

Professional learning – effective reading instruction in the early years

Final evaluation report

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

Background

The NSW Department of Education developed an evidence-based two-day professional learning (PL) course on effective reading instruction, with a strong focus on explicit teaching of phonemic awareness and synthetic phonics. The PL was provided in 16 locations in NSW in terms 2 and 3 of 2018. The department funded all NSW government schools with a kindergarten enrolment to send up to two teachers to the PL. In total 2,288 staff from 1,089 schools attended the PL.

The evaluation measures the impact of the PL on teachers' beliefs about the most effective practices for teaching reading to students; and confidence in implementing these practices; and their practices in the classroom.

Key findings

Beliefs: While some beliefs about the most effective practices for teaching reading changed, as anticipated, after the PL, other beliefs did not show this anticipated change. The largest changes were in beliefs about the explicit and systematic teaching of phonics and reading skills. These beliefs aligned with key concepts that were a focus of the PL.

Confidence: Participants reported increased confidence for all measured areas of effective reading instruction after the PL and these changes were maintained over time. There is still room for further improvement in participants' feelings of confidence in teaching a comprehensive and effective reading program.

Practice: Areas of practice that had the largest positive changes after the PL were the reading of decodable texts, teaching phonic knowledge and reviewing phonemic awareness. In contrast, developing reading fluency and comprehension strategies had the smallest change. This was expected as these components of reading were not a key focus of the PL.

Key considerations

Our key learning is that the department should continue to offer targeted, engaging, evidence-based PL on learning and teaching topics.

Based on these key findings, we have five key considerations for future PL offered by the department on learning and teaching topics:

1. Link the PL more effectively to existing practices, systems and interventions.
2. Use baseline data to more effectively differentiate PL content to the needs of participants.
3. Ensure PL is focused on a smaller number of targeted concepts and a specific audience.
4. Support staff after the initial PL to see long-term changes in practice.
5. Leverage the school executive more effectively to support school-wide changes in practice after PL.

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