



Building Capacity to Enact Change for Classroom Quality Improvement in New Jersey

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Abstract: The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes partnered with the New Jersey Department of Education from 2013 to 2017 to implement a peer learning community in selected districts. The goal of the PLC was to support effective implementation of key early childhood policies and improve the quality of instruction preschool through grade 3. This report describes the rationale and theory of change, identifies the impact on the SEA and LEAs, lessons learned, and concludes with next steps for the SEA.

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Introduction

State Education Agencies (SEAs) across the country are working to directly impact early childhood teaching and learning in local education agencies (LEAs). To do this, the SEA must rely on local change agents to increase classroom quality across a state. The work presented in this paper set out to build the capacity of educators, teachers and leaders in New Jersey to spearhead change in LEAs with the support of the SEA. The New Jersey Early Childhood Academy (NJECA) was conducted from 2013 to 2017 as a collaborative effort of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO), and the New Jersey Department of Education Division of Early Childhood Education and Family Engagement (NJDOE).¹ This paper describes the rationale and theory of change, identifies the impact on the SEA and LEAs, lessons learned, and concludes with next steps for the SEA.

Background

NJECA is a focused community of practice for district teams of administrators and early childhood teachers to learn and share best practices in implementing state policy reforms. Research-practice partnerships have been defined as “long-term collaborations between researchers and practitioners...which are organized to investigate problems of practice and generate solutions for improving district outcomes.”ⁱ In more formal terms, this partnership could be seen as a “Networked Improvement Community” as it involves “a network of districts that seek to leverage diverse experiences in multiple settings to advance understandings about what works where, when and under what conditions...to address a problem common to many different communities”ⁱⁱ (p. 10).

The NJECA commenced in 2013 and a first-year report was produced in 2014. “[Professional Learning Academy: Supporting District Implementation of Early Childhood Policy](#)” documents the structure of the professional development with districts and reports initial outcomes. The report noted impacts on:

- relationships (within and across LEAs),
- knowledge and understanding of key SEA policies that LEAs were expected to implement (e.g. teacher evaluation, early childhood education standards), and

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- stronger understanding of quality and how to use data to inform practice and policy.

In the most recent year of implementation, 2016-2017, the NJECA became an integral part of the [comprehensive work](#) the SEA is implementing through their federally funded Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant (RTT-ELC). This was accomplished with a focus on improving the quality of [kindergarten through third grade](#) through research and professional learning as part of a continuous improvement cycle.

Theory of Change

The NJECA serves as a model for other SEAs to build the capacity of LEAs to support high-quality teaching and learning for all children across the early childhood continuum. The NJECA is a cross-district professional learning community that meets several times a year. Districts bring a leadership team of at least one central office administrator, one building-level administrator, and one teacher. Districts are encouraged to build their leadership team larger than these requirements, and many do. The aim of the NJECA was to build the capacity of educational leaders and teachers to lead change in teaching and learning in kindergarten through third grade via a continuous improvement cycle. To do so, we engaged in this community of practice to achieve several specific goals. These are:

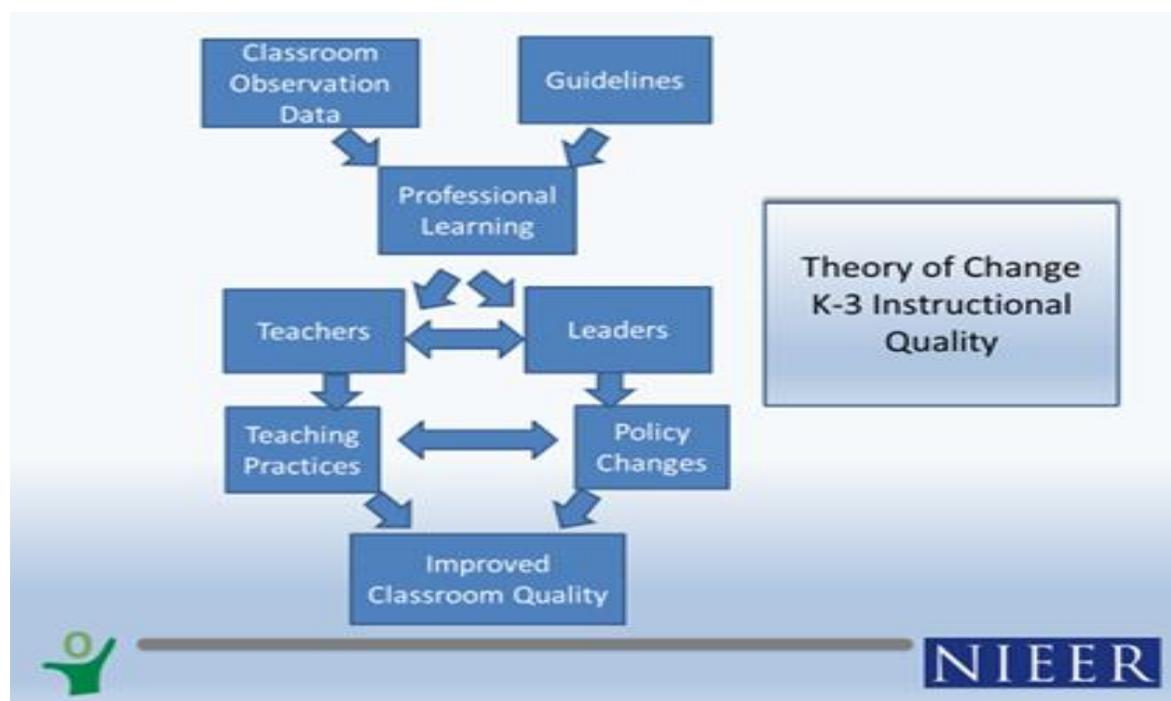
- Increase LEAs knowledge of developmentally appropriate and rigorous instruction in the early grades, as detailed in the guidelines.
- Implement a systemic approach to a continuous improvement cycle using data to guide the implementation of the guidelines. Preschool in NJ has received a lot of well-deserved attention for the on-going evaluation used to improve the quality of education for young children. The work at the NJECA was grounded in these successes and intended to pull up the best practices and strengthen the preschool to grade 3 system. This, in turn, sustains the positive preschool effects with a coherent system and high-quality early elementary experiences.
- Develop a realistic plan for districts to lead to alignment in instruction, school policies, and practices. We did not provide a program or a script or a curriculum for districts to use, there were no mandates, and there were no one-size-fits-all assumptions. Each district identified strategies to implement and sustain the use of developmentally appropriate and rigorous instruction in grades K-3 that were specific to the school and district context.

As has been noted, principals overseeing pre-K through grade 3 programs need knowledge and resources to better lead teaching and learning in this arena.ⁱⁱⁱ A critical component is to provide the opportunity for districts to discuss key initiatives and implementation of high-quality early childhood education across roles in the district. The leadership team members become key

change agents to support the shifts in teaching practices and enact the necessary policy changes to improve classroom quality.

The NJECA was part of a multi-pronged approach to improve the classroom quality for students in kindergarten through third grade. In 2015, the New Jersey Department of Education, Rutgers University's Graduate School of Education, and NIEER published the [First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines](#) to outline best practices for early elementary school educators. This work joined the state's already existing [Preschool](#) and [Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines](#) to create expectations for teaching children from preschool through third grade. The series of guidelines across the early childhood continuum (preschool through grade 3) offers alignment of instruction and experiences for young children. In addition, the RTT-ELC grant provided the opportunity for the NJDOE to embark on a [research study](#) across districts examining classroom quality in Kindergarten through third grade. This work complimented the well-established evaluation of preschool classroom quality in the state.

Figure 1: NJECA Theory of Change, K-3 Instructional Quality



As seen in the above **Figure 1: Theory of Change K-3 Instructional Quality**, the guidelines and the classroom quality data supplied the entry point for initiating change and improving quality of classroom instruction in the early years. Using the guidelines and data, professional learning experiences were developed and delivered to teachers and leaders across districts. This

included online [videos](#) of best practice, a five-day, trainer-led professional learning series for teachers, an online community for both teachers and leaders, and the NJECA.

Impact on SEA and LEA

The theory of change also illustrates that it takes a system to achieve the goal of improved classroom quality and demonstrates the influence of each component on the other with the multitude of arrows. Providing professional learning to teachers alone will not produce the change that is needed to provide developmentally appropriate academic rigor in our earliest grades. Likewise, changing policy alone will not produce the change in teaching practice that is necessary for increased quality. However, change can occur when teachers and leaders with capacity and authority to influence policy and teaching practice work together to create a coherent system with aligned goals and a common vision of classroom quality. As noted below, the SEA leader situated the NJECA effort within a systems change framework to support teacher and administrator quality improvement efforts.

Perspective of the SEA:

As evidenced in the 2015 Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC) report, the system of care and education for our youngest children is fragmented.^{iv} What often results from this fragmentation is a lack of rigorous and appropriate experiences for children as they transition from early childhood settings to the primary years of schooling. For teachers, this fragmentation looks like a push-down of expectations on our youngest learners. For administrators, this fragmentation creates a lack of alignment in curriculum and assessment practices. For children and families, this fragmentation leads to isolation as engaging a disjointed system is confusing.

In an effort to be intentional about the supports that we provide educators as they assist children who are transitioning throughout the primary years of schooling, the NJECA served as a catalyst to create coherence in the early years and was based on a theory of action that leveraged a system-wide approach. The elements of this theory are borrowed from the work of Michael Fullan (2007)^v and include the following:

- *Capacity Building: Essential to the approach was a focus on teachers and administrators.*
- *Collaborative: Key partnerships were leveraged as central to this initiative was having a state agency, districts, and higher education row in the same direction toward a common understanding of quality*
- *Pedagogy: Once best practices were defined, a educators across three levels (i.e., central office, building level, and classroom level) needed support to see practice in context*
- *Systems: Building on seeing practice in context, district teams needed to link initiatives (e.g., KEA and K-3rd quality) rather than treat quality in the primary years as an add on initiative*

For the state agency, the focus of these four coherence-building ingredients allowed us to do work that would have never been possible without strong and collaborative partnerships.

Perhaps the most difficult question in continuous improvement, at both the state and the district level, is “how do you know if your efforts were effective?” Yet, the partnerships that were so vital to the NJECA put us on a path to not only answer this elusive question, but provide the supports to build the capacity to assist others in answering the question as well.

Impact on District Policy and Practice

To support the shift in teaching practices, using the NJECA as the vehicle, we worked through a continuous improvement cycle with districts to guide them through the process of planning and implementing change. We began with the “what” and led the teams through an in-depth understanding of the guidelines. This provided the notion of everyone “being on the same page” and defined effective teaching. The data confirmed that improvements were required and districts were guided by researchers to fully understand the data to highlight what was going well and identify key areas for focus in the short and long term. We looked for improvements that could increase quality on several benchmarks (such as providing students more autonomy in the classroom). Much of the time was focused on developing and implementing the improvement plan while identifying professional learning, resources, curriculum/materials, and policy changes that could be leveraged. As noted below in the LEA perspective, the most important measure of success is the impact at the local level, where change happens and the impacts on children’s learning and teachers’ approaches to instruction are most visible.

LEA perspective

For district teams the early childhood academies provided a forum in which they have learned to use data to inform improvement plans, gotten help in identifying priorities appropriate to their specific contexts while also having opportunities to learn from colleagues in other districts. South Pensacola², for example, a mid size, suburban district was one of the first LEA’s to volunteer to participate in the 1st through 3rd grade implementation guidelines initiative. According to the elementary supervisor, engaging as a district to learn about how to push developmentally appropriate practices up from kindergarten was a natural next step in the work the district had been doing in early childhood. The district had already participated in an early childhood leadership workshop, sent staff to the kindergarten academies and was one of the districts piloting the kindergarten entry assessment.

The goal identified by South Pensacola for K-3 is intentionality. In the words of one principal, “We want to see teachers making decisions in their classrooms with intention based on what their students need.” Echoing this perspective, the elementary supervisor added, “And really taking what we know about best practice in preschool and kindergarten, and moving it up the ranks in a way that is not exactly the same but that evolves and becomes increasingly appropriate as the kids develop.”

² South Pensacola is a pseudonym for the name of the district.

Achieving such a broad goal across four elementary schools and four grade levels is no easy task. The EC academies helped the district leadership team to strategize the kinds of actions they might take that would support change but not overwhelm their K-3 teachers. One of the things they reported learning was the importance of starting small. As Principal Stewart Butler noted, “It was super clear last year about really practical, doable implementation...It was about low-hanging fruit and what’s realistic and what can you do tomorrow.” In their schools therefore, they began by focusing on room arrangement offering teachers extra money for materials that might help them implement more open-ended and integrated centers with children. One principal had the teachers in their Professional Learning Community meetings discuss one aspect of the guidelines. He explains, “So my second grade team has been focusing on integrating their centers and not doing just language arts during language arts time.”

While supporting their K-3 teachers to implement developmentally appropriate practices in small steps, the district leadership team still had their eye on attaining their overall vision for K-3. One of the ways they did this was to ensure that every K-3 teacher got to participate in the professional learning opportunities supported by the NJDOE, and led by faculty and staff from the NIEER. For the new cohort of participating teachers, the elementary supervisor Karen Goff reported that she and the principals met with the teachers to provide a “context and history” for the early childhood work in the district. Another sustaining strategy the leadership team is using is to concentrate deeply on one grade at a time while also encouraging best practices in K-3. In 2016-2017, the emphasis had been on implementing full day developmentally appropriate kindergarten while this new academic year they had begun to work with the first grade teachers to help them align their practices with those of kindergarten.

In the words of elementary supervisor Karen Goff, the NJECA provided a “designated time that we had the resources to ask questions.” And from their actions so far, South Pensacola, has used this resource in ways that are shifting instruction in the early elementary grades.

Lessons Learned

After more than three years implementing this targeted professional learning approach in select New Jersey districts, the authors offer the following lessons learned and considerations:

Investment Matters. The agents of change (district administrators and teachers) have to believe in the possibility of academic rigor and developmentally appropriate practice being able to co-exist in the early elementary years. Due to the nature of administrator’s knowledge of early childhood education, the NJECA was heavily rooted in offering discussions and presentations that expanded on this knowledge. As such, attendance was important to creating plans for change, but also to signal commitment to all partners.

Composition of District Groups Matters. Additionally, given that the effort was based on a philosophy of developmentally appropriate practice, it was critical to have various levels of decision making power and practitioners present at the table. This allowed the districts to listen to the messages provided at the meetings simultaneously which then fostered discussions about the possibility of planning and implementation immediately. Ultimately this allowed teachers to

hear principals say “we can do this” and principals to hear what the potential roadblocks or hesitations could be based on policies that would otherwise hinder efforts to implement new ideas (e.g. curriculum, schedules). This is an important component as it reflects a level of trust both between the researchers and practitioners, but also between levels of hierarchy within districts. Trust is an important aspect that can quickly present challenges if promises are not withheld or evaluations that yield data are not handled properly.^{vi} These group compositions also allowed for discussions that grappled with not only the goal of the approach but also that of logistics and challenges that would need to be worked out.

Time Matters. Clearly, change takes time. In examining the data, it was important to support districts in thinking about short-term goals and long term-goals as well as to support their planning of how to get there. This included helping them to think through how to relay information learned in the ECA back to their districts in a way that would be most supportive of change.

Data Matters. Most specifically, districts seem to largely focus on data related to child outcomes, as opposed to that of inputs. With the exception of the teacher evaluation frameworks, we found that districts heavily relied on student test results as the measure of their progress and ultimately, success. While it is difficult to use classroom quality data as a predictor of future student success, it is clear that inputs matter. In the case of early elementary grades, this includes data on how children spend their time (learning formats), objective/reliable measures of teacher interactions, and classroom environments. This is much in line with other studies of research-practice partnerships and how they help districts to build their capacity to use research and data for decision making in meaningful and aligned ways.^{vii}

Cross-District Collaborations Matter. Another key lesson learned for all participating partners, was that the opportunity to have districts come together to hear each other was powerful. Districts often found that the same challenges affected all of them. This included limitations of curricula, scheduling rigidity, overuse of assessments, communication shortages between administrative roles, etc. Including a variety of district types (e.g. size, demographics etc.) allowed for districts to hear that while they thought they were very different, there were many areas where they were the same. In short, districts were able to offer each other strategies and solutions for challenges already faced and lessons learned. Again, having varied group compositions allowed for teachers, principals, and central administrators to hear the perspectives and approaches of others in their like roles to garner ideas for implementing change.

Sustaining Change and Scaling Up

As the NJDOE moves toward implementing a system of developmentally appropriate and academically rigorous instruction in the early elementary grades of school, it will be necessary to address both how to sustain the improvements that are taking place in LEAs and also how to

scale up beyond the sample of districts that have been involved in the professional learning series and early childhood academies. The SEA will need to plan for the following to ensure the impact of the NJECA is deeply embedded in district practice:

Sustainability. The early childhood academies focused on working with districts to identify key ways they could begin to leverage resources to support their kindergarten through 3rd grade teachers to implement what they were learning in and through the training they were receiving. However, sustainability involves moving beyond implementation to institutionalization where teachers are consistently integrating high-quality, child-centered practices.^{viii} Sustainability is about keeping the improvement of teaching practices in the early elementary years going over time. In addition, sustainability is also about ensuring that the changes made by teachers and leaders are consequential or lead to deep changes in teachers' beliefs and practices as well as revised school policies that support teachers to do this deep kind of improvement.^{ix}

With only three early childhood academies over the year, LEA's embarked on implementation of the 1st through 3rd guidelines tentatively. District leaders and teachers were encouraged to start small whether it was making changes to the classroom environment with the inclusion of new materials, increasing the amount of small group work children engaged in or in a few districts trying out a project. In the first year of an initiative the kind of improvements in teaching and learning are more likely to be at the surface level.

Moving forward it is hoped that the cross-district collaborations that were sparked through the early childhood academies will continue so that LEA teachers and leaders are learning from one another as to how to continue to push for developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for children in the early elementary grades. However, given that LEAs are prone to being shortsighted when it comes to improvement over time, it is important that some consideration be given to how to continue to work with LEA leaders beyond the academies. One way we have done this is by creating a professional learning community guide for district administrators to use with teaching staff as part of their professional development for the year. But further conversations are needed at the state and district level about how to support LEAs to continue to stay the course with this initiative.

Scaling Up. Scaling up is about expanding the number of schools, districts, and teachers implementing the desired change.^x However, given that the aim of the 1st through 3rd grade guidelines initiative is to transform the teaching of subject matter in the early grades, going to scale also means ensuring that the changes made across the state also reflect the depth of change expected. The early childhood academies and professional learning series for 1st through 3rd grade has only reached approximately 40 districts over two years when New Jersey has over 600 districts, many of which are focusing on improvements in the early elementary grades. Moreover, the financial support provided by grant funding to enact the early childhood academies and professional learning series with these districts is coming to a close. The

challenge therefore is not just to work with the districts making change, but also how to use finite resources to leverage the kinds of deep change in curriculum and teaching practices in districts that have not so far been involved with the initiative. Scaling up to reach more districts requires state leaders to come up with a new reform plan, one that both supports implementation with LEAs who have started the work and one that also supports new LEAs to begin the process.

Sustaining change and scaling up remain two of the most difficult challenges of any complex reform initiative especially an initiative that attempts to move teaching in the early elementary grades away from didactic instruction and rote learning to child-centered and developmentally appropriate practices that emphasize learning through inquiry and metacognition. As a consequence, state leaders must match their reform plans to the multidimensional nature of the change required and recognize that this kind of deep shift in teaching and learning will take time.

Endnotes

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^x Coburn, C. (2003). Rethinking scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher*, 32, 3-12.

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