



How California School Districts Can Support Best Practices in Effective Teacher Professional Development

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Twenty-first-century learning requires sophisticated forms of teaching to develop student competencies, such as deep mastery of challenging content, critical thinking, complex problem-solving, effective communication and collaboration, and self-direction. In turn, effective professional development is needed to help teachers learn and refine the pedagogies required to teach these skills. However, research has noted that many professional development initiatives appear ineffective in supporting changes in teachers' practices and student learning. This leads to the question: **What are the features of effective professional development?**

The Learning Policy Institute conducted a review of [35 methodologically rigorous studies](#)¹ that have demonstrated a positive link among teacher professional development, teaching practices, and student outcomes. Through that review, researchers identified seven commonly shared features of effective professional development:

1. **Content focus:** Educator professional development that specifically focuses on pedagogical curriculum supports teacher learning within their classroom contexts. This element includes an intentional focus on discipline-specific curriculum development and pedagogies in areas such as mathematics, science, and literacy.
2. **Active learning:** Active learning engages teachers directly in designing and trying out teaching strategies, often providing them an opportunity to engage in the same kind of learning they are designing for their students. Such professional development uses authentic artifacts (e.g., curriculum plans, assignments, assessments, rubrics, and models of teaching), interactive activities, and other strategies to provide classroom-embedded, highly contextualized professional learning. This approach moves away from traditional learning models that are lecture based and have no direct connection to teachers' classrooms and students toward learning that can be directly applied to practice.
3. **Collaboration:** High-quality professional development creates space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in job-embedded contexts. By working collaboratively, teachers can create communities that positively change the culture and instruction of their entire grade level, department, school, and/or district.
4. **Modeling of effective practice:** Models of curriculum and modeling of instruction provide teachers with a clear vision of what best practices look like. Teachers may view models that include lesson plans, unit plans, sample student work, observations of peer teachers, and video or written cases of teaching.
5. **Coaching and expert support:** Coaching and expert support involve the one-on-one sharing of expertise about content and evidence-based practices, focused directly on teachers' individual needs.
6. **Feedback and reflection:** High-quality professional learning frequently provides built-in time for teachers to intentionally think about, receive input on, and make changes to their practice by facilitating reflection and soliciting feedback. Reflection and feedback help teachers thoughtfully move toward the expert visions of practice.
7. **Sustained duration:** Effective professional development provides teachers with adequate time to learn, practice, implement, revise, and reflect upon new strategies that facilitate changes in their practice.

1. Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Suggested Guidelines for Local Policy and Professional Practice

Examples of professional development that have successfully raised student achievement can help local decision makers better understand what quality teacher professional learning looks like. Because effective professional development has the potential to support powerful teaching and learning, the California Standards Technical Assistance Network (CalSTAN) recommends that California schools and districts carefully invest in the design and implementation of professional development models.

Professional development should be linked to identified teacher needs and should ensure teachers have a say in the type of learning they require to best support their students. Professional development should also be informed by, and respond to, students' contexts, strengths, and needs. For example, districts and schools serving English learners, a significant California student population, should make certain that professional development approaches adequately support academic language development and culturally responsive pedagogies.

Local decision makers can support and incentivize these types of evidence-based professional development models by providing more practice-based models of professional development that move beyond teachers' "seat time" to models that promote active learning and take place within teachers' schools, considering the context of their respective students, classrooms, and school site goals.

Criteria for Consideration by Local Decision Makers

- Evaluate students' learning needs to ensure that professional development is designed appropriately and that technical assistance providers have requisite expertise.
- Evaluate and redesign school schedules and the use of time to increase opportunities for professional learning and collaboration, including participation in professional learning communities, peer coaching, and observations across classrooms, and offer collaborative follow-up that allows them to be useful and effective.
- Ensure that professional learning opportunities are responsive to teachers' problems of practice, are of sufficient duration, and provide a collaborative setting for feedback and reflection.
- Measure LCAP Priority 2 through staff surveys on teachers' views about the nature and quality of the professional learning that they have experienced and that they would like to access (both in topic areas and types of learning), as well as teachers' identification of resources needed to improve practice. Data from these sources can ensure professional learning is connected to practice and that it supports areas of knowledge and skills educators want to develop.
- Integrate professional learning into all LCAP continuous improvement initiatives, such as efforts to implement new learning standards; use student data to inform instruction, improve student academic indicators, and increase student access to college and careers; and create a positive and inclusive learning environment.
- Identify and develop expert teachers as mentors and coaches to support learning in their particular areas of expertise for other educators.
- Focus on equity by building teachers' capacity through professional development opportunities to address specific student learning needs, particularly those of historically underserved student groups, including students from low-income families, foster youth, and English learners.
- Provide technology-facilitated opportunities for professional learning and coaching, using funding available under Titles II, III, and IV of ESSA, to address the needs of English learners and educators in rural communities. This funding may also be leveraged to provide opportunities for intradistrict and intraschool collaboration.
- Provide flexible funding and continuing education units for learning opportunities that include sustained engagement in collaboration, mentoring, and coaching, as well as institutes, workshops, and seminars.
- Partner with organizations that utilize professional development standards to guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of professional learning provided to educators. These standards should reflect the features of effective professional learning outlined in this brief.