



Results of a Statewide Professional Learning Survey of West Virginia School Principals and Teachers

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The West Virginia Board of Education High Quality Educator committee, using a grant provided by the Benedum Foundation, contracted with the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) to develop an action plan for revamping the state's approach to engaging teachers and principals in professional learning experiences. Working with an advisory group made up of national and state experts and stakeholders, NCTAF created a new vision for professional learning that involves shifting from the current system—in which major providers decide what schools and districts need, and offer a slate of workshops, academies, online courses, and the like to meet that need—to a system in which collaborative learning teams, or professional learning communities (PLCs), in schools and counties make their own decisions about their learning needs based on student data, and then seek out relevant training and resources.

To get a clearer picture of teachers' and principals' current views about their professional learning needs and various types of professional development afforded to them in recent years, NCTAF and the Transforming Professional Development Advisory Group tasked the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) Office of Assessment, Accountability, and Research (OAAR) with conducting a statewide survey of a representative sample of teachers and principals (including assistant and associate principals). The survey focused on the following overarching questions:

Research Question 1. What are teachers' and principals' views about their *professional learning experiences overall*?

Research Question 2. What are teachers' and principals' views about their engagement in *professional learning communities (PLCs)*?

The online survey began on February 28 and closed on March 13, 2014. It included a random sample of sufficient size to allow a 95% confidence level in the results. We had 699 respondents from a sample of 1,237 educators statewide; about 57% were principals and 43% teachers.

Results are organized by research question, beginning with responses about teachers' and principals' current and recent professional learning experiences overall, and then turning to their experiences in PLCs.

Professional Learning Experiences Overall

Current preferences

Both teachers and principals rank face-to-face professional learning higher than either blended or online learning. They also tended to rank in school as their preferred location for professional learning, followed by in *district*. Teachers tended to give a higher ranking to professional learning at home (an average of 2.4 on a 4-point scale, with 4 = *most preferred*) than did principals (average 1.9).

Teachers believed that workshops (i.e., one-time events on a focused topic), academies/institutes (i.e., series of events on a focused topic over time), and conferences, in descending order, had the greatest impact on improving their instruction to support greater student learning. PLCs ranked just above networks, at the bottom of the list of seven response options. Principals also gave their highest rankings to academies/institutes and conferences. But the middle of the scale for them was occupied by PLCs. Networks and graduate coursework occupied the bottom of their rankings.

Takeaway: If we want to redirect professional learning to school-based PLCs, there is work to do with both groups of educators, but especially with teachers, regarding their expectations for PLCs as important settings for improving practice.

Anticipated time and money spent in formal professional development

When asked how much time they expected to spend in formal professional development (e.g., workshops, academies, institutes, or graduate courses) during the 2013-2014 academic year, teachers reported expecting to spend an average of 23 hours, while principals anticipated spending an average of 33 hours. Teachers are required by code to participate in at least 18 hours of professional development, which is tracked and often offered by districts. The 23 hours they report is in alignment with that requirement. However there is no comparable annual mandate for principals. After participating in the New Principals Leadership Academy during their first year, which is provided by the Center for Professional Development (45 hours total), they are required to participate in 45 hours every 6 years, which amounts to 7.5 hours a year. New principals, however, make up less than 10% of the total population of school principals, so they alone do not account for this generally higher level of participation by principals in formal PD offerings.

As for unreimbursed professional development, including graduate studies, a minority of principals (46%) reported out-of-pocket costs. Of those incurring costs, the median was \$500 a year. Based on these results, we estimate that of 1,100 principals statewide, 528 of them are paying for graduate courses or other professional development. If each spent the median amount of \$500, this is a total of \$264,000 being spent statewide by principals.

Unlike principals, most teachers (61%) report they pay for graduate courses or other professional development. The median price tag for this group of teachers incurring out-of-pocket costs was \$400. Based on these results, we estimate that of the 18,800 teachers statewide, 11,490 of them are paying for graduate courses or other professional development. If each spent the median \$400, this is a total of about \$4.6 million.¹

Takeaway: School administrators are less engaged as a group in graduate courses or other unreimbursed professional learning, but when they are, they are spending slightly more money on average per year than teachers. Taking the two groups together, we estimate that teachers and principals are spending in the range of \$4 million to \$5 million dollars a year out of pocket.

¹Caution: The survey questionnaire did not provide a response option to indicate respondents did not expect to pay for graduate courses or other PD during the 2013-2014 school year. Consequently, some participants appear to have typed in a zero, while others skipped the question. If one changed the missing data to zeros in cases where the respondent had provided answers before and after this question, the resulting totals would be about 20% lower than those shown here—more like \$214,000 for administrators, and \$3.7 million for teachers.

Perceptions about most effective providers for improving student learning

The great majority of principals (83%) rate the professional development that happens at their own schools as being of the most value for improving student learning. There may be some response bias in that assessment, however, since they are ultimately responsible for providing it. However, it is also possible that administrators view school-based professional development to be more relevant to their needs and thus more effective. Teachers were a good deal less likely to characterize professional development provided by their school or district as good or excellent (about 60%). The great majority (80%) of teachers, on the other hand, rated graduate courses as being the most beneficial for improving their instruction and student learning. The CPD was the second-highest rated provider for both groups (83% of principals and 72% of teachers rating their offerings as good or excellent), and vendors were the lowest rated for both groups (about 50%). WVDE and RESAs scored in the middle, with about two thirds of teachers and principals rating their offerings as good or excellent.

Takeaway: There is a substantial mismatch in perceptions about the effectiveness of professional development offered by schools, with principals much more likely to consider it good or excellent than teachers. There was general agreement, however, about vendors—with only about half of both respondent groups rating professional development that vendors provide as good or excellent and the other half rating it poor or fair. Teachers greatly valued graduate courses, while large majorities of both groups rated CPD offerings as good or excellent.

Needs for the future

Teachers seemed to sense less urgency than principals about the need for additional professional development on any of the seven topics listed in the survey. The only topics that rose above a neutral rating were related to implementation of the NxGen CSOs. “Establishing and maintaining effective PLCs” was among the bottom three needed topics according to principals and the bottom two according to teachers.

Takeaway: Most teachers and principals recognized an ongoing need for NxGen-related professional learning, but the need for capacity building in the area of PLCs was not recognized as an urgent need by either group.

Professional Learning Communities

The balance of this report focuses on responses of educators who reported they currently participate in at least one professional learning community—which was about three quarters of principals in our total respondent group and a little less than two thirds of teachers. We asked these respondents to answer questions based on their experience with the PLC in which they are most engaged for their own professional learning.

Frequency, duration, and scheduling of meetings

More than half of all respondents indicated that their PLC met only once a month or less. About a third of respondents are meeting at least once a week, however. Principals and teachers report similar durations for their PLC meetings, with about half reporting meetings lasting up to 45 minutes and the other half, less than 45 minutes. About half of principals meet with their PLCs during non-school hours—that is, before school (14%), after school (32%), or during their lunch time (2.4%). About a third of teachers meet during non-school hours, either before or after school (34%) and another 21% meeting during their planning periods. A small group of both teachers and principals mentioned meeting weekly during scheduled 1-hour delays for students, which may be an innovative way to schedule more frequent meetings.

Takeaway: Large portions of the state’s principals and teachers who currently participate in a PLC do not have time reserved during the school day for their meetings or, in the case of teachers, must meet during periods reserved for planning. If PLCs are to be the focus of innovation and change, especially in the implementation of the NxGen standards, finding ways to reserve time for them during the work week, every week, will be essential.

Leadership, organization, and use of time

Looking first at principals, it appears that their PLCs are facilitated by peers. The same holds true for teachers, with only a small percent being facilitated by principals. As for how they conduct their meetings, about two thirds of teachers reported that they have established group behavior norms for their meetings, compared with more than 80% of principals. Nearly all members of both groups (about 80% of teachers and over 95% of principals) reported using agendas or protocols to guide their work.

Focus and activity of PLCs. More than two thirds of teachers are involved in PLCs that focus on their grade level, content area, or specialization—as recommended in the research literature. About half of administrators were focused on leadership and administration. Substantial proportions of

both groups were involved in whole-school focused PLCs.

For both groups, the top four ratings for activities requiring the most PLC time were in descending order, (a) discussing student data and learning needs; (b) addressing district-/state-mandated requirements; (c) discussing problems at the school; and (d) sharing information about curricular or instructional resources and tools. Only two of these (a and d) fall within best practices for the work of a PLC (Cobb & Jackson, 2011).

As for the lowest ratings for the amount of time spent, administrators reported in descending order, (a) reviewing student work samples; (b) designing units and lesson plans; (c) engaging with external content experts; and (d) scoring student work. That principals would devote less time to such classroom-oriented activities is not surprising.

The five lowest-rated activities among teachers, scoring below 4 on a 10-point scale (with 0 = no time, and 10 = a great deal of time) were in descending order, (a) reviewing student work samples; (b) engaging in follow-up training; (c) practicing and receiving feedback on new instructional skills/tools from a recent training event; (d) engaging with external content experts; and (e) scoring student work. All but possibly the last of these activities easily fall within best practices for PLCs (Cobb & Jackson, 2011), yet they appear to receive little attention currently.

Takeaway: Both teachers and principals report spending relatively large amounts of time focused on addressing district and state mandated requirements and discussing problems at school, which may more appropriately be topics for collaborative planning periods rather than professional learning. Further, teachers in particular, report spending little time on a range of activities associated with successful learning communities, especially reviewing student work, engaging in follow-up training or with external content experts, or practicing and receiving feedback on new skills introduced at other training events.

Tone, success, and progress

Nearly two thirds of principals characterize the tone of their meetings as trusting, compared with a little less than half of teachers. Very few of either group characterized the tone of their meetings as guarded, while large segments of both groups characterized the tone as routine.

More than half of administrators reported a large or very large impact for their PLCs on their learning, and in turn, student learning. More than another third thought the impact was at a moderate level. Teachers did not give such high ratings for impacts. About three times more teachers

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thought the PLC they participated in had no impact or a small one (about 28%). The remaining teachers divided evenly between moderate impacts and large/very large impacts.

Principals estimate their PLC's progress more positively than teachers, although teachers, too, believe their PLCs are making at least moderate progress.

Takeaway: A recent literature review (Hammer, 2013) suggested that an important factor in the success of a PLC is the willingness of members to trust each other enough to deprivatize their practice and have open discussions about issues they are struggling with. On the other hand, PLCs should not get too bogged down in routine management issues. While a large majority of principals seem to have established interactions based on trust in their PLCs, a minority of teachers have done so. Generally, administrators have a higher estimation of both the impacts of their PLC on student learning and their progress as a group overall. Teachers seem to be the group most in need of a more positive experience as members of PLCs.

References

- Cobb, P. & Jackson, K. (2011). Towards an empirically grounded theory of action for improving the quality of mathematics teaching at scale. *Mathematics Teacher Education & Development*, 13(2), 6-33.
- Hammer, P. C. (2013). *Creating the context and employing best practices for teacher professional development: A brief review of recent research*. Charleston, WV: West Virginia Department of Education, Division of Teaching and Learning, Office of Research.

This report was published by the WVDE Office of Assessment, Accountability, and Research. For more information, contact Patricia Cahape Hammer (phammer@access.k12.wv.us). To view a PowerPoint presentation with notes and charts displaying the results of the survey, visit <http://wvde.state.wv.us/research/reports2014.html>.
