

Practice Guide

Instructor Training for Literacy Programs

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Introduction

In any literacy program, instructors who work directly with students play the most visible and influential role in shaping program success. Program leaders can support these instructors by developing high-quality training that prepares them before instruction begins and supports them throughout program implementation. In Research for Action's (RFA's) evaluation of four pilot literacy support programs in Philadelphia, programs devoted substantial time and effort to refining training to meet instructor needs and, by extension, student needs. This practice guide summarizes what those programs learned, offering insights for similar initiatives and literacy practitioners more broadly.

The table below summarizes training practices that surfaced across programs. Many evolved over time as program leaders identified what worked best for their staff. The practices are organized into two categories: six pre-service training practices and three ongoing training practices. Pre-service training occurs before instructors begin working directly with students and includes onboarding, safety requirements, and team culture building. Ongoing training occurs once instruction is underway. Although ongoing training can be challenging to schedule, it provides essential support as instructors encounter real-world classroom challenges. When both are implemented well, instructors grow in skill and confidence, improving instruction for students.



Promising Practices for Staff Training and Support

Promising practice	Description
Pre-service training	
Instructor roles and responsibilities	Programs oriented instructors before they entered classrooms, clarifying responsibilities and logistics. This built confidence and ensured alignment with program goals.
Curriculum implementation	Programs using structured literacy curricula devoted pre-service time to ensure instructors felt prepared to implement lessons. Even experienced literacy professionals benefited from time to review materials.
Hands-on opportunities to practice instruction	Instructors engaged in modeling, role-play, or mock lessons to practice teaching techniques. Although it was logistically difficult to arrange direct practice with students, instructors consistently requested more hands-on opportunities.
Culture building	Training time was used to foster shared values, teamwork, and program identity. This helped instructors feel connected to the mission and to each other, strengthening morale and retention.
Behavior management	Explicit training on classroom management equipped instructors to address disruptions effectively and maintain supportive learning environments.
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	Programs delivered sessions that deepened instructors' cultural awareness and provided explicit guidance about how to serve students equitably. This included understanding more about the local context. For example, one program asked instructors to read and discuss a book about the underfunding of Philadelphia schools.
Ongoing training	
Individualized coaching sessions	One-on-one coaching provided instructors with personalized feedback and support. This responsive approach helped instructors refine their practice and address challenges as they arose.



Promising Practices for Staff Training and Support, continued

Promising practice	Description
Ongoing training, continued	
Behavior management	Revisiting behavior management strategies proved helpful to addressing emerging challenges. Programs provided behavior management support both within individualized coaching sessions and in group training sessions.
Peer observation and collaboration	Programs encouraged staff to observe one another and exchange strategies. Although challenging to schedule, this practice promoted professional learning, mutual support, and collaboration. Leaders noted that coverage was often necessary, but instructors valued the opportunity highly.

Instructor Training Reflection Questions for Literacy Programs

Based on the promising practices outlined above, literacy program leaders and developers may find it useful to reflect on the following questions:

1. To what extent do training and support structures align with the practices described above?
Where can supports be strengthened?
2. How could the program create additional opportunities for hands-on instructional practice?
3. How does the program differentiate training for instructors with varying levels of experience?
4. What additional contextual resources could instructors receive to better understand the communities they serve?
5. What is the approach to one-on-one coaching, and how could it better meet instructor needs?
6. Could there be more opportunities for peer observation and collaboration? If so, what barriers exist, and how might they be addressed?

Feedback?

RFA is always learning more about instructor development practices, particularly for literacy programs and out-of-school-time programs. If you have additional staff support and training best practices, particularly for literacy programs, please reach out to RFA at klaparo@researchforaction.org.

About this practice guide

This practice guide is one of several reports culminating from RFA's three-year evaluation of four pilot literacy programs in Philadelphia funded by the William Penn Foundation. This short, targeted brief is intended to share specific learnings from the field that will be useful to literacy practitioners. The data from this practice guide is drawn from three years of outcomes evaluations for four programs, including 29 interviews with program leaders, program instructors, and school personnel. Findings were subjected to a final member-check interview with six program leaders to collect feedback, refine findings, and add detail.

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