



RESEARCH REVIEW

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STUDY PINPOINTS SUCCESS FACTORS WHEN TEACHERS LEARN FROM PEERS

► THE STUDY

Lotan, R.A. & Burns, D. (2019). *The Instructional Leadership Corps: Teachers leading sustainable professional learning in their communities.* Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. Available at learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/instructional-leadership-corps-teachers-leading.

Elizabeth Foster (elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org) is vice president, research & standards at Learning Forward. In each issue of *The Learning Professional*, Foster explores recent research to help practitioners understand the impact of particular professional learning practices on student outcomes.

California's Instructional Leadership Corps (ILC), a peer-led, ongoing professional learning initiative operating since 2014, has served more than 32,000 educators in 2,000 schools and 495 districts across California. An additional 30,000 educators participated in ILC-related conferences and presentations, and 38,000 more trained as instructional coaches.

ILC is focused on developing the collective capacity and knowledge of teachers, principals, and superintendents to lead ongoing professional learning to implement effectively the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards. ILC's peer-to-peer design and large scale make it unique and an important area for study.

Researchers Rachel Lotan and Dion Burns from the Learning Policy Institute recently published a study about ILC's impact and the factors that have contributed to it. This study, which focused on four schools, was part of a larger study, which found that the initiative led to changes in instructional practice and improvements in student engagement in learning.

The four-site case study looked at how ILC teams were established and operated in different settings and sought to learn what factors enabled this practitioner-led professional learning to take hold, grow, and become successful in these varied settings.

The authors' research adds to our understanding of how to support teacher-led professional learning, which can be challenging for schools and districts to embed and sustain. Their study is of interest to Learning Forward because it supports our continuing efforts to highlight what professional learning aspects and conditions have a positive impact on teacher practice and student outcomes and what we can learn about specific initiatives that are generalizable to other contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The authors chose the sites for the four case studies based on reports that the ILC process had taken root, the ILC team reached an above-average number of teachers, teachers gave positive feedback about ILC participation, and the sites varied in demographics, geographic distribution, and engagement with local organizations. The four selected schools shared the common goal of addressing a chronic problem of practice, often inequities in students' access to high-quality instruction.

The four sites were:

- **Madera Unified School District**, a rural district serving largely Latinx students with varying levels of English proficiency, many of whom are from low-income families. ILC teacher leaders focused their efforts on language and literacy development through workshops, a train-the-trainer program, and induction supports for new teachers.
- **East Side Alliance**, a formal partnership between a high school and seven feeder districts in a moderate- to low-income community. Two ILC teams focused on math instruction, including new approaches to instruction, lesson study, and cross-grade alignment workshops.
- **Conejo Valley Unified School District**, a high-achieving and well-resourced district.



Two ILC middle and high school teams focused on Next Generation Science Standards implementation via webinars, workshops, co-planning, and co-teaching.

- **North Orange County**, a partnership between a professional learning network of ILC teacher leaders and a higher education institution's center for teaching careers. This site offered conferences focused on the instructional shifts required by new content standards and mentoring programs for new and prospective teachers.

The study examined how these sites implemented ILC strategies and connected them to broader efforts of the districts and counties. The research team also examined the perceived impacts on teachers' practice.

Researchers visited the sites, where they administered teacher surveys and conducted interviews of 28 teachers and 12 district and school administrators, adding follow-up phone interviews as needed. They also observed two ILC regional conferences, seven ILC team meetings, and classrooms of four participating teachers. Additional data included artifacts such as videos and video transcripts, presentations from ILC workshops, planning documents, and project reports.

FINDINGS

The researchers grouped their findings about success factors into five central lessons:

Teachers value professional learning led by their colleagues, in contrast to professional development from outside consultants. They

appreciated the accessibility of their colleagues and their familiarity with students and the setting.

ILC membership enhances teacher leaders' professionalism and sense of efficacy. They spoke of their experience as "empowering the profession."

The ILC supported structures that foster instructional change. The ILC ensured protected time and opportunity for professional collaboration, and this added legitimacy and institutionalized schools' commitment to professional learning on the new standards and curricula. The researchers recommended that future work prioritize engaging administrators with the authority to make these structural adjustments.

Systematic follow-up contributes to implementation of instructional shifts. Changes in pedagogy were more likely with sustained and consistent reflection and dialogue, both verbal and written, among colleagues. The researchers recommended building in additional strategies for such follow-up.

Strategic relationships support deep, widespread professional learning. Teacher leaders who built relationships with stakeholders such as district leaders, teacher associations, universities, philanthropic organizations, and policymakers were more able to align efforts, marshal resources, and share expertise, and they also reported the work was valued more by others.

This last finding speaks directly to Learning Forward's focus on moving away from sit-and-get workshops toward more comprehensive, embedded, ongoing professional learning. It is a reminder that understanding and undertaking this shift is still a struggle for many

educators and one that we need to continue to support.

The **Standards for Professional Learning** are evident and supported throughout the ILC approach and the research findings and recommendations. The **Leadership standard** is underscored by the fact that sites did particularly well when leaders were engaged and informed about the work, as well as the study's findings about supportive structural arrangements and teacher leaders developing professional efficacy through leadership.

The fact that this professional learning is teacher- and student-centered underscores the importance of the **Learning Communities standard**, which emphasizes that relationships are at the core and must be supported by a culture of collective responsibility and continuous improvement.

This study and the ILC program itself also support the comprehensive approach of the Standards for Professional Learning. Just as there is no single standard or element that alone makes professional learning systems succeed, it is the multipronged approach of capacity building, content expertise development, leadership, and supports that leads to positive outcomes in the ILC sites.

Studies like this one illuminate not just the impact of professional learning on teachers and students but also the factors that contribute to successful and sustained implementation that leads to impact. These learnings are valuable for everyone because the needs they target affect almost all schools and districts. ■