



TASS Highlighted in National Professional Development Study

TASS - *Teaching All Secondary Students*, a program of the VT Higher Education Collaborative, was one of the programs that received notice in a recently released report conducted by the National Professional Development Council and a team of researchers from Stanford University. The three-part *Status of Professional Learning* research study aims to measure the effectiveness of professional learning in the United States. In Part III of this effort the research team examined the policy frameworks supporting high levels of professional development activity in four states, Colorado, New Jersey, Missouri and Vermont, in order to identify effective professional development policies and strategies.

In the context of providing approaches to sustainable change the report highlighted the TASS program as offering, “Systemic coaching for schools working to improve”. It went on to describe TASS noting that it:

has the capacity to assemble teams of consultants and coaches to help schools assess their needs and secure the range of services needed for far-reaching change. With expertise in special education, various content areas, school leadership, collaboration, and curriculum reform, they are able to give comprehensive school reform support. In a given school over a period of many months, their expert on differentiated instruction may lead teams in curricular change, while one of their former principals might coach the administrative team through creating a restructuring plan, and the expert on Critical Friends training may be working with the staff to improve its ability to collaborate effectively...the districts benefit from a coherent process that centers them in the work they are doing, and a more comprehensive strategy that has greater potential for systemic change.

Later, in the summary of the report, TASS was referred to again saying, “Similarly, in Vermont, the Teaching All Secondary Students program (a subgroup of the Vermont Higher Education Collaborative) is a well-received intermediary professional development organization that provides expertise through a team of experienced school leaders to support schools engaged in comprehensive reform.”

The report mentions the importance of intermediary organizations throughout, at one point stating, “Across the four states, networking with intermediary organizations emerged as a common strategy for providing instructional program supports to schools. These closer-to-the-ground organizations are able to provide assistance to schools and districts in a way that the state departments cannot.”

It was not just the positive attributes of these programs that the report described. It also talked about the challenges that exist in the current economic and policy environment in

which intermediary organizations like TASS and the Education Service Agencies (ESAs) must work and survive saying:

The Vermont Dept. of Education needs the ESAs and other groups to provide direct services to schools and districts, but there remain a number of questions regarding the state agency's control over the ESA. Should there be more coherence between them? Should they adopt a more comprehensive Teacher Professional Learning ... model, like that of the TASS group? Or should a group such as TASS become a center for school improvement, with different ESAs taking on other areas of professional development expertise?

The challenge for all of these groups is that without a clear direction from the state education agency it is very hard for them to grow in scale. They are caught in a catch-22 where the state needs their expertise but doesn't have the funds to guarantee the business for the intermediary groups. The organizations are ready to scale up, but they do not have adequate resources to prepare and recruit the needed staff without guaranteed contracts.

The report refers to TASS three or four times and quotes TASS leadership consultant and Steering Committee member, Val Gardner, regarding the difference in her role with schools as an ongoing TASS school coach that can support a school over time and an auditor that may come into a school to do an audit and then leaves a report behind: "Ideally, I work with the school to help them really look at their data, really look at the depth of their understanding that they need and what are the issues that need to be addressed, and then have that coaching continue. That way of looking at the situation, as parts of a system that need to be examined and connected, is very different than having an auditor come in to make a disparate list of suggested tasks that need to be completed."

Coaching is one of the effective professional learning components that the report highlights over and over mentioning a number of other Vermont programs that also emphasize coaching like the Formative Assessment Project and the Vermont's Chapter of the School Reform Initiative. In this context the report quotes at some length a Vermont teacher who at one time had the role of teacher/coach in his school. That teacher turns out to be none other than Bill Rich who at the time was also the Coordinator of Instruction for the first iteration of the TASS program and is now the TASS Education Services Coordinator. About his role as teacher/coach the report says:

His attempt to implement differentiated instruction is documented in Carol Tomlinson's Differentiated School (Tomlinson, rimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008) and a 2005 Journal of Staff Development article (Pardini, 2005). In this role, he had the time and administrative support to lead teachers and teacher teams. On the most basic level, he was freed to respond to teachers' needs, answer emails, and give feedback on lesson ideas. From there he began to build communities for teachers to leverage their skills together: forming work groups and actively looking to build trust over time between the previously isolated colleagues.

Professional development is described as key to ensuring teachers have the highest skill level possible and effective teaching, along with strong leadership, comprise the elements most important to a system from which high-achieving students can emerge. The report goes on to further describe that system saying:

That system includes rigorous curriculum, ongoing assessment for and of learning, continuous professional development for educators; family and community engagement; and conditions within schools and communities that ensure safe and productive learning environments for students and educators. This complex system exists in many communities and is missing in others.

Of the many elements that comprise this complex system, effective teaching has risen to the top as the most important followed by strong leadership... professional development is the single most important strategy for extending and refining their knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices throughout their careers.

Yet as important as it is, the report notes that their findings indicate that high quality professional development is not commonly available to all teachers. So, what does effective professional development look like according to this study?

Research suggests that effective professional development is:

- Focused on specific curriculum content and pedagogies needed to teach that content effectively*
- Designed to engage teachers in active, collegial learning that allows them to try out ideas in the classroom and make sense of what they are learning in meaningful ways*
- Presented in an intensive, sustained, and continuous manner over time (with an average of about 50 hours or more on a given topic associated with changes in practices that produce gains in student achievement)*
- Linked to analysis of teaching and student learning, including formative use of assessment data*
- Supported by coaching, modeling, observation, and feedback*
- Connected to teachers' collaborative work in school-based professional learning communities and learning teams*
- Integrated with other school-level policies or reforms, so that there is a coherent approach to curriculum, instruction, assessments, and professional development.*

These findings and the elements that comprise a high performing system track closely with the TASS Foundation Principles for supporting schools to make transformative change:

TASS Foundation Principles

1. Creating and Living a Vision Focused on Successful Outcomes for All Students
2. Supporting Schools to Become Systems of Continuous Improvement
3. Taking Schools at their Current Level and Providing Supports Needed to Move Forward
4. Building Leadership Capacity/Teams
5. Providing Ongoing, Embedded, Research-Based, Professional Development and Supports
6. Applying Research on the Brain and Learning with Proven Education Research
7. Working with Schools on 3 Developmental, Interactive Components:
 - a. Foundations for Change,

- b. Effective Instruction and Learning Opportunities for All and
- c. Sustaining Change
- 8. Focusing on the TASS 5 Inter-related Essential Areas: Assessment, Curriculum, Instruction, Collaboration and Community
- 9. Providing a Comprehensive, Coordinated, Long/Term System of Support
- 10. Making Decisions Based on Data to Improve Outcomes of All Students
- 11. Ensuring Coherence, Connectedness & Coordination: Focusing Resources and Initiatives on Success of All Students
- 12. Utilizing Practitioners/Peers to Deliver Training and Support

This study identifies the importance and both the shortage and need for sustained, continuous, high quality, professional development but it also describes many ways that it can be fostered and maintained. TASS and the VT Higher Education Collaborative, along with our partner schools (Mt. Abraham, MVU, Oxbow, Peoples Academy, Washington NE and Winooski) are proud to be among the programs and strategies to be highlighted in this report and we hope that the outcome of this study will be the recognition that policies and funding can and must be enacted to ensure that effective programs of professional learning are sustained and increased if we want to ensure the success of all our students.

You can find out more about TASS and the VT-HEC at our web site - [VT-HEC.org](http://www.vt-hec.org).

You can read all of this report here:

<http://www.learningforward.org/news/2010Phase3TechnicalReport.pdf>