

INSIGHT REPORT

The Evolution of Professional Development to Professional Learning

August 2016

The Evolution of Professional Development to Professional Learning

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Foreword

Professional development is a topic of ongoing interest to education companies—in part to explore possible market opportunities, but also to better understand the current needs and key issues of interest to their customers. Educators are facing increased pressure to improve teaching practices, to implement individualized instructional approaches, and to increase student learning and achievement outcomes. Effective professional development is essential in order to address these complex goals.

The types of professional development provided to teachers and administrators in U.S. schools are evolving (some might even say in a state of flux), and this is an opportune time for companies that are part of the education industry to take an active role in the changes that are underway. For example, one recent trend is that teachers are taking PD into their own hands (tweet-chats, un-conferences) and other types of informal, self-directed learning. While PD was once solidly in the purview of district administrators, there are new openings for third-party product and service providers to become partners in developing some of these emerging PD models.

This report outlines the shape and size of the PD market (\$18 billion annually), reviews the relevant research about teacher satisfaction and the effectiveness of the current state of professional development offerings, and describes changing and new PD models. It explores specific areas of opportunities for external vendors—including online platforms, micro-credentials, and technology-assisted personalized learning for both students and their teachers.

The Evolution of Professional Development to Professional Learning was written by Annie Galvin Teich, who has worked for more than 25 years in K-12 publishing with broad experience in audience development, sales, and content marketing. She works with education companies to develop reports, case studies, white papers, newsletters, eBooks, articles, and webinars.

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Introduction and Overview

There is abundant research telling us that PreK-12 teachers want better professional development to help their students become better learners. There also is a common assumption that we know what good professional development looks like, but that teachers simply do not have enough time for PD or that we just have not figured out the best ways to do it at scale. Not necessarily.

What we do know is that we spend massive amounts of money on professional development. Districts spend an average of \$18,000 per teacher each year. The largest 50 school districts are estimated to spend \$8 billion annually on professional development. Up to 10% of the school year is spent on professional development days—as much as 19 full school days per year.¹

Yet, despite all the effort, teachers do not find the investment of time worthwhile, and it does not seem to help them significantly improve their teaching practice, as this report will examine. Even though many teachers have still not mastered critical skills, research indicates that many districts are not effectively helping teachers understand how to improve. In order to better understand this problem, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation commissioned a comprehensive survey of teachers and other educators. The findings, published in [Teachers Know Best: Teachers' Views on Professional Development](#), highlight a disparity between what “decision makers intend and the professional learning teachers actually experience.”

“Large majorities of teachers do not believe that professional development is helping them prepare for the changing nature of their jobs, including using technology and digital learning tools, analyzing student data to differentiate instruction, and implementing ... standards.”²

Hayes Mizell, Distinguished Senior Fellow at [Learning Forward](#), wrote in [Why Professional Development Matters](#): “Research confirms that the most important factor contributing to a student’s success in school is the quality of teaching.” Mizell maintains that when teachers receive professional development that is focused on specific skills that address students’ learning challenges, both student learning and achievement increase.³

Similarly, a recent report from The New Teacher Project, [The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development](#), poses a critical question about whether we actually know what helps teachers get better. This report goes on to assert that it is a mistake to think that we know how to help teachers improve, and that we can raise the instructional bar by applying that knowledge in a wider, more systematic way. *The Mirage* authors report that they “...expected to find evidence that teachers who improve share experiences or mindsets that set them apart from teachers who don’t improve. We found that it’s just not that simple.”

This paper will examine a range of research on professional learning to identify:

- What we actually know about what works and what doesn’t
- How to redefine our goals and capacities
- The way forward to more effective instruction that improves student achievement

Professional development is evolving along several important dimensions. As the title of this paper suggests, the emphasis is increasingly intended to improve teachers' professional *learning*, rather than simply adding up the hours spent in PD activities. And just as educators are embracing the concept of personalized or individual learning for their students, teacher PD is becoming more personalized—involving active learning techniques and focused on an individual teacher's specific interests and needs. For example, two professional learning formats that are gaining traction in schools are coaching and collaboration. Additionally, there are indications that teacher leadership programs have the potential to make an impact on student achievement. Other promising changes that have gained supporters include virtual communities, micro-credentials, and video—to name just a few.

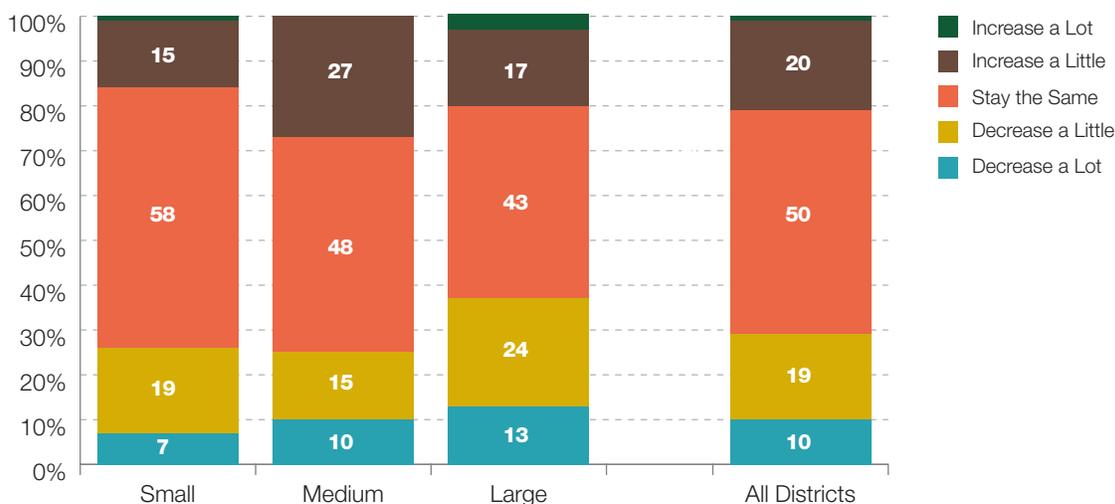
Trends and Changes in Spending

The Problem Is Not Lack of Money

The Gates Foundation report, *Teachers Know Best*, notes that the U.S. spends \$18 billion annually on professional development.⁴ This includes approximately \$2.5 billion from the federal Title IIA program, with the remainder coming from local funding sources.

And according to survey research conducted for MDR's *State of the K-12 Market 2015*, curriculum directors from 50% of school districts expected PD spending to remain at about the same level for 2015-2016. One in five expected increases, and less than a third of districts projected declines in PD spending.⁵

Figure 1: Professional Development Budget Outlook by District Size



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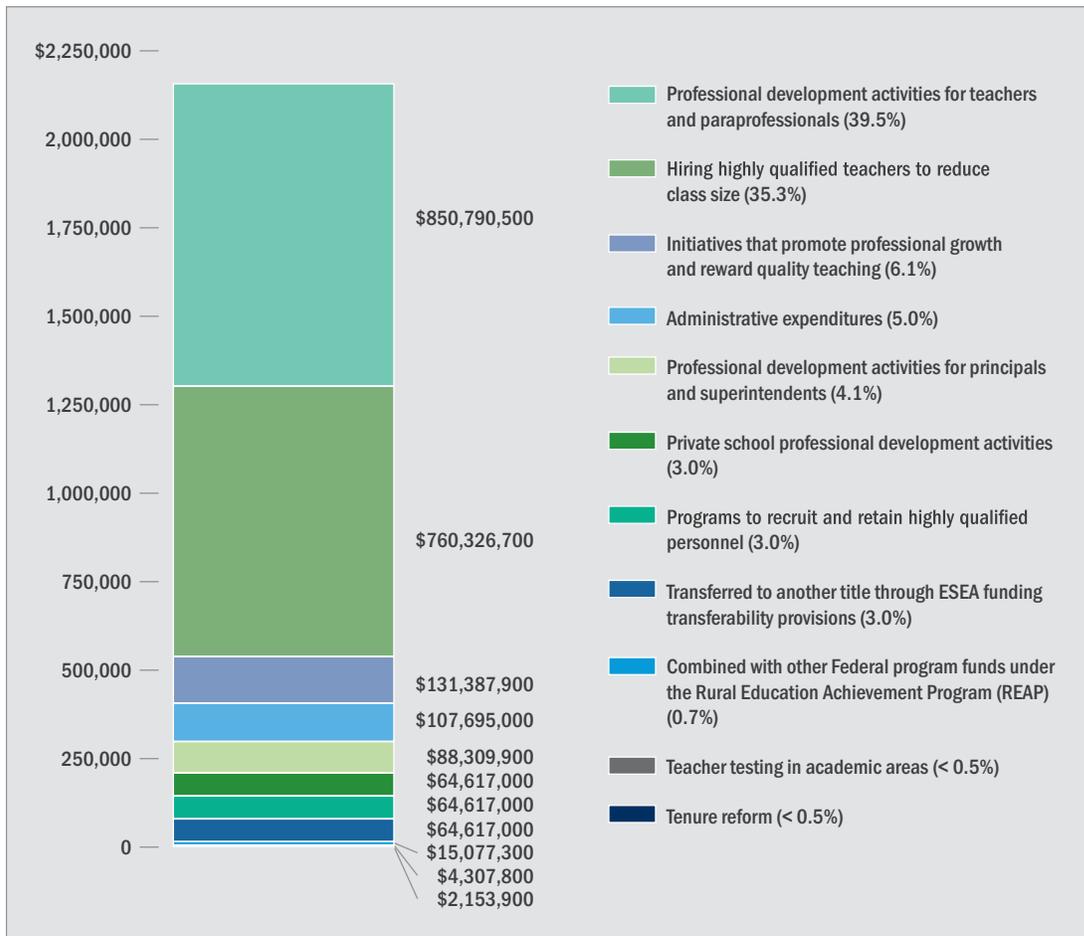
Source: *State of the K-12 Market 2015, Part I: K-12 Education and the Education Industry*, "Professional Development," MDR

Title IIA funding, part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), is the primary and only dedicated federal investment in teacher and principal quality. Specifically, the purpose of Title IIA is to: (1) increase student academic achievement through strategies such as improving teacher and principal quality and increasing the number of highly qualified teachers in the classroom

and highly qualified principals and assistant principals in schools; and (2) hold local educational agencies and schools accountable for improvements in student academic achievement [Sec. 2101]. While the funding through this program is also applied to reducing class size and a variety of other undertakings to increase educator quality, the majority of Title IIA dollars are spent on professional development.

The following chart shows how school districts allocated their Title IIA funds in 2013-2014.

Figure 2: How Districts Allocate Their Title 11, Part A Funds



Source: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/teacherqual/2013-14leasurveybrief.doc> and *Title II, Part A: Don't Scrap It, Don't Dilute It, FIX IT*, Education Policy Center at American Institutes for Research.

To put the money into perspective, Congress authorized \$2.85 billion for Title IIA in 2002-2003. For 2013-2014, the authorization was only \$2.25 billion—a 40% cut in dollars adjusted for inflation. Even though Title IIA represents less than two percent of federal education spending, it is a significant amount of money.

Why Is Title IIA Falling Short?

The primary problem is that these funds are largely directed to individual professional development, which has not been a successful strategy. The remedy is to direct these dollars toward systemic performance improvement so that school leaders can create a closer connection between professional development and student achievement.

Also, Title IIA depends on an old definition of professional development that does not require states to spend the money on activities that have been shown to directly improve student learning. Perhaps providing some incentives or guidance for organizational learning in how to manage professional development might help create leverage.

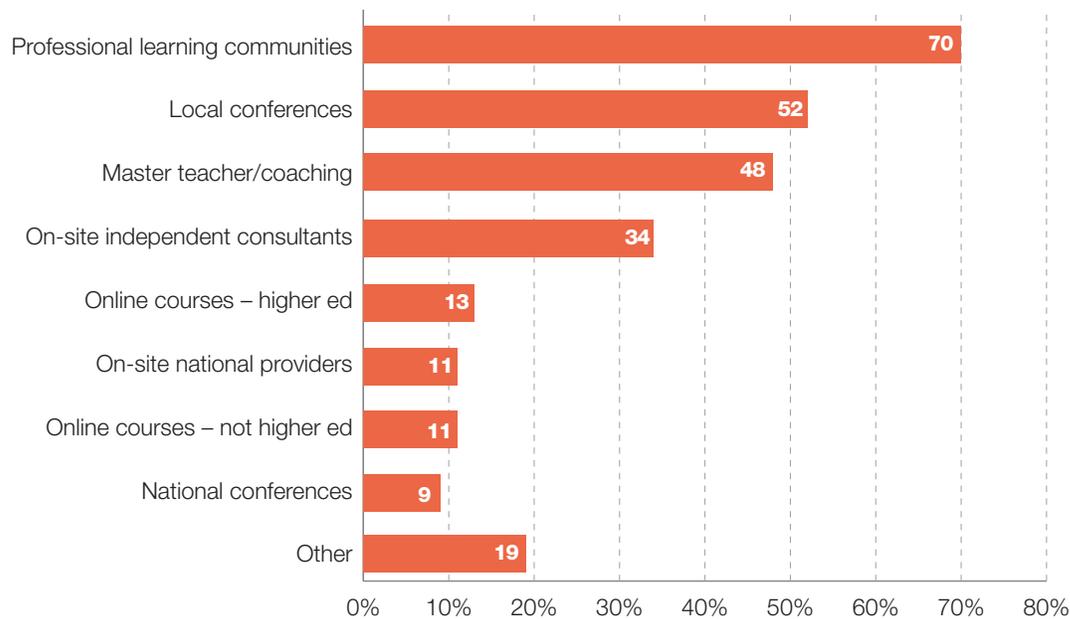
In *Title II, Part A: Don't Scrap It, Don't Dilute It, FIX IT*, Jane Coggshall, a principal researcher at the Education Policy Center at American Institutes for Research recommends a re-engineering of Title IIA to focus on a model of continuous performance improvement that more directly impacts student achievement outcomes. Importantly, she notes that performance improvement "...requires activities and resources that help teachers and leaders continuously get better at teaching and leading—both individually and collectively—from one day to the next."⁶

Where Does the Money Go?

The majority of professional development spending represents internal investments by school districts themselves. The Gates Foundation study found that, of the \$18 billion spent annually on professional development, only \$3 billion is delivered by external providers. With school districts creating and managing most of their own professional development, sometimes in partnership with local organizations, the professional development marketplace has been fragmented and localized. With the exception of online professional development resources and platforms, independent consultants have provided the lion share of professional development services to school districts across the country.

MDR's survey of curriculum directors explored the different types of PD that were frequently used by districts. When this question was last asked in 2013, professional learning communities and local conferences were most frequently used by more than half of districts.

Figure 3: Types of Professional Development Used Frequently, 2013



EdNET Insight Survey © 2014, Market Data Retrieval.

Source: *State of the K-12 Market 2013, Part IV: Educational Services*, “Professional Development,” MDR

In [*Teaching the Teachers: Effective Professional Development in an Era of High Stakes Accountability*](#), researcher Allison Gulamhussein notes that one of the challenges in identifying how much money is spent on professional development is that “school districts often place professional development spending into instructional support, a category that also includes spending for curriculum development, instructional supervision, computer technology and media, and other library costs.” Gulamhussein also found in a 2012 survey from The School Superintendent’s Association (AASA) that professional development is often the first item to be cut when budgets are tight, “with 69.4% of school districts reporting they would be reducing these funds in the face of budget shortfalls.”⁷

Impact of Effective Professional Development

The impact of professional development is felt in a number of ways. “When teachers are performing at capacity, the result is increased student achievement and matriculation and fewer dropouts,” says a Project RED report. When teachers are meeting student needs, districts can generate savings in remedial interventions and special education referrals, among other cost savings.⁸

Professional learning that builds internal capacity of teaching teams has a profound financial impact. Project RED notes that when teachers learn and grow together, the need for external consultants declines. Blending online and face-to-face professional development is not only cost-effective, but can yield systemic results as teachers learn from each other how to drive academic achievement.

Perceptions on Impact Important to Understanding ROI

A widely disseminated finding from a 2009 research study, *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*, found that, while 90% of teachers reported participating in formal professional development, most of them felt that it was totally useless (Darling-Hammond et al.). This indicates a significant disconnect between what teachers were being offered (primarily workshops) and its impact on changing teacher practice to increase student learning.

“The one-time workshop assumes the only challenge facing teachers is a lack of knowledge of effective teaching practices and when that knowledge gap is corrected, teachers will then be able to change,” says Gulamhussein. However, “research finds otherwise. It turns out teachers’ greatest challenge comes when they attempt to implement newly learned methods into the classroom.”⁹

Learning Forward’s Mizell asserts that, “professional development is not effective unless it causes teachers to improve their instruction or causes administrators to become better school leaders.” In other words, if professional learning does not positively impact student achievement, it has not done its job.

Gulamhussein shares some of the factors that impact professional development efficacy:

- Inexperienced teachers are still disproportionately concentrated in high-need schools (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013).
- Hard-to-staff schools remain hard to staff (Tirozzi, Carbonaro, & Winters, 2014).
- Each year about 20,000 of the nation’s 98,000 schools experience a change in leadership (Goldring & Taie, 2014).
- Achievement gaps by race and economics have shrunk only marginally (National Assessment of Education Progress [NAEP], n.d. Reardon, Greenberg, Kalogrides, Shores, & Valention, 2013).

Gulamhussein acknowledges that, “by and large, U.S. teachers have been receiving professional development that is superficial, short-lived, and incoherent.” Only one in five elementary teachers reported participating in professional development that resulted in actual practice for which the teachers received specific feedback.

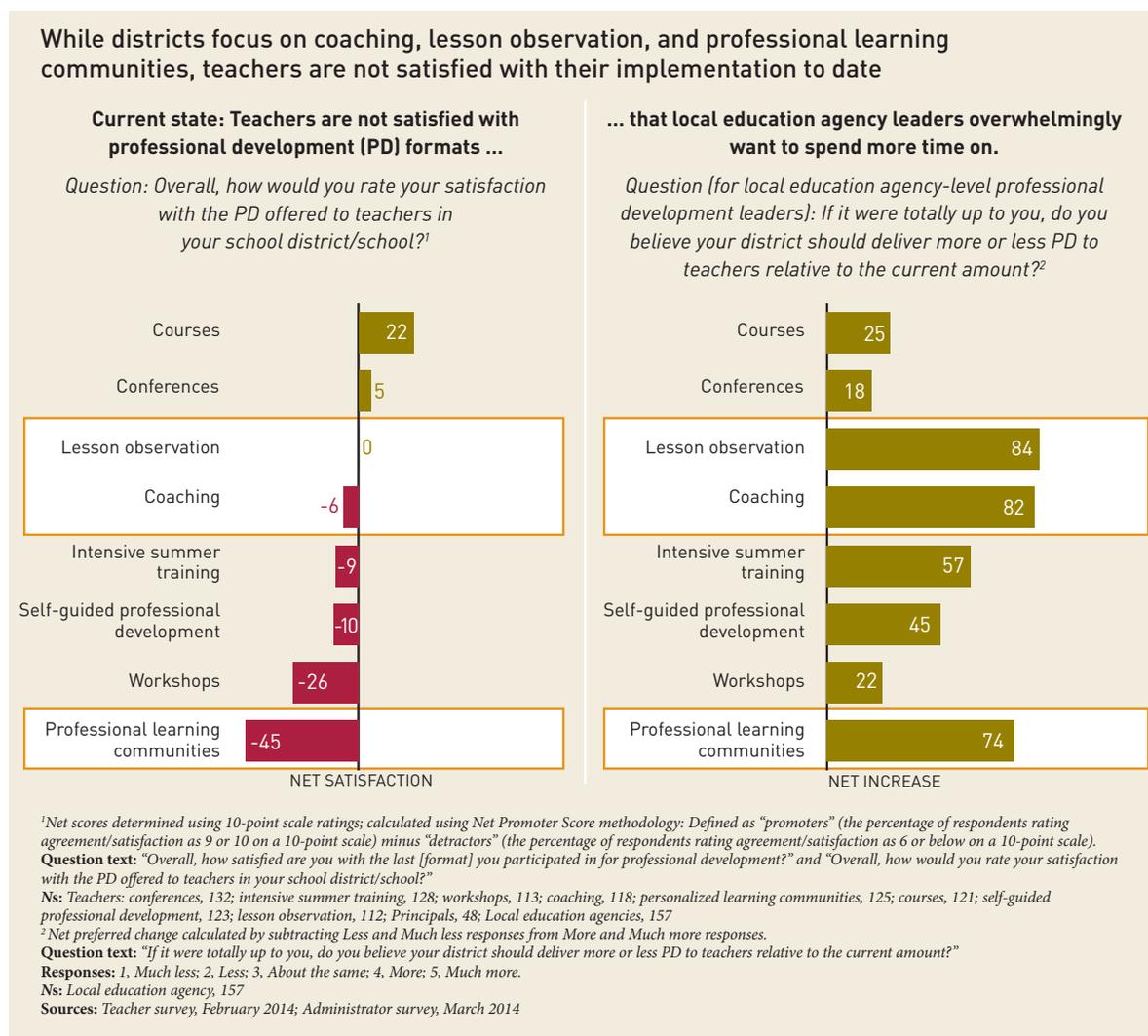
The Gates Foundation reports that:

- Only 29% of teachers are “highly satisfied” with current professional development.
- Large majorities of teachers do not believe that professional development is helping them adapt to the changing nature of their jobs, specifically in using technology and analyzing data to differentiate instruction—two driving factors in today’s schools.
- Professional development formats, such as coaching and professional learning communities that are supported by district leadership and principals, are not meeting teachers’ needs.¹⁰

However, there is a hopeful sign in a recent Digital Promise report, *Micro-credentials: Driving Teacher Learning & Leadership*, that revealed that nearly three in four classroom practitioners are pursuing informal learning that satisfies their personal quest to improve, even though they are not satisfied with their formal professional development programs.¹¹ Currently, in most school systems, these “informal” learning opportunities are not considered professional development since teachers cannot apply these activities for credit toward recertification or other goals—and because they have not been systematized, they are not being tracked or evaluated. It is a bit like the Wild West in terms of who is using these informal learning opportunities and how much impact they are having on teaching practice.

So there is a real divide between teachers and instructional leaders on type, frequency, and value of professional development. The following chart from *Teachers Know Best* starkly illustrates the magnitude of these disconnects.

Figure 4: Significant Disconnects



Source: *Teachers Know Best: Teachers’ Views on Professional Development*, 2014.

Why is there such a difference between what teachers find useful and what districts provide? Although the value of coaching and collaboration can be substantial, most coaching is reserved for new teachers and most collaboration opportunities are poorly planned and executed.

- About half of teachers report receiving coaching in the past year and less than a fourth of those received it on a weekly or more frequent basis.
- Even formal observations of new teachers do not usually include coaching about how to teach differently.
- Teachers prefer to be coached by experienced content experts and people who are trained to provide appropriate feedback.¹²

Funding also contributes to the difference between teacher and administrator views on professional development. Consider the role of Title IIA funding. As noted, these funds are largely directed to individual professional development, which has not been a successful strategy. The remedy is to direct these dollars toward systemic performance improvement so that school leaders can create a closer connection between professional development and student achievement.

Also, Title IIA depends on an old definition of professional development that does not require states to spend the money on activities that have been shown to directly improve student learning. Perhaps providing some incentives or guidance for organizational learning in how to manage professional development might also help create leverage. Experts at the Education Policy Center recommend a re-engineering of Title IIA to focus on a model of continuous performance improvement that more directly impacts student achievement outcomes.¹³

“ *The heart of the matter is this: For many teachers, professional development has long been an empty exercise in compliance, one that falls short of its objectives and rarely improves professional practice.*¹⁴ ”

Compliance Versus Learning

According to *Teachers Know Best*, most teachers view their professional development as an exercise in compliance rather than as a real learning activity. Interestingly, teachers who are allowed to choose most or all of their learning activities are more than twice as satisfied with their professional development. Unfortunately, this is a small group, with less than 30% choosing their professional learning opportunities; another 18% do not have any say in the matter at all.

The opportunity for professional development providers is to develop programs that teachers' value—activities that “directly support teacher practice, such as planning and reflecting on instruction...as they tap into their motivation to help students learn.”¹⁵

Teacher Recruitment and Retention Costs

One could argue that ineffective professional development is a symptom of a culture in education that leaves teachers feeling disempowered, resulting in human resource and financial tolls on districts. A recent survey from the Center on Education Policy, [Listen to Us: Teacher Views and Voices](#) reports that “large majorities of teachers believe their voices are not often factored into the decision-making process at the district (76%), state (94%), or national (94%) levels.”¹⁶ This can have a huge impact on teacher retention and recruiting. The same survey reveals the following:

- 46% of teachers cited state or district policies that get in the way of teaching as a major challenge.
- 60% of teachers said their enthusiasm for teaching has lessened.
- 49% said that the stress and disappointments at their school “aren’t really worth it.”
- 51% reported evaluation feedback was minimally or not at all helpful.

How teachers are treated as professionals and how they feel about the support they receive has a financial impact on a district’s ability to recruit and retain good teachers. Readers should be alarmed by the following quote from one of the teachers interviewed in the report as it indicates an unhealthy environment for both teacher retention and recruitment:

“The feedback I received has NOT been helpful nor has it refined or improved my teaching practice. The evaluation system/accountability measures in place have done nothing but motivate me to leave the profession. I write this as a veteran teacher who has earned National Board Certification, a doctorate, and been nominated several times for teacher of the year.”

The insight here for providers is that the majority of districts are not supplying effective professional learning opportunities for teachers. PD providers that can directly tie their professional development to effective student outcomes will increase teacher satisfaction, improve teacher retention, and provide districts an acceptable ROI for their investment in professional learning.

Changing Perceptions of What Effective Professional Development Requires

An evolving differentiation between professional “development” and professional “learning” is that educators largely view professional developments as one-time events imposed upon them by district leaders that have no real impact on their teaching practice. Teachers tend to regard professional learning as ongoing, self-organized, and directed by the teacher learner herself.

“ Professional development is something we go and do. We line up to get vaccinated.”¹⁷

Education experts at the [National Commission on Teaching & America's Future](#) (NCTAF) make the case that it is time to “redefine professional learning as *performance improvement*, which requires activities and resources that help teachers and leaders continuously get better at teaching and leading—both individually and collectively—from one day to the next.” They argue that the term “professional learning” indicates an important relationship between the adults’ learning environment and what students are learning. “That is, if we want our students to engage in rich, creative learning experiences that lead to mastery, then we must provide educators with rich, creative learning experiences that lead to mastery.”

Laurie Calvert, education policy advisor to NCTAF, writes about the importance of agency in professional learning. “In the context of professional learning, teacher agency is the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues,” she says. “Rather than responding passively to learning opportunities, teachers who have agency are aware of their part in their professional growth and make learning choices to achieve their goals.”¹⁸

The Importance of Agency

In *Moving from Compliance to Agency: What Teachers Need to Make Professional Learning Work*, Calvert acknowledges the foundational work on adult learning theory by Malcolm Knowles and more recent work by Jack Mezirow (1997) and Jane Vella (2002) where they concluded that for real learning to take place, adult learners must be both the decision makers and agents of their own learning. Not surprisingly, they found that teachers were more positive about the experiences in which they had agency. “They expressed the value of being part of a nurturing professional community, connecting to their real work, and being treated as experts and decision makers.”

“Teachers know that students learn best when they can connect their learning to something real in their world. The same is true for teachers. We need to be able to connect our learning with what we need to teach effectively” —Alexandra Fuentes, science teacher, Alexandria, VA

Essential questions for professional learning that fosters agency include:

- What is the purpose/goal?
- Who decides what the topics will be?
- When/how does it happen?
- Who is in control—is it directed or collaborative?

The following chart shows the difference between professional “development” with no teacher agency and professional “learning” that supports teacher agency. It presents a stark contrast between what teachers feel subjected to versus what they seek out for themselves in terms of personal learning choices.

Figure 5: Conditions That Do and Do Not Support Teacher Agency

System Conditions	Professional Development Lacking Teacher Agency	Professional Learning Supporting Teacher Agency
School approach to professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned by administrators, often delivered by external vendors; Driven by constraints of current scheduling; Doubts about whether professional development is working; One-time workshops without follow up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers plan and present professional learning; Educators engage in learning communities based on mutual trust and expertise; Professional learning happens during the school day and everyone engages in cycles of learning.
Reason for teacher participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compliance: to earn credits or carry out existing policies; Compulsion or external pressure to achieve a score, satisfy someone else's objective, or to receive external rewards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intrinsic desire to improve teaching and learning and connect with colleagues; Internal motivation to master one's craft, to be accomplished, to prepare students for the future.
Source of solutions to learning challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assumption is that the source of expertise and solutions comes from outside the school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look internally first for the source of expertise to solve problems.
Topics and skills addressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little input from teachers; Potpourri of topics chosen by system leaders and principals based on multiple, often competing, objectives; Decisions about what teachers need to know are made by the central office and school administrators; Topics are often unrelated to teacher and student learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher-identified learning objectives; Based on data (including observations); Focused on teachers' and students' continuous growth; Topics address specific classroom challenges; Teachers decide what they need to learn.
Role of teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementers, recipients of information, deliverers of content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planners, designers, advisors, presenters, implementers, evaluators, decision makers.
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School leaders predetermine topics for collaboration; Teachers do not choose which team(s) they will join; Norms and protocols are set outside of the group and may or may not be accepted by group members; Groups may include non-teachers whose primary role is to supervise the group's interaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers determine topics based on student's and teachers' needs; Teachers may choose to join teams with common goals and interests; Teams determine norms and protocols; Teams are responsible for working within their established norms and protocols, though non-teachers may participate as team members without a supervisory function.
Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Form of learning is not personalized; Sit and get; Teacher watches presentations, listens, takes notes, sometimes engages in small group discussion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Format based on teachers' learning needs; Grounded in adult learning research; Collaborative, constructivist exchange.
Tone of learning activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Checking the boxes; passive, inauthentic interaction; Unclear purpose; Loses focus, gets off track, devolves into staff meetings or complaint sessions; Evaluative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal-oriented; Professional; Clear agenda and meaningful protocols; Interpretive, solutions-oriented.
District plan and priorities for professional learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Driven by administrators and school board; Plan executed by central office; Focus on state and district mandates and program implementation; Excludes monitoring and feedback of effectiveness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educators examine data and determine priorities; District team comprises at least 50% practitioners; Plan to monitor implementation and impact; Established feedback loops.

Source: *Moving from Compliance to Agency: What Teachers Need to Know to Make Professional Learning Work*, Laurie Calvert, 2016.

Calvert's work on teacher agency provides a lens with which providers can evaluate their own professional development offerings to determine whether or not they currently build agency or can be amended to support teacher agency.

Building Systemic Agency

A common district concern is that by giving teachers more agency, they will lose control of the professional learning process. To positively impact student achievement, however, districts need to work with teachers to build out systems that can successfully drive learning outcomes. Calvert sees the next stage of building agency for educators as making systemic changes and additions to professional learning frameworks in districts, and she recommends the following steps:

Step 1	Make all professional learning decisions in consultation with teachers and principals. Ensure 50% teacher representation on planning teams.
Step 2	Rethink organization of school days so that educators have time to meet regularly and collaborate with their colleagues to improve teaching and learning.
Step 3	Involve and support teachers in analyzing data and identifying teaching and learning challenges.
Step 4	Establish learning communities where educators solve problems of practice and share responsibility for colleague and student success.
Step 5	Give teachers choices regarding their professional learning, including who they work with and where they focus their learning.
Step 6	Ensure that professional learning is for the purpose of continuous growth, not evaluation.
Step 7	Resist the temptation to scale up or mandate a particular form of professional learning without thoroughly examining the context in which it will be implemented. Remember that learners must want to improve their practice and see how the learning opportunity will help them to do so.

When asked to describe their ideal professional learning experience, teachers in the Gates Foundation report said it should be relevant, interactive, delivered by someone who understands their experience and treats them as professionals, as well as sustained over time.

Calvert cautions us to not regard agency as just another program to be implemented. Agency “is a deep and meaningful shift in the responsibilities and roles that teachers play in their learning and in the relationships they have with each other and administrators.”

To provide a road map for a new kind of educator learning, Learning Forward worked with 40 professional and educational organizations to develop its third version of [Standards for Professional Learning](#). These standards outline the kinds of professional learning opportunities that lead to effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student outcomes.

Even the decision to call them standards for professional learning rather than professional development emphasizes the importance of educators playing an active role in their own continuous development as well as being a part of a larger learning community focused on continuous improvement. The standards clearly state that the purpose of professional learning is so that educators can develop the necessary skills and practices that will help improve student achievement.

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, teachers might spend up to 10% of the school year—or 19 days—participating in professional development activities each year. Educators' perception of that time investment is that it yields few, if any, returns. In general, teachers say that most of the professional development they receive is not only ineffective, but not directly related to helping their students improve learning outcomes. It is a valid question, then, to ask if there is any research that connects the efficacy of professional development with improved student outcomes. Two experts offer sobering responses.

In his article, "Planning Professional Learning" in ASCD's *Educational Leadership*, Thomas Guskey states: "What we do not have...is strong and convincing evidence from activities and programs implemented in diverse contexts that resulted in better practice and improved student learning."¹⁹ Jane Coggshall notes in *Title II, Part A: Don't Scrap It, Don't Dilute It, FIX IT* that although we know most teachers are unhappy with the professional development they are receiving, there is little to no information about whether Title IIA federal funding is associated with any improvements in teaching and learning.

So we are left with what the teachers say themselves in *Teachers Know Best*, about the characteristics of effective professional development that can improve student achievement. These teachers believe that characteristics of "good" or effective professional development that lead to improved student achievement are:

- Sustained and content-specific.
- Teacher learning goals that are aligned to teaching standards and learning.
- Involves active learning techniques (observing expert teachers, leading discussions).
- Includes established teams to facilitate "collective participation."
- Assists teachers in using data to make instructional decisions.

Changing and Emerging Professional Development Models

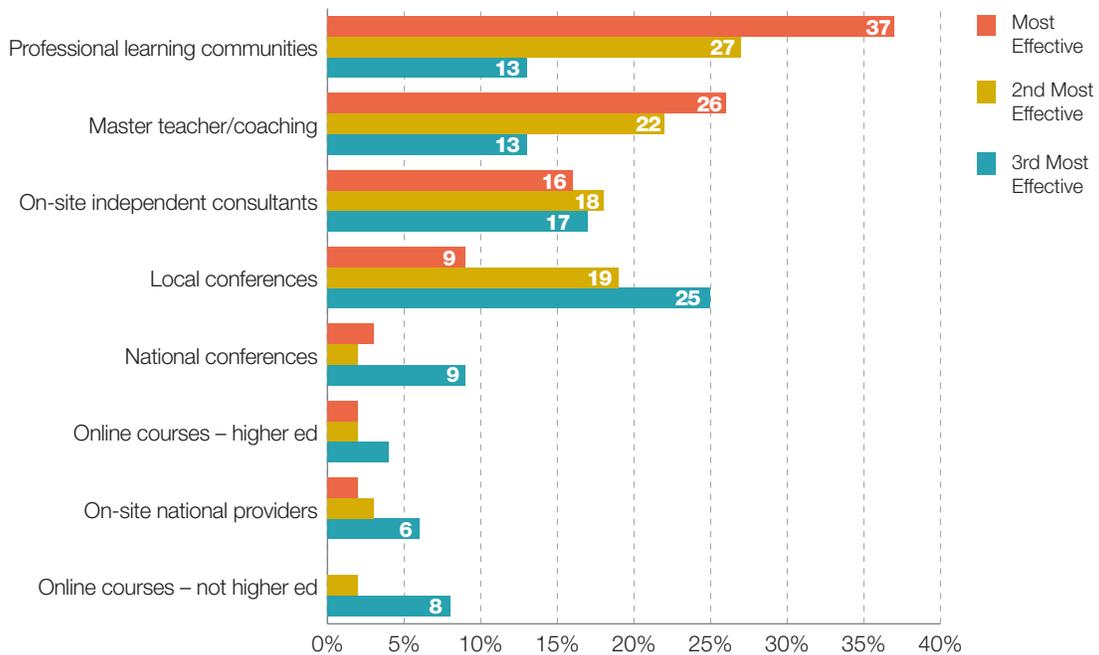
In an effort to achieve greater participation and better teaching and learning outcomes, K-12 has seen significant change in professional development models together with the emerging emphasis on new models. Districts have been actively testing different methods of supporting their teachers in new learning. The goal is to find the mix of activities that will best impact teacher practice and student learning as the entire public education system transitions to preparing students for 21st century life in a global world.

Districts—and even states—increasingly recognize the need to create new supports for educators that parallel recent trends in adopting student-directed learning models. In order for teachers to create a new student-learning model, it is helpful for them to see it modeled in their own professional learning experiences. For example, *The State of the K-12 Market 2015, Part I* reports on a teacher-led project in Delaware that has developed a Blueprint for Personalized Learning which states that “in order to effectively implement innovative, personalized instruction for every student, a parallel system of personalized professional development for educators must exist.”²⁰

Virtual Communities

Many districts encourage their educators to participate in online, virtual communities called professional learning networks (PLNs) or professional learning communities (PLCs). While not a substitute for systematic professional development, they can be a powerful adjunct to more formal professional learning and provide critical collaboration opportunities for teachers and administrators. Their relative effectiveness to other forms of professional learning (as viewed by district-level curriculum directors) can be seen in the chart below.

Figure 6: Effectiveness of Types of Professional Development: All Districts, 2013



EdNET Insight Survey © 2013, Market Data Retrieval.

Source: *State of the K-12 Market 2013, Part IV: Educational Services*, “Professional Development,” MDR

Structured Versus Informal Professional Learning

PLNs and PLCs come in multiple formats. There are managed vendor PLNs like [edWeb](#) and [WeAreTeachers](#) that provide webinars, lesson plans, and other resources for teachers. Many districts have created their own PLNs at individual schools (for example all grade-level teachers) or across the district (such as all math teachers). In addition, educators themselves are connecting via social media around particular topics such as game-based learning or assessment.

Examples of educator virtual communities are highlighted at the end of this section. Although connected educators are active on mainstream online communities such as Facebook and Twitter, education communities offer educators a deeper dive into content specific topics. Author Marcia Powell notes in *“Navigating Toward Personalized Professional Development”* that these communities help educators activate “prior knowledge, engaging with new material, encountering cognitive dissonance, and reflecting to build new knowledge in long-term memory.”²¹

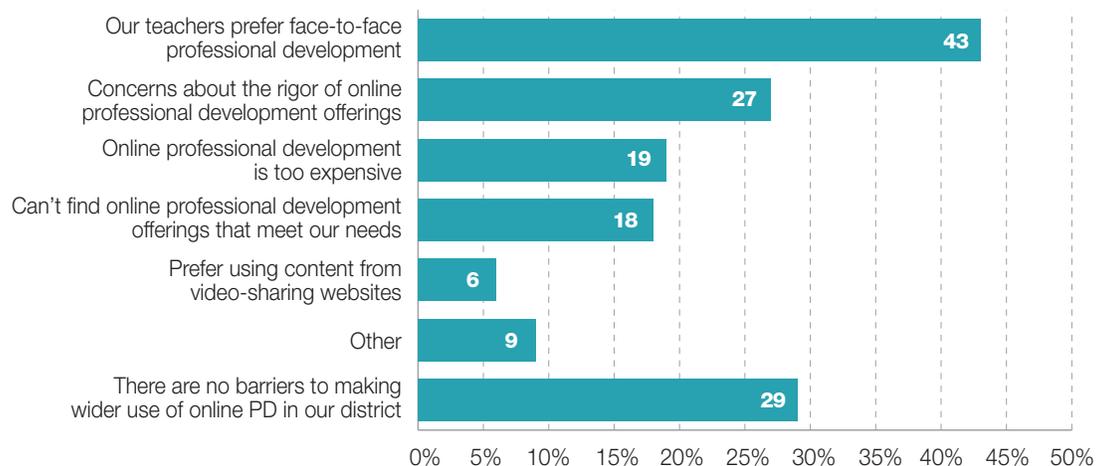
Most of these communities are password-protected platforms that offer a place for teachers to learn and discuss new topics, discard old assumptions, and learn from their peers. Powell cautions, however, that one of the disadvantages of these virtual communities is that administrators are sometimes skeptical that real work is happening there without supervision. Powell notes that this type of learning requires a high level of trust between teachers and administrators.

Teachers are regularly meeting for virtual #Edchats on specific topics at designated times on mainstream platforms. They also use Google Hangouts or Skype to meet and collaborate with colleagues near and far. In the last few years, there have been countless “unconferences” or “edcamps” online and in person that educators have organized and run themselves. These events are unaffiliated with any sponsoring organization, but provide the opportunity for educators to learn from each other.

Many districts encourage the formation of PLCs or PLNs so that teachers have the opportunity to collaborate with their building colleagues or those across the district. Often, districts integrate social media tools into these communities as a way to increase teachers’ technology skills and connect them to a broader learning community.

Educators who were early adopters of educational technology have long been attracted to a variety of online activities—for themselves as well as for their students. However, there are two leading barriers to more widespread adoption of online professional development. The first is that districts still believe that PD needs to be face to face in order to be effective. There is reluctance in some districts to move away from that traditional model. The other barrier is a concern about the rigor of online professional development.

Figure 7: Major Barriers Preventing Wider Use of Online Professional Development: All Districts



EdNET Insight Survey © 2015, Market Data Retrieval.

Source: *State of the K-12 Market 2015, Part I: K-12 Education and the Education Industry*, "Professional Development."

The Role of New Online Platforms

Ed-tech software developers have flooded the market with products that rely on emerging technologies that can personalize learning for teachers and help manage their workflow. These include online platforms that address teachers' needs for content sharing, video, and self-reflection.

Teachers Know Best identifies promising innovations related to the use of online resources for professional learning and notes that online platforms fall under a growing number of categories, including:

- **Content aggregation platforms**, which provide professional learning and content-specific resources.
- **Video platforms**, which provide both professional development resources and materials that can be used in the classroom.
- **Collaboration tools**, which allow teachers to share lesson plans, classroom materials for use with students, and other resources.
- **Platforms that close the loop for teacher evaluation** by providing web-based evaluation and coaching tools and other resources that support teacher effectiveness systems.
- **Data analysis tools**, which help educators to identify individual student needs and personalize learning.
- **Assessment platforms**, which provide new ways to monitor student progress.

New platforms provide the means with which to embed continuous, job-related professional learning opportunities for educators that are more directly related to improving effectiveness of instruction and learning. The use of video is particularly promising here—whether for just-in-time instruction for teachers or the means of modeling and showcasing more effective teaching strategies.

Examples of Established Online Learning Communities

- ✓ Content and virtual coaching on sites such as the [Teaching Channel](#) and [Discovery Education](#), as well as professional associations including the [National Science Teachers Association](#) and the [American Association of School Librarians](#).
- ✓ Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) like those offered through [Coursera](#), [edX](#), the [Friday Institute](#) at North Carolina State University, and the [Deeper Learning Network](#).
- ✓ Virtual communities like the [CTQ Collaboratory](#), where educators can learn about policy and practice from one another—and go public with their ideas.
- ✓ Online platforms that invite teachers to curate and share lessons, sometimes expanding the value of products ([BloomBoard](#), [Read180](#), [LearnZillion](#), and [Share My Lesson](#), just to name a few).

Source: *Micro-credentials: Driving Teacher Learning and Leadership*, Digital Promise and Center for Teaching Quality, 2016.

Micro-Credentials

Micro-credentials are growing in popularity as a way for educators to document their formal and informal professional learning. Earning micro-credentials provides teachers agency in their learning. And the portability of the micro-credentials allows educators to invest in their teaching practice and take charge of their own professional learning. A recent Digital Promise survey revealed that three out of four classroom teachers are pursuing informal learning opportunities that satisfy their goal of improving their practice.²² As a result, micro-credentials have great potential for adding structure and validating the relevance of informal professional learning.

[Digital Promise](#) and the [Consortium for School Networking \(CoSN\)](#) are both working to make micro-credentials a reputable, competency-based choice for teachers who want to personalize their professional learning. And Digital Promise has developed a micro-credential ecosystem that ensures that the credentials are research and evidence-based. The key characteristics of micro-credentials are that they are (1) competency-based, (2) personalized, (3) on-demand, and (4) shareable. More than 120 such micro-credentials recognize a range of professional competencies, including:

- Effective leadership of virtual communities of practice ([Center for Teaching Quality](#)).
- Teaching practices for supporting Deeper Learning ([Digital Promise](#)).
- Supporting students with learning differences and instructional competencies for learning fractions ([Friday Institute at North Carolina State University](#)).
- Data literacy and checking for understanding ([Relay Graduate School of Education](#)).²³

Digital Promise and the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) outline how it works in [*Micro-credentials: Driving Teacher Learning and Leadership*](#):

1. Teachers identify the micro-credential they want to earn and follow recommendations to become competent in that skill.
2. Teachers pursue their learning until they are ready to demonstrate competence.
3. Teachers gather and submit evidence that might include a video, student work, classroom observations, teacher and student reflection, and/or other documentation.
4. Trained assessors from the issuing organization evaluate the evidence to determine whether the educator should be awarded the micro-credential.
5. Teachers earn a digital badge they can post and share with colleagues and administrators.

Advantages of Micro-Credentials

As noted, micro-credentials provide teachers agency in their learning. Because of this, they can build a personal portfolio that certifies what they know and their commitment to ongoing professional learning. Being able to direct and share their expertise is a very different scenario than relying on districts to decide what appropriate professional learning is, how it should be delivered, and how it should be assessed. Micro-credentials allow educators to take charge of their own careers.

As Digital Promise and CTQ point out in their paper, educators are required to document their competence as part of the attainment of a micro-credential. “This approach has the potential to yield powerful evidence for promoting understanding of what great teaching actually looks like.”

Some of the driving questions that district leaders have about micro-credentials are rooted in their desire to support teachers as lifelong learners and learning models for their students as well as how to roll up and share the learning across the district. Digital Promise and CTQ recommend the following list of important questions to answer as districts move forward with systematizing micro-credentials:

- Do micro-credentials have a significant impact on teacher practice? Are some more meaningful than others?
- What is the effect of micro-credentials on teachers’ perceptions of their own (and their colleagues’) skills?
- Do micro-credentials increase collegiality and collaboration within and across school buildings?
- What types of evidence credibly document teachers’ learning and leadership?
- How can micro-credentials incentivize meaningful improvements in practice and leadership for teachers and administrators alike?
- How can micro-credentials and a system of competency-based professional learning best inform improvement of pre-service as well as in-service teachers?
- How can micro-credentials “travel” as the labor market for teachers opens up, with different jurisdictions effectively and efficiently recognizing this new form of professional learning?

In their conclusion the authors assert that, **“we are convinced that transforming how all students learn demands transforming how teachers learn and lead.”**

The growing acceptance of micro-credentials provides an opportunity for vendors to create and issue their own micro-credentials. This would allow providers to build programs that recognize their users, similar to the [Google Certified Educator](#) program. Staying with the Google comparison for a moment, micro-credentials are a new way to ensure that vendor products are implemented and used with fidelity. Although it does not have to be, it could also provide a new revenue opportunity for providers.

Video

The frequency of video used in professional development to inform and reflect upon teacher practice has dramatically increased in recent years. Video is seen as an important and powerful tool to help teachers improve their instructional practice, particularly when paired with other professional learning support such as coaching. Video can provide educators the same benefits that coaches and athletes look for in video: relevant, actionable feedback that improves practice and promotes growth.

An article in *Education Week* (“Video Gaining as Key Tool in Teacher-Learning Plans” by Michelle Davis) provides research results, together with testimony from a number of experts who back the idea that video with additional supports is the best way to boost teachers’ skills and positively impact student achievement.²⁴ Highlights include:

- ✓ A recent study by Insight Education Group on video professional development found that 80% of teachers surveyed said they were willing to be videotaped in class for formal observation.
- ✓ However, leading instructional coach and video advocate, Jim Knight, author of [Focus on Teaching: Using Video for High-Impact Instruction](#), cautions that many teachers have reservations about being recorded. It requires a high level of trust because teachers worry about how the video will be used. “The details of who owns the video, who will view it, and whether it will be used for formal evaluations is critical to make clear ahead of time,” Knight says. “If they have the opportunity to use video in a way that is psychologically safe, they’ll use it because it’s helpful and it doesn’t waste time.”
- ✓ [Teaching Channel](#) is a nonprofit that provides 1,000 free open source videos for teachers to use to improve their teaching practice. “New standards require new forms of teaching, new ways of checking for understanding, and require that students provide much higher-quality evidence,” says CEO Pat Wasley. “A good visual example makes it all much more explicit for teachers.”
- ✓ “Video is a “powerful way to shift thinking about teacher practice,” says Adam Geller, a former teacher and the cofounder of [Edthena](#), an online platform that allows teachers to upload videos of themselves teaching and have a coach or colleague provide feedback.

Observations and Evaluations

One specific use of video that has the potential to significantly impact teacher practice is using video as part of teacher observation or as a substitute for teacher observation. Both filmed and in-person observations are often used in the teacher evaluation process.

A new report, [A Game Changer](#), details how filming classroom instruction has the potential to transform teacher performance and impact student achievement—and provides educator opinions about the potential impact of video on their practice.²⁵

Traditional Observations	Video-Based Observations
70% of teachers reported that traditional observations do not yield the meaningful and actionable feedback they need to grow.	91% felt that simply filming their instruction would help them improve their practices.
62% of school leaders acknowledged that the evaluation systems in place at their schools are not effective in supporting educators' development.	85% of school leaders believe that using video as part of observations would help them provide more meaningful feedback to teachers.

Because there are high levels of dissatisfaction with traditional observations, video has the potential to create new best practices around teacher observations and evaluations. Even though some parts of observations will still be subjective, video provides the factual evidence of what actually transpires in the classroom and contributes to a common understanding for both teachers and their observers.

The report also identifies other benefits of using video-based observations as they allow both the teacher and the observer the opportunity to:

- Identify areas for improvement and communicate more effectively with each other about goals and best practices.
- Give and receive personalized support specific to a teacher's grade level and content area.
- Develop a shared understanding of high-quality instruction at the building and district levels and create a common language between observers and teachers.
- Collaborate more effectively within professional learning communities by sharing effective techniques and receiving peer feedback and support.
- Reflect on classroom practices and allow teachers to take action before sharing video with observers and peers.

For video to be successfully integrated into classroom observations or teacher evaluations, leaders need to be mindful of building trust. There are essential ingredients to building a safe environment where teachers can honestly see, hear, and share their teaching practice. It is critical that school leaders get teachers' buy-in, that they have the appropriate technology, that they create a supportive culture, and that they respect both teacher and student privacy.

A place to begin moving the needle to integrate video into the observation or evaluation process is by letting teachers choose and submit their own videos as part of their annual evaluation rather than having principals do the observations live. This provides more opportunities for teachers to think about, reflect on, and practice changing their instructional methods. Letting teachers control the cameras in their classrooms and choose the videos to be reviewed by the principal sends a message of confidence in teachers and can help create a culture of trust at individual schools.

Technology-Enabled Coaching

An ISTE white paper, [*Technology, Coaching and Community, Power Partners for Improved Professional Development in Primary and Secondary Education*](#), notes that coaching is a model of professional development that has shown potential to “improve the knowledge, skill, and practice of teachers, thus enhancing student achievement,” and that this model of professional development takes “advantage of the convergence of coaching, community, and...the implementation of technology as described in the Department of Education’s National Education Technology Plan.”²⁶

The authors write, “If a technology-rich environment is a given, offering job embedded professional development and coaching as a scaffold for ongoing support and growth will allow teachers an opportunity for low-risk practice and lots of feedback. And when teachers can work collaboratively to share ideas and improve teaching practices, a community of practice can emerge to provide a scaffold for support and growth.”

As more districts expand their technology infrastructure to accommodate one-to-one implementations and online assessments, they have an opportunity to use their infrastructure to scale effective professional development using digital content and communication tools, collaboration, and creativity to connect teaching and learning in a more direct manner.

To integrate an effective coaching program, three things have to be in place:

- Trust in the professionalism and respect for the process.
- Coaching and content need to be tied to the teacher’s daily work.
- The coaching needs to be embedded and ongoing.

ISTE's 10 Tips for Leveraging Technology, Coaching, and Community

1. Technology should be used to increase skills and expand or enhance learning across all skills and subject areas.
2. Adult learners learn best when knowledge is relevant. Position your program as an opportunity for teachers to improve their craft based upon their own needs and interests.
3. Develop a millennial point of view. Give younger teachers learning opportunities that meet their learning styles: collaborative, online, and technology-driven.
4. Allow coaches to build trust one teacher at a time. Your collaborative, technology-rich coaching presence should be perceived as a personal trainer, not an unwelcomed monitor.
5. Do not work on your own. Tap into your school or district's professional development agenda when developing your technology coaching plan.
6. Implementation dips are likely to occur, yet sticking with a long-term plan that allows for iterative improvement over time yields stronger results than one-off skill-building events.
7. One of the key indicators an administrator uses to determine the success of a professional development program is seeing that teachers are actually implementing what they are learning. Having an active communication plan to report progress and successes is crucial.
8. Coaching programs are having success regardless of whether they allow for full-time coaches or peer-embedded support with other practicing teachers. Put your best thinking forward in determining a process that will work within budget and time variables.
9. Every professional development initiative can benefit from the integration of technology. Together, you are better.
10. Resist the temptation to reinvent the wheel. Use technology, coaching methods, and learning communities as "power partners" to tap into existing resources, experts, and support structures.

Source: ISTE, *Technology, Coaching and Community: Power Partners for Improved Professional Development in Primary and Secondary Education*.

Collaboration

Collaboration among teachers has a positive impact on morale and school culture aside from the practical outcomes of shared lesson planning and assessments aligned to standards. If districts want to encourage collaboration between students, teachers can model collaboration by working with colleagues on a regular basis.

Building time into the school day for regular collaboration can be difficult, but well worth the effort. Some teachers experience lack of engagement, poor use of time, and poorly planned and executed collaboration opportunities. But *Teachers Know Best* notes that teachers who are satisfied with their collaboration efforts report that good collaboration is energizing, supportive, hands-on, ongoing, and scenario-based.

In fact, the benefits of collaboration on teacher morale and school climate have been well documented. An NEA report, [Teacher Voices for Education Reform: Making the Most of Time in School](#) asserts that collaboration increases student achievement and improved school-community partnerships.²⁷

However, there is a marked difference between how the average teacher perceives collaboration and how teachers who have good experiences perceive collaboration, as seen in the following information from the Gates Foundation report.

Teachers Want Well-Structured Collaboration and Are Most Satisfied When Benefits to Day-to-Day Work Are Clear

Criteria	Average teacher responses	Teachers highly satisfied with collaboration
Discussing each other's experiences, frustrations, ideas	19%	59%
Aligning on curriculum/standards/expectations	10%	57%
Reviewing student data	3%	48%
Planning specific lesson	-4%	59%
Identifying daily/weekly learning objectives	-13%	52%
Developing teaching skills/content/knowledge	-17%	57%
Debriefing student behavior issues	-20%	25%
Communicating rules, procedures, compliance	-30%	14%

Source: *Teachers Know Best: Teachers' Views on Professional Development*.

In some ways, teachers know good collaboration when they see it because they recommend that strong collaboration environments:

- Have formal collaboration time built into master schedule.
- Share instructional planning responsibilities (lessons planned in groups or on rotating basis).
- Create positive culture around collaboration (grade level/subject area teams trust and support each other).
- Generate higher job satisfaction with day-to-day work.
- Prepare teachers to face key challenges.²⁸

Teacher Leaders

For decades, the career path out of the classroom involved moving into an administrator role. But today's reformers are rethinking the roles and responsibilities of classroom educators. New leadership roles are beginning to emerge particularly with the coaching and collaboration activities discussed in this paper.

ASCD is one of the foremost organizations in the area of educational leadership. In late 2014, ASCD Executive Director Judy Seltz highlighted the potential that educator leadership has to impact student achievement:

*"What happens in schools is more complex than ever and cannot be accomplished with strict division between administrators and teachers. The leadership and responsibility for student learning must be a collaborative effort. If teacher leaders can help change school cultures so that teachers and principals collaborate to build a culture of learning, everyone benefits."*²⁹

Key takeaways from [Teacher Leadership: The What, Why, and How of Teachers as Leaders](#), a report a symposium convened by ASCD, highlights the various ways that teacher leaders can significantly impact a school's culture.

- Collaborative, shared leadership—between classroom educators and building administrators—is essential to meet increased student achievement expectations and support student success.
- Teacher leadership training must be implemented during teacher's entrance to the profession; it should also become formalized and funded.
- Teacher leadership must be intentional and fully integrated into school culture.
- Teacher leadership is not a threat to the role of the principal; shared, collaborative leadership plays to the strengths of each individual on the team.
- All teachers can and should be expected to cycle in and out of teacher leader roles and responsibilities.

Across the country, increasing attention is focused on leveraging the talents of excellent teachers in districts. [Leading Educators](#), a nonprofit teacher leadership organization, partners with schools and districts to help highly effective teachers develop leadership skills to shift from leading students to leading their fellow teachers. Their goal is to extend the reach and impact of effective teachers in schools to change student outcomes through job-embedded coaching and relevant professional development.

Leaders in the District of Columbia public schools have created the Teacher Leader Innovation program (TLI) in conjunction with Leading Educators, where teachers split their day between

teaching students and coaching their colleagues, according to Anthony Rebola in an article in *Education Week*. “During the school year, the teacher leaders meet weekly with coaches from Leading Educators to review their progress, analyze data, and hone their techniques,” says Rebola. “They also attend quarterly group training sessions organized by the district on coaching and leadership.”³⁰

The program’s results to date are impressive.

- 90% of teacher leaders in the program believe the program had a positive impact on their practice.
- 95% said their new role helped them reach more students.
- 100% of their principals said the program improved collaboration and instruction in their schools.

Clearly there are districts that understand the important connection between a vibrant professional learning community and effective learning for students. Reexamining traditional roles of administrator and teacher and redefining what areas of expertise they represent and how they will work together in the future presents exciting potential for those teachers interested in broadening their reach and adding leadership skills to their tool kit.

Standards and the Pursuit of Efficacy

The Role of Standards in Professional Learning

[Standards for Professional Learning](#) is the third iteration of standards outlining the characteristics of professional learning that lead to effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student results. Learning Forward developed the standards with the contribution of 40 professional associations and education organizations.

These standards call for a new form of educator learning—more personalized and self-directed. The decision to call these *Standards for Professional Learning* rather than *Standards for Professional Development* signals the importance of educators taking an active role in their own continuous development and places important emphasis on their learning. The standards make explicit that the purpose of professional learning is for educators to develop the knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions they need to help students perform at higher levels.³¹

Addressing Concerns About Dissatisfaction

Why is the status quo so unsatisfactory when teachers have complained for years about the one-size-fits-all model of professional development?

In *Teaching the Teachers: Effective Professional Development in an Era of High Stakes Accountability*, Allison Gulamhussein provides some insight:

- One comprehensive study analyzed 1,300 studies of professional development. Researchers found that the only effective programs that impacted student achievement were lengthy and intensive.
- The average number of separate instances of practice it takes a teacher to master a new skill is 20—the number of practices increases along with complexity of skill.
- One-time workshops assume the only challenge facing teachers is lack of knowledge, and when the knowledge gap is corrected, teachers will be able to change.
- Research finds that the challenge is not in learning but implementing a new skill.
- Research shows that teachers change their underlying beliefs about what will work only after they see success with students.

Gulamhussein states unequivocally that in order for educators to move the needle on student achievement, the focus of professional development should be student learning. Districts need to offer professional development that creates real change in teacher practice and turns students into critical thinkers and problem solvers.

Some of the most important requirements for successful professional learning are that it should be embedded in teachers' daily routine, it should be connected to specific content, and it should be differentiated to meet teachers' needs just as we expect teachers to do the same to meet students' needs.

As Rick DuFour and Douglas Reeves state in their article *Professional Learning Communities Still Work (If Done Right)*, “teachers would prefer professional development that helps them plan and improve their instruction, is teacher-driven, includes hands-on strategies relevant to their classrooms, is sustained over time, and recognizes that teachers are professionals with valuable insights.”³²

MDR's own research corroborates these expert opinions. Districts need to create a professional learning environment that “requires a rethinking of the role that teachers play, not only in their own professional growth but in determining the way that district priorities play out in their classrooms.”³³

For those creating new professional learning programs—either in districts or the vendor community—Gulamhussein describes five research-based principles of effective professional development:

1. The duration of professional development must be significant and ongoing to allow time for teachers to learn a new strategy and grapple with the implementation problem.
2. There must be support for a teacher during the implementation stage that addresses the specific challenges of changing classroom practice.
3. Teachers' initial exposure to a concept should not be passive, but rather should engage teachers through varied approaches so they can participate actively in making sense of a new practice.
4. Modeling has been found to be highly effective in helping teachers understand a new practice.
5. The content presented to teachers should not be generic, but instead specific to the discipline (for middle school and high school teachers) or grade-level (for elementary school teachers).³⁴

Multiple expert voices agree that effective professional learning should be continuous, ongoing, and directly related to teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. For example, Hayes Mizell reports that “school-based professional development helps educators analyze student achievement data during the school year to immediately identify learning problems, develop solutions, and promptly apply those solutions to address students' needs.”

The importance of collaboration and group learning also cannot be underestimated. When educators are organized into learning teams, they work together to determine why students are not learning. Perhaps they use data to identify the skill gaps, but they work together to close the gaps. The shared learning experience provides the opportunity for teachers to discuss what they are learning and how to apply that learning to their students' challenges. As Mizell notes, “they engage in an ongoing cycle of improvement.”³⁵

The Importance of Learning Theory in Professional Learning

One of the contributing factors in the widespread perception that traditional professional development is ineffective may stem from the lack of learning theory being applied to professional development. It turns out that teachers learn the same way that students do, but with rare exceptions, professional development has not been designed that way.

In his rallying cry, *Let's End Professional Development as We Know It*, Jal Mehta highlights the literature on adult learning.

This now familiar research on adult learning suggests that adults learn best when:

- They see the purpose of what they are doing.
- It is problem-driven rather than content- driven.
- They bring significant knowledge to the process, which is both an asset, but also means that they have developed conceptual schemas, which are difficult to change.
- Experiences are powerful ways of disrupting these longstanding beliefs and creating more substantial change.
- They have choice: choice is frequently a powerful driver of meaningful adult learning.
- And finally, adults learn well when they build up a stream of interest in a subject, which leads to both formal and informal learning.³⁶

Gulamhussein reminds us that, “recent education reforms and standards urge teachers to incorporate students’ prior knowledge, make learning social through collaboration and discussion, and engage students in meaning making. Paradoxically, school districts rarely apply these same learning theories to teachers’ own learning.” It is becoming clearer, however, that to create an environment where students have genuine enthusiasm for learning, we need to create professional learning communities in our school and districts that reflect those same attributes.

“ *Good teaching is not an accident...all effective teaching is the result of study, reflection, practice, and hard work.*³⁷ ”

The Way Forward

“If good intentions alone were enough to help teachers improve, every teacher would already be great.”³

Districts have been slow to transition away from the entrenched traditional workshop model of professional development for teachers. The preference for face-to-face professional development and issues of local control and financing has prevented the rejection of a model that is clearly not delivering sufficient value.

The New Teachers Project writes: “the evidence shows that the challenge of helping teachers achieve real, meaningful improvement has been massively underestimated and oversimplified. It also offers a compelling argument about the limits of traditional notions of ‘professional development’ in helping teachers improve.”

So, it is a huge challenge to organize and manage such a large transition toward more meaningful professional development in about 13,500 individually controlled public school districts. However, we need to make a start—and there have been enough successful trials for districts to feel confident about moving in a direction that will have a more profound impact on boosting student achievement.

Here are the steps recommended by the New Teachers Project to begin constructing a new understanding and framework for professional learning.

Redefine

- Schools need to define “helping teachers improve” in terms of providing appropriate content but also in creating a culture that facilitates ongoing professional growth and continuous improvement.
- Create metrics by which teachers can see measurable progress toward improving their teaching practice and student learning.
- Help teachers find an honest, deep, and rich understanding of their own performance and professional progress.
- Design a culture that encourages improvement with meaningful rewards and consequences.

Reevaluate

- Actively explore and test alternative approaches to development.
- Understand ROI for all activities based on their outcomes and impact.

Reinvent

- Invest in practices that encourage teacher retention and recruitment of good teachers.
- Reconstruct the teacher’s job—allowing for more specialization.
- Redesign schools to extend the reach of great teachers.

Key Takeaways for Developers

With the profound shift in the beliefs of what constitutes good professional learning, there are opportunities for product and service developers to help districts put more meaningful programs in place. This is particularly true for technology developers.

A good place to begin is with the work that has already been done by the organizations mentioned in this paper (such as [Learning Forward](#), [Digital Promise](#), and [Project RED](#)) that have created new professional learning standards and experimented with more effective types of professional development.

One area of great interest is online platforms that allow districts to adopt best practices of professional development, such as video to extend the learning across their district. Also, online platforms provide a safe learning space where teachers and administrators can work collaboratively and learn from each other as they improve their teaching and leadership skills.

The groundwork has also been laid for the accreditation of small discrete, portable, and research-based micro-credentials. These hold great promise for the teaching community, and product developers can energize and enrich this new movement.

Research indicates that both the coaching framework and collaboration have excellent potential to help educators create student-centered learning environments that will adequately prepare our students to be global citizens. There are many opportunities for the vendor community to help districts create cultures that support the continuous improvement we know will make the greatest impact on teaching practice. Specifically, providers can help districts implement programs that incorporate teacher agency. While face-to-face coaching is prohibitively expensive for many districts, technology such as video, micro-credentials, and game-based learning can improve teacher engagement to help reverse the perception that professional development is ineffective and a waste of time.

Traditionally, external vendors have had the smaller piece of the professional development pie as districts have been the primary provider of their own professional development. However, the situation is changing as companies use technology to add value to their district relationships by helping districts gather the content and tools they need to create and scale a new breed of professional learning communities to have a broader impact on student achievement.

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