PROFESSIONAL LEARNING Partner Guide

Guide to Effectively Managing Multiple Professional Learning Partners

Introduction

The work of adopting and successfully implementing high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) is challenging but can have big payoffs for students and teachers. Many schools and school systems find that they benefit from partnering with organizations who specialize in helping leaders successfully manage the implementation process (See our Steps to Selecting a Great Professional Learning Partner for guidance). Professional learning partners can provide practical support for complex tasks such as defining and building broad investment in a vision for excellent instruction, conducting a materials selection process, and supporting the successful launch and ongoing use of those materials.

Many times, school systems find that they need the support of multiple professional learning partners to meet all of their needs, however coordinating these services across multiple partners can be a challenge. It can be difficult to sync partners on the instructional priorities and the language, tools, and approach desired by the school or school system. Mixed messages, inconsistent language, and unclear roles can negate or limit the impact of even the strongest partners.

This guide helps leaders create cohesion amongst their professional learning partners to:
- reduce mixed messages and confusion, especially for teachers;
- define roles and responsibilities for partners; and
- set clear expectations for customized services that reflect your systems' priorities and needs.

Building Cohesion Among Partners

Step 1: Define your instructional vision and strategy.

A clearly defined vision and strategy serves as a guiding light— directing, aligning, and inspiring people's actions. Without them, attempts to improve outcomes for students can easily dissolve into a list of confusing, incompatible, and time-consuming projects that go in the wrong direction or nowhere at all. Before your school or system can clearly communicate your instructional vision and strategy to your partners, you must define them for yourself.

EXAMPLE

Instructional Priority: To ensure every student can engage in grade-level content and every teacher's instruction fosters mastery of that content for all students.

Instructional Strategy:
Ensure all core teachers
1) have access to HQIM, and
2) receive initial and ongoing professional learning that helps them use those materials effectively.

Be wary of chasing too many priorities or attempting too many strategies—throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping something sticks. Studies have shown that doing so fosters *incoherence,* makes it harder to allocate resources effectively, and increases the likelihood that teams spin their wheels.[1] Instead, focus on one or two key priorities and a small number of strategies that you believe are *most* likely to lead to meaningful progress towards those priorities.

Step 2: Share your instructional vision and strategy with your partners as well as the supporting role you expect them to play…over and over again.

Adopting and implementing new instructional materials is an exercise in change management. One of the biggest mistakes that organizations make when embarking on a process like this is undercommuniating the vision by a factor of 10 (or 1,000).[2] Don't assume that your partners know what's important to your school/system. In absence of clear direction from you, they are likely to bring their own priorities and strategies to the work, which may or may not fully align to yours.

You should also define roles for each of your partners in executing your instructional strategy to facilitate clear and effective sharing of information and to avoid partners inadvertently tripping over each other.

> **EXAMPLE**
>
> A district might hire one partner to support its elementary ELA teachers implementing CKLA and another partner to work with its principals.
>
> To ensure cohesion across the partners, the district should set the expectation that they hop on the phone with each other once a month to discuss trends that they're seeing and identify places where they can collaborate to support teacher growth.

Consider bringing all of your instructional partners together—either virtually or in person— once or twice a year to share and reshare your school's/system's northstar and ensure they are clear on the role each of them plays in helping you achieve that.

Step 3: Set clear expectations for the language and tools you expect partners to use

Though there will likely be places that you are open to partners suggesting new approaches— you did hire them for their expertise, afterall— there will be other places where your school/system already has established language, systems, procedures, and tools that you want them to use. Being up front with your partners about this will reduce the likelihood that they unintentionally contradict expectations that you (or other partners) have

> **PARTNER TIP:**
>
> Utilize the expertise of your partners to evaluate the effectiveness of your current tools and resources in helping help your district achieve its instructional vision and strategy. Their collective feedback and perspectives can lead to meaningful change in teacher practice.

[1] Paul Leinwand and Cesare Mainardi. (2011, April). *Stop Chasing Too Many Priorities*.Harvard Business Review.. Retrieved from: https://hbr.org/2011/04/stop-chasing-too-many-prioriti

[2] Kotter, J. P. (2021) *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press

set for your educators, thereby reducing potential confusion and frustration for all involved.

Observation tools are a common place where this type of confusion can occur. Do you already have a strong observation tool that is specific to your HQIM (e.g. Zearn's Classroom Walkthrough Guide) or aligned to the shifts (e.g. Instructional Practice Guides)? If you do, you might require that any partners who are observing and providing feedback to your teachers use your tool rather than introducing a new one. If not, this is a great place to ask for help from a partner who has the expertise to recommend a good one.
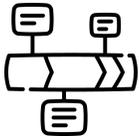
Step 4: Establish concrete goals, timelines, and regular touchpoints to discuss progress and solve issues

Establish and hold your partners accountable for and following through on agreed upon timelines and achieving measurable results. Even though the best laid plans will likely evolve over time, working with your partners to define goals and timelines early on will help avoid confusion down the line. Additionally, having clear goals and timelines from the beginning will help you and your partners have more productive conversations about if, when, and how to amend contract terms in light of new information or circumstances.

> **PARTNER TIP:**
>
> Establish clear communications protocols with your partners on how and when information and materials should be shared with school leaders and teachers including:
> - Review of materials prior to dissemination
> - How and when to elevate issues observed in the field
> - Frequency structure of ongoing check-ins

Relatedly, we recommend schools and school systems set up recurring check-ins with individual partners to discuss progress, challenges, and next steps. For example, you might schedule 30–60 minute check-ins 2–4 times per month and then a longer (60–120 minute) stepback meeting once a quarter to take a deeper look at where partners are against their goals and to address bigger issues and trends. As touched on in Step 2, if there are partners who are working with the same educators or closely connected ones (e.g. one partner is coaching 3–8 teachers in ELA and another partner is coaching those same teachers in math), you may consider requiring that these partners attend joint check-ins periodically to promote collaboration and cohesive approaches.

Need additional support to build cohesion among your PL partners?

Having spent the last five years supporting school systems with the adoption and implementation of HQIM— Rivet's team knows how important but challenging it can be to coordinate among multiple professional learning partners who are all trying to provide the best services to educators within a school or school system. We've also seen what works and what doesn't.

Contact us today at info@rivetedcuation.org to discuss how we can support you in ensuring your PL partners meet your unique instructional needs.