

III. Providing Professional Development to All Targeted Teachers

A. Introduction

LSC projects are charged with providing in-depth professional development to all teachers in the participating schools/districts over the course of their projects. In the 1997–98 core evaluation year, there were 8 projects in their fourth year of funding, 18 in their third year, and 20 in their second year. Evaluators in these projects were asked to consider whether their projects were on target to reach the goal, and, if not, what roadblocks stood in the way of their success and what adjustments were needed.

B. Strategies to Ensure Full Participation

Evaluators report that the LSC projects are working diligently to provide professional development as proposed, and are typically having success in reaching most of their targeted teachers. One elementary project established a project goal of 150 hours, a figure 50 percent higher than the NSF mandate, reasoning that teachers will at least achieve the less ambitious figure of 100 hours of professional development. Other districts ask teachers to submit proof of use of the designated instructional materials, which provides a strong incentive for them to participate in LSC professional development.

At the same time, some evaluators have reported that some teachers resent programs that they see as dictated from the top, and are therefore less receptive to them. Said one teacher:

The school was pushed into this project by the assistant principal, who feels we need to be on the cutting edge of everything. The teachers are angry, and are not planning to attend the summer workshop.

It appears there is a delicate balance that must be struck in order to get all teachers to participate and at the same time remain open to impact.

There is a real tension here....There is a real danger that the LSC will be seen as just another district-imposed mandate and thus fail to win the hearts and minds of the teachers it is seeking to empower.

Sometimes policies change in the midst of the project funding cycle, requiring the project to switch gears and adjust accordingly. Examples of such changes that have contributed to delays in meeting goals include elimination of release days for professional development, and turnover in administrative personnel. In addition, evaluators report that the availability of substitute teachers for full-day professional development sessions has been affected by reduced funding resulting from failures of school levies.

When not all teachers are required to participate simultaneously, recruiting becomes an issue. One evaluator noted that the program speaks for itself, and that success breeds success.

Just doing a great job has been a key component in facilitating support for alignment of key system components. More and more teachers joined the program through word of mouth encouragement of colleagues; that has produced a greater critical mass of committed school-based professionals who are already succeeding in helping to produce alignment of vision and resources and policies.

On the other hand, there are projects where recruiting poses a considerable challenge. It is more difficult to get reluctant teachers to come on board, which sometimes results in the projects having to deal with “waves” of participants distinguished by levels of enthusiasm.

As its work reaches deeper and deeper into the pool of potential professional development participants, the [project] must seek to understand how the remaining pool of teachers may be different from early volunteers and find incentives that will encourage them to participate. Incentives may include both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills. Teachers currently receive financial incentives for attending [project] professional development activities, but other incentives may be necessary to reach the remaining 40 percent of the teaching force in the [project] districts who have not yet participated.

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As the PIs noted in the course of their interview, a major challenge will be to engage the teachers who have not yet attended summer institutes and/or other forms of professional development. These are the teachers who are typically more reluctant to embrace change. While the sheer numbers of teachers who have participated and are enthusiastic about the science initiatives should offer some degree of leverage in attracting the more reticent teachers, there are bound to be some who resist.

Another evaluator predicts that this “wave” phenomenon will manifest itself in a differential impact on teachers.

Realistically, the eventual outcome will be seen along a continuum, or range, of impacts of [the project] on classrooms. There will be one strong subset of teachers who have adopted practices in line with the project, a second and larger set of teachers who've come to recognize the value of the [project] approach, but who are struggling to implement what they've been exposed to, and a third and smaller group of teachers for whom there have been no apparent impacts. In order to increase the number of teachers in the first subset, the project team needs to reach out and assure recruitment of teachers who wouldn't normally attend institutes, perhaps by creating more site-based interest among teachers for upcoming professional development opportunities.

Several of the Cohort 4 projects reported that late notification of funding meant that recruiting of teachers and schools and even scheduling professional development was hindered the first summer, putting them at a disadvantage when it comes to staying on schedule.

The Project Director has worked diligently to recruit more schools and was successful in adding two additional districts before the end of the first project “year,” which in reality was four months long (May through August).

Some of the “older” projects have been able to make up for late starts by accelerating instructional materials adoption or increasing the rate of entry of new participants and/or schools into professional development. In one case, the project has monitored professional development hours and developed plans to target schools that were below the proposed number of professional development days. Others have been able to allow more flexibility in the scheduling of professional development. In all of these cases, the end result has been to speed up the process of involving participants.

C. Changes in Teacher Populations

A practical concern of numerous projects was the difficulty in trying to serve a population of teachers that fluctuates constantly. Teacher attrition is a fact of life, with LSC-trained teachers retiring or moving to other schools or districts. These teachers are, in turn, replaced by teachers who need to be folded into the LSC professional development.

In addition to the challenges posed by teacher attrition, a number of projects have faced a marked influx of new teachers due to rapidly growing student populations and/or statewide mandates reducing class sizes. Teachers who are new to the system need to compress the entire requirement of professional development hours into a shortened time period in order to meet NSF’s expectations. Several evaluators expressed projects’ anxiety about demonstrating the full impact of the LSC as they see so many teachers who have participated in the project leave the district to be replaced by those who have not.

One evaluator suggested a revised accounting system for measuring success in reaching targeted teachers:

The constant influx of new teachers makes this goal a moving target. In the final two years of the project, a more realistic barometer of this indicator would be to look at professional development hours accumulated by teachers who have been with the project since its inception.

D. The Need for More Teacher Leaders

Very few projects initially had the capacity to provide high-quality professional development to large numbers of teachers. One project addressed this problem in advance by planning to prepare a larger number of teacher leaders than they thought they would need:

A second major strength of the project is the large number of teachers who participated in the professional development during the first full year of the project. The number of participants not only reflects positively on the project's ability to provide a professional development program, but it gives the project an extensive pool of potential leaders for the remainder of the NSF grant.

Evaluators of other projects have suggested that projects address the need to reach large numbers of teachers by preparing more teacher leaders. As one evaluator noted:

The project must continue to meet the challenge of developing its capacity to provide high-quality professional development. This means that the project must very strongly and deliberately develop its teacher leadership group. A large and strong group of teacher leaders, alongside a well designed and tested professional development curriculum, will help the project to continue to “scale up” its efforts so that the district can provide support to an increasing number of teachers and schools.