



North Carolina Partnership Supports Stronger Teaching for English Learners

The challenge: With 100,000 English learners¹ (ELs) spread across more than 2,500 schools and more than 130 charter schools in 115 school districts, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (the Department) needed to ensure that teachers of ELs received the latest professional development available. Research has shown that teachers of ELs need to use specialized instructional practices to develop students' academic language and content knowledge to support their achievement, but not all educators have training and preparation to meet these students' needs.

¹ English learners comprise a fast-growing population of students enrolled in U.S. schools who are limited in English proficiency and require placement in language instruction programs.

The Department identified high-quality EL professional development training for all North Carolina educators, including general education teachers, teachers of special populations such as ELs and students with disabilities, and district and school administrators, as an important pathway to achieving this goal. However, limited resources precluded Department staff from traveling throughout the state to train educators in every school with an EL population, so state officials instead relied on a select group of teachers to train other educators within their regions.

This support network of teacher-trainers delivered professional development locally, increasing the Department's capacity to reach schools and students throughout the state. But leaders needed to ensure that the support network was effective. Again, geography and limited resources posed a problem. With teacher-trainers spread across the state, how could Department staff offer them ongoing, effective feedback, tailored training, and guidance? How could the Department evaluate these teachers? And how could it make sure its trainers were the best they could be, and that teachers who participated in trainings were learning how to bring best practices to their classrooms?

Our Work

With support from the Southeast Comprehensive Center, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the Department began to refine its teacher-trainer support system in 2014. Center experts worked on two fronts.

First, the Department embarked on the development and evaluation of a teacher-training cadre. The Department's Title III office, which provides professional development support on EL issues to districts around the state, worked with Southeast Comprehensive Center experts to develop a tool that would help observers document the teacher-trainers' presentation skills and subject knowledge. The tool would be used to help current trainers reflect on their practice and as guidance for hiring new trainers.

By January 2016, the tool was ready for a pilot test to ensure teacher-trainers would be evaluated accurately and consistently by different raters. Center experts tested the tool during district training sessions with promising results: Ratings of the same teacher-trainer by different raters matched 80% of the time.

On the second front, the Department set out to review and enhance its annual 3-day summer conference for EL educators, general education teachers, and administrators. Department staff wanted to know whether and how attendees would use the strategies presented in various training sessions to improve their practice. To find out, the Center and the Department developed and administered a participant survey at the end of the 2014 conference.

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By 2015, the partnership had also produced an EL strategies implementation survey to be given halfway through the school year. The implementation survey asked which strategies educators had already implemented and how they felt their summer training had supported them where it mattered: in the classroom.

- Overall, more than 95% of survey respondents indicated that the summer training was relevant to their current assignment. One respondent wrote, “I brought back what I learned at the summer training and trained our EL department for the district through several smaller training sessions throughout this school year.”
- As an example of the utility of specific training sessions, more than 90% of respondents who attended the sessions on ExC-ELL* (a 10-step teaching strategy) indicated they were incorporating EL reading and vocabulary strategies into their instruction.

*Inclusion of specific products does not imply endorsement by AIR or the U.S. Department of Education.

As the Department moved forward, Center experts provided training for the state on how to extract, filter, and analyze the data from the tool and surveys. The training also included ways to use those data to inform state-level decisions on selecting future summer conference training and EL coaching topics.

The Results

Working together, the Center and the Department now provide more support for educators, particularly those teaching EL students, throughout the state. Department staff can evaluate their EL teacher-trainers more efficiently through observation, and they have confidence in the systems’ reliability. Development of a peer observation tool is underway to allow EL teacher-trainers to observe and appraise one another during professional development sessions.

Department staff are exploring other ways to use both strategies to provide effective professional learning opportunities to educators of ELs around the state and will continue to refine its summer conference to ensure that North Carolina educators get what they need to better support students in the classroom.

“The assistance with data collection and process and procedures has made us much stronger and better able to meet the needs of EL teachers across the state.”

—Staff member,
North Carolina Department
of Public Instruction

Next Steps

Motivated by the continuing goal of improving instruction, Center experts and the Department are diving deeper into the data they have collected from EL educators since summer 2014. Working together, they are currently revising the participant survey for the 2017 summer conference to discover how educators plan to use the strategies they learn during the conference. Later in fall 2017, a revised EL strategies implementation survey will be administered to the participants to gauge how they have employed the skills and knowledge gained from the conference in their classrooms. As the Department implements the Every Student Succeeds Act, Department staff will have to implement measures of English language proficiency. Over time, these new accountability measures may illuminate the extent to which EL students are benefiting directly from this professional development initiative.

To learn more about the Southeast Comprehensive Center, visit <http://southeast-cc.org>.

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