Building Better PL: What Works with RPPL

Nov. 16, 2022, 1:00–2:00 ET

We’ll begin shortly.

- CHAT your questions/comments
- Your VIDEO can be on or off
- Please stay MUTED until Q&As
- This session is RECORDED
Quick Introductions

In the chat, share:

- your name,
- your org, and
- what brought you here today.
On Behalf of RPPL’s Members …
Eric Taylor
Harvard University

Suzanne Wilson
University of Connecticut

Monica Higgins
Harvard University

Constance Lindsay
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Travis Bristol
University of California, Berkeley

Julia Cohen
University of Virginia

Hunter Gehlbach
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David Blazar
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Kirk Walters
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Judith Warren Little
University of California, Berkeley

Julia Cohen
University of Virginia

Kirk Walters
WestEd

Robert Berry
University of Virginia

Hunter Gehlbach
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... and Research Advisory Council ...
Today’s Speakers

Stacey Alicea  
RPPL Executive Director

Heather Hill  
RPPL Senior Researcher  
Professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Annenberg Institute at Brown University

John Papay  
RPPL Senior Researcher  
Associate Professor of Education and Economics at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University

Sarah Johnson  
RPPL Vice Chair  
CEO of Teaching Lab
Overview of Today’s Event

1. Introductions (5)
2. About RPPL (5)
3. Building Better PL: Presentation (30)
4. Building Better PL: Q&A (15)
5. Closing (5)
The Research Partnership for Professional Learning (RPPL) is a collaborative of professional learning (PL) organizations, researchers, school systems, and funders.
RPPL works to advance educational equity and student achievement by studying and sharing the specific features that make some PL programs more effective than others.
Our Goals

1. Uplift the current evidence base
2. Generate faster and better research on PL
3. Create the research and collaborative infrastructure so we can get that better research into practice in thousands of districts, schools, and PL orgs across the nation
4. Change who sets the research agenda
There is so much we don’t know about PL

**Equity**
What works for whom, how, in what contexts, and with what level of impact?

**Time & Format**
What is the number of hours focused on a topic or delivered in a particular format that leads to impact?

**Content**
What is the specific content knowledge or pedagogical content knowledge teachers should focus on to improve practice?

**Stickiness / Sustainability**
What sustains impact on teacher practice and student learning long after the end of a professional learning engagement?

**Scale**
How do we scale professional learning programs and maintain quality? (Impact declines when a program includes more than 100 teachers.)
We busted some myths about PL...

... which led us to what we DO know works
Building Better PL:
How to Strengthen Teacher Learning

Heather Hill
RPPL Senior Researcher
Professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Annenberg Institute at Brown University

John Papay
RPPL Senior Researcher
Associate Professor of Education and Economics at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University
Read all of this in our new brief

annenberg.brown.edu/rppl/what-works
As we wrote our last brief on dispelling PL myths, we asked a lot about what we know works in the literature.

It seemed like an opportunity to add...
  - With the publication of dozens of rigorous studies of PL, we have better evidence than ever before.
  - We wanted to stick close to the lessons from rigorous causal and descriptive studies.

We suspected that we would find some surprises in this literature.
How we approached this review

- Reviewed PL meta-analyses and reviews focused on its impact on student outcomes; read studies written after those reviews were completed.

- Relied on lessons from causal studies to generate our recommendations – but the recommendations are not based on causal methods. It’s complicated but important.

- Found few causal studies of PL focused on equity. This is a problem RPPL hopes to address.
Interpreting our findings

- We focused on features of effective professional development.

- Program features not recommended do not necessarily = program failure.

- Instead, PL tends to be more effective with the program feature.
What did we learn?

Some design features do appear to improve instructional practice and student outcomes across classrooms and contexts.

**HOW PL is delivered (formats)**

- Built-in time for teacher-to-teacher collaboration around instructional improvement.
- One-to-one coaching, where coaches work to observe and offer feedback on practice.
- Follow-up meetings to address teachers’ questions and fine-tune implementation.

**WHAT gets covered in PL (foci)**

- Building subject-specific instructional practices rather than building content knowledge alone.
- Supporting instruction with concrete materials like curricula or formative assessments rather than leaving behind only general principles.
- Explicitly attending to teachers’ relationships with students.
What makes these features effective?

Promising practices seem to share two common principles:

1. Effective PL supports teachers’ day-to-day practice – focus more on improving what teachers do in classrooms.

2. Effective PL involves accountability for change and improvement—follow-up from other educators.
HOW PL is delivered (formats)
Encourage peer collaboration for improvement

Examples:

- Direct discussion of or rehearsal of instructional practices
- Feedback from peer observations
- Informal consultations and assistance

What’s the evidence for this?

- There is growing evidence that teachers can and do learn from each other; teacher effectiveness improves when teachers have more time to collaborate.
- Collaboration seems to work better when it embodies joint work around shared and specific goals.
- Collaboration requires dedicated time for learning together and strong and supportive cultures.

Why does this work?

- Teachers learn from colleagues who have expertise and context-specific knowledge
- Learning is rooted in day-to-day problems of practice
- Collaboration can promote social accountability and follow-up
Examples:

- 1:1 work with teachers that includes modeling, observing, feedback and/or reflection
- Leading and supporting PLCs
- Non-examples: coaches helping with standardized testing, other admin duties

What’s the evidence for this?

- Across dozens of studies in diverse subjects, programs that contained coaching worked to improve both average classroom instructional quality and student outcomes.

Why does this work?

- Starts with where teachers are, and builds with new instructional techniques
- Relevant and motivating; psychological benefits
- Social accountability
How #3:

Add follow-up meetings to address teacher concerns

Teacher-driven follow-up meetings are a low-cost feature of many successful PL efforts.

Examples:

- A quick meeting with PL providers to talk about how the first weeks of implementation went
- A walk-through by a program coach
- Ongoing meetings with program designers

What’s the evidence for this?

- A recent meta-analysis of STEM instructional improvement programs found that follow-up meetings boosted overall program effectiveness.

Why does this work?

- Fosters collaboration and problem-solving, and possibly positive adaptation of the program
- Enhance teacher agency
- Social accountability
WHAT gets covered in PL (foci)
What #1:

Target subject-specific instructional practices over content knowledge

PL focused on new instructional methods in classrooms leads to greater student benefits than PL focused on content knowledge.

What’s the evidence for this?

- STEM: Program-induced changes in teachers’ instructional practice correlate positively with changes in student outcomes.
- STEM and ELA: PL programs that focus on new instructional strategies – and why they work – tended to have larger effects than programs that focused on conveying a body of knowledge to teachers.
- Science: PL around video analysis of instruction led to large student gains as compared to content-focused PL.

Why does this work?

- May be hard to substantially change content knowledge in a short period
- Practice-focused PL clearly delineates what teachers must do in classrooms to enact new ideas
- Highly relevant to teachers’ day-to-day needs
What #2: Prioritize PL with practice-supportive materials over general principles

Practice-supportive materials provide teachers with concrete ways to reach PL goals.

What’s the evidence for this?

- Two recent meta-analyses found that when PL opportunities featured new curriculum materials, they yield larger effects on student outcomes than PL programs that did not.
- PL opportunities focused on teacher study of student data seem to work only when that data is linked to materials that provide specific next steps in the classroom.
- Two successful formative assessment programs provide teachers with item banks to use regularly in their classroom.

Why does this work?

- Teachers do not have to integrate what they have just learned in PL into practice
- “Give me something to use the next day”
**What #3:**

**Deliver more PL focused on relationships with students**

Improving teacher-student relationships is crucial and potentially easier to address than other forms of content-focused PL.

What’s the evidence for this?

- Empathy-based intervention for teachers can cut their disciplinary referrals, especially among at-risk students.
- Perspective-taking intervention can increase teacher investment in perplexing students, and improve student-reported relationships with teachers and students’ grades.
- My Teaching Partner emphasizes teachers’ regard for students and the creation of emotionally supportive environments, and produces both gains in student achievement and reductions in racial disparities in classroom discipline.

Why does this work?

- Reducing disruptions leaves more time for learning
- Invites student engagement
- Feelings of safety and belonging reap cognitive benefits, especially for historically marginalized students
Where do we go from here?

Additional research about the design features that matter
Confirm whether these PL formats and foci are indeed effective in producing teacher and student learning
Explore other design features that are theoretically justified but have less existing evidence

Explore the reasons why they work, for whom they work, and the conditions necessary to make them more successful

Broaden the research base beyond STEM and ELA
In particular, deepen our understanding of how to best improve equitable instruction and how to support educators in developing culturally responsive teaching practices
What implications does this have for your work?

Use the CHAT

Come OFF MUTE to share
Q&A

Use the CHAT

Come OFF MUTE and ask
Closing

Sarah Johnson
RPPL Vice Chair
CEO of Teaching Lab
Share & learn with us

- Complete your exit ticket (survey)
- Learning something important about PL relevant to RPPL’s learning agenda? Share it with us!
- Participate in future shared learning and research opportunities with RPPL

Coming by email

1. Survey
2. Brief
3. Slides
4. Recording
CONTACT US

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