Education & Learning Program:
PreK–3 Professional Development

AUGUST 2013

The McKnight Foundation's Education and Learning (E&L) Program helps schools develop professional development (PD) systems that support effective and aligned literacy standards, instruction, and assessment from prekindergarten through third grade (PreK–3). The E&L Program provides funds for the Urban Education Institute (UEI) to deliver PD to the participating districts and schools and for districts to enhance their own literacy PD.

This brief describes the PD in the E&L schools in the 2012–13 school year, highlights its benefits and challenges, and offers recommendations for improving and expanding the PD.

The findings are from 54 interviews conducted in spring 2013 with district and school administrators, PreK–3 teachers (including dual language and English language teachers), and literacy coaches in the three districts and five schools with an E&L Program implementation grant,[1] and with three UEI trainers. The perspectives of the interviewees may not represent the full population of the staffs in these schools.

PD Structures

UEI provided PD through a gradual release model, the intent being to turn over more responsibility for PD to school leaders and coaches over 3 years. Additionally, districts hired literacy coaches and provided their own PD.

UEI used similar PD structures across districts. UEI provided cross-district Learning Institutes, school-based workshops, modeling of lessons, and individual classroom observations and coaching. These efforts were coordinated with districts' existing PD offerings and leveraged district- and school-based literacy coaches and professional learning communities (PLCs).

UEI held the Learning Institutes in November 2012 and February 2013. Teachers, coaches, and administrators from all participating schools attended. The first Learning Institute featured presentations on oral language development for young students, including dual language learner (DLL) students. The second institute provided hands-on workshops on instructional strategies in literacy such as read-alouds, think-pair-share, word solving, and reading miscue analysis.

School- and classroom-based PD was provided by UEI trainers who visited each school every 4 to 6 weeks to conduct workshops, observe and coach teachers, and meet with school leadership teams about student data, PD needs, and next steps.

UEI relied on the literacy coaches to support teachers in implementing the strategies they learned during the PD. BCCS had two literacy coaches and a Q Comp[2] coach who worked with PreK–6 teachers. One MPS school had a team of three literacy coaches to support PreK–3 teachers. The other school had a team of two literacy coaches. Both teams included one bilingual literacy coach. SPPS added two coaches who worked primarily with PreK–K teachers (the grades participating in the E&L program in 2012–13) but also spread practices to other grades.

In between UEI visits, the literacy coaches worked with teachers in their PLCs and individually on the strategies and skills presented at UEI trainings and on the goals identified during observations. In BCCS the literacy coaches provided PD during PLC time and co-planned, modeled, and co-taught lessons. The Q Comp coach supported teachers in implementing the changes suggested by UEI trainers' observations. The MPS coaches facilitated PLCs and chose topics based on assessment data. The SPPS coaches participated in PLCs and worked one on one with teachers after UEI observations.

[1] E&L Program schools with implementation grants are Earle Brown Elementary School, Brooklyn Center Community Schools (BCCS); Wellstone Elementary School and Saint Paul Music Academy, Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS); Jefferson Community School and Andersen United Community School, Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS).

[2] Q Comp is a Minnesota program that funds cognitive coaching along with annual incentive pay.

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The districts provided a variety of literacy PD for teachers beyond the PD UEI provided. MPS held district-wide trainings on literacy curriculum guides for Focused Instruction (the district's system for managing curriculum, instruction, assessment, and evaluation for all content areas) and Reader's and Writer's Workshop. SPPS delivered PD to all PreK–K teachers on oral language development, interactive writing, read-alouds, interactive read-alouds, and phonological awareness. BCCS offered early literacy training from the Center for Early Education and Development at the University of Minnesota and PD on instruction for DLL students through a Sheltered Immersion Observation Protocol (SIOP) trainer funded by the E&L grant.

PD Activities

The majority of UEI PD focused on helping teachers improve their literacy instruction by using student data to gauge areas of need and providing strategies to address those areas. Both BCCS and MPS used the STEP assessment to identify students' literacy levels.[3] SPPS used Concepts About Print (CAP) and Mondo Bookshop oral language assessments.

Across districts, UEI offered PD on using data to inform instruction. Both BCCS and MPS received PD on how to administer, analyze, and apply results of STEP. UEI offered MPS two days of training to introduce teachers to STEP and how to administer it. Then UEI trainers facilitated grade-level PD after each of the four STEP assessment windows on analyzing and using the data to create guided reading groups. In SPPS, UEI provided PD on how to break down Mondo oral language and CAP data in ways that helped teachers identify students' specific instructional needs. For example, they reorganized CAP data into four domains (one-to-one matching, letter versus word, structure/punctuation and directionality) so teachers could see domain scores rather than one overall score.

UEI trainers gave teachers specific data-based teaching strategies that varied by district, school, and grade level. In MPS and BCCS, UEI tied the use of STEP data to tailored text selection for guided reading groups and the use of character charts and anchor charts to increase comprehension. In BCCS, teachers also learned how to use STEP data to inform other literacy activities, including shared reading, literacy centers, and independent reading, and how to link these activities to each other. In SPPS, UEI tied PD on Turn and Talk (an instructional strategy that has students reflect, evaluate, and share their ideas with a partner) to Mondo data to promote oral language development, inferential thinking, and comprehension. UEI also helped SPPS teachers use CAP data to inform instruction on concepts of print.

Within districts, teaching strategies shared through PD varied by grade level. In BCCS, for example, PreK–K focused on phonemic awareness, grades 1–2 focused on decoding and word solving, and grades 3–6 focused on comprehension.

UEI trainers worked with district and school literacy coaches who supported teachers' use of new literacy strategies. UEI trained district and school coaches on how to support teachers with data-based teaching strategies. In this train-the-trainer model, UEI trainers and district or school coaches together observed teachers' classrooms and conducted post-observation coaching. For example, in both MPS and BCCS, UEI trainers and literacy coaches observed guided reading classes and then together met with the teachers to discuss the strengths of the lessons and areas in need of improvement. UEI trainers debriefed with the literacy coaches about the observation sessions.

Improved Outcomes from PD

The vast majority of school staff were pleased with the content and quantity of PD. They reported that it resulted in positive changes in teacher understanding, practices, and expectations, and student performance.

The PD created a common language and understanding among teachers. BCCS and MPS staff noted that teachers were using STEP language when they talked to each other about student performance, which facilitated a common understanding. SPPS teachers reported having a better understanding of what skills and behaviors are appropriate for students at certain levels and how to identify when students are off track.

Respondents reported improvements in how teachers use data to inform instruction. The majority of teachers said that the greatest takeaway from the UEI PD was gaining the ability to analyze

[3] STEP—the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress—is a developmental literacy assessment for grades PreK–3.

data and to tailor their teaching based on those data. SPPS teachers reported learning to pull apart and decipher CAP and Mondo data to inform instruction. BCCS and MPS teachers learned how to read and interpret STEP data to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and group them for guided reading.

UEI PD helped improve teachers' practices. Across the districts, teachers became more planful about the learning goals for their lessons in response to the PD on data use. SPPS teachers more explicitly taught CAP and oral language skills; for example, the teachers reported talking less and encouraging students to talk more. MPS teachers became more deliberate with read-aloud texts and making sure they had an instructional purpose. A MPS principal said teachers' professional learning plans included working on pieces UEI coaches suggested. Some teachers began having students do the majority of talking in class to make their thinking visible. Based on PLC work, K teachers prepared inferential questions for guided reading books before lessons. Toward the end of the year, BCCS teachers began aligning the learning objectives from their guided reading groups with their shared reading and independent work. Teachers from all three districts reported using new instructional strategies from the second Learning Institute.

Teachers reported that the PD increased their expectations for students and led to improved student performance. For example, an MPS teacher said UEI PD on STEP changed her thinking about the need to push students beyond factual recall to inferential thinking. In BCCS, teachers said they had higher expectations for their students because of the results they saw from using data to inform instruction.

Teachers also reported gains in student assessment scores. In SPPS, teachers reported growth in CAP and Mondo oral language scores. MPS and BCCS teachers saw improved STEP scores; in BCCS, increases were most prominent in the lower grades.

UEI PD helped create a system of PD and support for teachers. Teachers reported that the focus and quality of their PLCs improved because they now focused on the UEI strategies. Also, PLC leadership in BCCS and MPS changed from classroom teachers to literacy coaches, and they were able to better prepare and facilitate these meetings.

In addition, UEI modeled a new way of coaching to school literacy coaches that teachers found particularly helpful because of its narrow focus and immediate feedback. A teacher shared her experience:

> *…they just were really, really helpful in pinpointing something… I think in the past, the coaches have come in and they think so broadly, and they want everything to change so fast, that you just seem kind of overwhelmed…but what it did was it broke it down in pieces that informed me about changing my own instruction.*

Challenges

While most teachers generally liked the UEI PD, they did encounter some challenges with it. UEI trainers typically were responsive to district and school staff feedback and incorporated it into subsequent PD.

Teachers found the large group sessions that spanned all participating grades less helpful because the content was not always applicable. Teachers reported that addressing PreK issues and K–3 issues in the same training was difficult. An SPPS teacher summarized the challenge:

> *I felt like the ones that were individual were a lot more helpful than the group ones, because in the group, we had PreK and K, and English and Spanish. So, it was kind of broad. It didn't really target your particular classroom as much.*

As an example, a cross-grade PD workshop in SPPS used Mondo data, but PreK teachers did not use that assessment. Similarly, in BCCS teachers reported that some of the cross-grade PD content was above the academic level of PreK students and did not cover topics relevant to PreK, like the importance of oral language. However, respondents thought the PreK specialist and UEI STEP trainer who provided grade-level and classroom support was helpful in translating the PD to the PreK level.

Several teachers raised similar concerns about the generality and relevance of the first Learning Institute, and some teachers reported not being able to participate in the breakout sessions they wanted. UEI addressed these concerns in the February 2013 institute, which attendees received positively.

Although UEI trainers tried to coordinate their efforts with district PD, there were some overlaps and conflicts in PD content. SPPS staff mentioned that the first Learning Institute and some of their school-level PD were redundant to and more basic

than their own district PD on oral language development. Teachers also reported receiving some conflicting information. In SPPS, teachers mentioned receiving disparate suggestions on how closely to follow Mondo pacing guides from UEI and district trainers. Some BCCS teachers also struggled with aligning strategies learned from SIOP PD and UEI PD. For example, one teacher noted conflict about the use of sentence stems with DLL students. She reported being told by a UEI coach to not use sentence stems, but learning at SIOP training that it is important to use them with DLL students.

Unique challenges were associated with different stages of implementation. Being in their first year of implementation, MPS literacy coaches were challenged in supporting teachers in STEP because they were learning it at the same time**.** UEI plans to provide training for literacy coaches next year.

BCCS is in its second year of implementation and has learned the basics of using STEP data to inform its use of guided reading groups, shared reading, independent reading, and literacy centers. BCCS now would like to focus its PD on increasing instructional rigor and integrating STEP into all of its literacy framework activities.

School leaders and teachers identified resources and PD topics they felt they needed to be successful. BCCS leaders and teachers requested protocols on how to dissect data, sample lesson plans and recommendations on instructional resources, videotaped model lessons, and a list of recommended phonics programs. BCCS would also like a scope and sequence that blends STEP levels with Common Core standards and IB content to help teachers know where they should be and when. MPS literacy coaches wanted UEI trainers to model lessons, for example, a guided reading group that targets a specific STEP level and goal. District staff also saw the Learning Institutes as a missed opportunity for staff to share successful strategies across districts and schools.

In a few cases, staff felt that particular PD topics had been neglected. Some in BCCS were concerned about the lack of PD on writing. MPS district staff felt other topics relevant to the initiative were needed, including transition to K, community and family partnerships, and afterschool learning.

Across the districts, respondents reported needing a clearer sense of the overall PD plan. All districts reported wanting a PD calendar for the entire year. Further, SPPS and BCCS staff reported wanting a proactive PD plan based on anticipated needs rather than waiting for data to drive PD plans. For example, SPPS respondents said that UEI sometimes created PD plans based on observation information gathered the same day.

Recommendations

The E&L Program districts and schools engaged in new PD on assessment and instruction that positively affected teaching practices and student learning. Still, they experienced some challenges and identified additional PD needs. The following are recommendations for UEI to consider to help further strengthen PD.

- **Offer additional resources with examples of the instructional strategies taught in PD.** UEI could provide videos and model lesson plans with concrete examples of how to implement the recommended strategies for different STEP levels. Additionally, it could organize an online repository for teachers to contribute their own lesson plans and to locate resources prepared by other teachers.
- **Make group PD more relevant to teachers across the grade levels.** Provide examples and resources for each participating grade level at large group presentations. Before the PD, share draft presentations and materials with school-based representatives familiar with each grade level to ensure the material is relevant.
- **Facilitate cross-district and -school sharing.** Add time at Learning Institutes for district and school staff to present on specific strategies they are successfully using.
- **Clarify the areas of PD for which UEI is responsible.** The E&L Program is designed to improve many systems that impact literacy, but some topics may be outside UEI's core expertise. If districts want PD in other areas (e.g., family engagement in literacy efforts), additional PD providers may be needed.

The E&L Program helps teachers refine and expand their teaching practices and build the skills of district coaches to sustain these improvements. It will be important to continue monitoring PD efforts and impacts over the course of the initiative.