

October 2008

System-Level Support For Learning Teams In LAUSD Secondary Schools

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Summary

Our study of the system-level support for the Learning Teams Professional Development (PD) model in 2008-09 found dwindling support from the central district to support the model as the year progressed. The PD model's survival may depend on two local district Learning Teams settings intended to build the capacity of local district and school administrators to support this model. The following findings emerged from our study:

- Both the Regional and Learning Teams Local District (LTLD) settings appeared promising in their capacity to engage local district staff in rich, reflective dialogue with opportunities to develop understanding and support for the Learning Teams process.
- Active staff participation in both Regional and Learning Teams Local District settings was associated with local district superintendent attendance and participation in these settings.
- Emphasis on Learning Teams in the Superintendent's Cabinet meetings decreased over time, thus limiting opportunities for district leaders to collectively deepen their thinking about Learning Teams, reflect on implementation, and establish accountabilities.

That the Learning Teams PD model stands as a promising and favorable alternative to the sit and listen approach to building the capacity of educators is a given. The purpose of our study was to determine if LAUSD had a system in place to support plans for the district-wide implementation of the LT PD model. The long term survival of this professional development model depends on consistent support both from the local district and the central district. Central district leaders must recognize that the absence of continuous support for this or any district-wide initiative can be potentially damaging to its survival and its potential to benefit student achievement.

Overview

The Learning Teams PD model aims to develop teacher capacity through on-going, teacher-driven school-based PD as opposed to PD brought in by an outside vendor. In 2006-07, LAUSD contracted with Achievement Solutions to pilot their Learning Teams PD model in 13 secondary schools. In 2007-08, LAUSD extended this partnership to expand Learning Teams to 84 LAUSD secondary schools across the local districts. The district has planned to expand the Learning Teams PD model into all secondary schools within the next few years.

Research and Planning studied the system-level capacity to support the expansion of the Learning Teams PD model to all secondary schools. This research brief provides a general overview of findings presented with detail in the larger report.

Methods

Although Learning Teams is a school-based professional development model, the focus of our study was at a systems-level. Observations of ten central district and 71 local district LT settings from January to June 2008 were our primary data sources. In each of these settings we examined the following:

- Who attended and their level of participation in discussions
- Topic and Focus (e.g., logistical, reflective, etc.)
- Participant Grouping (e.g., whole-group, small group, etc.)
- Number and Type of Questions Asked (e.g. open-ended, probing, etc.)
- Uptake
- Capacity-Building Opportunities
- Accountabilities

In addition, in April 2008 we conducted a short, primarily closed-ended survey of local district Administrators of Instruction (AI), Directors of School Services (DSS), and school-site administrators responsible for LT at their school to gauge perceptions regarding LT implementation and capacity building.

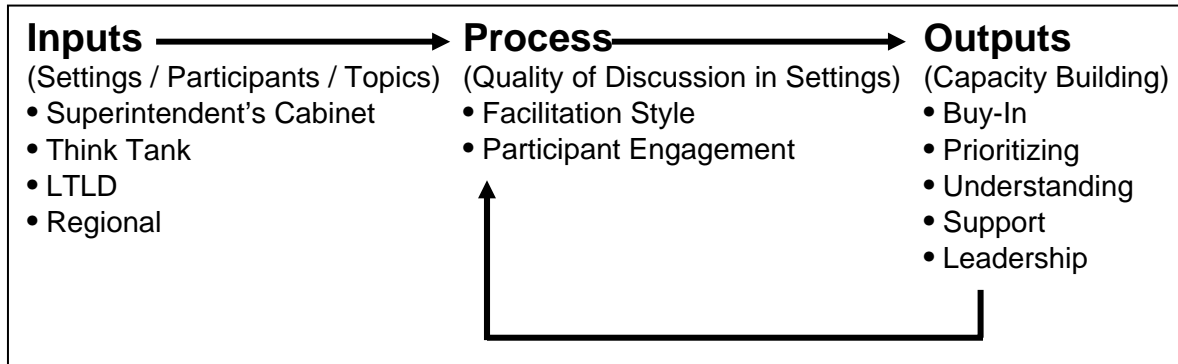
Key Findings

Regional and LTLD settings appeared promising in building capacity to support learning teams. Although participants in Regional setting experienced a higher quality of discussion around the intended topics than participants in LTLD setting, both settings provided opportunities to develop capacity building with emphasis placed on developing understanding and support for the Learning Teams PD model. Most local district and school administrators believe the LTLD and Regional settings helped develop their capacity to support the model. Although discussion around buy-in and prioritizing the Learning Teams PD model diminished as the year progressed and some school administrators did not see Learning Teams as a high priority, development of leadership skills helped LTLD and Regional participants take ownership of the Learning Teams process.

Staff participation in Regional and LTLD settings was associated with local district superintendent participation in these settings.

Attendance and participation by local district superintendents at Learning Teams settings, helped to influence local district staff engagement and support of the Learning Teams model. This finding exemplifies the potential of a cycle of improvement around the Learning Teams processes and outcomes (see Figure 1). As local district superintendents bought into the Learning Teams model and made it a priority, their engagement in the settings influenced staff engagement, which assisted facilitation of quality discussion in the settings. In turn, the deeper discussion created richer capacity building opportunities that fed back into the quality of discussion.

FIGURE 1
The Cycle of Improvement for Learning Teams Implementation



Opportunities for capacity building of local district superintendents to support learning teams diminished as the year progressed and may jeopardize the expansion and survival of the model.

A growing body of literature suggests that the leadership of the superintendent of schools is a critical component in institutionalizing educational change. Indeed, our report shows that local district superintendent support, in terms of attendance and participation in Learning Teams settings, stood as the driving force behind the cycle of improvement for Learning Teams implementation. However, as the year progressed, the amount of time spent discussing Learning Teams in the Cabinet decreased. Broader district concerns, specifically budget cuts and changes in the direction of the Cabinet, took time away from the intended instructional hour. By the end of the year, the Cabinet no longer functioned as a Learning Teams setting. In the absence of a setting intended to maintain local district superintendents' support of and accountabilities to the Learning Teams model (i.e., Superintendent's Cabinet), the momentum behind this cycle of improvement was threatened.

Conclusion

The Learning Teams professional development model is promising. The central district must consistently invest in their local district superintendents to support this model. Without the Superintendent's Cabinet or something serving a similar purpose, the Learning Teams setting at the local district that appear so promising will become jeopardized.

Our findings (some of which were detailed in this research brief) allowed us to make the following recommendations:

- Within the LTLD and Regional settings, local district leaders, particularly superintendents, should continue to model the participation, facilitation, and leadership behaviors necessary for all local district and school administrators to buy-into, support, and lead Learning Teams implementation.

- District leaders and Achievement Solutions senior staff should ensure the intended objectives of the Superintendent’s Cabinet setting—such as collaborative planning and establishing accountabilities—are incorporated into future central district settings or the existing LTLD setting.
- Local district superintendents, DSS, and AI should articulate and monitor staff accountabilities.
- Achievement Solutions senior staff and district staff who work closely with them should focus more attention on developing strong facilitation of the LTLD and Regional meetings.
- Local district leaders and Regional setting facilitators should strengthen efforts to establish the Learning Teams PD model as a priority throughout the year, particularly for high school administrators, by continuing to connect Learning Teams with other district and school initiatives.
- Local district superintendents and Learning Teams advisors should strengthen efforts within the LTLD setting to clarify how local district staff fit into the Learning Teams process.

Successful and sustained implementation of the Learning Teams model within LAUSD schools requires long-term support, and continual improvement, at all levels of the district. As the role of central and local districts change, district and Achievement Solutions leaders must reassess the purpose of existing Learning Teams settings so they can better adapt to changes and continue to provide capacity building opportunities over time.

For more information regarding this study see the full report:
López, Greycya and Rickles, Jordan. Building System-Level Capacity to Support the Learning Teams Professional Development Model. Research and Planning Publication No. 2008-08 . Available Online@ research.lausd.net