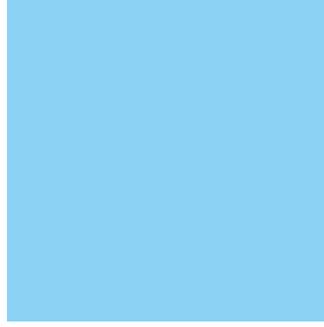
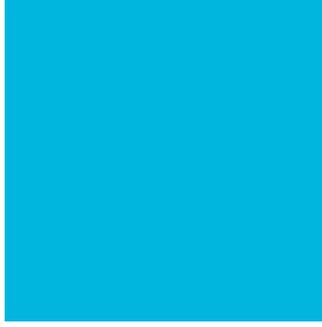


FROM PREP
TO PRACTICE:
**HOW LAB
CLASSROOMS
CAN ADVANCE
THE TEACHING
PROFESSION**



UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO
Education Innovation Institute



Stand for Children’s Teachers Improving Policy Summit (TIPS) is an opportunity for Colorado teachers to lead a conversation about how we can improve public education – from the classroom out. Learn more at www.stand.org/colorado/TIPS.



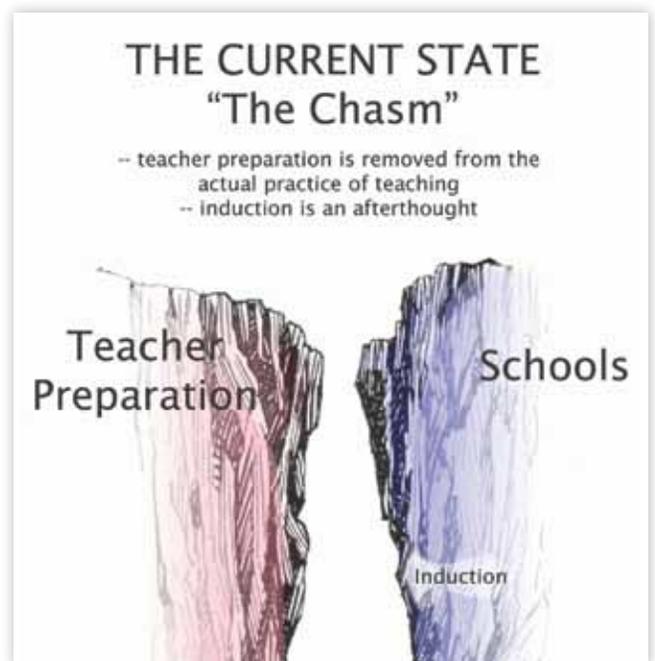
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FROM PREP TO PRACTICE: HOW LAB CLASSROOMS CAN ADVANCE THE TEACHING PROFESSION

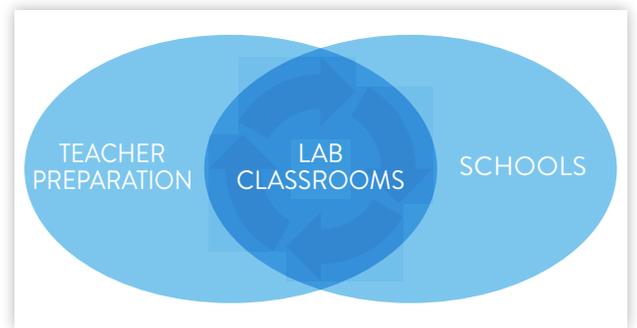
PUT A GROUP OF ACCOMPLISHED TEACHERS IN A ROOM, ASK THEM TO SOLVE A PROBLEM AND THE RESULTS CAN BE AMAZING. THAT HAPPENED OVER THE SUMMER OF 2012 WHEN SIX DENVER-AREA TEACHERS CAME TOGETHER TO IDENTIFY MAJOR BARRIERS TO IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING AND TO RECOMMEND SOLUTIONS.

They were convened by the nonprofit [Stand for Children](#) for a rare opportunity to inform the kind of policy decisions that shape their daily work. The issue that rose to the top during this “[Teachers Improving Policy Summit](#)” (TIPS) was the need to create a training environment that can ensure teachers enter the classroom ready to succeed while also expanding opportunities for growth throughout their careers. The solution proposed by the TIPS teachers – really, more of a 3-D vision – has the potential to transform teaching into a profession that is more respected by the public and characterized by long, sustainable, satisfying careers that will attract highly talented candidates. The reward for this transformation will be improved student learning.

What stirred the group’s creative juices was a too-common sharp break between [teacher prep programs and the first years of teaching](#). Think of a deep chasm with a Swiss cheese safety net just as you are starting your career. The TIPS teachers had different training backgrounds and work experiences but five of the six said they felt generally lost when they discovered that the pedagogy and instructional techniques from their prep programs did not necessarily align with the practices and expectations of their first schools. It was frequently hard to get help when they struggled with common rookie problems like managing classroom discipline or planning lessons for students at different levels. Assigned mentors often were too busy with their own classes to offer regular help and state-mandated induction programs were often perfunctory, providing little support beyond monthly meetings. Several TIPS teachers recalled seeing colleagues throw in the towel after struggling with problems they might have mastered with the right help. They regretted the loss of talent and disruption of the learning environment.



The TIPS proposal to bridge the chasm is big: Create a network of lab classrooms where teachers at any point in their careers can come to practice new skills and address weaknesses under the joint guidance of master K-12 teachers and prep program faculty. While individual lab classrooms and schools have been around for a while, the TIPS idea is for an eventual network that is dedicated to generating relationships between prep programs and K-12 schools and districts that lead to deep and ongoing collaboration beyond the labs.



Because the classrooms would be partnerships between K-12 districts and prep programs, they could provide the seamless coordination and support from prep to practice that the TIPS teachers hungered for. Placement of the classrooms could vary widely, depending on the needs, capacity, and resources of stakeholders, including districts, prep programs, and even the state. Some districts might have only one classroom, at least to start with, while others might spread several across multiple locations, with a few in each school, or cluster several together in a single lab school. As envisioned, the labs could become fertile centers of creativity for trying out new ideas and conducting research while also serving the professional growth needs of teachers and schools. In so doing, they could also help districts address the persistent problems of high turnover among new teachers and burnout or frustrated ambitions among talented veterans. By raising the chances of success and job satisfaction for teachers, these lab classrooms could improve the climate for teaching and learning.

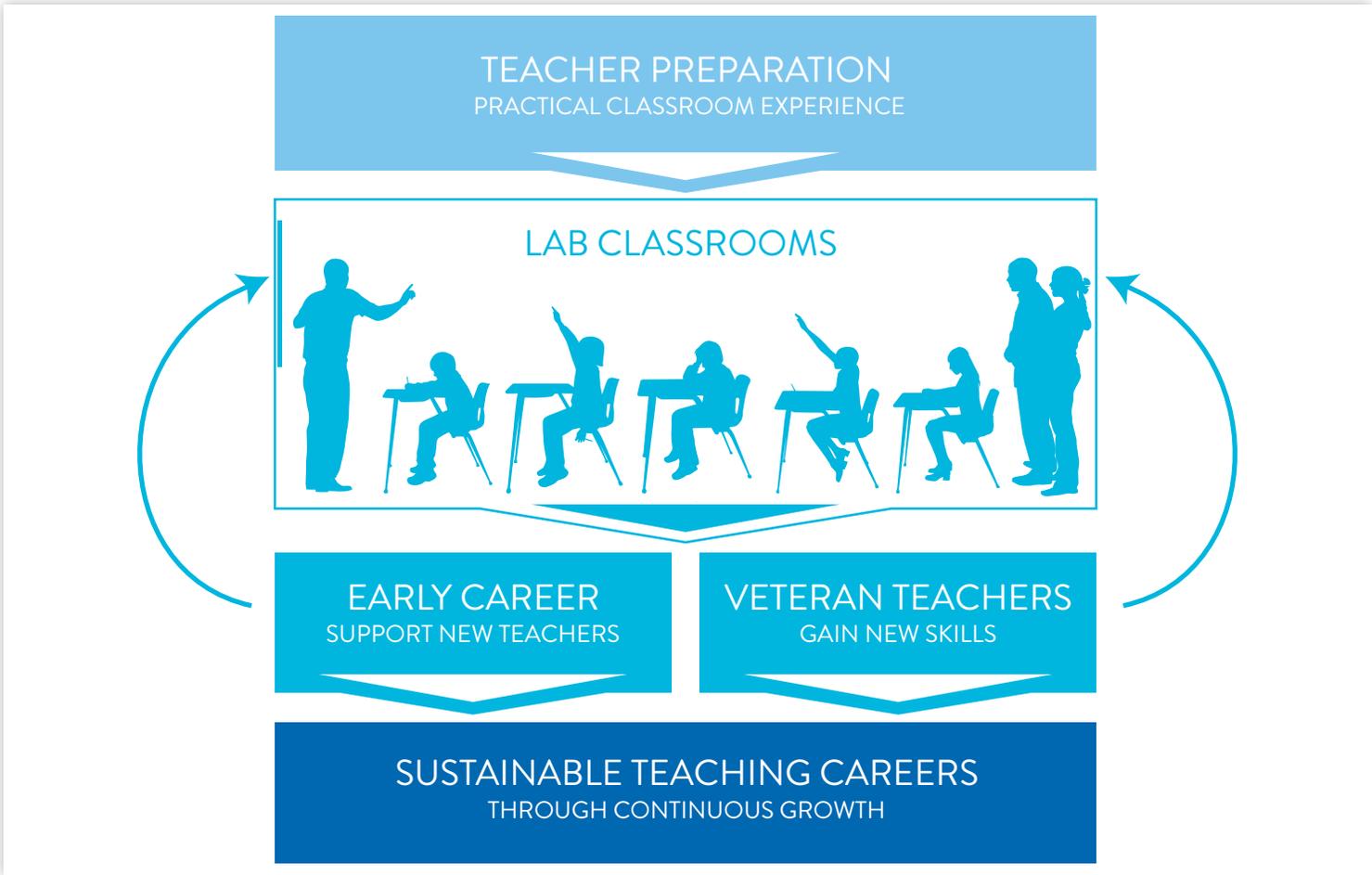
STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE LAB CLASSROOMS WOULD BENEFIT FROM LESSONS THAT ARE SUPERVISED – AND SOMETIMES MODELED – BY MASTER TEACHERS AND CLINICAL FACULTY FROM PREP PROGRAMS.

Districts would set their own policies for enrollment and other procedures, though students’ demographics should be representative of the full school and their progress should be monitored regularly to ensure they are getting quality instruction.

The labs would provide a range of supports. Teacher candidates could start observing well-run classrooms earlier in their training and student teachers could practice their craft with expert support. **New teachers could come to learn and practice skills** they did not get during student teaching. Teachers in their first years – when their learning curves are steepest and they still have provisional certification — could **work through problems**



encountered in the classroom, learn missed skills, or practice instructional approaches, all under the structured supervision of lab faculty. Veteran teachers with low ratings on professional evaluations could come for targeted remediation and follow-up support. Other veterans in good standing could come to learn new skills, pedagogical approaches, or technologies not available when they began their careers. Teachers could cycle in and out over a few weeks or months depending on their needs. Fully realized, the lab classrooms could supplement current professional development provisions, often one-shot seminars held in featureless hotel conference rooms offering little that is relevant to teachers' specific schools and contexts.



A key piece of the plan is to enrich the prospects of master teachers. **The TIPS lab classrooms would give talented veterans greater authority and prestige** while allowing them to continue focusing on instruction. They would share responsibility with prep program faculty for ensuring that the classrooms succeed in meeting the needs of both teachers who come for training and students enrolled in the classroom. The job would entail being both a deep mentor and an exemplar of effective practice for pre-service, novice, and veteran teachers. Mastering these two very different skill sets, both necessary for the lab classroom model to work, would provide even top teachers with a new professional stretch. It would mean working closely with the prep program to provide expert advice on issues of practice and to learn about emerging pedagogical theories. **It also could involve working with research faculty on cutting-edge studies.**

The current limited advancement options for top teachers are a common concern of educators, including the TIPS teachers, and policy makers and a frequent reason for advocating career ladders, which **reward high performers with more pay and responsibility** to entice them to stay in the profession. Currently, the main avenue is to move into the administration, starting with the principal's office, and away from the classroom and instruction. Almost half the teachers who told federal surveyors in 2008- 09 that they had left teaching reported that their new jobs had higher salaries, more opportunities for advancement, higher prestige, greater intellectual challenge, and more recognition and support from managers (USDOE, 2010). For master teachers who choose to become principals as well as those who become mentors, the labs would be a place to sharpen skills required for evaluating teachers under Colorado's new system, including critical observation of instruction, reliable performance scoring, and holding constructive follow-up conversations.

The TIPS teachers – whose classroom experience ranges from 1 to 21 years – agreed that **the ultimate beneficiaries of such an extensive support system would be students.** New teachers could start their first jobs with more complete skill sets and the greater confidence that such proficiency affords. When they hit inevitable problems they would know where to find help without fear of looking weak. Mid-career teachers could rejuvenate their practice by updating their content knowledge and learning new instructional techniques. Master teachers could continue to blossom by devoting their talents to improving the craft of peers instead of seeking advancement elsewhere. Such opportunities to increase the satisfaction and professionalism of teaching have the potential not only to improve the quality of instruction but also to reduce turnover and its destabilizing effects on a school's community and students' lives.

SEVERAL THEORIES INFORMING THE LAB CLASSROOM PROPOSAL ARE SUPPORTED BY RESEARCH. A GROWING BODY OF EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE INDICATES THAT THE QUALITY OF TEACHING HAS MORE BEARING ON STUDENT LEARNING THAN MOST OTHER SCHOOL-BASED FACTORS, INCREASING THE URGENCY TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN GOOD TEACHERS.

Studies also consistently find that teachers are most likely to leave the profession during their first few years when they are still learning the craft. For example, the 2008-09 federal survey of teachers reported that **nearly 11 percent of new public school teachers and 9 percent with 1-3 years of experience quit teaching**, compared with **less than 8 percent with 4 – 9 years and 4 percent with 10 – 19 years** (USD OE, 2010). Multiple studies have found that school working conditions strongly influence teachers' decisions to quit or switch schools. One study that interviewed new teachers in depth found that inadequate mentoring and other forms of support were common reasons for leaving (Johnson and Birkeland, 2003). Another study found that novices who got only basic induction programs were only slightly less likely to leave than peers who got none, but those who had well-matched mentors and collegial support were much more likely to stay (Smith and Ingersoll, 2004).

Researchers also have found that **effective schools often have strong principals who promote collegiality and high expectations for achievement**. Lab classrooms could double as training grounds for principals to observe and practice essential skills, such as instructional coaching, and as places where districts could scrutinize aspiring leaders in action to identify the most promising candidates. This would empower districts to cultivate principal pools strategically instead of relying mainly on self-selection, as many now do. In addition, reports and essays about new evaluation systems like the one Colorado is developing for principals and teachers often note the importance of coupling tighter evaluation criteria with ongoing support and increased opportunities for professional growth (e.g. Clifford & Ross, 2012; Mead et al, 2012).

As for the practicality of forging tight alliances between school districts and prep programs to operate lab classrooms, a recent Colorado study found that many university-based prep programs send **disproportionate numbers of graduates** to only a few districts that are either nearby or have characteristics emphasized by the prep program, such as rural or inner-city locations, making strong ties not only practical but advantageous (University of Colorado et al, 2012).

WHAT'S IN IT FOR K-12 DISTRICTS AND PREP PROGRAMS

THE TIPS TEACHERS STRESSED THAT THEIR INITIAL FRUSTRATION WAS NOT WITH THE QUALITY OF THEIR PREPARATION OR THE SCHOOLS WHERE THEY FOUND TEACHING JOBS. IT WAS WITH THE LACK OF COORDINATION AND SUPPORT BETWEEN THE TWO.

What was remarkable was that the six teachers had very different backgrounds – different prep experiences and a range of schools for their first jobs – but all identified the same gap as a major hindrance for new teachers that could – and should – be fixed.

The gap isn't surprising. **K-12 schools and prep programs exist in different systems** with different missions, are bound by different laws and regulations, and were developed through different histories and traditions. True collegiality and interdependence are rare, even between schools and prep programs that share many goals. But both sectors could benefit from the labs. K-12 schools and districts could identify excellent candidates among student teachers and gain a powerful tool for retaining promising novices and veterans. They also could provide professional development tailored to teachers' specific needs, improving their chances of salvaging teachers whose performance is subpar on just a few skills. All these benefits could help districts reduce human resources costs and allow them to provide more stable staffing in schools.

Prep programs would improve access to and collaboration with partner school districts, a bond many consider important for a seamless transition from prep to practice. The elevated collaboration could open doors for research in the lab classrooms and other venues in the district. And alumni who use the labs would find unusual continuity and outreach from their prep programs, improving their chances of professional success and loyalty to their alma mater..

ANY PROPOSAL INVOLVING UNFAMILIAR INNOVATIONS IS LIKELY TO ENCOUNTER CRITICAL QUESTIONS, PARTICULARLY DURING TIGHT ECONOMIC TIMES. THIS IS TRUE EVEN WHEN THE PROPOSAL SEEKS TO IMPROVE THE TEACHING PROFESSION AND COMES AMID CALLS FOR FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES IN THE WAY WE EDUCATE TEACHERS.

The following list notes implementation issues that could arise with the lab classrooms and suggests some responses.

- ▶ **Getting a new group of lab classrooms up and running will involve expenses** for planning time, training, equipment, and other costs. Even with eventual human resources savings likely, Colorado's tight funding environment could make it hard to secure state dollars to create and operate experimental classrooms. Still, pilots represent a cost-effective way to target limited resources to learn about promising and innovative practice. Small districts and/or schools in large districts could form consortia to ensure that lab classrooms are available for teachers in all content areas and in enough different locales to prepare teachers to work with students from an array of backgrounds and in all kinds of school settings (i.e. rural, suburban, urban). In addition, policy makers could encourage support from outside funders to help provide start-up costs.
- ▶ **The level of collaboration between prep programs and K-12 districts** necessary for the labs to run smoothly will require trust-building and negotiation. Major differences in funding and mission between the sectors must be navigated to create legal agreements for joint operation. Demonstrating the value added to both districts and prep programs is vital. Likely steps include:
 - **Each sector will want to review job descriptions of key personnel** – notably master teachers and clinical prep faculty – and adjust requirements such as teaching loads and evaluation criteria if necessary to accommodate the labs' unique work profile. Reassessing expectations through a new lens can lead to a more creative and efficient use of talent and provide practice-based prototypes for other reforms under discussion, such as career ladders.
 - **Each sector also will want to review curricula, scheduling, and other practices** that might need adjustment to accommodate lab classrooms. For example, teacher candidates in prep programs would benefit from the earliest possible exposure to the exemplary practices and coaching in lab classrooms but many programs do not begin field experiences until the junior year. Similarly, both sectors will need to scrutinize the content of prep and induction programs to ensure a smooth transition from training to practice.
- ▶ **Accountability requirements**, including the state's new teacher and principal evaluation system, will need to be reviewed to make sure schools, teachers, and prep programs will not be penalized — and perhaps be rewarded — for participating.
- ▶ **Initially, parents may need to be persuaded** to enroll their children in the experimental classrooms and sign releases for activities such as video, classroom observation, and research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

THE TIPS TEACHERS NOTED THAT LAB CLASSROOMS DON'T NECESSARILY REQUIRE LEGISLATION TO BECOME REALITY. INSTEAD, THEY RECOMMENDED SEVERAL STEPS POLICY MAKERS AND ADMINISTRATORS COULD TAKE TO ENCOURAGE DISTRICTS AND PREP PROGRAMS TO CONSIDER THE IDEA.

- ✓ **Authorize and fund the creation of pilot projects** that include well-designed evaluations to test different models and scientifically measure their effectiveness.
- ✓ **Encourage the use of public and private grants.**
- ✓ **Provide substantial stipends for master teachers** that are tied to tasks required in lab classrooms as well as other assignments requiring elevated responsibility and specialized training, such as evaluating peers under Colorado's new Educator Effectiveness system.
- ✓ **Provide financial incentives for prep faculty** to participate and remove barriers that discourage deep engagement with schools.
- ✓ **Keep the lab classroom vision in mind** when considering new legislation, rules and, programs to avoid provisions that would impede the creation and operation of the classrooms.

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