The Importance of PD And Growth Opportunities For Teachers

EDITOR'S NOTE

Continuous professional development fuels teacher growth, fostering engaging classrooms and brighter futures for students. This Spotlight will help you investigate the ins and outs of effective PD; uncover the types of PD that teachers want; learn how PD can help teachers better support English learners; evaluate the debate around hybrid PD; explore the value of learning networks; and more.
Teacher Professional Development, Explained

By Sarah Schwartz

It’s lauded by some as one of the best ways to improve teaching and learning, scorned by others as a complete waste of time. It’s something that teachers might have access to weekly, or barely get once or twice a year.

Professional development will be part of almost every teacher’s career. They will take district-provided training, participate in collaborative learning groups, or seek out seminars and conferences.

When professional development is done well, it provides an opportunity for teachers to grow their knowledge and sharpen their skills, which can lead to better student outcomes. It’s a way for teachers to collaborate with their colleagues, and one avenue through which administrators can support their teachers.

That’s the goal. But it’s not always the reality.

The K-12 professional development landscape is diffuse and highly local, with offerings varying from district to district and even school to school. Teachers have long said that the PD they receive often isn’t relevant to the subject or grade level they teach, that it doesn’t provide tips for practical application in the classroom, or that its goals are vague.

And research on the topic is mixed, with studies demonstrating that some approaches work well—and others don’t have any effect. Read on for an overview of the field: what options exist, what research shows can improve student outcomes, and how teachers say professional development could be improved.

What is teacher professional development?

Professional development, or professional learning, can refer to any kind of ongoing learning opportunity for teachers and other education personnel.

Some professional development is required—for example, a state law could mandate that all elementary school teachers undergo training in early literacy instruction, or a school could host a mandatory workshop on a day reserved for in-service teacher professional development.

Most states require that teachers complete a certain number of hours of professional development to renew their teaching licenses or to receive salary boosts. Usually, teachers can meet these requirements by taking continuing education classes through colleges and universities, or by taking professional development courses from state-approved providers.

A host of organizations provide these PD sessions, including teachers’ unions, subject-specific professional associations, education companies and publishers, museums, government agencies, and nonprofits.

Exactly how much teachers pay for PD varies, too. Districts and unions will offer some options to teachers for free, or deeply discounted. But often teachers pay out of pocket, especially for opportunities hosted by outside organizations.

What are some examples of teacher professional development?

The stereotypical PD session is the “one-and-done.” A group of teachers gather in a classroom or an auditorium to listen while a consultant delivers a scripted presentation on a general topic. It’s then up to teachers to figure out how to apply that information to their specific classroom contexts—if they choose to do so at all.

Teachers, policymakers, and education researchers have criticized these kinds of one-off workshops for their lack of continuity and coherence, but they’re still very much a part of the PD landscape (see the next section).

Still, the suite of options is much broader than just workshops. Here are some of the other types of professional learning that teachers could have access to:

- **Professional learning communities:** Also known as PLCs, these small groups of teachers—often organized around subject areas or grade levels—meet regularly to share expertise and plan for instruction.

- **Curriculum-based PD:** Teachers learn how to use their school or district’s curriculum and other instructional materials, often discussing how to adapt it for their students’ needs.

- **Coaching and peer observation:** An instructional coach, or teachers themselves, help other teachers plan lessons, observe each other’s classrooms, and offer feedback.

- **Conferences, seminars, and institutes:** Teachers attend meetings outside of school, where they can learn from experts and their colleagues. These often occur during summer or other school breaks.

- **National Board Certification:** Teachers who complete a series of portfolio projects and pass an
assessment receive this advanced certification, which comes with salary increases in some states.

- **University courses:** Teachers can take these to deepen their subject matter knowledge or their understanding of instructional practice. They can also count toward graduate degrees, which help teachers move up the pay ladder.

### What kind of teacher professional development is most common?

Teachers say that the type of PD they participate in most often is collaborative learning, according to a 2023 study from the RAND Corporation that surveyed a nationally representative sample of 8,000 teachers.

This includes work time with colleagues or more structured meetings, like professional learning communities. Thirty-nine percent of teachers said they did this at least weekly.

Still, workshops and short trainings are still part of many schools’ approaches.

The federal government provides funding that districts and states can use for professional development through Title II-A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Data from the 2020–21 school year show that 90 percent of districts that used some of this money for PD spent the funds on trainings that lasted three days or fewer, or on conferences.

Districts spent on other types of PD too. Eighty percent of districts said they funded longer-term professional development lasting four or more days, and 33 percent supported collaborative or job-embedded professional development.

Research from the past decade shows that much of the professional development that teachers undergo doesn’t meet the federal standard for “high-quality.”

The Every Student Succeeds Act, the federal K-12 law that replaced the No Child Left Behind Act, defines high-quality professional learning as meeting six criteria: it’s sustained (meaning not a one-off workshop), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused.

But most offerings don’t meet all of these benchmarks. A 2016 study from the Frontline Research & Learning Institute examined 3.2 million PD enrollments between 2011 and 2016, and found that 80 percent of them didn’t meet the federal standard in full.

Most professional development is locally provided, from school districts, regional offices of education, or teachers’ unions. Quality control is often lacking: Some states have hundreds of approved providers, and only audit a small sample each year.

### What makes for effective teacher professional development?

Hard data on which professional-development models lead to better teaching are difficult to come by.

In part, this is because professional development relies on a two-part transfer of knowledge: Teachers need to learn new knowledge and skills such that they change their behavior, and those changes must subsequently result in improved student mastery of subject matter. Unsurprisingly, the complex nature of those transactions renders the field of professional development a challenging one to study.

Still, research reviews conducted over the last five years or so have provided some insights.

In a brief published in 2022, researchers at Harvard Graduate School of Education and Brown University reviewed dozens of studies on professional development to identify some commonalities in successful programs.

They found that professional development that focused on instructional practice—identifying key teaching strategies and providing support for carrying out those changes in the classroom—was generally more effective for improving student performance than professional learning that focused solely on building teachers’ content knowledge in their subjects.

This instruction-focused PD is most effective when it’s tied to materials that teachers are going to use in the classroom, an approach also known as curriculum-based professional development. The paper cites two meta-analyses—one of coaching programs, and one of science, technology, engineering and math instructional improvement programs—that both found PD had larger effects on student outcomes when it helped teachers understand how to best use their classroom materials. Other research reviews have identified the importance of providing teachers with models and examples.

Adding follow-up sessions was helpful too. They provide opportunities for teachers to share their experiences implementing new information and get feedback from peers.

Coaching is also powerful. A 2018 meta-analysis of 60 studies on instructional coaching found that it can improve teachers’ practice, so much so that in some cases a novice teacher performed at the same level as one who had been in the classroom for 5 years. It improves student performance, too, as measured by standardized test scores.

Still, the results came with a caveat. Coaching programs became less successful as they got larger, involving more teachers. Recruiting, developing, and supporting a large staff of coaches can be costly and challenging to districts to implement, the researchers said.

Other types of professional development also have stipulations.

Adding collaboration time for teachers to work together can be very effective—but only if that time is well-used. One 2022 study, for example, found that teachers reported participating more—and perceived collaborative time to be more useful to their practice—when it was focused on a specific goal, rather than swapping general strategies to improve instruction.

### What do teachers say would make professional development better?

Because professional development varies so widely in type and in quality, teachers’ opinion of it varies too. But in general, teachers’ critiques of PD line up with research findings about what is, and isn’t, best practice.

Teachers have said they want professional development to be more practical and directly connected to the work that they’re doing in the classroom. A common complaint is that PD is not tailored to teachers’ needs—for example, mandatory seminars that often have no relevance to their particular subject area or cover skills that they mastered years ago.

Teachers want time to apply what they’ve learned with students and then follow up with PD providers and their colleagues to evaluate: Did this go well? Why or why not? And is it helping students?

Finally, teachers have also identified a need for more support in reaching certain student groups. In the 2023 RAND survey, most teachers said their professional learning offered no access to expertise, or only slight access to expertise, in supporting students with disabilities or English learners.
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The Importance of PD and Growth Opportunities for Teachers

Professional Development That Matters: What Teachers Say They Want

By Elizabeth Heubeck

It’s no secret that teachers have a lot on their plates. One thing they’d like to unload?

“Mandatory [professional development] that isn’t helpful,” responded at least one teacher to an informal Education Week online poll this summer.

Others concur. “PD is controlled by the district & is one-size-fits-all,” wrote an educator in response to a survey in Education Week’s Savvy Principal newsletter. “Much of it is not applicable to me or my colleagues.”

It’s not that teachers don’t want professional development. Their online behavior suggests that they are actively seeking out informal PD they find useful.

Case in point: A recent study that examined the popularity of TikTok videos created by various professionals between 2016 and 2023 found teachers are highly engaged on the social media platform. TikTok videos linked to the hashtag #teacher garnered 61.3 billion views. Popular videos include snippets of teachers managing sensitive situations with students, sharing strategies for teaching kids with ADHD, and offering tips for staying calm in a crisis. Their engagement on social media points to teachers’ desire to connect with learning opportunities in ways that are authentic, convenient, and teacher-driven.

Despite the continuation in many districts of mandated PD that’s not always widely relevant, greater voice and choice in professional learning does appear to be a growing trend—one that teachers are eager to embrace. Some models include schoolwide coaches and teacher-driven PD conferences.

PD quality varies widely

But for now, the type of PD offered to teachers continues to vary widely.

“It’s hard to say, nationally, ‘this is where we stand [on PD],’” said Holly Boffy, a high school principal at W. D. & Mary Baker Smith Career Center in Lafayette, La., and a former program director of teacher development for the Council of Chief State School Officers. “It all goes back to who’s leading. From school to school, it’s different.”

Boffy did, however, point to an increasing number of schools incorporating professional learning into the daily work schedule.

“Instead of paying thousands of dollars for an outside speaker, some schools are using a built-in coaching cycle,” said Boffy. These educator coaches, often referred to as instructional strategists, work at the school level and focus on teacher growth, she explained. The two primary areas of support they offer teachers are classroom management and content knowledge.

Teachers taking the reins on PD

Some districts have taken the idea of “in-house” learning a step further, using their own teachers and educational leaders to develop and facilitate PD sessions.

“You have some educators who are so good at their work that they can’t help but share it,” said Boffy. “I think it’s incredibly powerful when there is an outlet for that to happen for educators.”

But teacher-led PD is not happening widely, according to Taylor Wallace and Morgan Mercado, twins and 4th grade teachers at the same south Louisiana school that the sisters attended as children. They describe their mandatory, back-to-school professional development as consisting mostly of redundant curriculum-based topics that serve, at best, as a review.

“We could get so much more out of it if it was about classroom management, how to reach underachieving students, how to engage students, reach students with dyslexia, things...
like that,” said Mercado. “Things we haven’t been taught or were taught 10 years ago in college and don’t remember.”

The 4th grade teachers describe a desire to grow in their profession and have discovered they’re not alone. They launched DoubleDutyTeachers, a multichannel online platform established as a forum where educators can exchange teaching strategies. To date, they’ve developed an Instagram following of 10,000-plus.

With encouragement from their social media following, support from former college professors, and a grant from the Pugh Family Foundation, Mercado and Wallace enlisted their colleague Andre Deshotel and together the three educators designed and ran Teach Out Loud, a daylong conference for teachers that took place in March and was hosted by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, College of Education and Human Development.

Mercado and Wallace, veteran attendees of PD conferences, endeavored to develop an experience that incorporated “teacher-friendly” features. They sent surveys to teachers well in advance of the conference, asking what they wanted to learn more about and allowing responses to guide their session topics. They handpicked presenters from among a network of educators who have inspired them. They kept the conference small (they sold out all 250 tickets) and inexpensive, at $20 per attendee—including lunch and a free T-shirt. Popular sessions included those on student engagement, behavior management, and a panel on special education.

In addition to planning for their second annual conference for next March, for which they hope to double attendance, Mercado and Wallace are in the process of formalizing the organization while they begin a new school year. Said Mercado, “I don’t think we’d ever quit our [teaching] jobs.” Right now, they express more interest in inspiring fellow teachers in ways they say traditional PD too often doesn’t.

“Teachers are down in the dumps lately about a whole lot of things,” said Wallace. “It doesn’t help when you see PD sessions that aren’t what we need.”
What Works—and What Doesn’t—in Teacher PD

By Madeline Will

When done right, professional development can improve teacher practice and student experiences. But when done wrong, it can have little to no impact and end up frustrating teachers who don’t see any relevance to their work. And it’s all part of a costly, $18 billion market with little quality control.

A new paper, published by the Research Partnership for Professional Learning and written by researchers at Harvard Graduate School of Education and Brown University, examines the literature to understand what works in the field of professional development—and, just as importantly, what doesn’t.

“Teachers in different schools, in different subject areas, in different districts have very different experiences with their professional learning,” said John Papay, an associate professor of education and economics at Brown and a co-author of the paper. “Some of it, we know, can be effective, and some of it, we know, isn’t effective. The challenge is, how do we maintain this investment in and emphasis on professional learning and teacher development throughout the career while also working to make it more effective?”

The research review analyzed both individual studies and syntheses of teacher professional learning, relying mostly on studies that identified a causal impact of the PD on teaching and learning. However, the researchers noted that their review cannot say with certainty that the PD formats and contents are the sole factors behind any success with student outcomes.

It finds that the most effective forms of professional development focus on improving what teachers do in classrooms—their day-to-day practice. It also has an element of accountability involved, so teachers are motivated to change and improve.

Here are five takeaways from the report.

1. PD should focus on instructional practices rather than content knowledge

Over the past two decades, professional development has focused on building teachers’ content knowledge, said Heather Hill, a principal investigator and professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education and a co-author of the paper. The idea was that if teachers have a firm understanding of, say, how fractions work, they will be better at teaching fractions. But the body of literature suggests that’s not necessarily the case, Hill said, adding that the realization was “personally a little earth-shattering.”

Instead, professional development that focused on changing teachers’ instructional practice—such as by identifying key teaching strategies and providing support for carrying out those changes in the classroom—was found to be more effective for improving student outcomes.

One study in the review directly compared elementary science PD that focused on deepening content knowledge to PD that was focused on analyzing videos of lessons. Teachers spent the same amount of time in both professional development experiences. Students of teachers who did the lesson-analysis PD outperformed students of teachers who did the content-deepening PD by 20 percentile points on a research-developed assessment.

The researchers hypothesized that content-focused professional development might not last long enough for teachers to learn enough about the subject to truly make a difference in their instruction. Also, those types of PD programs often don’t offer much support for the day-to-day practice, and teachers need to be able to connect their learning to their existing curriculum materials or lesson plans, the researchers said.

2. PD should prioritize concrete materials for practice over general principles

There are two approaches toward PD that can be at odds. The first is to give teachers materials like curricula, lessons, and assessment items that offer concrete ways to reach the goal, but may leave them without a strong understanding of the learning philosophy behind the new approach. The second is to emphasize more general principals to promote broader and more lasting changes in instruction, but leave it up to the teachers themselves to integrate those changes in their existing lessons, materials, and assessments.

For example, one approach to PD could focus on helping teachers learn new instructional practice by training them on analyzing their own lessons. The other approach might emphasize design principles so teachers can create their own new instructional materials.

The research review found that focusing PD on concrete materials is more effective than teaching general principles, which usually ends up requiring teachers to do addition-
The Importance of PD and Growth Opportunities for Teachers

3. Have follow-up meetings after PD or coaching

A low-cost way to boost the effectiveness of a PD program is to add a post-implementation follow-up meeting, the research review found. Teachers can share their experiences implementing the practices learned and receive feedback from colleagues and program facilitators. They can also ask questions and voice concerns about parts of the new program that are particularly challenging to implement.

These sessions are typically collaborative, so teachers can share ideas with one another and perhaps even improve the program by customizing it to meet the needs of their students and school.

Also, the paper notes, follow-up sessions offer some accountability—teachers are more likely to implement the practices if they know they will need to report on how it went to their colleagues and facilitators.

4. PD should help teachers build relationships with students

Past research has shown that strong teacher-student relationships can lead to higher student academic engagement, better attendance, better grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates. Those effects were strong even after controlling for differences in students’ individual, family, and school backgrounds.

These relationships can be fostered and improved through targeted professional learning, the researchers found.

The University of Virginia’s school of education offers professional-development support focused on improving teacher-student interactions. The program, called MyTeachingPartner, has been associated with student gains in learning and the closing of the racial discipline gap in high school.

Hill said she has witnessed facilitators in those trainings share easy-to-implement strategies for teachers to better connect with students. For example, a facilitator urged teachers to stand at the door as students file in at the start of the class, greeting them individually and asking questions about their life outside of school (like how a basketball game went).

These are “on its face, very simple strategies that actually can be pretty powerful,” Hill said.

5. Coaching and teacher collaboration are key strategies

The research review emphasized the effectiveness of both peer collaboration and coaching. Evidence suggests that teachers can and do learn from each other, and that when schools promote collaboration, teacher practice and student outcomes improve. Coaching—which can include modeling instruction, co-planning lessons, direct feedback, and other consultations and support—has also been found to successfully improve classroom instructional quality and student outcomes.

However, the design of these practices matters. Collaboration should be focused on shared and specific goals for improvement rather than meeting to vaguely improve practice. And teachers should have dedicated and protected time to work and learn together.

Meanwhile, coaching is most effective when it’s more focused—when the coaches can focus on working with teachers instead of administrative duties, and when the coaches also receive some professional development and leadership support.

Yet the realities of school operations these days often don’t allow for these conditions, the researchers said. Many schools are struggling to staff classrooms, and coaches are often tapped to act as substitute teachers, pulling them away from the core functions of their jobs. And collaboration time can be put at risk when teachers have to cover other classrooms.

“‘There’s coaching as it is in the literature, and coaching that exists in schools,’” Hill said.

Educators have a lot on their plates this school year, and teacher stress levels are still high, surveys show. Still, teachers are tasked with helping students recover unfinished learning as a result of the pandemic, making effective professional development more important than ever, the researchers said.

“Finding opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning seems particularly critical now because that type of support, that type of ongoing development ... leads to teachers feeling more satisfied [in their jobs, which can] alleviate burnout,” Papay said.

“Cutting out professional learning or not prioritizing it will, in some ways, lead to larger challenges downstream.”
TEACHER SHORTAGE SOLUTIONS: 
Short-Term and Long-Term

By: Jason Odom, Director of Instruction, FlexPoint Virtual School

Over the past several years, various research reports have highlighted major hurdles for Kindergarten-12th grade education - with one of the most prominent being teacher shortages. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 9 in 10 public school districts struggled to hire teachers heading into the 2023-24 school year.

In my role as the Director of Instructional Models, I have various responsibilities, but two core objectives guide me daily. The first is to inspire instructional leaders and principals at FlexPoint Virtual School to implement personalized instruction, resulting in exceptional student outcomes. The second objective is to equip these leaders and their dedicated teachers with the necessary tools and resources to ensure their success.

While these two objectives are easy to describe, they are not straightforward by any means. Having been a teacher, principal, and school leader, I’ve learned effective methods to attract, recruit, and retain teacher talent. However, adjusting HR practices can take time, so short-term solutions are crucial for school and district leaders in the interim.

For education leaders grappling with teacher shortages, I’ve put together a set of short-term and long-term solutions to help you meet your goals and objectives this school year.

Teacher Shortage Short-Term Solution: Work with a Supportive Third-Party Partner to Fill Teacher Vacancies

Last school year, I had the privilege to chat with school and district leaders from around the nation at several education conferences. During these conversations, we discussed a handful of challenges they’re facing due to teacher shortages, including having difficulty hiring for specific subject areas like world languages and Advanced Placement® to unexpected leaves in the middle of the school year.

For immediate staffing needs, I recommend partnering with a supportive virtual school. Whether you need several teachers to help fill vacancies or if you have one class where a teacher left unexpectedly, this partner should be an extension of the incredible work you and your teachers already do.

For example, we partner with Hart-Ransom Academic Charter School (HRACS), a WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) accredited charter school based out of Modesto, CA, that provides a variety of flexible learning options to students and families who desire direct learning from home.

After our initial meeting with HRACS, it was clear that our organizations share the same core value: the student is at the center of every decision. “We are so invested in our students and their growth, and as soon as we started working with FlexPoint, we felt like they were equally as invested. That is what a real partnership looks like,” said Rashell Avila, Online Tech Support Specialist with HRACS.

HRACS utilizes FlexPoint Virtual School, our fully comprehensive online learning solution that provides schools and districts with expertly crafted digital courses, intuitive systems, and certified teachers. Those resources, plus HRACS’ guidance counselors and school administrators, work seamlessly together to ensure student success.

“In the past we worked with other online learning providers, and everything felt prescribed. But with FlexPoint, we have the flexibility to personalize learning to match a student’s individual needs, and that makes all the difference. While there are many online learning providers to choose from, what stands out about FlexPoint is their flexibility and willingness to find solutions that best fit our students’ needs,” said Avila.

Additionally, it’s important to find a partner who can offer a variety of instructional models to fit your needs. FlexPoint Virtual school is model agnostic, which means we can support schools that are fully online, half online and half in-person, labs or blended learning models, and more.

The key takeaway: if you have immediate needs, it’s critical to find a provider that will be your partner in learning. You’ll set yourself up for success if you find a team that truly listens to your school’s needs and cares about individualizing learning for your students.
Teacher Shortage Solutions: Short-Term and Long-Term, continued

Teacher Shortage Long-Term Solutions: Refine Strategies to Attract, Recruit, and Retain Teacher Talent

Teachers make the magic, which is why developing or refining your school’s or district’s HR practices to attract, recruit, and retain their talent is pivotal to solving teacher shortages.

Tips to Attract Teacher Talent
Researchers from Curtin University in Australia recently surveyed a national representative sample of 268 teachers and 206 parents and found that 85% of teachers and almost three-quarters of parents thought the portrayal of the education sector by news media outlets was mostly negative.

The reason I wanted to include this data is because when trying to attract high school and college students to the teaching profession, it can be difficult to combat negative stories and perceptions. My recommendation is to work with your school or district to tell the positive and inspiring stories you see everyday - whether through the media, social media, or even word-of-mouth. The more future generations hear these impactful stories, the more likely they are to enter the field.

Additionally, it’s critical that you showcase your school’s or district’s commitment to providing a supportive and innovative teaching environment because your reputation impacts the talent you attract. Ensure that you have a strong mission, vision, and commitment that provides staff with a unified goal to help students succeed.

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Best Practices to Retain Teachers

Once you hire a team of dedicated and enthusiastic teachers, your next priority should be ensuring they have the resources and tools needed to feel confident and prepared.

Below are tactics you can implement to ensure you teachers feel supported and part of a community:

- Provide comprehensive onboarding training that includes an overview of your organization’s culture, how to build relationships and engage with students and parents online, and how to utilize the systems needed to teach, monitor, and communicate with students.

- Set clear expectations on what they’ll need to accomplish in the first 30, 60, and 90 days. The goal is to gradually release teachers into the work environment so they have time to ask questions and receive the feedback needed to thrive.

- Develop a culture of communication through surveys, town halls, regular one-on-one meetings, and more. Through these initiatives you’ll learn what teachers are most concerned about, what their goals are, what roadblocks they have, as well as ideas they want to implement to improve school processes. These are critical touch points to learn from your staff and create an environment where everyone is heard.

- Pair experienced and new teachers together to exchange ideas, observe lessons, and provide feedback. Set aside time for intentional professional development opportunities to allow your staff to learn, collaborate and present on best practices and new teaching tools.

- Promote a healthy work-life balance by encouraging your team to fully disconnect when they are out of the office. Another way to do this is by providing health and wellness programs to your staff - whether that is on exercise and nutrition or mental health supports and tips.

- Host social events to give teachers an informal setting to learn from each other. Think: coffee chats, team celebrations, and more.

I hope that these short-term and long-term solutions help with the teacher shortage challenges you may be facing. And remember, you’re not in this alone and we’re here to help!
The Importance of PD and Growth Opportunities for Teachers

Professional Development Tips for Supporting English Learners

By Ileana Najarro

The English learner population is growing but the number of specialized instructors for them and training for general education teachers who work with them is lagging.

Researchers and educators say professional development for all teachers and school leaders rooted in best practices for English learners is needed to fill in the gap.

But, if a district or school were to invest time and money into developing such training, where would they start, and what are some of those best practices that should be covered to ensure the best return on investment?

Diane Staehr Fenner, the president and founder of SupportEd, a consulting firm focused on English learners’ education, and Rebecca Bergey, a senior researcher at the nonprofit American Institutes for Research, offer some suggestions.

What to do before starting professional development

Here’s a sample of what to cover before rolling out professional development across a school or district.

Acknowledge that schools and students are unique

Every English learner is unique, just as schools can be unique in how best to serve their students.

“So you want to [first] look in classrooms and see what’s happening, what’s going well, and what might need to be improved,” Staehr Fenner said.

Use classroom observations and data

A needs assessment, that starts with school leadership, should involve observations of multiple, varied classrooms. Depending on the school, that could mean a 3rd grade English/language arts class, a 7th grade math class, and a specialized English-as-a-second-language class period.

In these observations “typically you’re looking for scaffolding, peer-to-peer interac-

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Diane Staehr Fenner
President and founder, SupportEd

...tions, [use of] oral language, academic language, formative assessment, culturally responsive teaching,” Staehr Fenner said.

In the needs assessment, you also need to review data such as how students are doing on English language proficiency tests, and break down content area data by English learner subgroups.

Get teacher input

This preliminary assessment phase must also involve asking teachers where they feel they need more support and even hosting student focus groups for their input as well, Staehr Fenner added.

Getting teacher input is a key part of how school leaders can cultivate “a culture of continuous improvement and continuous learning within their site” said Bergey with AIR.

With that mindset in place, general education or content area teachers, even other staff members such as arts teachers and P.E. coaches, can have more buy-in to training and more readily view English learners as their shared responsibility and not the sole responsibility of specialists.

Roll out professional development in phases

Once the needs assessment is complete, school leaders must agree upon what topics need to be covered in school wide professional development.

The next phase should invite a group of both general education and English as a second language teachers, already invested in moving the needle at their school, to pilot the professional development. From there, a small group of teachers can undergo the training and then it gets rolled out across the whole school, Staehr Fenner said.

Best practices that should be covered in training

Though each school’s needs may be different in terms of what topics must be covered in professional development on working with English learners, here are a few that generally should be accounted for based on best practices rooted in research:

Scaffolding: Make sure that all teachers know how to scaffold instruction, especially in the academic content areas, to ensure that En-
English learners can engage with grade-level work alongside their non-English learner peers.

**Academic conversations:** Teachers need to be able to set up English learners with the right opportunities for practicing academic conversations in class. “[Teachers] can’t just say ‘Hey, turn and talk,’ that’s not really going to work with our English learners, you’d have to provide them support so they’re coming to conversations prepared,” Staehr Fenner said. That could include offering structured conversation guides for students to use with peers.

**Academic language:** Academic language—distinct from everyday, social language—isn’t limited to vocabulary. It requires students to understand how sentences and discourse work in a given field of study such as the academic language of explaining a math problem versus that of a debate in history class. Training needs to cover how to best support English learners’ development of academic language in class.

**Culturally responsive teaching:** All teachers should work to build relationships with English learners at their school and help them feel welcome. One way to do that is to ensure that instruction for these students is infused with culturally responsive teaching, Staehr Fenner said. Broadly speaking, culturally responsive teaching is a kind of teaching that uses students’ customs, characteristics, experiences, and perspectives as tools for instruction. Training should help teachers understand how to use this teaching approach with their English learners.

**Collaboration:** Training should emphasize opportunities for collaboration between English learner specialists and all other educators in a school. This would ensure that these students are properly supported in all classrooms with grade-level content.

“Ten or 20 years ago, there was the thought that students learn English first, so put them in the ESL classes, when they get enough English, then let’s start teaching them content, let’s push them out,” Bergey said. “And we know now that that’s not the case, that students are learning both English and content simultaneously.”

Schools with English learner specialists should leverage their expertise by giving them time and opportunities for collaborative conversations to take place, she added.

Interim informal check-ins through teachers observing other teachers to see how the professional development is going, and other forms of coaching along the way could help teachers integrate new strategies in their instruction as training continues, Staehr Fenner said.

**Formative assessment:** Language development is a process and a way to help all teachers understand this is by making sure they first know what English learners are tested on in language proficiency tests, Bergey said. The ACCESS for ELLs test for instance, used in 36 states, tests students in four language domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Learning more about the test and how students are scored can help teachers best know how to support students in class. For instance, they may have an English learner who listens well and actively participates by speaking in class, but they could use extra support and opportunities to practice their reading and writing skills.

In general, teachers should have strategies and tools at their disposal to see how their English learners are doing, and then be able to take the data and adapt their instruction accordingly, Staehr Fenner said.
Hybrid PD May Be the Best of Both Worlds, School Leaders Say

By Olina Banerji

After running online teacher training for almost a year, the Clark County school district in Winchester, Ky. switched back to more in-person PD in July 2021. Its leaders knew immediately that they’d made a mistake.

“We over-pivoted. I’ll be honest, we lost a few teachers in the process of going back to in-person school, which included in-person PD. They went to work in flexible remote jobs,” said Dustin Howard, the superintendent in Clark County.

Howard and his colleague Tammy Parish, the director of human resources in the district, said their goals now are to be more “employee friendly” and retain trained professionals, and opportunities for teacher development—especially if they are virtual—seem to be a big draw.

“There’s a bigger push towards mental health now. Teachers will ask, ’Are you going to let me do this training at my own convenience at home or make me stay back for a two-hour meeting after school?’”

The push-and-pull over the place of virtual PD—more than three years after the nation’s sudden shift into all-virtual learning—poses a bevy of questions for the leaders charged with making sure teachers keep their skills and techniques fresh. Clark County’s move to adopt more virtual trainings is reflected in new nationally representative survey data from the EdWeek Research Center.

All in all, that survey shows that district and school leaders expect more PD to contain an online portion in the next five years. More than 250 district leaders and 100 principals responded.

Virtual training resources have long been available to teachers in Kentucky, said Howard, but resources mostly contained one-sided, non-interactive videos. “There was no accountability with those videos either. So virtual was actually a problem at that time,” said Howard.

When the pandemic pushed all teacher training online, the district leaders realized that only doing in-person PD had downsides, too: It was often costly and inefficient. It also wasn’t great for employee morale.

Now, Clark County wants to forge a new type of PD for its teachers—one that’s customized to their needs, and crucially, one that’s available throughout the year. Parish says the district won’t have to fly in training experts or pay for a location, electricity, and travel for teachers. Or get teachers to give up a lot of their instructional time.

Online PD isn’t a silver bullet

Clark County’s leaders are picking out which parts of their PD should be online. It’s a fine line to tread, said Howard, because they don’t just want to “take stuff off the internet.”

Parish said modules on classroom engagement and classroom management are being developed to push out to the 380 teachers in their district. “They can use our ed-tech tools to do self-paced, continuous learning themselves,” Parish said. Virtual modules also give the district leaders a chance to dig deep into individual teacher instructional needs in a way that wasn’t possible before a single administration.

“We can now work with teachers individually on skills like questioning techniques. We can evaluate if they ask low-level compliance questions in their classrooms,” said Howard.

Teachers often must sit through in-person PD that’s boring, or not suited to their needs at all, while virtual PD can inject more “voice and choice” into the system and turn PD from a few conferences and meetings in a year to a continuous process of learning and development throughout the year.

With time and cost efficiencies baked into the format, virtual PD can sound like it’s a silver bullet to districts’ professional development problems. Principals, though, want to be cautious about what parts of PD they want to put online, pointing out that some training simply is more meaningful done in person.

“I prefer to do core modules, like practices under restorative justice, in-person,” said Katherine Holden, the principal at Talent Middle School in the Phoenix-Talent, Ore. district. Teachers must be trained, and then have an opportunity to model in a real classroom, how they create places for students to mediate their grievances. It’s not an easy practice to shift online, said Holden, if teachers aren’t present or paying attention in a Zoom training.

Scott Tombleson, principal at the South Portland High School in South Portland, Maine, faced that problem himself, when trying to attend an online training. “They kept asking us to put questions into the chat box. My mind kept wandering. I was miserable. How can I expect my teachers to learn from online training? I firmly believe we learn from conversations with each other,” said Tombleson.

At South Portland High, Tombleson has put only mandatory trainings like bloodborne pathogen training into teachers’ virtual PD bucket.

Connecting cohorts

Holden acknowledged that one of the advantages of virtual PD is that teachers can connect with other educators spread out through the district—and build supportive cohorts.
Tell us about the current and future mix of in-person vs. online professional development in your district or school.

- Currently, our professional development is about
- Five years from now, I expect our professional development will be about

100% virtual

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NOTE: Data reflects responses from principals and district leaders.
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center

“I’ve noticed that teachers have built wellness cohorts. If they are feeling worn down or burned out trying to engage the students in their class, they need to feel supported by others going through the same thing,” Holden said.

And as the district adopted a new English/language arts curriculum, “we’ve been able to stay connected with the curriculum developers virtually. Teachers can check back with them, ask questions. The developers continue to support the teachers virtually,” Holden said, adding that this constant back-and-forth would have been difficult to facilitate offline and in-person. Like Clark County’s Parish, Holden counts continuous training as a key benefit of virtual PD.

Stephen Jordan, an English teacher at an alternative school in Illinois, said virtual PD is beneficial if it mimics at least some aspects of a live, in-person discussion. “We could potentially even learn from teachers in Finland about how they approach their classes,” he added.

Jordan’s own school only does compliance training virtually, but he enjoys a virtual class he takes every week on “Leading teacher development and student learning,” offered by National Louis University in Chicago. Jordan says he couldn’t complete a parallel class he was taking online because it was only self-study with no Zoom calls with other educators.

Tombleson, the proponent of in-person PD, is sure that his teachers learn best when they grapple and disagree with each other over a topic—an experience that he considers hard to replicate online. “If there’s a choice between [accessing] a high-level trainer online vs. a local expert, I’d choose the latter,” he added.

New material can be virtual

Tombleson says he might consider turning the in-person training into a hybrid one that features both the out-of-town trainer and the local one. EdWeek’s survey indicates the percent of school and district leaders who already offer a hybrid version of PD will tick slightly upwards—from 30 to 36 percent—over the next five years.

Virtual PD lets principals unite self-paced study modules and in-person, collaborative learning when dealing with new subjects, or entirely new technologies.

Ben Feeney, the principal of Lampeter-Strasburg High School in Lancaster, Pa., had used this hybrid format for AI training with his teachers. “Teachers have a very wide understanding of what AI is. I want them to become more educated on how AI tools can assist them,” said Feeney. Feeney’s instructional designers have created a virtual training toolbox for teachers—they pick tools that help them learn AI skills for their own subjects.

Feeney said they’ve relied on ed-tech tools like MagicSchool and generative AI platforms like Bard and ChatGPT to train teachers. “When teachers learn how to use AI to craft responses, write essays or argue a point, that trickles down to students,” said Feeney. In several classroom observations, Feeney said he had noticed teachers explain the use of AI tools for research projects to their students, an indication that the virtual trainings were hitting home.

The self-paced modules, said Feeney, are something that teachers can keep coming back to. But these must be paired with discussions, either online or in-person, and even then he thinks the in-person tend to be more successful. “We’ve done some of these discussions online on Zoom, but it doesn’t capture the power of in-person discussions,” Feeney said.

Clark County’s district leaders, despite their overwhelming support for virtual PD, said there are elements they can’t move online. “If teachers are learning to set up a collaborative teaching station, they need to do this person,” said Howard. A teaching station is a strategy where two teachers work with a single group of students in a classroom.

Just like teaching stations are a new way of teaching, Howard said the district is open to changing the way teachers learn new things.

“There is such a teacher shortage right now. The teachers we get may not be going through the usual trainings as before. Having online resources at hand can keep them intrinsically motivated to keep learning,” said Parish.
A group of over 100 directors of teaching and learning from across Washington state sat in a conference room in Des Moines, Wash., in October of 2021. It was the first time many of them had been to a conference since before the pandemic, and they were eager to learn more about what this two-yearlong hybrid learning network would look like. The directors had signed on to the professional learning journey, and many of them spoke that morning about their need to not just learn from researchers and their colleagues but also their deep need to feel connected to other leaders from around their region and across the state. That was exactly the reason why we created this journey, which we called the Instructional Leadership Network.

After everyone came in to say good morning to each other, grab some breakfast, and find a seat, Chris Beals, the project coordinator for the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) stood at the microphone to welcome everyone to the ILN.

As the lead adviser along with Jenni Donohoo for the network, Chris Beals, Mike Nelson (assistant executive director of WASA), and I had spent a few months designing success criteria for the professional learning program. The ILN was the brainchild of Nelson, a retired award-winning superintendent from Washington state. Donohoo and outside evaluator Tom Murphy (retired superintendent) completed the team.

The ILN had funding from the state’s schools superintendent’s office and support from WASA Executive Director Joel Aune. On that first morning when we all sat together, as Beals stood at the microphone, he welcomed everyone and began reading Circles All Around Us by Brad Montague. He read, “In the circles all around us, everywhere that we all go, there’s a difference we can make and a love we can all show.”

According to the Random Penguin House website,
The Importance of PD and Growth Opportunities for Teachers

- Lack of Decisionmaking Authority

One of the results that emerged from these impactful sessions was the role of the reciprocal transfer of learning. Reciprocal transfer involves not only the transfer of learning from the person in the role of teacher or facilitator but also includes learning that transfers back to the person in the role of teacher or facilitator through the following methods:

- Discussions around data and evidence.
- Team discussions when planning for learning.
- Developing success criteria with members of a team or the audience engaged in learning.
- Engaging in conversations about specific content with learners.
- Engaging in collegial conversations about the work with colleagues inside and outside their work environment.

What the ILN represents is what Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan refer to as essential features of effective networks.

8 Essential Elements of Effective Networks

In Essential Features of Effective Networks in Education (Rincón-Gallardo, S., & Fullan, M. (2016). Essential features of effective networks in education, Journal of Professional Capital and Community, 1(1), 5-22.) Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan highlight eight areas that are essential when creating a network, which are:

- Focusing on Ambitious Student Learning Outcomes Linked to Effective Pedagogy
- Developing Strong Relationships of Trust and Internal Accountability
- Continuously Improving Practice and Systems Through Cycles of Collaborative Inquiry
- Using Deliberate Leadership and Skilled Facilitation Within Flat Power Structures
- Frequently Interacting and Learning Inwards
- Constantly Connecting Outwards to Learn from Others
- Forming New Partnerships Among Students, Teachers, Families, and Communities
- Securing Adequate Resources to Sustain the Work

In the End

Every time our core leadership team (Nelson, Beals, Donohoo, Murphy, and I) met, which was biweekly for two hours each, we looked at that overall success criteria and made sure we had specific success criteria tied to it for the monthly learning sessions and Lunch and Learns.

Due to the success of the ILN, we are entering into a third year but will not have the state funding we did over the last two years. Given the change in funding, we have decided to change the name of the program to the Instructional Leadership Academy and will expand the audience to educators such as instructional coaches, building leaders, and district leaders from across the nation and internationally.

What we learned, and continue to learn, is that leaders are looking for opportunities to connect with others and learn from those networks, too. The experience we created over the last two years has been life-changing for all of us, and we are excited to deepen the work.

Peter DeWitt is a former K-5 public school principal turned author, presenter, and leadership coach.
According to a research brief by RAND Corporation, 16% of principals left their schools in the 2021-22 school year. The reasons for this exodus vary - from staffing shortage challenges, threats to their safety, political debates, budget constraints, and retirement.

As a former teacher, assistant principal, and principal, I know that navigating new responsibilities and roles can only be effective when the right systems of support are in place. This makes it critical for schools to create a culture of growth that includes specialized support and sets clear expectations for school leaders.

Here are three ways your school or district can support leaders to retain talent.

1. Provide comprehensive onboarding training

The first way to retain talent is to do a week-long onboarding training that includes an overview of your organization’s culture, how to build relationships and engage with teachers online, and how to utilize the systems you use to teach, monitor data, and communicate with students.

Then, for their first month, train new principals and instructional leaders on what data to look at including how to monitor classrooms and individual student reports. Be intentional when coaching leaders and set clear expectations on what they need to accomplish in the first 30, 60, and 90 days.

2. Create a talent pipeline of teachers

Part of the culture of our leadership team is to be in tune with our instructors and what future aspirations they have for leadership roles. If their future goal is to become a school leader, their principals or instructional leaders can recommend they participate in our Aspiring Leaders program, which gives teachers insight into what it takes to be part of the instructional leadership team.

Aspiring leaders is an annual application based program where the participants are exposed to leadership responsibilities in instruction and beyond. The program culminates with a project where the participants collaborate to solve a current challenge. While this program is not a requirement for a teacher to apply to a management position, it is a great opportunity for them to understand what their future role could look like and if it’s the right fit for them.

3. Provide intentional professional development

Four times a year, we bring our school leaders together for face-to-face meetings. This purposeful professional development allows for collaboration and presentation of best practices. School leaders are afforded the opportunity to hear from their peers about important topics like school improvement, data driven decision making, innovation, and much more.

Additionally, once a year, our entire organization participates in our annual professional learning conference which delivers a dynamic growth opportunity for teachers and support staff. During this event, we welcome expert guest speakers and our own staff to present in innovative breakout sessions covering the latest trends and best practices in online education.

If you’re interested in learning more about the professional development opportunities we provide to ensure school leaders and teachers across the nation are set up for success, connect with us at flexpointeducation.com/get-started.
Today’s post highlights results of a recent study surveying teachers and administrators about what they want from professional development.

A Tangible Feeling of Discontent

Denise Furlong is an assistant professor at Georgian Court University in New Jersey and the author of Voices of Newcomers: Experiences of Multilingual Learners.

Carly Spina is a multilingual education specialist for the Illinois Resource Center and the author of Moving Beyond for Multilingual Learners: Innovative Supports for Linguistically Diverse Students:

While it is clear that educators value learning and often consider themselves to be lifelong learners, there is a tangible feeling of discontent with respect to the requirement of traditional professional development.

Many question the lack of measurable impact on student achievement (Kirsten et al., 2023) and the agendas that influence these initiatives. There has also been talk about a difference between “professional development” and “professional learning.” Professional development has a connotation of something that is an obligation or requirement that is planned without the voice of the participants.

The term “professional learning” considers engagement in a variety of ways that educators access experiences that improve their instructional practice, understanding of pedagogy, appreciation of cultures, and consideration of social-emotional mental health of themselves and their students. Professional learning may be measured by feelings of teacher efficacy and student outcomes; professional development is measured by compliance.

In our study about perceptions of professional learning of educators who identify as holding different roles in education (Furlong & Spina, 2022), administrators, teacher leaders/instructional coaches, and teachers all report frustrations (and successes) considering accessing opportunities for engagement in meaningful professional learning.

Some frustrations from all groups include requirements that are viewed as inauthentic or not applicable to their current role(s). Successes consistently reflected professional learning that was specific to their district and provided ongoing support and follow-through.

Some key takeaways include:

- Access to different formats of professional learning is critical. Participants reported that they have relied on varied professional learning methods, including in-person or virtual workshops, book studies, committee work, or job-embedded professional learning such as instructional coaching, collaborative teaching, or mentoring. According to one teacher in the study, “I learn/gain the most (and I think my students do, too) when I am able to spend time with other teachers.”

- The invitation to participate in professional learning also matters. When educators are “voluntold” to participate in a program or initiative, this can negatively impact their feelings of efficacy, buy-in, and agency.

- The professional learning provider is also important to consider. When participants of workshops feel that their facilitator is knowledgeable (both in content and also how adults learn), approachable, and has relevant in-classroom experience, that makes a difference in overall perceptions of the effectiveness and quality of the professional learning experience. Credibility matters.

- Leveraging local talent is a great way to empower professional learning alongside people who know the specific needs of the district and may be able to continue the support past a one-time workshop. Districts who acknowledge that their current educators (teachers and coaches) have valuable skill sets and experiences can design initiatives with long-lasting support. One participant shared, “Many times there is no follow through on the PD. Even if it’s a beneficial PD and presented well, it’s a one-time thing that doesn’t develop nor see how the PD is actually being used or benefiting teachers and students.”

- Choice and voice are the most important factors, and often it is considered more effective if the learning is guided by someone who knows the content and (just as importantly) their district and the
The Importance of PD and Growth Opportunities for Teachers

The diversity of the community. It is here that educators report that there are measurable outcomes in terms of student engagement and progress.

- The view and outcome of professional learning are also very important to consider. Participants reported that they spend countless hours learning on their own only to learn that they cannot accept those hours in their monitoring system. Even while educators may have felt that their professional learning experience was valuable, it may steer educators away from engaging in authentic professional learning experiences in the future. When the focus is on requirements and compliance, the notion that learning is not expected to be meaningful is disheartening.

- Professional learning must go beyond learning new academic programs or instructional strategies. An administrator reflected that there are several initiatives to support SEL for students in their district but little professional learning that is designed for the health of the staff. Rather, much of the PD is a requirement or is something that adds more responsibilities onto the plates of the educators. A teacher agreed that "teachers are stretched too thin these days, and many don’t even have the stamina to consider PD," especially when it doesn’t meet their specific needs.

Educators today reflect how they can best improve their practice, learn about their students’ diverse needs, maintain positive mental health, and support one another as they contribute to the field. As an administrator shared, "PL [professional learning] keeps me rooted in my why. Not every educator feels compelled to engage in ongoing PL so I work hard to listen and find ways to offer meaningful opportunities or time."

Educators want to engage in professional learning and want to continue to learn and improve their practice—as long as it is authentic and relevant to them and their students.

Thanks to Denise and Carly for contributing their thoughts!

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.