Spotlight on Progress Monitoring and Mentoring

Ready to Learn Providence

What problems has Ready to Learn Providence solved?

- How to make evaluation data meaningful at the student level
- How to use a portfolio to monitor student progress and plan instruction
- How to follow up on monthly professional development activities with daily on-site mentoring
- How to use progress monitoring data and teacher reflection in mentoring

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Ready to Learn Providence has two Early Reading First grants. Project staff has reflected on the experiences of ramping up the program to expand, and the varying fidelity of implementation of practices at old and new sites. Rhode Island has early learning standards that they have modified to communicate to staff with different levels of experience. More than 90% of their children qualify for free and reduced-price lunch and many exhibit characteristics that put them most at risk for reading difficulty.

There are eight independent sites, including four community centers with child care, one Head Start, one public school, one YMCA child care, and one private for-profit site. The public school site is inclusionary. All sites are fully operational over the summer, with the exception of the public school and Head Start sites. The program serves 46 teachers and approximately 400 children. The teachers have a variety of educational backgrounds, ranging from masters to associates degrees. Teaching assistants often have high school degrees or Child Development Associate certificates.

In addition to its formal assessments, the program has developed the Personal Literacy Plan (PLP), an informal assessment tool for monitoring student progress. The plan is used to maintain a record for each student of work samples, observations, audio recordings and photographs, and assessment results. Observations and audio recordings of conversations are included in the PLP to help document and plan oral language instruction. The PLP was designed to assist teachers in their understanding of data created from formal assessments and to guide teachers in monitoring students' progress on a daily basis. The director explained, "Standardized information is important, but there's that other whole aspect of. . .progress monitoring. . .Documentation plays [a critical part in our program], and documentation more than just paper and pencil. . .For example, samples of children's work, conversations that adults and children have, tape recordings, that's all really important. . .We're discovering more about the importance of [documentation] every day as we look at [examples and portfolios]."

The information is shared with students to reflect on their own progress and with teachers to inform practice and focus individual instruction. "We share documentation with the teachers to help promote. . .their learning. But we're also bringing it back to the children. And we're showing them their own learning. And from there they're even leaping forward from that— yes, through the documentation." This tool constitutes what program staff agrees is the strongest evidence they have of their success.

Ready to Learn uses rigorous data collection methods. The director notes, "I don't know if bulletproof is the right term, but [we wanted to come] as close to that as we could in terms of establishing for staff how important it was to collect accurate data about kids. . . There's no underestimating just how critically important it is to make [the documentation] visible to teachers. . .It's the things that teachers see that are real concrete indicators of children's progress that keep us all feeling good about what we do every day."

The director comments, "There's a huge human nature component to documentation that, regardless of how accountable we are to ourselves in terms of data, that is undeniably the underlying motivation. . .We've done a lot of documentation that shows change—the staff utilizes that as a way of supporting teachers and recognizing the critical steps forward that each of them has made in their own practice. So there's a lot of before and after photographs that are [used by] the coaches and mentors so that teachers can celebrate where and what they have really achieved in their classrooms."

Mentors and coaches provide extensive ongoing support to teachers. There are on-site mentors for each site, who meet with teachers three hours/week. Teachers receive six hours of professional development each month, and there are currently three (soon to be four) coaches who support teachers in their work. Mentors are a part of the day-to-day work with teachers and form strong, reciprocal relationships with teachers. They use observational and assessment data to set goals and engage teachers in developing action plans for achieving these goals. They ensure that the monthly professional development focus is implemented; hold weekly meetings; help teachers plan, co-create lessons; model interactions, etc. Additional classroom support is provided by Early Literacy Assistants, who provide one-on-one sessions with children or co-teach; and Americorps volunteers, who facilitate access of resources from the Providence libraries.

Coaches provide the professional development training. Their approach to training comes from the Head Start model, which provides the foundation for teachers, out of which other professional development grows as needed. Whole-group teacher experience is provided through the model, while the professional development that follows is provided in small groups and individually to address specific teacher practices and provide support. The mentors make sure that the monthly professional development focus is carried out during the remainder of the month.

Program staff emphasizes the importance of creating a community of adult learners, which is central also to their approach with struggling teachers. The program found that by working with teachers through the needs of the children, they were best able to address teachers' growth in a less threatening way. The "Summer Booster Shot" is another program for addressing teacher needs. Coaches spend time in the classroom, focusing on needs illuminated by the end-of-the-year assessment. It became an opportunity for "reluctant" teachers to observe new teaching practices. Staff noted that teacher participation must be voluntary, otherwise the expectation that teachers will adopt new practices is treated with resentment.

One staff member concludes, "What I've observed happening here is that people have really formed deep relationships with one another. And organizationally I think that—well, what we know is that the content knowledge is critical, that it needs to be rigorous, that what people are doing needs to be hard. And in doing hard work together and for lots of the teachers that we're working with, and particularly the teacher assistants for whom English is a second language, the challenges that those teachers have in being exposed to the level of training that's provided here is maybe the first time in their careers they've had the expectations that we've brought to the relationship. I think they get through it in large part because of the incredibly supportive environment that that Early Reading First team creates."

(Excerpts from Ready to Learn Providence Interview)