Professional Development in a Standards-Based Learning System

By Winona Hao

Public schools spend between $4 billion to $18 billion annually on professional development, much of which educators have deemed ineffective and not particularly relevant to the challenges they face. At the same time, professional learning is routinely cited as an essential ingredient to improving educators' practice so their students can meet the high academic standards states have set. State boards of education can resolve this conundrum by aligning standards for professional learning to student learning standards.

Research has highlighted a couple of factors that help explain why professional development has failed to improve teacher practice much. First, after improving significantly in the first three to four years of their careers, teachers plateau, either because they believe they already know how to teach well or for lack of motivation. In systems with no pay raises, promotions, or improvement of status accruing from being better trained, many teachers unsurprisingly fail to attain the highest levels of expertise or become coaches or school leaders.

Second, the typical mode of delivery has come under stiff criticism. The workshop model, the most common type of US professional development, makes up more than 90 percent of teachers’ learning activities. Consultants and administrators have usually picked workshop topics and speakers, with little input from teachers. Most important, workshops tend not to present content by subjects or grades, reducing its impact on practice.

State boards can play key roles in professional development by 1) strengthening state policies; 2) promoting effective models; 3) creating a career ladder; and 4) collecting data on the effectiveness of teacher learning activities.

Policies. States can examine their professional development programs to see whether teachers are learning how to elicit student analysis and reasoning, investigation and problem solving, and questioning strategies, called for in many state learning standards. States can also define high-quality, effective professional development to encompass time, frequency, intensity, and content. These definitions can serve as a baseline for state and local agencies.

States can go further, initiating requirements or developing guidelines to help districts connect content to teachers’ subject areas and grades. Researchers and teachers agree that hands-on experience and training in classroom-like settings is the best. Where this approach is a revamp, states should consider providing additional resources.

Models. Workshops and other one-offs do not work. Conversely, mentoring, coaching, curriculum planning meetings, and establishing a professional learning community have proved effective. State policies can ensure that, whatever model is used, professional learning is ongoing and consistent and gives teachers time to practice skills. Mastery of a new skill takes 20 separate instances of practice on average—and more times for more complex skills. States can encourage models in which teachers engage in professional learning not only as trainees but also as trainers, which is far superior to engaging outside lecturers unfamiliar with local contexts.
Career Ladder. States can consider mechanisms for motivating teachers to improve and take on more responsibilities as they gain experience. Top talent is hard to find or develop where raises come only with years logged. High-performing systems have used career ladders for years to nurture and incentivize educator leaders. When combined with comprehensive performance review, such systems provide teachers with multiple opportunities to learn skills, practice them, and meet career goals.

Data Collection. Monitoring and evaluation is essential to determine professional learning’s effectiveness. Too often, researchers and educators report that no effective data emerged from professional learning evaluations. Research-based data collection systems should ensure selection of indicators that can truly show whether professional learning dollars were well spent.

NEW JERSEY’S REQUIREMENTS
New Jersey established professional development requirements for teachers in 1998 and has since worked with stakeholders to strengthen those policies. School districts must provide new-teacher mentoring and data-driven professional development plans. School-level committees must follow state professional development standards and content standards as they create their plans, which are to feature collaborative practices such as professional learning communities. Last December, the New Jersey Department of Education surveyed districts to see how they had implemented the state requirements in hopes of garnering strong implementation models and assessing financial and operational impacts. Results are not yet available.

NEW INCENTIVES UNDER ESSA
The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, presents opportunities for state boards. It redefined professional development as “sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, and short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, classroom-focused...” State boards should assess their own definitions, standards, and guidelines to see whether they align with ESSA.

ESSA also allows Title II money to be used for professional development in all subjects, not just core ones as before. It further states that activities and programs should be evidence-based. The Title II language supports career ladders and job-embedded programs such as induction, coaching, and mentoring.

With the adoption of rigorous learning standards, teachers need more effective support. States boards should work with stakeholders to ensure policies align and thus truly build a well-qualified workforce.

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NOTES
7. Ibid.