EducationWeek® | SPOTLIGHT 2026

The New Playbook for Professional Learning: Coaching, Collaboration, And Technology

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This Spotlight explores how districts are rethinking professional development to meet today's instructional challenges including preparing educators to **use AI effectively**. The articles show that PD is most successful when it is **sustained, job-embedded, collaborative**, and supported by **coaching, virtual learning, and professional learning communities**. Combined with **high-quality instructional materials**, these approaches help teachers and school leaders build the **confidence, expertise,** and **practical skills** needed to improve teaching and student outcomes.

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A Homegrown AI Coach Critiques Teachers on Their Lessons. How It's Working

By Alyson Klein

Education Week + Getty

James Cantonwine has long wished teachers working in his district's smaller schools of 250 students or less got the kind of personalized instructional coaching available to educators at the district's larger campuses.

So Cantonwine, the director of research and assessment for the 9,000-student Peninsula school district near Seattle, used artificial intelligence to create the next best thing: LessonLens, which critiques teachers' lessons based on recordings they upload to the tool.

LessonLens was inspired in part by a software demo Cantonwine saw that gave teachers feedback on the number of open-ended questions they asked in classes (which can spur creative thinking) compared with close-answered ones (where a simple "yes," "no," "true," or "false" will suffice.)

"And I thought, that's really cool, but [it] also seemed like it left a lot of value on the table," Cantonwine said.

He believed AI could offer teachers more detailed feedback to help them reflect on instructional practice—without the feeling of judgment that comes with a human critique, even from a supportive coach.

Teachers can upload videos of their lessons to the tool, then select a set of guidelines against which they want to be measured.

Options include popular blueprints for best practice, such as Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, Doug Lemov's Teach Like a Champion, or Universal Design for Learning, as well as the district's own instructional guidelines.

A biology teacher, for example, uploaded a video of her lesson on DNA to LessonLens and asked for feedback on how closely she adhered to what the district considers best instructional practice.

LessonLens complimented her for encouraging peer collaboration and providing clear directions but suggested she consider assessing how well individual students understood the lesson, as opposed to asking questions of the whole class.

One teacher pursuing her national-board certification asked LessonLens to evaluate a lesson she plans to submit to earn the credential.

Use of the tool is "totally optional," and not part of a teachers' performance evaluation, Cantonwine said. District leaders can see how many teachers used it but not who. And they can't access the feedback the tool provides, though some teachers have shared it voluntarily to help Cantonwine test and refine the platform.

The lack of visibility for district and school leaders "was deliberate," said Cantonwine, a former middle school science teacher who thought back to his own experiences with coaches in designing the tool.

"One of the big challenges for any instructional coach is: How do you make sure that the teacher understands that you're not big brother? That you're not there to spy on behalf of the principal, but that you're there to help a colleague get better?" Cantonwine said. "And so, if we're going to have an AI tool help with coaching, it's got to be able to do the same thing."

Vibe coding can be problematic but can pay dividends

Cantonwine developed the tool using Claude Code, a widely available AI coding application. (Competitors include: Codez, Cursor, Replit, and Loveable.)

The approach, known as "vibe coding," allowed the district to create a coaching platform that's more customized—and cheaper—than anything available on the open market.

Tools created using vibe coding can be glitchier and more prone to security vulnerabilities than those coded by humans, experts say. But district leaders with significant computer science expertise may be able to alleviate those problems.

Cantonwine doesn't have that sort of background, but he's collaborated closely with Kris Hagel, the district's chief information officer, and other staffers with deeper coding experience.

The district has created a range of other tools using vibe-coding. One is a tool that can comb the internet for scholarships that Peninsula students may be eligible for and add the information to district communications and postsecondary planning kits for kids and families. Another is an app to help parents compare Peninsula's academic performance with that of other Washington state districts with similar demographics.

Cantonwine knows LessonLens has a few flaws. For instance, when one teacher submitted an audio file of her lesson, as opposed to a video, the tool told her that she needed to stand closer to students or move about the room more.

The teacher had, in fact, used that "proximity" strategy, but LessonLens wasn't able to pick up on that when it had no visuals to analyze and made the critique without the relevant information.

What's more, as far as Cantonwine knows, LessonLens has mostly been used by some of the district's instructional high fliers.

He's not sure yet how the tool would handle a lesson that truly flops—or whether a teacher would even want to record and share their failures, no matter how much privacy they're guaranteed.

"I don't think there's an authentic way for me to grab a sample from a teacher who's really struggling in the class in the way I kind of wish I could," in order to test how the tool would respond, Cantonwine said.

But even if LessonLens needs refining, he's excited about the tool's ability to provide "a very Peninsula-specific version" of PD.

"It's not something we'd be able to buy off the shelf," Cantonwine said. ■

Additional Resource
View this article's charts

Edmon de Haro for Education Week

Published May 18, 2026

More Schools Are Providing AI Training For Teachers. Is It Any Good?

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Most high school students report using generative artificial intelligence tools for schoolwork. Many teachers are using the technology to save time, communicate with parents, and brainstorm lesson plans. And President Donald Trump last April signed an executive order that called for embedding AI throughout K-12 education.

The order also called for "comprehensive AI training for educators," and prioritizing discretionary grant funds for that purpose.

So, what is the state of professional development on AI for K-12 teachers?

Schools are making strides. In less than three years, the proportion of teachers reporting they've received at least some training on AI has grown from a minority to a clear majority.

But this movement is uneven at best—from the frequency of training to the type and depth of information imparted. Complicating matters, many teachers remain reluctant to learn about using AI in their work, or at least aren't enthusiastic about it.

Schools steadily adopting PD on AI in recent years

The EdWeek Research Center has conducted national surveys in recent years in which it has asked K-12 teachers how much PD they've had on AI.

In October 2024, almost 60% responded that they'd received no such training. By the fall of 2025, the percentage of K-12 teachers who reported receiving no training on AI dropped to 50%, while 14% said they'd had multiple sessions and 5% reported receiving ongoing training.

This past winter, in a new survey, the percentage of teachers reporting that they'd received no training on using generative AI in the classroom stood at 42%, with 22% reporting that they'd received multiple training sessions and 9% reporting ongoing training on the subject.

Even as these efforts ramp up, most teachers' knowledge and comfort level with AI likely will remain well behind that of their current students (especially those in high school) and recent graduates. While students use generative AI for schoolwork and more colleges offer AI-related degrees, many schools are just starting to provide AI training to teachers.

Some haven't even begun.

The need to move beyond teaching AI's 'efficiencies'

But as AI gains an ever-stronger foothold in K-12 education, some administrators sense the urgency in getting teachers on board.

"We understand that AI is most likely not ever going to go away. So we have to not only empower teachers with this tool," said Anthony Salutari Jr., the principal of Daniel Hand High School in Madison, Conn., and the 2026 state High School Principal of the Year. "Teaching students how to use AI appropriately and, even more importantly, when to use AI, is our responsibility."

Salutari's administrative team last year began introducing teachers to basic ways they could use AI to assist them in their jobs—planning and developing lessons, scheduling, writing emails to parents. He admits that moving beyond training in AI as an "efficiency tool" to one that teachers can incorporate into teaching and learning has been more of a challenge.

That's not uncommon, according to Jessica Garner, managing director of innovative learning at ISTE+ASCD, a professional development organization focused on the use of technology and curriculum in K-12 schools. And it's likely why many schools don't move past the basics when it comes to training teachers on AI.

But Garner challenges schools to provide PD on AI that goes beyond the basics and gets teachers to grapple with questions like: How do we use AI to differentiate instruction for students? How can AI help teachers do a process-based assessment, looking at kids' thinking along the way?

"We can't stop with efficiencies," she said. "We still have a great need for educators knowing good use of AI for the purpose of teaching and learning."

Getting reluctant teachers on board

Training teachers on the complex capabilities of AI-assisted teaching is challenging on its own. It also requires teachers' buy-in, and not all teachers are open to it.

In a national survey of 651 teachers conducted in February and March, the EdWeek Research Center posed this question to teachers: How eager are you to learn—or learn more about—integrating AI into your teaching practice?

Thirteen percent responded "not at all"; 24% responded "slightly."

Similarly, an EdWeek Research Center

survey last summer found educators divided on whether AI will be good or bad for teaching and learning in the next five years. Forty-seven percent said it will have a negative impact, and 43% said it will be positive.

Teachers' reluctance around AI stems in part from a lack of strong guidance on the topic from leadership, according to experts.

"Without a clear stance on AI, confusion reigns. Schools need clear guidelines on AI use for student work: what's allowed, what's not, and how and why to use AI across curricula. Teachers must be part of that process, as each discipline prompts different questions around AI use. Without clear guidance, schools will continue to struggle," Michael Horn, a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and co-host of the Future U podcast, told EdWeek Opinion contributor Rick Hess earlier this year.

ISTE's Garner agrees. "Administrators need to make sure they're crafting the right messages right now," she said.

Salutari, the Connecticut principal, keeps his message about AI-related training student-centric to bring reluctant teachers on board.

"I do think framing it as preparing our students for the future has really helped," he said. ■

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Published April 22, 2026

Does Virtual Professional Development Tie Directly To Young Students' Academic Outcomes?

By Emma Kate Fittes

A new, rigorous study is taking a look at a critical question for the K-12 industry: Can virtually-provided professional development for teachers move the academic needle for young students?

The exploration is especially timely as school districts across the country are under pressure to improve student outcomes at the same time that budget conditions constrict.

Virtual professional development is one solution that both vendors and school administrators may consider as a relatively low-cost way to increase support for teachers. Research across the field is starting to offer insight into whether it can ultimately improve learning in the classroom.

Early childhood educators who received an additional package of virtual PD — including synchronous digital training — from Teaching Strategies saw gains in both teacher morale and some student performance, finds a study released this month.

Teacher retention increased by an estimated 23 percentage points among the teachers who received the extra support, compared to those who didn't, the report says.

Those educators spent an average of five extra hours on other, asynchronous PD and clocked 94 more hours of platform engagement over the course of the study.

And the preschoolers in those classrooms saw statistically significant gains in language and math outcomes compared to others on Teaching Strategies' formative assessment, which is aligned to its curriculum. Those outcomes were even stronger in the classrooms where teachers were retained.

"In our field, we're really wrestling with, how do we solve the workforce crisis?" said Nicol Russell, chief academic officer for Teaching Strategies. "This is one more proven way to do that, and we should be talking about it now and talking about it loudly and frequently."

The randomized controlled trial, run by the National Institute For Early Education Research at Rutgers University over the course of three years, studied 125 New Jersey preschool classrooms using the company's curriculum.

> **"In our field, we're really wrestling with, how do we solve the workforce crisis? This is one more proven way to do that, and we should be talking about it now and talking about it loudly and frequently."**
>
> **NICOL RUSSELL**
> Chief academic officer
> Teaching Strategies

The findings can help inform education companies across the field on what type of digital training works, Russell said, and inform how they invest in developing their own products and support services for teachers.

"[This applies] no matter what age [student] you're working with, as long as the person who's supposed to be teaching you something feels adequately resourced, adequately supported, and their success depends on how much they've been taught," she said. "Everybody wants that kind of outcome for the learner."

For this study, teachers received a series of virtual, synchronous PD sessions in addition to the general digital "ecosystem" for training that the company offers, according to the report. The control groups of teachers had access to the ecosystem, but not the additional synchronous sessions.

Researchers then compared the time teachers spent on the PD and the extent to which they engaged with digital resources to the formative test scores of children in those educators' classrooms.

Although the study had some statistically significant findings—and emphasized the importance of strong, aligned PD in achieving gains in classroom quality and child development—tying professional development directly to student outcomes remains a challenge.

The results were less clear on third-party exams, such as the Woodcock-Johnson exam, which captured similar growth among all students, regardless of whether their teacher received the extra PD resources.

That may be because of a "floor effect," the report said, which essentially means the measurement was limited because scores overall had a low variance.

It's hard to capture incremental growth on those types of exams, said Russell of Teaching Strategies, who is a former early childhood educator. The assessment created by the company includes more detailed benchmarks of student skills.

In response to the findings, Teaching Strategies is now focused on sharing this information with key K-12 stakeholders, including state and program leaders, Russell said. The company will also still offer in-person profes-

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Kristopher Radder/The Brattleboro Reformer via AP

Left: A high school principal gives a high-five to an incoming junior at the school, as upper-level students return on their first day of school in Brattleboro, Vt. Principals need access to frequent and relevant professional development opportunities to tackle the rising complexities of the job.

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Practical and Paced: How Principals Like Their PD Served Up

By Olina Banerji

The principalship has become one of the most complex and demanding roles in education. The hours are long, and the responsibilities are endless: managing student behavior, coaching teachers, and keeping schools safe. Even as the role has expanded, many principals say their skills haven't kept up with the evolving demands of their jobs.

And it's not just new principals who need to master these skills.

"It's easy to assume that someone with more experience may need less professional development, when, in reality, it may be much more, because the job has evolved and changed over time," said Jon Minton, the principal of Elizabethton High School in eastern Tennessee.

Yet professional development opportunities are often limited, inaccessible, or disconnected from daily realities, frequently tied to conferences that principals lack the time or funding to attend. Like teachers, principals don't want "one-and-done" sessions without follow-up, nor do they want generic training that fails to reflect current demands on their jobs.

In an EdWeek Research Center survey of 876 educators conducted online from Feb. 12 to March 17, about one third of respondents said the PD they received in the past year was very or somewhat irrelevant to their job. Many cited a lack of follow-up as a reason, and many said it was unrelated to the real challenges they face.

Principals say effective PD must be well-paced, give them time to experiment with new ideas in their school, and group them with peers who are working through similar challenges. When Minton saw the number of in-person PD opportunities dwindle after the pandemic, he created his own platform—a podcast—to address areas in which principals want to build their skills.

When faced with new developments, like the use of artificial intelligence to do schoolwork, principals often have to piece together answers by diving into district policies, asking colleagues, and searching online.

"It would be great to have a toolbox that we can go to on a minute's notice and access to deal with staff or student emergencies," said David Wiedlich, the principal of Radnor Middle School in Radnor, Pa., who's been trying to build up his skills in trauma-informed leadership. When a colleague passed away last year, Wiedlich struggled to find the right words to address his staff and students. "Emergencies aren't common or expected, but it would have helped to know how to talk to people after a crisis," he added.

Meeting principals' PD needs can be challenging, experts say. Principals are tied to their buildings and cannot easily step away for extended training, and their needs vary widely by experience and context. Some may need support with classroom observations, while others may need help guiding teachers in the use of instructional strategies for a particular group of students.

Engaging and useful PD for principals must be a mix of in-person coaching and conversations, self-reflection, and experimentation. Here are a few ways experts say districts can make that happen.

Choose the right venue

Principals are always in a time crunch, often working 50-60 hours a week and taking work home. Professional development for principals has to be a mix of in-person sessions, virtual meetings, and pre-recorded content, say experts.

Different types of learning should happen at different venues, said Jasmine Kullar, the chief school leadership officer at Cobb County schools in Georgia.

"When you pull principals out of buildings, be intentional about the purpose," Kullar said.

Compliance-related training, such as information on new laws or district policies, can be handled online. When principals need to dig into a new instructional strategy or discuss a complex challenge like improving teacher morale, in-person PD, with a coach or peers, is more suitable.

A handful of principals in the same area and at similar schools in the Cobb County district meet once a month to discuss challenges and learn from each other. Principals in these learning groups also visit their colleagues' schools to observe each other.

Different venues for different types of PD can help principals compartmentalize their time and be prepared to engage, Kullar said. Districts should not mix the different kinds of training that principals need: a 20-minute leadership session at the end of a long day of compliance training won't work, she added.

Principals learn best from each other

Like teachers, principals find their best teachers are often their peers, who've tackled similar challenges. The principal cohorts in Cobb County pick topics like how to empower and coach their assistant principals.

This kind of peer learning should be baked into formal PD opportunities, said Joe Schroeder, the associate executive director of the Wisconsin Association of School Administrators. Principals table ideas they want to experiment with—like introducing a new teaching strategy or a creative use of school data—and get ideas from their peers on implementation, following up later to share results and troubleshoot challenges.

Principals love to workshop a challenge, said Ashley Wardlaw, the principal of Blue Ridge High School in Greenville County, S.C.

"My building is different from the school that's 20 minutes away. I can bounce ideas off another principal and say, 'Hey, this is my roadblock. Help me see things differently,'" Wardlaw said.

Principals need time to reflect

For PD to be effective, it needs to be sustained and thoughtfully paced, allowing principals time to apply and refine new strategies. In Wisconsin, Schroeder has created multiday academies aimed at principals of all experience levels, structured around a "plan, do, study, act" cycle that lasts through the year.

Learning opportunities for principals need to be frequent but interspersed, so leaders have time to work on their challenges, collect data, and reflect on the effects on students and staff, Schroeder said.

Bringing these data back to the cohort also keeps principals accountable to the problem they set out to solve, in contrast to the dominant "one-and-done" PD model, which is ineffective in creating any lasting change in schools, Schroeder added.

The pacing can be hard to get right, especially when principals can't spend too many days away from their schools. The time commitment to meet a few times a year can be a challenge, Schroeder said, but worth it if principals get real-time, clear, and applicable solutions to their problems.

"The job is designed to pay attention to the urgent," he said. "We have to turn their attention from the urgent to the impactful. That's what moves the needle for students." ■

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Published May 18, 2026

How a District Stopped Relying on 'One-and-Done' Professional Development

A strategy used to improve teaching of English learners applies to all students

By Ileana Najarro

Nashville , Tenn. -

Jenna Davis handed papers over to two kindergarten teachers of English learners. The English-learner coach at Nashville's Mt. View Elementary School wanted them to record their reflections on what was going well in the classes they co-lead with other teachers and what they should adjust for next semester.

"I haven't got a good rhythm," teacher Glenda McKinney said at that Dec. 5 meeting of her working relationship with her co-teacher.

McKinney and 12 of her Mt. View colleagues who specialize in helping English learners master the English language have been part of a shift the Nashville district made a few years ago to a co-teaching model, in which teachers of English learners team up in the same classroom with general education colleagues. The change, which has happened in some of Nashville's schools, is meant to enforce the idea that all teachers are responsible for teaching English learners, who now account for 60% of the district's 81,000 students.

The gen ed teacher provides the academic-content expertise in these classroom teams, and an English-learner teacher provides the language-development expertise. But it takes a lot of effort to get those working relationships right—and training on its own isn't enough.

Enter Davis, who coaches English-learner teachers like McKinney who work in classrooms with gen ed colleagues.

What Davis does encapsulates many elements of what research has shown makes professional development effective—for any teacher, not only those working with English learners. As a coach, she provides continuous feedback to help teachers improve and reinforce lessons from their training. She facilitates professional learning communities, or PLCs, in which teachers work together to solve common problems they're facing—not theoretical problems dreamed up in a training curriculum. And Davis is present at the school throughout the year, not delivering a workshop one day and gone the next.

William DeShazer for Education Week

Olga Dietz and Glenda McKinney meet with coach Jenna Davis (center) at Mt. View Elementary School in Antioch, Tenn. Dietz and McKinney, teachers of English learners, co-teach kindergarten classes with general education colleagues. Regular coaching is one element of what research has shown makes professional development effective.

Davis' role is part of the Metro Nashville district's broader investment in making sure professional development sticks, especially when it comes to supporting the growing English-learner population. While English-learner coaches work with gen ed teachers, too, the district also has literacy and numeracy coaches as well as instructional coaches for different content areas.

More often, U.S. schools don't rely on in-house coaches to provide follow-up and feedback on how teachers are implementing lessons from professional development. Instead, PD is often a one-and-done deal.

"Sit-and-get professional development doesn't work. We've known that for a long time," said Linda Darling-Hammond, the chief knowledge officer and former CEO of the Learning Policy Institute, a nonprofit research firm on education policy and practice.

Professional development requires feedback and follow-up to stick

Research on effective professional development for teachers points to the value of models in which teachers collaborate with coaches and colleagues on planning lessons, designing curriculum, and more, said Darling-Hammond, who is also the California state board of education president and an emeritus professor at Stanford University's graduate school of education. In other words, the lessons PD imparts are modeled, actionable, and relevant to teachers' day-to-day work.

"If teachers are collaborating on planning, and there are teachers in that team who have greater expertise, they then are sharing it with the other teachers, and they can work out ways to observe reciprocally, see each other teach in the classroom and organize the sharing of knowledge," she said.

Coaching and collaboration have become more common facets of professional development over time, but traditional workshops without much follow-up are still common.

In an EdWeek Research Center survey of 876 educators conducted online from Feb.

12 to March 17, participants said workshops led by district leaders or outside presenters were the most common forms of professional development their district or school used. Designated collaboration time among teachers and instructional coaches ranked third and fourth, respectively.

More than half of educators in the nationally representative survey, 54%, said their supervisor never or rarely followed up on the impact of professional development provided to them to try and determine its impact.

About a third of respondents said PD they received in the last year was very or somewhat irrelevant to their job. Of those who said it wasn't always relevant, the top reason they gave was there's little or no follow-up, making it effectively "one-and-done" training (48%). Forty-four percent said the PD is unrelated to the real challenges they face.

"Professional development is only effective to the extent it is implemented with follow-up and follow-through from management. It entails management leading by example and holding themselves accountable in order to hold others accountable," one survey participant wrote in an open-ended response.

In a separate survey conducted in March by the EdWeek Research Center of more than 1,100 educators working with English learners, educators across the country spoke of the need for more training or PD, especially for gen. ed. teachers, on how to teach language development in mainstream classrooms and better support English learners.

PD didn't stick until coaches provided feedback and follow-up

The Nashville district found itself with the same professional development need over a decade ago as its population of English learners rapidly grew. The district at first invested in getting more of its teachers certified to work as English-learner teachers, said Molly Hegwood, the district's executive director of English learners.

Then in 2011, the district created a role called English-learner consultant, which supported classroom teachers almost as an aide working with the English learners in their rooms.

In 2013, that position changed to EL coach, with a heavier focus on providing feedback on teaching and learning.

"The word 'consultant' was not leading to the coaching and feedback sessions that needed to happen," Hegwood said.

Today, English-learner coaches across the district work with English-learner teachers on content and language integration. They observe, plan, and give feedback. The coaches receive their own ongoing professional development on adult learning to hone their coaching skills, Hegwood said.

In her time working as a teacher of English learners, Davis said, gaining a building-level, English-learner coach represented a turning point. Before then, the learning on how to teach English learners didn't really stick. Then, the coach started to lead monthly professional learning communities and work with teachers individually to provide tailored, ongoing feedback.

"That's where I truly learned to grow as a teacher of multilingual learners ... because I had that support provided to me," Davis said.

District investments in effective PD pay off

Today, Davis coaches 13 full-time English-learner teachers on co-teaching in gen ed classrooms and working with English learners in language-intervention blocks.

As the dean of instruction, she's also Mt. View Elementary's multitiered system of supports lead for academics, working with teachers and data to determine which students might need academic intervention to learn literacy or numeracy.

She reviews students' academic and linguistic data with teachers and helps them set goals not just for their students but for themselves as educators. She gives teachers tips on strategies to use, then follows up with them afterward to see how they've done implementing them in their classrooms.

The district used to rely heavily on one-day professional development, sending teachers back to the classroom with new insights but limited follow-up, Hegwood said.

While teachers still attend some one-time sessions during the school year, most professional development that teachers participate in now takes place at their schools. Colleagues study, learn, and problem-solve together, then coaches provide feedback and observations.

"We've shifted away from trying to get every single person to attend a contract PD to building up individuals across the district to redeliver [lessons from PD], so that's really cut down costs for us in the sense of contracting professional development," Hegwood said.

One benefit from this investment in district- and school-level coaches has been the development of internal expertise, Hegwood said.

"In the long haul, if you don't invest in the expertise of teachers, ... you're going to have less effective outcomes, then have to spend a lot of other money to make up for the fact that you didn't do the most effective teaching you could have done," Darling-Hammond said.

Effective PD calls for continuous improvement

This tailored approach to PD—with teachers receiving training in skills they need to improve on, often indicated by student-assessment data, coupled with feedback and follow-up from coaches like Davis—has led to teachers implementing more best practices, Davis said.

One example: English learners take language-proficiency tests in the spring. For years, Davis has imparted to teachers the importance of slowly introducing students to the test format as early as August to prevent logistical, test-taking challenges later on.

Thanks to her coaching, more teachers are taking her advice and find themselves able to focus more throughout the year on students' actual language development rather than devoting substantial blocks of time to testing tips.

The reason the practice has caught on is because Davis has kept working with the same teachers, reinforcing her message and offering feedback, she said.

"I'm not a consultant. I didn't just do my PD, tell some jokes, and then leave," Davis said. "I'm able to come back and say, 'OK, we went through XYZ together. Where's the evidence of that?'" ■

Additional Resource
View this article's charts

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Published February 05, 2026

Principals Need PD, Too. Here's What They List as Top Priorities

By Olina Banerji

When Brent Osborn became principal of the lone high school in a small school district in Washington state, he realized he didn't have many administrators around him to learn from. His superintendent, while a great sounding board, could only share what he'd learned as a middle school principal.

Osborn felt isolated—until he went to an Association of Washington School Principals meeting.

"Going to that meeting changed my career," said Osborn, who has led the 500-student Lakeside High School in Nine Mile Falls for 15 years now. "As I grew in my principalship, the state association grew what they were offering as professional development to principals."

The nature of the PD sessions has changed since Osborn started attending—there was a lot more content on "compliance and evaluations" years ago, he said. More recently, sessions are focused on how to develop "emotional intelligence" as a leader and how to build a sense of community within a school.

The shift in tone has been crucial for Osborn, who, like principals across the country, is dealing with an ever-changing job description.

"As glorified middle management, you live in the middle of this hourglass, where there's stuff from states and communities on one side, and then the building that you have to manage," said Osborn. "There's just so much to do that you've got to have the tools and assets to lead through all of it."

The principalship can be a tough and lonely job. Beyond the years spent in preparation courses, school leaders aren't offered many PD opportunities that meet the needs of their evolving roles.

Principals can attend regional and national conferences or find mentors and coaches in their districts. But it's largely up to individual principals to create their own learning opportunities, said Adam Heywood, the principal of Winman Middle School in Warwick, R.I. Heywood and his assistant principals are always on the lookout for PD opportunities within and outside their district.

Districts largely focus on making sure teachers have the training they need, school leaders say.

"Principal PD falls into a vacuum. It's harder [for district leaders] to think about what they're doing to keep principals on top of things. But it should be prioritized," said Osborn.

Principals seek PD focused on teacher engagement and student success

In the 2024-25 school year, Osborn was among nine school administrators who attended a year-long training on school culture, facilitated by the state association for principals. The training, Osborn said, helped him identify which teachers were fully immersed in the school's culture and which were indifferent or "on the fence" about participating.

Once Osborn knew that data, he could strategize on how to engage all his teachers, so they would look forward to school every day.

In their PD sessions, Osborn and his cohort picked up useful tips to engage teachers during staff meetings. The cohort met once a month to brainstorm strategies that would make school more fun for teachers, improve their well-being, and celebrate their hard work.

As Osborn implemented those strategies, teacher morale improved—and he noticed teachers were more ready to buy into the school's goal to push students academically.

"We believe the rigor [students] choose is a great predictor of success at the post-secondary level," said Osborn. Over the last three years, 85% of Lakeside's seniors have enrolled in advanced math, which, to Osborn, is an indication that teachers are setting high expectations.

Heywood, the principal from Rhode Island, searched for PD that would help him get teachers on board to revamp the "portrait of a graduate" for their school. Heywood and his assistant principals signed up for training offered by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, an accreditation body for public and private secondary schools.

The training helped Heywood and his administrative team survey teachers, students, and parents to "get honest feedback" on what should constitute the revised portrait.

"Teachers really weren't necessarily focused on data, and they were making decisions based on, ... 'if we're doing a lesson with kids, it's because we've done it for the last 30 years, and it's our favorite lesson to do in this method,'" said Heywood.

Using the survey information—which prioritized skills like communication, critical thinking, and lifelong learning—Heywood could help his teachers evaluate if their lessons reinforced the new portrait of a graduate.

Over the last five years, Heywood has introduced new curriculum in every subject at his school. The PD helped him get teachers on board and adapt their teaching to the new goals and standards.

Principals need PD that addresses their day-to-day challenges

Setting up training for principals can be challenging, said Luke Spielman, the principal

of Park View Middle School in Mukwonago, Wis. It needs to be the right mix of lofty leadership lessons and practical strategies that principals can apply to the daily challenge of running a school.

Spielman said both types of PD help. His district has partnered with a leadership training organization called InitiativeOne to coach school leaders on topics such as communication or leading with empathy.

Spielman has mixed these lessons with PD by the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators, which offers different levels of training that correspond to where a school leader is in their career.

Over the last two years, Spielman has used the lessons he learned in PD to address teacher retention in his school. For example, he implemented "stay interviews," a spin on exit interviews.

Spielman asks the staff he wants to stay questions like: "What do you love? What can we do to make our district a better place that creates trust?"

Spielman has also involved more teachers from his school in the district-level PD offered to principals.

"It's been really interesting because now we have a teacher group and administrator group who are using the same language," he said. "I think it's easier to make change when you are speaking the same language, when you have the same values, when you have the same expectations."

Principals want more peer learning

Formal PD aside, all three principals believe that districts should set up more coaching and mentorship for school leaders at every stage of their journey—especially for those in more rural or remote school districts.

Osborn coaches newer principals in Washington state, an opportunity he wished he had when he started at Lakeside High. His advice to younger principals is to make time for PD, even if it takes them out of their building.

It's often hard for principals to see the benefit of PD, Osborn added, especially when there are always small fires to put out in the school. Still, he encourages principals to tap a colleague or a teacher to cover for them.

"A couple of days of meaningful reflection of your craft can change the way you do things," said Osborn. ■

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Solution Tree

Published April 03, 2026

Teachers Like It. Research Is Promising. Is This the Solution To Teacher PD?

By Sarah D. Sparks

Decades of research suggest engaging, effective teachers are the most important factor in student learning.

But linking ongoing teacher learning to student achievement has proven more difficult.

Now the U.S. Department of Education is doubling down on teacher collaboration—one of the few approaches to teacher professional development backed by both emerging research and the teachers themselves, according to a new report by the Government Accountability Office, which studies topics of interest to Congress.

In a guidance letter released in February, the Education Department encouraged districts to use their share of the $2.2 billion in federal Title II grants—the largest source of federal funding for teacher professional development—for team-teaching and other staffing models that generally give the most effective teachers more opportunities to share their expertise with colleagues or impact more students.

(At odds with the guidance letter, the Trump administration on Friday released a budget proposal that would eliminate Title II grants for states and collapse them into a smaller block-grant program for states, the second year the administration has proposed such a move.)

Federal support for collaborative teaching could encourage more states and districts to improve the scheduling, mentoring, and evaluation structures needed to support formal teacher collaboration—and bolster the already rapid spread of team-teaching models, such as Arizona State University's Next Education Workforce Initiative and the nonprofit Public Impact's Opportunity Culture.

"For professional learning, it is incredibly important for teachers to be in environments where they feel like they're supported, they're heard, and they can effectively teach and work together on that," said Samantha Holquist, the director of research engagement at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Matt York/AP

At Westwood High School, shown here in Mesa, Ariz., teachers combine classes and grades rotating between big group instruction, one-on-one interventions, and small study groups. Teachers find collaborative teaching models generally more useful than other PD models like seminars.

From isolated to collaborative training

More than two-thirds of public K-12 teachers believe collaborating with other educators is the "most useful" element of professional development, according to the GAO's analysis of nationally representative RAND Corp. data, and collaboration was more likely to be linked to improved student test scores than PD models that emphasized curricular alignment or coaching.

One K-12 teacher separately interviewed by the GAO said collaborative learning with colleagues and classroom-embedded coaching have been the most useful kinds of professional development because the formats "allowed me to immediately apply what I learned, receive feedback, and adapt practices to fit my students' needs."

The federal guidance letter encourages districts to use their funding to pay stipends for lead or guest teachers, create collaborative planning blocks and schedules, or develop team-based training and evaluation strategies.

Such strategies allow teachers to learn in the context of their own students, rather than in more general school- or grade-wide training, said Richard "Lennon" Audrain, the head of innovation and policy initiatives for ASU's Next Education Workforce project.

"Teachers are thinking about the kids they all share and what they need," Audrain said, "as opposed to, 'Oh, I went to this English conference and here's some strategies I learned,' absent of the context of the actual learners in your room."

GAO finds disparate teacher training

For their analysis, GAO researchers analyzed five existing meta-analyses on teacher PD, administered teacher surveys, and conducted focused interviews with state officials and teachers in nine districts in New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee.

In the 2023–24 school year, GAO found school districts nationwide spent about $1.8 billion under Title II-A of the Every Student Succeeds Act,ranging from $32,000 in small districts to roughly $1.3 million in large districts. States spent roughly $101 million in Title II-A funds that year, ranging from a high of $12 million in California to $262,000 in West

Virginia. (The grants are weighted based on student population counts and poverty rates.)

The federal grants require teacher professional development to be sustained (as opposed to stand-alone, short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused. But the GAO found districts are still more likely to report using one-shot training workshops than the intensive and sustained teacher professional development called for under Title II.

And Jacqueline Nowicki, the director of education, workforce, and income security issues for the GAO, said there's still little consensus in the research about what parts of professional development beyond collaboration can significantly improve student test scores.

With all that's happening in a classroom, "it's just incredibly difficult to tease apart which of these things is driving the effect or even contributing to the effect" on student achievement, Nowicki said. "It's not surprising, but ... it's frustrating that after all this time there still isn't any direct research that cracks that nut." ■

iStock/Getty

Published January 07, 2026

What It Looks Like to Put Teachers In Charge of Their Own PD

By Olina Banerji

It's not easy for school leaders to plan the perfect professional development for their teachers. Teachers often find sit-and-get PD boring, repetitive, or untethered to the skills they need.

There's also a sizeable gap in how principals and teachers view PD: In a nationally representative survey of over 1,400 teachers conducted in October 2023, the EdWeek Research Center found that almost half of the respondents said the PD they are required to take is irrelevant. By contrast, 41% of the more than 650 school leaders surveyed at the same time said the PD they provided was "very relevant."

While teachers may dislike the typical PD sessions they're subjected to, they still want to learn new skills as classrooms and students change. Teachers need more training on how to use artificial intelligence in their day-to-day work, or to better manage disruptions due to student behavior. They may also need specialized training to implement a new reading or math curriculum.

Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, teachers want to choose PD that's most relevant to them. They may want to go a step further, too.

In an informal social media poll by Education Week, 93% of the more than 1,300 respondents said teachers should have more of a say in developing the PD offered in their schools. An informal poll in The Savvy Principal newsletter yielded similar results. Of the 213 readers who responded, 74% said teachers should be more involved in developing their own PD.

Some educators went into more detail in the comments of the social media posts. Their answers have been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Teachers want the freedom to choose what they learn

Teachers are asked to consider what to do for students that are learning and what to do for students that aren't. So why can't PD be the same for teachers? PD should allow teachers to accomplish their personal growth goals.

—Maurleen P.

Each professional educator is unique and knows what they need to know. They are the only ones who should have any voice in their continued professional development.

—Dan S.

YES! I am a 16-year veteran. I'm so tired of PDs geared toward newbies. I would love to pick out my own PDs.

—Selina C.

I personally think PD that doesn't lead to certification or licensing or degrees is pretty much a waste of our time and talent, but if the bureaucrats want us to do it, the least they could do is make sure it's relevant to the educators and their specific and current challenges on their specific campus.

—Timothy M.

Teacher-administrator collaboration might be key

Some respondents suggested that teachers should be ready to put in the work if schools go with a DIY approach to PD—for example, staying abreast on the latest education research and being ready to present it to their peers. Of course, this task would add to teachers' hefty workload, some noted.

Some educators said a collaboration between administrators and teachers may lead to the most suitable PD.

The assumption is that teachers are going to be up on the latest research in education and are willing to step up to present it. Yes, they should be involved in developing PD assuming teachers are trained in how to present to their colleagues (which has not been the norm). So yes, teachers should be included in PD, if they are willing to (like other professions) be open to feedback.

—David G.

I feel this is a no brainer for most any profession. A lot of PD was teacher-led at my school, which meant that we were exposed to a lot of ideas being practiced around the school. Like anything, some were more useable than others. But it made for good PD and teacher empowerment.

—Kevin M.

I definitely feel that teachers should have a say. They may feel there are areas that they want to develop more or need for their toolbox. And there are also times that the admin. sees an overarching need that could/should be addressed in PD. It should be a combination of both.

—Diane A.

Teachers can learn from their peers

At Lenape High School in Lenape, N.J., teachers can choose their own PD and find experts on campus to teach them new skills.

Over the last eight years, Principal Tony Cattani has been perfecting a system of peer

observations that allows teachers to observe each other during their planning or free time. Teachers can sign up to showcase their skills, like classroom management or fostering student engagement, and other teachers keen on picking up that skill can sign up to observe.

Cattani, a former health teacher, hit upon this model only when he started doing teacher observations as a principal. Cattani believed he was a "pretty good teacher" but quickly realized that he would've benefited from watching his peers do things differently.

"Their classroom management skills were different but purposeful. They were clear with their expectations. They promoted a growth mindset in their classroom differently than I did," said Cattani. "I realized that if I would have seen others teach sooner, ... I would have been a better teacher when I was in the classroom."

Cattani, who was named the 2025-26 National High School Principal of the Year, wanted his teachers to have that experience. So far, the model has yielded close to 4,000 unique peer observations. This school year, there have already been 200.

"Peer observations have become the backbone of the PD culture in our school," Cattani added.

Teachers at Lenape can also observe the same group of students across subjects. For instance, said Cattani, teachers could figure out through a series of observations why a student who does well in English isn't as engaged in math.

"It could be the content," said Cattani. "But it could also be how it's delivered. Teachers can diversify their instruction."

Teachers can learn from each other during observations, but there are other avenues, too. The school hosts "collegiate cafes" where teachers can sign up to deliver PD on a topic in which they feel confident. The platform allows both veterans and newbie teachers to learn from each other: Those with more than four decades of teaching experience can train younger teachers on classroom management, while the new teachers, more adept at technologies like AI, can help their senior colleagues.

Do teachers want yet another task to do?

The culture at Lenape encourages teachers to learn from each other, but there are some who don't take advantage of the model, said Cattani.

Teachers have a full plate grading papers and implementing new lesson plans, and PD can often get lost in a "world of priorities," he said. Some teachers are happy to be observed, but don't have the bandwidth to visit other classrooms or develop PD on specific topics for their peers.

It's important to create options for these teachers, too, Cattani said. The school still has in-service days and collegiate cafes where teachers can learn instead of being in the driver's seat. Cattani also sends out a weekly staff email with best practices and tips for the classroom.

Cattani wants to keep pushing for a culture where every teacher strives to be better.

"I want more teachers to be more like my best, so we need to provide opportunities for them to grow and be the best version of themselves," he said. ■

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Global PD teams

Meet David, a superintendent **balancing district goals and tight budgets**

DIFFERENT SCHOOLS, ONE SHARED DIRECTION FOR GROWTH

David oversees a district where no two schools are the same. Each campus has its own distinct demographic challenges and instructional priorities—but all are expected to grow in the same direction and deliver consistent results. Finding a professional learning system that supports both individuality and alignment has become a constant challenge.

Global PD Teams gives David a scalable solution. It gives every school in the district on-demand, equitable access to a massive library of Solution Tree resources, allowing individual buildings to target their specific needs while still staying connected to districtwide goals. By partnering with GPDT, he was able to:

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Peter DeWitt

Left: ILC's in Alabama discuss a protocol developed by Michael Nelson.

OPINION

Published October 13, 2025

Looking for a New Way to Approach Professional Learning? Try This

This design ensures leaders at all levels see themselves as part of a coherent improvement effort

By Peter DeWitt & Michael Nelson

We've all been in meetings where leaders are asked to collaborate, yet the room doesn't feel collaborative at all. Andy Hargreaves once called this contrived collaboration, which occurs when collaboration is required but rarely transformative. Lately, the two of us have developed instructional leadership collectives (ILCs) at the provincial, regional, and state levels in the United States and Canada. Instructional leadership collectives are grounded in collective leader efficacy, which is the belief that leaders and teachers who develop a shared understanding, engage in joint work, and collect evidence of impact can positively affect student and adult learning. They are guided, facilitated groups of educational leaders who engage in collaborative inquiry using structured protocols.

ILCs are not a new name for professional learning communities or communities of practice. For the last three decades, those two approaches have shaped how we think about professional collaboration.

Professional learning communities give us data-driven collaboration, but in practice, they can become compliance-driven. Communities of practice, meanwhile, offer authentic identity-based learning but tend to be more organic and free-flowing. ILCs, in contrast, are a new way of organizing professional learning for leaders, teacher leaders, and such educators as school psychologists in leadership positions. They blend structure with flexibility and create improvement within and across systems.

What Makes Instructional Leadership Collectives Different?

Three elements set ILCs apart from other forms of professional learning.

They are guided and intentional. ILCs aren't free-floating conversations or compliance-driven meetings. They are facilitated learning collectives that move through a six-phase cycle of collaborative inquiry: gathering and identifying themes, forming collectives, designing inquiry, implementing and collecting evidence, reviewing progress, and sharing knowledge across groups. Tools like the Collaborative Inquiry Placemat help leaders frame problems of practice, set priorities, and build theories of action supported by both leading and lagging indicators.

They include educators from different roles and different districts. In many systems, teacher leaders, coaches, mid-level administrators, and superintendents operate in isolation. ILCs bring them together. A principal in a rural district can learn alongside a central-office leader from a larger system. Instructional coaches can contribute insights that inform district strategy. This design ensures leaders at all levels see themselves as part of a coherent improvement effort.

They are focused on evidence and impact. Too often, professional learning is disconnected from outcomes. ILCs are purpose-driven: Themes emerge from real data, such as equity and belonging, Tier 1 instruction, grading practices, or persistent absenteeism. Leaders gather and analyze evidence throughout the cycle, using data not as a compliance tool but as a flashlight to illuminate what's working, what isn't, and where adjustments are needed.

How do you start them? In our work, we use collaborative inquiry, which focuses on four stages: 1) developing a problem of practice; 2) creating a theory of action; 3) collecting four types of evidence, as laid out by Victoria Bernhardt (demographic, perceptions, student learning, and school processes) around the problem they are solving; and then 4) reflecting on what went well and what didn't.

What we have seen in our work with leaders across North America is that there are common themes to the challenges they want to solve using inquiry. We recently wrote about it, which you can find here. When working within districts, regions, or across states, we look at the participant's focus for collaborative inquiry, create common themes around those areas of focus, and then invite participants to join that group. Typically, we want no more than 10 educators in a group so we can keep them intimate and personalized. We take those theme-based groups through six phases of learning using collaborative inquiry in an effort to foster collective leader efficacy among the group.

small theme-based groups around those areas of focus, and use a facilitator to help guide the collectives through inquiry. At a broader scale, regional networks can research the areas of focus schools within their regions are interested in and create theme-based collectives. Developing collectives, training facilitators to do the work, or creating collectives and facilitating the group ourselves is the work the two of us are doing.

Why ILCs Matter Now

Professional learning for leaders has long left people siloed, unsupported, or stuck in compliance mode. In too many cases, leaders leave a workshop with a binder on the shelf but no ongoing structure to apply and refine what they've learned.

Instructional leadership collectives change that dynamic. They create spaces where professional learning is:

- Reciprocal — every participant both contributes and learns.
- Networked — spanning schools, districts, and even provinces.
- Sustainable — grounded in ongoing cycles of inquiry rather than one-off sessions.
- Impactful — centered on evidence of impact on both adults and students.

A Call to Action

Over the past few years, we have surveyed hundreds of leaders and their teams, and found that their challenges are similar to other leaders and educators in different regions, states, provinces, or countries.

What we also have seen is that regional budgets are being cut and school districts cannot afford to send educators out to conferences. They are looking for a hybrid approach, which brings together in-person and virtual learning. These collectives can become a lifeline so no one feels alone as they navigate through their challenges. ■

Peter DeWitt is a former K-5 public school principal turned author, presenter, and leadership coach. Michael Nelson is a leadership coach and thought partner for the Instructional Leadership Collective. Nelson is now co-blogging Peter DeWitt's Finding Common Ground Education Week Opinion blog.

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