



The Instructional Leadership Corps: Entrusting Professional Learning in the Hands of the Profession

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Abstract

The Instructional Leadership Corps (ILC) is an innovative professional learning project in which teacher leaders in California collaborate to lead sustainable professional development to support implementation of new student standards within their districts. Over more than 4 years, the ILC has served over 100,000 teachers. The responses of these educators to ILC conferences and trainings have been overwhelmingly positive. This brief describes how the ILC has changed the professional development landscape in four communities, offering lessons about how teacher-led learning can motivate shifts in practice, enhance teachers' professionalism and efficacy, and create supportive systems and strategic relationships that can sustain change.

The full report can be found online at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/instructional-leadership-corps-professional-learning>.

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Introduction

The work that I've been doing with the Instructional Leadership Corps (ILC) has helped me grow as a professional, [it has helped] my kids grow, and when I'm doing PD [professional development], I help other teachers understand what Common Core is. It's not just integrating one or two lessons that are Common Core-ish. It's helping the kids make all these connections and seeing how it applies to the real world.

—Teacher leader, ILC

This California teacher is describing the Instructional Leadership Corps (ILC), a California collaborative teacher professional learning project in which expert teachers organize local professional development to spark iterative changes in practice. Launched in 2014, ILC is a joint effort of the California Teachers Association (CTA), the National Board Resource Center (NBRC), and the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE).

The ILC changes the paradigm for teacher learning from one dependent on outside consultants, who often conduct one-shot workshops before they leave for the next district, to one that engages local professionals who have been trained and supported to lead ongoing learning within their own districts—and, in many cases, to carry that learning to other schools and districts in their regions.

Over only 4 years, the more than 250 teachers and administrators who comprise the ILC have served more than 100,000 California educators through a professional learning approach that supports school-based learning, develops additional teacher leaders as well as instructional leadership among administrators, and has begun to strengthen the

capacity of schools and districts in California to implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). The CCSS and NGSS are moving instruction away from a transmission curriculum that often featured scripted lessons and multiple choice tests toward higher order thinking skills acquired through student engagement in inquiry and problem-solving—a shift that requires major transformations in how teachers teach and how teachers learn.

Implementing these changes across California—a large state serving a diverse and high-need student population, and one that has experienced significant teacher shortages—poses considerable challenges. A new funding formula and accountability system has shifted decision-making to the local level and allowed districts and schools to seek out and implement innovative learning opportunities for teachers.

ILC Program Design

The ILC’s purposeful approach, “teachers teaching teachers,” empowers teachers to lead sustainable professional development and advance instructional capacity within their districts. ILC instructional leaders are primarily teachers, augmented by a smaller number of administrators, who have received intensive professional development from ILC experts on how to implement the key instructional shifts required by the new standards.

These instructional leaders bring that knowledge back to their home districts in the form of multiple professional development workshops (PDWs) interspersed with teacher-designed changes in classroom practice followed by opportunities to reconvene, reflect on, and refine these efforts, a hallmark of the ILC project. During these workshops, the leaders demonstrate what an instructional shift that the standards call for looks like in the classroom, help their colleagues develop appropriate lesson plans, and then support them in engaging in new practices and carrying them to their students. In subsequent sessions, teachers jointly analyze real-world results from the new practices, examine student work samples, and refine their approaches. In this iterative and collaborative process, teachers receive the ongoing support and development they need to make sustained and standards-aligned changes in classroom instruction.

The ILC’s reach has been extraordinary. Since its inception in 2014, ILC leaders have provided multi-session professional learning to more than 32,000 educators statewide, in more than 2,000 schools and at least 495 districts in California. An additional 30,000 educators participated in ILC-related conferences and presentations, and 38,000 more were impacted as ILC members trained instructional coaches in a trainer-of-trainers model. The responses of these educators to ILC conferences and trainings have been overwhelmingly positive, with many participants identifying this as the best professional learning experience they have had.

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In this study, we sought to discover how ILC teams in different settings gained traction and began to transform professional learning opportunities in their communities and regions, often addressing long-standing problems of practice and inequities in children’s access to high-quality instruction. We studied the work of ILC teams at four very different sites:

- Madera Unified School District in rural San Joaquin Valley, serving largely Latino/a students, with varying levels of English proficiency, and students from low-income families. There the ILC focused on language development across the curriculum.
- Conejo Valley Unified School District, a high-achieving and well-resourced district in Ventura County, where the team focused on building science competencies and aligning instruction from elementary to high school.
- The East Side Alliance, a formal partnership between East Side Union High School District and its seven k–8 feeder districts in East San Jose, which range from moderate to extremely low-income. There the teams worked with and learned from each other as they supported new approaches to standards-based mathematics instruction.
- A partnership between the ILC leaders’ network in North Orange County and California State University at Fullerton’s College of Education, which worked across a wide range of districts through a series of “Teachers Teaching Teachers” conferences focused on the instructional shifts in the standards. These efforts led to new mentoring programs for both beginning teachers and high school students interested in teaching.

In each of the four sites, we interviewed ILC leaders; participating teachers; and school, district, and county administrators. We observed professional learning workshops, statewide conferences, and conferences organized by ILC teams. We also observed classrooms of teachers who participated in workshops led by ILC leaders.

The ILC in Action

The ILC team in Madera created a professional learning program for teachers to help develop and support students’ academic language learning. In one of the professional development workshops, with close to 40 teachers attending, two parallel sessions were held in two separate rooms—one for elementary school teachers and one for secondary school teachers.

After a welcome and introductions, the workshop leaders distributed task cards and resources. Teachers engaged in discussion, proposed ideas, and exchanged experiences of CCSS-aligned instruction. The teacher leaders then used slides and short videos to introduce strategies for giving students more opportunities to participate and talk in class to develop their language skills. They modeled these strategies by giving the teachers time to talk. As one teacher leader noted, “The person doing the talking is the one doing the learning.” Rather than asking students to be quiet so the teacher can talk, the teachers were being trained to get students actively engaged and

interacting. This idea represented a significant shift in the district's approach to teaching and learning after almost a decade of Explicit Direct Instruction, a highly scripted curriculum that had been implemented in the district.

The second part of the workshop involved a short, interactive presentation that built on the earlier workshop content. Teachers received materials on sentence frames for students to present an opinion, acknowledge ideas or seek clarification from a peer, or constructively disagree and make a suggestion. Teacher leaders showed how these structures could build across grades to foster more complex dialogue, from those in grades k-1 ("I think ..., because ...") through to more advanced frames in grade 6 and beyond ("Based on ..., I infer that ...").

Before the end of the workshop, and after a short debrief, the organizers urged the teachers to try out, as soon as possible, the instructional strategies presented and bring their lesson plans and student work samples to the second PDW, which would be scheduled shortly. They encouraged the teachers to send emails with questions, complete the homework in the shared Google Classroom that had been set up, share experiences, and visit each other's classrooms to help support these instructional shifts.

Between workshops, teachers engaged with each other to share and refine practices, and in a subsequent workshop, they reconvened to discuss what they had learned and to take up additional approaches for implementing the strategies.

Impact on Teaching and Learning

We found, like earlier evaluators, that the ILC project resulted in changes in instructional practice and greater student engagement in learning. Most participants in ILC workshops consistently report that their ILC experiences have influenced their curriculum, instructional strategies, assessments, student engagement, and student learning to a "great extent." During classroom observations, we saw teachers incorporate strategies and tools learned in the ILC workshops. Teacher leaders and administrators described noticing a change in teacher mindset after the ILC work—teachers felt empowered to give more control to students and engage more with challenging parts of the curriculum. A district representative in Conejo Valley noted these positive shifts in the flow of the lessons and in the teachers' perceptions of their role:

The changes that I've seen in the classroom have been that teachers now don't feel like they have to front-load science vocabulary and information—that it comes through naturally.... The kids are not distracted [and] off-task; they're engaged in their own learning process. I think that for some of our teachers, that's been a big shift. [Previously] they had to control everything to make sure that child is focused and behaved.

Teachers commonly attributed to the ILC workshops the increased levels of student engagement they witnessed: Students were more actively involved in lessons, explored multiple ways to solve a problem, exhibited perseverance in tackling difficult problems, and were more confident and empowered when faced with challenging subjects. A middle school teacher in East Side's Mount Pleasant district reported a shift in her students' disposition toward mathematics as she incorporated new teaching strategies, noting:

My students are more engaged. They love the math block. They love collaborating more. They love basically the different strategies that I used from [the ILC workshops]. They are having more of a growth mindset when it comes to math. I know from previous years that they come into the classroom already saying, "I can't do math, it's not my thing." But once I've implemented so many different strategies and number talks and collaboration that we've learned, they become more receptive. My students help one another, they're collaborating, they're working as a group. Two years ago, none of that was really happening within the classroom.

This was echoed by a district administrator and later ILC member in Madera, who described what convinced him to support expanding the reach of the ILC workshops to other schools in the district:

Here's the thing that was a real tipping point for me.... I was seeing the evidence, but what we heard from teachers was, and this gets me a little bit passionate, they heard kids say things like, "I felt smart today." That's a huge thing to hear a kid say. When a 7th grader who's not doing well in school tells you they felt smart today, it's because someone taught them how to feel smart today, right?

The ILC gave teachers a renewed sense of collegiality, purpose, and common mission that reaffirmed their professional identity, kept them engaged in their work, and gave them a sense of responsibility that extended well beyond their individual classrooms. Teacher leaders at all four sites found ways to collaborate with school and district leaders, as well as their teacher associations, to reach more teachers and to connect with organizations outside their districts, such as counties and universities, to realize systemic changes in the landscape for professional learning in their regions. As one teacher leader noted:

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The ILC, for me, has been [about] how we can carry not the same exact ideas, but that same passion and belief that we can do better. When you get caught up in how my school is doing or how my district is doing, we forget that it's a larger stage. That we're not just here for this small group; we have to impact as many as possible if we're true educators.

The ILC was able to impact many teachers through the building of relationships between the teacher leaders and local school and district leaders, teachers associations, county offices of education, and universities. As the approach became better known and understood, ILC leaders were able to integrate it into existing professional development and coaching infrastructures more fully, to train other teachers as leaders to spread their expertise, and to work with educators at many levels of the system to create shared enterprises for learning.

The ILC's success reflects a promising model: helping teachers acquire sophisticated new practices while developing instructional leadership, increasing professionalism and self-efficacy, and building successful systems of professional learning.

Lessons Learned

We noted the following lessons from our examination of the ILC in action:

1. Teachers value professional learning led by their colleagues.

When asked to compare ILC workshops with traditional professional development offered by outside consultants, teachers expressed their unconditional preference for learning from and with their colleagues. Teacher leaders were attentive to local needs; attuned to the specific implementation challenges facing teachers in their districts; and more accessible for follow-up questions, advice, and support. Teachers who participated in teacher-led workshops valued these experiences, recognizing that their colleagues were responsive to and knowledgeable about the shared context and the educational needs of their students and could not only describe but also demonstrate some of the recommended instructional shifts.

2. ILC membership enhances teacher leaders' professionalism and sense of efficacy.

Beyond the effect on teachers' work in their home districts, creating and leading professional learning for colleagues was highly beneficial for the ILC teacher leaders. Realizing that they were having an impact on shaping other teachers' practice increased their sense of professional efficacy. Broadening their professional reach beyond their classrooms, they strengthened their leadership skills as they initiated innovative activities and solidified professional relationships. ILC members were proud of their work and accomplishments, and empowering the profession was a frequent theme in the teacher interviews.

3. Supportive structural arrangements foster instructional change.

Adoption of CCSS and NGSS required curricular and pedagogical shifts that were ambitious, profound, and demanding. Moving from scripted curriculum and pacing guides to planning lessons with engaging learning activities could not happen quickly or effortlessly.

The shifts in instruction necessitated changes in instructional leadership and teaching evaluations. To align with more student-paced learning, administrators had to shift how they conducted classroom observations and provided feedback to teachers. Given their role in allocating resources and acting as instructional leaders, school and district administrators must be aware of and involved in sustained changes in instruction.

More time and opportunities for professional collaboration were critical to implementing instructional changes. ILC teachers and their colleagues needed time and material resources to plan lessons, observe each other's classrooms, analyze the work of their students, and discuss and reflect together on their experiences. Teachers had more opportunities to do so when administrators at the school and district levels provided resources and built structures that allowed and supported collegial collaboration.

4. Systematic follow-up contributes to implementation of instructional shifts.

Achieving depth versus reach is a perennial dilemma in teacher professional learning initiatives. Lasting changes in pedagogy are more likely to occur when teachers can try new strategies, receive feedback, address challenges in implementation, and iteratively improve over the course of multiple workshops, with advisors and coaches at hand. This raises the question of how to reach a large enough number of teachers while still providing the kind of close support associated with meaningful changes in pedagogy.

Frequency and quality of the follow-up opportunities are indispensable. Follow-up usually consisted of teacher self-reports; verbal or written reflections with colleagues; and, sometimes, samples of student work. Meaningful follow-up was important but rare and involved either the modeling of teaching practices in the classroom by ILC teacher leaders or observation and feedback of participant teachers trying out the instructional strategies. Designing for long-range engagement and follow-up is a key element of lasting change and should be part of initial plans so that the many benefits of teacher-led professional development can be secured.

5. Strategic relationships support deeper, more widespread professional learning.

ILC teacher leaders gained the greatest traction when they were able to build relationships with district administrators, teachers associations, county offices of education, universities, and philanthropic organizations. Partnerships with these institutions supported content alignment and leveraged financial and logistical resources at the local level.

As mutual trust developed, districts and teachers associations were increasingly willing to contribute financial resources, support, and logistical assistance. ILC teams were more successful when they connected to organizations and institutions that recognized the

inherent value of their work and were willing and able to provide support and resources. Maintaining these connections and establishing productive relationships are necessary for project continuation and institutionalization.

The foundational support of ILC's institutional partners was also indispensable. SCOPE, NBRC, and the CTA provided ongoing guidance, access to intellectual and academic resources, sustained professional interactions, upkeep of the professional network, and personal recognition. The existence of a solid organization that guides, documents, and assesses the outcomes of the ILC project is vital for its continued success.

Conclusion

Our study of the four sites demonstrated the ILC's success in elevating teachers' understanding of the new standards and assessments, presenting instructional strategies to support students' learning, and developing teacher leadership. The ILC is a pathbreaking effort offering a solid template for providing professional learning opportunities to educators. The next phase of the project is to expand to more districts throughout California and ensure that the practices take root in local communities by deepening partnerships and garnering resources to sustain ILC activities, thereby enhancing teachers' knowledge of the new standards and the instructional capacity needed to support students in meeting them.

About the Learning Policy Institute

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