

# TEACHER TALENT TOOLBOX

## Teacher Development Through Deliberate Practice

*"Deliberate practice involves more than just repetition; it requires activities that are designed to improve performance, challenge the learner, and provide feedback." - Robert J. Marzano*

Teachers require focused practice and feedback to hone their techniques. This deliberate practice leads to instructional improvement when teachers are on their own in their classrooms. Current research indicates that mastering any new skill requires the same cycle of deliberate practice – whether sinking a free-throw, performing heart surgery, or checking for student understanding. Dr. K. Anders Ericsson defines deliberate practice as “activities designed...for the sole purpose of effectively improving *specific* aspects of an individual's performance.” Implementing deliberate practice techniques is one of the most effective ways for school leaders to support teachers in developing their instructional skills.

### 1) SET PRACTICE GOALS AND ACTION STEPS

The goal of deliberate practice is to create automaticity in the execution of a skill or technique. In the classroom, this translates to a teacher's ability to implement a skill with minimal intellectual effort, i.e. redirecting a student with a well-rehearsed hand gesture without losing the pace of instruction. To begin, select an area for practice (for example: “crafting strong lesson objectives” or “establishing classroom routines”) and identify one or two targeted action steps for immediate classroom use. These action steps should be concrete, clear, and immediately actionable – “bite-sized” – and focus on only one routine. For the practice areas above, sample action steps might be “introducing objectives at the start of each lesson” or “efficiently passing out papers.” When determining an appropriate action step for practice, consider:

- Is this skill or technique measurable, specific, and targeted?
- Is this skill or technique the quickest and most effective way to make this change happen?
- Could the change positively affect other areas of teaching and learning?
- Can the teacher make this change within one week— and can I measure if the teacher made the change?

Engage teachers in identifying the area of practice, and establish the purpose behind the selection. After each conversation with a coach or leader, teachers should have an explicit understanding of what successful implementation will look like as they improve – and why the new practice and actions are important.

### 2) MODEL AND REHEARSE

Teachers, like students, learn through action, experience, and repetition. After determining action steps, give teachers an opportunity to practice the changes using some of the following strategies:

- Offer examples of excellent practice (for example, by providing model lesson plans and materials, or opportunities for teachers to observe a coach or master teacher performing the action step with students).
- Role-play ways to implement the change with the teacher – demonstrate how to implement the action, and offer a chance for the teacher to practice. Action steps can also be rehearsed during professional development with groups of teachers.
- Support teachers during their first attempt at the new skill. For example, create a set of lesson objectives with the teacher, or be present as they test a new technique in class.

### 3) OFFER CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK

Give teachers multiple opportunities to practice new techniques, obtain feedback from coaches and peers, and immediately practice again. Many schools incorporate these ongoing practice and feedback cycles into grade or subject-level meetings or professional development offerings such as Professional Learning Communities, Inquiry Groups, and Action Research groups.

### 4) REFLECT AND REPEAT

Deliberate practice occurs in the following cycle of reflection, action, feedback, and improvement:

*Select a practice goal —> Model and rehearse —> Implement action steps —> Obtain feedback from coaches and peers —> Implement feedback —> Repeat —> —> Assess progress*

Track each teacher's progression through these cycles by recording practice areas, action steps, progress, and new goals. Reflection is a crucial aspect of keeping practice focused and purposeful. Provide teachers with multiple opportunities to debrief and discuss their growth with coaches, peers, and in practice journals.