

Producing Lifelong Learners

The Penn Literacy Network Continues a Legacy

by Juliana Rosati

Reading, writing, and communication are at the core of a student's ability to learn any subject. Yet too often, schools are not equipped to teach these skills in ways that research has proven effective. For over thirty-six years, the Penn Literacy Network (PLN) at Penn GSE has worked to change this through practical professional development to help preK–12 educators improve their methods of teaching literacy. The program has worked with more than 36,000 educators since its founding.

“We’re changing a generation,” says PLN Executive Director Bonnie Botel-Sheppard, GED’76, GRD’81. “When I think of the number of children we ultimately serve through the educators we touch, it’s overwhelming.”

Interactive Learning Experiences for Educators

Schools and districts partner with PLN to provide onsite credit and noncredit professional development and coaching for faculty and administrators. This work is grounded in the research-based approach of the renowned late Penn GSE professor Morton Botel, ED’46, GED’48, GR’53, who created “Four Lenses of Learning” and “Five Reading, Writing, and Talking Processes” that underpin PLN’s course offerings. The goal is to help teams of educators use literacy practices in multiple subject areas, including English, math, social studies, science, and the arts, so that students become more productive and reflective learners. During the courses, PLN works collaboratively with educators. “We ask them to bring their own materials to the course sessions so that they can construct their own version of what literacy looks like in the classroom,” says Dr. Botel-Sheppard, who is Morton Botel’s daughter. PLN’s coaching likewise helps teachers incorporate new approaches into their everyday work. “Our coaches work closely with teachers to observe and support their instruction and provide feedback,” says PLN Associate Director Lara Paparo, GED’06. “To have someone in the classroom to work with them is a powerful thing.”

A Growing Network

PLN has expanded its reach carefully over time, seeking to work with schools on a long-term basis. Having launched originally in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, today PLN also

works in Delaware, New York, Vermont, Florida, California, Ireland, Scotland, China, and India. Alumni of GSE and Penn have played a valuable role in increasing PLN’s capacity both regionally and nationally. Penn GSE alumna Tara Novell, GED’97, a public school teacher in Tampa, Florida, has worked as a PLN facilitator and helped PLN connect with educational venues in her area. “My collaboration with PLN allows me to remain connected to GSE and the Penn community,” Novell says. “I have found it incredibly rewarding. Though I have participated in numerous professional development opportunities, I have yet to experience one as rich and relevant as PLN.”

Skills for Families in Need

Taking its work beyond schools to realize one of Botel-Sheppard’s dreams, PLN recently established the Family Success Coaching Initiative to address how poverty and homelessness affect children’s opportunities to learn. Through a pilot program, “Good Eating/Good Reading,” PLN brought its literacy workshops and coaching to homeless women and their children at the People’s Emergency Center in West Philadelphia. There, PLN taught literacy skills and healthy eating habits simultaneously through books about nutrition. “We provided activities for parents and children to do together to jump-start children’s learning,” says Botel-Sheppard. “Parents are building their literacy skills as well and certainly their confidence.” The goal is to instill habits and skills that will help families move out of poverty. Botel-Sheppard hopes to expand the program across the city and the nation. “We want to provide a sustainable model for homeless shelters and other family-focused organizations,” she says.

Though PLN reaches thousands of people each year, Botel-Sheppard says she thinks about the program’s impact in terms of individuals. “What is one child in one teacher’s classroom experiencing?” she asks. “One mom who has been homeless—what does she gain? That’s what I focus on.”

Visit www.gse.upenn.edu/pln for more information about PLN’s programs. To learn more about becoming a local PLN facilitator, contact gsepennlit@pobox.upenn.edu or 215-898-1984.