



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?

New educator roles

Given the wide range of academic and socio-emotional supports that educating the whole child demands, we must reconsider the types and sizes of educator roles we need to support learners. Specifically, we believe we need each student to be supported by a team of educators that includes educational leaders, professional educators, paraeducators and community educators.



Community educators
Prepared members of the community



Paraeducator
Complement the work of professional educators



Professional educators
Pre-service, novice, experienced and specialist teachers



Educational leader
Leaders of teams, schools or systems

Exact educator roles should vary as a function of students, curriculum and context. Student profiles should be 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 educators 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 educating multilingual learners). 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 access 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
Range of educator roles	The full-time employee (1 FTE) model dominates	Opportunities for full-time, part-time and volunteer educators
Responsibilities	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
Approach to hiring	Hiring teachers	Hiring educators with specialized skills to meet student needs
Professional learning	Dominated by one-size-fits-all, seat-time-based models	Personalized and prepares educators to better serve students
What advancement means	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.

How might deeper and personalized learning be catalysts for educational equity?

We borrow Elena Aguilar's definition of equity as it appears in Deeper Learning Means Educational Equity in Urban Schools (2013):

“ Every child gets what they need in our schools—every child, regardless of where they come from, what they look like, who their parents are, what their temperament is, or what they show up knowing or not knowing. Every child gets what they need every day to develop the knowledge and skills to be ready for college or a career.”

While the educator workforce has become more diverse by race and ethnicity over the last three decades (Ingersoll et al., 2021), it still has a diversity problem (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Educational systems are inherently biased against adults who don't have a lot of money or time. If we are to meaningfully increase the diversity of the educator workforce, more must be done at every stage of an educator's development, starting with preparation and entry to the profession.

Preparation and entry to the profession

First, we need lower-risk opportunities for prospective educators to test the profession. One way to do this might be to create new roles with lower barriers to entry (either in terms of time or cost). This might in turn increase the opportunity for a more diverse group of people to determine if a professional pathway is right for them before committing to a formal degree or preparation program. When possible, these new roles should also have hourly wages, and any preparation for them should ideally count toward a larger credential. These roles could be made available to a wide range of people, including high school students, family members and potential career switchers.

Paid residency opportunities might be a second way to increase diversity through preparation and entry to the profession. Evidence suggests that “support and assistance for beginning teachers have a positive impact on

three sets of outcomes: teacher commitment and retention, teacher classroom instructional practices and student achievement" (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). New teachers with more training in teaching methods and pedagogy, specifically, are far more likely to remain in the classroom after their first year on the job (Ingersoll, Merrill & May, n.d.). We also know that a growing number of educators enter through pathways that require less preservice preparation and that educators entering through those pathways are disproportionately teachers of color (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Higher quality preservice training options are not without significant opportunity cost to the participants. A full-time residency program often means that the person cannot have a job, or if they do, it must be on top of an already full schedule. This translates into the highest-quality pre-service options being biased toward those future educators who have the luxury of not needing to also hold a part-time job. Having a paid residency program would help to level that playing field, making the highest-quality preparation paths more accessible to those from lower-income backgrounds.

Finally, an advancement pathway built around competencies, not seat time, would value an educator's experience without lowering the expectations for the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to be successful in specific roles. Having raised a family or worked for years as a classroom aide should translate into competencies that education systems value. Given that there are nearly 1.4 million teaching assistants in the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), and that, on average, these educators tend to be disproportionately educators of color, creating more equitable ways for those who want to advance in the profession by valuing their experience could meaningfully contribute to diversifying the education workforce, across the entire spectrum of educator roles.

Advancement and specialization

Restructuring and lowering the cost of advanced credentials may help open advancement pathways for educators from a wider range of backgrounds. Most current systems of professional advancement reward degree attainment, usually in the form of masters and doctoral degrees. Requiring an advanced degree for professional advancement may impose an unnecessarily high barrier to completion because of the extensive time demands and high out-of-pocket costs. The cost of a masters degree in education at an in-state public university, for example, is about \$13,000 (Arizona State University, 2020). The prohibitive cost of tuition may limit the number of educators who can pursue advancement, and it almost certainly limits the access of educators from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.



With a broader range of educators gaining access to advancement pathways, and with educator teams that need team members with specialization, more opportunities will be available for meaningful use of specializations such as culturally sustaining pedagogy, trauma-informed instruction and restorative approaches."

Imagine a different advancement system in which educators could attain specializations that confer financial benefit but are smaller in their scope (e.g., culturally sustaining pedagogies, teaching phonics) than advanced degrees (e.g., curriculum and instruction, educational leadership). Specializations could be offered at a lower price point and would take less time to complete than an advanced degree, yet they could be "stacked" towards an advanced degree, should educators wish to pursue that path. Stacking specializations would allow educators to receive the financial benefit of incremental pay increases over time while simultaneously pacing their financial investment and providing flexibility for completion, effectively making advancement accessible to educators who may not have the time or financial resources available to pursue more traditional advancement pathways.

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