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Effective Professional Development: Teacher Voice, Collaboration, and Sustainable Change

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Page 7

EDITOR'S NOTE

This Spotlight examines how successful professional development is increasingly driven by **teacher leadership, collaboration, and intentional district design**. It highlights compelling examples of teacher-led **math professional learning**, redesigned approaches to **supporting English learners**, and collaborative **professional learning communities in science** - all of which give educators a stronger voice in shaping their own **professional growth**. Drawing on research that links teacher satisfaction and collaboration to higher student achievement, it shows how thoughtfully designed, teacher-centered professional development can **strengthen instructional practice and improve student outcomes**.

Peter DeWitt

Page 15

Some Schools Are Taking the Lead In Teacher Training. What That Looks Like 2

Teachers Dread PD. Here's How One School Leader Made It Engaging 3

Going NUTs: How One District Supports Its 'New and Untenured' Teachers 5

2 Districts Overhauled How They Teach English Learners. Here's How 7

Teachers Set the Agenda for This Math PD Program. So Far, They Like the Results 9

OPINION

Looking for a New Way to Approach Professional Learning? Try This 11

How Communities of Practice Can Drive School Improvement 13

Educators Want to Connect With Colleagues. Learning Networks Offer That Opportunity 15

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Some Schools Are Taking the Lead in Teacher Training. What That Looks Like

By Sarah D. Sparks

Schools can no longer afford to rely solely on traditional preparation programs to train educators, says Eastside Elementary School Principal Rex Crabtree.

With qualified math and science teachers in short supply at his rural pre-K-8 school—located an hour north of Chattanooga, Tenn.—Crabtree has made it a priority to provide ongoing support for teachers, including professionals like a former accountant who transitioned into teaching math.

"The teachers that we've got, they're what we've got," said Crabtree. "We work hard with them with training, extra help, and resources wherever they're struggling, whether it's with content or classroom management."

New teachers, particularly those from non-traditional pathways, need ongoing mentorship, Crabtree emphasized.

"They are already jumping into the deep end of the pool," he said. "If you've not gone through student teaching, it really is a different world when you do step in that classroom and shut the door for the first time."

Eastside is among five finalist schools for the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching annual Founder's Award, which honors schools whose career development for teachers has spurred student achievement. All of the finalists serve a majority of low-income or high-need students, and their students have grown faster than average in their states. The group, which works with more than 11,000 schools nationwide, tapped the following schools as finalists for NIET's award:

- Eastside Elementary School in Warren County, Tenn., public schools;
- Provencal Elementary/Junior High School in Natchitoches Parish public schools in Louisiana;
- Shenandoah Elementary School in the Shenandoah School Corp. district in Indiana;
- Somerset High School in Somerset Independent school district in Texas;
- Waterloo Elementary School in Laurens County, S.C.

Courtesy of National Institute for Excellence in Teaching

First grade teacher Tyrhonda Route teaches a lesson at Waterloo Elementary School in Laurens County, S.C. The school's specialist and lead teachers provide ongoing professional development to other educators.

While the majority of U.S. teachers still complete a traditional college-based degree program, the number of teachers completing these programs has declined 25 percent in the last decade, according to federal data. More teachers now enter the classroom through alternative licensing programs or emergency certification, which can put the onus on schools and districts to provide ongoing professional development.

"We know non-traditional teacher pathways are growing," said NIET Chief Executive Officer Joshua Barnett. "Districts and schools need to focus on creating collaborative teams that ensure that every teacher—especially those new teachers—receives coaching and ongoing, sustained support, beyond getting just a mentor assigned to them."

Several finalist schools, including Provencal and Waterloo, also have implemented advanced teacher leadership roles, both to give more support to new teachers and better career trajectories for veteran teachers.

At Waterloo Elementary, for example, teachers work in multi-grade teams, each supported by an instructional coach and a master teacher, who co-teaches, tests new instructional practices, and trains other teachers. Each week, the teams choose focus areas for development, such as improving questioning techniques or developing classroom assessments.

Having teacher-leadership teams "offers a deeper level of support for our teachers," said Waterloo Principal Emily Parks. Two of the school's 14 educators are new and another teaches under alternative certification.

"We operate under the motto of, 'we go first,'" Parks continued. "Before we roll out any kind of new strategy or technique, our teaching specialists who have their own classes try it in their classrooms, and in turn, they can model successful ones for their teammates and the other teachers in the building."

Administrators also need to provide structural support for teacher collaboration and training, Barnett said. For example, Shenandoah Elementary dedicates time each week to ongoing training chosen and led by the teachers.

"We want them to have an effective professional learning and coaching system, so they don't have sporadic success but systematic success. And we want to see an ability for the school to create a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement," Barnett said.

Each of NIET's finalist schools receives $10,000, and the winner—to be announced at the end of the month—will receive $50,000. ■

RETURN TO PAGE 1

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Teachers Dread PD. Here's How One School Leader Made It Engaging

By Olina Banerji

On most days, Courtney Walker, the assistant principal at Carrollton High School in Carrollton, Ga., doesn't make it too far down her to-do list. That's because she's always adjusting the school's master schedule to make room for new learning opportunities for students and teachers.

Walker joined the school in 2019 as an assistant principal for attendance and assessment, but quickly developed a "passion" for creating learning pathways for the 100 teachers in her school, which serves about 1,700 students.

"Educators are one of the largest group of stakeholders [in school], and they're experts in what they do. They should have a voice in what kind of professional learning they receive," Walker said in an interview with Education Week.

With her leadership team, which consists of her principal, other assistant principals, and the student dean, Walker has created five different personal learning pathways for teachers that guide their professional development for the year, in a structure that mirrors how high school students choose career pathways.

Teachers take a baseline assessment, choose an area of instruction they want to work on, and attend four sessions over a year to learn and practice their new skills. The pathways are run by expert teachers at the school, a model that favors peer learning over one-size-fits-all lectures by outside experts.

Many teachers dislike PD. Too much of it isn't customized or relatable. In a nationally representative survey of over 1,400 teachers conducted in October 2023, EdWeek found that almost half of the respondents said the PD they are required to take is irrelevant and not connected to their most pressing needs. By contrast, 41 percent of the more than 650 school leaders surveyed as part of the same effort, said the PD they provided was "very relevant."

There's a middle ground here, and leaders like Walker are trying to build on it. Her efforts appear to have borne fruit. Teacher resignations and retirements at the school are back to pre-pandemic levels, after doubling in the 2021-22 school year. And while it's notoriously hard to connect student learning directly to teacher PD, student outcomes on state assessments in subjects like American literature, U.S. history, and biology, have improved.

Walker's efforts were recognized recently at a gathering of assistant principals from across the country, where she was named the National Assistant Principal of the Year. Here's what Walker said about the connection between good PD and meeting a school's goals.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What was your transition like from educator to administrator?

Working with kids is totally different from working with adults. I used to be an elementary school teacher. Adults approach professional learning very differently from students learning in a classroom. That was something I really had to work through. And in moving from the classroom setting to administration, I realized that I had to present [professional] learning that looks authentic to educators, and something that they are vested in.

With students, they're easier in terms of implementing change, because they're pretty open and excited. But a lot of the educators are veteran, and they're a lot older than I am, and they've got a lot of expertise in their field. I wanted to respect that.

My job was to figure out how to help dial in their gifts and talents, and push them toward things they are passionate about. I don't ever want to assume that I know what they need, because they know the needs of their students.

How did you include educator voices in your PD?

The professional learning pathways for our teachers are similar to the career pathways we've created for our students. Teachers self-identify areas for growth, and they attend professional learning that directly addresses their need. We wanted teachers to lead this learning.

So, we gave them a structure of five pathways of learning, which were linked to our teacher-evaluation standards and district initiatives.

[A pathway could read something like: "increasing student ownership over learning through self-assessments," according to a presentation Walker shared.]

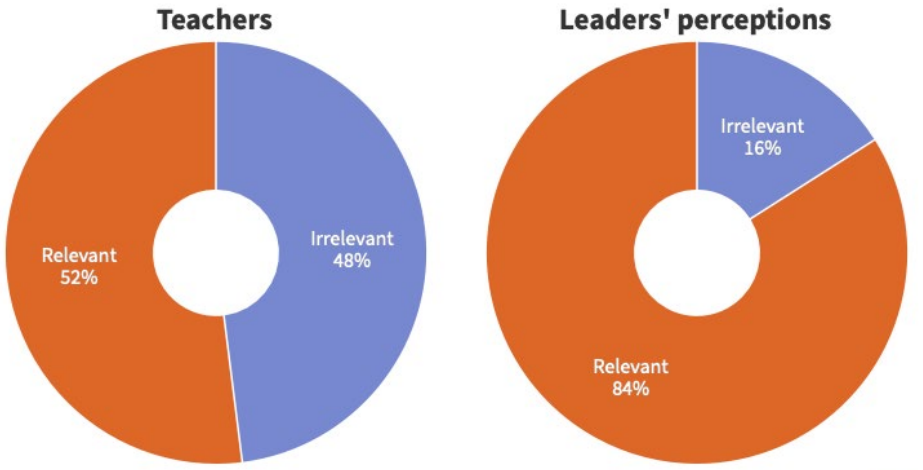
All teachers took a needs-based assessment at the beginning of the process, and within two years, were able to attend a training that was their first or second choice.

A teacher stays with a pathway all year long, but the difference is that you're meeting in small groups of four or five, instead of a big 40-person training. In a meeting, teachers from different disciplines learn strategies, roll them out, and then report back on how they're working.

What about PD on specific subjects?

In parallel to the schoolwide learning pathways, we also have common course teams that meet every week. They look at student data within their subject, what instructional strate-

How relevant to your/their current teaching job was the professional development your district or school provided (or paid a vendor to provide) in the past year?



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center, The State of Teaching 2024

gies were adopted, and drill down to what each individual student needs.

It's running both ways, right? You have teachers of the same content working together. And then you're looking much more broadly, across the building and across curriculums, about strategies that are beneficial.

The third area of work are "data digs" we do three times a year to zoom out and check if we're making progress toward our school's goals.

Teachers have a lot on their plates. How do you encourage them if their interest in the PD is flagging?

I give teachers time throughout the school year to reflect on which of their practices are working. It's important to prompt or coach them in that reflection process. Making time for this is important, so we have a 90-minute planning block for these pathway meetings four times a year.

We observe their classroom for strategies that they discussed with peers in their pathway session. If they're supposed to use self-assessments and checklists in the classroom, then we're looking for that. It's an opportunity to give feedback and say, hey, I noticed that you had students self-assess on this skill and I think it went well. That connection between teacher reflection and administrator feedback is critical. It's also an opportunity to push them when they need to see things from a different perspective.

One of the things that our teachers asked for this year was to implement peer observations. They wanted to watch another teacher in action. One of our math teachers watched an AP Environmental Science class to observe how questions were being framed and asked.

What is the role you played specifically in making this happen?

When we started to do PD this way, we needed to have a structure in place to be able to support this. I created the framework, our five pathways [of learning], analysis protocols for our teams, which meant making agendas, meeting minutes, and assigning roles in the teams. And then I've worked very closely with all the team leaders to support them. I do monthly touch points to make sure it's being rolled out. But teachers are the ones driving the training.

Do you miss teaching?

Oh yeah! This year, some of our English teachers let me teach some lessons in their classrooms. There's nothing quite like it. ■

RETURN TO PAGE 1

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Going NUTs: How One District Supports Its 'New And Untenured' Teachers

By Sarah D. Sparks

New York's Frontier Central school district, on the banks of Lake Erie south of Buffalo, faces an increasingly common staffing problem: As of August this year, 140 out of its 478 teachers have been with district four years or less—and the ranks of untenured teachers are expected to swell to 250 in the next five years.

And while Frontier provides mentors to first-year teachers, its leaders worry that the majority of Frontier teachers will be new and untenured, with less institutional memory and limited engagement in the district's culture and community.

"That's approximately half our teaching staff," said Patrick Moses, Frontier's assistant superintendent for human resources. "They need support not just in year one, but also in years two, three, and four. ... How do we set ourselves up to provide the very best instructional environment that we can?"

To address the issue, the 4,400-student Frontier district has launched a training and support program for new and untenured teachers—affectionately dubbed the "NUTs"—in the years between the milestones of new-teacher induction and tenure four years. (In New York, it takes teachers four years and a day to earn tenure, which confers due process protections before they can be let go.)

Courtesy of Amber Chandler

Frontier Middle School teachers meet at Alchemy restaurant in Hamburg, N.Y. for a trivia game about school policies. It's part of a mentoring and engagement pilot program for untenured teachers in their 2nd to 4th years teaching at the school. The program is expanding districtwide this school year.

Most teacher support stops after a year or two

The Education Commission of the States, a clearinghouse of state policies, finds that about 31 states and the District of Columbia require induction and mentoring for new teachers, but in many cases these programs do not extend beyond the first year.

Frontier teachers enjoy one-to-one mentoring in their first year. The NUTs program is less intensive than that, but provides ongoing support from veteran teachers afterward and helps early career educators build a professional and social network to ask for help, share ideas, and learn about the district.

Building off the district's existing mentoring program for first-year teachers, a veteran mentor teacher in the district, Amber Chandler, launched a pilot of the extended support program in Frontier Middle School in 2023, with help from a $10,000 professional development grant from the American Federation of Teachers. The district has opted to expand the program to all its untenured teachers in the 2025-26 school year.

"You can look at this as, 'The sky is falling! We have all these new teachers! What are we gonna do?'" said Chandler, the author of the 2023 book Everything New Teachers Need to Know But Are Afraid to Ask. "But there's a great opportunity to create a community of educators from the ground up."

This kind of extended support and acculturation has become increasingly important with the so-called "greening" of teaching experience nationwide, as retirements escalate and fewer young teachers stay in the profession long term.

"It's a phenomenon that we see across the landscape," said Danielle Brown, the director of candidate experience and an expert on early-career educators for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which runs the National Board Certification process.

Board certification is an advanced teaching credential requiring a content assessment and portfolios of work. Traditionally, only teachers who have completed their third year in the classroom are eligible for the certification, but the National Board recently allowed teachers to begin the process as early as their first year.

"That change was in response to where we can see the landscape of where teaching is going," Brown said. "A mid-career teacher may be someone who is in year four or five, right? And once upon a time, a mid-career teacher was closer to 10 to 15 years in the profession."

These teachers still need support and development from their districts, Brown said, but their needs differ from those typically addressed by basic induction programs.

"Once you're in that mid-career space, you're thinking, OK, I have pedagogy now. What does this look like in practice with my actual students?," Brown said. "That mid-career educator is really looking for opportunities to build community through learning. They're looking for a space of reflection and collaboration ... seeing ways that connections could be made across either content areas or with other educators."

Lengthier support for teachers can be cost effective

Chandler said most of the new supports cost little but build significant instructional and social capital for teachers. Teachers in the program have monthly online "coffee breaks" in which they can discuss basic common problems, like grading or communicating with families. Teachers can get explicit help for classroom observations and preparing their professional portfolios for tenure review, but NUTs provides most of its information through social events: trivia nights, happy hours, and Q&A sessions rather than formal meetings and training.

"It was never like, 'come to a class and sit through like a boring seminar,'" said Madeline Vail, a newly tenured 2nd grade teacher who participated in the NUTs pilot program at Frontier Middle School last year. "My [first-year] mentor wasn't at the same school as me anymore, so it was nice that we were constantly having these events ... not only to build community with the other new and untenured teachers, but veteran teachers were there as well to discuss any issues."

They use a group messaging app to coordinate rather than email, to allow teachers to post photos, take polls, and ask quick questions of their colleagues without digging through other official communications.

"That way they will build community and become committed together," Chandler said. "Teaching's lonely, but if they find their community, it'll really strengthen education."

It can also help in a crisis. "In my third year of teaching, I had a student pass away, and it was so nice to have support and mentorship through that," Vail said. Despite no longer being a newbie, "I still felt like I had mentors who were available to me and people who were supporting me."

Not all teachers who are new to the district are new to teaching, and the program has also given more experienced, untenured teachers a way to engage with the community.

Lindsey Wright, a kindergarten teacher and military spouse with 18 years' experience across different districts, is going into her final pre-tenure year at Frontier.

Though she has extensive pedagogical experience, getting used to the different culture in each district is stressful even for seasoned teachers.

"When you go to a new district, there's different policies, different procedures. ... It can be overwhelming and taxing even for veteran teachers," Wright said. Through the program, "you have somebody help bring you into the fold and envelop you into your school environment. You don't feel so alone and like you're floundering."

Wright has already started to take classes to become a mentor herself once she makes tenure next year.

"Teaching is hard and it's complex and there's always challenges," she said, "so it helps having a safe person to lean on as you're trying to figure out being in a new district, in a new school with new colleagues." ■

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3 Secrets to Success from High-Impact PLCs

Across districts, the most effective PLCs share a simple truth: strong results come from shared purpose, structured collaboration, and evidence-based decision-making. These three core beliefs surfaced *repeatedly* in a recent conversation with K-12 leaders reflecting on what truly moves the needle for PLCs.

1

A Shared Vision Anchors the Work

High-impact PLCs begin with clarity. Teams align on what PLCs are meant to achieve, how success is defined, and the norms that guide collaboration. This shared foundation keeps the discussions focused and helps teams build momentum over time.

2

Protected Time Turns Collaboration Into Progress

PLCs *thrive* when educators have consistent, dedicated time to meet. Whether embedded into weekly schedules or supported through release time, structured collaboration ensures teams can dig into student learning, reflect on instructional strategies, and make meaningful adjustments.

3

Data Should Drive Every Conversation

When teams ground their discussion in student data, they can quickly identify trends, surface misconceptions, and design targeted supports. Data turns PLCs from conversations into actionable plans that accelerate student growth.

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-Laura Kegan, Principal, Scott County Schools

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2 Districts Overhauled How They Teach English Learners. Here's How

By Ileana Najarro

Years ago, the Beaverton school district in Oregon participated in a study to determine the right models for improving English learners' academic achievement.

The results, which came out in 2019, pointed to two promising models, especially for the elementary grades: dual-language immersion, in which students learn in both English and another language, and an integrated, collaborative model, such as when a content-area and English-language-development teacher work side by side in the same classroom, ensuring English learners are exposed to grade-level academic content and vocabulary.

While beneficial to both English learners and native English-speaking students, dual-language immersion programs are costly and hard to find across the country.

So Beaverton, the Corvallis school district, and other Oregon districts have worked in recent years to scale up their use of integrated, collaborative teaching.

They've encountered some logistical hurdles adjusting to a new model—changing schedules, staffing classrooms with qualified English-language-development teachers alongside content-area teachers, and getting all staff on board with the shared responsibility of helping English learners learn English. But they've been able to address some of the factors that were holding English learners back.

In Beaverton, students who retained the English-learner classification into high school were missing some electives and core courses because of the time they had to spend in English-language-development sessions. And in Corvallis a decade ago, half of Latino students—including many who were English learners—weren't graduating on time.

The switch to the collaborative model has allowed the districts to tackle those problems.

"We know that language learning cannot just take place one period of the day in an English-language-development period," said Andrew Robinson, an assistant administrator for multilingual programs for the Beaverton district, which is located outside of Portland. "It must be supported throughout students' entire day, so that is where we're focusing a lot of effort now: clarifying roles, helping people understand and build capacity so that not just the ELD teacher, but all teachers, can support language development."

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As the population of English learners continues to grow nationwide, Oregon districts such as Beaverton and Corvallis offer a case study in how to use the collaborative model to help English learners learn English through academic content.

Integrated, collaborative models take different forms

Generally, the integrated, collaborative model takes two different forms: co-teaching and consulting.

In the co-teaching model, English learners take a high school course, such as social studies, alongside their non-English learner peers. The English learners in the class are at about the same level of English-language proficiency, but there's nothing that really sets them apart in the classroom. They're not taken out of the room for special instruction or given a different curriculum.

In the classroom are two teachers, the social studies teacher and an English-language-development teacher, answering questions, planning lessons, and teaching together as equals.

With consulting, the content-area teacher teaches alone, but shares planning time with English-language teachers to ensure lesson plans feature English-language instruction strategies, Robinson said.

Beaverton and Corvallis use a combination of these models.

In Corvallis, both English-language and content-area teachers have told Marcianne Koetje, the district's multilingual programs and equity coordinator, that the collaborative model has not only helped English learners but all students in the classroom.

But there are several logistical and cultural challenges to these models.

In Corvallis, the switch to the collaborative model required administrators to think about English learners' schedules first when preparing master schedules each year, said Koetje said.

And Beaverton—a much larger district about 100 miles north of Corvallis—is working now to extend the collaborative model to the high school level.

But one of the biggest hurdles for both has been getting all teachers onboard with the idea of playing a part in language instruction through academic content.

"Especially at the high school level, there's this fixed mindset that I'm a content teacher and I'm endorsed in science or I'm endorsed in social studies, and language has always been somebody else's [job]," Koetje said.

Overcoming challenges to these models requires district support

Koetje has had to be strategic in choosing whom to hire as English-language-development teachers. The district now looks for teachers with general classroom or coaching experience that can translate to co-teaching or consulting.

"I think that has really helped us as a district, because in the past we had language-development specialists who had only ever been trained on how to do small groups, and we noticed there was a huge disconnect, because when they were co-teaching, when they were doing integrated ELD, they didn't really have the skill set necessarily to work with all students," Koetje said.

With content-area teachers, Koetje and her team have found often that it's not that they don't want to engage with language instruction altogether, but rather they are afraid to admit they don't know how to do it. Professional development and schedules that allow for shared planning time with English-

language-development teachers have helped, she said.

In Beaverton, district leaders must sort out how to set up planning and classroom schedules, as well as how to pair content-area teachers with English-language-development peers, Robinson said.

Beyond these logistical challenges, the larger challenge Beaverton—with more than 50 schools and nearly 39,000 students—faces is how to coach so many teachers with different degrees of experience with either language or content-area instruction on this new model.

The district has turned to professional development to try to address this.

In one session, a high school English-language-development teacher led a mock health lesson for various content-area teachers completely in Spanish. She used language-learning strategies that help students learn content even if they're not proficient in the language of instruction. These are the same strategies teachers would be expected to use to help English learners in their own classrooms where they're teaching in English.

The exercise put teachers in the proverbial shoes of English learners so they could better understand how language instruction through content works, said Katherine Hart, a teacher on special assignment at the district as part of the high school multilingual team.

"One of the main goals of our PD is to really get the content-area teacher to see the ELD teacher as a partner, and you can't just hand over your lessons and expect them to be adopted and then get them back. It is really a team effort, and you're really planning together," Hart said.

English-language-development teachers are getting professional development on stepping into coaching and co-teaching roles that they may not be used to after years of working primarily with small groups of English learners in separate classrooms.

The Beaverton and Corvallis districts, along with several other districts and researchers from Oregon State University they're working with, have also developed a district-level guide for using integrated, collaborative models to help other districts in the state—particularly those that are smaller and more rural. ■

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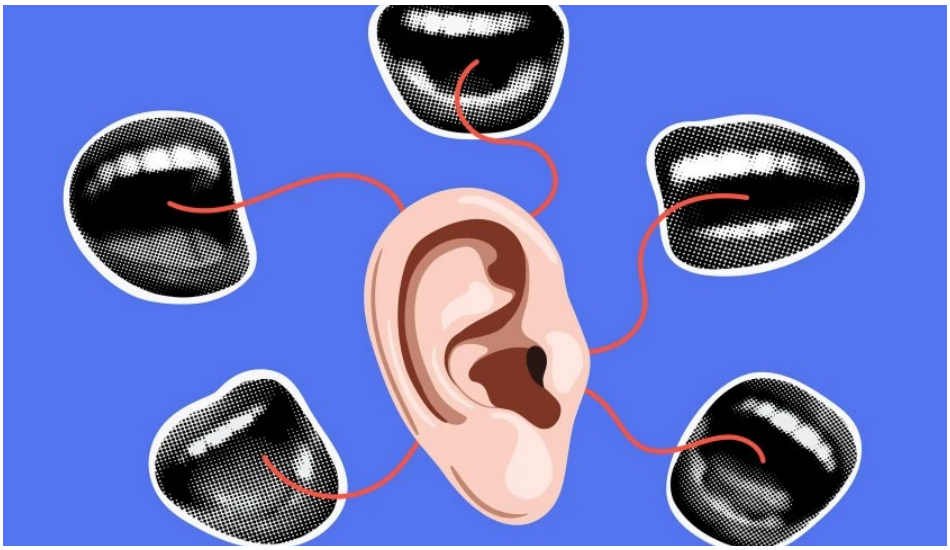
Teachers Set the Agenda for This Math PD Program. So Far, They Like the Results

By Sarah Schwartz



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It's one of the most common complaints about teacher professional development: The programming that districts put together doesn't actually address the instructional challenges that vex teachers the most.

Teachers often feel like the rare time set aside for them to improve their craft isn't actually designed in a way that will lead to better outcomes for students—in part because administrators who aren't in the classroom set the PD agenda.

A growing statewide network in West Virginia is hoping to fix this intractable problem.

The Mountaineer Mathematics Master Teachers, or M3T, pays middle and high school math teachers to lead local professional-learning teams across the state. Teachers set the agenda and serve as expert facilitators, zeroing in on the issues that "bug" educators in their classrooms and testing out strategies to address them, said Joanna Burt-Kinderman, one of the network's project leads.

"That shouldn't be radical, but that's what never happens," she said.

Burt-Kinderman, who was featured as an EdWeek Leader To Learn From in 2019 for her work in math instruction in West Virginia's Pocahontas County schools, launched the network six years ago with Matthew Campbell, an associate director of the West Virginia University School of Education. There are now 41 math teacher-leaders leading groups of educators across 37 of the state's 55 county school districts.

In the M3T network, teachers use a continuous improvement framework: making incremental changes, monitoring the results, and then taking action based on the findings.

Change at this scale feels more doable than the system overhauls that other kinds of professional learning might suggest, said Dana Stoll, a math teacher at Brooke Middle School in Brooke County, who participates in the network. "It's small, manageable things," she said.

Why teacher collaboration matters

Professional learning that centers teacher collaboration and prioritizes concrete classroom applications isn't a new idea. Research has long shown that this kind of PD is most effective.

This approach makes PD immediately relevant for teachers, because "this work has been done with the students in this school, in this place," said Davita Lancelin, the vice president of services at the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. The group, which was not involved with the West Virginia network, partners with schools to implement teacher-coaching and professional development systems.

But M3T has a broader reach than traditional school- or district-based communities: It connects teachers with others in their subject and grade level across the state. And it takes a more bottom-up approach than some other teacher-leadership models, relying on participants to set their own goals, rather than working from district priorities.

"Everything that we have been testing have been things that we've identified in our own classes that students struggle with," said Karen Keener, a math teacher-leader at Brooke High School in Brooke County. "It's very tailored to our classes."

Especially now, getting students to engage in math classes can feel like an uphill battle. "We've identified that our students just don't persevere when they're struggling," Keener said.

Study after study has shown that math achievement took a hit during the pandemic. Attitudes toward the subject have shifted over time, too. Not only in the United States, but across the world, teenagers are now more likely to say that math makes them anxious than a decade ago.

And because math is cumulative—students' ability to master new concepts is often largely dependent on their understanding of foundational ideas—supporting middle and high school students who struggle can be tricky.

Beyond this, West Virginia teachers face some unique challenges, with a growing number of non-certified teachers in math and science classrooms. Average teacher pay in the state was the lowest in the nation in the 2022-23 school year, according to a database compiled by the National Education Association.

In the M3T network, teachers are paid an annual $10,000 stipend for what amounts to about four to five hours of extra duty work a week.

"This is providing people that second job," Burt-Kinderman said. "This is taking really ambitious folks and trying to incentivize them to stay and help us figure out how everybody can teach math better."

The project, which had been funded through a time-limited National Science Foundation grant, could become a permanent

fixture in some districts. Last year, the West Virginia state legislature passed a bill that will make new funding available to schools to support teacher-leadership networks in math and science.

Though only limited, preliminary data are available on student outcomes, evaluations of the project from WestEd have found that both teachers and administrators felt that it improved math teaching.

And while only about half of all teachers in the state think that professional learning offered through their school or district is valuable, 96 percent of M3T members say their participation in the network meets that bar, according to data from West Virginia University. They're also more likely to say they want to continue teaching.

"We enjoy our work more, we find value in what we're doing," said Elaine Cook, a math teacher-leader at Musselman High School in Berkeley County. "It's making us stay in the classroom, and we wouldn't be here otherwise."

Students struggle with math mindset—but also foundational skills

Despite working in different districts with different student populations, the stickiest problems in teachers' math classrooms have turned out to be remarkably similar, Burt-Kinderman said.

There are persistent challenges around mindset: getting students to take charge of problem-solving, talk to each other about what they're struggling with, and engage deeply with the material.

But there are also more discrete, concrete gaps in students' knowledge. Many haven't mastered previous grade-level skills, so teachers have to figure out ways to build those lessons into new content—and teach them in a way that will stay with kids as they move on from the class.

At Brooke Middle School, for example, teachers saw that students tended to freeze up when presented with word problems—so they tested a new approach to tackling these questions.

They started to take a deliberate pause, requiring students to jot down what they noticed and wondered about the problem before starting to pull out numbers and begin calculations. The strategy made students more likely to attempt the problem, rather than shut down, said Jami Packer, an 8th grade teacher at the school and a math teacher-leader.

It had other benefits, too.

"Especially at a middle school level, kids are so worried about what their peers think," she said. Asking students to dissect the problem, rather than immediately asking for an answer, "lowers the bar on correctness," she said, leading to more participation.

Will better PD lead to better student outcomes?

Still, teachers reported that the strategy didn't have a significant impact on an important outcome: students' accuracy in word-problem solving.

It's not yet clear whether the network has large-scale effects on student scores.

Pass rates on the 8th grade state math test nearly doubled between 2021 and 2023 in schools that participated in the network, compared to slower growth in non-network schools. But Burt-Kinderman is quick to note that other factors—or combinations of them—could be responsible for the higher scores.

For teachers, though, the success is evident in how students operate in the classroom.

Kyle Berry, a math teacher-leader at Barboursville Middle School in Cabell County, focused this year with his cohort on encouraging students to remember and reuse previously learned skills.

While before, most students said on surveys that they didn't regularly do this in class, Berry now sees evidence of this practice in his classroom daily. Students take pictures of diagrams on the board; they save notes to pull out for later use, he said.

The network is building confidence and self-efficacy, he said—not just for teachers, but for students, too. ■

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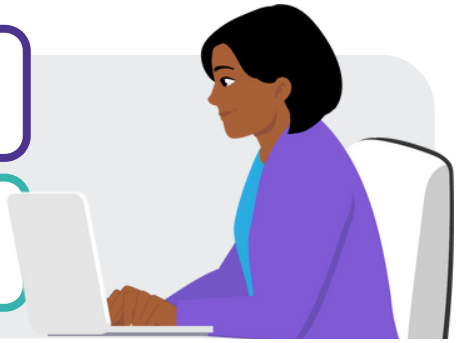

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Peter DeWitt

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.

Districts that want to follow the same approach and create collectives can research the common areas their leaders, teachers, and staff members are focusing on in their academic or school improvement plans, create

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.

Peter DeWitt

OPINION

Published July 16, 2025

How Communities of Practice Can Drive School Improvement

Leaders can learn to build the trust needed for real change

By Peter DeWitt & Michael Nelson

The two of us have a pretty simple goal when facilitating professional learning. Keep things simple, mix research with practice, understand our impact, and ask questions that allow us to learn from our participants as much as they, we hope, learned from us.

That doesn't always seem to be the norm in professional learning. In education, professional learning often feels more like an event than a process. In our experience as facilitators, we learned long ago that there are educators who are "voluntold" to attend a session. Other times, we have seen educators who attend large conferences, experience a sit-and-get, and then head back to their schools implementing very little of what was thrown at them.

Professional learning needs to be approachable, personal, and empathetic to the needs of the people in the room.

We have found in our roles as teachers, building leaders, and Michael as a district leader that what impacts educators the most is when they are engaged in learning that has elements of coaching, research, and true practice from individuals who have actually spent time in the classroom or leading a school or district.

A while ago, the two of us began engaging in a Communities of Practice (CoPs) during our long-term work with educators and leaders. Communities of Practice is a model rooted in the work of Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner. They say, "A CoP is formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor."

At their core, CoPs are not just groups that get together and talk about schedules and adult issues. They are social learning systems. They form when people come together around a shared challenge and evolve through relationship-building and continuous meaning-making. The theory is powerful, when done correctly.

Translating Theory to Practice

In 1972, Odetola's research found that students feel alienated from schools for two reasons. One, they don't feel like they have a voice in their own learning, and two, they don't feel an emotional connection to their teacher or school. These days, we know that many adults working in schools feel the same way, which partly contributes to the teacher-attrition issue school leaders are dealing with around the world.

In our work with leadership teams across states and districts, we've discovered the real power of CoPs lies in making that theory actionable. In their books, the Wenger-Trayners give permission for participants in a CoP to have flexibility within a structure. It's about taking ownership over our own learning.

In our book Lead Collectively: From Belief to Action to Impact, we introduce a simple but powerful framework: the three-legged stool of collective leader efficacy. The three legs are shared understanding, joint work, and evidence of impact, which are rooted in collaborative inquiry.

The three legs of our stool aren't just key components of strong leadership; they mirror the core elements of the Wenger-Trayners' CoP theory.

For example:

Shared Understanding = Domain The pair describe the domain as the area of focus that brings people together. In our framework, this translates to building trust, clarity, and coherence around a shared priority. Whether it's literacy, equity, or instructional improvement, clarity in the "why" gives a CoP its direction. Our teams use strategies like the Frayer Model and the Collaborative Inquiry Placemat to co-construct meaning and avoid assumptions.

Joint Work = Community Community is where relationships grow. In our CoPs, joint work isn't just collaboration, it's purposeful, structured, and grounded in data. Leaders engage in protocols, coaching, and shared decisionmaking that foster vulnerability and interdependence. We've seen that when leaders work together to define problems, test strategies, and reflect on outcomes, they build the trust needed for real change.

Evidence of Impact = Practice A CoP's practice evolves through reflection. We build this into every cycle. Using Victoria Bernhardt's four types of data, which are demographics, perceptions, student learning, and school processes, teams evaluate whether their strategies are improving student outcomes.

What It Looks Like in Practice

CoPs are dynamic and focused learning groups. They meet monthly, supported by trained facilitators and our inquiry tools. Leaders:

- Explore problems of practice rooted in evidence
- Develop and test theories of action
- Collect and analyze evidence of impact
- Engage in reflection cycles to guide next steps

The results have been powerful. Teams report stronger leadership clarity, more strategic use of data, and greater alignment between adult actions and student needs. As a result of participating and engaging in the CoP process, leaders have also reported they have better language to use with staff they supervise and see a better connection to the overall district vision.

A Way of Being

As Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner suggest, CoPs are more than a strategy, they're a way of being, which matches our leadership thinking around our collaborative inquiry place mat that will ultimately support student learning. The husband and wife researchers believe that learning is social and change is relational. CoPs invite us to shift from isolated leadership to interdependent inquiry. They create space for agency, reflection, and shared purpose. ■

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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Peter DeWitt

Mike Nelson facilitates a group of educators at a leadership conference in Kennewick, Wash.

OPINION

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Educators Want to Connect With Colleagues. Learning Networks Offer That Opportunity

8 essential elements to build successful ones

By Peter DeWitt

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 (read guests blogs by Nelson here and here). 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,

"This is the story of a circle. When we're first born, our circle is very small, but as we grow and build relationships, our circle keeps getting bigger and bigger to include family, friends, neighbors, community, and beyond."

Over the next two years, our team of five, along with close to 200 directors of teaching and learning, met monthly in a hybrid approach through the ILN. We had three in-person events each year and monthly three-hour sessions that focused on instructional leadership, collective efficacy, and other timely topics.

We used the online engagement tool Mentimeter to engage participants and formally assess their learning, and Mentimeter helped us understand the needs of the group so we could plan for the next session. We had a "Lunch and Learn" for one hour each month based on what we had learned from the audience and used learning protocols during each session to engage the audience but also to model strategies they could use for teachers and leaders in their districts.

The feedback from participants each time and overall, after the two-year professional learning journey completed, was hugely positive. Anyone working in school leadership understands the importance of developing a professional learning network that is impactful, and it's more needed now than ever before. The reason why it's so important now is that burnout among leaders is high, educators are leaving the profession, and we all need to feel connected to our colleagues—and connected to the reason why we got into education in the first place.

In fact, 42 percent of principals surveyed indicated they were considering leaving their position (NASSP, Learning Policy Institute). Among the most common reasons they cite are:

- Working Conditions
- Compensation and Financial Obligations
- High-Stakes Accountability Systems and Evaluation Practices
- Lack of Decisionmaking Authority
- Inadequate Access to Professional Learning Opportunities (NASSP, LPI. 2021).

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 (read more about it here) 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. ■

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RETURN TO PAGE 1