

# HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

## Supporting Teacher Training to Improve Student Learning



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July 2013 | An Excerpt

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### INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

According to Harvard University Professor Heather C. Hill, the “professional development ‘system’ for teachers is, by all accounts, broken.” One likely reason for this view held by Professor Hill and others is the reliance on short-term, episodic, and disconnected professional learning for teachers—the kinds of training programs that are unlikely to positively influence teaching and improve student achievement. It takes sustained investment of time into teacher training to change instruction and improve classroom outcomes. A review of research on the effect of professional development on increased student learning found that programs had to include more than 14 hours of professional development for student learning to be affected. None of this is lost on the educators on the receiving end of professional development. “Perhaps the most damning indictment of PD [professional development] is that even teachers themselves regard it with contempt,” writes Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute.

Yet the education industry—including federal, state, and local education policymakers, plus all those who work to deliver teaching and learning to students—has recently made a sizable bet on the power of professional support to change teaching and boost student learning. From federally supported and locally enacted educator-evaluation systems to the rollout

of the Common Core State Standards, the nascent changes to education all require educators to learn new and better ways to do their jobs. Almost every presentation or speech or conversation about educational reform inevitably includes some reference to the amount of support and training teachers and administrators will need in order to make key reforms real and effective in classrooms.

Just how critical is professional learning for teachers to educational improvement?

In many ways professional development is the link between the design and implementation of education reforms and the ultimate success of reform efforts in schools. The evaluation of educator effectiveness based on student test scores and classroom observation, for example, has the potential to drive instructional improvement and promises to reveal important aspects of classroom performance and success. That information may, in some cases, be used as the basis for critical personnel decisions such as whether to dismiss an educator or increase his or her salary. But in order to have the impact on student learning that supporters of reform intend, evaluation needs to be accompanied by insightful feedback about teacher performance that leads to a strategic set of professional-learning activities to help educators improve their practice.

### THE FEATURES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING LINKED TO IMPROVEMENT

According to the research, high-quality professional-learning opportunities for teachers contain the following five characteristics:

- Aligns with school goals, state and district standards and assessments, and other professional-learning activities
- Focuses on core content and modeling of teaching strategies for the content

- Includes opportunities for active learning of new teaching strategies
- Provides the chance for teachers to collaborate
- Includes follow-up and continuous feedback

The above characteristics indicate that a professional-learning activity meshes with the work of teaching. But the exact structure of professional learning might differ depending on

the needs of the teacher, the school, and the district. What follows are brief descriptions of the structures and features of professional development that researchers have found to be related to instructional improvement.

### Sustained and regular activities

Researchers and practitioners note that when the traditional programs of professional development—usually single-event, so-called “drive-by” interventions— are replaced by longer-term designs, there is a greater chance that teachers will improve instruction. For example, in the survey of 1,300 studies of professional learning mentioned previously, the one study with the most powerful effect on raising student achievement had teachers participating in the activity for about 60 hours over six months.

### Job embedded

This term has been included in many descriptions of high-quality professional development, often without a definition or explanation of what the term means in relation to the work of teaching. According to the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, or NCCTQ, professional development is job embedded when it is:

- Grounded in day-to-day teaching practice, and is designed to enhance teachers’ instructional practices around content
- Integrated into the workday, and part of a continuous improvement cycle
- Intended to improve student learning
- Directly connected to learning and application in daily practice
- Some examples of job-embedded professional learning include:
  - » A teacher working with a teaching coach to plan and execute a lesson
  - » A group of teachers meeting to analyze student test scores and discuss ways to change instruction and share important resources
  - » An instructional facilitator conducting a model lesson for a group of teachers working on a particular instructional practice
  - » A teacher sending a video clip of her teaching to an off-site coach and they discuss it in an online conference and talk about what could be improved

These are job-embedded activities because they are authentically related to the work of the teachers involved and are informed by what the teachers are doing and need to do. These are not the only possible forms that job-embedded professional learning can take, but they provide illustrations of how it might look.

### Collaboration among teachers about improving teaching

One of many challenges facing teachers is the lack of opportunity to learn from colleagues, particularly in a setting where there is a structure and protocol for revealing excellent teaching practices and having a group of professionals discuss and learn from them. Many of the professional-learning designs that show improvements in teaching and learning include some kind of regular collaboration among teachers in a school or across grade levels—sometimes with an instructional leader—to work on better strategies and practices for teaching.

### Coaching

Coaching is often part of professional-development programs and the research that does exist suggests that, like other features listed here, it works in conjunction with other aspects of professional development. If coaching is longer in duration, if teachers collaborate around what they learn from coaching, if they get to observe instruction and then talk about the observation with a coach, then it is more likely to be effective. This feature hinges on the expertise of the coach to do this work. If the coach is not an expert in teaching teachers, then it is unlikely that coaching will be effective.

### Use technology wisely

Video can be a useful part of professional development, but like the other features mentioned in this report, it appears to be best leveraged as part of a program that includes other features as well.

According to researchers, one or more of the above features are almost always part of high-quality professional development, regardless of the subject area; grade level; and location of the classroom, school, or background of the teacher or students. School context should be a key consideration as high-quality professional learning opportunities are put into place. Simply put, context matters, as it can and will affect the success of the program, for better or worse. It should be obvious that a coach who is an expert on beginning reading, for example, is probably not the best fit for a middle school where students who are struggling with the comprehension of complex text challenge teachers.

The need for some mechanisms or activities to improve the quality of teaching, which in turn leads to greater student achievement, has always been present although at times ignored. But at this moment it’s all but impossible not to hear the plea that high-quality professional development be part of widespread school reforms now underway. These reforms—teacher-evaluation reforms and the implementation of Common Core State Standards—hinge on the theory that better instruction will lead to better student achievement. Yet the same shortfalls that plague traditional professional development could end up challenging the success of these reforms.

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND TEACHER EVALUATION: THE PERFECT MATCH

New models of rigorous teacher-evaluation systems have become central to some of the nation's most ambitious school-reform efforts in the past four years. As of 2012, 37 states and the District of Columbia had revised their teacher-evaluation policies to include both student achievement and observations of classroom instruction as components of a teacher's rating. Another key feature of these revised evaluation systems is that rather than being rated on a binary scale—effective versus ineffective—teachers were now being rated on a four- or sometimes a five-point scale.

While one goal of the new evaluation systems is to garner information about teachers for human-capital management decisions—such as identifying and dismissing teachers who are ineffective—an important aspect of the system is to specify strengths and weaknesses in instruction and help teachers improve their professional practice. This second goal may be more powerful and critical than the first, at least in terms of truly improving the quality of teaching and overall education for all children. Heather C. Hill and Corinne Herlihy, both of Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, in a set of recommendations for policymakers stress that, "The reform of the teacher evaluation system will see its chief success not through carrots and sticks, but through providing teachers with information about their performance and the means for improvement."

Many of the teacher-evaluation systems being designed and implemented by states include provisions requiring that teachers and evaluators meet to talk about the evaluation. In general, the observation portion of teacher evaluation should follow this format: An observer—often a school administrator—uses a rubric with categories of teaching practices to rate the classroom instruction observed and afterward meets with the teacher to talk about what was observed.

The goal of the teacher-evaluator conferences, then, is to provide teachers with careful feedback about their instruction so they can consider how to improve—in essence, a personalized professional-development opportunity. The conferences should be followed by a number of suggestions for specific activities and programs that will help teachers improve in areas where their instructional practice is weak. The point is, the evaluation is not simply a summation of a teacher's work, but rather is a jumping-off point for specific and sequenced improvement.

### **Making sure evaluation leads to instructional improvement**

As the new evaluation systems are rolled out in many states, educators are still learning how to use the post-observation conferences to deliver feedback, support, and personalized professional-learning opportunities to teachers. The early

reports suggest that this is an area that deserves attention from education policymakers and practitioners.

There are a number of proposed solutions to the problem of weak post-observation conferences and the lack of appropriate, personalized, robust professional learning opportunities tied to evaluation data, including the following:

- **Make sure that there is a shared understanding about the evaluation rubric before assessment and observation takes place.** Teachers and evaluators should understand what instructional practices are included on the rubric, how they will be viewed and assessed, and what constitutes excellent teaching. A shared understanding of instruction is a first step in sparking rich and purposeful conversations about improving teaching and learning.
- **Invest in professional development for administrators and other evaluators so they can deliver the kind of feedback teachers need and deserve.** If teacher and evaluator conferences post-observation lead to conversations about teaching practice, and if teachers trust the knowledge and wisdom of the evaluator, it's likely that the evaluation system will be part of a change in culture that leads to continuous improvement.
- **Use data to form groups of teachers to work together on particular skills or content.** In Illinois a number of districts are using data from the entire teacher workforce to find patterns of strengths and weaknesses, and are then using that information to create professional-learning communities for teachers based on those needs.
- **Help evaluators know what kinds of professional-learning opportunities are available so they can have resources available for teachers at post-observation conferences.** This could mean the district or state education offices provide lists of high-quality providers of professional-learning activities with research based evidence of effectiveness. Or it could mean that states and districts create video libraries of exemplary classroom instruction paired with materials to help teachers improve their practice. This may include identifying excellent teachers whose classrooms are open to other teachers to watch instruction.

The larger goal of evaluation, beyond determining a teacher's effectiveness, is to improve teaching that leads to better learning for all students and to build a system of continuous instructional improvement. Using the data from evaluations to create more powerful systems for professional learning is an integral component of such a system.

## TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement

### Evaluation and professional learning in a single system

TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement brings together teacher evaluation and professional learning into a cohesive and coherent system to support instructional improvement. TAP, which is managed by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, is used in about a dozen states and in several hundred school districts. The core of the TAP System is a complex rubric of 19 indicators complete with descriptors that outline what constitutes good teaching practices. These indicators drive teacher evaluations and the professional learning that accompanies it.

Teachers at TAP schools are observed and evaluated at least three times a year with the goal of delivering precise feedback to teachers in specific areas that might be ripe for refinement and identifying areas of strength. In addition to administrators, master and mentor teachers also conduct a significant number of evaluations, which embeds the work of instructional improvement with the teacher workforce in the school. TAP requires that schools implement career ladders for teachers with varied steps and responsibilities, and different pay scales—giving teachers opportunities to take on new roles and tasks.

Augmenting the feedback that teachers receive from evaluations, teachers work in groups called clusters that are arranged around different aspects of a teacher's assignment. A school might, for example, have a grade-level cluster of teachers and it also might have a cluster of teachers organized by subject. These clusters, which meet during scheduled common prep time, are led by master teachers and concentrate on strategies related to student need and the 19 indicators on the rubric that will improve instruction and student learning.

TAP's parent organization offers data management, as well as intensive training and support for districts as they implement the complicated and tightly aligned evaluation and professional-learning system, along with the differentiated career paths and compensation programs. TAP-based teacher-quality improvement projects in districts have been awarded more than \$500 million since 2006 through the federal Teacher Incentive Fund, a competitive grant program run by the U.S. Department of Education.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING TO TEACH THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

The Common Core State Standards are as powerful as teacher-evaluation policies in their potential to reshape education in the United States. The standards, developed by a coalition of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, are based on best practices in education nationally and internationally, and are designed to ensure that U.S. students are ready for college, careers, and to compete in the global economy. For all primary and secondary grades, the Common Core State Standards includes dramatic shifts in the focus of student learning and student work.

Yet that opportunity comes with enormous challenges as well. If the ultimate intention of the Common Core State Standards is to raise the level of learning and achievement among students, then the interim goal must be to improve the quality of instruction to help students boost achievement. Moreover, changing the behavior and professional practice of teachers will require intensive and high-quality opportunities

for professional learning—with a strong focus on content that engages teachers to learn, is sustained over time, and involves collaboration and feedback from colleagues. Such professional development for teachers will be an essential element of the success of the policy. Thus far it appears that all but one of the 45 states and District of Columbia that have adopted the standards have some kind of plan for teacher learning embedded in their Common Core State Standards efforts.

What makes efforts to train and support teachers in the Common Core State Standards so important is that the effect of the standards on student learning depends entirely on teachers' ability to improve instruction to help students achieve. This is why the Common Core State Standards should be considered a classroom-level school reform. The policymakers and advocates who have called for and supported the adoption of the standards have repeatedly said that support and training for teachers are critical components of the standards' implementation.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It's no secret that there is potential to improve the quality of teaching through the utilization of high-quality professional development. We have abundant evidence that practitioners in other professions—nurses, engineers, and pilots—as well as those in the skilled trades—plumbers, hairdressers, and chefs—learn and improve their skills by collaborating with colleagues and sharing knowledge about best practices. As a nation we invest a lot of money in this belief—by some estimates as much as \$20 billion annually in total federal, state, and local funds for educator professional development. What's more, we're counting on this investment paying off and playing an important role in the success of sweeping educational reforms. Yet we're still learning how to ensure that professional development delivers the results we desire.

Why exactly is this the case? Why aren't the powerful systems necessary to improve teaching already in place? The fragmented organization of education is one impediment. The way our public education system is currently structured leaves it to each school district to come up with its own plan to improve teaching since there is no single, agreed-upon set of resources, activities, and systems readily available to all educators. Moreover, there are no sets of teaching practices that have been identified and agreed upon as essential and fundamental for all teachers to know, understand, and master. As a result, administrators who choose or design professional learning for teachers may have few readily available resources or standards for determining what is the best and most effective template to follow. Fortunately, this situation could change for the better when states begin to implement the Common Core State Standards and educators have the opportunity to share materials and best practices using a common framework with common goals.

Another hurdle facing educators tasked with designing and implementing professional-learning activities at the local level is being able to know what programs have evidence of demonstrated effectiveness. What further complicates the work of selecting professional-learning activities is that there are no features or programs that always work in every setting. Rather, professional development is as complex as teaching. To put it another way, it is teaching, but once removed from the classroom. Professional development is about teaching teachers. High-quality professional learning does so with an eye on using what teachers already know and building on that expertise to improve their teaching—it is not about pouring content into teachers and then expecting them to instantly use what they learn. Just as students need to learn new content and skills over many days and many lessons, teachers also benefit from sustained professional learning that builds over time.

Having made the argument for more critical evaluation, that is not to say that improving teaching is a complete mystery. There are some structures that we know need to be in place so strong

professional learning can take root in schools and districts as part of the regular, continuous work of teaching, including:

- **Establishing a strong evaluation system that identifies strengths and weaknesses in teaching practice.** If a teacher evaluation leads to productive conferences about teaching, collaboration among teachers to learn and improve their work in classrooms, and ultimately allows expert teachers to support and train their peers, then evaluation would be a success as a professional-learning opportunity. Putting such a system in place is key to improving professional learning for teachers.
- **Encouraging administrators in schools, districts, and state education agencies to take steps to become experts in changing standards—specifically in relation to the Common Core State Standards and new student assessments—and making sure teachers are aware of these.** This first step is to make sure all educators know when standards and assessments change so they can be prepared.
- **Supporting administrators in schools, districts, and state education agencies in the creation and collection of resources about new standards and assessments to help teachers maintain and improve classroom instruction.** While teachers work each day to improve student learning, administrators elsewhere in the educational system can support that work by making sure every teacher has whatever she or he needs to offer excellent instruction. Those resources range from giving teachers access to video equipment to record their instruction to share with peers to ensuring that every district's instructional coaching staff fully supports high-quality teaching, which is a key component of professional learning and growth.
- **Adapting staffing, the organization of the school day, and the other basic structures of schools to support better teaching.** The most capable teachers might be able to share their expertise by spending part of their time coaching other teachers, which means that it might be important to reconsider staffing structures. Or perhaps groups of teachers might be able to learn from each other or from a coach or expert if they had time to meet about student data and instructional practices. To get that time it might be necessary to reconfigure the school day to free up teachers to collaborate. There are other basic structures in schools that could be redesigned to improve teaching and learning.

Given what we want and expect our teachers to be able to do—turn out students who are college and career ready—it is critical that we give them the tools and support that will allow them to learn, improve, and do their jobs better even as we hold them accountable for their work.