



BY KAREN HAWLEY MILES

**G**ood professional development is not the same thing as a good professional development strategy. But a good professional development strategy is the heart of a good district strategy for school improvement. Creating a powerful professional development plan involves reconsidering practices and investments that touch on every aspect of school and district organization — from teacher salaries, responsibilities, and job structure to the details of the district’s accountability system.

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It’s worth spending time on how adding the word “strategy” after the words “professional development” changes the discussion. A strategically designed professional development system allocates scarce resources to its most important priorities in ways most likely to improve student performance.

This short definition embeds four questions that a district strategy should consider:

- What resources are involved in professional development?
- What are the district’s student performance priorities?
- Who needs support — which schools, teachers, or school leaders?
- What kind of professional development is most likely to improve student performance?

**A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE**

Professional development resources can be defined as the time and money diverted to increasing the knowledge and skills of teachers and school leaders. When quantifying the resources devoted to these activities, district leaders typically consider the cost of training and coaching. Sometimes, they include money spent to reimburse teachers or principals for individual course work. But a broader definition includes hidden and untracked investment that contributes to building capacity and adds up to many times more than this direct cost.

A systems perspective includes the cost of teacher and principal time explicitly designated for professional development. This time might be in the form of contractually identified days or hours added to the calendar or workday for professional development. Or it could be in the form of reduced teacher loads for new or mentor teachers. Even though these costs don’t show up in a separate budget line item, the number of days and hours worked affects teacher salaries, and the number of periods a teacher works affects the number of teachers a school must hire.

A full consideration of costs also includes a portion of the total spend-

TOOL

Consensus characteristics of good professional development	<b>TIGHT DEFINITION</b> What this means for professional development aimed at schoolwide improvement	<b>LOOSER DEFINITION</b> Typical interpretations that don't meet the test of highly leveraged school improvement professional development
<b>School-based collaboration</b>	Teams of teachers in the same school whose members share subjects and/or students learn together as they plan and reflect on their own instruction and its effectiveness in meeting the school's learning goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional development takes place in any classroom or school and includes classroom observation and some practice.</li> <li>A few teachers from a school attend, along with groups from other schools.</li> </ul>
<b>Use of student performance data</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School leaders and teacher teams use student performance data to determine areas of focus and set school improvement goals.</li> <li>Using data on their own students' performance on tests and classroom assignments, teachers identify instructional areas for improvement and monitor their effectiveness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers work on professional development on priority topics as identified by student performance analysis.</li> <li>Teachers learn how to analyze student performance data.</li> </ul>
<b>Focuses on problems students have learning instructional content</b>	Professional development is tightly linked to each teacher's planning and implementation of a specific curriculum and to the problems students have learning the content.	General training on topic areas such as "writing" or use of math manipulatives is not specifically linked to the teacher's curriculum goals.
<b>Includes follow-up and coaching</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers have a chance to practice new skills and review their impact with expert support.</li> <li>Coaching support occurs throughout the teaching career every day and every week.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers receive opportunity for feedback.</li> <li>Teachers have periodic access to coaching or mentoring not connected to daily work.</li> </ul>
<b>Involves participating teachers in planning and prioritization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional development and coaching evolves directly out of joint work with expert support to plan, practice, and review the results of daily classroom instruction.</li> <li>Professional development is an ongoing part of the daily work of teaching and an absolute requirement for creating a good school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Course offerings are determined using teacher input from surveys or focus groups.</li> <li>Teachers choose whether they participate unless they are performing poorly.</li> </ul>
<b>Accountability for improved instruction and student performance</b>	Coaches, teacher teams, and school leaders expect, reflect on, and measure improvement in instructional practice and student performance as an integral part of professional development.	Evaluations rely on teacher reports of effectiveness or satisfaction.

ing on teacher salaries. Most districts move teachers along a salary scale based on their years of experience and education credits. In such a structure, districts essentially pay teachers through salary increments for acquiring further training. Depending on

staff composition and the details of salary structure, these extra payments for course credits can easily total one-third of all teacher salary spending. This significant investment makes sense only if this training translates into improved teaching practice. But

there is little evidence that links added education credits to higher student achievement. Because of this, districts nationwide are currently experimenting with other ways of measuring and rewarding teacher proficiency. Finally, a full systems perspective

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considers factors that influence the size of the need for professional development. A district that can hire and retain teachers and principals who bring high capacity to their schools won't have to invest as much to build proficiency. Many factors influence the quality of the teaching pool. Some of the factors, like the local job market, are outside district control.

However, a district can influence the training that prospective teachers receive by partnering with local colleges and universities. And salary levels and working conditions determine the relative quality of teachers hired, as well as how long they stay.

Working conditions are determined by the structure of the teaching job, the opportunities to work individually with students using strong curriculum and instructional materials, and buildings that are safe, clean, and cheerful. In summary, nearly all of a district's resources pay for or contribute to the total investment in growing professional knowledge of teaching and learning.

**TARGETING**

Strategic district professional development directs resources to its most important student performance priorities in schools and with teachers that can benefit the most. Understanding student performance priorities requires that districts have ways of measuring and reporting student performance that allow them to zero in on specific schools, teachers, and students that need improvement.

Further, the assessment data must be detailed enough to provide concrete help on the specific areas in which students — and thus teachers — need to improve. For example, knowing that students are performing below grade level in math doesn't

allow as much targeting as knowing that they are performing well in computation and poorly on problem solving. Student performance data also can help district leaders determine which schools and which teachers need intensive support. These data also enable district leaders to identify schools and teachers doing so well that their practices should be studied and spread across the district.

Even the most timely student performance data does not provide a district that is determined to ensure high-quality instruction across all schools with enough information to effectively target and monitor the effects of professional development. Student performance data come too slowly and too late for effective action, especially in low-performing schools.

Further, student data don't give district leaders or planners of professional development much information about what might be driving student performance. Students of Total Quality Management know that managers need process indicators that tell them about their key inputs along with outcome indicators. In schools, this would include evidence of the quality of instruction and curriculum. Data on process allow district leaders to target professional development and support more precisely.

**EFFECTIVENESS**

Finally, a strategic professional development system invests in professional development that is designed according to evidence-based principles regarding the kind of professional development activities most likely to improve student performance. While it is always tricky to link improved student performance to any single professional development effort, there is an emerging consensus regarding the characteristics of professional development that improves student performance.

Since the district goal is to create a system of high-performing schools, it makes sense to begin by outlining the research base that describes what good schools do. First, all of the teachers in a school must effectively use high-quality, research-based curriculum and instruction materials that are aligned with high standards for student learning. High-performing schools have a unified philosophy of instruction and use a consistent curriculum and instructional approach across classrooms in a grade and across grades so that learning builds over time. This seems especially true of schools that have made dramatic improvements in student performance.

Second, teachers continuously use assessment data and look at student work on their own and together to adjust classroom instruction to meet individual student needs and to improve on their own classroom assignments and instructional technique.

Third, schools are organized and teachers work together to ensure that students have access to the time and attention that they need to master the learning goals.

Fourth, good schools have cultures of adult learning where resources, teacher time, and teacher responsibilities are structured to facilitate reflection on their practice and sharing their expertise.

So, a school isn't good only because it is a collection of individually strong teachers. Schools are coherent organizations and unique communities. It follows that from a district perspective, professional development should involve school teams collaborating to improve their instruction in response to their own student's needs as often as possible. The National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development add that effective professional development uses student performance data

## DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR A STRATEGIC DISTRICT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

Clearly defined standards for student performance, instructional conditions at the school level, and standards for professional practice allow the district to:

1. Invest primarily in multiyear, school-based coaching aimed at building schoolwide instructional capacity around instructional content.
2. Encourage individual professional development through career structure and incentive compensation, and focus district investment in individuals on career entry, leadership, and remediation in ways that meet school and district needs.
3. Vary professional development and level of intervention depending on performance.
4. Invest only where conditions for success exist, but intervene to improve conditions for dysfunctional schools or individuals.
5. Actively extend best practices.
6. Design professional development that embodies a research-based vision of how schools and teachers improve.
7. Ensure sufficient time for meaningful, collaborative learning and planning.
8. Work to develop the best entry-level teachers possible by partnering with local universities, setting hiring standards, and adjusting compensation levels.

and districts to find significant resources to provide hands-on coaching and demonstration and supervision of teachers. Finally, such professional development acknowledges that some teachers are more expert than others and are responsible for sharing this expertise.

### STRATEGIC DISTRICT SYSTEM

A good professional development strategy goes beyond offering high-quality professional development opportunities. Such a strategy deliberately balances investment in different parts of the district's system — compensation, salary, teacher time for planning and collaboration, and professional development — and makes trade-offs regarding who and which schools get what. Outlined in the box on this page are eight principles that define a clear strategy and embrace the entire district system of professional development.

These design principles suggest trade-offs and choices. For example, they state that the district will concentrate on providing

professional development aimed at school-level collaboration rather than individual teacher professional development.

Regardless of the specific principles adopted, the very act of stating principles that comprise a professional development system goes a long way toward improving our understanding of what works.

The evidence about what matters most in improving the quality of teaching is far from definitive, in part because districts have only begun to clearly describe their strategies and organize to meet them. But we cannot prove the importance of professional development or test what mix of resources makes the most strategic sense without first defining a strategy. ■

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to identify priorities, focuses on the instructional content, includes follow-up and coaching, and involves participating teachers in planning and prioritization. The challenge in using these principles is to define them stringently enough so they guide those designing and evaluating proposed professional development offerings. The chart on page 35 illustrates one way to define these principles more closely.

The use of looser definitions allows a symbolic response and can create the impression that good work is being done but may keep the district from doing enough to be effective. The tighter definition takes a stand on what professional development likely to improve school performance looks like.

First, it says that professional development must take place in schools, in the context of the school's

specific improvement plan, and with all of the school's teams of teachers. It cannot be one-size-fits-all because it responds to each school, teacher team, and teacher. This kind of professional development is not voluntary because mastering and improving the craft of teaching requires learning and planning together and opening the isolation of classrooms to observation and feedback.

This tighter definition implies that teachers will implement the district's specified curriculum and instruction matched to student learning goals unless they can demonstrate how their approach meets or exceeds these goals. It suggests that school schedules and resources will be restructured to create long blocks of daily and weekly time.

Implementing this kind of professional development requires schools