

CASE STUDY

Minnesota's Center for Early Education and Development (CEED): Building Statewide Capacity for CLASS[™]-Related Professional Development

The use of the CLASS[™] in Minnesota was prompted by a heightened interest in the role of teacher-child interactions and several new state and local policy initiatives focused on measuring and/or improving these interactions. The catalyst was inclusion by the Departments of Human Services (DHS) and Education (MDE) of the CLASS[™] as a measure for the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System pilot (Parent Aware). Additionally, the MDE intended to build professional development capacity around CLASS[™] dimensions. Finally, researchers at the University of Minnesota's Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) discussed using the CLASS[™] as a tool to identify and address gaps in teacher knowledge and practice in early care and education settings. Along the way, unexpected events, such as the Office of Head Start's decision to use the CLASS[™] in federal program reviews, ramped up momentum.

The state did not designate a single entity with authority to orchestrate how early care and education programs participating in the state's QRIS pilot used the CLASS[™]. However, CEED, whose mission is to promote children's developmental outcomes in part through applied research, training, and outreach, provided leadership by communicating ongoing research and strategically facilitating partnerships that could lead to a systematic approach to measuring and improving teacher-child interactions. As a result, funds from DHS, MDE, CEED and others, including the McKnight Foundation, are now supporting training, consultations, and shared learning about the use of CLASS[™] in Minnesota child care, school-based preschool, and Head Start programs. CEED's focus on facilitating a coordinated approach to professional development in the context of supporting program improvement and an emerging QRIS was - and is - crucial to the success of CLASS[™]-based work in Minnesota.

Planning and Decision Making - Building Constituency Awareness and Buy-In

As part of early planning sessions with other Minnesota agencies, CEED recognized the need for building greater awareness and understanding of CLASS[™] among those who would be engaged in some fashion with CLASS[™]. To increase capacity for this work, several CEED staff attended CLASS[™] Train-the-Trainers program. CEED staff also stayed in regular contact with CASTL to ensure that their work aligned with CLASS[™]-related work at the University of Virginia. According to CEED's Vicki Hawley (Early Literacy Coordinator and CLASS[™] trainer), while teachers often view research and related tools with a combination of intrigue and hesitancy, the CLASS[™] connects with Minnesota early educators' practical experience and fills a void in their preparation.

Below are examples of ways CEED raised awareness for various levels of staff.

Program administrators gained more understanding of the CLASS[™] by meeting CLASS[™] experts at Minnesota events and webinars; by hearing from CLASS[™] users at leadership conferences; and by being part of informal meetings hosted by foundations and facilitated meetings such as the Head Start Assessment User Group.

Professional development specialists deepened their knowledge by having CLASS[™]-related information and concepts incorporated into statewide training on assessment/curriculum and trainer meetings and

by sharing crosswalks between the CLASS[™] and existing PD curricula.

Teachers and caregivers became familiar with the CLASS[™] through training materials and tools that offered strategies for use in staff meetings and tips for using CLASS[™] video library subscriptions; and awareness training as a segue to more intensive, sustained professional development.

Infrastructure Development - Building PD Implementation Capacity

CEED implemented several steps to build an approach to CLASS[™]-related professional development (PD) that supports sustainable and on-going teacher change that can help programs maintain a higher level of performance and move up the state's QRIS. This was accomplished by:

Supplementing federal and local efforts to build capacity to conduct CLASS[™] observations. To date, CEED's CLASS[™]-certified trainers who have provided the CLASS[™] Observation Training to 105 observers from 13 school districts, 14 Head Start programs, and several child-care programs. To qualify for these trainings and additional support, programs must provide detailed responses to a questionnaire asking about issues such as their timeline and resources for providing their teaching staff with intensive, ongoing support focused on teacher-child interactions. This helps ensure that programs will put the additional training to good use.

Delivering intensive, research-based training to support CLASS[™]'s use as a professional development tool.

CEED developed a two-day session targeting people who were already reliable CLASS[™] observers but who were in need of further support to deliver ongoing CLASS[™]-based PD as coaches and consultants. This training identifies research-based recommendations for on-going PD known to promote teacher change. It includes practice in communicating CLASS[™] concepts in teacher-friendly language, observation, goal-setting, and teacher feedback. Participants gain strategies to use in large and small groups (e.g., training, staff meetings, professional learning communities), as well as 1:1 coach-teacher interactions

Providing ongoing support for program planning and implementation. Once programs include reliable observers and attend the CLASS[™] PD training, they become part of an online learning community (CEED facilitated three learning community cohorts in 2009-2010). Key areas of focus are:

Sharing successes and problem-solving challenges. Monthly online cohort meetings include topics such as: introducing CLASS[™] to teachers, observation snafus and questions, maintaining reliability, processes for teacher feedback, balancing the roles of colleague and observer.

Integrating CLASS[™] with existing initiatives. Statewide early literacy, math, and science initiatives, local mandates, and Parent Aware program improvements add up to a complicated state PD scene. Each initiative has its own knowledge base, vocabulary, training/coaching process, and assessment(s). Teachers can be overwhelmed by the prospect of adding another tool. CEED has worked diligently to facilitate integration of vocabulary and concepts across initiatives.

Supporting observers who deliver ongoing PD. The practicalities of observer reliability (gaining and maintaining) are commonplace for researchers but much less so for program administrators and other staff who serve as on-site coaches. Work is underway to maximize relationships developed through the learning communities to identify opportunities to maintain reliability (e.g., setting up dual visits, group reliability checks/debriefs).

Setting specific goals. After learning that program-based observers trained to reliability often did not return to their programs and conduct CLASS[™] observations, CEED began facilitating goal-setting for observers and using the online learning community as a means of "check-in" for the purpose of informal accountability.

Lessons Learned

Use local expertise, relationships, and contexts to inform the development of effective CLASS[™]-based trainings and supports. While CASTL and Teachstone continue to develop and disseminate evidenced-based products and tools to support the use of the CLASS[™] at the state and local level, CEED has an intimate knowledge of the early childhood community in Minnesota, and this has allowed them to customize these offerings for their community. These customizations work best if done in partnership with CASTL and Teachstone to ensure their consistency with the CLASS[™] tool. It is also important to monitor the effectiveness of these newly designed training approaches.

Minimize fragmentation and program “overload” by helping programs integrate the CLASS[™] into existing initiatives. Strategies include:

Mapping content and instructional strategies from other initiatives onto CLASS[™] dimensions (and vice versa). Meeting with project trainers/coaches to build awareness of the CLASS[™] and explicitly identify how to connect and integrate vocabulary and concepts from different initiatives.

Continuing discussion at the program level about reasonable adaptations to avoid overwhelming teachers. For instance, if a program is using Work Sampling, Creative Curriculum, ELLCO, ERS, CLASS[™] and child-specific assessment, try to identify efficiencies to avoid “assessment fatigue.”

Go slowly and set specific goals: who, where, when. Programs are more likely to actually implement CLASS[™] observations for PD when a plan includes provisions for who will observe which classrooms, a calendar with scheduled observations, and administrative support that prioritizes CLASS[™] observations over other unexpected events (like observers being pulled aside as substitutes).

Work to include pre-service educators at institutions of higher education. This is just beginning to happen in a systematic way in MN.

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