

SHARED VISION SHARED COMMITMENT

STRENGTHENING EDUCATOR PREPARATION IN ILLINOIS

By the time new teachers are hired for their first classrooms, they've heard "quality instruction" defined differently at every stage of preparation from coursework to student teaching, licensure, and on-the-job evaluation.

That problem became evident when a network of Chicago-area colleges of education set out in 2018 to ensure that their graduates were meeting the instructional needs of local schools and students, particularly students from historically marginalized subgroups.



The Illinois Ed Prep Impact Network, a two-year project organized by Deans for Impact, brought together everyone who helps shape a novice teacher’s education -- from university professors to supervisors of student teaching to school principals.

Once they were all in the same room sharing notes and observations, they realized they would have to agree about what quality teaching looks like before they could improve how instruction is coached and evaluated.

At a moment when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupts where and when learning takes place, the experience of the network points to the importance of attending to the details of instructional practice in order to improve educational outcomes.



The idea for the Illinois Ed Prep Impact Network began in conversations between Benjamin Riley, Deans for Impact’s executive director, and Tom Phillion, dean of Roosevelt University College of Education, who participated in DFI’s first Impact Academy fellowship in 2016.



Phillion invited a small group of Chicagoland deans to talk about building a small regional network in the fall of 2017.

They included Robert Muller at National Louis University, Laurie Elish-Piper at Northern Illinois University, and Mindy Sjoblom, who leads Relay Graduate School of Education-Chicago.

The following spring, Tracey Weinstein, DFI's vice president of data and research, helped the deans review surveys of recently hired graduates and analyze three years of data from edTPA, a measure of teacher readiness that all new teachers must pass to be licensed in Illinois. They wanted to understand how their programs could better prepare future teachers.

Pass rates alone didn't tell the story, but a closer look at edTPA's three components – planning, instruction, and assessment – showed each program where there was room for growth. Improving instruction emerged as the network's overall goal.

By fall 2018, the network had added the college of education at Northeastern Illinois University.



Over the next few months, university faculty and representatives from partner school districts visited every program to watch student-teachers together, observe university coursework, and compare definitions of quality instruction. In all, they observed 35 classrooms and interviewed 130 future teachers, graduates, mentors, school principals, and district administrators.

They discovered that definitions of good instruction were too vague across the network and the various tools used to identify quality didn't

measure what partner school districts wanted to see in new hires.

“We need[ed] more agreement on definitions and commonality between programs,” one faculty member said after discussing the visits with colleagues.

Teams realized that they would have to set aside much more time in the coming year to find a common understanding of quality before they could talk about specific ways to improve it. “This is hard work - with big payoffs,” one director of teacher education said.





John Roberts, DFI senior program director, composed a set of detailed instructional “look-fors” informed by research in cognitive science that could guide how novice teachers were trained, coached and evaluated.

For example: “Teachers focus on developing a deep understanding of content and model content, practices, and strategies, by thinking aloud, using worked examples, and providing verbal explanations.”

An observer would look for teachers to go beyond discrete facts to help students understand the frameworks, concepts and procedures of academic disciplines; link new ideas to prior knowledge; ask students to understand and probe different perspectives; and effectively clarify students’ confusion and misconceptions.

Roberts then mapped those “look-fors” onto the corresponding sections of edTPA and other common evaluation tools used by districts, which mostly describe similar principles, but use different terms that can be confusing for beginning teachers.



Each program identified a specific improvement goal.

For example, Northern Illinois University aimed to deepen its relationship with the DeKalb school district, which wanted to hire new

◆ FROM PRACTICE TO POLICY

Often, a gap exists between the worlds of practice and policy. What policymakers believe will improve instruction in schools clashes with what teachers need in order to challenge and engage all students. At the same time that faculty, supervisors, and K-12 school partners were working together to agree on definitions of quality instruction, the deans of each network institution came together to advocate for thoughtful, aligned state policies. They formed a Deans Coalition that developed policy recommendations, wrote op-eds, and offered testimony at meetings of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and other statewide forums. “We have really established ourselves as an independent and thoughtful voice about teacher quality in 2020,” Dean Muller of National Louis University said. That voice will be important in the next few years because improving instructional quality may take a back seat to basic survival. In Fall 2020, the Deans Coalition prepared to expand its membership and re-doubled its commitment to instructional quality. “I want to be a part of this because the need for improvement never really goes away,” Dean Phillion of Roosevelt University said. “We’ll have new challenges in the next two or three years once we understand what the new environment is going to be like.”

teachers who already had a firm grasp of social justice principles, knew how to use restorative practices in the classroom, and were able to differentiate their teaching for diverse students.

These were new ideas to many of the retired teachers and principals hired by the university to supervise student teachers in their classrooms.

“In the beginning there was definitely some eye-rolling,” Elish-Piper said. “One of them said, ‘restorative practice, is that even a thing?’”

One supervisor said she didn’t know what was taught in methods courses. Participants said methods professors typically don’t go into district schools to observe student teachers.

Elish-Piper urged the supervisors to help student teachers connect what they learn in class with what they must show on the job to succeed.

“The reality of today is that if our teacher candidates are not comfortable and competent in these areas, they are going to struggle as new teachers and we’re going to lose them,” Elish-Piper said. “And we can’t afford to lose them.”

The faculty at National Louis University wrote a common features guide focused on what quality instruction looks like with examples that provide more guidance than just a definition, but aren’t so particular they resemble a recipe. For instance: “Lesson plans include specific teacher language that will be used during the modeling process to make their thinking explicit.”

“We’re not there yet, but it really has driven pretty substantial change about teacher prep overall and the kinds of conversations that folks are having,” Muller of NLU said.



Meanwhile at Roosevelt, the faculty customized DFI’s “look-fors” tool to give more consistent feedback during the 100-150 hours aspiring teachers spend in classrooms as tutors and assistants before they begin their formal student teaching assignments. Specifically, they wanted teacher candidates to feel better prepared to support English Language Learners.

Every supervisor was trained on the tool, which was rolled out across the college of education. “In terms of the issues that my faculty face, it’s provided really helpful coherency,” said Phillion of Roosevelt.



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◆ — **Laurie Elish-Piper**

Northern Illinois University

The “look-fors” were especially useful for Relay, which wanted to improve the experiences of its students who participate in Teach For America.

Those graduates, who comprise about a third of Relay’s students, were hearing different things from their Relay professors and TFA coaches. Relay used the “look-fors” to build a common observation tool that reflected the values of both Relay and TFA.

◆ —
In the spring of 2020, network participants were preparing to systematically observe student-teachers across the region when the pandemic hit.

On Sunday, March 15, Weinstein was in San Diego, preparing to board a plane the next day when her phone lit up with urgent text messages from her Chicago colleagues.

They all reported the same bad news: Every school Weinstein had planned to visit was closed. Something about a virus.

“Bags were packed, but I did not make it on the plane,” Weinstein said. “We had to re-think everything.”

Northern Illinois University pivoted to preparing supervisors for the new reality of online classrooms, and those retired teachers and principals stepped up in a big way. After their trainings went online, participation soared from 50 to nearly 100 percent. Because the supervisors were trained this summer using online tools, they are better prepared to coach student-teachers online this fall.

Relay-Chicago had made progress on the observation tool they wanted to use with TFA, but there was much left to do and no time to do it. DFI staff built on what they’d already put together and helped the team complete the tool. Over the summer, DFI designed training materials for all Relay faculty and TFA coaches.

“I was so grateful for [DFI] finding that need and just jumping in,” Mindy Sjoblom said. “[Relay and TFA] are really excited to start diving in and using those tools.”

◆ —
Deans for Impact and participants in the Illinois Ed Prep Impact Network learned two central lessons from their collaboration. First,



educator-preparation programs improve when they cohere around a common vision of instructional excellence for future teachers and use common tools to put that vision into action. And second, even the best laid plans in education are subject to uncertain and dramatic change, including a global pandemic.

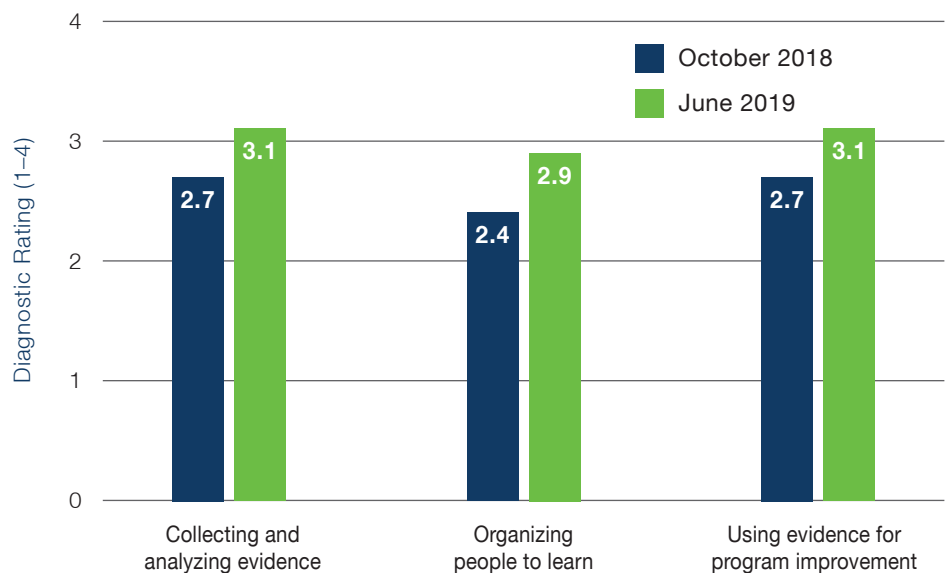
As a new school year gets underway, network teams are training coaches, faculty, and supervisors on new tools and cohering around

TRACKING PROGRESS

Network members used diagnostic tools developed by Deans for Impact to track changes within their programs and their alignment with school partners. In the first year of the network, they monitored progress on foundational behaviors, like teams’ ability to “organize people to learn” and “use evidence for program improvement.” In the second year, they assessed specific changes related to defining quality instruction and direct support to teacher-candidates. The network also analyzed changes in future teachers’ instruction via classroom observations and the edTPA -- a process complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and closure of school buildings in Spring 2020. Network-wide averages on each of the Deans for Impact diagnostic tools are shown in the two graphs. A rating of 3.0 is considered *developing*, meaning that underlying activities or behaviors are observed most of the time.

AVERAGE EVIDENCE USE DIAGNOSTIC RATINGS

October 2018–June 2019



Evidence Use Diagnostic Dimension

common language to ensure that future teachers receive strong support, regardless of the circumstances of where schooling takes place.

And programs are expanding their improvement efforts.

National Louis University is among a selective group of institutions that has joined DFI’s Learning by Scientific Design Network, a groundbreaking national effort to incorporate principles of learning science throughout teacher preparation. The foundation laid over the past two years will support NLU’s hard but vital work of redesigning coursework and clinical training using the science of learning.

“Under Dean Muller’s leadership, National Louis is poised to transform how it is preparing teachers in ways that make use of our best available understanding of how students learn,” said Riley, Deans for Impact’s executive director. “They’re working tremendously hard to provide meaningful, science-informed preparation to teacher-candidates.”

We may live in uncertain times, but the need for effective teaching will endure long past the current crisis. Participants in the Illinois Ed Prep Impact Network contributed to that goal by improving the readiness and effectiveness of future teachers, ensuring their work will live on for years to come.

AVERAGE ALIGNMENT DIAGNOSTIC RATINGS

January–August 2020

