

# THE POWER of TEACHER AGENCY

**WHY WE MUST TRANSFORM PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SO THAT IT REALLY SUPPORTS EDUCATOR LEARNING**

**By Laurie Calvert**

**I**t may be a well-worn trope, but for many educators, the problem with professional learning really is a modern example of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”

On the one hand, school leaders need professional learning to implement successfully a range of teaching and learning initiatives driven by the state and district. They rely on professional development to ensure the success of systemwide improvements, such as college- and career-ready standards and closing gaps. They count on educators keeping up with research to teach shifting student populations, use technology effectively, and make use of emerging information about the science of learning.

On the other hand, something seems to hamper professional learning and impede our ability to roll out systemwide improvements. What if the very professional development strategies that we expect to help schools achieve their goals do not effectively support teachers’ continued growth? What if we are operating under faulty assumptions about how adults learn and what motivates them to improve? Are the



\$2.6 billion spent on professional development at the federal level (Layton, 2015) and the \$8,000 to \$12,000 spent per teacher in districts (Knowledge Delivery Systems, n.d., p.8) squandered funds?

The heart of the matter is this: For many teachers, professional development has long been an empty exercise in compliance, one that falls short of its objectives and rarely improves professional practice. School leaders who disagree would be wise to check out a study released in 2014 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. *Teachers Know Best* found that the majority of school systems still struggle to provide valuable professional learning experiences for teachers.

The more than 1,600 teachers surveyed characterized their professional development as irrelevant, ineffective, and “not connected to their core work of helping students learn.” Similarly, TNTP’s 2015 study, *The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development*, concluded that, despite extraordinary financial and time investments, “most teachers do not appear to improve substantially from year to year — even though many have not yet mastered critical skills.”

### A CONUNDRUM THAT HAS BECOME A CLICHÉ

The education industry has produced volumes of research describing what professional learning should look like, and, for the most part, researchers agree about many of the critical components. In 2011, Learning Forward updated — and most states since have adopted — Standards for Professional Learning that align with this research. The standards call for professional learning that is ongoing, embedded, connected to practice, aligned to school and district goals, and collaborative. The Gates study reinforced the Standards for Professional Learning and also found that teachers want professional development that is teacher-driven and recognizes that teachers are professionals with valuable insights.

This leads us to ask an important



This article is adapted from the report *Moving From Compliance to Agency: What Teachers Need to Make Professional Learning Work* (Calvert, 2016). The full report is available at [www.learningforward.org/publications/teacher-agency](http://www.learningforward.org/publications/teacher-agency).

question: If we know what good professional learning looks like, why aren’t teachers experiencing it?

To get closer to potential answers, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) and Learning Forward initiated a series of extensive conversations with teachers, former teachers who are now responsible for district-level professional development, and school administrators. We talked individually and at length with 26 educators in an attempt to understand causes for the disconnect between what teachers really need and what they are getting from professional learning and to discover how schools and systems might bridge the gap.

In the course of our research, we have come to believe that to transform professional learning so that it really supports educator learning, education leaders will need to pay greater attention to the importance of teacher agency.

### WHAT IS TEACHER AGENCY?

In the context of professional learning, teacher agency is the capacity of

teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues. Rather than responding passively to learning opportunities, teachers who have agency are aware of their part in their professional growth and make learning choices to achieve their goals.

For years, educators and policymakers have referred to ongoing education for teachers as professional development (PD) or PD trainings that teachers “receive.” We use the term professional learning because it recognizes teachers as agents of their growth and emphasizes that learning is an experience driven largely by the learner.

The degree to which a teacher acts with agency in professional learning depends on a number of factors, including both a teacher’s internal traits, such as the motivation to engage in professional learning, as well as a school’s structural conditions for professional learning, including the degree to which the system involves teachers in decisions about what and how they learn.

Though we discuss teachers’ need to own their agency and take responsibility for their learning, the focus of this paper is on what schools and systems can do to improve teacher agency so that teachers continue to develop their craft and students learn well.

### 7 STEPS FORWARD

We do not propose teacher agency as a panacea. We understand that creating effective professional learning is complex and difficult. Instead, this paper sheds light on the importance of teacher agency in effective professional learning and offers school leaders and policymakers strategies they might adapt within their own contexts to create greater avenues for teacher agency that improves learning.

We noticed in our conversations about professional learning that the teachers’ tone improved considerably when describing learning experiences where they have had agency. Instead of

bemoaning meetings hijacked by “administrivia,” they brightened as they expressed the value of being part of a nurturing professional community, connecting to their real work, and being treated as experts and decision makers.

To make this happen, we recommend seven important actions that district and school leaders can take to improve educator agency in their professional learning systems. See these steps outlined at right.

When schools and districts begin to improve teacher agency, the potential payoffs can be big. The Gates study found that, while fewer than one in three teachers choose most or all of their professional learning opportunities, teachers with more choice report much higher levels of satisfaction with professional development learners (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014, pp. 10-11).

The work to advance agency and balance teachers’ needs with system goals is not easy. The challenges cannot be solved by instituting a one-size-fits-all program or marking through a checklist. However, as we describe in these steps, research and teachers’ experiences offer useful conditions that, when adapted to fit local contexts, can help schools and districts move toward greater educator agency and effective professional learning.

### **SYSTEMS THAT TAP INTO TEACHERS’ INTRINSIC MOTIVATIONS**

Effective teachers understand the value of giving learners opportunities to construct knowledge and discover an important truth built on their prior knowledge and their own search for information and relationships.

“Having a student discover a theme of a novel is much more powerful than if I tell her the theme,” one teacher told us. “When she discovers, she is more likely to internalize what she has learned.”

Like their students, teachers long for opportunities to watch colleagues teach and choose for themselves the strategies they will adapt for their classrooms, following up with teachers they observed to

### **WHAT DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADERS CAN DO to improve education agency in their professional learning systems**

1. Make all professional learning decisions only in serious consultation with teachers and principals. Ensure at least 50% teacher representation on school and district teams that are responsible for every stage of decision making, from planning and data analysis to design, implementation, and evaluation.
2. Rethink organization of the school day so that educators have time to meet regularly to collaborate with colleagues to improve teaching and learning.
3. Involve and support teachers in analyzing data and identifying teaching and learning challenges.
4. Establish learning communities where educators solve problems of practice and share responsibility for colleague and student success.
5. Give teachers choices regarding their professional learning, including with whom they work and where they focus their learning.
6. Ensure that professional learning is for the purpose of continuous growth, not evaluation.
7. Resist the temptation to scale up or mandate a particular form of professional learning without thoroughly examining the context in which it will be implemented. Understand that learners must want to improve their practice and see how the learning opportunity will help them do so.

talk about their practice and ask questions. Instead of sitting in generalized professional development sessions, they long to construct solutions to real classroom challenges.

For many teachers, these are the real motivations for learning. “Teachers are in it for the autonomy and the mastery. They want to master their craft and be free to innovate,” Kentucky English teacher Katrina Boone said. “Principals who get this [will] solve their professional development problems and a whole lot of other school challenges.”

Former teachers now working in district offices said that it is often difficult for districts to lighten their control over professional learning. “There is a central office fear of letting go, of giving educators agency to make decisions,” said a former teacher working on professional learning in a district office. “Various departments each have their thing, the program they want to emphasize. They believe this is the most important. They are afraid that if they don’t direct the PD, teachers will lose sight of it.”

Teachers admitted that they are sometimes complicit in relinquishing control for their own learning. They may be reluctant to push back against structures that don’t work or are unaware of how to make constructive changes in what they are offered.

“Teachers need to step up a little,” said a former teacher now serving as an assistant principal. He explained that teachers are free to call their district office and ask for specific professional development that they need, but that teachers rarely take advantage of this option. As teachers become aware of the importance of their agency, they must give themselves permission to lean into their own learning more often and more effectively.

### **SEEING THE FOREST AND THE TREES**

When 6th-grade math teacher Bill Day of Two Rivers Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., described his school’s approach to professional learning, he emphasized Two Rivers’

strategy of balancing system needs with individual teacher needs. Day said that his school's mix of professional development offerings gives teachers agency within a framework of identified school learning objectives. School leaders survey teachers regularly, observe classes, and review data to determine objectives, but they define them broadly enough to be adapted to all subjects and grade levels.

In a practice called data analysis strategy loops, teachers work in multidisciplinary teams to learn about an instructional practice, develop individual plans to use the skill, collect data, share the data, observe each other's classes, and act as critical friends. The teachers themselves determine how they will use each new strategy, including what lesson they will teach and what materials and

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content they will use. Yet everyone in the school is focused on a coherent goal, such as building student craftsmanship or effective use of classroom critique.

The strategy loops help Two Rivers teachers improve by exposing them to effective and research-based practices, while the observations and interpretive-stance discussions strengthen instructional practice. "It works because teachers have agency, but within an umbrella of instructional practice," Day said. "Districts and schools get to see the forest. Teachers get to see the trees. You need both."

We heard from some teachers being treated as experts and learning from one another, but other teachers told us that for teacher agency to improve professional learning, principals and system leaders would have to engage with teachers differently.

Working to improve professional learning in New Haven, Connecticut, former teacher Justin Boucher said that until very recently it was not unusual

to hear administrators say, "[The teachers] had the PD on that, but it's still not working," a stance that sees teachers as service providers rather than problem solvers or decision makers. Boucher says educational leaders sometimes see their job as getting teachers to do things, and then they "blame teachers when initiatives don't work."

**HOW TO ADVANCE TEACHER AGENCY**

- **Tap into teacher leadership.**

Within any school or district, there is enormous untapped teacher expertise that could be harnessed to improve professional learning. Recognizing this reality, district officials in Burbank, California, hired two of the district's best teacher leaders to work full time as teachers in residence, designing induction and professional development for educators.

For middle school English teacher Rebecca Mieliwocki and 5th-grade teacher Jennifer Almer, the first step was talking with the teachers. They surveyed the 400 teachers from their 16 schools and got clear marching orders: no "big binders" that will sit on shelves but make no impact on their practice. Instead, teachers asked for feedback on their instruction, ideas to be more creative, strategies to use technology, models of best practice, and time to collaborate during the day.

After conducting the survey, Mieliwocki and Almer brought together teacher leaders from each school to talk about the survey results and make teacher-directed plans for professional learning. The district team agreed to adopt a visible learning model, and the teacher leaders within each school are forming teams to deepen their practice in something they have been asked to learn so that student learning improves.

- **Support teacher engagement.**

Teachers who are passionate about professional learning often speak about how they have grown through professional learning networks to which their school has introduced them. Dwight Da-

vis, a former teacher who now serves as an assistant principal at the Wheatley Education Campus in Washington, D.C., credits his participation in the Education Innovation Fellowship and a Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellowship as central to his continued growth as a teacher.

"I couldn't have done it without my principal, though," Davis said. His principal nominated him to participate in one of the fellowships and encouraged his full participation in the other, including authorizing absences from school to learn with colleagues.

Robin (Meme) Ratliff is a health and physical education teacher in Kentucky who says she owes much of her development to her experiences as a Hope Street Fellow and her involvement in an ECET2 network of educators. Formed in 2011 by the Gates Foundation, ECET2 (Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teachers and Teaching) is focused on harnessing the power of teacher networks.

Ratliff was nominated to participate by her principal, who also supported her time away from school and nurtured her growth. She said her participation in ECET2's colleague circles and directed table conversations about problems of practice have helped her to cultivate her calling to teach, hone her skills, and stay in the classroom. The first ECET2 conference "was my light bulb moment," Ratliff said. "It created a huge shift in my thinking. I am much more invested in education now."

- **Balance loose and tight control with support.**

Several district officials emphasized the importance of balancing tight and loose control of professional learning based in part on teachers' needs. In New Haven, Connecticut, teachers are seen as professionals who may choose to participate in independent learning sessions and which sessions to join.

The control tightens for beginning and struggling teachers, who are required to participate in some specific, more intensive coaching and development, and

then gradually releases as they are ready. West Virginia Principal Jennifer Ross explained, “The secret is that as a principal, you have to turn things over and give up some control. You can’t micromanage. The teachers have to be part of the team. I am on the team, but I’m not the only one.”

One way to help ensure a balance between management and agency is to include structures for authentic accountability. Teachers told us that teams need constant check-ins and monitoring of their progress, but the touch need not be heavy. Some schools ask teachers to upload documents that show their progress after meetings. Others engage in regular, ongoing conversations that offer snapshots of how teachers are progressing so that school leaders know when teachers need help.

The key is to make sure every team member participating in the learning assumes a nonevaluative stance. And if it looks as if a team is in trouble, a principal might have a conversation with the team leader and support her through effective follow-up.

Districts can improve accountability and balance control with support by putting systems in place to collect and review data that can help educators evaluate the quality of professional learning. Support for this strategy can be found in the Data standard in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) as it describes “a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning” (p. 36).

- **Hire leaders who believe in professional learning.**

For teacher agency to contribute to quality professional learning, teachers and district leaders told us it is critical for school leaders to believe in professional learning and establish a culture of continuous learning. “The principal doesn’t have to be on every team,” North Carolina math and science teacher Ben Owens told us, “but she must ensure that

there is commitment of excellence and improvement through peer networks.”

The Leadership standard in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) emphasizes the importance of having “skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning” (p. 29). Peggy Stewart, 2005 New Jersey Teacher of the Year, said it is important to have a school leader who holds learning among the highest priorities for everyone in the school and who recognizes that with high expectations there must be support for continued learning.

“In schools where the principal doesn’t understand, giving teachers choice can be a disaster,” Stewart said. To illustrate, she described the experience in a New Jersey school where the teachers didn’t buy into learning communities, so they set up instructional learning goals like attending yoga classes, but the principal didn’t know enough about how to guide them toward more authentic professional learning goals.

- **Start small and go deep.**

Schools and districts that are just beginning to improve agency are advised to begin with small steps and reflect about what these changes really mean for their systems. In “In here, out there,” researcher James Noonan (2014) concludes, after observing and talking with educators at a middle school, that it can be very “difficult to shift norms of professional learning in schools” (p. 151).

Educators we talked with confirmed it takes time for new approaches to be shaped to fit individual contexts and begin to make a difference. Harnessing teachers who have operated as solo fliers into collaborative communities will not happen overnight. Teachers who have not been given much responsibility or agency in the past will have to learn to use them well.

Schools and districts need to provide capacity building and support so teachers can take advantage of the opportunity. School and system leaders will have to

prepare themselves for challenges from teachers who now have a voice and find themselves sharing in the leadership of the school and trust those teachers to make lasting improvements.

“We expect change to be this massive, rapid thing,” a district leader in Nevada told us. “The truth is it takes time to build trust and to move the needle. It can take five to seven years.”

## CLOTHING THE EMPEROR

Lest we be guilty of inventing our own fairy tales, we must all acknowledge

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that providing teachers with more agency in their development will not solve every challenge in professional learning. There will be times when the adults in the room will choose learning experiences that do not significantly change their thinking or their practice.

Nevertheless, teachers are making a clear statement that what we have been doing is not effective. More importantly, they make a compelling case that improving teacher agency is critical to their professional learning and to their profession.

When teachers tell us that the emperor has no clothes, they are not saying that all current staff development is pedagogically deadening. Some enjoy teacher meetings and appreciate time to catch up with colleagues. What they are telling us, though, is that they do not grow professionally from these experiences. They may receive “PD credits,” but they do not fundamentally change their practice.

This is what we learned by talking with educators: The opportunity is ripe to work together to clothe the emperor. Let’s bring in our teachers as partners to create job-embedded, authentic systems of learning for the whole school commu-

nity. Let's give them the time, structures, support, and choices they need to be fully engaged in improving practice and solving our most pressing educational challenges.

When we believe in our teachers, listen to them, and support their continual development, there is no telling what our educators and their students will accomplish.

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## The view from the principal's office

*Continued from p. 50*

purpose, focus, and analysis. The literacy classroom visit model fosters development in all students with a particular focus on literacy learning to analyze how efforts within the school are affecting classroom practices that develop readers.

Literacy classroom visits meet the needs of leaders and teachers as they seek to collect and analyze accurate information about strengths and needs in current classroom practices in order to provide staff with the support necessary to grow. Continued visits can monitor ongoing progress in the developing literacy culture and instruction in a school or district.

School leadership experts say that robust and ongoing training can alleviate issues like rapid turnover rates and help keep new principals on the job. A 2013 report from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that "principals who did not get professional development the previous year were 1.4 times more likely to leave their school than leaders who did receive training" (Prothero, 2015, p. 10). Turnover in leadership ultimately means wasted resources for districts.

Although the specific professional development needs vary from new to experienced principals, the tenets of good career training remain the same. According to leaders in the field, it should be rooted in real-world/real-school issues, spread out over a period of time, and promote higher-quality instruction as well as develop a more powerful culture and climate within the school (Prothero, 2015).

Principals want and need to work in districts where their professional learning needs are fulfilled. In order to cultivate

a culture of literacy and support effective literacy instruction that fosters student achievement, leaders need access to strong support and development, far beyond a mentor program in the first two years on the job.

Just as we do for teachers, doctors, and lawyers, we must continue to invest in principal skill development and support them in the complex work of leading schools.

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