

Induction Insights



Supporting Special Education Teachers–Teacher Educators [TEII-5]

Professional Learning Communities

A Practice to Support the Induction and Retention of Novice Special Education Teachers

Briefly...

Collaboration among novice special education teachers and their general education colleagues can bolster the impact of induction programs for all novice teachers, including special education teachers. Strong, supportive collaborative structures also can influence novice special education teacher retention. A Professional Learning Community—the topic of this Brief—is a promising collaborative structure for engaging these novice teachers in the professional school culture.

The school climate sets the tone for the early career experiences of novice teachers. A positive climate that encourages professional growth and teacher collaboration can have a positive effect on induction programs and may influence novice special education teachers' decisions to remain in teaching.

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 be useful as teacher educators work with schools. Such knowl-

edge also may assist teacher educators in designing teacher education programs, as well as studying implementation and its results. 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 conditions and environments.
- Shared personal practice (e.g., ongoing interactions).

The following benefits have been 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.

Collaborative practices—such as Professional Learning Communities—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.

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 providing the novice teacher with school-based support and socialization opportunities.

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.

◎◎ Consider This...

What aspects of the school as a community should be considered when building strong induction policies and practices for beginning special education teachers? Further research is needed to address the potential of Professional Learning Communities in supporting special education teacher induction. Examples of focus areas and questions follow.

How Professional Learning Communities Emerge and Sustain

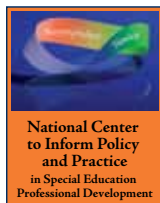
- How are novice special education teachers included within schoolwide Professional Learning Communities?
- If there are several special education teachers in a school, including a novice, how does this subgroup interact within the schoolwide Professional Learning Communities?
- How do novice special education teachers interact in emerging and mature Professional Learning Communities?
- How do novice special education teachers interact in Professional Learning Communities that are perceived to be strong and active?

Impact of Professional Learning Communities on Teaching Practice and Student Learning

- How do the teaching practices of novice special education teachers change as a result of being involved in a Professional Learning Community?
- How does special education teachers’ participation in a Professional Learning Community affect the achievement of students with disabilities?
- Do outcomes differ for participating veteran special education teachers as compared to novice special education teachers?

Organization Structures and Conflict

- How does the participation of special education teachers (e.g., their specialized language, preparation, and experience) affect schoolwide Professional Learning Communities?
- How do novice general education teachers and novice special education teachers manage conflict, tensions, and disruptions in Professional Learning Communities?
- How do general education teachers and special education teachers see their work as interconnected in Professional Learning Communities, and how do they see their work as diverging?



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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