



How do we prepare teachers for accelerated learning? Experts weigh in

BY JEFNA M. COHEN

When I was a primary classroom teacher, it was my goal for each student to make one year's worth of growth in reading over the school year. My same-grade

teachers stuck to that goal, too. It made sense because not only did it feel attainable, it also felt like a reasonable amount of progress to ask students to make in a single school year.

I was so invested in my students' reading that often I tacked my success

as a teacher directly to their progress on whatever measurements I was tasked with using, such as DIBELS, Fountas and Pinnell's assessments, an Orton-Gillingham-based assessment, and others. Never far from reach, my reading clipboard was piled with pages

of class scores, conference comments, and reading group notes so I could track students' progress toward the growth goal.

But over time, I realized that not all students make that kind of growth each year, and I worried: What about students who start out behind their peers? All growth is a celebration, but when students begin lagging, where does that leave those kids over time? If a low-scoring student achieves that hard-won year's worth of reading growth, they're still low-scoring entering the following grade, too. And if I couldn't catch those kids up to their peers, and their subsequent teachers couldn't either, what would become of them?

Most educators already know the answer: Underperforming students are remediated into low-ability groups out of the best intentions, but they usually get stuck there. Year after year, they meet in the low-scoring groups, their teachers and interventionists working mightily to give them the skills they need to move forward. And they do move forward, but usually not enough to ever reach their grade-level peers.

I can clearly picture my students who received reading intervention services lining up at the door and leaving with the reading assistant

who accompanied them to another classroom down the hall. I felt a mixed sense of relief at my temporarily shrunken class size, but also some concern. Those students were missing out on what the rest of the kids were doing.

While working on this issue of *The Learning Professional* and digging into academic acceleration approaches, I've wondered: What if I had known about acceleration as a way to give all students access to grade-level content? Do my former students' current teachers know about it? And what would we all need to learn to make it successful?

Acceleration is complex. It involves a mindset of seeing the strengths in all kids and forming relationships with them so they can learn in a supportive community, techniques for planning scope and sequence in a way that streamlines standards, and frequent student assessments so teachers can adjust instruction in real time.

And while some of those things already come naturally to many teachers, other aspects are counterintuitive, especially for educators who have been teaching differently for many years. This kind of reflective, data-driven teaching that provides many pathways for students

to master content is unlikely to happen without strong professional learning.

What should that professional learning look like? What would have made a difference for me and my students, and what would make a difference for those grappling with learning gaps now? I asked a group of experts in the field to weigh in on what educators need to know about acceleration and how professional learning can help them build that knowledge and accompanying skills.

By sharing highlights of their recommendations, I hope to give educators at varied levels some ideas of where to start with this promising and relatively new approach. After all, as one of those experts, assistant superintendent Renee McCall, put it, "Educators should know that the challenges they face as a result of unfinished learning is a universal concern. School communities must collectively embrace a shared responsibility for meeting the needs of all learners."

What follows are excerpts from my conversations with these experts, condensed and edited for clarity.

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Renee McCall

Assistant superintendent for teaching and learning, Newton Public Schools, Newton, Massachusetts

Educators must be provided with opportunities to grapple with content standards to deepen their understanding of the grade-level demands and expectations and identify potential areas of growth. With an understanding of current grade-level expectations and knowledge of subsequent grade-level standards, educators are better equipped to make more informed instructional decisions, such as providing targeted instruction on prerequisite skills. Also, by focusing on fewer concepts and deepening conceptual understandings of the content, students will have a strong foundation to build on in subsequent years.

Professional learning should be designed to provide educators with an understanding of the impact of unfinished learning, balanced by highly effective, practical strategies and examples that help to concretize skills and knowledge. Ongoing, frequent data collection and analysis will inform educator practice and provide key information related to student progress toward mastery of content standards. Additionally, it is integral that educators engage in frequent discourse with their colleagues in a professional learning community about student progress to continuously sharpen their practice to effectively meet the needs of all learners.



S. Ayesha Farag

Assistant superintendent for elementary education, Newton Public Schools, Newton, Massachusetts

Many educators have not had adequate professional learning specifically focused on meaningfully and effectively instructing students with gaps in foundational learning to access grade-level work. It is essential to understand that shifting from remediation practices to an acceleration approach is likely a significant shift, requiring ongoing and tailored support for educators of varied roles, such as teachers, coaches, and administrators.

Such substantive pedagogical changes necessitate a long-term commitment to professional learning that is practical, job-embedded, and sustained over time, with frequent opportunities for modeling, practice, and feedback.

One strategy is to start small. Compelling research and the urgency to serve all students can lead us to set ambitious goals that are greater than we can realistically support. We launch with the best of intentions but are unable to sustain momentum or focus in the face of the demands of new learning, coupled with the complexities of everyday work in schools.

One example of starting small is focusing on practicing instructional changes in one content area. Another idea is to conduct a case study by focusing on the needs of one or two students, centering their needs in instructional planning, monitoring the impact, and creating time to reflect and learn.

The insights gained from small, highly focused practice and reflection enable educators to build their understanding and skills for learning acceleration and gradually broaden the application of their repertoire of strategies to plan, implement, analyze, and adjust instruction to meet the needs of all learners.



Verónica Madrigal

Principal, Grant Elementary, Long Beach, California

Learning acceleration requires a shift in how we provide Tier 1 instruction. Through a coordinated and collective process, educators in Long Beach Unified School District, including the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development and school site leadership, learned that one of the most important aspects of learning acceleration is providing all students with quality core instruction. To do this, we leveraged our instructional leadership teams to provide professional development to support this priority.

My school, Grant Elementary, made this shift by using research from Student Achievement Partners on critical literacy accelerators implemented through Tier 1 instruction. A pivotal moment was the restructuring of interventions. Our support team had to rethink when and how we pulled students for intervention. Interventions were moved into classrooms, allowing specialized staff to work in tandem with teachers. This “push-in” model removed a learning barrier that had existed previously. Students were not missing critical instruction as a result of being pulled out and falling further behind.

Now we continuously evaluate our instructional practices, conduct data dives, adapt our professional development plan, and implement tier levels of support to ensure that we keep students moving forward in their intended grade-level pathways.

Additionally, educators in our diverse learning community hold the belief that all students enter the school site with cultural and linguistic assets. We build on students’ assets while ensuring they have access to grade-level tasks with the appropriate scaffolds. Teachers provide strong instruction using formative practices to determine what students know as well as to determine the needed scaffolds required by students to make grade-level work accessible.

In partnership with students and caregivers, high expectations are set for all students regardless of their learning abilities. These partnerships, grounded and cultivated by mutual trust, allow for deep engagement in the classroom.



Wanda Mangum

Learning Forward senior consultant

One important skill for acceleration is applying gradual release of responsibility concepts in the classroom consistently to assure that all students are given the opportunity to experience success as an individual learner. The teacher guides the students and has a conference with each individual to customize the support based on the learner’s needs.

Once receiving customized support based on the keen observation of the teacher, the student can practice concepts and skills at an independent level. This practice often leads to the student successfully deepening their knowledge as they apply the skills on a regular basis with ongoing teacher feedback.

Professional learning is important for building this kind of knowledge and skill. Collaboration with a mentor, instructional coach, or instructional leader can help teachers refine and apply best practices. Research is clear about the impact that coaching support can have on the application of the knowledge and skills acquired across all content areas and concepts (e.g., Joyce & Showers, 2002), and acceleration should be no different. In fact, Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey (2013) have emphasized how mastery of the gradual release concept is related to teacher modeling, often linked to the support obtained during their professional learning experiences.

REFERENCES

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