



# Specializations and advancement pathways

## Elements brief

### Introduction

If we are serious about deepening and personalizing learning for all students, we need teams of educators with distributed expertise. We need educators who are thriving, not surviving, and to do this, we need to stop asking every teacher to be all things to every child. This doesn't happen easily. Systems must be intentionally redesigned to create a much wider range of educator roles. Educators need "just-right" responsibilities, the ability to personalize their professional learning, and clear ways to advance in the profession that don't require leaving the classroom.

Expanding our conception of who can be an educator does not mean lowering expectations for educators or attempting to replace teachers. Quite the opposite. We see specializations and advancement pathways as a means to increase the number of caring adults around students, to bring more educators into the profession and to retain those who are effective — because the job has become rewarding and sustainable.

### What do specializations and advancement pathways look like in action?

#### Continuum of educator roles

Given the wide range of academic and socio-emotional supports that educating the whole child demands, we are unlikely to meet those needs if every educator looks the same. We need greater educator diversity. This is true in almost every conceivable way: race, life experience, content expertise, etc. To get a diverse educator workforce, we must reconsider the types and sizes of roles we need to support learners. Many will be full-time, some part-time and others, volunteers. Because of the inflexibility of the current staffing model, we miss out on all sorts of people who could be making a profound difference in school settings. As shown in the figure below, we believe schooling systems could and should include a range of educator types.



An Adaptable Model:  
Specific roles and responsibilities can and should vary among learning environments

Exact educator roles should vary as a function of students, curriculum and context. Student profiles should be put at the center of team design, with team members flexing or being added to best support learners. For example, if a school has a highly-mobile student population, perhaps there is a role that helps newcomers integrate into the school community. Or if students rotate through a language lab in which they choose from on-demand foreign language instruction, maybe there is a facilitator who helps students track their data and support technology needs. A certified, experienced teacher may not necessarily need to fill those roles. A community member who had training and is adept at working with young people might be the just-right person. Full-time professional educators would also take on specific team roles. One teacher may be the ELA lead planner and with her expertise in data science, lead data team meetings and coach students to analyze and reflect on their own data.

### **Just-right responsibilities**

As these different types of educators are intentionally staffed on teams to meet the specific needs of a particular group of students, it's imperative that they are not expected to do more than their preparation responsibly allows. Adding community educators with deep, real-world expertise to a team for a unit would likely help deepen learning, and we would never expect them to design and teach that unit. Instead they might work with teachers on that team to influence the design of the unit, teach parts of key lessons and provide feedback to students on authentic work products. Consider how a new teacher might enter the profession. As a member of a team, the novice would have a sheltered experience, taking on meaningful pieces of the work, but not expected to pull off the same set of things a veteran might. Regardless of the role, we need to clearly articulate the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to be successful in that role and only place educators in that role who are ready.

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### **Personalized professional learning**

To ensure that educators are prepared to take on “just-right” roles, professional learning must be personalized and allow educators to develop depth in particular areas. Currently, educators signal specialization through advanced degrees (e.g., master's degree in curriculum and instruction with a concentration in English as a second language). These degrees, while robust, are less accessible to many educators because of the required time commitment (months to years) and the cost (several thousand dollars) which has equity implications related to who can partake in these opportunities. Additionally, earning advanced degrees doesn't always translate into differential responsibilities in the classroom or transfer of learning to other educators in the school.

In addition to advanced degrees, are there other options that could better prepare educators to take on specific responsibilities and signal they are ready for new roles? Most of the professional learning already exists, but it's either widely inaccessible or doesn't clearly signal expertise. New credentialing systems like MicroMaster's, nanodegrees and micro-credentials all have promise to change this. By creating smaller units of learning and credentialing, it's possible to make personalized professional learning more accessible and expertise easier to signal. Team-based hiring could then account for educators' specific skill sets.

To develop this sort of expertise, professional learning must become more personalized, within both teacher preparation and in-service professional development. Ideally, graduates from preparation programs will have a solid background in a limited set of core practices and one to three areas of deep specialization of their choosing. In-service educators would have greater autonomy (and incentive) to pursue professional learning in skills that would allow them to better meet the needs of their students.

### Clear advancement pathways

Finally, educators need clear pathways to advance in the system. Currently, most advancement pathways for professional educators are tied to years of service and require advanced degrees or graduate credits. Modest stipends may exist for educators taking on additional responsibilities like leading a grade-level, leading a content-based department or coaching a team. But advancing in the profession often means taking on responsibilities that distance the educator from students. The opportunities for advancement for instructional aides and paraprofessionals are even more restrictive, often requiring formal degrees in education where years of experience working in school settings does not count.

As we become increasingly clear on the specific knowledge, skills and dispositions required to do particular roles well, incentives for professional learning can shift from rewarding seat-time to rewarding competency. This would also allow programs to honor prior learning in meaningful ways, hopefully reducing time and cost for educators looking to signal what they know and are able to do.

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As schools move to Next Education Workforce models, a number of shifts will be required with respect to professional learning and advancement pathways. The chart below summarizes a few of those shifts.

## Shifts: Traditional to Next Education Workforce models

	Traditional one-teacher-one-classroom models	Next Education Workforce team-based models
<b>Range of educator roles</b>	The full-time employee (1 FTE) model dominates	Opportunities for full-time, part-time and volunteer educators
<b>Responsibilities</b>	Educators asked to do more than their training has prepared them to do	Educators fill roles that match their current level of knowledge and skill
<b>Approach to hiring</b>	Hiring teachers	Hiring educators with specialized skills to meet student needs
<b>Professional learning</b>	Dominated by one-size-fits-all, seat-time-based models	Personalized and prepares educators to better serve students
<b>What advancement means</b>	Must leave direct work with students to meaningfully advance	Possible to advance without leaving the day-to-day work with students

# What evidence do we have that specializations and advancement pathways produce positive outcomes?

It has long been known that teaching is an incredibly complex activity with events that are multi-dimensional, simultaneous and unpredictable (Doyle, 1977). Unsurprisingly, there is a cognitive load associated with teaching, and when it becomes too high, educators' efficacy, happiness and ability to learn from their experiences decrease (Feldon, 2007). There are two concrete ways to decrease cognitive load in teaching: (1) authentically practice components of the work and receive feedback; and (2) reduce the complexity of the task. By creating specialized roles and ensuring that they are only staffed by educators with the right set of skills, it is possible to help ensure that educators experience more success and satisfaction.

To prepare for “just-right” roles, educators' professional learning will need to be personalized — a change that will increase educator autonomy and result in less time spent in one-size-fits-all, large-group professional development sessions. These changes hold promise for educator satisfaction and student learning. Grunwald Associates LLC and Digital Promise find that educators' satisfaction with professional learning increases as teachers are able to direct their own professional learning (2015). Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner have found that peer learning among small groups of teachers was the most powerful predictor of improved student achievement over time (2017).

Next Education Workforce models would likely address other known issues associated with educator satisfaction. In a nationally representative sample of current teachers, Educators for Excellence found that approximately 90% agree that opportunities to progress in their career in terms of responsibility, authority or increased pay would make them more likely to stay in teaching (2020). Ingersoll, Sirinides and Dougherty not only found significant relationships between teacher leadership, autonomy and retention in the profession, but also positive associations with student achievement in math and ELA (2017). By giving teams more autonomy to take responsibility for their group of students and by creating leadership roles on the teams, it may be possible to both increase student achievement and improve retention of high-quality professional educators.

It should be noted these findings are likely associated with studies involving teachers who are not working in fully-implemented team-based models as we are defining them. More must be done to understand how specializations and advancement pathways play out in Next Education Workforce models. To that end, we are working with school partners and researchers to build out a robust research agenda around these topics.

## References

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