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Policy Brief
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Professional Development in Peril: Budgetary impact on professional development and the implications for student learning

The effects of our country's economic struggles are now being deeply felt in the public school arena. Texas, like other states, is in the process of cutting billions of dollars from the education budget. Thousands of teaching positions will be eliminated, textbook adoptions are in question, and programs to support curriculum and instruction are highly vulnerable. Professional development, which is one of the means by which schools will be able to achieve the high levels of student success that new accountability measures require, will likely face deep cuts as districts attempt to retain low staffing ratios and deal with their budgetary shortfalls. This policy brief will shed light on many aspects of professional development. After a brief historical overview and glimpse into the international context of professional development, information will be presented describing the budgetary issues currently unfolding in Texas school districts and the effect these will have on professional learning. Finally, viable professional development options and alternatives will be presented.

Vocabulary Terms

- **ERIC**: Educational Resources Information Center, a database housing a vast collection of educational research.
- **NCLB**: No Child Left Behind, the federal reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001.
- **Professional Development**: Activities to enhance professional career growth. Such activities may include individual development, continuing education, and in-service education, as well as curriculum writing, peer collaboration, study groups, and peer coaching or mentoring (found in the thesaurus of the ERIC database)
- **PLC**: Professional Learning Community, "a school's professional staff who continuously seek to find answers through inquiry and then act on their learning to improve student learning." (Hipp & Huffman, 2010)
- **PISA**: Programme for International Student Achievement, an international assessment of the reading, science and mathematical literacy of 15-year-old students taking place in 3-year cycles to monitor changes in student achievement and other features of worldwide educational systems over time.

The value of professional development

Increasing teacher quality is imperative for the United States to become educationally competitive with international peers. Unfortunately, it cannot be assumed that the U.S. is currently competitive in the realm of education with these nations. The recent results of the 2009 administration of the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) assessment demonstrate the degree to which the U.S. is behind other industrialized nations in the areas of mathematics, science, and reading performance. This test, administered once every three years since 2000 to participating nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), provides information on the relative performance of nations on commonly accepted educational standards. On the 2009 administration, this comparison group included 65 participating nations. For example, in the category of science literacy, US students scored measurably below the average scores of 18 other OECD nations. In the area of mathematics, U.S. students scored measurably below the average scores of 23 other OECD nations, and in the area of reading, US students scored measurably below the average scores of nine other OECD nations (OECD, 2011). Considering the comprehensive educational system our nation boasts and the compulsory nature of schooling in the US, these results are troubling. The factors behind the results vary widely, but regardless of how the results are portrayed or analyzed, they are hardly complimentary of the state of our educational system.

While the U.S. system of education (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say “the collection of state educational systems in our country”) is a multi-faceted entity, the quality of our collective teaching force is one of the pivotal factors in the success or failure of our schools. “Research shows that teacher expertise can account for about 40 percent of the variance in students’ learning in reading and mathematics achievement—more than any other single factor, including student background...” (Rhoton & Stile, 2002, p. 1). The pre-service education of our teachers, the certification policies and practices that enable them to enter classrooms, and the continuing education they receive while working in the field all contribute to the collective knowledge and skills they use to influence and instruct our country’s youth. A logical question to ask after a review of the PISA results is, “Are we providing ample, appropriate, and effective learning opportunities for our country’s teaching staff to equip them for effective classroom instruction?”

The historical perspective of professional development in the United States

The practice of evaluating professional development as a field of inquiry is a relatively recent phenomenon. Prior to 1965, the topic of professional development or staff development (as it was more commonly known until recently) appeared in professional literature on very few occasions, and a search of the ERIC database for both of these terms produces only three results prior to

1965. In the late 1960s, interest in the learning of teachers grew and in 1969, the National Staff Development Council was founded with 17 members (Yastrow, 1995). Professional development became a topic that school districts attended to in the 1970s, but most of the focus centered on the production of classroom materials or the training of teachers to use pre-made curriculum kits (Speck & Knipe, 2001). Coinciding with this growing interest in professional development in public schools was much study and writing in the field of adult education, specifically about adult learning theory in the university setting. However, little of this research stretched into the area of K-12 schooling.

Only in the era following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) have professional development practices been analyzed for their effectiveness. Of interest in this historical context is a report published nearly 45 years ago by the National Education Association. Its focus on professional development was remarkably forward thinking, considering the era in which it was published. The author states:

Like the machinist, farmer or physician, teachers and school administrators find themselves with the task having totally new dimensions, a task for which their background of preparation and experience becomes increasingly inadequate. Continued professional performance requires that every educational practitioner be engaged in a program designed for his continuous improvement. (Wagoner, 1964, p. 1)

The publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) by the National Commission on Excellence in Education marked a shift in focus within the system of public schools. The report sounded the alarm about the state of education in the U.S. and prompted a reevaluation of curriculum and a closer analysis of teacher skills and training (Hunt, 2008). Principals were criticized for their operation as school managers and were expected to take on stronger roles as instructional leaders. These new roles and expectations for principals and the heightened expectations of teachers led to a heavier emphasis on professional development and the improvement of teaching practices.

Recently, a series of movements such as the “standards” movement and the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) have shifted attention from the activities of teachers to the achievement of students on clearly defined criteria at the state and national level. The accountability for student performance has been a catalyst for local education agencies to reevaluate instructional practice in classrooms as well as to redesign their methods and models of professional development (Speck & Knipe, 2001). This shift will be increasingly important as our country strives to become educationally competitive on an international stage. NCLB included a thorough description of quality professional development (see Appendix), and Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council) also has published a definition of professional development with many elements in common with those of NCLB (Learning

Forward, 2011). It appears that no shortage of information about the importance of professional development exists. In practice, however, this information takes many different forms.

Professional development in the context of international education

As noted above, teacher quality (as determined by qualification [i.e. full certification, degree in field of teaching, and teaching experience], continuing professional education, and classroom effectiveness) is one of the most predictive factors in student success. In a study comparing the U.S. to other high achieving nations, our country fell behind ten others (including Japan and Australia) on measures of teacher qualification (Akiba & LeTendre, 2009). Additionally, once new teachers of the U.S. enter classrooms, “only 5.9% of U.S. teachers are given a reduced workload in their first year, in comparison with 46% of Australian teachers and 100% of Japanese teachers.” (Akiba & LeTendre, 2009, p. 127) There is evidence that many states are requiring formal learning opportunities for teachers. Parise & Spillane’s analysis (2010) reports that the modal expectation is 120 hours every five years (2010). What is less known, however, is the precise estimate of state or national expenditures on professional development or the degree to which the expectations are consistent with commonly agreed upon standards of quality professional development.

Professional development expectations in the international community of competing nations also vary widely. In the U.S., state agencies, independent groups, universities, vendors, regional support centers and others offer an array of professional development programming to local districts in no centralized, systematized manner. NCLB placed requirements on the degree to which federal educational budgets must be spent on professional development (i.e. 5% of Title I budgets set aside for this purpose on campuses designated for “school improvement” based on performance) and described the characteristics of high quality professional development (see Appendix) but does not centralize professional learning content, quantity, or timing. Great variations exist between districts in the design and planning of adult learning. As a result, large discrepancies in the skills, understandings, and expectations of professional staff can be seen in schools across the country.

Australia’s approach to professional development had also been characterized with inconsistency until 1999. At that time, the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme (AGQTP) was developed to address this issue through a mapping of professional learning activities across the country. Teachers in Australia spend the first three years compiling evidence of their progress toward “professional competence.” This evidence includes lesson plans, reports on professional learning activities, and notes on observations of their peers. This information is compiled into an application for accreditation as part of the Professional Teaching Standards. Once accredited, teachers are required by their state and territories to complete standard numbers of professional

development hours (100 hours every 5 years divided between Institute-registered professional development courses and other formal or informal activities) in order to retain their accreditation (Akiba & LeTendre, 2009).

Japanese educators participate in a highly structured, well-coordinated system of professional learning that is scaled according to teachers' years of experience. With the exception of on-site learning opportunities developed and implemented by teachers (known in Japan as "lesson study"), the system of adult learning is organized and dictated by the Ministry of Education. Based on the number of years of experience teachers possess, there are legislative requirements for participation in various forms and systems of education, perhaps the most notably occurring in the 10th year of experience when teachers are required "to spend 20 days for off-site professional development during summer break, and another 20 days for on-site professional development during the regular academic year." (Akiba & LaTendre, 2009, p. 107)

Educational budget challenges

The United States is facing one of the biggest budget crises in generations. At the time of this writing, the federal deficit was over 14 trillion dollars. The effects of the recession of the past 3-5 years have now taken root in state budgets and are leading to unprecedented cuts to state programs, most notably education. Currently in session, Texas' legislature is preparing to cut between 4-9 billion dollars from the education budget. This will have a detrimental effect on public schools for decades to come.

In an attempt to capture the likely programmatic ramifications of the current Texas budget crisis, the author collected surveys of curriculum department administrators across the northern part of the state. Of the thirteen districts responding, twelve were already aware of planned cuts to professional development initiatives. Districts ranged in size from 1-5,000 students to greater than 25,000 students, and comments on the survey most often sounded like this:

Opportunities for professional development will be limited to sharing knowledge that we already have in the district. That type of initiative has significant limitations, as it requires a well-developed filter to determine which information is truly research-based and worthy of sharing. When we use outside support for professional development, we have immediate evidence of the research-base and the quality of the presentation. Additionally, our ability to follow the national trends and to put our teachers in touch with important books/texts, speakers, and conferences will be significantly limited. (Anonymous, 2011)

Likely staffing cuts range from literacy coaches (a valuable form of job-embedded professional development for teachers) to curriculum specialists and professional development administrators (who often have the greatest impact on the manner and degree to which professional development activities are planned) to

assistant principals (who are instrumental in serving a supporting role on campuses which allows the principal to spend more time as an instructional leader). Other cuts mentioned include the number of professional development days planned on the calendar, the ability of teachers to attend conferences both in and out of state, and the removal of stipends paid to teachers for attending professional development during their non-contract time.

Structural changes are also being necessitated in school schedules as a result of the budget predicament. Many schools that had previously built in a 45 minute block during every day for team collaboration, professional development, or professional learning communities are seeing this time eliminated in exchange for larger class loads (teaching 6 of 7 periods and increases of students exceeding 150-175 per secondary teacher). In response to the survey's statement "Please describe the ways in which campus schedules in your district will be changed (due to budget constraints) that will impact time for teams to collaborate and work in professional learning communities.", one coordinator made the following observation about her 25,000+ student school district located north of Dallas:

Such decisions are campus-based, but schools that wish to continue with their professional development periods (PLCs) will see class sizes increase to levels that cannot be accommodated in the classrooms. Though there is some research suggesting that class size does not affect student achievement, that is only true in cases where teachers' overall workloads (especially in an English class) do not exceed capacity to work individually with student writers and where the classroom can accommodate such large numbers." (Anonymous, 2011)

There is great irony in the fact that currently both in Texas and in the United States there are increasing expectations for student performance on national tests. Also being developed are more rigorous state and national curricular standards that students are to have mastered (National Governor's Association, Common Core Standards, 2011). In reference to the Common Core Standards that will soon be a part of schools in 48 US states, their website states,

The *Standards* are not a curriculum. They are a clear set of shared goals and expectations for what knowledge and skills will help our students succeed. Local teachers, principals, superintendents and others will decide *how* the standards are to be met. Teachers will continue to devise lesson plans and tailor instruction to the individual needs of the students in their classrooms. (National Governor's Association, 2011)

The issue this statement raises is when and how teachers, principals, superintendents and others are going to be able to learn and plan for effective implementation of the teaching and learning laid out in the new standards. In many states, the funding for the staff and hours to do such work is quickly

dwindling.

Recommendations

In synthesizing the recommendations of numerous studies on the characteristics of effective professional development, Akiba and LeTendra point out that teacher learning is enhanced when opportunities are:

1. Sustained and continuous
2. Coherent with teachers' learning goals as well as school missions and reform goals
3. Focused on teaching practices and student learning in the context of actual classrooms
4. Providing opportunities for teacher collaboration. (2009, p. 97)

In an attempt to balance these characteristics of professional development with the dire budget situations facing schools, the following recommendations may be helpful:

1. Focus professional development energy on building the capacity of principals.
Schools led by principals with strong instructional leadership skills, ideally with the help of an array of external support systems (central office, community, parents), may be able to design and ensure professional learning, collaboration, and improved instruction occur on his/her campus. Principals either without these skills or without the external support systems may have a more difficult time. As in Japan, where becoming an administrator is a routine expectation of experienced, skilled teachers, the U.S. may be well served to consider the structuring of professional learning expectations for administrators to more fully equip them to lead the learning of their staff.
2. Establish the expectation that teacher collaboration and peer observation within buildings/departments is a requirement.
In some states (i.e. Virginia and Vermont), peer observation and participation in collaborative curriculum development count toward professional development hours required for recertification. Since collaborative discussion between teachers in their work environments was found in one study to be the strongest predictor of teacher change in math and language arts, this less-formal (and less expensive) professional development may be a viable option (Parise & Spillane, 2010).
3. Allow districts more flexibility with the use of and requirements for instructional time in order to build in more non-traditionally structured time slots for professional learning.
Creative scheduling, the use of substitutes or volunteers to assist with creating time for teachers to collaborate, and more clearly articulating expectations for curricular and instructional collaboration can help to

accomplish this form of professional learning with minimal budgetary impact.

4. Require publishing companies vying for textbook adoptions to build professional development (in a wide variety of formats) into their bid process.
As many professional development topics pertain specifically to the content material covered by adoptions, specialized consultants, web-based learning opportunities, and customized presentation linking district curriculum and adopted materials would help districts defray some of these costs for districts.
5. Establish a system of national professional development standards to ensure common instructional skills and expectations of the U.S. teaching force.
As the Common Core Standards become a part of the fabric of U.S. schools, the timing may be appropriate to build in expectations of teaching competencies and skills for all of those implementing the standards.

Conclusion

The current trajectory of U.S. students' relative performance to other nations coupled with decreasing professional learning due to both a lack of centralized/structured requirements for teacher education and the lack of funding for such may have catastrophic effects on public education as we know it today. As our country moves toward a historic unification of curricular standards, it seems logical to similarly align our professional development standards to ensure that our teaching force is capable of helping students meet new and greater challenges.

Appendix

NCLB's Definition of Professional Development

The term 'professional development' includes activities that:

- I. Improve and increase teacher's knowledge of the academic subjects the teachers teach, and enable teachers to become highly qualified;
- II. Are an integral part of broad school-wide and district-wide educational improvement plans
- III. Give teachers, principals, and administrators the knowledge and skills to provide students with the opportunity to meet challenging State academic content standards and student academic achievement standards;
- IV. Improve classroom management skills';
- V.
 - a. are high quality, sustained, intensive and classroom-focused in order to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction and the teacher's performance in the classroom;
 - b. are not 1 day or short term workshops or conferences;
- VI. Support the recruiting, hiring and training of highly qualified teachers, including teachers who became highly qualified through State and local alternative routes to certification;
- VII. Advance teacher understanding of effective instructional strategies that are –
 - a. Based on scientifically based research (except that this sub clause shall not apply to activities carried out under part D of title II); and
 - b. Strategies for improving student academic achievement or substantially increasing the knowledge and teaching skills of teachers; and
- VIII. Are aligned with and directly related to –
 - a. State academic content standards, student achievement standards and assessments;
 - b. The curricula and programs tied to the standards described in sub clause (I) except that this sub clause shall not apply to activities described in clauses (ii) and (iii) of section 2123(3)(B);
- IX. Are developed with extensive participation of teachers, principals, parents and administrators of schools to be served under this Act;
- X. Are designed to give teachers of limited English proficient children, and other teachers and instructional staff, the knowledge and skills to provide instruction and appropriate language and academic support services to those children, including the appropriate use of curricula and assessments;
- XI. To the extent appropriate, provide training for teachers and principals in the use of technology so that technology and technology applications are effectively used in the classroom to improve teaching and learning in the curricula and core academic subjects in which the teachers teach;
- XII. As a whole, are regularly evaluated for their impact on increased teacher effectiveness and improved student academic achievement, with the findings of the evaluations used to improve the quality of professional development;
- XIII. Provide instruction in methods of teaching children with special needs;

- XIV. Include instruction in the use of data and assessments to inform and instruct classroom practice;
- XV. Include instruction in ways that teachers, principals, pupil services personnel, and school administrators may work more effectively with parents;
- XVI. And may include activities that –
 - a. Involve the forming of partnerships with institutions of higher education to establish school based teacher training programs that provide prospective teachers and beginning teachers with an opportunity to work under the guidance of experienced teachers and college faculty;
 - b. Create programs to enable paraprofessionals (assisting teachers employed by a local educational agency receiving assistance under part A of title I) to obtain the education necessary for those paraprofessionals to become certified and licensed teachers; and
 - c. Provide follow-up training to teachers who have participated in activities described in subparagraph (A) or another clause of this subparagraph that are designed to ensure that the knowledge and skills learned by the teachers are implemented in the classroom.

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