GETTING SMART ON

TRANSFORMATIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

Alvin Crawford,
CEO of Knowledge Delivery Systems

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Four Characteristics of Transformative Professional Development

If any education expert, policymaker or practitioner sat down with a blank sheet of paper to make notes about what needs fixing in our schools, I'd bet that improving professional development would top that list.

We know the dismal numbers. According to a recent study, some school districts spend, on average, $18,000 per teacher per year on professional development. With about 3.5 million teachers on the job in the U.S., that's billions of dollars in annual PD spending.

According to a new study (and many that came before) that money is mostly wasted. This new study found that about 70 percent of teachers showed no improvements in teacher learning or effectiveness. In fact, some teachers actually regressed.

To be clear, even though the current system's not working, I'm not in favor of taking money out of professional development. I am a proponent of using that money—but far less of it—to get professional development right. I want to invest in making PD systems that actually help teachers get better—much better. I want to help build professional development efforts that transform teachers and improve student outcomes, expedite the adoption of new technologies and ensure that important principles such as equity really take root in schools.

We can't abandon PD, nor can we afford to keep the broken system of professional development that exists today. We can't simply tweak our current practice and expect that much will change in terms of outcomes for teachers or students. We need to overhaul

our approach to developing certified teachers to improve outcomes for students. While no one-size-fits-all answer exists, we do know what works and what we need to change in order to achieve better teacher practices and outcomes for students.

We should consider how teachers learn and acknowledge the dual modalities for teacher development: one proving more formal and focused on acquiring new skills, and the second involving an ongoing sharing of ideas and best practices in a less formal learning community.

In the traditional model, we offer a variety of professional development workshops and hope teachers take advantage of the offerings. Let's accept the reality that this model of choice doesn't accomplish much. It's not deep enough, it generally doesn't provide active collegial learning, and there is little or no follow-up. At a systemic level, we should provide more focused and scaled professional development that addresses key problems of practice that carry importance for all teachers.

Let's explore the more formal way of teacher training and call it Strategic Professional Development with four common characteristics:

Focused
As much as a desire exists to individualize professional development, there are key problems of practice present in every district. There are many ways to allow for differentiation and choice within professional development, but to maximize impact and return on investment, we should develop a common language and understanding in non-negotiable areas like college and career-ready standards or by offering support for diverse learners. Here there should be an expectation that all teachers become experts in this practice.

Collegial Learning
Teaching is engaging. It's interactive. Learning better teaching should be, too. Many traditional PD workshops are "sit and get." We know that yields no outcomes for teacher knowledge or student achievement. There's also a difference between reading about a new teaching practice and experiencing it firsthand—watching someone implement the practice or trying it yourself. Good PD programs not only allow peer-to-peer learning and modeling; they include it by design.

Intensive, Sustained and Continuous
Despite the current practice of holding a one-day workshop and calling it done, almost all of the research on effective PD describes intensive, sustained and continuous professional development focused on a particular content or pedagogy for more than 50 hours. To some, this may sound daunting. In practice, however, it amounts to less than 30 minutes a day focused on acquiring new skills and collaborating with coaches and peers around the work, followed by job-embedded applications of new skills in the classroom.

Improving PD also means recognizing that teachers—like their students—learn in different ways and at different speeds. The best programs accommodate for self-pacing in development and allow for questions as well as reflection and exploration.

Good programs also build upon the premise that learning doesn't stop— especially for teachers. In fact, the research suggests that teachers need to apply a skill more than 20 times in order to gain mastery. Support, collaboration, community, peer feedback and practice should remain ongoing. If teaching and learning don't stop for students, the support shouldn't either.

Analyze and Optimize

The lack of good measurements made it impossible to determine what was and wasn't working in PD. For many, the benefits of flipping PD and using online professional development to scale the learning include real-time metrics on teacher progress and improvement. Better information unearths best practices and builds on efficiencies across many professional development implementations.

In cases where PD systems built on these four pillars, the results—predictably—have proven, easy to measure and (modesty aside) spectacular. In one urban school district that deployed a pilot program of our system, teachers showed a 44 percent boost in competency across the board. Additionally, the new development programs we tested cost just $500 per teacher, instead of the previously allotted $18,000.

While it may not be practical to check off every box on an education improvement list, it absolutely can be to reimagine and reengineer professional development. We know how to do it better and for less money. The only remaining question: Why haven't we yet?

Next-Gen Professional Learning: Online, Personalized and Collaborative

Dr. Mark Porterie, Superintendent of Port Arthur Independent School District

For most new teachers—those with zero to five years of classroom experience—the actual classroom experience can be far different than what they studied or expected. Theoretical learning can only do so much as far as preparing a teacher to adequately guide students.

That's part of the reason that, according to a 2014 Carnegie Foundation report, at least four out of every 10 new teachers leave the profession within five years. That level of teacher turnover costs us $7 billion a year nationally. Even worse, as a result, students suffer because they routinely learn from teachers who lack the skills and experience of classroom veterans.

Administrators do what we can to assist younger teachers. We do things such as pair them with more experienced teachers, ask questions about their progress and devote time and financial resources to professional development to improve their skills.

But we knew that wasn't enough.

Schools leaders saw and heard the frustrations about the existing PD system and nodded in agreement when studies like Teaching The Teachers came out, showing that, for the past 20 years, PD has been predominantly ineffective.

In a perfect world, we—I think every school—would provide ongoing, one-on-one support and development for all of our teachers. We'd help build and back organic teaching communities where educators could learn from one another and share their successes and challenges. And we'd not only support our newest teachers; we'd make sure they also had access to teaching experts outside the district.

Now it's possible for districts like ours to get much closer to delivering the tools we want—and our teachers need—by looking outside the traditional, in-person systems to new, online options. Fortunately, here at Port Arthur ISD, in concert with the TSTA (our teachers' association), we secured grant funding to buy and test a new, online learning platform for our beginning teachers. Our search, decision and early results may be helpful for other districts determined to revamp and upgrade their PD programs, too.

Early on, we identified four key needs for our online PD test drive:
1. Foremost, it needed to bolster new teachers, reducing turnover.
2. It required an innovative PD system that's geared toward newer teachers who learn, think and communicate online and through social media.
3. It needed to help experienced professionals who came to the classroom from other careers.
4. It needed to provide more training and development time—both overall and over a longer duration—without losing quality.

I imagine many districts have a similar PD wish list.

Since, in our district, more than a third of our teachers are new, we were counting on the new teacher support effort to cut down on teacher turnover—adding continuity and experience to our classrooms and benefiting our students. As every district or business leader knows, turnover is costly as well as corrosive to morale and stability.

And because so many newer teachers are also digitally-fluent millennials, we're optimistic that putting professional development online—in a format that so many new teachers already use and prefer—will make the transition even easier. It's just silly to use a chalkboard in an iPad world.

Most of all, we wanted a program that lasted more than a day or two—something that teachers could rely on for assistance whenever questions or opportunities arose. We needed our PD to be longitudinal as well as deep. It needed to weave in real-life experience from our more seasoned teachers, but also best practices from national teaching leaders who could offer fresh or unique ideas.

And while those seemed like lofty goals, the flexibility and power of online learning made reaching them possible. After review, the Professional Learning Platform we brought in— designed and provided by Knowledge Delivery Systems (KDS)— met our core needs and the benchmarks of transformative PD.

This online PD program uses social learning tools and unique content to personalize learning, and it encourages teachers to build relationships, share experience and collaborate in ways that just weren't possible before. In addition to its year-round nature, the KDS program also involves in-person meetings—in teacher communities—every six weeks so teachers can review their experiences both in the classroom and within the course. Overall, the program delivers a robust 50 hours of training, engagement and support. It reflects a complete shift from the single day of development we once required.

So far, the response to the online approach has been positive—especially the ability to have long-term, assigned coaches at your fingertips. "It covers every area of concern a new teacher could face," Emily Moore, a former Port Arthur principal told Ed Dive, "If you're teaching a concept, and you're struggling with it, you have an online coach. You have a form you can type out saying, 'Hey, I'm struggling with this idea.'"

Based on what we know our teachers and students need, we were not content to stick to the old ways that proved ineffective, as they fostered turnover and burnout. With these better, more dynamic, online PD alternatives already available, the only thing you have to lose by shifting to one is the older, slower, more expensive system—which wasn't working well in the first place.

Transformative Professional Learning: Getting Better is Getting Easier

Irvin Scott, Deputy Director, Education at Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

I will never forget what it was like to be a new teacher in 1989. I was fresh out of college and eager to make a difference in the classroom. Passionate about literature and writing, I burned with a commitment to inspire and ignite learning in my students. But it didn't take me long to realize that I had so much to learn, despite four years of training to become a teacher. Nearly 30 years later, new and experienced teachers find themselves in a much better place when it comes to opportunities to improve their practice.

It's been more than two years since I wrote about efforts to improve teacher success through increasing collaboration and better, ongoing training. And it's been more than three years since Primary Sources, a poll of teachers released by Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, showed that teachers ranked more time for collaboration and quality professional development (PD) among the most important factors to keeping them in the profession—more important than salary increases or greater decision-making roles.

In that time, many bright minds and new ideas have been put to the task of making teacher development richer and more impactful. The Gates Foundation, where I work, has invested heavily in creating spaces for teacher input, collaboration and engagement. And that work continues.

Unfortunately, so do the reports that professional learning for teachers still has a very long way to go. Just a month or so ago, another widely discussed study found that, despite districts spending billions of dollars a year on professional development, about 70 percent of teachers showed no improvements in teacher learning or effectiveness. Some teachers actually regressed.

While the lack of measurable progress can be dispiriting, the collective work of education leaders, policymakers, entrepreneurs, nonprofits and researchers has actually shown great progress. Thanks to the collective efforts of those working to improve PD as well as the creative application of new technology, we know more about the essential factors that have the potential to improve teachers' practices.

In working with teachers, we've seen firsthand what they can do when they are given the flexibility to experiment in addition to the resources and communities with whom to share what they learn. We've also seen that, in order to really be effective, PD needs to be ongoing—over weeks and months instead of the one-day-a-month format used in many districts. We also know that great PD needs to have pathways for honest peer-to-peer evaluation as well as advice and support from outside experts.

That's why we're investing in innovative PD models that leverage technology and make it easier for teachers to connect and support each other in powerful, sustained ways.

Through the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) and the Mathematics Design Collaborative (MDC), thousands of teachers from across the country pool their expertise and resources to develop high-quality units aligned to the Common Core. Cross-country collaboration also lies at the heart of the Common Assignment Study (CAS), in which teams of teachers from Colorado and Kentucky have worked together over the past two years to co-design units and then coach one another as they teach in their respective classrooms. Teachers involved in these efforts report that the collaborative process has done wonders for their professional growth—and that their students remain more engaged in these co-built units.

Another online community has formed around the Redesign Challenge, a new effort to crowd source educators' best ideas for improving PD. As part of the first challenge, educators submitted more than 100 ideas for using video to support PD, and several of these ideas will be developed, piloted and, if successful, scaled up. Teachers now program their own PD events—such as ECET2 (Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teaching and Teachers) and Edcamp—to exchange ideas and teaching practices. And school districts across the country—from Long Beach to Washington, D.C.—are giving teachers more choice and flexibility in choosing professional development opportunities that meet their learning goals.

Technology is also changing the way teachers access PD. Videos and resources to support high-quality instruction have become available online through websites like Teaching Channel, LearnZillion and many others. Educators also now take charge of their own PD with the help of tools like Knowledge Delivery Systems' professional learning platform, which allows teachers to access customized videos and content, track their learning and get real-time feedback—all in a virtual environment that's constantly at their fingertips.

These promising models are still on the cutting edge, but we're seeing them catch hold, especially among the educators who have been calling for transformation in PD. And as teacher networks grow and districts increasingly leverage new tools to support PD, we feel truly excited about the potential to share data and practices across districts, regions, student populations and subjects. Widespread adoption and integration of new, teacher-powered approaches to PD shows real promise to end the practice of siloing teaching innovation and improve teaching everywhere in ways we had never dreamed of before.

Even years into this journey, I remain optimistic about what all of us can do for our nation's teachers and students. We're literally and figuratively a long way from the days when I taught, and that's a good thing. We continue to believe in the power of persistence and innovation to transform teaching and learning— and the power of education to transform lives. After all, we truly believe that every life carries equal value.

Pushing Professional Learning to New Heights: What Will It Take?

Stephanie Hirsh, Executive Director of Learning Forward

"Oh great, next Friday is our district PD day…Let's be sure to get seats in the back to plan our next unit."

"Yes, we have team time every Wednesday, but we haven't really been sure about what to do during that time."

"Our standards session was really helpful. I wonder when we'll get back to that?"

I can't be the only one who has heard comments like these over the years. Education stakeholders have a love-hate relationship with professional development. On the one hand, anyone invested in improving education outcomes for students, with all that entails, knows that the quality of the teaching is paramount. Subsequently, doing everything we can to build educators' knowledge and skills should be a top priority. And no one disagrees with that.

On the other hand, professional development often fails to meet its promise. Too many educators have been obligated to attend professional development that didn't give them what they need. Too many systems have invested money in professional development that didn't produce better outcomes. A recent report from TNTP found that teacher supports in the school systems that they studied didn't have meaningful impacts.

The tolerance for ineffective professional development is rightfully low right now. Teachers themselves find that many of their experiences aren't meeting their needs, as they indicated in last year's Teachers Know Best. Teachers and schools sit in the spotlight, while districts and states across the country implement college- and career-ready standards, new assessments and revamped educator effectiveness systems. Given these high-stakes demands, the need for deep understanding of effective professional learning is critical.

Those who advocate for effective professional learning know that no other school improvement strategy proves as essential as building the knowledge and skills of educators along with the contexts and structures that make continuous improvement possible. Meanwhile, the body of knowledge continues to grow that helps educators understand effective teaching.

We know with greater confidence every year that meaningful collaboration among teachers improves their knowledge and skills, as evidenced most recently in a study of more than 9,000 teachers in Miami-Dade County. There are schools and systems around the world that have created learning systems that result in changes in practice and results, as highlighted in the report A Global Network of Teachers and Their Professional Learning Systems challenge remains to apply the evidence in meaningful ways to inform immediate and long-term actions.

Learning Forward has long championed the view that professional learning is only effective when it leads to better teaching and learning. Through three versions of the Standards for Professional Learning, now used in more than 35 states, we have led the field in demanding meaningful professional learning and helping educators to understand what that entails.

As stakeholders consider how to take next steps in ensuring that every educator has access to authentic support for growth, Learning Forward posits these foundational precepts as a starting point for designing a comprehensive professional learning system:

Articulate a vision for professional learning. Until educators at all levels establish that professional learning can and should be an integral and meaningful component to how a system reaches all students, the status quo will reign. Education leaders have an obligation to establish a vision for professional learning, share it widely and devote resources to reaching it. Vision without the supporting resources will be an empty promise, so, for example, districts will need to find ways to create time for learning as did the 17 high-performing schools highlighted by the National Center for Time and Learning.

Adopt Standards for Professional Learning. Just as systems establish rigorous standards for the learning that students experience, they should also hold high expectations for the learning of educators. This echoes the case made in Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning. Standards not only outline the essential elements of professional learning and the conditions that make it possible, they also help to ensure equity. If systems hold all learning to the same high standards, then every educator will have access to the support they need.

Involve all stakeholders in professional learning. Establishing professional learning systems that have impact isn't possible without the active participation of the leaders and the learners the system has been designed to support. Including all stakeholders' voices contributes to greater engagement, more effective learning and widespread implementation. In addition, finding ways to validate teacher-driven learning, such as the micro-credentialing system highlighted in Making Professional Learning Count offers strategies for increasing not only engagement, but also innovation.

Measure for results. Professional learning can't really be standards-driven or achieve a vision without constant monitoring to ensure that the learning leads to results for educators and students. While adoption of standards is essential, until systems measure the degree of implementation and the connection to results, standards are only aspirational. Measuring impact has implications for resources, planning and staffing. Any complexity involved in assessing results doesn't excuse the obligation to do so.

Conclusion

Tom Vander Ark, CEO of Getting Smart

Powerful, Personalized Professional Development

A recent RAND study suggests promising student learning results from early personalized learning models in K-12 education. The 32 models studied blended online and face-to-face instructional strategies to personalize learning and begin moving toward a competency-based progressions. A meta analysis compiled by The Learning Accelerator suggests that these components have positive effects. (See their new Competency-Based Professional Learning Model for educators as well.)

Sophisticated organizations have long used blended learning strategies to accelerate professional growth and provide real-time learning. The postsecondary landscape is being transformed by blended, personalized and competency-based learning opportunities. The requirement for lifelong learning in most careers now increasingly translates into stackable credentials and professional portfolios.

Like K-12 students and other professionals, teachers deserve sophisticated personalized learning. They deserve the opportunity to learn what then need, when and how they want, and they should have options for showing what they know and can do.

In Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning, we described a system such as this one that includes personalized professional learning plans, with teachers using online tools to pursue their learning at their own pace, plus learning in ways which mimic and model how educators should teach their students. We called for project-based learning for educators, competency-based learning at pace, online, blended and personalized learning options that allow educators to learn specific content and skills that will help them improve their ability to teach, reach and engage all students. We outlined what professional learning could look like with the implementation of micro-credentialing, where teachers earn badges for specific skills that translate into effective teaching in the classroom. In Preparing Leaders for Deeper Learning, we described a similar system for leaders—informed by dozens of education leaders who described required roles for building and sustaining next-gen learning environments.

Our work over the past several years has pointed us to examples of programs that make a difference in their communities and in the corners of their (face-to-face or virtual) world. However, the move from a vision for transformative professional development to reality hinges upon the ability to deliver high quality PD at scale.

An approach like the one described by Alvin Crawford in 5 Steps to Transformative Professional Development delineates a path forward:
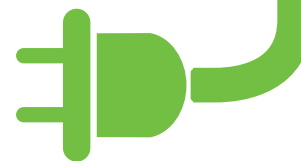
1. **Follow the research.** Crawford writes: "To be transformative, strategic professional development needs to be intense, continuous and sustained to have a lasting impact. The Center for Public Education's Teaching the Teachers reports that effective PD takes 50 hours or more on a given topic."

2. **Go online.** Online PD offers scaling opportunities, reaching thousands of educators instead of dozens at a time. Online learning also offers customized and personalized options.

3. **Incorporate face-to-face learning.** Crawford writes, "Face-to-face common planning time and online support communities are both essential—a true blended approach. To learn a skill, it's also been proven essential to provide coaching, modeling, observation, feedback and time for teachers to reflect on what they've learned."

4. **Allow for self-pacing and collaboration.** Educators can collaborate online and/or in person, and they can pace their own learning, moving at their individual speed. Let's model what we also believe should be true in Deeper Learning environments for students.

5. **Act now.** Preparing new professional development models needs to start right away. It is possible to transform PD and to scale this. We can turn the vision of transformative professional development into a reality.

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