

# MAKING A Difference

## 10 Essential Steps to Building a PreK-3 System



Linda Sullivan-Dudzic  
Donna K. Gearns  
Kelli Leavell  
Foreword by Ruby Takanishi

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*Making a Difference: 10 Essential Steps to Building a  
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## Establishing Your Professional Development System

Help your group select common days and times that are available to most teachers for your monthly trainings. Are there currently consistent days that most programs meet? If not, is it possible to change that, so that most teachers and providers could attend your training? Because your group created goals for children and fostered a culture of inquiry, you are able to creatively problem-solve to address each program's professional development needs and other issues as they arise.

The length of time for your trainings could vary depending on your group. If the trainings are too brief, it will be difficult to provide in-depth information or engage in discussion. If they are longer than three hours, it is difficult for centers to release teachers for the training, and teachers become anxious to return to their classes or other duties. Trainings that last about three hours can include review of the information presented the previous month, and teachers can show examples of how they implemented the information in their classes from what they learned the previous month. Discussion, which focuses on the variety of activities completed, serves to deepen the understanding as well as provide even more examples of hands-on application of the information. Teachers are great at "piggybacking" on each other's ideas and activities, and often, this discussion leads to even more in-depth knowledge and applications.

Determine your monthly training location. It can be enlightening for teachers to rotate the training among the community preschool partners. By visiting other sites, providers can experience additional learning environments, gain new ideas, and often get re-energized about their own classrooms. For the hosting provider, it grants the chance to display the results of hard work and demonstrate pride in the implementation of past training topics. It also builds the excitement, such as what happens when "company is coming," and provides an opportunity for self-reflection. While preparing their room for the "company," teachers can ask questions that can guide their preparation and self-reflection. Have I created a quality-learning environment? Have I incorporated the research into my own classroom? Is it making a positive impact for children and their families? Encouraging preschool teachers to host the training is an effective friendly accountability strategy.

During the training, honor the adult learner; start on time, provide breaks, and offer wonderful snacks. Since preschool teachers are on the floor with children all day, have comfortable adult chairs whenever possible; one adult remarked, "on Friday, I deserve to sit in a big chair!"

## Training Format

The format for the monthly professional trainings may need modification or adjustment over time. Use a consistent format, so that adults can focus their attention on the important aspects. Components of each monthly professional development consist of the following:

- A half hour to welcome, review, share, and celebrate success
- A quarter to one-half hour to connect your current topic to your foundation
- A half to three-quarters of an hour of new information
- Three-quarters to one hour for practical application
- Three-quarters to one hour to complete "make and take" activity (more on this later in this chapter) to use on Monday morning

## Review and Celebrate Small Successes

At the beginning of the training, develop an exercise to review the information from the last month. It could be a game, activity, or discussion. Also take a few minutes to invite teachers to share successes from the past month; it could be anecdotal information, pictures, or work samples. Highlight programs for implementing research or activities from the last training that had a positive impact on children. If any program received awards or newspaper coverage, recognize it also.

## Connect Your Current Topic to Your Foundation

After recognizing implementation and successes since the last training, provide information to connect your current topic to one of the foundational pieces set by your leadership group. By intentionally discussing how the current topic fits into the overall plan and other professional development, you will be supporting the entire system. The trainings will not appear to be random topics without any basis or thought to their use and selection. This connection of new information to prior knowledge is consistent with brain-based learning.

## Provide Research and New Information

Next, the trainer presents new information based on topics previously determined by the leadership group; this could be new research or vital changes published, such as information from the National Early Literacy Panel or National Math Panel, or topics based on data. Depending on the group, it could be essentials such as foundational

knowledge that everybody needs to understand, or it could build on the group's common knowledge. The level of sophistication in teacher conversations is elevated and focused on children when teachers become well versed in research and take pride in its implementation. This high expectation and sophisticated knowledge sets the tone for new members. Partners attending conferences or other trainings report that they "already knew the information" and were surprised when others did not. It becomes readily apparent that this is not the norm everywhere. Some examples of topics include the following:

- Phonological awareness (listening, rhyming, segmenting, blending)
- Oral language and vocabulary
- Alphabetic principle and print awareness
- Teaching letter names and sounds
- Importance of background knowledge for later comprehension
- Useful assessment data
- Preschool curriculum training

### **Practical Application: Classroom**

Teachers are interested in practical, hands-on application of new knowledge or research, especially how to apply it to their own learning environment. When information is useful and readily available to use in their classroom, it increases the probability of its implementation. One core principle of the training is to share information, skills, and activities that can literally be used on Monday morning to benefit children and families.

Save your teachers hours of prep time by providing activities and materials they can easily put together and use. Tangible, practical examples increase the likelihood of implementing the information. Here are a few:

- Teachers, who have already applied the information or the materials, can provide examples. This keeps the discussion real and relevant. It also increases ownership of the information; teachers often comment, "I do that" or "I want to try that."
- Share classroom videos, photos, and other developed activities that demonstrate the application of the research. Teachers take pride in sharing their successes. If you have a coach, that person can facilitate obtaining this media; it is critical to honor teachers, yet not to create extra work for them.
- Table discussions can be structured to facilitate more opportunities for participation rather than just whole-group discussion.

- With a “think/pair/share” exercise, time is provided for each person to think about the topic under discussion. Partners then discuss it with each other before sharing their discussion with the rest of the table. One representative from each table then synthesizes the information and shares it with the entire group.
- Jigsaws are an effective method to disseminate and discuss written information. The entire group is numbered according to the number of topics to be discussed. Participants with the same number meet and read, discuss, and become “experts” on the information assigned to them. Then they go back to their original table and teach the information to the rest of the table group. At the end of the given time, everybody at the table has learned all of the information. The information can then be discussed as a whole group if feasible or desired.
- Gallery walks allow participants an opportunity to move around the room. Charts are placed around the room with a topic, subtopic, or question written on the top of each one. The participants answer the question or brainstorm ideas to go with the topic and write them on the paper. The facilitator determines when the groups move to the next chart; the new group adds new ideas or indicates agreement or disagreement with ideas already on the chart. After all groups have rotated to all charts, a group discussion takes place.

### **Family Engagement: The Home Environment**

After the teachers have heard the research and its application for their classroom, the next step is to encourage families with this information. This will extend the children’s learning environment and expand opportunities for their growth. As part of each training plan, provide time for teachers to translate the information into parent-friendly terms to support children in their home environments. Parents trust and value their child’s teacher. They are more willing to hear ways to support their child for school success from their own teachers than by attending training presented by the school district staff. Ongoing information delivered by the teacher may be a more effective method for reaching families who lack time or are uncomfortable attending formal presentations. It also avoids the dangers of one-time presentations with limited possibility of change. This cycle of providing information to the community preschool teachers, who have an established relationship with families, who present it to the parents, who then incorporate it into their child’s daily life, creates a continuous learning environment for children and enriches your system of support. Other strategies to connect with families

include: creating a “family literacy corner” with activities that families and children can engage in during drop off and pick up, using materials from the make and take to send home in bags for additional multiple joyful practice opportunities, and subscribing to a newsletter such as *First Teacher* (Parenting Matters Foundation) for your families. Some programs have backpacks with books for children to take home and read; the books are rotated weekly.

## Low-Cost Training Options

Focusing on research is an excellent starting point for your professional development. By devoting one month to each area of phonological awareness and the remainder of the school year to the other four areas in the “big five” ideas for reading (phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency with text), your entire first year is planned. Contact others throughout your school district, local educational service district, or state department who are experts in your goal areas to provide training for your group. It is possible to enlist the services of these individuals at no cost to the school district. The following are some low- or no-cost training options:

- *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel* (National Institute for Literacy, 2008)
- *The Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read* (NICHD, The Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000)
- *Foundations for Success: The Final Report of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel* (U.S. Department of Education, 2008)
- Use of instructional coaches to train on the preschool curriculum
- Explore the use of a “trainer of trainer” model, where coaches attend trainings and then train other district and community teachers

Training considerations are more complex, but not impossible, if the group does not have a common curriculum. You can use the above resources to create your own training sequence or use the Early Learning and Development Benchmarks and the kindergarten elementary school standards for your state. Examine the benchmarks related to your goals to determine what your children should currently be doing; use the kindergarten state standards to see expectations once they leave preschool. Decide on the skills that need to be taught to meet these benchmarks and identify the gaps, if any, between preschool and

kindergarten standards. This is more time and labor intensive than having a published curriculum, but it is sound instructional practice to align your curriculum with the standards.

## **Make and Take Activity**

The make and take activity is a valuable component of your monthly professional development. It allows teachers to apply the information on Monday morning. We have all been to conferences or trainings and returned with lots of information and no time to apply it. Your make and take will be the bridge between the information just presented and classroom implementation. It could be something used daily in the classroom, an activity for small-group or free-choice time, a teacher-led activity, or something that parents receive. You provide the materials specific to the project and, ideally, a laminator to add durability to the children's papers; the teachers bring their own basic art supplies.

## **Celebrating Your Successes**

To honor the hard work of the teachers, consider a formal process to recognize growth and celebrate successes. This helps to create a cohesive learning community. At the beginning of the training, and throughout the year, find reasons to celebrate your success. The following are some suggestions to do just that:

- Spotlight local media reports of positive events regarding early childhood or reports that highlight efforts of group members.
- When the group or individual members receive an award, invite the agency to re-present it at a training or leadership group meeting; let everybody share the good success.
- Acknowledge personal or classroom endeavors during the review portion of the trainings. Providing avenues for teacher's self-reflection also honors hard work and accomplishments.
- Provide an intentional method for teachers who are not able to attend trainings to share their successes with the group via reports or other visual means.
- Develop a PowerPoint slide show using video clips that demonstrate each class's proudest moments.
- Create a book with the teachers on a specific topic studied; teachers can submit digital photos and captions on numerous subtopics selected by the group. The book could illustrate each concept