



## Virtual Professional Learning Community: Supporting Migrant Educators

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### Abstract

Migrant educators across the United States support children of highly mobile agricultural workers. Since families move often, many children have missed school and some have not yet learned essential skills needed for school success. Therefore, this paper describes a virtual professional learning community designed to help migrant educators across New York State identify and address students' needs in the areas of reading and math skills.

**Keywords:** *Teaching and Learning; Education Support*

### Introduction

Anna is a former classroom teacher and is now an educator for one of the Migrant Education Program Regional Centers in New York. Once a week, Anna meets with Anthony, an eight-year-old boy enrolled in a rural public school. Anthony and his family moved to New York last year from Texas. His family speaks Spanish at home, and Anthony and his four siblings are learning English. Anthony has attended three schools since his parents started working as agricultural workers.

Anna visits with Anthony at his home. She balances instruction between Anthony's immediate needs and his long-term needs. For instance, Anna helps him with his homework. Sometimes, he has trouble understanding it, but she tries not to provide the answers and guides him while he figures it out. Anthony wants to do well in school, but his schooling has not been consistent, and he has some gaps in basic reading and math skills. She must therefore address these long-term needs to help him achieve grade-level expectations. Anna is eager to help him with the specific skills he requires to succeed in school, but she struggles to find effective ways to identify and remediate these gaps. Anna discusses these challenges with her colleagues and

learns instructional approaches during monthly meetings at the Migrant Education Regional Center. Still, in her day-to-day work, she works alone teaching students who qualify for her support.

This article examines one state's approach to addressing the professional development needs of their migrant educators who provide supplemental educational services to the children of highly mobile agricultural workers. This two-year virtual program is designed to supplement professional training for migrant educators.

### The Challenge

The success of any program is contingent upon the effectiveness of that program. Migrant Education Programs (MEPs) across the country support students who are the children of highly mobile agricultural workers. Many families live in poverty and move frequently. Most live in isolation and speak little to no English, while others are learning English. The children have missed school because of the nature of their parents' work, and as a result, some have not acquired the essential skills needed for school success. As a



result, they fall behind academically, are retained, and "although currently there is no reliable estimate of the graduation rate for migrant students, the working estimate is roughly 45-50%" (Ed.Gov, 2015). Therefore, professional development for migrant educators is needed to ensure their teaching effectiveness – this critical aspect is the cornerstone to the success of Migrant Education Programs.

In 2016, New York State required that migrant educators administer the easyCBM to assess their students' skill development in mathematics and reading (Alonzo, Tindal, Ulmer, & Glasgow, 2006). These quick and easily administered measures assess students' basic skill development. Educators assessed their students twice a year to determine the effectiveness of the MEP services.

Faced with limited funding and time, the New York State Migrant Education Program Identification & Recruitment – Technical Assistance & Support Center (NYS-MEP ID&R – TASC) or TASC, was determined to find effective ways to support regional directors and migrant educators at each of the eight regional instructional and support service centers across the state of New York. TASC took advantage of technology to develop a sustainable professional development program for educators across the state.

TASC had a two-step vision to move forward. One step was to support migrant educators beyond simply administering and interpreting the assessment results. Since educators collected data from the easyCBM assessments, TASC used this opportunity to teach educators to use this data to inform instruction for individual students. The second step was to leverage technology to build sustainable and consistent access to professional development and instructional resources. TASC identified reading and math experts who could translate the easyCBM data into learning needs based on

New York State Learning Standards (2017). These same experts were interested in taking their instruction into a variety of virtual settings.

### **Establishing a Professional Development Community - Virtually**

To support and strengthen migrant educators' skills in administering and then using the easyCBM results to teach specific reading and math skills, TASC planned a mixture of virtual and in-person sessions throughout the year. TASC selected the Zoom virtual platform because it ensured that migrant educators could interact with one another (Zoom Video Communications, 2019).

TASC transitioned statewide professional development from in-person training into a virtual community incorporating virtual training, webinars, online resources, and professional development modules. The eight regional centers continued with face-to-face meetings utilizing various online resources. At first, most educators preferred face-to-face meetings; this opinion, however, changed over time.

**Statewide virtual training.** TASC debuted its first statewide virtual training at the beginning of the program year. All regional directors and migrant educators met at each of the eight regional centers to learn how to administer and record the easyCBM math and reading measures. In this way, everyone received the same instructions. The presenters were projected on a Zoom virtual platform screen (Zoom Video Communications, 2019). While the presenters were virtual, the regional directors and educators were together and interacted during the presentation.

**Leveraging technology.** Next, before the statewide in-person conference, the reading and math content experts prepared pre-conference instructional materials. Each regional director facilitated pre-



conference workshops during their scheduled meetings. During these meetings, migrant educators watched videos, viewed/listened to voice-over PowerPoints, and read articles about math and reading skills. For instance, in reading, one article, Target the Problem, explained the components of early reading skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics (Reading Rockets, n.d.). Then educators viewed a video and practiced a phonics assessment. In math skills, regional directors received a PowerPoint with directions to access easyCBM's Math Item Analysis report. Then the migrant educators identified areas to focus on with their students – these results were then used during the workshop at the statewide conference.

**In-person conference.** During a 2-day in-person statewide conference and introduction before launching into an online platform, migrant educators attended various workshops. All educators administering the easyCBM were required to attend both the reading and math workshops.

During the workshops, migrant educators learned to interpret student data to determine individual students' needs and administer additional diagnostic assessments to pinpoint specific needs in reading and math. For example, if a student had difficulty reading fluently, migrant educators practiced administering and interpreting a phonics screener to identify a student's difficulties in specific phonics skills. For example, a student had not yet acquired the phonics skill for silent-e words in one video. Therefore, educators administered the phonics screener to pinpoint the skill need. In addition to data analysis, the workshops included various centers to practice hands-on activities designed to address specific reading and math needs. In both sessions, handouts were provided.

At the end of the conference, migrant educators completed a survey and requested additional training.

These post-workshop survey responses helped TASC determine the next steps. For instance, educators requested training in the following areas:

- (1) Addressing the specific needs of students new to this country with limited English-speaking skills,
- (2) Using the phonics screener,
- (3) Utilizing the easyCBM to inform instruction of older students, and
- (4) Strategies applicable for high school students.

**Webinars.** Following the conference, TASC scheduled a series of webinars associated with specific requests from migrant educators. Educators registered for a webinar from a list of options. TASC offered sessions at different times during the week and group webinars scheduled during a regional center's monthly meetings. An expert led each 90-minute webinar in reading and math. The webinars consisted of PowerPoints, assessment tools, instructional approaches, practice with feedback, and opportunities for questions and discussion. For instance, during the phonics workshop, educators observed the trainer model how to interpret a student's test results and select resources to support the student's learning of a needed skill. Then educators practiced – they interpreted a student's results and took turns selecting resources from the online resource library (see below). The trainer provided feedback, led a discussion while educators asked questions and shared experiences. In math, during a fractions workshop, the trainer used a document reader attached to her computer to demonstrate using Cuisenaire Rods to model the addition and subtraction of fractions with like and unlike denominators. Again, educators had time to practice, ask questions, and receive feedback from their statewide colleagues and trainers.

**Resource libraries.** TASC established a resource library on the New York State Migrant



Education Program website. For instance, in addressing reading and math skills, the library includes instructional tools that coincide with specific skills and directions on building a student profile to guide instructional decisions.

**Professional development modules.** Another section on the website involves professional development modules. Regional directors can use these stand-alone training modules to facilitate a group session or by migrant educators for independent study. For instance, the website includes nine modules: teaching the main idea, theme, or vocabulary development. In addition, the mathematics module includes instructional videos that demonstrate strategies such as hands-on teaching of fractions, decimals, and pre-algebra skills.

Each module includes a facilitator's guide, a video, and instructional resources—the trainer in the video models a strategy to support skill development. Educators then have opportunities to practice the skill. In addition, each module includes modifications for students learning English. For example, some modules include an article for study groups, and an additional module provides various ways to lead a compelling article study. After field-testing the content during the initial webinars, content trainers used the educators' questions, and the pacing was incorporated into the video module.

**Ongoing support.** The reading and math trainers provided ongoing support to migrant educators, regional directors, and TASC. TASC met with trainers via virtual meetings utilizing the Zoom virtual platform (Zoom Video Communication, 2019). Regional directors invited trainers to monthly meetings for additional training in utilizing resources; other times, trainers attended regional meetings virtually. Finally, migrant educators emailed trainers with questions.

## **Project Strengths and Lessons Learned Strengths of Project**

There are many overall benefits. The most significant benefits include the resources, the connections the migrant educators made with one another, and the initiative's cost. Each of these benefits is discussed below.

**Resources.** The initial project goal was to teach educators how to administer and report the easyCBM data and support educators in interpreting these results to inform instruction based on individual student's needs. The project was accomplished by providing professional development beyond the initial workshops in assessment administration and by establishing an ongoing, consistent approach to professional learning across the state. As reported, one-shot professional development does not have lasting effects on practice (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

The pre-conference and conference were followed by webinars, resource libraries, additional webinars, and more professional development resources. Resource libraries and professional development modules align with the training provided during the webinars. These resources also support new migrant educators and help guide regional directors. Directors can readily access the materials to use during in-service meetings. In addition, both the resource libraries and professional development modules ensure the sustainability of the initiative.

The resources targeted the specific needs of the educators. The discussions during the virtual webinars helped TASC connect with migrant educators and learn the specific challenges in the field. Following the webinars, TASC debriefed with content trainers, and based on these discussions, TASC planned for additional training and resources to support the educators working in the field.



**Community building.** During the project, there was an effort to build community among migrant educators who work across the state. Since an essential aspect of each webinar included questions and discussion, educators had opportunities to discuss ideas with other educators. At first, some educators were hesitant, but over time, more and more educators participated. It was beneficial when an experienced migrant educator asked questions or expressed uncertainty in dealing with an instructional dilemma. Other educators became willing to ask questions about practices they did not yet understand. For instance, during one webinar, a migrant educator explained an instructional practice in a classroom that, in her opinion, was not effective. She expressed uncertainty about how she should support her student. With the trainer and other migrant educators, she learned ways to modify practice and various solutions to try with her student. Without this level of support, she would have likely continued an ineffective practice.

Furthermore, since the content trainers remained the same throughout the project, the messages were consistent, and the educators became comfortable with the trainers. Migrant educators also connected with TASC since the state team participated in the webinars as well. They ensured that everyone could access the webinars and facilitated the presentation, but more importantly, they participated. As a result, TASC asked questions, completed activities, and offered suggestions as part of this learning community.

**Cost.** This initiative is one way to offset limited funding – bringing educators together virtually and providing online resources are cost-efficient. This virtual project, which focuses on specific skill development for many people across many miles, saves money.

## Lessons Learned

There were also many lessons learned throughout this project. While technology offers effective and cost-efficient solutions to support professional learning, it also presents challenges and ways to overcome these challenges.

TASC launched the first statewide training with little practice. However, they quickly found out about the potential challenges of technology, such as the need for technology checks ahead of time and incorporating additional conference cameras, speakers, and microphones. They also attended other webinars to learn "how" to handle registration and attendance, facilitate the sessions, address audio challenges, and deal with material handouts. Each webinar taught TASC ways to address new challenges. Since migrant educators displayed varied technological abilities, and many educators had not participated in a webinar format, TASC provided step-by-step guidance from signing in and accessing the webinar and support with audio. TASC learned that one person was needed to take individual calls as educators experienced connection issues before and during webinars. TASC learned how to ensure that everyone knew how to operate webinars, including the chat feature, mute the audio, or message someone, privately.

At the regional offices, meetings to train regional directors were critical in moving forward. Some directors needed support in setting up the video and audio-conferencing equipment and learning various fix-it strategies in addressing computer, audio, and camera issues, mainly if the equipment was not strong enough at their center. For example, when virtual training was held in large rooms, there were audio issues because the microphone and speakers on the laptops were not sufficient and required augmentation. However, the directors became more comfortable over time.



Also, for both the webinars and extensive group training, the content trainers struggled with reading the group and catching non-verbal cues. For instance, trainers had difficulty engaging the educators in group discussions because it was hard to gauge an individual's willingness to participate. During webinars, TASC encouraged the use of the "chat box" for questions and comments, and they also made time during the sessions to discuss key ideas. In the beginning, TASC initiated many of the questions or included ideas to break the ice, such as polls and breakout rooms, allowing educators to meet in small groups. In time, the educators willingly participated. However, some educators had a level of self-consciousness; for instance, some expressed discomfort looking at themselves. In addition, participation dropped when TASC started recording webinars – TASC stopped the recordings.

Another current challenge is ensuring that educators continue to access and utilize the materials on the website. Some educators were not accessing the resource materials provided on the website. Instructional change is not easily attained. Therefore, it is essential to provide educators with opportunities to locate relevant materials to integrate the changes into their existing routines. TASC is now offering ongoing training such as short website tours and encouraging website use by "advertising" resources in the Migrant Educator Bimonthly Newsletter.

Website maintenance and updating are vital to the success of this initiative. Dated materials, inaccessible links, and difficulty locating resources can lead to frustration, and thus, educators will not turn to the website as a resource. Fortunately, TASC has someone devoted to maintaining the website as a resource for educators.

Over the next two years, TASC and regional directors will support educators in using the materials

and evaluate their effectiveness before adding them to the library. Migrant educators received ProBooks during the second year of the project, which can be utilized for virtual staff meetings, attending workshops, accessing resources from the website, and working with students.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, TASC learned many lessons. Technology requires patience. It is essential to take the time to learn and practice features on the platform. It is also critical to learn from others, such as attending other webinars.

Community building that is planned and intentional, particularly with educators who work alone in the field, is essential. At times, educators feel isolated, but they have many shared experiences – both successful and challenging. Gathering a community of educators involved in the same work through virtual professional learning allows them to learn from one another. Therefore, the practice of stopping a PowerPoint training to encourage questions, offer support, and share ideas are essential. During each webinar, TASC changed the screen to include everyone, and everyone un-muted the audio. As a result, instead of one voice (the trainer) leading the presentation, all educators could see one another and have a group discussion from hundreds of miles apart. One significant community-building opportunity involved taking advantage of serendipitous moments, such as acknowledging an educator's cat or dog that puts in an appearance during an evening workshop; suddenly, many educators introduce their dog or cat during the webinar.

Overall, the NYS-MEP virtual professional development initiative was a great success. It provided more than the training in specific reading and math skills. Migrant educators and regional directors, united by a common mission, were brought together to learn



with each other and from one another. TASC overcame the obstacles of limited funding and distance between regional centers by offering this valuable virtual platform. In the end, New York State migrant educators are better equipped to address the particular and unique needs of children of highly mobile agricultural workers.



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