Chapter 6
The PDSA Overhaul: Approaching Reform in Teacher Candidate Support

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how faculty in a large, rural teacher preparation program adopted a model for change built upon the tenets of improvement science and the PDSA cycle. Using PDSA in teacher preparation allows programs to pilot the innovations and test refinements quickly. Data are collected and analyzed as the innovations are implemented so changes can be made on an ongoing basis and the innovations can become increasingly effective. A case study surrounding critical reform areas for teacher preparation will be described to show how elementary education faculty moved through multiple PDSA cycles while reforming teacher candidate support in the year-long student teaching experience. The considerations, challenges, and opportunities for using the PDSA cycle in teacher preparation programs will also be presented. This case study can serve as a model for other teacher preparation programs looking to use disciplined inquiry to drive program improvement.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes how faculty in a large rural teacher preparation program adopted a model built upon the tenets of improvement science for change. The chapter will explore program improvement using the Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) cycle.

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A case study surrounding critical reform areas for teacher preparation will be described to illustrate how elementary education faculty moved through multiple PDSA cycles while reforming teacher candidate support in a year-long student teaching experience. The considerations, challenges, and opportunities for using the PDSA cycle in teacher preparation programs will be presented. This case study can serve as a model for other teacher preparation programs looking to use disciplined inquiry to drive program improvement.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

The need for program improvement is influenced by external factors changing the educational landscape. Since 2011, the state of North Carolina has linked student achievement data with preparation programs as part of program effectiveness reports. Shared publicly through an electronic dashboard, North Carolina is one of only ten states reporting value-added measures (VAM), yielding data on the effectiveness of individual teachers. Having access to this data inevitably increases attention to teacher preparation programs regarding their performance, which has both positive and negative consequences. Spotlighting the effectiveness of the program impacts enrollment and eventually resources. As a result, teacher preparation programs must examine their data and invest in the innovations that yield high student learning outcomes and either revise or abandon ineffective innovations.

Overall, enrollment in teacher preparation programs is decreasing across the country. The United States Department of Education (2015) reported a 30% drop in enrollment, creating teacher shortages in all areas, including elementary. In response, legislators at the national level are seeking alternative routes to teacher licensure. For instance, a provision in the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) allows non-university teacher preparation programs to become alternative routes to teacher licensure. In the future, teacher candidates may choose from even more alternative routes, further impacting enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs. This increased attention on the student learning outcomes of graduates, decreasing enrollments, and alternative routes into the profession has created a challenging environment for teacher preparation programs.

Teacher preparation programs may be tempted to see these external factors as roadblocks and delay innovating until these factors diminish or become more stable. While the external factors certainly increase the difficulties inherent in program improvement, approaching them as a catalyst with the intent of developing a coordinated set of curricular and clinical reforms is advisable. Even those teacher preparation programs that decide to make changes find that systemic program changes take time to implement. Creating a system to continuously study innovations in a rapid cycle that will increase the pace of change within the system is imperative.

IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE IN TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Given such a context with varying external factors to reform and transform, it can be difficult for programs to get started with program reform. Research is happening, but changes in teacher preparation occur slowly. Expectations for teacher preparation programs are outpacing the changes (Bryk, 2015), and the gap keeps expanding. Traditional, isolated research completed by individual faculty members does not always lead to the comprehensive change needed. In the past, the roles of researcher and prac-