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Déjà vu in American education: The woeful state of professional development

Posted by [Barnett Berry](#) on Wednesday, 11/19/2014

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Most
American
teachers
experience



professional development that is woefully inadequate. Call it the worst-kept secret in education—and one of the field’s most baffling paradoxes. Why is a profession focused on learning so inept at supporting its practitioners to learn?

The central problem is not a lack of investment. A hard-hitting national study, not yet released, will soon reveal that states and districts spend about \$18 billion annually on professional development. Let that sink in. \$18 billion. These funds are spent in highly fragmented ways, typically driven by the preferences of local administrators (often at the district level) who make most of the decisions about how and what teachers are to learn.

[A recent report](#) from the National Association of School Boards notes that American teachers have limited support in efforts to engage in more effective instructional shifts and lack sufficient time to learn from their more expert colleagues. Furthermore, most school districts do little to track the effects of what they do spend on teachers’ professional development—which is often in the form of workshops led by external consultants.

The good news is that we do know what effective professional learning looks like. [Another report](#), released in 2013, by the Center for American Progress, summarized the research succinctly. Effective professional development is aligned with

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school goals and assessments, sustained over time and job-embedded, focused on core content and active learning, and fueled by serious collaboration and coaching.

Of course, none of this is “news”—compare the evidence and the recommendations in the CAP report to those in a [1995 report](#) from the Consortium on Policy Research.

So why haven't things changed?

Drawing on thirty years of experience with conducting research inside of schools, along with work with legions of teacher leaders in the CTQ Collaboratory, I've identified five key reasons why PD remains unchanged in the US:

1. Professional learning communities in the U.S, unlike those in top-performing nations, are driven by data and spreadsheets, as opposed to being driven by inquiry and led by teachers;
2. Most formal evaluation tools devalue the spread of teaching expertise—and teachers have little opportunity to test out, refine, and expand on the feedback they receive;
3. When teachers are elevated as instructional coaches, they are taken out of the classroom and are soon viewed by colleagues as quasi-administrators, not as peers;
4. Very little of what counts as professional development in the U.S. builds on the importance of reciprocal mentoring between teacher and coach in collective efforts to improve instructional practice; and
5. Many administrators do not know enough about how to utilize teachers to lead their own learning—and, under pressure to garner short-term test gains, they tamp down the role of classroom experts in transforming professional development.

What next?

Even some of the most progressive American districts struggle with these factors. I recently visited Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD), which has rightfully received national recognition for its sound professional development programs and student achievement gains. In this outstanding district, surveys reveal that teacher learning opportunities

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[remain seriously short-changed](#). Only 10 percent of the district's teachers reported they had sufficient time for "sustained practice" of the teaching techniques learned through professional development, and only 5 percent felt strongly that they had a significant role in selecting their PD activities.

LBUSD administrators, to their credit, are tackling the professional development problem head-on.

More policymakers, administrators, teachers, and teachers' unions should conduct a fearless inventory of the beliefs and practices that perpetuate ineffective professional development. To transform teacher learning for students' benefit, we must assess precisely what has gotten in the way of doing so before now.

Good intentions—and knowing what the research says—will not suffice. It's time for a good long stare in the mirror.

Coming soon: More on what CTQ has been learning about the future of professional learning from a new virtual community of teachers and administrators from eight nations (including Australia, Finland, and Singapore).

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