

Induction Insights



Supporting Special Education Teachers-Administrators [AII-09]

Professional Learning Communities

A Promising Practice for Integrating Novice Special Education Teachers into the School Culture

Briefly...

Positive climates that encourage professional growth and teacher collaboration can bolster the impact of induction programs and may influence novice special education teachers' decisions to remain in teaching. As you plan induction programs, consider how Professional Learning Communities—the topic of this Brief—may be used to integrate special education teachers into the school culture.

One of the challenges novice teachers face is becoming an integral part of the school culture. A positive school culture and climate are associated with beginning teachers' satisfaction with their job and their intention to remain in teaching. Moreover, beginning teachers report even higher satisfaction when they experience an integrated school culture in which veteran and novice teachers collaborate.

Principals bear the primary responsibility for creating workplace conditions that promote shared decision making and collaboration. Effective principals create a school culture that supports distributed and shared leadership between veteran and novice teachers within a collaborative learning community.

Professional Learning Communities provide a context that can promote well-designed induction programs and encourage ongoing professional development. In these schools, beginning teachers are not left to their own devices to learn to teach. Rather, they work closely and collaboratively with veteran colleagues.

Although most of the literature on Professional Learning Communities focuses on schoolwide efforts, there

is some indication that special educators have been included. Professional Learning Communities may be used as a practice to integrate special education teachers into the school culture and to help provide them with important school-based socialization experiences.

An understanding of how Professional Learning Communities might be utilized for special education teacher induction can assist administrators in planning successful programs. Read on to learn about this emerging and promising practice.

A Brief Look at Professional Learning Communities

Although there are many ways to describe a Professional Learning Community, in this Brief it is defined from a school improvement perspective:

A Professional Learning Community is composed of professionals in a school—typically groups of teachers—who work collaboratively to improve practice and enhance student learning.

Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities include:

- Supportive and shared leadership (e.g., a collegial principal).

- Collective creativity (e.g., collective learning and application).
- Shared mission, focus, goals, values, and vision (e.g., consistent focus on student learning and improvement).
- Supportive environments.
- Shared personal practice (e.g., ongoing interactions).

The following benefits are associated with Professional Learning Communities:

- Improvement in teacher practice.
- Positive changes in a school culture (e.g., increased collaboration, focus on student learning, and continuous teacher learning).
- Improvement in student achievement.
- Support for school reform and improvement efforts.

Including Novice Special Education Teachers in Professional Learning Communities

Collaborative practices—such as a Professional Learning Community—that treat beginning special education teachers as fully participating members of the school’s learning community can provide a means for improving their quality and intent to stay in teaching. There are particular aspects of Professional Learning Communities that may make them promising for helping these novice teachers acclimate to their new role and environment.

Professional Learning Communities have the potential to serve as catalysts for integrating novice special education teachers who might otherwise become marginalized and isolated into the general education community. Such collaboration also provides a structure for helping the

novice teacher with school-based support and socialization opportunities.

Professional Learning Communities also may provide a safe environment for debating issues that many novice special education teachers face. For example, many Professional Learning Communities focus on struggling students, including students with disabilities. Professional Learning Communities provide a forum for addressing conflicts related to managing students with academic and behavioral problems. Open debate in Professional Learning Communities has been associated with general education teachers accepting greater responsibility for all learners.

Participants in Professional Learning Communities may be more willing to debate issues such as inclusion—a topic that poses particular challenges to novice special education teachers. Professional Learning Communities provide a structure for collaboratively developing solutions to problems and managing conflicts related to disagreements about whether students with disabilities should be included in general education classrooms.

Professional Learning Communities may improve outcomes for students with disabilities. The classroom practices of special education teachers, like those of their general education counterparts, may improve. With time, Professional Learning Communities may help place a greater focus on students, including those students who struggle most.

Learn More. This Brief summarizes select findings from a comprehensive review of the literature:

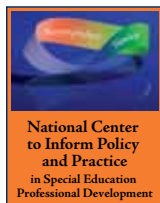
Pugach, M. C., Blanton, L. P., Correa, V. I., McLeskey, J., & Langley, L. K. (2009). *The role of collaboration in supporting the induction and retention of new special education teachers.* (NCIPP Doc. No. RS-2). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development (NCIPP).

It is available on the NCIPP website at www.ncipp.org.

◎◎ Sightings...

Additional activities that principals can use to promote a positive culture for all novice teachers include:

- Engaging them in orientation sessions.
- Observing them and offering constructive feedback of their teaching.
- Protecting them from difficult situations (e.g., large numbers of challenging students, extensive nonteaching duties, etc.).
- Providing mentors who are capable of meeting new teacher needs.
- Providing time to plan with colleagues, observe other classrooms, and meet with other new teachers for peer support.
- Providing resources (e.g., curriculum materials, professional development, etc.).
- Promoting a schoolwide philosophy of joint responsibility for all students and ensuring that necessary structures (e.g., discussions of inclusion as part of professional learning communities) are in place to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities.
- Assisting novice special education teachers with challenging tasks that are unique to their positions (e.g., completing required paperwork, supervising paraprofessionals etc.).



This Brief is part of a series designed to help special education teachers during their initial years in the profession. The National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development (NCIPP) is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education (cooperative agreement # H325Q070002). Bonnie Jones is the OSEP Project Officer. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Education. NCIPP aims to inform special education policy and practice by examining and recommending those policies and practices that improve the retention and quality of beginning special education teachers. There are no copyright restrictions on this document; however, please use proper citation. The Briefs were produced by Warger, Eavy and Associates.

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