors that are the ultimate goals of professional development. In the sections that follow, these features are illustrated in considerable detail with regard to one approach that focuses on teacher-student interaction as the outcome.

This report provides background information on the broader challenges of building effective professional development for teachers, the theory of action that undergirds the CLASS-MTP system, and a description of the CLASS-MTP tools and evidence base. The report closes with a discussion of the policy and practice challenges of implementing effective systems of teacher professional development on a district or statewide level based on the evidence gleaned and lessons learned from this work.

Among the policy questions addressed are:

- What are the design and implementation features of effective professional development for teachers?
- What are the standards for evidence that can be applied to professional development models?

- Can proven-effective models also be scalable and cost effective?
- What are the state and district challenges to adopt or select proven-effective models?

Policy and decision-making recommendations include:

- Explicit requirements for criteria related to the actual processes by which specific professional-development activities are intended to improve teacher performance and student achievement.
- Evidence of impact for any professional-development model should be present in order to be eligible for use of public funds.
- Development and use of guides for selecting professional development for district and state leaders that specify explicit criteria for selection of effective professional development.
- Tighter monitoring of the use of public funds for the purposes of providing professional development for teachers.
- Requirements by states and federal agencies that direct, valid assessments of teacher performance be included as part of teacher preparation and certification systems. Direct assessments actually sample real teaching behaviors as they are experienced by students (observations or student surveys) while valid assessments have demonstrable links to student achievement and other outcomes.

In the pages that follow, we demonstrate why that time-honored practice, the one-day teacher workshop, should die a well-deserved death, and that piling up professional-development course credits and advanced degrees has virtually no impact on student achievement. We show that one of the most important factors in achieving academic progress is a students' consistent exposure to positive, cognitively demanding student-teacher interactions, and that video snippets and one-on-one coaching can inspire and transform a teacher's daily performance. It sounds simple, and it is.

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