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# Efficacy and Implementation of the Teachers Institute Approach



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### *Teacher Quality and Effectiveness*

Participation in Teachers Institutes that follow the approach developed in New Haven enhances those teacher qualities known to improve student achievement.<sup>1</sup> “Teachers Institutes significantly strengthen teachers in all five of the major dimensions of teacher quality. They also include all seven elements now recognized to be crucial in successful professional development programs... Institute participants had nearly twice the retention rate of non-participants in local teaching.”<sup>2</sup> Rogers M. Smith, Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, who conducted the evaluation, found: “In Institute seminars teachers gain more sophisticated content knowledge and also enhance their skills as they prepare curriculum units adapting the themes of their seminars for their students. Most teachers are enthusiastic about the seminars and the opportunity to teach the units they have written. They expect more of the students taking them. And they succeed in motivating their students to learn at higher levels.”<sup>3</sup>

Each participating teacher writes a curriculum unit to teach aspects of the seminar topic to his or her students and to share with other teachers in the school district. The units are also published on the Internet and are available online at [teachers.yale.edu](http://teachers.yale.edu). Smith concludes:

“The data on unit use also show that after teaching their Institute units two-thirds of all participants rated them superior to all other curriculum they had used. Roughly 60 percent of all participants rated student motivation and attention as higher during these units, producing substantially greater content mastery.... These data strongly support the conclusions that virtually all teachers who complete Institute seminars feel substantially strengthened in their mastery of content knowledge and their professional skills more generally, while they also develop higher standards for what their students can achieve.”<sup>4</sup>

The study examined retrospectively the results of Institute participation for New Haven teachers between 2000 and 2005. According to Smith: “The New Haven quantitative study indicates that Institute seminars attract a broad range of teachers from every observable demographic category and that those who choose to be Fellows are much more likely to continue teaching in the district than those who do not.”<sup>5</sup>

The enduring partnership between Yale University and the New Haven Public Schools attests to the value of the seminars to teachers and leaders concerned with student learning in a district serving many low-income students. Reginald R. Mayo, who since 1992 has been Superintendent of the New Haven school district, says the report underscores the benefits he has long observed the district receives from the Institute:

“The Institute has made an enormous contribution to strengthening teaching and learning in the New Haven Public Schools. It has been a significant factor in school improvement by exciting teachers and sparking student interest in learning. I have seen how powerful Institute participation can be for creating a very fruitful collaboration among teachers within a school, and in stimulating them to learn more about the subjects they teach and to develop new classroom materials that excite and engage students in learning. Maintaining this kind of teacher quality in our schools has never been more important, so the report’s finding about the retention of Institute participants is especially encouraging.”<sup>6</sup>

### ***Meaningful Impacts for Students***

Participant surveys suggest that positive changes in teacher practice and student motivation result from teacher participation in the Institute seminars.<sup>7</sup> Nearly all participants rated the seminars as moderately or greatly useful. The teachers surveyed about their use of the curriculum units showed that almost all participants went on after the seminar to teach the units they prepared in whole or in part, and many also reported using units prepared by other teachers. Most reported presenting the units in teacher-led discussions rather than lectures, and they stressed writing exercises and other exercises designed to strengthen speaking, listening, vocabulary, and reasoning skills.

The teachers surveyed for the National Demonstration Project reported that student responses to the units they developed in the Teachers Institutes were quite positive. Nearly two thirds of the teachers rated student attention during the unit as higher than during other work, and more than half rated student motivation, student interest, and student mastery as higher during the Institute-developed unit than during other work.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Teacher Retention***

The retrospective study of the impact of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute from 2001, mentioned above, compared participating and non-participating teachers and their students over a five-year period using district data on teachers and students. The analysis showed that, after controlling for other characteristics, Teachers Institute participants were almost twice as likely as non-participants to remain teaching in the district five years later. “Because research suggests that experience within a district is more strongly associated with teaching effectiveness than earlier experiences elsewhere, this finding is especially notable.”<sup>9</sup>

### ***Participant Satisfaction***

As early as 1986, the Education Policy Research Division of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) assisted the Teachers Institute in developing questionnaires for its

participants, crafting the format that New Haven and other Institutes continue to use, with only minor modifications. *A Progress Report* on the data from the annual questionnaires administered between 1986 and 1991 found that teachers from all grade levels and diverse subject matters rated the seminar experiences and the impact of the curriculum units they wrote on students in consistently positive ways, as subsequent studies have also shown. In a preface to the *Report*, Gita Z. Wilder of ETS wrote that the surveys showed New Haven Fellows to be “representative of the larger population of New Haven teachers” in terms of subjects and grades taught, and that all teachers rated their seminar experiences highly with “remarkable” consistency.<sup>10</sup>

The findings of the 2009 Report on Institute Experiences were strikingly similar:

“Annual surveys of teacher participants at all four existing Institutes in the last six years confirm earlier results: teachers drawn from all grade levels and all subject areas participated out of desires to obtain curriculum suited to their needs (84.6 percent to 89.3 percent at the four sites), to increase their mastery of their subjects (85.5 percent to 90.5 percent), and especially to obtain materials *to motivate their students* (93.2 percent to 94.7 percent). Over 96 percent of all participating teachers rated the Institute seminars overall ‘moderately’ or ‘greatly’ useful. High percentages said the seminars increased their knowledge (87.3 percent to 93.7 percent) and raised their expectations of students (87.8 percent to 94.75 percent). Though data on unit use are less extensive, they show that after teaching their Institute units, two thirds of all participants rated them superior to all other curriculum they had used. *Roughly 60 percent of all participants rated student motivation and attention as higher during these units, producing substantially greater content mastery.*”<sup>11</sup>

In their evaluation of the Demonstration Project, Policy Studies Associates stated that “large majorities of Fellows were unequivocal in saying that their experience in the Institutes, especially the preparation of a curriculum unit, gave them a real sense of accomplishment and re-kindled their excitement about learning. As one Fellow put it: ‘to be teachers, we must also be learners.’ When asked in interviews to compare their experience in the Institutes with their experience in other kinds of professional development, teachers agreed that the Institutes are vastly superior.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Teachers Institute Theory of Change***

In 2010, the Teachers Institute engaged the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Ellen E. Kisker to design a management information system that will support both the operation of Teachers Institutes in New Haven and at other locations and a rigorous new evaluation. AIR is one of the largest behavioral and social science research organizations in the world, with expertise in education, educational assessment, health, human development, international development, and the workforce. Dr. Kisker, Managing Partner of Twin Peaks Partners LLC, has more than twenty years of experience conducting experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations, including eighteen years as

a Senior Researcher at Mathematica Policy Research. Dr. Kisker describes the Teachers Institute theory of change and cites the extensive research that supports the theory: “The Teachers Institute approach was developed more than 30 years ago, but it remains a state-of-the-art program. The theory of change is grounded in the founders’ vision for the program, affirmed by participating teachers’ reports about their experiences and the benefits of participating, and backed by research and experts’ current understanding of best practices.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Implementation of the Teachers Institute Approach*

The Institute’s National Demonstration Project, conducted from 1998 to 2003, showed that the Institute approach can be rapidly established in a variety of settings, in cities larger than New Haven with different population compositions and education resources.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, the Project demonstrated that

- A Teachers Institute serving approximately 20 schools that enroll predominantly minority students can be rapidly inaugurated;
- Such a Teachers Institute can immediately carry out a program of four-to-six content-based seminars in the humanities and sciences, which increase teachers’ knowledge, heighten their morale, encourage their use of new technologies, and result in individually crafted curriculum units of substance for use in classrooms;
- These Institutes can help teachers quickly to construct curriculum units that will implement academic standards in their state and district;
- Such Institutes will arouse the enthusiasm and support of significant numbers of teachers and university faculty members;
- Such Institutes can attract support – including pledges of continuing support – from administrators of a private liberal arts college, a private university emphasizing the sciences, a flagship state university, and a major state university in a larger system;
- High-level administrators in school districts, superintendents or their immediate subordinates, will be attracted by the idea of such an Institute, will start thinking about the local means of scaling-up, and will commit themselves to its long-term support; and
- The strategies employed in the National Demonstration Project are admirably suited for the process of further disseminating the Yale-New Haven model and establishing a nation-wide network of Teachers Institutes.

As further and more recent evidence of the feasibility of replicating the Teachers Institute model, following these tested strategies three new Institutes have been established through the National Initiative in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Charlotte, North Carolina; and New Castle County, Delaware.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Rogers M. Smith's 2009 report, *To Strengthen Teaching: An Evaluation of Teachers Institute Experiences*, presents results of a study of participants in Teachers Institutes from 2003 to 2008 and in National Initiative seminars at Yale from 2005 to 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Rogers M. Smith, *To Strengthen Teaching: An Evaluation of Teachers Institute Experiences* (New Haven: Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 2009), 5-6, [teachers.yale.edu/pdfs/An\\_Evaluation\\_of\\_Teachers\\_Institute\\_Experiences.pdf](http://teachers.yale.edu/pdfs/An_Evaluation_of_Teachers_Institute_Experiences.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 16.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>6</sup> Yale National Initiative, "Report Links Institute Participation to Teacher Quality and Retention," news release, April 15, 2009, [teachers.yale.edu/story/index.php?skin=h&page=045](http://teachers.yale.edu/story/index.php?skin=h&page=045).
- <sup>7</sup> Smith, *To Strengthen Teaching*, 13-22.
- <sup>8</sup> Rogers M. Smith, *To Motivate My Students: An Evaluation of the National Demonstration Project of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute* (New Haven: Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 2004), 9-12, [teachers.yale.edu/pdfs/To\\_Motivate\\_My\\_Students.pdf](http://teachers.yale.edu/pdfs/To_Motivate_My_Students.pdf).
- <sup>9</sup> Smith, *To Strengthen Teaching*, 24.
- <sup>10</sup> Gita Z. Wilder, preface to *A Progress Report on Surveys Administered to New Haven Teachers, 1982-1990* (New Haven: Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 1991), iii, [teachers.yale.edu/publications/index.php?skin=h&page=progress\\_report](http://teachers.yale.edu/publications/index.php?skin=h&page=progress_report).
- <sup>11</sup> Smith, *To Strengthen Teaching*, 5-6, emphasis in original.
- <sup>12</sup> M. Bruce Haslam and Üllik Rouk, "Professional Development with the Yale- New Haven Teachers Institute Model: Impact, Lessons, and Future Prospects," with Katrina G. Laguarda (Policy Studies Associates, February 2006), 46.
- <sup>13</sup> Ellen E. Kisker, "The Teachers Institute Theory of Change," *On Common Ground*, no. 14 (Fall 2011): 4-7, [teachers.yale.edu/pdfs/ocg/ocg14.pdf](http://teachers.yale.edu/pdfs/ocg/ocg14.pdf).
- <sup>14</sup> Smith, *To Motivate My Students*, 19.