

Florida Center for Reading Research

TeachFirst

What is the TeachFirst program?

TeachFirst is a professional development company that has designed an organizational structure and accompanying materials for creating Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs are groups of teachers who come together to engage in building a sustainable, school-wide instructional framework to improve student learning across the whole school. It focuses on school-wide implementation of reading and writing strategies for elementary and secondary classrooms. Founded in 2000, *TeachFirst* has four main goals for effective professional development: 1) establish and sustain an effective site-based professional development framework using PLCs, 2) build instructional leadership capacity at the site level, 3) increase teacher learning and use of instructional strategies, and 4) increase student learning.

The *TeachFirst* model is a cycle of learning that begins with building instructional leadership capacity. This is implemented through leadership training, professional development planning, and PLC facilitator training of teacher leaders. The next step is to organize the faculty into learning communities of 5-8 members. Once schools have formed PLCs, *TeachFirst* provides instructional conversations and accompanying visual models of research-based strategies through their online videos; these contain 5-10 minute clips of the session's instructional topic in action. Resource materials, printed and web-based, are also provided to guide discussion during the PLCs and enrich teacher knowledge of reading and writing content. The final part of this cycle is measuring progress throughout the year with self-assessments and documented summaries of the individual group meetings.

The instructional content of both the elementary and secondary models are organized into instructional strands and subdivided by instructional conversations that center on an instructional strategy. The elementary model has four instructional strands: Learning to Read, Reading to Learn, Learning to Write, and Establishing Learning Environments. The secondary model has three instructional strands: Building Background Knowledge, Writing to Learn, and Reading Comprehension. Under each of these strands the instructional conversations address reading and writing strategies such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, shared reading, guided reading, and shared writing for the elementary model. The research base for the inclusion of some of these strategies is the findings of the National Reading Panel (2000). Balanced literacy instructional strategies are also emphasized in many instructional conversations. The secondary model focuses on the nine instructional strategies identified by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollack (2001) as research-based. These strategies are identifying similarities and differences; summarizing and note taking; reinforcing effort and providing recognition; homework and practice; nonlinguistic representations; cooperative learning; setting objectives and providing feedback; generating and testing hypotheses; and questions, cues and advance organizers (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollack, 2001, p. 7).



The PLCs meet every two weeks for one hour sessions. At each meeting the peer facilitator leads the group through the instructional conversation outlined in the Facilitator's Guide for the specific strategy. The topic will have a video clip demonstrating the strategy in action and the Guide serves as the lesson plan for the

group's discussion of what was observed. The Guide is divided into two parts. Part One consists of a description of an instructional strategy, explains its purpose, and helps group members activate their background knowledge about the strategy. Then group members are provided actions or comments to do or consider as they watch the video clip from the *TeachFirst* website. When the video clip is over members reflect on what they saw and link it to what they do or should begin to incorporate in their own instruction. Each topic in the Guide has additional observations and follow-up questions noted from the video concerning struggling readers and writers, English Language Learners, and special education students. The Guide provides questions and potential answers to help the facilitator lead the discussion. At the end of Part One the members of the PLC formulate an action plan. The Guide provides suggested ways to implement the instructional strategy in their classrooms and how to collect evidence of its success or difficulty. (This may be a rubric for teachers to use or a worksheet on which to collect data).

At the next PLC meeting the facilitator continues the discussion from the last meeting by using Part Two of the Facilitator's Guide. Part Two asks group members to discuss the success or difficulties members experienced while implementing the strategy. They are lead through a series of questions and asked to share the evidence they collected. Based upon the outcome of this discussion they decide as a group what to do next. They may move on to another instructional strategy within the strand or continue with the same strategy if they feel they need more time or information to successfully implement it in their classes.

All resources and materials are provided to the school and teachers via the *TeachFirst* website. Training handouts are given to attendees of the TeachFirst-led trainings, but all materials needed to run the PLCs are online. When a PLC member logs-on to the website he or she will find it has been customized based on the school's professional development plan. The member will have access to the complete plan; the content associated with the school's selected instructional strands: rubrics, videos, references, worksheets, etc; and the collection of PLC summaries completed by the PLC over the course of the year. The website is well-organized with "tabs" and is easy to use. The videos are aligned with the content of the instructional strand, however; the content presented in the videos does not consistently model explicit instruction when it would be appropriate to do so (e.g., introduction of a new skill). They are designed to act as a catalyst for discussion in the group setting. It would be the responsibility of the facilitator to guide group members to discuss why the instructional routines viewed in the video are or are not examples of explicit instruction. A listing of resources is provided with each strand, if PLC members feel they need more knowledge on the instructional strategy; however, it may be difficult for the facilitator to be able to select the appropriate resource if he or she also has limited experience with the strategy.

What processes are in place in TeachFirst?

TeachFirst works at the district and school-level to implement professional development. To help districts and schools with this process *TeachFirst* facilitates discussion with district and school-level administration by providing them with a professional development plan template and a consultant. Prior to meeting with the *TeachFirst* consultant, schools are asked to review their student achievement data to identify areas of need for students and teachers, identify the yearly school-wide literacy goals, and organize the PLCs. Organizing the PLCs includes forming the

groups, designating meeting times and locations, and selecting one teacher from each group to act as the facilitator. At the first meeting with the *TeachFirst* consultant, the school leadership team completes the rest of the professional development plan template. This template is customized based on the school's responses to the student achievement data discussed above. The rest of the template delineates the school and *TeachFirst's* roles in the following outline: a schedule for the principals and facilitators to participate in the 5 training and consulting sessions provided by *TeachFirst* staff; the selected instructional strands and specific instructional strategies or "conversations" the school will focus on for the year; how the teacher learning will be measured via teacher self-assessments and the monitoring of the discussions within each PLC; and a plan of action for the school to build capacity for community learning. This plan includes clearly identifying who the point people are at the school so if there are problems that need to be resolved within or across PLCs (e.g., principal, reading coach, assistant principal) a process is in place. Ultimately, this professional development plan is the "contract" between *TeachFirst*, the district, school administration, and teachers as to each party's roles and responsibility during the year.

There are several planning and training sessions that occur throughout the *TeachFirst* process. The exact timeline of these sessions vary depending on the district and how they decide to implement the *TeachFirst* model. They include *TeachFirst* Instructional Leadership Series, Developing a *TeachFirst* School-Wide PD Plan, Facilitating a Professional Learning Community, Expanding Our Skills as PLC Facilitators, Looking Back: Moving Forward, Preparing for Student Learning, and Student Learning: A Measure of Success. Each session focuses on a different aspect of the PLC with the end goal of building capacity at each school for sustained PLCs.

The *TeachFirst* model has specific tools created to ensure fidelity of implementation within the PLCs and to monitor teacher learning. Each PLC is required to enter a "PLC summary" of the day's meeting onto the *TeachFirst* website after every meeting. These summaries capture the focus of the discussion, the action plan agreed upon by the members and how they will measure their next steps. *TeachFirst* staff, principals, and district staff have access to these summaries to monitor PLC progress. Teacher self-assessment surveys are also provided for PLC members to report their perceived knowledge level of an instructional strategy, how well they are implementing it, and to identify additional areas in need of discussion. Facilitators and school administration may review these assessments. Periodically, facilitators also complete a self-assessment survey to monitor their growth as teacher-leaders in their PLC. Quarterly, the information collected from these assessments is compiled by *TeachFirst* staff and school personnel are provided with a progress report on how well the school is moving towards meeting the professional development goals outlined in the professional development plan. At the end of the year, the final progress report is compiled and a meeting is held with district and school faculty to compare the professional development growth of the faculty with student achievement data.

Does TeachFirst address the context in which the program will be implemented?

TeachFirst contracts with school districts for a minimum of one year with two year commitments being most common. The district may decide to target specific schools or all of their schools. In both scenarios school-wide implementation is recommended although not required. In the initial meeting with a school district

TeachFirst personnel outline the resources the schools will need to implement *TeachFirst* PLCs and explain the resources and services provided by *TeachFirst* (e.g., training modules, consultants, website features, etc.). Each school district is provided with a customized professional development plan based on its student achievement data. The instructional strands one school selects to focus on for the school year may be different from another's selection.

There are two models of PLCs that schools may elect to adopt. The first model is the school-wide adoption in which all faculty in a school participate in a PLC. The second model is the phase-in adoption. This model begins by implementing two or three PLCs, usually grouped by grade-levels primary and intermediate, and over the course of the year more PLCs are organized and meet for the remainder of the school year. The model a school adopts is dependent upon the readiness of the school's faculty to fully participate. *TeachFirst* consultants work with schools to determine which model is appropriate for their school.

Research Support for TeachFirst

The structure of the *TeachFirst* model was based on the work of Joyce and Showers (2002) which identified that "whole-school" and "whole-district" staff development systems had better rates of transfer than small groups of teachers who volunteered to participate. Within the "whole-school" model they state it is the study-group/peer-coaching organization that leads to the highest percentage of teacher understanding, attainment of skills, and application within the classroom.

There have been a few case studies reported to examine the efficacy of the *TeachFirst* model. However, these studies are not included in this report because they did not meet FCRR's standards for research designed to examine program effectiveness: http://www.fcrr.org/FCRRReports/PDF/Research_Criteria.pdf.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *TeachFirst*:

- Schools use their available student data to customize the professional development needs of the faculty.
- Dedicated meeting times for the PLCs are required.
- The school-wide implementation of professional development provides faculty and students with a common vocabulary and bank of instructional strategies.
- PLC members are accountable for the learning and discussion that occurs during meeting times.

Weaknesses of *TeachFirst*:

- Not all of the video exemplars demonstrate initial strategy instruction with explicit instruction when it would be appropriate.

Which Florida districts have implemented TeachFirst?

Brevard	321-631-1911	Marion	352-671-7702
Broward	754-321-2600	St. Lucie	772-429-3925

For More Information

<http://www.teachfirst.com>

References

Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (2002). *Student achievement through staff development* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollack, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. NIH Publication No. 00-4754. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

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Important Note: FCRR Reports are prepared in response to requests from Florida school districts for review of specific reading programs. The reports are intended to be a source of information about programs that will help teachers, principals, and district personnel in their choice of materials that can be used by skilled teachers to provide effective instruction. Whether or not a program has been reviewed does not constitute endorsement or lack of endorsement by the FCRR.

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