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INVESTING IN GROWTH

A Roadmap for Advancing Teacher Professional Learning in Rhode Island

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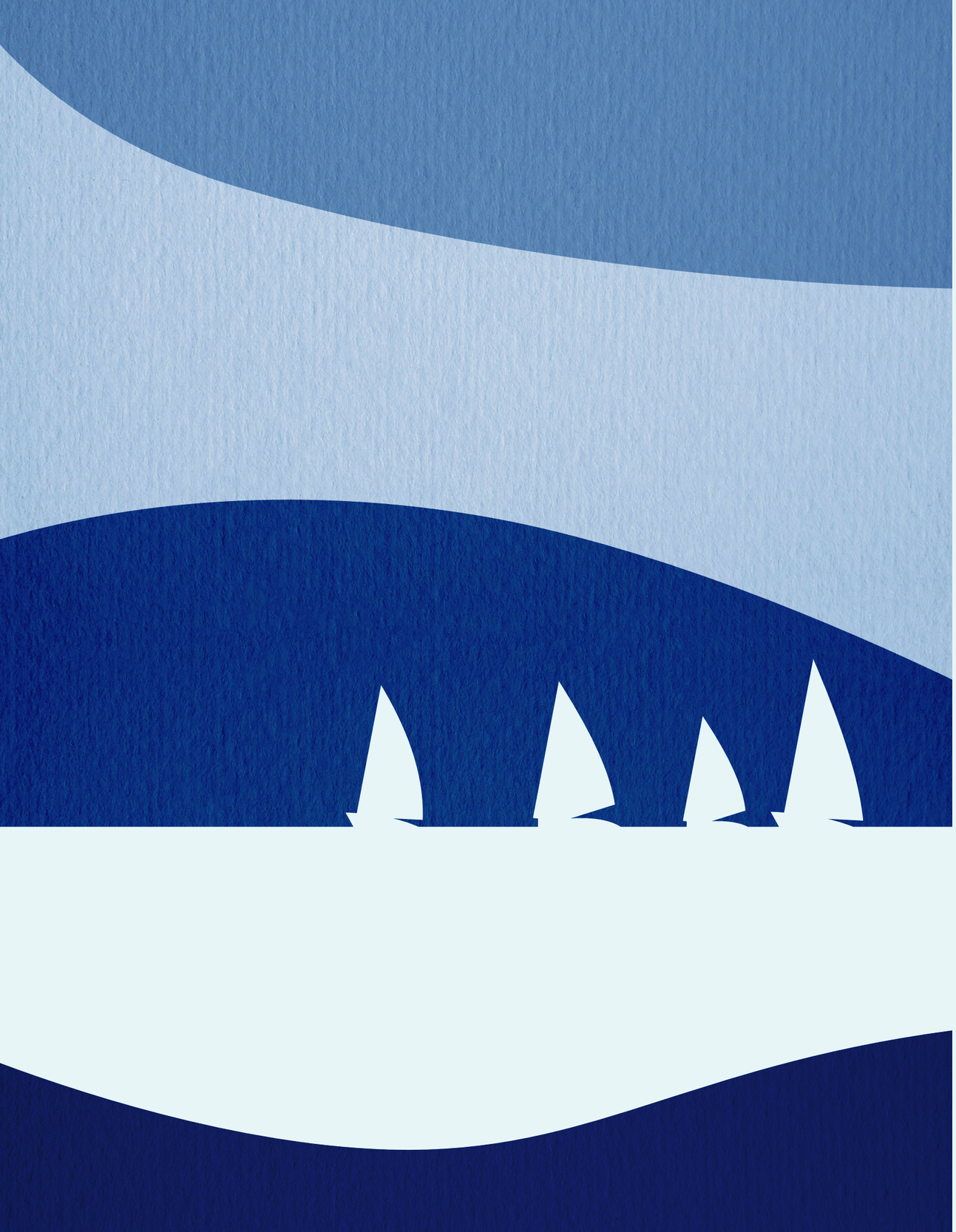

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INTRODUCTION

Across the country, and in Rhode Island, the way students are taught is changing. In 2019, Rhode Island passed two pieces of legislation to reshape instruction in core subjects, like language arts, math, and science. The Right to Read Act requires districts to provide professional learning (PL) for teachers about the science of reading–an approach to literacy instruction rooted in cognitive science.[1] Rhode Island's curriculum legislation required districts to adopt new, high-quality curriculum materials (HQCM) in mathematics and English language arts (ELA) before the 2023-24 school year and in science before the 2025-26 school year.[2] These shifts in curriculum materials and instructional approaches come on the heels of the pandemic and the substantial challenges it brought to public schools across the state.

These kinds of instructional changes are difficult to enact at scale. They require districts to implement PL that helps teachers learn new ways of teaching and to provide ongoing support for that teaching.[3] Research across the country suggests that these types of reforms–to curriculum materials and to instructional approaches–are particularly effective when they are coupled with high-quality PL opportunities to support teachers in using the materials.[4]

Rhode Island is making substantial investments in PL, including expanded efforts in instructional coaching, an especially high-leverage way to support teachers in improving their instruction.[5] Given this promise, it is critical to ensure that PL in the state leads to the kinds of instructional shifts envisioned by state legislation.

In this report, we review the landscape of PL across the state, exploring how these investments are playing out in Rhode Island districts. Bringing together interview, survey, and administrative data, we describe the state of PL, highlight roadblocks Rhode Island districts face when enacting PL policies, and provide recommendations from the field to overcome those roadblocks. Specifically, we focus on state and district leaders' work developing and enacting PL in traditional public school districts, centered around four pillars: **Strategy, Budget, Personnel, and Time.**

Analyzing the Rhode Island landscape, we uncovered learnings in four different areas:

STRATEGY

Districts report that their strategies often prioritize curriculum implementation, are developed using student achievement data and input from internal staff, and are constrained by interrelated factors around districts' budget, time allocation, and collective bargaining agreement negotiations.

BUDGET

Statewide budgets for PL have nearly doubled over the last decade, with spending increases concentrated both in Providence and in wealthier districts. Most of that money was spent on paying educators to attend or facilitate PL.

PERSONNEL

The personnel most often facilitating PL were instructional coaches and school- and district-based leaders. While the number of instructional coaches statewide doubled over the past decade, much of that increase was in Providence. Coaches across the state left those jobs at high rates.

TIME

Districts report having limited time for PL during the school day, but nearly every district had regular time set aside for teachers to plan instruction together, referred to as common planning time (CPT), built into their schedules. During PL time, teachers most often analyzed student data, learned about their curriculum, and planned lessons. They spent less time practicing and getting feedback on instruction.

Rhode Island districts face roadblocks around each of these pillars when they are supporting PL. Specifically, districts wrestle with:

1. **Enacting Statewide Strategy**: Districts reported that they have been asked to adapt to many new initiatives at once, often without any funding support, making it challenging to get investment from teachers and develop coherent and sustained district PL strategies.
2. **Limited Budgets**: Districts reported struggling to adapt to more limited PL funding left by the expiration of federal COVID relief funds. These funding gaps may be particularly large in higher-poverty districts that often rely more on federal funding.
3. **Personnel Instability:** The limitations and inconsistency of PL funding have left districts with unstable instructional coaching capacity and fewer opportunities to build that capacity over time.
4. **Unaligned Time:** Leaders said PL time was limited and not always aligned with districts' PL strategies, and the majority of teachers did not find PL time valuable or relevant.

To overcome these roadblocks, we provide three recommendations to guide state and district leaders in strengthening professional learning in the state:

1. Stabilize investments in PL, enabling districts to make long-term strategic decisions.
2. Identify a clear instructional coaching model with aligned training and support for coaches and school leaders.
3. Strategically negotiate PL time that can enable districts' professional learning strategies, and create conditions for that time to be used effectively.

THE RHODE ISLAND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING POLICY LANDSCAPE

District, state, and national policies shape PL in Rhode Island. These policies, and the way they are operationalized, all impact how teachers experience PL. They determine districts' budgets and direct where that money is spent, change the allocation and purpose of personnel, align PL time to strategic priorities, and change districts' overall strategies.

The Right to Read Act and other state laws mandate specific PL activities for teachers.

The 2019 Right to Read Act requires all teachers to demonstrate proficiency or awareness, depending on the subject area they teach, in science of reading and structured literacy. Current teachers must undergo training to develop and demonstrate their knowledge of these literacy practices by the current (2025-26) academic year. Starting this year, teacher candidates who complete Rhode Island-approved educator preparation programs should meet proficiency or awareness requirements when they graduate, per state policy guidance.[8]

The Right to Read Act adds to a growing body of state legislation that requires regular training for teachers. In Rhode Island, teachers are required to participate in regular training on suicide prevention, trauma-informed teaching, school safety, CPR, dating violence, and family engagement.

Rhode Island's 2019 curriculum legislation does not require specific activities, but still shapes districts' PL strategies.

Rhode Island's 2019 curriculum legislation requires all districts to adopt high-quality curriculum materials in ELA and math by the 2023-24 school year and science by the 2026-27 school year. According to RIDE guidance, new curriculum materials must be chosen from an approved list with "green" ratings from the curriculum evaluation project EdReports. These new curricula require teachers to approach instruction differently, and districts need to invest substantially in PL to help teachers adjust.

Rhode Island has made additional grant funding available to districts to support instructional coaching through the Instructional Coaching Corps and a Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant.

The Instructional Coaching Corps (ICC) was a statewide $5 million grant program that provided funding to hire 26 full-time instructional coaches and an additional 9 part-time coaches in 24 traditional and charter school districts. Instructional coaches who were part of this program, along with district leadership, received professional development support over 10 sessions, which began in February 2025. These sessions provided coaches and district leaders with development around implementing systems for one-on-one instructional coaching in their schools, with a particular focus on coaching teachers to support HQCM implementation.

The state is extending some of its ICC work using a $40 million Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) Grant from the United States Department of Education. Starting in the 2025-26 school year, these funds will support (among other things) hiring and training of literacy coaches throughout the state over the next five years. The state invited traditional and charter school districts to apply for CLSD funding to employ literacy coaches to support birth through Pre-K, elementary, and secondary schools. 21 traditional public school districts will receive funding from the grant for K-12 coaches.

Districts and local teachers unions negotiate collective bargaining agreements with provisions that shape how PL strategies are enacted on the ground.

Each traditional public school district in Rhode Island negotiates a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with the local teachers' union. These mutually agreed upon contracts contain numerous provisions that affect PL. CBAs define teacher PL time, like setting the number of PL days in a year and the frequency of common planning time. CBAs affect budgets by setting pay rates for additional time outside of contractual hours, and sometimes outline personnel hiring policies for PL staff. These provisions set the stage for how state legislation and policy can be enacted in each district.

DATA SOURCES

To understand how districts are enacting PL in the state, we drew on a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data, focusing specifically on Rhode Island's 36 traditional public school districts:

- **Budget Data:** We classified the state's Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA) dataset to identify different types of PL spending and their sources between the 2011-12 and 2023-24 school years.
- **Collective Bargaining Agreements:** We reviewed districts' collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) to learn about provisions that shape PL, including the amount and frequency of PL time, stipends for teacher time, and provisions that shape how PL time can be used.
- **District Leader Survey:** In partnership with the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association, we sent out a survey to every traditional public school district in the state to learn about districts' PL priorities, activities, and challenges, and got responses from 28 of Rhode Island's 36 districts.
- **Teacher Survey:** We analyzed teacher responses to Rhode Island's statewide SurveyWorks survey to understand teachers' perceptions of their PL between the 2017-18 and 2022-23 school years.
- **District Leader Interviews:** We interviewed five of the 28 leaders who responded to our district survey and additionally drew on the experiences of five districts participating in Annenberg's PL Network. This work provided more grounded perspectives on district leaders' experiences with PL.
- **Instructional Coach Interviews:** We interviewed seven coaches and seven district leaders who participated in Rhode Island's Instructional Coaching Corps to better understand how coaching is implemented in school districts.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING?

Broadly, PL refers to the activities teachers participate in to improve in their roles. PL includes a wide range of activities, such as instructional coaching and feedback, learning about curriculum materials (e.g., unit and lesson internalization), planning with other teachers, analyzing assessment data and student work, and workshops. Evidence suggests that high-quality PL supports teachers' day-to-day practice, promotes accountability for instructional change, and builds teacher investment in instructional change.[6]

With the adoption of HQCM across the country, districts and states have focused on enacting curriculum-based professional learning (CBPL). The Research Partnership for Professional Learning defines CBPL as professional learning that uses evidence-based practice to consistently support teachers' use of HQCM in their everyday instructional practice.[7]

STRATEGY

KEY FINDINGS

Twenty of the 28 districts that responded to our survey prioritized curriculum implementation in their PL strategies. They focused on piloting new materials or aligning already adopted materials with their vision for instruction.

District leaders reported that they primarily rely on student achievement data and input from teachers and principals to shape PL strategies, using data to identify performance gaps and staff input to design targeted responses.

While districts cited budgets, time, and CBAs as interrelated key constraints, some districts partnered with teachers and union officials to steer available teacher time towards PL.

When districts were asked to name their top three PL priorities in open response questions, curriculum and HQCM came out on top.

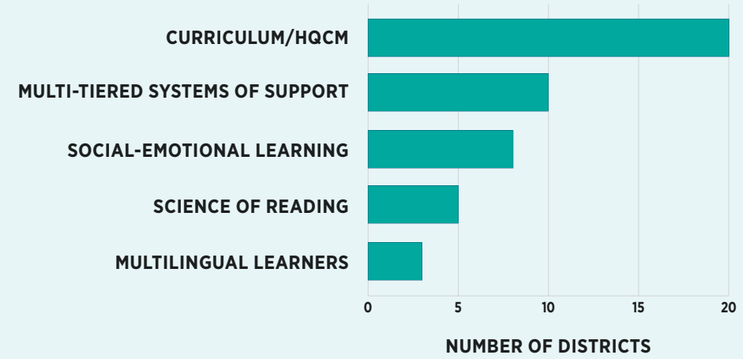

FIGURE 1
Number of districts who named each PL priority.

NOTE Each district is represented up to three times in this figure.

Twenty of the 28 districts that responded to our survey prioritized curriculum implementation in their PL strategies. They focused on piloting new materials or aligning already adopted materials with their vision for instruction.

Districts reported using a wide variety of PL strategies during the 2024-2025 academic year, from implementing specific instructional strategies like *Building Thinking Classrooms or The Writing Revolution*, to attending to student safety and belonging. However, when we asked districts to name their top PL priorities (as shown in Figure 1), curriculum implementation was by far the most common. The emphasis on curriculum implementation aligns with state legislation that requires the adoption and implementation of HQCM.

Though that legislation does not directly mandate PL for teachers, studies maintain that successful implementation of new curricula requires strategic PL support for teachers.[9] In our survey and in interviews, district leaders described numerous investments they made in CBPL, including hiring curriculum vendors and instructional coaches to provide CBPL.

District leaders reported different reasons for emphasizing curriculum implementation. Some were piloting or implementing new curricula in science and social studies–subject areas for which districts need to adopt HQCM over the next two academic years–or had only recently adopted a new ELA and math curriculum. These districts were focusing on familiarizing teachers with the new materials and supporting the implementation of those materials in teachers' classrooms.

Districts that adopted new curricula a few years ago were often working on sharpening implementation by aligning curriculum use with the district's vision for instruction. District leaders who participated in the Annenberg PL network described how a "by the books" HQCM implementation could lead teachers to deviate from the kinds of active and engaged student learning district leaders wanted to see in classrooms. PL in those districts focused on core instructional strategies to spur more student thinking and engagement in the classroom, while maintaining integrity to the curriculum.

District leaders reported that they primarily rely on student achievement data and input from teachers and principals to shape PL strategies, using data to identify performance gaps and staff input to design targeted responses.

Results from our district survey suggest that leaders relied on a wealth of information to develop their PL strategies. Every district leader said that, to some degree, they drew on statewide or progress monitoring assessments. Fifteen districts ranked data from statewide or progress monitoring assessments as the most important. Similarly, every district leader said they relied on input from teachers and principals, though fewer districts ranked this input as their top priority. District leaders were less likely to report drawing on input from external voices, like community members, vendors, or leaders in other districts, to define their priorities.

Realistically, district leaders use achievement data and input from staff together to inform PL strategies. In interviews, district leaders described using achievement data to assess areas of student performance in need of improvement and then strategizing on PL plans with input from staff. For example, one found its middle grades RICAS math scores had decreased substantially over the last few years, pointing to a need for PL in that area. With input from teachers and school leaders, the district found that students were struggling with the skills necessary to succeed in Algebra I and needed support with math in earlier grades, leading to a PL focus on elementary math.

While districts cited budgets, time, and CBAs as interrelated key constraints, some districts partnered with teachers and union officials to steer available teacher time towards PL.

We asked districts what limited their ability to execute their PL strategies. Out of 28 surveyed districts, 25 said district budgets, 24 said school day schedules, and 23 said CBAs. These three are clearly interrelated. Budgets are largely outside of district control and in turn influence how time and CBAs develop. In interviews, districts connected these concerns directly: district leaders believed that the CBAs did not include enough time for teachers to participate in meaningful PL. Additional dollars could allow for more time. In fact, many districts spent now-expired COVID relief funds to compensate teachers for additional PL time.

Importantly, some districts leveraged CBA negotiations to support PL directly. Five districts said their CBAs enabled PL. We interviewed leaders from two of these districts. Both discussed prioritizing PL time in negotiations and ensuring that teachers had multiple forms of contractual time set aside for PL, including whole workdays and time for teachers to plan instruction together, referred to as common planning time. These contracts also allowed district- or school-based leaders to direct a portion of teachers' planning time, which allowed leaders to steer that time towards common district PL priorities.

Another district leader discussed harnessing a PL committee negotiated in the district's CBA. That committee included teachers and school- and district-level leadership who jointly developed the district's PL priorities and solicited and reflected on teacher feedback. This leader reported regularly and meaningfully engaging with the committee and soliciting advice on a regular basis, explaining that the committee "collect[s] feedback on everything that we do…. Every time we have an early release day or we have professional development, the feedback is important." According to this leader, the approach helped build investment among teachers for PL strategies.

A CLOSER LOOK: DISTRICTS' DIVERSE PL PRIORITIES

While most districts prioritized curriculum implementation for their PL strategies, there were a few other common priorities that showed up in survey responses.

- Ten districts prioritized implementation of **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)**. MTSS is a strategy districts use to coordinate instructional and mental health interventions by using data to move students into more intensive levels of intervention based on their needs. One leader described MTSS as the "umbrella" under which all their other PL priorities fall, including social-emotional learning, differentiation, and direct instruction.
- Eight districts prioritized **social-emotional learning** as a way to improve student mental health and well-being.
- Five districts prioritized **science of reading** or phonics instruction. The 2019 Right to Read act required all teachers to exhibit proficiency or awareness, depending on the subject area they teach, in the science of reading by the 2024-25 school year, often requiring large time and financial investments by districts.
- Three districts prioritized instruction for **multilingual learners (MLL)**. Shifts in state regulations for MLL instruction and increases in MLL enrollment across the state have and will continue to require districts to increase their instructional capacity for those students.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORK IN RHODE ISLAND

Rhode Island districts can learn from each other's experiences, relying on each other's knowledge to sharpen their PL strategies. During the 2024-25 academic year, the Annenberg Institute partnered with the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association to form the Professional Learning Network in Rhode Island. Six districts participated in the network, developing PL plans that centered around improving instruction and student outcomes through curriculum-based PL.

The core work of the network occurred during "deep dive" visits, when district leaders, school leaders, and instructional coaches gathered at a district to learn about initiatives, observe classroom instruction, and discuss next steps for PL. These visits and other network activities facilitated cross-district connections where district leaders could get feedback on their work and learn high-leverage practices from their peers. This work will continue during the 2025-26 school year with two additional districts and a focus on improving math instruction.

BUDGET

KEY FINDINGS

Rhode Island increased its investment in PL during the pandemic, with spending peaking at $10,000 per teacher. Although total dollars have declined since, districts continue to devote a larger share of their budget than before (3.5%).

Spending increases were larger in lower-poverty districts that relied more on general funds, and smaller in higher-poverty districts that relied on federal funds–with the exception of Providence.

Paying educators to facilitate PL consistently made up the lion's share of spending. Spending on facilitators doubled in the past decade, largely because of increased spending in Providence.

Rhode Island increased its investment in PL during the pandemic, with spending peaking at $10,000 per teacher. Although total dollars have declined since, districts continue to devote a larger share of their budget than before (3.5%).

In 2013-14, Rhode Island spent $65 million, or about $7,000 per teacher on PL (adjusted for inflation). This accounted for around 2.5% of the state's overall education budget. PL spending increased only modestly in the following years, before pandemic recovery dollars from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund led to a substantial increase, up to $10,000 per teacher, between 2021-22 and 2022-23. PL spending fell substantially in 2023-24, back to $9,000 per teacher, coinciding with the approaching end of ESSER funding and limited state aid. However, while total PL funding decreased, the state maintained its increased investment in PL as a percentage of the budget, at about 3.5%. National budget data suggests that Rhode Island's PL spending is somewhat higher than the average state and close to the average of New England states; Massachusetts and Vermont spend slightly more.

Providence dominated PL spending in RI, accounting for 40% of all PL dollars in 2023-24, and consistently invested more per teacher than other districts.

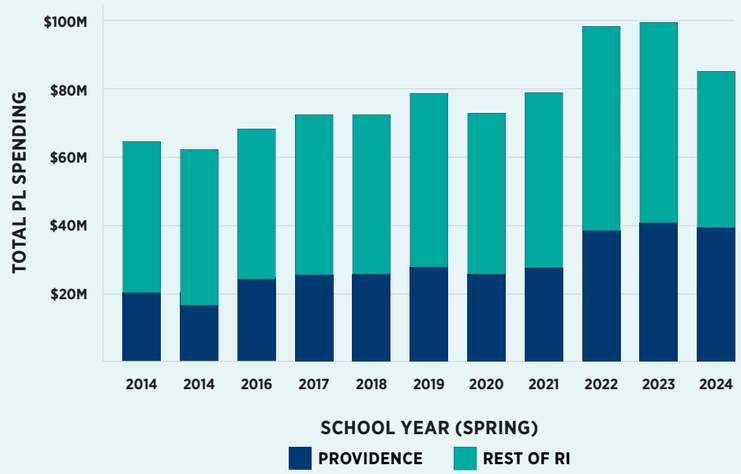

FIGURE 2
Total annual PL spending in Providence and the rest of Rhode Island.

NOTE CPI adjusted to 2024 dollars.

The share of districts' budgets spent on PL varied widely.

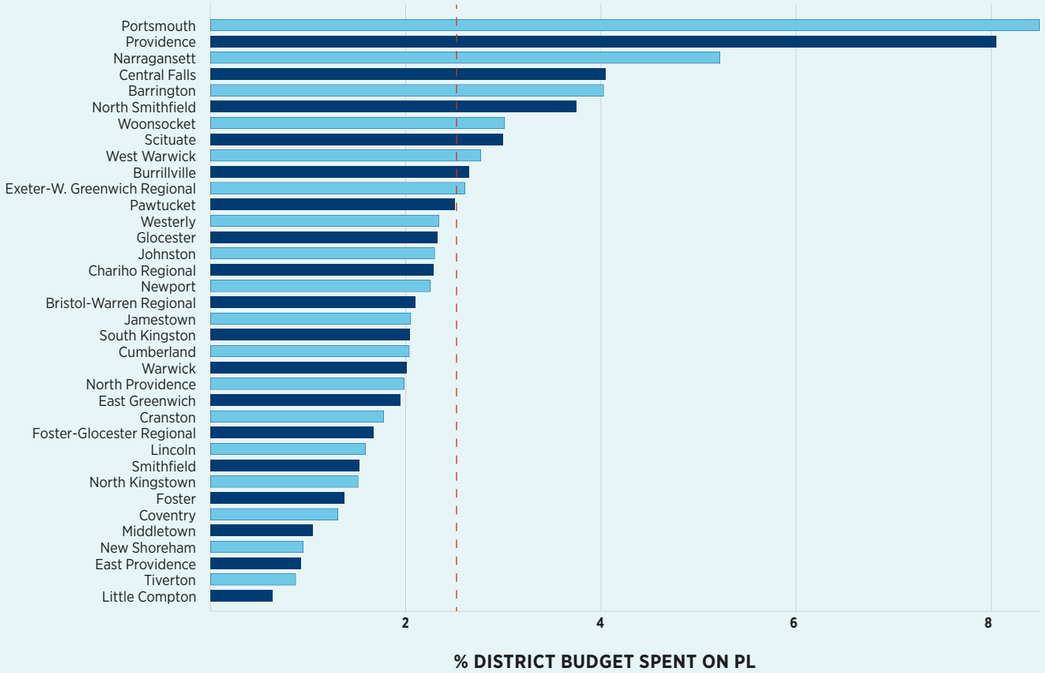

FIGURE 3
Percent of districts' budgets spent on PL, 2023-24 school year.

NOTE Hatched vertical line represents district average.

Providence has accounted for nearly half of this increase over the past decade. In 2023-24, Providence made up 17% of Rhode Island's student enrollment, 20% of its overall education spending, and 40% of PL spending, as shown in Figure 2. The district has consistently spent more overall and per teacher on PL than any other district. In part, the scale of Providence's overall budget explains its larger PL spending. Between 2020-21 and 2021-22, districts outside of Providence increased PL spending by 16%, just under $1,000 per teacher. At the same time, Providence increased spending by 40%, but this represented seven times the increase in per-teacher funding ($7,000 per teacher).

Providence's larger PL spending also reflects different choices districts make about how to allocate their budgets as they navigate trade-offs between PL and other spending with constrained funds. As shown in Figure 3, in 2023-24, districts like Providence and Portsmouth spent as much as 8% of their budgets on PL. Other districts, like East Providence, Little Compton, New Shoreham, and Tiverton, spent less than 1% of their budgets on PL.

With the exception of Providence, high-poverty districts consistently spent less on PL than low-poverty districts and rely more on federal funds.

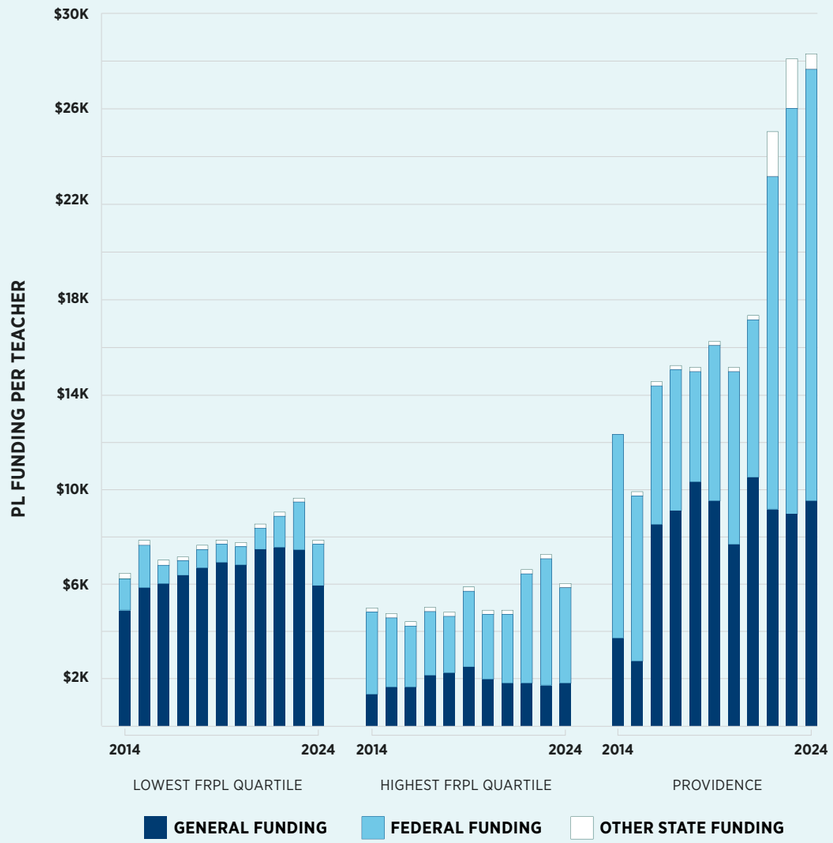

FIGURE 4
Per teacher PL funding over time by funding source and FRPL quartile.

NOTE CPI adjusted to 2024 dollars. Providence excluded from lowest FRPL quartile.

Spending increases were larger in lower-poverty districts that relied more on general funds, and smaller in higher-poverty districts that relied on federal funds–with the exception of Providence.

Excluding Providence, PL spending increases were larger in districts with the lowest levels of student poverty. As shown in Figure 4, in lower-poverty districts, spending increased about two-thirds from just over $6,000 per teacher in 2013-14 to just under $10,000 per teacher in 2022-23. These districts relied much more on general funds than districts with higher levels of student poverty did. As a result, total spending from general funds on PL in these districts increased much more than total federal funding.

In contrast, even before ESSER, the highest-poverty districts have consistently supported PL more from federal funding, often from Title I and Title II. These funds are distributed based on student economic disadvantage and partially earmarked for PL spending. In short, higher-poverty districts spent more federal funding on PL than lower-poverty districts because they systematically received more of those funds and have been required to use some of them on PL.

Before the pandemic, about half of PL funding in higher-poverty districts came from federal sources. Between 2020-21 and 2022-23, though, these districts saw a near-doubling of federal funding spent on PL, largely driven by ESSER funding routed to those districts. At the same time, PL spending from general funds remained steady or dropped. As a result, higher-poverty districts (other than Providence) spent less on PL on average than wealthier districts. As outlined above, Providence is a striking exception to these patterns, seeing extraordinarily high levels of PL spending despite enrolling many economically disadvantaged students.

In 2023-24, 21 of the state's 36 traditional public school districts experienced decreases in PL spending. In the highest-poverty districts (except Providence), drops in federal funding accounted for a decrease of over $1,000 per teacher. In the lowest-poverty districts, though, the decline of $2,000 per teacher came largely from drops in general funding. In Providence, PL funding remained steady, though spending from federal funds increased slightly. With the expiration of ESSER funding in 2024 and continued uncertainty around federal programs, federal funding will likely contribute less to PL spending, which may disproportionately impact higher-poverty districts.

Paying educators to facilitate PL consistently made up the lion's share of spending. Spending on facilitators doubled in the past decade, largely because of increased spending in Providence.

When most people think of PL, they often envision workshops run by external experts that happen on district PL days. However, over the past decade, paying district staff, teachers, and instructional coaches to facilitate PL consistently made up around three-quarters of overall PL spending. Instructional coach salaries alone made up 40% of that spending. Paying teachers to attend PL days or other forms of PL consistently accounted for around a fifth of PL spending. Vendors accounted for as little as 9% in 2017-18 but increased to more than 20% since 2021-22. In part, this increase in spending on external vendors came from short-term ESSER funds that limited longer-term investments. Materials and supplies made up a vanishingly small share of PL spending.

The investments in coaches and other non-coaching providers represented a substantial expansion of PL staff across the state. In 2013-14, Rhode Island spent $1,900 per teacher on instructional coaches and $2,000 on non-coaching PL facilitators, like district and teacher leaders. These increased to $2,500 and $2,700, respectively, by 2023-24 and were even higher during the pandemic.

Much of this expansion occurred in Providence. In fact, during 2023-24, Providence employed as many coaches as the rest of the state combined. That same year, Providence accounted for 40% of the state's overall spending on instructional coach compensation, spending $7,000 per teacher on coaches compared to $1,700 in the rest of the state. Though Providence spent more per teacher on internal coaching, it also spent more on other forms of PL. Coaches represented 24% of Providence's overall PL budget, compared to 31% for the rest of the state.

The statewide increase in non-coaching PL staff costs is almost entirely explained by Providence. In 2013-14, Providence spent $1,400 per teacher on non-coaching internal provider expenses, which has steadily increased to $8,300 per teacher in 2022-23. The vast majority of that money went to stipends for teachers and teacher departmental leaders to facilitate PL. In other Rhode Island districts, spending on non-coaching internal provider expenses has stayed flat or declined.

Paying educators to provide and attend PL has consistently made up the vast majority of PL spending.

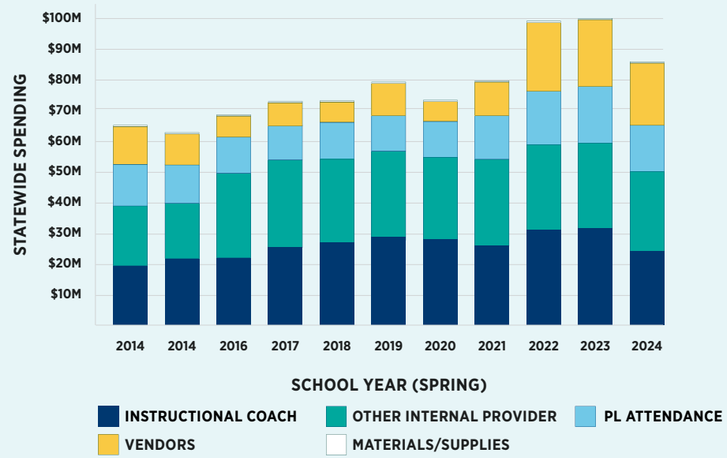

FIGURE 5
Statewide PL spending over time by spending category.

NOTE CPI adjusted to 2024 dollars.

> **ESSER funding supported a literacy coach and a math coach for the district. We lost the math position entirely. We were able to retain the literacy coach this year through another grant, but at the end of the year, we may lose her as well. ESSER funding also paid for a significant portion of our PL support through outside consultants, and we have only been able to retain a small portion of that through other federal grants.**
>
> - DISTRICT LEADER

A CLOSER LOOK: HOW WAS ESSER MONEY SPENT?

Between the 2020-21 and 2023-24 school years, Rhode Island spent $70.9 million in ESSER funds on PL. These funds, which are now expired, supported substantial increases in PL spending across the state – especially during the 2021-22 to 2023-24 school years. In Figure 6, we show how these funds were spent on PL.

- **Providence accounted for $39.3 million,** or 56%, of traditional districts' ESSER spending on PL in Rhode Island. Providence spent approximately $92,000 per teacher over 2020-21 and 2023-24 combined, with approximately $25,000 per teacher coming from ESSER dollars. Providence spent 26% of its ESSER allocation on PL and invested proportionally much more on teacher PL than other districts did.
- **Other districts spent a combined $31.5 million,** or approximately $3,800 total per teacher over 2020-21 and 2023-24 combined. Those districts spent 10% of their collective ESSER allocation on PL.

More ESSER funding was spent on short-term expenses, like vendor services and teacher compensation to attend PL.

- Districts spent $35.4 million on **vendor services.** This accounted for 40% of the spending on vendor services statewide. This spending coincided with the adoption of new curricula across districts, and curriculum vendors often supported district training efforts.
- Districts spent $18.2 million on **compensation for teachers to attend PL.** Providence accounted for three quarters of this spending, which coincided with district-wide MLL training for teachers.

Districts spent less ESSER funding on ongoing expenses, like full-time compensation, likely because of the short-term nature of these dollars.

- Districts spent $13.3 million on **instructional coaching compensation,** accounting for 13% of instructional coach salary spending statewide.
- Districts spent $7.6 million on **internal provider compensation,** excluding coaches, accounting for 6% of spending on internal provider compensation statewide.

> **Vendor services and compensation for attending PL constituted the majority of the $70.9 million of ESSER funding Rhode Island spent on PL.**

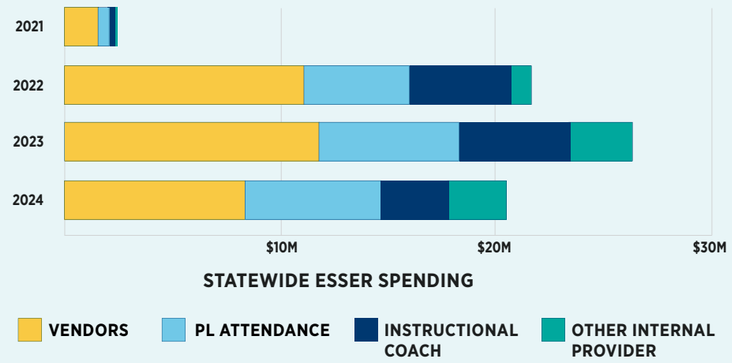

FIGURE 6: ESSER PL spending over time, by spending category.

NOTE CPI adjusted to 2024 dollars.

PL SPENDING CATEGORIES

Category	Description
Instructional Coach Compensation	Salaries and benefits for instructional coaches and stipends for educators who do instructional coaching part-time.
Other Internal Provider Compensation (Excluding Coaches)	Salaries and benefits for other PL providers who work in the district, for whom at least 40% of their job is facilitating or strategizing around PL. Also includes stipends for educators who lead PL sessions.
Compensation for Attending PL	Stipends for educators attending PL. Also includes salaries and benefits for PL days.
Vendor Services	Payments to external vendors who provide PL services.
Materials and Supplies	Materials and supplies that are used for PL. Does not include curriculum purchases.

PL FUNDING CATEGORIES

Funding Category	Description
General Fund	Funds gathered by districts from municipalities and state funding formula aid.
Other State Funding	Funding from state grants that are allocated to fund a specific purpose or program.
Federal Funding	Funding from federal categorical programs. Notable programs include: • Title I, which distributes funding to school districts and schools on the basis of student economic disadvantage. • Title II, Part A, which provides the state and districts with grants for teacher and leader PL. • ESSER Funds, which provided temporary additional funding for schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

PERSONNEL

KEY FINDINGS

The number of in-house coaches employed by Rhode Island districts has increased by two-thirds over the past decade, and they do much more than coach teachers one-on-one.

The growth in the number of coaching positions and high coach turnover means that a third of Rhode Island's coaches were new to the job in 2024-25, and half had three or fewer years of experience as a coach in the state.

Supportive principals play a critical role in making professional learning effective by protecting time, modeling strong instructional practices, and framing coaching as a resource for all teachers rather than a remedial measure.

The number of in-house coaches employed by Rhode Island districts has increased by two-thirds over the past decade, and they do much more than coach teachers one-on-one.

Interviews with district leaders and instructional coaches revealed the diverse work coaches did, beyond the core coaching work of individualized observation and feedback. They facilitated teachers' common planning time (CPT), where they helped teachers implement protocols for effective collaboration and student data use. Coaches also provided workshops for teachers and modeled instructional strategies, which can help expose teachers to new ways of teaching in the classroom. In some cases, coaches were pulled into non-PL tasks, like test coordination, substitute teaching, and student intervention.

During the 2013-14 school year, Rhode Island staffing data show that the state employed 83 instructional coaches. As shown in Figure 7, by 2024-25, that number nearly doubled to 150. The number of coaches in the state rose steadily year-over-year, with more substantial increases coinciding with ESSER funding. Much of this increase occurred in Providence, which hired an additional 20 coaches.

> "Coaching done well, I think, is really key to supporting teachers and administrators with implementing curriculum with fidelity.… I think implementing curriculum without coaches – I don't know how much success you're going to have."
>
> - DISTRICT LEADER

The number of instructional coaches in Rhode Island has increased by a third over the past decade.

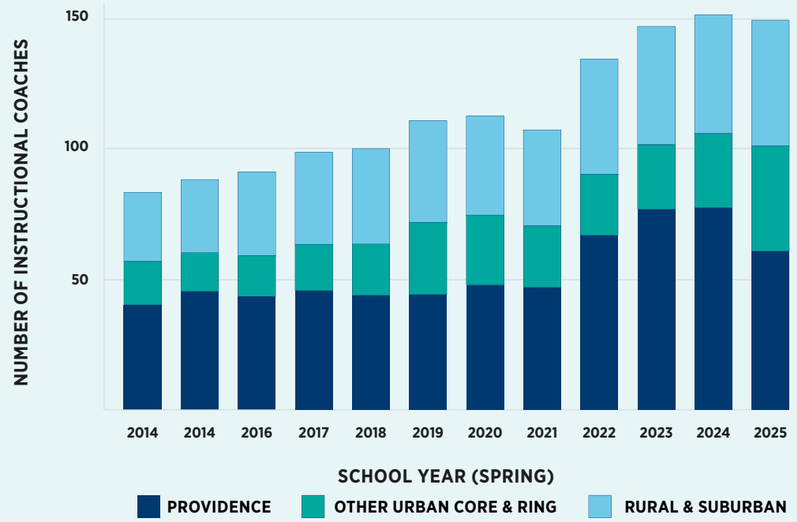

FIGURE 7
Number of instructional coaches in Rhode Island by district locale type.

These data likely undercount the number of instructional coaches in the state. The 29 districts we surveyed reported having a total of 157 full-time coaches and 50 part-time coaches during 2024-25 (compared to 150 reported in the staffing data).[10] The combined staffing and survey data for the 2024-25 school year shows that Rhode Island employed one coach for every 43 teachers, while the average district that employed coaches had one coach for every 70 teachers.

Instructional coach staffing differences seem to be driven by local budgetary and strategic considerations and not student demographics or other district characteristics. Providence, Narragansett, Portsmouth, Smithfield, South Kingstown, and West Warwick–districts of various sizes and enrollment patterns–all employed at least one full-time coach for every 30 teachers. Cranston employed one coach for every 26 teachers, but all of its 60 reported coaches provided coaching part-time. In contrast, eight districts employed one coach for every 100 teachers or more, and four districts employed no instructional coaches.

The growth in the number of coaching positions and high coach turnover means that a third of Rhode Island's coaches were new to the job in 2024-25, and half had three or fewer years of experience as a coach in the state.

Instructional coaches in Rhode Island do not often accumulate much experience on the job. Part of this lack of experience is rooted in the substantial growth in coaching positions in some districts. Turnover and moves to other roles also factor in, as does instability in funding that leads to coach positions being cut. On average, over the past five years, a quarter of instructional coaches have left their jobs each year.

Between the 2012-13 and 2020-21 school years, districts across Rhode Island hired a total of 250 new instructional coaches. Figure 8 shows that five years after they started the job, only 95 were still coaching. Twenty eight moved into other support staff positions, 45 moved into teaching roles, 27 were principals or assistant principals, and 55 were no longer present in our data.[11]

> Out of the 250 coaches hired in Rhode Island between 2012-13 and 2020-21, only 95 were still coaching five years after they entered the role.

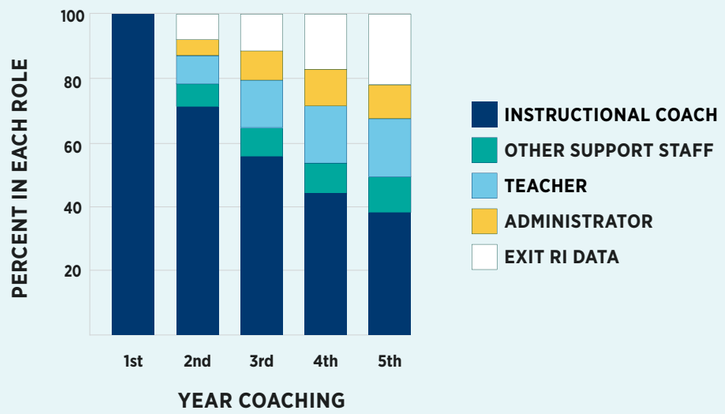

FIGURE 8
Roles of first-year instructional coaches hired between 2012-13 and 2020-21 over time.

NOTE Twenty one (38%) of exiters were 60 or older, suggesting they were approaching retirement. Because our administrative data only includes educators in certified positions, we cannot distinguish whether exiting our data represents a teacher exiting a Rhode Island education position or moving into a role that does not require a certification.

This pattern persists among newer cohorts of coaches: among the 49 new coaches hired in the 2023-24 school year, 19 were no longer coaching during the 2024-25 school year.

Some of this turnover reflects teachers' own decision to move into other positions or to move across districts. But, despite the overall growth of coaching positions in the state, the number of coaching positions in a given district often fluctuates from year to year. A third of coaching turnover was associated with a position being eliminated the following year.

In interviews, district leaders explained that it was hard to support coaches consistently due to unpredictable funding. In some years, they would have to cut existing coaching positions due to budget constraints, while in others they could hire because of additional funding. Multiple district leaders discussed having trouble recruiting coaches due to the perceived instability of the job. Teachers were reluctant to give up their preferred courses to take a coaching job that might not exist in a few years' time.

Supportive principals play a critical role in making professional learning effective by protecting time, modeling strong instructional practices, and framing coaching as a resource for all teachers rather than a remedial measure.

District leaders described how instructionally-focused principals monitor and directly participate in teacher CPT and model procedures for productive instructional planning, collaboration, and student data analysis. Some also observe and provide feedback to teachers to supplement instructional coaching capacity.

Principals set the conditions for effective instructional coaching to take place. District leaders reported that principals and assistant principals supported this work by protecting time for teachers to participate in coaching and for coaches to focus on PL instead of other, unrelated tasks, like filling in for absent teachers. Supportive principals also communicated to teachers the importance of coaching and instructional improvement, regardless of teachers' level of experience or current skill level.

A CLOSER LOOK: HOW DO DISTRICTS USE EXTERNAL PL PERSONNEL?

While internal staff provide the majority of PL capacity in a district, districts also rely on external personnel for that work. Vendor services consistently made up the second-highest share of PL spending, hovering under $1,000 per teacher between 2011-12 and 2020-21 and doubling between 2021-22 and 2022-23. Much of the increase was funded with ESSER allocations.

- Districts identified **dozens of unique vendors** they use to provide personnel for PL services, from curriculum vendors like McGraw-Hill, to benchmark testing providers like Curriculum Associates, to leadership support like Instruction Partners.
- In interviews, district leaders described relying on these external personnel temporarily **to build local expertise** to supply PL in specific topics, like coaching and training teachers on how to use new curricula required by legislation.
- Others brought in external leadership support to **help teachers use CPT productively or to use data to drive instructional decisions.** Teachers and instructional coaches could then train other staff in this kind of work after these external personnel left the district.
- Half of the districts we surveyed said that **external personnel facilitated PL at least once a quarter** in their districts during the 2024-25 school year, suggesting districts are still directing funds to these services.

TIME

KEY FINDINGS

Districts differ in time allocated for PL outside of the typical instructional day via PL days, early release and late start days, and paid after-school time.

All surveyed districts had common planning time (CPT) at least once a quarter, and two-thirds had CPT at least weekly. District leaders reported that involving coaches and school leaders in that time made it more meaningful.

During PL time, Rhode Island teachers were most commonly analyzing student data, learning about the curriculum, and lesson planning. They spent less time practicing and getting feedback on instruction.

Most districts had between two and three PL days during 2024-25.

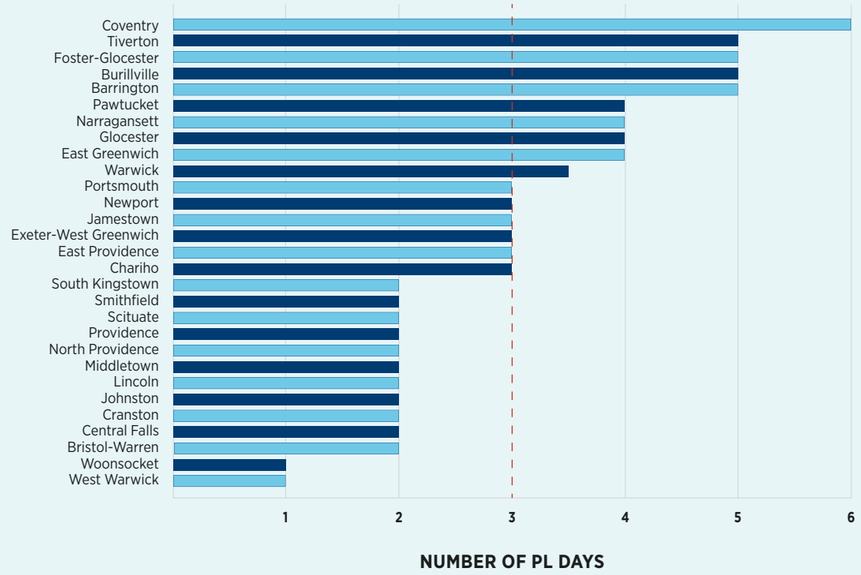

FIGURE 9
Number of PL days in 2024-25 reported in district survey.

NOTE Hatched vertical line represents district average.

Districts differ in time allocated for PL outside of the typical instructional day via PL days, early release and late start days, and paid after-school time.

Nearly every district in Rhode Island has PL days built into the school-year schedule. Figure 9 shows that, among the 28 districts we surveyed, 17 have two or three PL days. Woonsocket and West Warwick only had one day set aside, while Coventry had six. Five surveyed districts also scheduled early-release or late-start days for students in addition to PL days, once a week (2 districts), once a month (2), and infrequently (1). These days trade off some instructional time for PL time on a regular basis.

Many districts reported having other time set aside for PL, most of which required paid stipends for teachers. Six districts said they scheduled paid after-school PL time. For example, Lincoln's CBA provided five teacher-directed PL hours in addition to two full PL days. Pawtucket's CBA provided two leave days for certified staff in addition to four PL days. Ten districts reported providing release time from the instructional day, including substitutes, for teachers to attend PL sessions. Three district CBAs outlined time for at least some teachers to attend conferences and workshops during the school day–in some cases at the teachers' discretion, and in others at a principal's discretion.

All surveyed districts had common planning time (CPT) at least once a quarter, and two-thirds had CPT at least weekly. District leaders reported that involving coaches and school leaders in that time made it more meaningful.

District leaders and teachers unions negotiate rules governing CPT in districts' CBAs. Every district's CBA at least permits using release periods for CPT, and nearly all mandate some amount of regular time for CPT. According to our district surveys, 20 out of the 28 responding districts had CPT at all school levels they manage[12] at least weekly, and all but one district had CPT at least monthly at all levels.

In interviews, some district leaders said they found the amount of CPT afforded to teachers in their districts restrictive and tried to find ways to increase that time. One district leader asserted that the two days of CPT a month after school were not nearly enough and relied on principals and assistant principals to schedule more common planning time for grade-level or subject-level teams during teachers' regular planning periods.

Multiple district leaders discussed how, in their view, involving principals and coaches in CPT made that time more useful. They provided examples of that productive engagement. For example, one principal created a year-long plan for the half of CPT over which they had control, providing sequenced development for those teachers. In some districts, coaches helped model collaborative lesson planning during CPT. Importantly, district leaders reported that coach and principal involvement in CPT was valuable when it was aimed towards productive instructional tasks, like planning instruction, rather than administrative tasks, like departmental announcements or training on test administration.

During PL time, Rhode Island teachers were most commonly analyzing student data, learning about the curriculum, and lesson planning. They spent less time practicing and getting feedback on instruction.

In our survey, we asked district leaders to identify how frequently teachers participated in different PL activities by grade level. Figure 10 shows that the most frequent activity was lesson planning with curriculum materials, which happened at least quarterly in nearly all districts and school levels, and at least weekly in about half of districts. Other common activities included becoming oriented with curriculum materials and analyzing student data, both of which happened in nearly all surveyed districts at least quarterly.

Teachers across all grade levels observed classroom instruction rarely, with only 20% of districts saying teachers did so at least monthly. One-on-one coaching and analyzing classroom instruction were more common in elementary schools than middle or high schools. In elementary schools, one-on-one coaching happened at least monthly in two-thirds of districts, but in only a third of districts for middle and high schools.

These differences are also reflected in the state's teacher survey data. When we compared teachers in the same district,[13] middle school teachers were 15 percentage points less likely to see a coach once a month than elementary school teachers, and high school teachers were 25 percentage points less likely. The pattern is similar, but not as stark, when examining the frequency of feedback and analyzing student data.

We interviewed district leaders in two districts where these differences were especially stark, and both leaders attributed the difference to three interrelated factors: culture, structure, and strategy. Culturally, leaders emphasized that in their districts middle and high school teachers are more professionally autonomous and less likely to invite instructional coaches into their classrooms or participate in PL. Structurally, district leaders explained that elementary teachers had more frequent CPT, allowing for more sustained collaborative PL–an assertion supported by our district survey. Strategically, district leaders viewed elementary schools as a more viable entry point for professional learning, especially when districts were targeting early literacy and numeracy skills that could make students' transition into more advanced classes smoother.

> "At the elementary level, there's been more focus and attention on [curriculum] implementation. And although teachers have been trained in high-quality curriculum materials at the secondary level, and I have follow-up conversations with them, they're more autonomous, I think, by nature."
>
> - DISTRICT LEADER

Elementary teachers spent more time analyzing student data, participating in one-on-one coaching, and doing lesson rehearsal than middle or high school teachers.

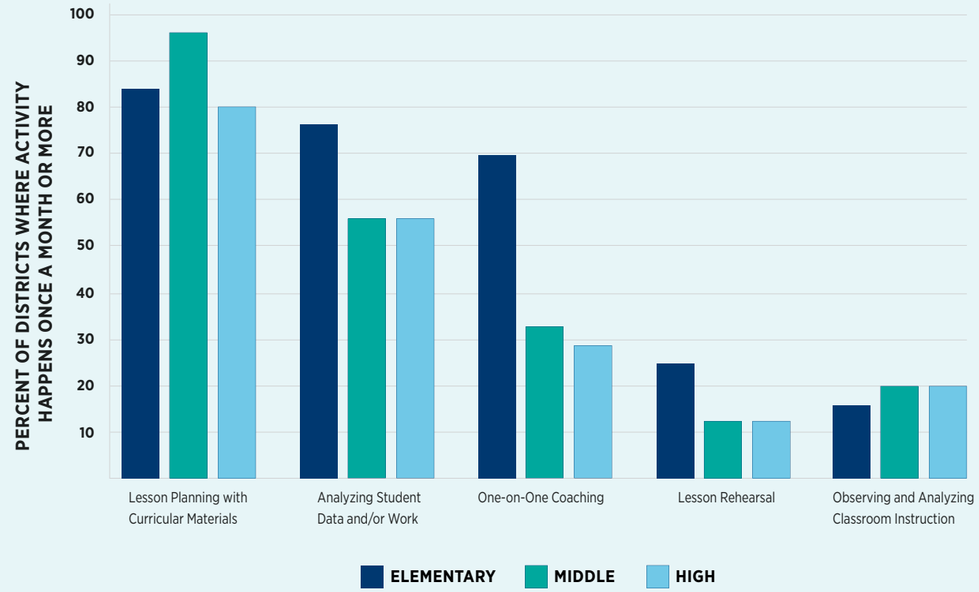

FIGURE 10
Frequency of PL activities by school tier reported in district survey.

A CLOSER LOOK: PL DAYS IN CBAS

A closer look at district CBAs reveals the variety of ways this time is structured. Most districts plainly state a required number of PL days, but some districts specify other potential structures for PL time:

- Four districts specify a set of **days that can be used for PL, parent/teacher conferences, or other conferences.** For example, Johnston's CBA has 10 days that can be allocated for PL or parent-teacher conferences. In 2024-25, Johnston reported having two PL days.
- Three districts **allow PL days to be split into equivalent staff meetings or half-days** across the school year, allowing districts the flexibility to schedule PL in shorter doses throughout the school year. For example, for the 2025-26 school year, Narragansett is taking advantage of this flexibility to schedule PL-focused faculty meetings throughout the year.
- Three districts specify a maximum number of PL days, and **require additional hourly wages** to be paid during those days on top of teachers' salaries. This approach gives districts budgetary flexibility, as they could spend or save money by choosing whether or not to schedule PL time instead of committing to paying teachers for that time. But for districts with tight budgets, this practice also constrains districts to only schedule PL days when funding is available.

ROADBLOCKS

While districts and the state are doing promising work improving PL, they are also facing roadblocks to accelerating that work.

In this section, we describe four of these roadblocks: **Enacting Statewide Strategy, Limited Budgets, Personnel Instability, and Unaligned Time.**

Enacting Statewide Strategy

Districts reported that they have been asked to adapt to many new initiatives at once, often without any funding support, making it challenging to get investment from teachers and develop coherent and sustained district PL strategies.

Limited Budgets

Districts reported struggling to adapt to more limited PL funding left by the expiration of federal COVID relief funds. These funding gaps may be particularly large in higher-poverty districts that often rely more on federal funding.

Personnel Instability

The limitations and inconsistency of PL funding have left districts with unstable instructional coaching capacity and fewer opportunities to build that capacity over time.

Unaligned Time

Leaders said PL time was limited and not always aligned with districts' PL strategies, and the majority of teachers did not find PL time valuable or relevant.

ROADBLOCK ONE

Enacting Statewide Strategy

Districts reported that they have been asked to adapt to many new initiatives at once, often without any funding support, making it challenging to get investment from teachers and develop coherent and sustained district PL strategies.

Over the past three academic years, districts have faced deadlines for implementing provisions of the 2019 curriculum legislation and Right to Read Act. In our survey, multiple districts reported dedicating nearly all of their PL time over the last two years to ensuring teachers met Right to Read Act requirements, meaning that other PL priorities were crowded out. Because the legislation did not provide direct funding to purchase training materials or compensate teachers for their training time, many districts reported drawing on federal COVID relief funds to meet the requirement.

According to district leaders, the amount of change that has occurred in a short period of time has made it challenging to develop consistent PL strategies. Leaders report "initiative fatigue" among teachers, leading to low investment in the district's PL strategies around curriculum.

As most state legislative deadlines have passed, many district leaders we interviewed were now working on developing longer-term strategic PL plans focused on curriculum implementation and active and engaged student learning. Having sustained time and space to enact these strategies by developing personnel, like principals and coaches, to provide consistent support for teachers will be key to successful curriculum implementation. Still, additional statewide educational initiatives are coming, including strengthening instruction for Rhode Island's growing population of multilingual learner students, more rigorous graduation requirements in math, and attending to ongoing student needs emerging from the pandemic. Districts will need to continue to fold these statewide initiatives into their PL strategies.

PROMISING PRACTICES: STATE-BASED COACH AND LEADERSHIP TRAINING IN THE RHODE ISLAND INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING CORPS

Through the Rhode Island Instructional Coaching Corps (ICC), the state invested $5 million in 2023-24 to fund 26 full-time and 9 part-time district-based math and literacy coaching positions. The state budget process meant that these grants launched late, with some districts not being able to fill the roles. But, those that did reported substantial benefits from the program.

Importantly, ICC coaches and their district leaders were provided training throughout the spring semester to support coaches' practice and leaders' development of coaching systems. Leaders and coaches both reported finding this training and a related statewide approach to coaching valuable. District leaders asserted that the training helped them develop a clear vision for coaching and provided the opportunity to build positive coaching cultures in their districts. They reported a shift in their coaching strategy from "technical assistance" with curriculum and materials to "more adaptive, more job-embedded coaching" focused on strengthening teachers' instructional practices.

Participating coaches said they learned how to build teacher investment in coaching, use student data to set goals with teachers, and support teachers' HQCM use. Coaches highlighted that the in-person, statewide training allowed them to build sustained connections with other coaches outside of their district in what could otherwise be, as one coach put it, "a very lonely world."

As a result of their experiences with ICC coaches, teachers who were coached reported increased confidence, openness to coaching, and improvements in instructional practices. Over 90% of surveyed teachers said they would recommend coaching to another teacher.

ROADBLOCK TWO

Limited Budgets

Districts reported struggling to adapt to more limited PL funding left by the expiration of federal COVID relief funds. These funding gaps may be particularly large in higher-poverty districts that often rely more on federal funding.

Districts used ESSER funds to increase their investments in PL. In some cases, this money supported temporary expenses that are no longer needed. For example, districts paid teachers to attend training required by the Right to Read Act. These costs likely will not continue at the same scale. While this requirement is ongoing, science of reading instruction is being integrated into teacher preparation programs and will require less active investment from districts. In interviews, district leaders also described contracting with vendors temporarily to build local capacity to help coach and train teachers on how to use new curricula required by legislation.

But other costs are ongoing. In interviews, district leaders reported using ESSER funds to pay teachers regularly to participate in PL activities outside of their contracted time. For example, one district used ESSER funds to pay teachers to participate in 90 minutes of PL every other week. Another district leader used these funds to pay teachers for coaching debriefs that they said would otherwise have been impossible to schedule during contractual hours. In interviews, districts described cutting back, or eliminating entirely, spending for teacher time outside of contractual hours in the wake of ESSER's expiration, and say teachers are understandably reluctant to participate without pay.

> "Our district utilized ESSER funding to select and implement materials in ELA and Math. This effort required more than a $2 million investment and countless hours of PD. The [school committee] is significantly concerned regarding the science selection of HQCM. With our current budget realities funding the science requirement will be extremely difficult.
>
> - DISTRICT LEADER

Nearly every district we surveyed reported that the expiration of ESSER funds has impacted its ability to deliver PL. Districts were concerned that budgets might come up short as they continue to require teacher time and support services to implement new curricula required by legislation. Beyond the expiration of ESSER funds, the federal education funding environment is increasingly uncertain. Title II, Part A funds were temporarily paused this summer, and other federal education funding is in question.

Districts with higher levels of student poverty, which draw less on district general funds and rely more on federal funding to support PL, may be facing new trade-offs when deciding how much to spend on PL. They will likely need to draw more on district general funds to maintain PL spending.

ROADBLOCK THREE

Personnel Instability

The limitations and inconsistency of PL funding have left districts with unstable instructional coaching capacity and fewer opportunities to build that capacity over time.

District leaders we talked to discussed attempts to limit spending from ESSER funds on recurring expenses, but given districts' constrained budgets, some hired personnel with those funds. ESSER funding accounted for 12% of instructional coach salaries between the 2020-21 and 2023-24 school years. And the number of instructional coaches increased substantially statewide during those years: from 107 coaches during 2020-21 to 151 during the 2023-24 school year.

But the coaching workforce is unstable. Districts have regularly lost coaches and coaching positions each year. While districts made up for these shortfalls using other funding sources, including ICC grants, some coaches we interviewed from ICC said their roles had been cut next school year due to the expiration of state funding.

This instability can stymie coaching recruitment and development. Multiple district leaders discussed having trouble recruiting coaches due to the perceived instability of the job; teachers were reluctant to give up their preferred courses to take a coaching job that might not exist in a few years' time. After recruitment, coaching requires building a distinct set of skills from classroom teaching, from closely observing teachers' instruction and providing meaningful feedback to modeling to teachers how that feedback should be implemented in classroom practice. According to district leaders, building proficiency in these skills can take multiple years of concerted development–development that cannot be sustained and built upon if coaches are not able to stay in their positions long-term.

ROADBLOCK FOUR

Unaligned Time

Leaders said PL time was limited and not always aligned with districts' PL strategies, and the majority of teachers did not find PL time valuable or relevant.

Across the state, many district leaders reported that they did not have sufficient PL time and that the time they had negotiated in district CBAs did not always allow them the flexibility to use it well. For example, districts often struggled to find time for coaches to provide instructional feedback. Statewide survey data shows that even when districts employ more coaches, teachers are not substantially more likely to meet with them. For example, in districts with one coach per 200 teachers, 35% of teachers reported meeting with a coach once a month or more, on average. In districts with one coach per 50 teachers, only 40% did. This pattern could of course represent more intensive coaching. But, district leaders tended to attribute it to a lack of defined time during the school day for coaches or leaders to provide instructional feedback, an essential aspect of coaching. PL time, instead, was often limited to a few PL days and CPT, which are not ideal times to provide regular instructional feedback.

Another example comes in CPT, which is included in nearly every CBA. District leaders reported that CPT in their district was not always aligned with PL priorities, such as curriculum implementation, or was not always focused on instructional planning. According to those leaders, some principals or coaches would model productive collaboration or help set priorities for CPT. But in other cases, principals were disengaged from CPT, did not use the time well, or felt constrained in what they could do during the time.

We also see dissatisfaction from teachers. According to the state survey, teachers consistently report they have not found their time spent on PL useful. The high watermark came in 2020-21, when 41% of teachers reported they found PL valuable and 42% reported they found it relevant. In most years, these numbers hover around 35%. In other words, two-thirds of teachers in any given year are not satisfied with their PL.

PROMISING PRACTICES: COACHING SPRINTS IN CENTRAL FALLS

Many districts had trouble finding time for instructional coaches to work directly with teachers. In Central Falls, district leaders reported that teachers were interested in coaching but were hesitant to participate because of limited time in their schedules for debriefs. Chief Academic Officer Joy Souza explained, "We started noticing far fewer teachers signed up [for coaching], and it wasn't because of the quality of the coaching…but it was things like, 'listen, I'm in the thick of the year now. I can't give up my prep period.'"

To address this challenge, Central Falls incorporated "coaching sprints" into their coaching portfolio. This strategy involved an instructional coach co-teaching with a teacher for one or two weeks and providing real-time modeling of new instructional practices and quick bouts of observation and feedback. Doing a coaching sprint meant that coaches did not have to find additional time to do debriefs with teachers. Souza found that teachers rated the coaching sprints highly on post-cycle surveys, adding that "teachers were able to clearly state the goals [of the sprint] and what they got out of it." On SurveyWorks, Central Falls teachers were more likely than other teachers in the state to report that coaching was a structure that supported their professional growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Leveraging Rhode Island's Strengths to Improve Professional Learning

Rhode Island's sustained focus on implementing high-quality curriculum and structured literacy instruction will continue to require high-quality CBPL for teachers. An increasingly constrained funding environment will make this challenging. We provide three recommendations for how Rhode Island school districts and RIDE can leverage their existing strengths–including a focus on instructional coaching and the near-universal availability of CPT–and maintain progress towards these broader goals.

RECOMMENDATION ONE

Stabilize investments in PL, enabling districts to make long-term strategic decisions.

Investing in PL requires making trade-offs. In interviews, district leaders described trade-offs between hiring coaches or hiring for student-facing roles, like interventionists or counselors. They also expressed concerns about moving particularly strong teachers from a classroom role into a potentially temporary instructional coaching role. The state can support long-term PL strategy by prioritizing predictable funding and investing in long-term state PL priorities.

Prioritize predictable funding that allows districts to strategize long term and fund stable PL positions.

Predictable school funding enables districts to develop long-term, proactive PL strategies rooted in their local contexts without only relying on short-term grant funding for statewide PL priorities. It also supports stability for PL roles, allowing districts to develop and retain that staff over time. To coach effectively, educators need to build coaching-specific skills over time. That development can be promoted if districts are able to make long-term investments in those roles.

Invest in long-term funding for state PL priorities.

Using targeted funding, RIDE and the state legislature can encourage districts to align on PL priorities. Ensuring long-term enactment of those priorities requires long-term investment. For example, the state provided one-year funding for coaches through the Instructional Coaching Corps in 2024-25. Starting in 2025-26, the department is investing in more sustained literacy coaching through a federal Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) Grant, which will fund 30 K-12 literacy coaches in traditional and charter LEAs for five years. This funding should provide stable coaching roles in the 17 participating LEAs, allowing for sustained development. But this work is limited only to literacy coaching roles. Similar investments in math coaching could support the state's commitments to improving students' math learning.

RECOMMENDATION TWO

Identify a clear instructional coaching model with aligned training and support for coaches and school leaders.

Instructional coaching is most effective for improving instructional practice and student achievement when coaches are able to plan with teachers, observe teachers' instruction, and provide meaningful feedback.[14] Enabling that kind of coaching requires defining a clear coaching model, aligning that model with training for coaches, and creating the organizational conditions for coaching to happen.

Continue to provide statewide guidance and training on how to implement a clear coaching model and core practices.

Instructional coaching is a complex task that has an emerging set of competencies and practices to do well.[15] Support for implementing a statewide model of instructional coaching that is also adaptive to individual district needs has many benefits. It provides a common language and set of practices for coaches across the state, helping them collaborate. It also provides opportunities for aligned development for coaches, which can help them develop their coaching practice and strategy. The ICC appears to have had real success doing some of this work by providing regular training for instructional coaches funded by the program, focused on instructional observation and feedback. In interviews and surveys, coaches and district leaders report finding this work valuable, allowing both to get a clearer vision of what effective instructional coaching looks like.

Set the organizational conditions necessary at the district and school level for coaching to be a regular and meaningful part of teachers' PL.

Investments in instructional coaching do not pay off if coaches are regularly pulled into other tasks (such as providing intervention for students) or work in schools without a culture of coaching. District and school leaders play a critical role in building the conditions necessary for coaching to succeed. In interviews, ICC coaches and district leaders said principals could promote coaching by building investment among staff and separating coaches' work from their own evaluative work. Both district leaders and ICC coaches suggested that principals should be folded into coaching development, a change RIDE is planning as they begin CLSD work next year.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

Strategically negotiate PL time that can enable districts' professional learning strategies, and create conditions for that time to be used effectively.

In many schools, teachers have very little time to engage in PL, to incorporate the lessons from PL into their practice, or to collaborate effectively with one another. Ensuring teachers have such time requires foregrounding PL in CBA negotiations, aligning that time with district PL strategy, and creating the conditions for that time to be spent supporting instructional improvement.

Prioritize PL time and venues for teacher, principal, and district leader collaboration during CBA negotiations.

In our survey, several districts reported that their CBAs enabled effective PL. In interviews, these districts explained that they foregrounded PL time in their negotiations, including PL days, CPT, and access to classrooms for instructional feedback. They engaged teachers and union leaders in ongoing conversations about PL priorities through regular district PL committees. Better time for PL and more input on PL activities supported teacher investment in PL.

Align the time districts and unions negotiate in CBAs with districts' PL strategies.

In RI districts, CBAs that supported PL did not always provide more full PL days, but prioritized PL time that could be used productively towards district goals. For example, negotiating more PL days might not be optimal if a district's PL strategy is focused on instructional coaching, which requires regular touchpoints with teachers. Instead, districts and union leaders might negotiate for more consistent teacher planning time during the school day and ensure that time can be used for coaching debriefs.

Clarify principals', coaches', and district leaders' roles in creating the conditions for effective teacher PL.

Personnel at all levels help ensure that the time made available for PL is used productively for instructional improvement. For example, nearly every district in the state has CPT outlined in their CBAs. In some schools this time is used well, and in some it is not. Principals can create the conditions for productive collaboration during that time by supporting a positive climate in the school, modeling productive collaboration, and supporting leadership among teachers who lead CPT.[16] Coaches can also support productive CPT by modeling instructional practices and assisting with lesson internalization and data analysis during that time. District leaders can provide regular support for those coaches and principals through district-wide professional learning communities that develop principal and coach skills for supporting collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Rhode Island leaders are doing to support educators as they implement new curriculum and learn new ways of teaching. Districts across the state have made substantial monetary investments in PL since the passage of 2019's Right to Read Act and curriculum legislation, especially as pandemic relief funding flowed from the federal government. Now, as federal funding expires but PL needs remain the same, the state needs a realistic PL strategy that leverages its strengths.

A purposeful PL strategy will ensure that Rhode Island's HQCM and science of reading legislation are both translated into changes in the instruction students receive. Other instructional priorities, like helping students meet more rigorous math graduation requirements and serving the needs of Rhode Island's increasing multilingual learner population, will require similar PL efforts. Rhode Island has the tools to build PL infrastructure that will meet these needs. Stabilizing investments, developing instructional coaching, and strategically negotiating PL time will help build the infrastructure needed to support teachers' growth.

ENDNOTES

[1]For more information about the Right to Read Act, see: https://ride.ri.gov/instruction-assessment/literacy/rhode-island-right-read-act

[2]For more information about Rhode Island's 2019 curriculum legislation, see: https://ride.ri.gov/instruction-assessment/curriculum

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[10]This discrepancy likely stems from two sources. First, some districts do not call their coaches "instructional coaches," but instead use "specialist" or "teacher leader" titles, meaning they would not always show up in our staffing data as instructional coaches. Second, like some other district-level positions, instructional coaches may be labeled as non-certified staff. Only certified staff show up in our staffing files. We believe this kind of exclusion is rare for coaches. The third is recall — some district leaders may have provided estimated or inaccurate coaching counts on the survey.

[11]Twenty one of these exiters were 60 or older, suggesting they were approaching retirement. Because our administrative data only includes educators in certified positions, we cannot distinguish whether exiting our data represents a teacher exiting a Rhode Island education position or moving into a role that does not require a certification.

[12]One responding district only manages elementary schools, and one only manages elementary and middle schools.

[13]We estimated models predicting the probability of a teacher participating in one of these PL activities at least once a month, conditional on district PL spending per teacher, student enrollment data (including the share of students on free and reduced priced lunch, with limited English proficiency, with an IEP) and school level (indicators for middle, high, and other; elementary as an excluded category). The findings described here reflect models including district and year fixed effects, which control for all time-invariant school characteristics and common shocks that impact all teachers in the state similarly in a given school year, respectively.

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About Annenberg's Rhode Island Education Research Initiatives

This work is the result of a long-standing research-practice partnership between researchers at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), and the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association (RISSA). Annenberg works closely with RIDE to analyze administrative statewide data that informs policy around issues such as the staffing, training, and retention of the educator workforce. With RISSA, Annenberg facilitates district networks, bringing district leadership teams together for long-term collaboration and learning around common research implementation goals. These networks are focused on critical statewide needs, such as student learning acceleration, mental health support in schools, and teacher professional learning. RI Education Research Initiatives bring these policy- and practice-focused projects together to deliver high impact insights with the goal of improving educational experiences and outcomes in and beyond Rhode Island.

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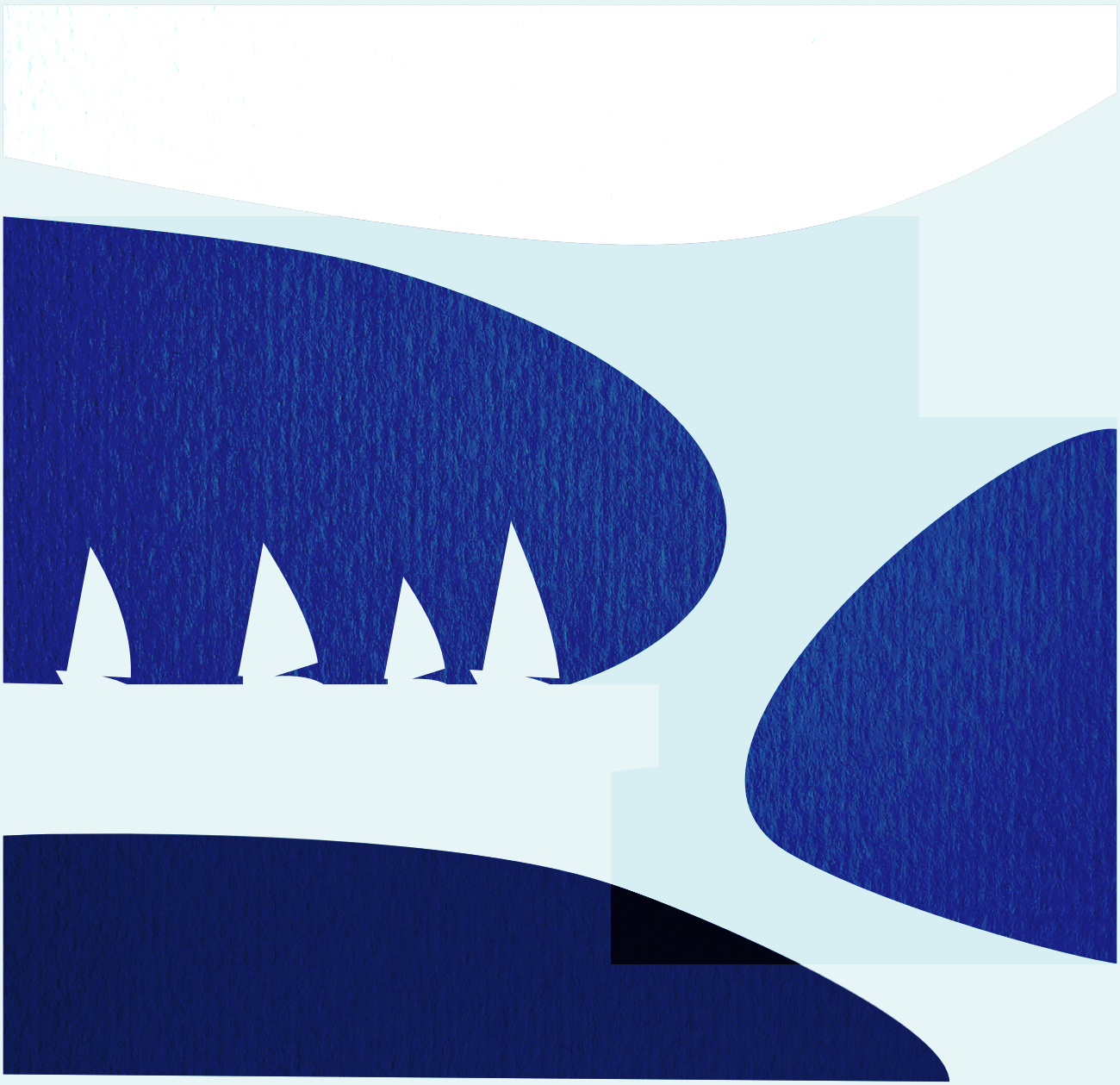

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