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Practical Takeaways from the Rhode Island Professional Learning Network



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Introduction

In the 2024–2025 school year, Annenberg launched the Professional Learning (PL) Network in RI, a community of practice with six Rhode Island school districts focused on curriculum-based professional learning (CBPL). Districts in the PL Network developed professional learning initiatives to improve instruction, drawing on insights from the Research Partnership for Professional Learning (RPPL).

In this brief, we highlight three primary implementation challenges that network districts faced and the promising practices that emerged to address them.

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Coordinating Teacher Support

Supporting teachers' daily instruction through professional learning was difficult to coordinate across all the layers of district leadership, from the superintendent's office to content and grade level teams where teachers collaborate. Districts also struggled to target instructional support to teachers who needed it most. Without clear targeting and tight coordination, district leaders did not always see instructional change result from their PL efforts.

To address this challenge, districts:

Braided their vision for instruction with high-quality curricular materials (HQCM).

By setting clear expectations for lesson structure and selecting key practices, districts gave teachers actionable guidance for enacting the vision for instruction through HQCM.

- One network district established a clear lesson structure for its middle school English and Language Arts classes, consisting of direct instruction, small group intervention, and personalized learning on digital platforms. In each portion of the lesson, teachers implemented the district's curriculum.

Built a system of coaching.

Districts trained and normed instructional coaches in a unified approach to provide teachers consistent, high-quality support, regardless of the coach.

- One network district trained all of its coaches to provide instructional support using ["Six Steps for Effective Feedback."](#) Each coach used a common coaching protocol based on this approach to provide consistent instructional feedback.

Developed supporting materials and structures.

Districts created unit plans and lesson templates aligned with new curricula and instructional models. Using these materials, teachers were able to focus on instruction instead of planning.

- One network district worked with lead teachers to draft detailed unit plans and sample lessons that showed teachers how to integrate a new instructional model and HQCM into their lesson planning.

Promoting Accountability for Incremental Change

As districts developed systems of accountability to promote change, districts' expectations for change sometimes outpaced the professional learning teachers received. These expectations made it challenging for teachers to incrementally close the gap between their current teaching and the district's desired instructional practice. When the district's instructional vision required immediate wholesale change, teachers were often overwhelmed and sometimes resistant.

To address this challenge, districts:

Established simple routines to monitor progress.

Districts developed routines for teachers to use common, formative data to assess student progress and inform instructional change.

- One network district incorporated regular reviews of targeted student data points into the agendas for common planning time (CPT) and professional learning community (PLC) meetings. Teachers used these existing structures to adapt instruction based on formative data.

Set achievable expectations.

Districts targeted one instructional strategy or lesson per unit allowing teachers to gradually adjust to new instructional models.

- One network district was adopting instructional strategies from the book *Building Thinking Classrooms* into their classrooms. To start, instead of asking teachers to adopt the strategies wholesale, the district asked students to try a single practice, like using random student groupings and vertical surfaces during math practice, to get started on the path to full implementation.

Building Teacher Investment

Building teacher investment in new initiatives was a major challenge. Without buy-in, districts struggled to establish accountability and provide daily support, and new initiatives lost visibility among the many competing priorities in schools. Leaders who pushed multiple changes at once without clear teacher support faced uneven adoption and strained relationships.

To address this challenge, districts:

Prioritized system coherence.

Districts aligned all instructional processes and practices, from meetings to evaluations, with the new instructional vision.

- One network district revised their teacher observation evaluation rubric, instructional coaching model, curricular support materials, and student data reviews to ensure all district systems encouraged teachers' to adopt their model of instruction.

Strategically built momentum.

Districts engaged credible early adopters and highlighted instructional bright spots to spread enthusiasm for professional learning and for the initiative.

- One network district offered time with an outside consultant to teachers who were enthusiastic about the initiative. These teachers joined the leadership team's learning, tried out new classroom practices, and helped build positive energy and excitement by sharing early successes with their colleagues.

Snapshots of District PL Plans

Bristol-Warren

Continued implementation of **Illustrative Math** in secondary grade levels **through the CPRL CICF framework** to build more rigorous, **student-centered learning environments**

Central Falls

Continued implementation of **Eureka^{^2} Math** curriculum in **Elementary classrooms**, leveraging instructional coaching and PD days to **improve student engagement and learning** in K-5 math lessons

Narragansett

Piloted instructional techniques from **Building Thinking Classrooms** **across all grade and content areas** to build more rigorous, **student-centered learning environments**

Woonsocket

Piloted **McGraw Hill Social Studies curriculum** in both middle and high school, with **teacher pairs** working together to implement strategies focused on **student discourse** in the classroom

Providence

Continued implementation of **Illustrative Math** and **ARC ELA in middle schools**, empowering school-based content leads to leverage CPT to train teachers to promote **student-driven learning** in MS ELA and math classrooms

Paul Cuffee

Piloted new **Data Team Processes**, **such as the Data Wise approach across K-12** to strengthen teacher lesson-planning and **responsiveness to student data**



District Spotlights

CENTRAL FALLS SCHOOL DISTRICT (CFSD)

Central Falls joined the PL Network to improve implementation of a new elementary math curriculum. The district prioritized increasing teacher capacity to analyze and respond to student data, strengthening coaching, and shifting coaching from an evaluative to a supportive model.

To achieve these goals, Central Falls invested heavily in its induction and instructional coaches. The district **built out its coaching system** by creating a community of practice that was grounded in a clear and consistent vision of coaching. Throughout the year, coaches met regularly to share strategies, review past coaching interactions via notes and video, and track teachers' instructional improvement. They adopted shared protocols and tools for coaching meetings to ensure teachers received consistent, high-quality support, regardless of the coach with whom they worked.

Central Falls also adjusted their coaching modality to better meet the needs of teachers, with some logistical changes that fit coaching better into the day-to-day experience of the teacher. Induction coaches met with teachers before or after the school day to accommodate shifting schedules. One coach revised her coaching cycles from 6–8 week long commitments to two-week long coaching “sprints,” during which she co-taught with the teacher throughout the day. This revision made the time commitment more manageable for participating teachers while intensifying the feedback and support they received from the coach. Survey responses indicated that teachers viewed the coaching experience very positively. More broadly, the coaching promoted instructional improvement and helped shift perceptions of coaching from an evaluative practice to one of professional support.

In addition, the district provided training to lead teachers in grades 3–5 on **establishing routines for monitoring progress** through data analysis. They worked to improve lead teachers' ability to analyze student performance, identify learning gaps, and plan to address them. Lead teachers then brought strategies back to collaborative planning time, sharing techniques with colleagues and spreading best practices.

Together, these efforts positioned coaching and peer-driven support within teacher teams as catalysts of instructional change, strengthening Central Falls' implementation of high-quality curricular materials while deepening teacher capacity to effectively adapt instruction.

NARRAGANSETT SCHOOL SYSTEM (NSS)

Narragansett joined the PL Network to scale the [Building Thinking Classrooms](#) (BTC) instructional model across all grades and content areas. The year prior to the network's launch, the district had piloted BTC in math classes with highly effective teachers who were receptive to the approach, in order to **strategically build momentum** around the initiative. Early on, district leaders also communicated with union leadership to ensure they maintained a cooperative relationship with the collective bargaining unit throughout this effort in teacher development and instructional improvement. Early adopters volunteered to participate in a BTC book club, led by district administrators, where they discussed the model, aligned on practices, and provided input on how to implement the strategy throughout the district. When Narragansett adopted BTC as the district-wide instructional vision in the 2024–2025 school year and focused on helping all teachers implement the model, these early adopters served as critical models and peer leaders in the schools.

In Summer 2024, each NSS teacher received a copy of the BTC book, *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics*, and was asked to read short selections in preparation for beginning of year Professional Development (PD). August PD began the same way for all teachers in the district, with a message from the Superintendent connecting the district's “Vision of a Graduate” with the instructional model presented in the book. Then, at each school, principals, instructional leaders, and teachers who were early adopters led PD sessions focused on BTC.

District leadership set achievable expectations by asking teachers to try at least one BTC lesson per semester, focusing on 2–3 techniques from the book to keep implementation manageable. Coaching cycles were timed to support teachers throughout the process, and included co-teaching, lesson planning, and post-lesson feedback. Throughout the year,

district leaders worked with content leads to **develop supporting materials** for teachers (including sample lessons and unit outlines) that would guide teachers' planning **using curricular materials in alignment with the instructional vision**. A mid-year survey enabled leaders to monitor adoption and teacher comfort, informing ongoing adjustments and support.

Through these sequenced steps (pilot classrooms, leadership alignment, updated evaluations, professional development, and coaching), Narragansett gradually spread BTC practice across the district without overwhelming teachers, building **system-wide coherence** for the instructional model.





Network Summary

THE PL NETWORK IN RHODE ISLAND

Each district in the PL Network developed an evidence-based professional learning initiative tailored to its unique needs, meeting the following criteria ([Allensworth et al., 2023](#); [Hill & Papay, 2022](#)):

- Support effective curriculum implementation while affording the flexibility teachers need to meet students' needs
- Include activities and materials designed to support teachers' day-to-day work
- Include structures to promote job-embedded teacher learning (e.g., PLCs that engage in data-informed instructional planning, coaching)
- Promote teacher investment in and social accountability for shifting instructional practice through sustained and focused implementation support

Annenberg supported each network district's implementation with training on data analysis and the use of practical measures to monitor progress toward goals, as well as one-on-one support via quarterly check-ins with each district, where teams could reflect on their progress and adjust their initiatives. Though each initiative was tailored to a specific district context, common goals emerged across the network. District leaders wanted to strengthen their implementation of high-quality curriculum by:

- Promoting a student-centered vision for instruction
- Establishing processes for teachers to respond to student data
- Supporting teachers' ability to engage students in more active learning

Cross-district work took place during monthly "Deep Dives," which formed the core of the network. Each Deep Dive was hosted by a district at one of their schools, where district leaders from across the state could engage directly with the professional learning initiative. Visiting leaders learned about the host district's plan from its leadership team, observed classroom instruction, and engaged with teachers and staff to understand how the plan was implemented. They then provided critical feedback and shared strategies from their own districts. These visits gave network members structured time in a community of practice to surface challenges, exchange ideas, and explore solutions to the thorny problems facing their initiatives. And, just as important, leaders applied learnings from these visits to their work in their own districts.

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