

***Supporting Instructional Improvement:
Teacher Learning in Comprehensive School Reform***

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With the passage of No Child Left Behind, all schools are under pressure to improve the achievement of all students. At the same time, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners increasingly recognize that improving student outcomes is dependent on improving instruction: the day-to-day interactions between teachers and students.

For the past five years, we and our colleagues at the Study of Instructional Improvement at the University of Michigan have conducted research on the strategies used by Accelerated Schools Project (ASP), America's Choice (AC), and Success for All (SFA) for improving instruction and student learning.¹ While the development of instructional techniques and materials is central to ASP, AC, and SFA, all three programs recognize that effective use of these techniques and materials is dependent on multiple strategies supporting teacher learning, particularly in schools where conditions are the most challenging.

The objective of this article is to help school leaders and teachers consider how comprehensive school reform programs can support instructional improvement by highlighting promising strategies for teacher learning.

Strategies Supporting Teacher Learning

The strategies discussed below are used to varying degrees and in varying combinations by ASP, AC, and SFA to develop the knowledge and skills in teachers to improve instruction and student outcomes. Many of the strategies are consistent with current themes in research on teachers' professional development, and all are supported

by years of experience among the three programs working with schools to improve instruction.

Embedding learning opportunities in instructional materials: One strategy used variably across ASP, AC, and SFA involves providing instructional materials that are educative for both students and teachers. For instance, some materials provide examples and analysis of student work that ground academic goals in student performance and alert teachers to particular difficulties and misconceptions that students are apt to experience. Other materials include text explaining the underlying rationale of the instructional design, as well as the content-area knowledge to be covered in particular lessons.

Models of instructional practice: ASP, AC, and SFA provide teachers with multiple models of instructional practice, including vignettes describing instructional interactions between teachers and students; model classrooms where teachers can observe live instruction; and, increasingly, videos showing teachers and students working together. Such models are used to transition teachers out of established and well-worn instructional routines into new instructional routines focused on student performance and outcomes.

Collegial learning opportunities: ASP, AC, and SFA provide blueprints for organizational structures within which teachers can work together, either one-on-one or in groups. They also help teachers to learn from one another by providing additional supports, such as vocabularies for discussing the work of instruction; standard student work products and assessments for collective discussion; texts designed specifically for discussion among teachers and focused on key instructional topics; and even videos modeling collegial professional development.

Instructional leadership: Much as they seek to focus teaching on the learning needs of individual students, ASP, AC, and SFA seek to focus leaders on the learning needs of teachers. All three programs have designs for improving instructional leadership, both by creating new leadership roles and by reorienting conventional administrative roles to instructional improvement. Central to the designs for instructional leadership is the use of student assessment results and other information to tailor professional development opportunities to the specific needs of individual teachers.

Local and national networks: ASP, AC, and SFA create national and local networks of schools that function as key learning opportunities for both teachers and leaders. National networks provide important opportunities for learning about on-going developments in the programs, as well as opportunities for schools to provide suggestions and feedback. Local networks are especially important for helping teachers and leaders use general program resources to meet district and state standards for achievement.

Direct technical assistance: ASP, AC, and SFA provide direct technical assistance to teachers and school leaders over a period of years. Such assistance goes beyond initial training to include observation and feedback in the context of site visits; additional training for specific program components; assistance interpreting and using state assessment results; and ad hoc assistance via phone and e-mail. All three programs see direct technical assistance as an essential strategy for realizing change in schools.

Research Support for Strategies

While the strategies discussed above are central to AC, ASP, and SFA, they also reflect current research on the professional development of teachers. For example, in contrast to conventional in-service professional development, researchers increasingly

recognize a need for teacher learning that is rooted in instructional practice (e.g., Borko and Putnam, 1995; Ball and Cohen, 1999). Key resources for such learning include: opportunities for teachers to work collegially on instructional problems (e.g., Little, 1982, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1991; McLaughlin, 1993; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995); information about students' performance (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Aness, and Falk, 1995); and video and other representations of instructional practice (e.g., Lampert and Ball, 1998; Lieberman and Miller, 1999). Underlying this research is the position that practice-based learning is a key component of professional instructional practice (e.g., Darling-Hammond and Sykes, 1999).

Considerations for Program Selection

Across ASP, AC, and SFA, we see increasing efforts to provide teachers with multiple strategies that directly support implementation of instructional techniques and materials. These are not isolated and uncoordinated improvement strategies; rather, they are carefully coordinated with each other, grounded in instructional practice, and targeted at improving student outcomes. They often entail the development of new roles, structures, and functions, and they incorporate schools into networks of educators, reformers, and researchers. While the above-described strategies are promising, ASP, AC, and SFA continue to experiment with different strategies, monitor the results, and revise their programs.

When choosing a comprehensive school reform program, school leaders and teachers may wish to consider whether the program uses strategies like those used in ASP, AC, and SFA. Does the program embed learning opportunities in instructional materials? Does it provide multiple models of instructional practice? Does it provide

opportunities and guidance for collegial learning? Does it provide resources and guidance for involving leaders in the professional development of teachers? Does it provide opportunities to reach beyond the school to networks of other schools and to the program provider, itself?

In summary, a given program may include all of the strategies for teacher learning discussed above, a subset of the strategies, or even different strategies. In any case, our on-going analysis of ASP, AC, and SFA leads us to the conjecture that the more these strategies are integrated into a coherent curriculum for teacher learning, the more likely it is that teachers will use instructional techniques and materials in ways that improve instruction and student learning.

Notes

¹. For current information on ASP, AC, and SFA, the authors recommend visiting the web sites for each program (<<http://www.acceleratedschools.net>>; <<http://www.ncee.org>>; <<http://www.successforall.net>>). The authors also recommend reviewing more comprehensive accounts of each program (e.g., Hopfenberg, Levin, and Associates, 1993; Slavin, Madden, Dolan, and Wasik, 1996; Slavin and Madden, 2003; Tucker and Coddling, 1998, 2002).

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