

Pitt Researchers Receive \$2.5 Million to Train Tennessee Teachers on Common Core Standards

By Adam Reger

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Under a strategy instituted by the Toyota Motor Company, any autoworker on the production line could halt production to signal a quality issue. It was part of a company approach to continuously improve performance.

Now, for the first time, the U.S. Department of Education is funding research employing a similar approach to more rapidly improve education programs, and scholars at the University of Pittsburgh are leading the way.

A team of researchers in the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC) has been awarded a \$2.5 million grant to partner with the LRDC's Institute for Learning and the Tennessee Department of Education to test and refine a training model that supports teachers transitioning into teaching the Common Core State Standards, a national initiative aimed at increasing the quality of education in English language arts and mathematics. In the model, coaches are trained in Common Core teaching and coaching methods. Then they work closely with teachers in a small number of schools to assist the teachers with implementing the new methods.

The grant, awarded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, will support a three-year effort in which the Pitt research team will evaluate that model using "continuous improvement research"—a strategy pioneered in the business and health care sectors at companies like Toyota that is gaining momentum in the education field. The new approach calls for the researchers to conduct frequent evaluations of the coaching work in Tennessee, incorporating coaches' feedback and other data to make rapid ongoing changes to the program to improve the overall process.

"Typical research can go on for years before there is any feedback to educators. This research model is different. We don't just drop in, collect data, and leave. We have deep engagement with practitioners. We are supporting improvement along the way," said Jennifer Lin Russell, the project's principal researcher, an associate professor of learning sciences and policy in Pitt's School of Education, and a research scientist at Pitt's Learning Research and Development Center.

During the project, continuous improvement cycles will each last about four months,

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Russell said. Each cycle will be launched with in-person network meetings between the research team and the coaches. Even more frequently, monthly phone conferences will allow the coaches to provide feedback and the researchers to tweak their model. Along with participating in meetings and telephone conferences, coaches will work with researchers by keeping logs, audiotapes, and other records of their coaching conversations for the researchers to analyze.

Russell's team is beginning its work this summer. The first two years of the three-year project will entail working with a group of 30 coaches to train them in Common Core-aligned coaching practices; the coaches will in turn train math teachers who are implementing new math teaching methods in their classrooms. The coaches will relay feedback from the teachers, serving as a critical conduit between the teachers and the researchers.

At the end of the second year, the research team will review the tweaks that were made during the continuous improvement cycles and then use a refined model to train a new group of coaches. They will conduct a formal pilot study with the results of the refined model being tracked and compared to the results of a group receiving "business as usual" coaching.

Russell said hands-on coaching has become a popular model for states implementing the Common Core State Standards because it is designed to help implement the standards under varying conditions, including differing levels of teacher knowledge and experience, differences in past curricula, and differing levels of support available to teachers.

"This is moving beyond the thinking that there is a single solution for all sites," said Russell. "There are strategies that work better under different conditions. Tennessee is a state with a commitment to the Common Core State Standards and significant momentum around implementation."

Co-investigator Mary Kay Stein, professor of learning sciences and policy in Pitt's School of Education, notes that the Common Core State Standards are poised to be a big game changer in education.

"At no other time in our nation's history have so many individuals and organizations agreed on the direction for change in America's classrooms. Although there are lots of pieces to work out, there is no doubt that Tennessee is one of the states that has grasped the significance of this moment and is leading the way toward supporting teachers to be able to teach in more focused and cognitively demanding ways," said Stein.

The \$2.5 million Institute of Education Sciences grant builds upon recent collaborations between Pitt educational researchers and Tennessee's Department of Education. In 2013, faculty from the Learning Sciences and Policy program in Pitt's School of Education received a pair of grants for projects in the state: a \$1.5 million grant from the National Science Foundation to study instructional quality, teachers' access to resources, and student achievement across Tennessee and a \$25,000 William T. Grant Foundation grant to study the performance of students in grades 3 through 10 on a pair of statewide assessment tests. A team from Pitt's Institute for Learning also partnered with the Tennessee Department of Education last year to train more than 900 Tennessee coaches in the Common Core State Standards using institute-developed materials.

In addition, the Tennessee Department of Education has conducted summer trainings for teachers over the past three years using a "Common Core Coaching Model" developed in partnership with the University of Pittsburgh. Russell's new project now

aims to extend this initiative by deepening the training of mathematics coaches and building a network of highly trained coaches that can be expanded over time to reach across the entire state.

Additional Pitt co-investigators for this project are Learning Research and Development Center researchers Richard Correnti and Lindsay Clare Matsumura, along with Institute for Learning fellow Victoria Bill.



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