

Teacher Academy Cohort 5, Professional Learning of NEPF Standards and Indicators

In response to statewide efforts to improve instruction through the Nevada Educator Performance Framework (NEPF), the Northeastern Nevada Regional Professional Development Program (NNRPDP) offered Teacher Academy Cohort 5 (2018-2019), to teachers in all six northern districts that comprise the NNRPDP region. Teacher Academy Cohort 5 focused on the following instructional practice standards and accompanying nineteen indicators:

Standard 1: New Learning Is Connected to Prior Learning and Experience

Standard 2: Learning Tasks Have High Demand for Diverse Learners

Standard 3: Students Engage in Meaning-Making through Discourse and Other Strategies

Standard 4: Students Engage in Metacognitive Activity to Increase Understanding of and Responsibility for Their Own Learning

Standard 5: Assessment Is Integrated into Instruction

Led by NNRPDP coordinators, educators were supported in their knowledge and implementation of the NEPF through participation in Teacher Academy Cohort 5. Critical Friends Group (CFG) was an integral extension of Teacher Academy Cohort 5. The CFGs, small collaborative groups, supported group members in implementing content knowledge learned in Teacher Academy Cohort 5 through inquiry, professional reading, and analyzing student work.

The overarching outcome of Teacher Academy Cohort 5 and CFGs was to improve instructional and pedagogical practices through the implementation of the NEPF's high-leverage instructional standards. Teacher Academy Cohort 5 focused on the first two goals of NEPF, 1) foster student learning and growth and 2) improve educators' instructional practices (NDE: NEPF FAQ, 2018).

Instructional Context

In the spring of 2018, K-12 educators in the NNRPDP's designated service area were invited to apply to participate in Teacher Academy Cohort 5. Unlike previous cohorts requiring participant selection through principal nominations, teachers from Eureka, Humboldt, Elko, and Lander school districts applied and were carefully selected based on application responses. Also, unlike previous cohorts, Teacher Academy Cohort 5 invited alumni teachers to apply.

Teacher Academy Cohort 5 included 36 teachers from 21 schools, representing grade levels Kindergarten to high school (see Table X). Alumni members made up 31% of the total cohort. Additionally, Teacher Academy Cohort 5 included unique perspectives from a diverse population (i.e., K-5 librarian, 5-6 music teacher, Read by Grade 3 learning strategist, and high school Advanced Placement (AP) teachers). In addition, participants represented both self-contained and departmentalized contexts with teachers from small departments and solo teachers who are the department. Teachers traveled as far as 150 miles one way to attend the full day sessions and to collaborate with colleagues.

Table _: Teacher Academy Cohort 5 Participants

District	Number of Schools	Number of Teachers	K-5	6-8	9-12
Elko	17	30	20	3	7
Eureka	1	1	1	0	0
Humboldt	1	2	2	0	0
Lander	2	3	3	0	0
Total	21	36	26	3	7

The demographics of students taught by Teacher Academy Cohort 5 educators were diverse as well. They included a range of multicultural populations (i.e., Native American, Asian, Hispanic, Black, and White). Also included are English language learners, special education students, and many students who qualify for free or reduced lunch/breakfast. Most common Teacher Academy Cohort 5 individual teaching contexts included at least one, and often more, students in each of the above subcategories.

Initial Data and Planning

NNRPDP launched the first cohort of Teacher Academy in 2014-15 in response to the passage of AB222 which outlined the expectation of a statewide performance evaluation system for teachers and school administrators. Nevada Department of Education tasked the three Nevada Regional Professional Development Programs to administer trainings on the NEPF. The depth of the framework and the limited number of teachers who could be supported in each year's Teacher Academy led to continued cohorts in subsequent years. Teacher Academy 2018-19 was Cohort 5, serving veteran teachers as well as teachers in the first few years of their careers. Responses to application questions revealed the need to understand the theoretical underpinnings of the NEPF as well as practical instructional and pedagogical strategies aligning to the NEPF. From alumni participants, the opportunity to join a second time indicated an overwhelming sense of value from participating in a previous year. For example,

Why do you want to participate in Teacher Academy Cohort 5?

I would like to participate in the Teacher Academy because I believe it will provide an incredible opportunity to learn and grow alongside other educators who also seek to challenge themselves in new ways. This current school year, several colleagues participated in Teacher Academy and I enjoyed listening to their experiences in Teacher Academy, and was inspired by examples they shared about how they were integrating new strategies and approaches to teaching into their classrooms. I desire a similar learning experience, and would deeply value an opportunity to be challenged, professionally and personally, by expanding my understanding of NEPF and then putting

that "understanding" into practice in my classroom. I believe this would not only increase student learning, but also, student engagement and motivation in my classroom. I also believe this would help me to be a better educator, colleague and member of my school community (Cohort 5 first time applicant).

My last experience with Teachers Academy was VERY worthwhile and I would be delighted to have another opportunity to participate. This program has helped me to fall back in love with learning and realize that I teach to pass that on to my students. Learning strategies aligned to the NEPF helped me be a better teacher. All teachers need the Teachers Academy experience (Cohort 5 Alumni applicant)!

Although the NNRPDP provides a variety of NEPF learning opportunities across the region, Teacher Academy Cohort 5 is the only intense and ongoing across-region collaborative professional learning experience. Combined total Teacher Academy participation in cohorts 1, 2, 3, and 4 (n=175) represents 17% of the teachers in the NNRPDP region. Continued professional learning focused on NEPF is crucial for the remaining 83% of the region's teachers.

Guided by research in effective professional development (Guskey, 2002; Murray, 2014), the Teacher Academy Cohort 5 learning design included whole-group, full-day instruction of a single NEPF standard and accompanying indicators with further support through small-group, half-day CFGs. Diverse CFG groupings were based on teacher location, grade level, and subject areas taught. Also, given the NNRPDP's vast service area and unique travel challenges for many participants, virtual attendance became an option for some half-day CFG members.

Learning Design

Focusing on one specific NEPF standard and its indicators, NNRPDP coordinators planned content details for each full-day Teacher Academy Cohort 5 as well as content for the accompanying half-day CFG. Peer review feedback guided planning of content delivery, participant engagement, and interaction, reading assignments, intentional questioning, and reflection prompts.

Teacher Academy Cohort 5 launched with an orientation day in August 2018, prior to the start of the school year. Teachers arrived energized and motivated about this unique professional learning opportunity. Applying for Teacher Academy Cohort 5, rather than being nominated by their principals as in previous years, ensured that every participant self-selected this elite opportunity for their professional learning.

Full-Day Teacher Academy Cohort 5

Following orientation, Teacher Academy Cohort 5 met as a whole group for five full-day content trainings, each day targeting one specific NEPF standard. This targeted, sustained professional development extended throughout the school year, beginning in September 2018 and concluding in February 2019. This deep dive into each standard gave teachers an opportunity to reflect on their new learning and plan instructional implementation. Each day began with learning outcomes and success criteria. Learning included discussion of the research supporting

each standard and indicators with examples of aligned instructional strategies and pedagogy. In addition, teacher participants used the NEPF performance levels to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies and tasks modeled by the NNRPDP coordinators. Careful planning ensured participants had opportunities to experience the standards and indicators first hand throughout the day.

Half-Day Critical Friends Group

In addition to the full-day professional learning, teachers deepened their NEPF knowledge by participating in CFGs. These half-day professional groups, limited to five or six teachers per CFG, met in between whole day Teacher Academy Cohort 5 days to provide additional implementation support. CFGs also met for two hours in the afternoon as a conclusion of the full-day Teacher Academy Cohort 5. CFG work included planning implementation mini-inquiries, discussing student work samples and professional readings, and reflection writing, all as a means to support each other as professionals. The members of the CFG’s developed a close relationship that allowed this support to happen. Finally, National School Reform Faculty and School Reform Initiative protocols provided a structure for CFGs. Table _ details the three components of CFG.

Table _: Components of CFG

Components of CFG	Description and purpose	Protocols
Inquiry	Teacher inquiry provided support for teachers to make changes in practice as they planned and implemented a mini inquiry based on learning from each Teacher Academy. Using “The Cycle of Inquiry” protocol, teachers provided encouragement and feedback, meeting the collaborative, and collegial outcomes of a CFG.	Cycle of Inquiry A Change in Practice
Student work analysis	Analyze and learn from student work, looking for connections between students’ learning and teacher instructional practices, curriculum, assessment or other factors of teaching and learning.	Looking at Student Thinking Guidelines for Learning from Student Work
Professional reading	Carefully selected journal articles provided teachers content, new perspectives, strategies, and ideas. Using protocols to process text ensured collaborative construction of meaning, opportunities to clarify and expand thinking, as well as a structure to examine assumptions and beliefs while gaining a deeper understanding of content.	Text Rendering Block Party The Final Word Save the Last Word for Me

Measurement

Multiple qualitative and quantitative measures were used to assess educators' instructional and pedagogical practices aligned to NEPF standards and indicators: a) NNRPDP evaluations, b) participant reflections, c) teacher inquiries, and d) teacher self-reported affective benefits.

NNRPDP Evaluation

The NNRPDP evaluation consists of seven self-assessment statements which are rated using a Likert scale, ranging from *not at all* (one) to *a great extent* (5). Participants completed this evaluation at the end of every full-day Teacher Academy Cohort 5 and half-day CFG.

Teacher Reflections

Participants completed an open-ended reflection after every full-day Teacher Academy Cohort 5 and half-day CFG. As a support, reflection prompts from the National School Reform Faculty were provided. NNRPDP coordinators reviewed these reflections and considered the feedback when debriefing each Teacher Academy Cohort 5 and planning for the next session.

At the conclusion of Teacher Academy Cohort 5, participants synthesized their understanding of how the NEPF standards are connected using the Stronger and Clearer Each Time (SCET) structured thinking routine (Zwier, 2011).

Teacher Inquiries

Teacher inquiries provided anecdotal evidence of participant change in classroom practice based on the NEPF standards and indicators. Through the use of protocols and subsequent inquiry results, teachers reflected on improving student learning.

Affective Benefits

Participants considered affective benefits from each full-day Teacher Academy Cohort 5 session and ranked them in order of most beneficial to them personally.

Results and Discussion

Results from the NNRPDP evaluation demonstrate teachers' self-assessment of learning progress as a result of Teacher Academy Cohort 5. Table _ shows each statement and corresponding score based on a five point Likert scale. The score is an average of the evaluations given after each day of learning in Teacher Academy Cohort 5.

Table _: RPDP State Approved Evaluation

RPDP State Approved Evaluation (5 point scale)	Average Score
My learning today will affect students' learning.	4.54
My learning today has prompted me to change my practice.	4.28
This training will help me meet the needs of diverse student populations	4.45
I will use the knowledge and skills from this training in my classroom or professional duties	4.72
The training will improve my teaching skills	4.58
This training added to my knowledge of standards and/or my skills in teaching subject matter content	4.55
The training provided opportunities for interactions and reflections	4.80
The training matched my needs	4.63

Teacher Reflections

Additional evidence related to instructional and pedagogical strategies required to meet the NEPF standards and indicators came from teacher reflection statements. Their statements demonstrate the impact of Teacher Academy Cohort 5:

- *Today's session was incredible. It helped me more clearly identify the difference between discussion and discourse; I walked away with so many great strategies and better understanding of what productive discourse looks, sounds and feel like as well as how to provide multiple opportunities for student to make meaning and explain how and what they are learning with regards to the content.*
- *As always I feel amazing leaving a TA/CFG day! I love the inquiry process, student work, share, and the real and meaningful discussion our group has.*
- *My ah ha was what does it mean to have assessment integrated into instruction. It means my students thinking is visible. This is how we are able to make immediate adaptations.*
- *The inquiry process is a great thing to help me make my teaching more meaningful.*

The Stronger and Clearer Each Time (SCET) thinking routine solidified participants' understanding of how the NEPF standards were connected, as portrayed in this example:

- *The NEPF standards were created with a purposefully structured flow. They are interconnected with a focus on students that encourages them to collaborate and connect in a teacher provided safe environment that promotes highest possible learning opportunities.*

These teacher reflections and SCET summaries identify critical knowledge and learning necessary for professional growth.

Teacher Inquiries

The following vignette provides evidence of one teacher's personal learning story as she implemented her inquiry with a class of 5th grade students. This anecdotal evidence suggests a transformation in teacher instruction and formative assessment based on teacher reflection and student actions.

Vignette:

This professional learning inquiry took place in an intermediate, 5th- and 6th-grade, school general music class setting. Students attend a general music class once per week for forty minutes...students' primary learning goals were to be able to read and play simple and complex melodies, with a steady heartbeat, and accurate rhythm pattern, on each string of the acoustic guitar.

This ...inquiry was derived from a previous professional learning inquiry "gone astray" for NEPF Standard 4 to support students engaging in metacognitive activity to "increase understanding of and responsibility for their own learning" in combination with NEPF Standard 5, in which "assessment is integrated into instruction" The original...inquiry ... revealed that the majority of 6th-grade students could not identify the learning goals for the current learning target -- singing and playing Rock Around the Clock -- which made it impossible for them to monitor their learning or create a learning plan no matter what metacognitive strategy was utilized.

After this discouraging, yet necessary awakening to the reality of what students did, and did not, understand about the course learning goals, I determined that students needed a "vision" for the overarching learning goals, as well as a "visual tool" that identified learning "steps along the way" to achieving the learning goals....[I designed] a Learning Continuum Chart (LCC) for 5th- and 6th-grade students ... learning goals centered around playing the acoustic guitar.

[The] learning goal was that students would be able to play three songs using the notes E, F and G on the first string of the guitar, with each song increasing in complexity. With that learning goal in mind, each specific skill needed to achieve the goal was broken down into steps, which became the basis of the progression. The visual chart created reflected the overall skill, represented by an arrow, and each step towards the learning goal progressed from left to right on the arrow.

The first LCC included a progression chart for accurate placement of the fingers to play the notes, and a progression chart for performance of the song. After the initial implementation, I noticed that students required additional separation of the skills for performance LCC progression -- students could sometimes play the melodic pattern accurately, but not play with a steady heartbeat or accurate rhythm pattern. These observations led to the creation of two separate LCC -- one focused on accurate

performance of the melodic pattern, and one focused on accurate performance of the rhythmic pattern.

During the second phase of implementation, I integrated the revised and updated LCC [and] feedback from students...showed that the majority of students could now clearly identify what they already knew/could do, what they needed to work on, and what their next step would be in the learning process. Students could also clearly match their assessment of their own learning with my assessment of their learning.

The LCC became the “anchor” for each music class, wherein students began the class with a partner-discussion of where they were in the learning process on each skill progression chart, and what specific steps they needed to take to move forward in the learning process, and what possibilities existed to take each skill beyond the steps listed on the LCC. Ultimately, students went beyond taking ownership of their learning just within the music class goals, and began brainstorming ways to extend their learning beyond the goals of the class by identifying ways ...each skill could be challenged further e.g. “If I can use the notes E, F and G to play a song, then what would it look like to create my own song using those notes?” It was incredible to watch students extend their own understandings of the learning goals, and their own role in the learning process in this way!

This professional learning inquiry ultimately led to the development and integration of LCC for each new grade, and music unit ...Students’ familiarity with the LCC has allowed them to truly own their learning, and to challenge and extend their learning in ways that I could never have imagined!

In sum, the development and integration of the LCC dramatically changed my approach to teaching (instructional practice).

Additional statements reflecting teachers’ inquiry provides further evidence of a change in practice based on learning the NEPF standards and indicators during Teacher Academy Cohort 5:

- I have tried to place more of the final understanding and knowledge base on my students. I have tried to keep my questions and assessments more open ended. Rather than giving my students a direct standards-based quiz/assessment before moving on, I am trying to keep it more open such as.... show me what you understand about _____. Or, How will I know you understand the _____?*
- How would using the strategies 2 minutes talk, Hot Seat and First Word on consecutive days’ impact grammar usage, specifically adjectives.*
- What would happen if I build my curriculum around a pattern/theme of social, economics, and political connecting through the lens of micro to macro?*

- *If I use a strategy (think, pair, share) to discuss text features in non-fiction, rather than direct instruction, could it speed up the instructional process and possibly add more rigor to my practice?*

Affective Benefits

Teachers reported secondary benefits stemming from Teacher Academy Cohort 5 having a profound impact on teaching and learning that extend beyond the professional development experience. Four major benefits surfaced in the teacher reflections:

- *More reflective of my practices*
- *Professional interactions*
- *More confident to share*
- *Rejuvenating*

Over half of the teachers chose “more reflective of my practice” as the most beneficial affective aspect of Teacher Academy Cohort 5, followed by professional interactions, confidence to share, and rejuvenating. While each affective aspect of Teacher Academy Cohort 5 is important, “more reflective of my practice” is closely aligned with the NEPF goals of Teacher Academy Cohort 5 to increase student learning and growth and improve educators’ instructional practices.

Conclusion

Teacher Academy Cohort 5 improved instructional and pedagogical practices through the implementation of the NEPF high-leverage instructional standards, evidenced by multiple measures. Results suggest a correlation between teachers’ understanding of the NEPF standards and indicators and their confidence to implement aligned high-quality instructional pedagogy. The culmination of evidence strongly suggests teachers’ effectiveness and responsiveness to the needs and backgrounds of their students. In addition, being more reflective, as well as the other affective benefits, enhanced teachers’ experience during Teacher Academy Cohort 5, potentially transferring to many areas of professional practice.

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