



High-Quality Professional Development for Teachers

Supporting Teacher Training to Improve Student Learning

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Introduction and summary

Professional development in education has gotten a bad reputation, and for good reason. Everyone on all sides of the education reform and improvement debate agrees that what most teachers receive as professional opportunities to learn are thin, sporadic, and of little use when it comes to improving teaching. According to Harvard University Professor Heather C. Hill, the “professional development ‘system’ for teachers is, by all accounts, broken.”¹

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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.

State education leaders in many places know this and have specifically included direction for following up evaluation with professional learning in their public descriptions of educator evaluation. Connecticut lists it as a design principle for its “Education Evaluation and Development” system, stating on its website to “Encourage aligned professional development, coaching, and feedback to support teacher growth.”⁵ Colorado lists “professional development” as a necessary support to its educator-effectiveness system,⁶ and the District of Columbia includes educator evaluation and professional development and supports on its webpage titled “Ensuring Teacher Success.”⁷

Meanwhile, 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards, which set out academic expectations for student achievement that have been called rigorous when compared to most standards currently in place in the states.⁸ Now, almost three years after the standards were introduced, and about a year away from implementation in most states, educators and policymakers are thinking not only about the demands these new standards will place on students; they are also grappling with the challenges teachers face as the standards inform classroom instruction.⁹ Report after report mentions the need for teacher training and instructional support as an essential part of the success of the Common Core State Standards.¹⁰

But even if these reforms were not in place, the work of improving teacher training and support would still pose a key element of any improvement plan for education. Effective teaching is an activity that can be learned, and the notion that someone is born to teach is simply inaccurate.¹¹ Improving the practice of teaching—learning to teach better—does not necessarily come from teaching longer.

Experience does not lead directly to better instruction.¹² Enhancing skills, knowing strategies, and understanding content and how to unpack that content in ways that students can understand—these are aspects of teaching that can be learned and improved upon.

Some districts, schools, and teachers are designing, implementing, and experiencing professional-learning opportunities that have the power to improve teaching and enhance student learning. Some states are working on strategies to support teacher learning and that spread the culture of continual improvement to all classrooms. These states aren't alone in this effort; a number of other organizations are creating different kinds of resources to help improve teaching practice—some in relation to the Common Core State Standards and some in conjunction with educator evaluation. These projects and initiatives are not easy: Teachers may need different supports or activities to improve their practice since what works in one school might not work in another. Moreover, all teaching learning and development activities must be integrated with the day-to-day work of teaching and the standards guiding that work.

Given the need to improve the quality of instruction and the lack of clarity and shared knowledge about what systems and activities improve teaching, this is the right time to take stock of what is known; what kinds of activities are currently underway; and what will be needed going forward as reforms roll through the education system. As is often the case in education, successful systems and strategies emerge in many places around the country but these bright spots too often remain hidden to the majority of educational organizations because of geographic distance and the decentralized structure of schooling.

This paper is the first of a periodic series of reports and briefs by the Center for American Progress looking at professional learning—what states and districts are doing that is working, and what policies are in place to support effective teacher-training activities. The work of improving instruction to help students achieve deserves our attention, particularly now when it is an important part of powerful reforms. This report is an attempt to map the landscape of professional learning to prompt ideas that can grow from the foundation—albeit small—that is already in place around professional learning.

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