



Moving from Compliance to Agency

What Teachers
Need to Make
Professional
Learning Work



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Teacher Agency

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.

It 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, like college- and career-ready standards and closing gaps. They count on educators keeping up with research to teach shifting student populations, to use technology effectively, and to 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–\$12,000 spent per teacher in districts (KDS, 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 and 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 *Mirage* study 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 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.¹

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. In addition to analyzing data, visiting classrooms, and reviewing school and system goals, leaders must cultivate an environment of continuous learning that engages teachers in their professional learning at every step of way. They must understand the intangible, but enormous, value teachers place on being listened to and involved meaningfully as well as the benefits the school community enjoys when teachers are intrinsically motivated to pursue their continued development.

¹ Many we interviewed are educators we know in conjunction with work done at the U.S. Department of Education or Learning Forward; others were referred by organizations interested in teaching and professional learning; and some contacted us directly when they heard about our investigation.

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.

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.

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.

In most cases, teacher agency is not a dichotomous, all-or-nothing proposition in which teachers are either fully engaged or completely disengaged

in their learning. Rather, engagement runs along a continuum so that teachers have more or less agency within any given system. The following matrix offers leaders a framework with which to consider the role of teacher agency in their current professional learning systems and identify areas where there might be room for them to increase opportunities for agency. The graphic contrasts both ends of the engagement continuum by juxtaposing **traditional professional development** (that often excludes agency) with **emerging professional learning systems** (that position teachers as constructive participants in their professional growth). Our recommendations focus on ways systems can maximize agency that leads to improved teaching and learning.



Conditions that do and do not support teacher agency

System Conditions	Professional Development Lacking Teacher Agency	Professional Learning Supporting Teacher Agency
School approach to professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned by administrators, often delivered by external vendors; Driven by constraints of current scheduling; Doubts about whether professional development is working; One-time workshops without follow up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers plan and present professional learning; Educators engage in learning communities based on mutual trust and expertise; Professional learning happens during the school day and everyone engages in cycles of learning.
Reason for teacher participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compliance: to earn credits or carry out existing policies; Compulsion or external pressure to achieve a score, satisfy someone else's objective, or to receive external rewards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intrinsic desire to improve teaching and learning and connect with colleagues; Internal motivation to master one's craft, to be accomplished, to prepare students for the future.
Source of solutions to learning challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assumption is that the source of expertise and solutions comes from outside the school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look internally first for the source of expertise to solve problems.
Topics and skills addressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little input from teachers; Potpourri of topics chosen by system leaders and principals based on multiple, often competing, objectives; Decisions about what teachers need to know are made by the central office and school administrators; Topics are often unrelated to teacher and student learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher-identified learning objectives; Based on data (including observations); Focused on teachers' and students' continuous growth; Topics address specific classroom challenges; Teachers decide what they need to learn.
Role of teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementers, recipients of information, deliverers of content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planners, designers, advisors, presenters, implementers, evaluators, decision makers.
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School leaders predetermine topics for collaboration; Teachers do not choose which team(s) they will join; Norms and protocols are set outside of the group and may or may not be accepted by group members; Groups may include non-teachers whose primary role is to supervise the group's interaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers determine topics based on student's and teachers' needs; Teachers may choose to join teams with common goals and interests; Teams determine norms and protocols; Teams are responsible for working within their established norms and protocols, though non-teachers may participate as team members without a supervisory function.
Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Form of learning is not personalized; Sit and get; Teacher watches presentations, listens, takes notes, sometimes engages in small group discussion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Format based on teachers' learning needs; Grounded in adult learning research; Collaborative, constructivist exchange.
Tone of learning activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Checking the boxes; passive, inauthentic interaction; Unclear purpose; Loses focus, gets off track, devolves into staff meetings or complaint sessions; Evaluative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal-oriented; Professional; Clear agenda and meaningful protocols; Interpretive, solutions-oriented.
District plan and priorities for professional learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Driven by administrators and school board; Plan executed by central office; Focus on state and district mandates and program implementation; Excludes monitoring and feedback of effectiveness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educators examine data and determine priorities; District team comprises at least 50% practitioners; Plan to monitor implementation and impact; Established feedback loops.

Seven Steps Forward

We do not propose teacher agency as a panacea. We understand that creating effective professional learning is complex and difficult. Instead, our 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.

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.

What district and school leaders can do to improve education agency in their professional learning systems

STEP 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.
STEP 2	Rethink organization of the school day so that educators have time to meet regularly to collaborate with colleagues to improve teaching and learning.
STEP 3	Involve and support teachers in analyzing data and identifying teaching and learning challenges.
STEP 4	Establish learning communities where educators solve problems of practice and share responsibility for colleague and student success.
STEP 5	Give teachers choices regarding their professional learning, including who they work with and where they focus their learning.
STEP 6	Ensure that professional learning is for the purpose of continuous growth, not evaluation.
STEP 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.

A Case for Improving Teacher Agency

The teachers we spoke with, while generally positive about teaching, often sighed audibly when asked to describe their professional learning. They characterized “PD days” as episodic, irrelevant, and uncoordinated — an experience they usually “dread.” Their stories ring like different verses of a sad song lamenting “top-down” instruction that is too general to help them, that doesn’t offer solutions to challenges in their classrooms, and about which they have little or no choice.

“We walk into a room and get the handouts. We sit and listen to a Power Point, usually without paying attention. Then an hour goes by and we go to the next session.”

“There are so many initiatives, and there is so much pressure to cover them all, that the PD is not connected to overall goals for the year or for school’s objectives. It’s like throwing spaghetti on the walls.”

“We have to force PD down people’s throats, whether they need it or not.”

“As an elective teacher, I’m tired of going to required PD and hearing this sentence: ‘Well, this doesn’t really apply to you...’”

“PD is something we go and do. We line up to get vaccinated.”

Even professional learning communities, a common form of professional learning, were consistently described as “broken” or “seriously off track.” One science teacher described PLCs as “a total cliché.” An English teacher explained, “Our conversation is so superficial. We are afraid to bring up a situation that we are having a problem with for fear of being judged. And it’s rote. We are just going through the motions.”

While NCTAF and Learning Forward prefer not to dwell on the negative experiences of teachers, we do believe it is critical for educational leaders to acknowledge how teachers are experiencing the very professional development on which they rely to enact state and local reforms. If we believe all students should experience great teaching, then support for teachers must be equitable and it must be stable from school to school and state to state. We cannot ensure great teaching when teachers feel bored or forced to comply with an exercise that is imposed on them, one that they do not believe will help them to improve. “If the reason I to go to PD is ‘I’ve been told to’ and there is no other frame of reference or motivation for me to attend, my value from the PD is, indeed, going to be low,” a physics teacher told us. “When I have no skin in the game, I am just going through the motions.”

Education leaders must acknowledge how teachers are experiencing the very professional development they rely on to enact state and local reforms.

How adults learn

Much of our stance about the importance of teacher agency comes from the last several decades of research on adult learning theory, which has progressed rapidly since Malcolm Shepherd Knowles offered his *principles of andragogy* in the 1980s. Jack Mezirow (1997) showed that for adults to experience *transformative learning* — the process by which they change their frame of reference — they must experience something different in form from the learning commonly associated with children (Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow contends that ideal conditions of adult learning require that participants be free to engage in various roles of discourse, including becoming critically reflective of assumptions, and “free from coercion” (p. 10).

In *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, Jane Vella (2002) describes twelve “deeply interconnected” principles of adult learning that she has drawn from research. Most rely heavily on teachers’ agency. She argues that adult learning requires “participation of the learners in naming what is to be learned” (p. 4), a design that conveys to adult learners “this experience will work for them” (p. 8), and “respect for learners as decision makers of their own learning” (p. 15). About

this last principle, she elaborates, “Healthy adults desire to be subjects or decision makers and resist being treated as objects, something that can be used by someone else” (p. 15).

Vella’s and Mezirow’s pictures of what effective adult learning looks like are very different from traditional professional development that may often be a forum where teachers receive information to implement someone else’s agenda. Their constructivist theories are grounded in a body of research that shows people gain knowledge and meaning from the interaction between their experiences and beliefs. They insist that for real learning to take place, the adult learners must be both decision makers and the subjects — and agents — of their own learning.

The learning that teachers value

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.

Being part of a nurturing professional community: Chris Poulos

Chris Poulos teaches Spanish at a Connecticut school that currently offers professional Reviews of Practice designed by teachers and chosen by teachers. Early in his career when Poulos didn’t have this option, he felt frustrated by a lack of professional learning opportunities and formed his own community with other world-language colleagues. They met regularly to develop curriculum, plan instruction, build assessments, consider data, review each other’s work, talk about strategies to improve, and offer feedback. “It worked because it was relevant, meaningful, and embedded,” Poulos told us. “I got to work on what I needed to get better, and we were all working to achieve a common goal.”

Poulos’s experience illustrates a strand that runs through many educator conversations about professional learning that works, namely, the importance of collaborating with colleagues regularly. The Learning Community standard in the *Standards for Professional Learning* affirms this as well: “[T]he more one educator’s learning is shared and supported by others, the more quickly the culture of continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and high expectations for students and educators grows” (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 25). At its core, Poulos’s story is about using his agency to find a common ground where he could grow, a space where he could work with like-minded colleagues to collaborate, offer feedback, and support one another’s continual learning.

Connecting to the real work: Alexandra Fuentes

Alexandra Fuentes, science teacher in Alexandria, Virginia, explained that agency is an important part of what makes professional learning relevant for teachers. “Teachers know that students learn best when they can connect their learning to something real in their world,” she explained. “The same is true for teachers. We need to be able to connect our learning with what we need to teach effectively.”

Fuentes said her growth as a teacher has been heavily influenced by professional learning that connected directly to her immediate practice in

the classroom. As Fellows of the Knowles Science Teaching Foundation (KSTF), she and other KSTF teachers followed for three years an inquiry-based model that blended deep learning with intensive collaboration and independent work. She described how teachers in her cohort pushed her capacity by causing her to continually reflect on her practice and consider how she could use innovative strategies both immediately and over time. “It totally changed me and how I think as a teacher,” she said. “I learned the pedagogy of science, how to get kids to understand science.”

Treating teachers as decision makers and experts: Monica Washington

Both Alexandra Fuentes and Chris Poulos describe strong professional learning that they found outside of their schools, but we are interested in how teachers can have the same kinds of engaging learning experiences within their school systems. **Monica Washington**, an 18-year high school English teacher in Houston, Texas, offered an example of how teachers in her system recently benefitted from increasing teacher agency in their professional learning.

Before the start of the school year, Washington’s district surveyed teachers to learn about teaching skills they needed, asked them to propose workshops that addressed needs teachers identified, and let teachers choose from the offerings. “This was the best professional development I’ve had [from the district] by far,” she said. She learned specific skills to use technology and build student’s vocabulary, while gaining a deeper respect for the teachers in her district.

Washington’s story reflects an aspect of agency that teachers often point out: the value of teachers learning from each other. As a member of the National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY), Washington has been developing

professional learning modules for teachers through a partnership with TeachingPartners, a new professional development initiative that brings teachers together to meet the instructional challenges of new, higher standards. Teachers on the NNSTOY team individually design a lesson for other educators about an important pedagogical insight. They present the lessons, which are videotaped with other teachers acting as an audience. At first, the NNSTOY teachers presented only to each other and for the camera, Washington told us, but later they invited teachers from the area to attend the events so that they could participate in meaningful professional growth. The invited teachers described the teacher-led sessions as authentic, engaging, and more useful than any they had attended.

Washington’s experiences testify to the power that teachers find in learning from one another. “People who have never taught, or haven’t taught in a long time, have a tendency to bring ideas that work on paper, or they bring tired, old strategies,” she explained. “We want to learn from an effective teacher who understands what the job really entails.”

What Does Teacher Agency Look Like?

At the core of our use of the term professional learning is the belief that there is an important relationship between the adults' professional learning environment and what students learn in school.

We must provide educators with rich, creative learning experiences that lead to mastery.

That is, if we want our students to engage in rich, creative learning experiences that lead to mastery, then we must provide educators with rich, creative learning experiences that lead to mastery.

The stories of Poulos, Fuentes, and Washington illustrate several aspects of agency that are important for individual teacher learning: belonging to a community; connecting to practical, classroom needs; and tapping the expertise of teachers. The following examples provide further insights into what teacher agency in professional learning might look like in systems and schools.

Learning before designing: Long Beach Unified, California

Long Beach Unified recently rolled out a professional learning virtual platform called myPD. MyPD is a program that supplements face-to-face professional learning in the district by connecting teachers with a variety of learning experiences. Before district leaders made plans to improve professional learning for teachers, they immersed themselves in the world of teaching and learning and conducted a thorough needs assessment.

Asking and listening to teachers

"We realized we couldn't design a system for the teachers without understanding those we were designing for," said **Pamela Seki**, assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional development at Long Beach Unified. To find out, the district also conducted an extensive review of their current professional development offerings, following a protocol developed at Stanford University that is anchored in a five-step information gathering process. The process helped district leaders to define and understand the issues.

Teachers on the team

District officials didn't stop there. They continued to interact with teachers to interpret the survey's findings and learn more about teachers' needs. In daylong meetings with several hundred teachers (about 750 hours of conversations), district leaders delved into the specifics of teachers' teaching experiences and professional needs. They formed a cross-functional district team (80% teachers, 20% administrators) who acted as thought partners throughout the design of a new professional learning system.

Continuing to expand agency

Since the rollout districtwide, leaders at Long Beach Unified have had initial success with the program and positive feedback from teachers who have used it. They credit their success with their active and purposeful attempt to learn from teachers about what they needed and to create professional learning experiences that align with their goals. The myPD program itself is partially driven by teacher agency because it gives teachers control of the inputs into the virtual platform and the professional development choices they access once they are in the system.

Structured choices: New Haven, Connecticut

District officials in New Haven had a feeling that their professional development wasn't helping teachers grow professionally in the ways that they needed most. **Justin Boucher**, a former teacher now working for the district to improve professional learning, told us that it was common for teachers to miss whole-day professional development sessions. "On top of that," he said, "no one felt that having 90 people in a room and talking to them for one and a half hours was working." The district, therefore, set out to find ways for teachers to engage more meaningfully in their development.

Teachers leading

District leaders began by returning to a concept that they believed had shown some potential in schools — the PLC — but infused their new form of professional learning communities with a heavy dose of teacher agency. They used a TIF grant and a Gates grant to look for mechanisms and protocols that would give teachers more ownership of their learning. They also asked effective teachers within the system to apply for paid positions as facilitators or liaisons between the district and the school, hired about 60 facilitators, and gave them training in adult learning and facilitation. The new teacher facilitators were charged with talking with other teachers in their building and working with the principal to create engaging learning communities that addressed their needs.

Motivation to learn

Boucher believes the teacher-led learning sessions are effective because teachers decide what aspect of their teaching they want to work on and what communities of practice to join. "When it comes to professional growth," he said, "agency matters. When the teacher says, 'This is what I really need'; when they identify their needs themselves rather than having someone from the outside saying, 'You need to learn this,' that's everything." He said that teacher involvement in groups of their choice has led to positive peer effects, providing motivation

and encouragement for teachers to attend and engage more fully than they might have in more traditional professional development. Teachers who were initially reluctant have been drawn into the discourse and improved their teaching.

Positive pressure

The New Haven theory of action is to give teachers agency, but to provide "some pressure for participation." Teachers in the district are required to set growth goals and to show they are working toward their goals. Principals have an expectation of growth for teachers and hold regular conversations with them about their professional learning, sometimes nudging them to take greater responsibility. Often teachers use their active participation in a learning group to satisfy part of their growth goal for their evaluation. The district also expects that growth-oriented professional development initiatives take place during school time, and they offer training and structures for working with colleagues. He summarized the New Haven strategy this way, "We try to give the teachers time and space and then insist that they use it well."

When it comes to professional growth, agency matters. When teachers identify their needs — rather than someone from the outside — that's everything.

Purposeful, organic collaboration: Tri-County Early College High School, Murphy, North Carolina

Math and science teacher **Ben Owens** is a career changer who became interested in professional learning after noticing striking differences between his earlier development as an engineer and his growth as a teacher. As an engineer, he was encouraged to learn from colleagues and to review their work regularly. “In fact,” he told us, “it was a job expectation. . . .It was considered bad to try and solve a problem that someone else had already solved when you could have learned from someone else in the profession.”

Instructional rounds

Taking a page from Richard Elmore’s concept of *Instructional Rounds in Education* (2009), Owens and a team of like-minded teachers at his school decided to organize into a professional community and work to improve their teaching. The multidisciplinary team of five teachers and an administrator meets twice a week, following an organic structure they developed over time that allows them to achieve two objectives: watching each other teach and helping to solve their own problems of practice. Owens says their team time on Mondays and Wednesdays is “like gold.”

Here’s how they work: Throughout the week, everyone on the team visits a teacher’s class to look for the same specific kinds of data. Each Monday, they debrief from their instructional rounds in a protocol-driven conversation that includes statements beginning with “I saw...I heard...I liked...” or “I wondered...” The teacher who was visited takes notes and asks questions, and sometimes summarizes what he or she learned. Owens likes these conversations because they follow a protocol and they get right to what the teacher needs: feedback from the lesson, including what worked and what could be improved. “The time invested in this kind of professional learning is makes it a true game changer for our school and the protocols make it very efficient and effective,” he said.

- **Organic discourse.** On Wednesdays, Owen’s team meets again to have another purposeful conversation, this time about a specific

challenge some of the teachers are experiencing. Their discourse covers one in a range of issues: how to run a paperless classroom, troubleshoot the state’s new electronic gradebook, improve student-led parent conferences, and so on. They also vary how they address the issue; sometimes they have open conversations, discuss articles they read, provide in-house training on a new technology, or work together to construct a solution. The team also uses this time to collaborate on schoolwide initiatives such as integrating the school’s project-based-learning focus across all subjects.

- **Real solutions.** Although participation is not mandatory, Owens said, their meetings always have 100% attendance because the teachers feel empowered and have complete agency over their work. They had asked for a schedule that would allow them to meet twice a week. Now, they are committed to working together because they see themselves developing as teachers and believe their common work is making a significant impact on their teaching.
- **Interpretive, not evaluative, observation.** The Monday review of instructional rounds and the Wednesday discussion about problems of practice share an important aspect: Though they are interpretive and analytical, they are not evaluative. The team uses a shared leadership model to help each other solve challenges and get better. While the school’s principal is on the team, she acts as an equal team member, not to keep them on the right track. More important than having someone evaluating the teams, Owens believes the key to improving professional learning may lie in having leadership in the school that works to establish a culture of “true peer networks.” In true peer networks, teachers view each other’s classes, share problems and solution ideas, work from established protocols and norms, and follow up what they have learned. The principal doesn’t have to be on every team, but she or he must foster a commitment of excellence, improvement, and shared leadership through such peer networks.

Conditions for Teacher Agency

When schools and districts begin to improve teacher agency, the potential payoffs can be big. The Gates (2014) 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, pp. 10–11).

The work to advance agency and to 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 an "agency" checklist. However, as we describe in the table on page 5, 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, to 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 student learners, teachers long for opportunities to watch colleagues teach and to choose for themselves the strategies they will adapt for their classrooms, following up with teachers they observed to 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."

Districts that abandon structures and traditions that don't serve learning

Recognizing teachers as professionals and problem solvers and improving teachers' ownership over their learning will require changes at the school and system level. Former teachers who now have leadership positions in schools or in district professional development offices told us that for teacher agency to contribute to effective professional learning, some practices might have to be shown the door. Here are some insights they offer about practices that need a second look:

Protection of programs and job descriptions that don't meet teachers' learning needs

"There is a lot of energy going to the traditional way of delivering PD. There is a staff developer on the payroll, and it is her job to be sure we get PD. I went to summer training and it was horrible" (teacher now working in a district office).

Principals who don't believe in professional learning and teacher agency

One principal told us that she came up through the system when teachers and principals were not aware that there are Standards for Professional Learning. It took her some time and intentional work to understand what effective professional learning looks like and how she can support teacher growth in her school. Teachers we talked with often acknowledged that principals themselves haven't had the support they need to be good instructional leaders. "A lot of principals have never had good professional learning, so they don't know how to help teachers to get it. Others say they support PD, but they won't give teachers time to learn" (former teacher who is now coaching).

Teachers are in it for autonomy and mastery. They want to master their craft and be free to innovate. Principals who get this will solve their professional development problems and other school challenges.

Control of professional learning

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. Various departments each have their thing, the program they want to emphasize. They believe this is the most important thing. They are afraid that if they don’t direct the PD, teachers will lose sight of their thing,” said a former teacher working on professional learning in a district office. Another former teacher working on district professional learning told us that they are moving toward agency and loosening control because they believe “it can’t be much worse” than the traditional approach they had been following.

Teachers who abdicate their own agency

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 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.

Education leaders who attend to the forest and the trees through system-teacher alignment

When 6th-grade math teacher **Bill Day** (Two Rivers Public Charter School, Washington, D.C.) described his school’s approach to professional learning, he emphasized the 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 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 teachers at Two Rivers to 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,” said Day. “Districts and schools get to see the forest. Teachers get to see the trees. You need both.”

The story about Westside Community Schools district in Omaha, Nebraska, illustrates how educational leaders can work to balance teachers’ learning needs with system goals (see inset box, “The Westside Way”).

The Westside Way

Greg Betts, the director of professional learning at Westside Community Schools (about 6,000 students in Omaha, Nebraska), decided in the summer of 2014 that the district had to figure out a new way to help teachers improve their instructional practices. Betts, a former teacher and principal, could tell that their current system of professional learning needed to evolve to meet the needs of educators just as classroom instruction had been evolving to meet the individual needs of students. “The ‘sit and get’ just wasn’t working,” he said, “We knew this.”

To mix things up, district leaders asked teachers to propose sessions on instructional best practices that they could present to colleagues during a PD day that was akin to speed dating. “In the morning, teachers presented for a minute about their work, and peers chose what and who they wanted to learn from,” Betts said. Survey data about the new format showed it was beneficial to teacher learning, but district leaders knew from Standards for Professional Learning that for the professional learning to affect teaching and learning on a large scale, it needed not only to offer teachers agency, but also to be ongoing and aligned to district goals. The Learning Communities standard, for example, deals with the need for professional learning to occur “within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.” The District Teaching and Learning Team developed an innovative strategy to balance teachers’ individual learning needs with those of the system and ensure that the learning is continuous and embedded throughout the year.

So, for the 2015–16 school year in the Westside District, teachers participate in four full-day professional learning sessions offered quarterly by the district, with four follow-up

sessions on early-dismissal days. During the full-day sessions, teachers attend three different professional learning sessions: two of their choice and one common session on a focus topic for the district.

- **One common session.** After analyzing district and school data, the Teaching and Learning Team selected one instructional focus for the school year: *eliciting student response*. The quarterly professional learning days include one required session on eliciting student response, thus expanding and following up on the topic from session to session.
- **Two independent choices.** Teachers select two sessions to attend, from approximately 51 learning topics, based on their interests and needs. The independent sessions are designed and led by teachers who have submitted proposals that fit under the district’s instructional objectives. This year, all topics fit into one or more of three categories: personalized learning, technology, and literacy.

Feedback was positive from teachers who participated in the first full-day session and follow up in October; they appreciated the “personalized approach to professional development,” the “practical” strategies presented, and that there was “enough time to learn new things, but also to really explore what I’d learned and have some good discussions about it.” Many comments dealt specifically with the importance of teachers being allowed agency for their learning. “I appreciate the efforts to make these professional development days beneficial for us, and not a waste of time,” one teacher wrote. Another wrote, “I appreciate being able to choose sessions that I am interested in or that apply to me!”

Schools and systems that treat teachers as allies

We heard from Texas teacher Monica Washington about the power of 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.”

Boucher argues that it is far more effective to see teachers as professionals who are on the team, or allies. “We need to include teachers on the team and treat them like allies,” said Boucher. He emphasized that when system leaders respect teachers’ expertise and opinions in education decision making, all are more likely to achieve their common goals.



First Steps: How Some Districts and Schools Are Advancing Agency

Though there is no checklist for incorporating teacher agency, we did begin with the suggestion of seven steps that increase teacher agency in professional learning. We close by offering examples of how some schools and districts have taken steps to harness the power of teacher agency in their professional learning systems.

Tap into teacher leadership to design professional learning that works for teachers

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.

The Burbank example is powerful because it taps into teacher leadership at the district and in schools and offers individual teachers choices about where to focus their learning. 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 (e.g. CCSS, NGSS) so that student learning improves.

Support teacher engagement with learning networks and teacher leadership organizations

Teachers who are passionate about professional learning often speak how they have grown through professional learning networks to whom their school has introduced them. **Dwight Davis**, 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 Innovator Fellowship and a Teach Plus 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 is focused on harnessing the power of teacher networks for the purpose of Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teachers and Teaching. 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 lightbulb moment,” said Ratliff. “It created a huge

shift in my thinking. I am much more invested in education now.”

Jarvis Lundy, now a principal in New Orleans, Louisiana, was a kindergarten teacher when he found a way to take responsibility for his own professional learning by aligning himself with an organization that could help him grow. When Lundy felt that he wasn’t growing through his school’s professional development, he connected with Leading Educators, a nonprofit organization that helps teachers to become leaders and improve their teaching. He was supported by his principal, who not only gave him time away from school to develop his skills but who agreed to pay for his training. “It changed me so much,” he told us. “I was able to jumpstart our school’s RTI [Response to Intervention] program, for one.”

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 leadership in the school to believe in professional learning and establish a culture of continuous learning. “The principal doesn’t have to be on every team,” 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 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 to 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 fully 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.”

It can be very difficult to shift norms of professional learning in schools.

Clothing the Emperor

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

As leaders of schools and systems, we must acknowledge that until we find ways to address the variation in what teachers need, we will continue to undermine the potential for professional learning to adequately prepare teachers for the challenge of improving education and the profession. Over time, our systems will inevitably regress toward the mean, and our professional learning will continue to miss the mark.

Words of caution about improving agency

We do not argue here that to fix problems with traditional professional development, systems’ leaders should adopt protocols or checklists to comply with teachers’ desires for agency. Agency is not another program to be implemented, but a deep and meaningful shift in the responsibilities and roles that teachers play in their learning and in the relationships that teachers have with each other and administrators. Agency is not a panacea, but one of many important elements in creating professional learning that works.

Lessons about the potential of agency

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 community. Let’s give them the time, the structures, the support, and the 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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