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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPLAINER

Teacher Professional Development, Explained

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

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

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

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

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

And research on the topic is mixed, with studies demonstrating that some approaches work well —and others don't have any effect.

Read on for an overview of the field: what options exist, what research shows can improve student outcomes, and how teachers say professional development could be improved.

What is teacher professional development?

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

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

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

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

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

What are some examples of teacher professional development?

The stereotypical PD session is the "one-and-done."

A group of teachers gather in a classroom or an auditorium to listen while a consultant delivers a scripted presentation on a general topic. It's then up to teachers to figure out how to apply that information to their specific classroom contexts—if they choose to do so at all.

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

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

- **Professional learning communities:** Also known as PLCs, these small groups of teachers—often organized around subject areas or grade levels—meet regularly to share expertise and plan for instruction.
- **Curriculum-based PD:** Teachers learn how to use their school or district's curriculum and other instructional materials, often discussing how to adapt it for their students' needs.
- **Coaching and peer observation:** An instructional coach, or teachers themselves, help other teachers plan lessons, observe each other's classrooms, and offer feedback.
- **Conferences, seminars, and institutes:** Teachers attend meetings outside of school, where they can learn from experts and their colleagues. These often occur during summer or other school breaks.
- **National Board Certification:** Teachers who complete a series of portfolio projects and pass an assessment receive this advanced certification, which comes with salary increases in some states.
- **University courses:** Teachers can take these to deepen their subject matter knowledge or their understanding of instructional practice. They can also count toward graduate degrees, which help teachers move up the pay ladder.

What kind of teacher professional development is most common?

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

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

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

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

Districts spent on other types of PD too. Eighty percent of districts said they funded longer-term professional development lasting four or more days, and 55 percent supported collaborative or job-embedded professional development.

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

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

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

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

What makes for effective teacher professional development?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Other types of professional development also have stipulations.

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

What do teachers say would make professional development better?

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

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

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

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

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