

LEARNING TO BE A CHANGE AGENT

SYSTEM
LEADERS
MASTER
SKILLS TO
ENCOURAGE
BUY-IN FOR
REFORMS

By Nonie K. Lesaux, Sky H. Marietta, and Emily Phillips Galloway

To keep pace with expectations for student literacy achievement, instructional leaders need professional learning designed with the understanding that individuals in system-level leadership have widely varied professional backgrounds and experiences.

For example, some leaders have deep knowledge of how students learn and corresponding knowledge of classroom practices but may have limited experience with adult learning (e.g. the skills to convey that knowledge to those without it) and effecting change outside of the classroom.

In other cases, a leader may be experienced in reform, skilled in working with adults and designing effective improvement structures, but may lack knowledge of the substance of literacy reform.

Supporting implementation of any reform at scale demands skill in both areas.

In designing professional learning for system-level leaders, two participant roles emerge as key: learners of content and agents of change. As learners, the principles of strong instruction apply. Exposure to content must occur repeatedly, be connected to prior knowledge, and

is most effective when communities of learners work together. As change agents, participants must be able to broker the knowledge they have gained and build buy-in in the larger school community.

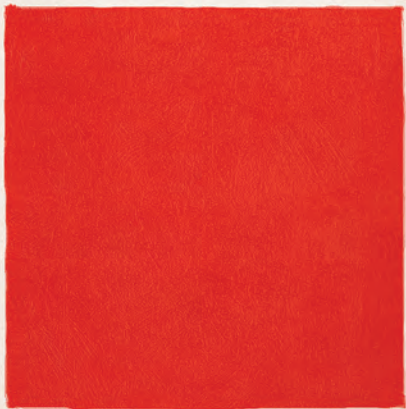
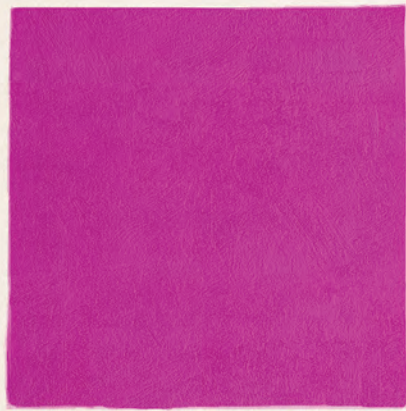
One-day, one-size-fits-all professional development workshops remain the most common method for cultivating new knowledge and capacities among educators. However, it's been clear for some time that this model lacks the intensity and multiple opportunities for learning and application known to bring about student improvement.

Although extant research points to the need to transform this approach, few districts have committed the resources — both financial and human — to professional learning that leverages what we know about learning, teaching, and school reform.

What follows is the story of a professional learning initiative that sought to provide the intensity needed to build conceptual and applied knowledge to support district leaders in assuming the role of change agents.

OVERVIEW

As a team with collective expertise in literacy instruction and capacity building among educators, we have designed and led professional learning institutes



SYSTEM LEADER KNOWLEDGE SHIFTS

	Outset of institute	End of institute	Participant reflections
Populations included in response to intervention	Response to intervention is for struggling students only.	All students participate in response to intervention through daily instruction, and some receive supplemental instruction and intervention.	"Now I know that (classroom instruction) is about good instructional strategies for all students." "Thinking about response to intervention as really a way to improve ... instruction to help all students overall."
Increasingly complex conceptualizations of response to intervention	Response to intervention is special education renamed and is a mechanism to support struggling students.	Response to intervention is a schoolwide system to identify instructional targets, improve daily instruction, and inform intervention groupings and strategies.	"All teachers are response to intervention teachers."
Assessments	Any assessment can be used to screen students for literacy risk.	Screening assessments, which assess code-based and meaning-based skills separately, are uniquely suited to surface literacy difficulties and play a vital role in response to intervention.	"Understanding the purpose of assessments is crucial."
Implementation	Response to intervention is a system that can be quickly implemented with minimal time investment.	Response to intervention needs to be carefully organized and professional learning provided over an extended period of time.	"Ongoing improvement is not the work of one, but many. Multilevel collaboration is important."

for system-level leaders whose task is to support school-based literacy improvement in one of the largest school districts in the U.S.

Our goals were to create professional learning that simultaneously builds participants' knowledge about the content of the literacy-based reform (leader as learner) and participants' knowledge leading and supporting implementation (leader as change agent). To accomplish the latter, we ask participating leaders to select partner schools in the district to serve as a field site to apply the knowledge gained in the institute.

We design the institutes much like a university course, drawing on the principles of effective adult learning communities. Ultimately, a community of practice forms through interactive, hands-on, and discussion-based sessions. Participants receive resources to support the full-day sessions and their learning outside of the face-to-face meetings. These include:

- Course syllabus;
- Slides from each session;
- A companion document for each session with more information on the content presented;

- A course book for reference;
- Webinars on key topics that include a presentation to be used in school-based work; and
- Email contact with institute facilitators as needed.

CASE EXAMPLE

We developed an institute to support system-level leaders on the design and implementation of a response to intervention model in schools serving high-needs populations of English language learners in high-poverty neighborhoods. Response to intervention is an approach that makes use of universal screening to guide the design of both high-quality classroom instruction for all students and supplemental supports for students at risk for reading difficulty.

For these schools, response to intervention holds real promise for developing students' advanced literacy skills and yet will, in many cases, require significant shifts in how schools and teachers approach literacy instruction. The 11-day, 60-hour professional learning institute progressively built participants' knowledge about response to intervention and effective literacy reform.

KEY DATA COMPETENCIES TO LEAD RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

<p>Strategist</p> <p>Identify key problem areas and develop an associated action plan that promotes teacher knowledge and builds best practices for literacy instruction.</p>	<p>Leader</p> <p>Understand the social, political, and cultural dynamics of decision making and improvement processes and connect school staff with key resources to promote buy-in.</p>
<p>Analyst</p> <p>Apply a repertoire of data-analytic strategies to identify patterns in data and sources of student difficulty.</p>	<p>Designer</p> <p>Develop an efficient and comprehensive assessment battery that allows school staff to understand student skills in key domains over time.</p>

Between sessions, participants led the work of implementing response to intervention at their partner schools. Often, leaders are expected to implement reforms at scale with little experience in doing so. These school partnerships gave leaders practice negotiating the realities of applying conceptual knowledge of response to intervention in school contexts where the leadership structure, the specific characteristics of the student population, and the existing curriculum and practices, among other factors, did not allow for simple implementation.

Three specific goals guided the institute:

- Develop participants' knowledge about the content of the literacy reform;
- Equip participants with the skills to cultivate communities of practice in their own school-based work; and
- Foster participants' identity as change agent.

1. Develop participants' knowledge about the content of the literacy reform.

The challenge this institute sought to address — implementing high-impact literacy instruction in schools with high numbers of at-risk learners — is vast and somewhat complex. If participants were to become agents of reform, they had to first understand ELL students' literacy development.

This is a population that is particularly vulnerable to school failure. Many ELLs are long-term ELLs — students who never develop sufficient English proficiency to access the mainstream curriculum independently — and, as a population, ELLs are referred to and inappropriately identified for special education services at much higher rates than their non-ELL peers.

At the same time, participants needed to understand the potential for response to intervention to support these readers. When the institute began, most participants had only a basic understanding of response to intervention and saw it as a special education model, rather than a school-based model of prevention and targeted instruction tailored to students' needs.

Four areas of conceptual shifts surfaced in participants' written reflections on key learnings gained during the institute.

1. Participants came to view response to intervention as a schoolwide system designed to support literacy development of all students, including those reading at or above grade

level — not just as a system for struggling readers.

2. Participants' understanding of response to intervention shifted from viewing it as a special education model to one designed to bolster the level of literacy instruction in every classroom.
3. Participants considered their augmented knowledge of assessment systems to be an important cornerstone of a response to intervention framework.
4. Participants noted that they had abandoned the idea that response to intervention can function as a quick fix and came to view implementation as a multiyear process involving numerous stakeholders. This shift reflects participants' growing awareness of their role as change agents and highlights the importance of developing leaders' knowledge of response to intervention to support their growth as leaders. (See table on p. 42.)

2. Equip participants with the skills to cultivate communities of practice in their own school-based work.

While the ultimate goal of our partner district was to ensure strong implementation districtwide, some of the most effective reform starts with a small group — to fine-tune the approach and ensure that it is scalable.

We designed sessions to promote community while simultaneously developing key data competencies to lead response to intervention. (See table above.) We supported all participants to serve as strategists, analysts, leaders, and designers of response to intervention.

A variety of discussion and workshop formats engaged participants in applying the material and in problem solving with each other. Participants came from a variety of roles within the district, and even from different departments. Some specialized in ELLs, others in response to intervention, while still others led teacher evaluation and development.

These different roles allowed deeper collaboration and knowledge building as participants built a sense of how their diverse roles converged around response to intervention. In addition, sessions were designed to model best practices in adult learning. We developed structured discussion protocols and activities that guided participants through the learning process.

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS TRACKER



PLEASE USE THE CHART TO INDICATE WHICH PORTIONS YOU HAVE COMPLETED IN YOUR WORK WITH YOUR PARTNER SCHOOL(S).

	Response to intervention groundwork			Examining assessment systems			Data analysis and instructional design			Advancing your response to intervention model							
	Created work plan for school collaboration	Established response to intervention team	Met with response to intervention team to discuss overview of response to intervention	Created master list of literacy assessments	Categorized assessments by type	Inventoried instructional time used for testing	Reviewed literacy data scores	Calculated percentage at risk by literacy skill	Determined instructional priority area	Discussed best practices for Tier 1 literacy instruction	Identified priority area for response to intervention system	Wrote assessment purpose statement	Created action plan for implementation				
EXAMPLE: Bay Elementary	6/15	9/05	9/22	10/11	10/22	10/23	11/5	11/5	11/7	12/13	1/5	2/7	3/15				

If you are working with a single school, place a name of a team member in each column. Each person can sign off on completed action steps. If you are following the progress of several school sites, use multiple rows to follow each school individually. Put the name of the school in each column.

During the second half of the institute, participants partnered with one or two K-8 schools to carry out the improvement process at a local site characterized by high numbers of ELLs and in the early stages of implementation. The regular sessions, therefore, served two functions: to build system-level leaders' knowledge about response to intervention and ELLs while also building their capacity to support their schools and associated principals and teachers.

The institute closed with presentations by institute participants, who were often accompanied by some of their school partners. The presentations were made in a case consultation format, where the presenter focused the audience on key aspects of the partner school's plan and sought input and feedback that could move the work forward.

3. Foster participants' identity as change agent.

Beyond building participants' knowledge about response to intervention and tool kit for working with schools, the institute focused on how to bring about change in schools.

Many participants had been communicating compliance-based procedures to their schools. The institute transformed participating leaders into change agents in the literacy reform process, with an eye toward sustained improvements in ELLs' reading outcomes in their partner schools.

An implementation progress tracker supported participants' efforts to lead change. (See table on p. 44.) Webinars allowed participants to review session content and to share what they learned with members of their school teams. Using presentations and other supporting materials, participants led professional learning communities being cultivated at the schools.

In many cases, participants undertook a systematic approach with schools to do this work by:

- Forming a school-based team;
- Holding regular meetings over the course of eight weeks as part of a long-term plan;
- Using case study materials as a platform for knowledge building;
- Using discussion protocols as a basis for dialogue and decision making; and
- Engaging school-based teams in independent work between meetings.

LESSONS LEARNED

We noted four key takeaways to consider when designing professional learning for instructional leaders and educators.

Structure. This initiative confirmed and reinforced what research says about effective professional learning that results in instructional change. Effective professional learning:

- Is sustained — in this case, over six months;
- Centers around a community of practice (system-level leaders);
- Includes multiple modes of delivery (webinars, course material, hands-on, interactive work, discussion);

- Is anchored in context (a partner school site); and
- Provides ongoing opportunities for questioning and reflection.

Deep focus on content knowledge. As educators move up through the system and become instructional leaders, they are increasingly placed in the role of expert on topics and problems about which they have varying degrees of knowledge. For participants in this institute, baseline knowledge about response to intervention was relatively limited and thus capacity to engage schools in the finer details would be limited.

Professional learning must therefore be deep and sustained enough to build participants' content knowledge. Participants need resources that follow a progression for individual learning and can be accessed outside of the classroom.

In this institute, many participants relied heavily on these resources and reported greater understanding and confidence in working with schools on their response-to-intervention process. The resources included:

- Webinars;
- Modules with professional learning community exercises;
- Companion book, written for practitioners; and
- Case-based materials for use with partner schools.

Situating the work within the reform landscape. If any new initiative is to be effective, instructional leaders and educators must understand the ways in which it relates to and will bolster other improvement efforts. To accomplish this, the professional learning community analyzed the relationship between response to intervention and other reform movements in the district, including Common Core State Standards.

In addition to building their knowledge about response to intervention, participants highlighted this aspect of the institute work as crucial to their own learning and success.

CREATE KNOWLEDGE

Just as careful instruction is required to improve student outcomes, instructional leaders need time and a safe learning environment in order to hone their craft.

Immersing key instructional leaders in interactive and transferable professional learning creates the knowledge base necessary to enact complex policy changes. Successful professional learning in today's reform landscape requires that participants be regarded simultaneously as content learners and as change agents.

Nonie K. Lesaux (nonie_lesaux@gse.harvard.edu) is a professor, Sky H. Marietta (sky_marietta@gse.harvard.edu) is a post-doctoral fellow, and Emily Phillips Galloway (ecp450@mail.harvard.edu) is a doctoral candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts. ■