

Transforming the Education Workforce and COVID-19: Learning Teams

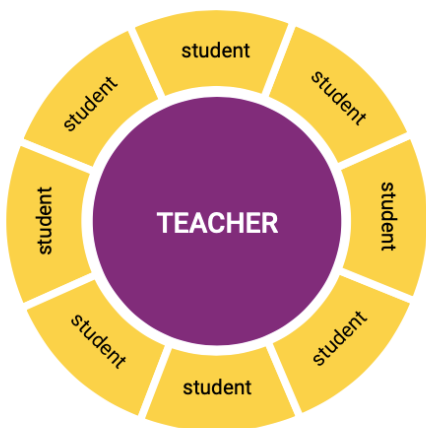
It takes a team to educate a child.

What are learning teams?

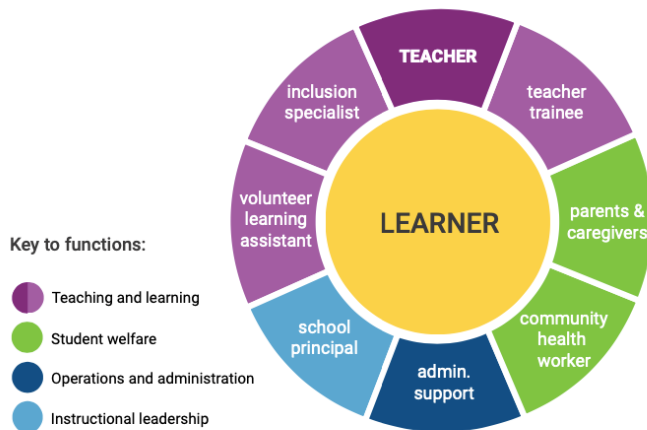
Learning teams are groups of professionals led by teachers that collaborate inside the classroom, and within schools, districts, and systems to ensure learning for all. Learning teams will be different in every context and at every level in the system. They can include qualified teachers, education support personnel, leadership and management, and health and welfare specialists. Learning teams also engage the community to draw on local knowledge and support, especially from parents.

This represents a shift from current class design where teachers tend to be at the center undertaking many different roles to a design where the learners are at the center supported by a teacher-led collaborative team of professionals which collectively leverages a variety of expertise and experience to focus on improving the learning and inclusion of all students, as well as continually learning themselves.

Current class design



Learning team design





COVID-19 and learning teams

The COVID-19 crisis has affected 63 million primary and secondary teachers globally with school closures in over 190 countries. The critical role of teachers has been highlighted during the pandemic, with teachers rapidly mobilizing and innovating to deliver distance learning and communicating health and safety measures to help mitigate spread of the virus. The COVID-19 crisis has also highlighted that teachers cannot work alone. Teachers, supported by school leaders, have been working closely with parents and caregivers, community volunteers, and community health workers to ensure learning continues and no child is left behind. A 'learning team' approach is common in other sectors such as early childhood and health but less so in education despite some evidence to support the benefits of additional staff roles working together including leaders, specialists, learning support roles, and community engagement. Now is the time to assess and collect more evidence on how learning teams can be used more systematically to ensure a learner-centered, resilient, and flexible education system.

Current evidence on the learning team approach

Emerging evidence suggests that supporting teachers and learners with a multidisciplinary team-based approach can be an effective way to improve student learning. Team-based approaches are integral in other sectors (as mentioned above) where they have demonstrated improvements in service delivery, health outcomes, and cost-effectiveness.¹

While few education systems employ a formal learning team approach, differentiated teaching roles – such as teaching assistants or specialist teachers – often exist alongside classroom teachers to support teaching and learning. Where teaching assistants support individual pupils or small groups using a specified approach they have been trained to deliver, there are positive benefits.² Specialist and complementary education support roles have been effective in helping reach those left behind and enable inclusion.³ Even members of the community – for example community workers, trained volunteers, and parents – can provide support in areas such as mother tongue instruction and address barriers to learning.⁴ Teaching at the right level (TaRL) programs led by volunteers and NGO staff have consistently led to gains in learning outcomes.⁵ Evidence from the Complementary Education Program (CBE) in Ghana, which requires community engagement for the selection of local facilitators, has shown significant improvements in learning outcomes when taught in mother tongue with flexible modalities.⁶ School leadership and management roles have been found to be strongly associated with better educational outcomes and district roles have been powerful in supporting teachers and leaders to improve their practice and sustain change.⁷



Benefits of the learning team approach

- **More effective teaching:** A team approach can allow for distributed expertise to support personalized learning; peer collaboration; coaching and mentoring; learning assistants and trainee teachers to support impactful strategies; and leadership focused on instruction – all of which can lead to more effective teaching and learning practices.
- **Increased instructional time:** Tasks such as classroom management and routine or administrative activities can be shifted to support roles in a team approach, allowing teachers more time to focus on instruction.
- **Greater access to specialist expertise:** Gaps in subject and pedagogical expertise can lead to solutions within and potentially across schools, harnessing technology where appropriate.
- **Better support for inclusion:** A team approach can include complementary roles that provide specialist and inclusion expertise, classroom support for children with greatest needs, and better links to the community.
- **On-the-job learning and support:** Planning and teaching in teams, peer collaboration, coaching, and mentoring can drive professional development and self-improvement at the school level.
- **Improved workforce motivation:** A team approach can help establish an environment of trust and support through collaboration and empower the workforce by offering a greater variety of career opportunities that match an individual's current skills and knowledge as well as professional goals.
- **Improved parent and community engagement:** A team approach can include roles that focus on connecting schools with parents and the wider community, leading to resilience during times of fragility and emergency, such as the current COVID-19 crisis.

The key element of a learning team is that different roles work together in a collaborative way to collectively support each learner. This means that the diverse needs of children can be met and teachers can focus on teaching and have greater support (see box above for full list of learning team benefits).

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Learning team responses to COVID-19

The following profiles highlight examples where learning team approaches have been essential in responding to the pandemic.



CAMFED: Young female volunteers provide life skills and mentoring

Across five countries in Africa (Ghana, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe), CAMFED's Learner Guide program partners with Ministries of Education. By the beginning of 2020, the program was active in 2,417 government schools and had reached 832,341 students, the majority in secondary school.

Learner Guides are recent female school graduates who sign up for an 18-month commitment to volunteer in their local schools. They contribute as members of school learning teams by:

- **Identifying girls who have dropped out of school**, or are at risk of doing so, and engaging with school/community authorities to support girls' school attendance and wellbeing;
- **Mentoring girls** to navigate the challenges they encounter on their journey through school;
- **Delivering a life skills curriculum** designed to complement the academic curriculum, through weekly sessions integrated in the school timetable.

Learner Guides bring invaluable local knowledge and trust to their roles, often serving at the schools from which they graduated. Their familiarity with local dialects, practices, and power dynamics helps them serve as school-to-home links, especially in rural contexts where government teachers are rarely from the local communities where they teach. Their role creates a nexus for cross-sectoral local solutions, linking children to appropriate school and local authorities (social welfare, health, education, traditional leaders). Evaluations show increased confidence, questioning of gender norms for boys and girls, and retention and engagement for marginalized girls. Pupils in participating schools also demonstrated increases in math and English scores.

The profound value of having dedicated, trained learning team members embedded within communities has been illuminated by Learner Guides' immediate, agile outreach to children following the COVID-19 school closures. While school systems scrambled to develop and deliver distance learning, Learner Guides stepped in with direct, personalized support for girls struggling to hold onto their education by providing accurate health information, basic supplies, advocacy, connections to remote learning options, and psycho-social assistance. Many Learner Guides resumed life skills sessions by holding in-person gatherings (as allowed with appropriate social distancing), using WhatsApp groups, and broadcasting over community radio. As schools reopen, they are reaching out to the families of girls who are failing to return and identifying their needs.



Pratham: Parents and community volunteers support foundational learning

Pratham's work employs several models that engage the community to support early childhood education and foundational learning at the primary level with demonstrated impact. These include:

- **Mobilizing unpaid community volunteers** who are trained to support Pratham's early childhood work with Anganwadi centers (government-run preschools) by leading developmental activities.
- **Engaging mothers of children** in Pratham's early childhood programs has resulted in mothers taking an active role in their child's education. Through demonstrations and practice sessions with activities, group meetings, and home visits, mothers become familiar with activities and strategies to enhance and support their children's learning. Mothers' groups are formed for every preschool center and meet periodically to have activity sessions.
- **Using an intervention called "Teaching at the Right Level" (TaRL)**, Pratham groups children by ability rather than by grade and teaches them using methods and materials targeted to their ability until they have reached the appropriate level. Pratham mobilizes and trains unpaid community volunteers to support the schools that employ this intervention. A series of randomized evaluations by J-PAL-affiliated researchers has shown that this approach consistently improves learning outcomes and has led to some of the largest learning gains among rigorously evaluated education programs. The intervention has proven to be effective in multiple contexts and evidence has shown that targeted instruction can be successful when delivered by tutors, volunteers, and government teachers, both during the school day or at camps during the summer holidays.¹

This community engagement has been essential during the COVID-19 crisis as volunteers have helped Pratham adapt its content to be compatible with WhatsApp and SMS and supported reaching out to families of the children they have worked with closely over the years. Phone numbers were gathered through community volunteers, children, and their friends and one WhatsApp or one SMS message with activities is sent to these families every day (depending on the phone that the family has). The activities are designed in such a way that readily available household objects and materials serve as support to the parents as they engage with children in a variety of activities. A person who knows the children and parents calls at least once a week to find out how the family is doing and to get feedback on the activities sent on the phone. During the week, children and families often send photos and videos back to the Pratham team to share the fun they are having with the activity.¹



Pratham teams are reaching children in over 11,000 communities across 20 states in India every day. More than 90,000 phone messages are sent out on an average day and Pratham team members make about 18,000 phone calls a day. Pratham estimated that in the month of April they called and spoke to over 50,000 children.

Education Development Trust: Community health workers facilitate distance learning

In Kenya, Education Development Trust (EDT) is working with an extended 'learning team' of community health volunteers, parents, teachers and instructional coaches as part of distance learning support for marginalized girls during the crisis. The UKAid-funded Girls' Education Challenge Transition program, *Wasichana Wetu Wafaulu (Let our Girls Succeed)* supports learning outcomes and transition to secondary school for 70,000 disadvantaged girls.

In rural areas in Kenya, one of the key challenges during the COVID crisis has been ensuring learning continuity in the most isolated communities, especially where girls cannot attend school, lack access to mobile resources, and – in some cases – cannot receive radio broadcasts.

The innovative 'learning team' model ensures that the most vulnerable girls in remote areas continue to get teacher feedback on their work:

- **Recent student assessment data is used to design targeted tutorials** on topics students struggle with most – a compressed curriculum to accelerate learning gains in the areas of challenge.
- **A network of community health volunteers delivers hard copies to households** as part of their health circuits, as well as picking up intelligence on any risks or challenges that girls are facing to feed back to program staff.
- **Parents or literate adults use marking guides to provide the first round of feedback** to students in the household.
- **Health volunteers deliver the transcripts back to schools**, and a team of two dedicated teachers and one coach per school cluster moderates the marked transcripts, which are returned to students in the next delivery cycle.
- **Head teachers receive regular reports on student learning** to build readiness for school reopening and enable them to plan for effective teaching in the months ahead.

EDT is currently undertaking rapid research into the role that community health workers are playing to learn lessons from the process. Key challenges so far include identifying and supporting appropriate literate adults in the household as the line between informal and formal



learning becomes blurred. Approaches to help parents make the most of informal learning are being trialed – for example, through storytelling which can help students develop conceptual thinking and comprehension skills. Spot checks are being undertaken to verify whether the completed tutorials are the girls’ own work. Initial findings show that community health workers play a key role in supporting learning continuity: 91% of them are encouraging girls to access the radio/TV lessons, 67% are encouraging parents to allow the girls access to lessons, and 78% are undertaking household visits to motivate girls to continue to study privately with the tutorials delivered.

Learning teams beyond COVID-19

The pandemic is forcing countries to strategize how to accelerate the transformation of education systems to be more resilient and flexible. The education workforce is key to this transformation. Countries should seize this opportunity as they plan for the reopening of schools. To build more robust capacity post-COVID, education systems should look at their workforce holistically and leverage the existing expertise and experience of their leaders, support staff, and communities in a learning team approach that can facilitate quality education for all children. For further evidence and examples of learning teams, see the [Transforming the Education Workforce](#) report.

¹D'Amour, Danielle, Marcela Ferrada-Videla, Leticia San Martin Rodríguez, and Marie-Dominique Beaulieu. 2009. "The conceptual basis for interprofessional collaboration: Core concepts and theoretical frameworks." *Journal of Interprofessional Care* 19 (1):116-31.

²Education Endowment Fund. 2019. "Teaching and Learning Toolkit: Teaching assistants." London: Education Endowment Fund.

³Cajkler, Wasy and Geoff Tennant, 2009. "Teaching assistants and pupils' academic and social engagement in mainstream schools: insights from systematic literature reviews." *International Journal of Emotional Education* 1 (2): 71-90; Ebersold S.2003. "Inclusion and mainstream education: an equal cooperation system." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 18: 89-107.

⁴Deforges, Charles with Alberto Abouchaar. 2003. "The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review." London: Department for Education and Skills.

⁵TaRL. "TaRL Instructors: Who are TaRL instructors and how are they equipped to effectively implement TaRL?" <https://www.teachingattherightlevel.org/the-tarl-approach/implementation-teams/>

⁶Carter, E., Sabates, R., Rose, P., Akyeampong, K. (2020). Sustaining literacy from Mother Tongue Instruction in Complementary Education into Official Language of Instruction in Government Schools in Ghana *International Journal of Educational Development*. 76. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102195>

⁷Leithwood, Kenneth, Christopher Day, Pam Sammons, Alma Harris and David Hopkins. 2008. "Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership." *School Leadership and Management* 28 (1): 27-42; Marzano, R. J., T. Waters, and B.A. McNulty. 2005. "School leadership that works: From research to results." Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; Leithwood, K. 2013. *Strong districts & their leadership*. Toronto, Ontario: Ontario Institute of Education Leadership.