



Taking Literacy Skill Building to Scale in OST Programs

A Three-Tiered Approach from the Philadelphia Out-of-School Time Literacy and Quality Improvement Initiative

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Research indicates that out-of-school time (OST) programs have the capacity to support literacy skill development and can provide a comfortable environment where youth can build excitement about literacy (Afterschool Alliance, 2015). Providing literacy-rich environments outside the school classroom where children can practice and enhance their literacy skills has been a priority for the City of Philadelphia and the William Penn Foundation.

From 2019 through 2023, with generous funding from the William Penn Foundation, the National

Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) implemented a model of training and support for OST professionals that focused on developing literacy-rich OST environments through training, coaching, and ongoing support in a community of practice (CoP). This article provides an overview of an effective intervention model using a combination of well-practiced professional development strategies that assisted staff to successfully incorporate light-touch literacy¹ practices in their everyday OST program activities.

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¹ *Light-touch literacy* refers to “a way to promote a love of reading among children through practices such as read-aloud, literacy-rich environments, and independent reading” (City of Philadelphia Office of Children and Families, 2020).

Research consistently demonstrates a strong connection between professional development in OST and the benefits experienced by program participants (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Garst et al., 2014; Palmer et al., 2009). OST staff, however, have limited time, resources, and opportunities to participate in regular workshops, training, or courses. Organizations also face challenges with investing in ongoing staff training because of financial limitations, time restrictions, and high turnover. In addition, staff often fail to apply new information from training as the result of a lack of support from colleagues, insufficient time and accountability to implement what they have learned, and the absence of follow-up support (Buher-Kane, et al., 2006). Therefore, to be effective, professional development approaches must consider the specific challenges faced by OST programs and identify realistic and sustainable strategies for supporting ongoing learning in the field. OST educators have long advocated for professional development that includes immediately applicable activities, relevant resources, and content knowledge expansion (Clark et al., 2021).

Model Building

With this understanding of the field in mind, NIOST researchers and coaches implemented a learning model (see Figure 1) combining asynchronous video training, individualized program coaching, and CoPs with ten OST programs in Philadelphia with the goal to enhance staff ability to integrate literacy practices into daily activities for children in kindergarten through third grade. The project team included an expert literacy coach (content expert) who developed training videos and provided related literacy skill-building resources. The model was designed to meet the need for convenient and content-focused training, opportunities for ongoing targeted support, putting strategies into immediate practice, and the chance to learn with peers through shared experiences. Staff participation in video training, coaching, and CoP meetings varied by program, but generally included program directors, site directors, OST coordinators, lead teachers, and group activity leaders.

Video Trainings

The rise of microlearning and online or virtual training options has introduced new opportunities to overcome time and schedule constraints for professional

Figure 1. NIOST Model for Literacy Skill-Building in OST Programs

Video Training	Individualized Coaching	Community of Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five 15-to-20-minute training videos focused on a specific theory and practice released each month. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing 1:1 coaching to support programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly virtual meetings for programs to reflect, learn, plan, obtain resources, and support each other.

development. Microlearning, as described by Nieves for Edutopia (2021), consists of “bite-sized” training opportunities that participants can access at their own pace, at times and locations convenient to them. By mitigating challenges such as time constraints and accessibility, these novel modes of instruction align with the readiness of OST staff to use online or hybrid methods, particularly video-based training (Clark et al., 2021).

Each month, the literacy coach designed and recorded a 15-to-20-minute training video, focusing on a specific light-touch literacy practice. NIOST administered these videos through an online learning management system, allowing completion tracking and making the videos accessible anytime. Participants in some programs watched the videos together as a group; others viewed them individually at their convenience. The videos often featured a role model demonstrating the strategy with children, such as conducting an interactive read-aloud. The practices highlighted in the videos were designed to be implemented immediately by staff. This model allowed program leaders and staff to view the training at their convenience and share the videos widely, even as new staff members onboarded throughout the year. Program participants were asked to try each month’s strategy but ultimately focus on the techniques that worked for them and could be sustained within their daily program practices. Each video was accompanied by resource documents and reflection questions to support program implementation planning.

Individualized Coaching

Like other organizations, OST programs must adapt professional development content to their unique setting and ensure that it reaches all staff, particularly those working directly with youth. The transfer of

knowledge from program leaders to site coordinators, staff, and volunteers requires considerable buy-in, capacity building, and ongoing effort at the site level. Previous research suggests that individualized coaching is one of the most effective ways to support OST program staff and improve program quality (O'Connor et al., 2020). Coaching fosters trust and creates space for reflection, ultimately allowing staff to build self-efficacy (Costa & Garmston, 2003). By overcoming the challenge of sustained professional development, coaching helps transform novel learning into improved practice (Kraft et al., 2018).

NIOST coaches made an initial visit to each program site to understand its structure, staffing, physical space, history, mission, and program practices. Using a literacy skill-building inventory, coaches assessed the specific literacy skill-building practices already in place at each program. Each program received monthly coaching sessions focused on literacy skill-building approaches and practices tailored to their specific needs. Some programs kept a focus on light-touch literacy fundamentals; other programs explored ways to incorporate literacy into other program areas, such as physical activities or transitions.

Follow-up coaching calls were structured around the monthly topic introduced in the training videos, giving programs the support needed to implement new practices when ready. Feedback through coaching calls was also instrumental in helping coaches determine the comparative effectiveness of different strategies and change direction when warranted.

Communities of Practice

OST programs often have staff with a wide range of experience, knowledge, and skills. CoPs offer a valuable opportunity for OST staff to learn together—leveraging these diverse experiences and knowledge to focus on shared goals (Wiedow, 2018). Recent research has found CoPs to be an effective method for building capacity in OST programs (NIOST, 2023). The NIOST team facilitated monthly virtual CoPs, following each month's completion of video training, the implementation of the literacy practice, and the coaching session. These meetings offered programs

a platform to share learnings, challenges, and successes, as well as receive updates from NIOST on other aspects of the initiative. Each CoP followed a consistent format:

- **Warm-Up Activity:** a community-building activity often centered around personal experiences with literacy.
- **Keeping It Real:** one or two programs shared their experiences with implementing light-touch literacy practices.
- **Extending the Learning:** the literacy coach provided further insights or clarification on the monthly literacy topic.
- **Small-Group Discussion:** facilitated breakout groups allowing program leaders to discuss their experiences with the monthly literacy topic.
- **What You Should Know:** a segment during which the NIOST team addressed initiative logistics.

These monthly meetings allowed staff to reflect, learn, plan, and support each other. Many staff found the breakout groups particularly helpful, as they provided a space for creative lesson planning and sharing ideas for delivering literacy skill-building activities. By discussing challenges with other program leaders, staff were able to find solutions to common obstacles. The CoP fostered professional connections and allowed staff to gain new insights, experiment with new strategies shared by their peers,

access creative approaches, avoid common challenges, and continue growing with ongoing support.

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Reflections and Key Takeaways

The three-tiered model was successful in getting literacy practices into programs quickly, building confidence with literacy skill-building with both program leaders and direct service staff, and encouraging programs to set goals and plans for creating literacy-rich environments. Outcome findings are captured in the Philadelphia Out-of-School Time Literacy and Quality Improvement Initiative (NIOST, 2023).

Focus groups with youth participants highlighted the variety of literacy skill-building activities they experienced, such as independent reading, reading with a partner, being read to by staff, writing stories,

journaling, and playing word games (see Marshall, 2024 for additional findings).

Program staff appreciated the approach of integrating literacy skill-building into activities that were already taking place in their programs. The sense of confidence, excitement, interest, and engagement in literacy activities grew for both staff and children. Throughout the process, program leaders were engaged, eager to learn, and willing to try new things in their programs. Based on feedback gathered during CoP meetings as well as coaching calls, this dedication translated into authentic adoption of light-touch literacy practices. Even though a few programs struggled to keep up with trainings and implement practices, overall, programs saw significant positive changes in children's enthusiasm and engagement with literacy activities, including extended read-alouds, paired reading, journaling, collaborative writing, word games, vocabulary scavenger hunts, and book clubs, among others.

Key Takeaways

The following are important lessons learned from this program:

- **Readiness:** A program's existing commitment to ongoing quality improvement coupled with an intentional assessment of current readiness for change were key ingredients toward successful implementations.
- **Clarity of goals:** Staff felt more comfortable implementing light-touch literacy strategies when they understood that the goal of the initiative was to improve attitudes toward and engagement with literacy skill-building versus measuring school-related literacy achievement.
- **Customization:** Programs were given training on the same light-touch literacy practices, but the planning, implementation, and coaching were individualized to meet the needs and goals of each program.
- **Design for sustainability:** Learning activities were all designed with the realities of OST in mind and the goal of sustaining practices despite typical challenges such as staffing turnover, time available for professional development, and creating buy-in at all levels of program staff.

Conclusion

This three-tiered model made it possible for programs to access training on their own timeline, tailor strategies to their specific program, and receive

ongoing support through coaching and peer learning. Together, these components ensured an environment in which programs could experiment, get feedback, and identify practices that worked for them. This approach helped to address the barriers of cost and time that affect a program's capacity for staff training, and worked for programs in a variety of settings with interest in adding or expanding literacy skill-building opportunities for their children and youth.

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