

## Professional Development and the Promotion of Highly-Effective Teaching

Dr. Barbara Levin, Department of Teacher Education and Higher Education  
UNC-Greensboro

### Introduction

Research tells us that a teacher's effectiveness is the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement. Longitudinal research found that ongoing, high-quality professional development is a major contributor to the development of teachers' thinking about teaching and learning. Other educational scholars recently concluded that effective instructional strategies have the power to drive and build capacity for needed improvements in education. Therefore, professional development for teachers, when it is done well, is one crucial factor for ensuring a high-quality teaching workforce in North Carolina.

For many years, teacher professional development consisted mainly of one-shot "sit and get" one- or two-hour after school "training" sessions. This method was not sufficient for most teachers to improve their practice. In fact, research says that after participating in most short-term workshops, teachers typically apply only 10% of what they learned to their practice. Research also says that teachers—much like all learners—may need to practice a new skill at least 20 times to achieve mastery; some research says that teachers may need as many as 50 hours of instruction, practice, and coaching before a new teaching strategy is mastered. Since World War II, the mindset was that "training" led to learning, but new research on how people learn has been applied to the field of teacher professional development. Today, professional development is now more appropriately called **professional learning**, which should be ongoing, often intensive, and always focused on improving student learning.

### Elements of Effective Professional Learning

The primary goal of professional learning in North Carolina and across the country is to increase student achievement and to prepare students to be college and career ready upon graduation. Contemporary research on effective professional learning for teachers tells us that it should be (1) job-embedded (occur locally at the school level during the regular workday and relevant to teachers' responsibilities); (2) research-based and standards-driven; (3) focused on grade-level and/or discipline-specific content and skills; (4) include effective demonstrations and multiple opportunities for active engagement and practice with feedback; and (5) be followed up with ongoing coaching and feedback. In addition, professional learning must include adequate (6) time for collaborative analysis and reflection on student work, student assessment data, and current teaching practices; (7) time for sharing successful teaching strategies along with learning content and new teaching strategies; and (8) time for collaboration, co-planning, and problem solving.

### Professional Learning in North Carolina

29th ANNUAL  
**EMERGING ISSUES FORUM**  
TEACHERS AND THE GREAT ECONOMIC DEBATE  
FEBRUARY 10-11, 2014

In the past 5-7 years two nationally-recognized, research-based models for professional learning have become ubiquitous in North Carolina: **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)** and **coaching**. In most schools in North Carolina, PLCs are typically grade-level or department-level groups of teachers who meet regularly (at least weekly) with a school leader, such as a curriculum facilitator or an administrator. PLCs can also be comprised of cross-grade level or cross-disciplinary groups of teachers. Typically, during required PLC time the members evaluate student data, learn about new instructional strategies, and discuss changes designed to increase student achievement.

PLCs were originally conceived to be teacher-led and inquiry-based, although this is not always the case in practice in North Carolina. This is likely because our high-stakes accountability system that rates and ranks schools, teachers, and students expects new teaching strategies to be implemented quickly. As a consequence of these pressures, many schools use their PLC time to “train” teachers on new curricula, new teaching strategies, or required initiatives from the state or school district. This agenda leaves little time or energy for extended inquiry into local problems using data-driven decision making to guide subsequent action. Nevertheless, PLCs are considered to be one of the most effective models for teacher development because they can foster more sustained, relevant, and coherent opportunities for professional learning and because teachers have much to offer each other when given opportunities to share strategies that work with their students.

Coaching is another effective model for promoting professional learning because instructional coaches (or curriculum facilitators or lead teachers) can provide follow-up modeling, observation, and feedback that research proves is necessary for professional learning to make a difference. Coaches are often the facilitators of PLCs because they can offer professional development to groups based on their own learning about new curriculum mandates, and then follow-up directly with teachers in their classrooms by demonstrating, observing, and providing feedback.

Professional learning can and should happen in a variety of ways. It is no longer dependent solely on outside experts “delivering” professional development workshops that may not be a fit for all teachers or the school context. In fact, professional learning can and should happen in many places—at conferences, during workshops, at summer institutes, in university courses, etc.—and take many forms, such as collaborative inquiries, book club discussions, teacher action research, and lesson studies. Professional learning may also result from participating in a variety of online learning opportunities, including required modules, online courses and workshops, or through teachers developing their own online personal learning networks (PLNs). Undertaking the process of Nationally Board Certification also provides opportunities for professional learning for experienced teachers. Ultimately, professional learning is most effective when it is differentiated in much the same way we know that student learning must be differentiated to be most effective for all. This is especially true for very experienced teachers whose professional learning needs are different from those of novice teachers.

### **Mandates for Professional Learning**



29th ANNUAL  
**EMERGING ISSUES FORUM**  
TEACHERS AND THE GREAT ECONOMIC DEBATE  
FEBRUARY 10-11, 2014

Districts ensure that teachers meet state and local professional development mandates, although local districts and schools often have additional goals for professional development based on Title II mandates from the federal government, local needs, grants, and university-school partnerships. School administrators have the responsibility for managing and distributing the limited funds available for professional development and are charged with creating a culture that embraces change and promotes continuous improvement. Further, while teachers must document their completion of at least 75 hours of professional development every five years to renew their teaching license, most teachers easily do more than that and consider themselves to be lifelong learners who are responsible for continuously improving their skills in order to help their students learn.

Recent priorities for teacher professional development in North Carolina include learning how to implement a new curriculum (i.e. the Common Core State Standards that focus on critical thinking rather than rote learning), how to use formative assessments effectively to guide instruction, and how to use a new statewide instructional improvement and student information system called Home Base. Other recent priorities in most North Carolina schools include new standards and programs for teaching math and reading, as well as a push to integrate technology into the curriculum.

### **Funding Professional Learning**

Funding for professional learning in North Carolina is limited. Funds for teacher professional development come mainly from the state and federal government. Prior to the recent recession in 2008, research estimated that national spending on professional development was 2-5% of a typical school district's budget; although actual costs may be higher. Since then, funds for professional learning have diminished. Title II funds from the federal government, part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, continue to be available, however, to fund professional development in most of North Carolina's districts. Local districts can apply for these funds, which are prioritized based on the number of highly-qualified (licensed) teachers and student achievement (based on annual yearly progress, or AYP) in each district.

Sixty-two percent of the funds for educating North Carolina's children comes from the state, 24% is from local funds, and 14% comes from the federal government. Of the \$7.5 billion available from state public school funds for 2011-12, 90.4% was used for salaries and benefits. Of the 62% of funds that school districts received from the state, they were allowed to use 19.8% for categorical expenses such as staff development. However, districts also had to use these funds for hiring additional teachers, teacher assistants, and instructional support personnel, or to provide services such as transportation, or to purchase supplies and materials. In the 2012-13 state budget, no new appropriations were allotted for teacher professional development, school technology, or mentor pay.

Grants can be a source of funding for professional learning, but this leads to uneven and inequitable opportunities for professional learning across the state. In 2010, North Carolina was one of 12 states to receive \$400 million in federal Race to the Top (RttT) grants. About 50% of

29th ANNUAL  
**EMERGING ISSUES FORUM**  
TEACHERS AND THE GREAT ECONOMIC DEBATE  
FEBRUARY 10-11, 2014

these funds were distributed to school districts for their own local initiatives, including teacher professional development to support the goals of the North Carolina RttT plan.

Ultimately, finding and paying for teachers' time to engage in professional learning communities and for coaches represent critical cost items, with the full benefit of teacher professional development as it promotes retention not always well documented. Research on teacher retention estimates that some districts in the U.S. invest \$4,000-\$5,000 annually in new teachers, resulting in a lost investment of \$20,000-\$30,000 for each teacher when up to 40-50% of teachers leave the profession within five years.

### **Challenges to Professional Learning Today**

While the NC State Board of Education sets priorities for professional development for teachers and administrators across the state, the NC Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) oversees implementation. New standards, new programs, and new technology mean teachers must attend required "training" sessions after school or online during their own time. This is often accomplished through eight regional education agencies using what is known as the "train-the-trainers" model for professional development, and/or through university partnerships to create online learning modules for teachers. The train-the-trainer model prepares personnel from districts or schools who then take the information and training back to their district or school and deliver it to other teachers. This model is cost effective and time efficient, but it rarely meets all the criteria for high-quality professional development described earlier.

There are additional challenges to effective professional learning today. Besides the problems of limited funding and teacher turnover, the focus for mandated professional development often changes yearly. As a consequence, when teachers face annual changes and lack the 3-5 years that research says it takes for new innovations (like technology, or reform-based mathematical practices, or the Common Core State Standards) to yield real change in teaching practices, they can become demotivated to implement new strategies. Too many changes or too many foci for professional development interfere with the professional learning of both novice and experienced teachers. For example, when several experienced teachers were interviewed recently about the requirement to implement both a new commercial reading program and the new Common Core State Standards at the same time, they expressed feeling like beginning teachers all over again, displayed low self-efficacy, and as a result failed to increase their students' learning.

Contrast this reality with professional learning in Finland, which is one of the top-performing countries in the world on international tests of math, science, and reading achievement. In Finland, teachers spend approximately 10 to 20 hours a week on joint professional development focused on understanding why their students are learning or not. In the U.S., the average number of hours that teachers engage in professional development is estimated at between 40-100 hours per school year, which is the equivalent of only one to two and a half hours per week. Compare this with the four weeks or 157 hours that K-5 teachers currently spend assessing and testing just the reading skills of students in U.S. schools today.

## Conclusion

Professional learning that supports world-class teaching is complex, but we know what works. Supporting teachers' professional development requires dedicated funding, clear priorities, time, and the right balance of effective drivers that leads to improved education for all teachers and students: capacity building, group work, instruction, and systemic solutions. That being said, years of research shows that any direct link between professional development and student achievement is both mediated and confounded by many other factors. These include indicators of teacher quality such as years of experience, levels of certification, and performance on licensure tests, as well as contextual factors including class size and per-pupil expenditures, which also influence teacher effectiveness. In other words, ongoing, high-quality professional learning opportunities are necessary but not the sole driver in recruiting or retaining world-class teachers. Professional development is only one of many factors needed in a complex, multi-faceted system to promote world-class teaching. In fact, while providing better compensation, maintaining strong professional standards, and raising the status of the teaching profession must be part of any system for improving teacher quality in North Carolina, there are many more factors—inside and outside the school—that need to be addressed systematically.

## References

- Darling-Hammond, L., Chung Wei, R., Andree, A., & Richardson, N. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council. Retrieved from <http://learningforward.org/docs/pdf/nsdestudy2009.pdf>
- Ermeling, B. (2009). Tracing the effects of teacher inquiry on classroom practice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26, 377-388. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0742051X09000559>
- Fullan, M. (2011). *Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform*. Centre for Strategic Education Seminar Series Paper No. 204. Retrieved from <http://www.michaelfullan.ca/media/13436787590.html>
- Gulamhussein, A. (2013). Teaching the teachers: Effective professional development in an era of high-stakes accountability. Retrieved from <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Staffingstudents/Teaching-the-Teachers-Effective-Professional-Development-in-an-Era-of-High-Stakes-Accountability/Teaching-the-Teachers-Full-Report.pdf>
- Joyce, B. & Showers, B. (2002). *Student achievement through staff development*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Available as a Google book.
- Knight, J. (2009). *Coaching: Approaches and perspective*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Available as a Google book.
- Knight, J. (2009). Coaching. *Journal of Staff Development*, 30 (1), 18-22. Retrieved from <http://205.154.84.199/cognoti/content/file/resources/documents/5f5fc68fdc/5fc68fdce2f8a3f36313e991da7c6fc686486bd1/CoachingJSDWinter2009.pdf>



Learning Forward. (2013). *Establishing time for professional learning*. Washington, D.C.:

Learning Forward. Retrieved from <http://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/commoncore/establishing-time-for-professional-learning.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

Yoon, K. S., Duncan, T., Lee, S. W.-Y., Scarloss, B., & Shapley, K. (2007). *Reviewing the evidence on how teacher professional development affects student achievement* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2007–No. 033). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest. Retrieved from [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southwest/pdf/REL\\_2007033.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southwest/pdf/REL_2007033.pdf)

### Additional Resources

- Links to recent research on professional development, reports on the status of professional learning, and articles from the premier staff development journal, *JSD*, on the Learning Forward website at <http://learningforward.org/>
- Links to research on professional development at the MOFET's International Teacher Education Community at <http://m.itec.macam.ac.il/portal/Sections/Section/44>
- Background article in Ed Week on teacher professional development with links to additional information: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/professional-development/>
- Learn more about North Carolina's new instructional improvement and student information system called **Home Base** at <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/homebase/>
- For information about North Carolina's budgeting process for schools see <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/fbs/resources/data/#highlights>
- How much time do teachers spend teaching? <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/48631419.pdf>
- Article about hours spent testing students: <http://lexialearning.com/lexiaresearch/whitepapers/educators-spend-four-weeks>