

# WHAT TEACHERS WANT

EDUCATORS AT ALL CAREER STAGES  
EXPRESS THE DESIRE TO CONNECT WITH  
AND LEARN FROM ONE ANOTHER



## SURVEY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPTIONS

Activity	Apprentice means	Professional means	Expert means	Distinguished means
Conducting classroom research.	2.40	2.38	2.56	2.56
Influencing school or district policy.	2.26	2.32	2.49	2.54
<b>#1</b> Having opportunities to connect with other teachers.	3.59	3.61	3.67	3.57
Attending a workshop on documenting student progress.	2.76	2.67	2.83	2.53
<b>#3</b> Receiving support for reflection about the results of the work I do in my classroom.	3.25	3.11	3.15	3.11
Being offered opportunities for leadership.	2.69	2.68	3.04	3.01
Attending a workshop on communicating with parents and conducting parent conferences.	2.81	2.50	2.59	2.38
Teaching undergraduate and graduate courses.	1.77	1.82	2.02	2.18

Teachers rated 16 professional development activities on a Likert scale: 1 = The activity is of no benefit to a teacher, 2 = little benefit, 3 = some benefit, and 4 = great benefit. The numbers in each column represent the mean perceived value that teachers indicated for each of the activities.



By Cynthia M. Compton

**W**e are now well into the 21st century and as a nation are clamoring for change and opportunity. What does this mean for public school educators? As a group, are we moving rapidly into the future, or are our systems

rooted in the past? Most importantly, what development opportunities do experienced and novice educators alike perceive as necessary to move our systems into a new era?

If we really believe that our schools are vehicles that prepare students to live in a democracy, then our schools should reflect the democratic principles they espouse. While there is a growing body of literature promoting a new paradigm of differentiated professional development in which teachers' voices shape learning opportunities, the reality is that much professional de-

Activity	Apprentice means	Professional means	Expert means	Distinguished means
Learning to link standards for learning with assessment.	3.03	3.01	3.15	2.96
<b>Crafting new methods of instruction.</b>	3.51	3.37	3.48	3.41
Delivering formal or informal training sessions for colleagues.	2.09	2.29	2.78	2.59
Having assistance with locating and selecting materials and supplies.	3.09	2.95	3.15	3.05
Sharing expertise through writing for publications or conference presentations.	1.90	1.89	2.28	2.31
Attending a workshop on working with gifted and special needs students.	2.82	2.74	2.77	2.65
Learning about current research and best practices.	2.94	2.88	3.08	3.05
Serving in a formal leadership role within the school or district.	1.97	2.17	2.76	2.51

#2

**TEACHER PHASES**

<b>Apprentice:</b> Apprentice teachers are beginning to plan and deliver instruction on their own. Classroom responsibilities consume all their time and energy.	<b>Professional:</b> Professional teachers shift from focusing on personal needs to student needs and build relationships with peers.	<b>Expert:</b> Expert teachers reflect on their teaching and maintain contact with other expert teachers in the district.	<b>Distinguished:</b> Distinguished teachers demonstrate leadership skills and passion for their practice.
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Source: Steffy et al., 2000.

velopment continues in an outdated, top-down mode. Teacher input is rarely solicited to determine the perceptions of teachers regarding their professional development needs. The result of this outdated approach is that many teachers experience professional development that does not consider them as learners (Darling-Hammond & Ball, 1997) but as passive recipients of knowledge transmitted by someone who tells them what to do and how to do it.

To explore the untapped potential of teacher voice in choice of professional development, I created a survey based on the work on the Steffy model of teacher career growth (Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000). Steffy's model outlines the characteristics of teachers through six career phases from novice to emeritus.

In my study, teachers in a large, suburban school district responded to a survey choosing from an array of professional development options. In addition, teachers answered questions that would place them into one of several career phases: apprentice, professional, expert, or distinguished.

I recognized the need to assess teachers' level of development, expertise, and commitment as part of understanding their learning needs. Experience, degree of structure, sequence, and pace are elements of learning that can be varied to address these three characteristics.

Of the 16 suggested activities (see chart on pp. 52-53), most notable was the one selected by teachers from all levels and all phases — having opportunities to connect with other teachers. This striking level of selection indicates that this activity is an important one to explore across career phases and, through incorporation with other professional development activities, would be a starting point for optimum impact. Indeed, this is formative assessment at its best among professionals. At every level — elementary, middle, and secondary — teachers want to discuss their practice activities and ideas with others.

### EMBEDDING TIME TO COLLABORATE

NSDC outlines three essential areas — context, process, and content — that must be considered in professional development in an era of standards-based reform. When opportunities for teachers to connect with others are incorporated into the teacher's day, these elements are present. In discussing our practice with others, we enjoy a much-desired chance to share with others, as well as validation of our role as a contributing professional. This act of sharing creates a connection and opens a dialogue for col-

leagues to learn from one another. Ultimately, these types of discussions are a critical element in forming learning communities, proven successful in school improvement. In addition, such collaborative learning gives teachers in the expert and distinguished phases of their careers the opportunity to share their expertise with others in the professional or apprentice phases. This allows each participant to give and take what best meets his or her needs while at the same time forming a living learning community.

For example, some high school and middle school principals work together to schedule meetings among their respective teachers within the same department. English and language arts teachers discuss curriculum vertical teaming to provide more continuity for their students. This discussion of common issues provides untold benefits as teachers begin seeing the whole picture rather than one year of a student's language arts education. Providing time for teachers to reflect on their practice allows teachers from different phases — apprentice, professional, expert, and distinguished — to network. The apprentice and professional glean what they need from the meeting, having the opportunity to ask questions or share information. Expert and distinguished teachers can share their expertise with others in a nonthreatening environment. It's a winning combination for teachers and students.

### OTHER POPULAR LEARNING OPTIONS

The second highest activity in which all career phase teachers expressed interest was for constructing new methods of instruction. Traditionally, educators tend to think this is suited only to teachers in the distinguished career phase. If supported, this kind of professional development could provide new energy for schools, opening opportunities for ideas both freshly learned in college as well as those grounded in years of practice.

The third popular activity in the survey was receiving support for reflection, a notion that is hardly surprising with the frenetic pace of K-12 schools today. Many leading educators stress the importance of reflection in professional learning, but this poses some tremendous challenges, as time and money are in short supply in most schools. Some schools find the time by hiring lunchroom attendants so that teachers can have that period to meet. Others hire an aide to monitor study halls, releasing teachers to meet with each other and spend time reflecting on their practice. Some schools have journal clubs or book groups read current literature on a topic of educational interest. Allowing the group to choose the book gives teachers leeway in meeting their specific needs.

### PHASE-SPECIFIC CHOICES

While these opportunities received universal support, others were more phase-specific, as identified by my research. Not surprisingly, apprentice phase teachers showed a marked preference for professional development in the area of learning to

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communicate with parents. This area of responsibility can be daunting to a new teacher, who may be only a few years older than the students he or she teaches. In an era where developing and retaining successful educators is paramount, this activity has been associated with successful induction programs (Steffy et al., 2000).

Apprentice phase teachers also showed an interest in having assistance with locating and selecting materials. However, an unanticipated finding was that expert phase teachers also showed interest in this opportunity. This could be an outgrowth of the expert phase teachers' quest for continuous growth. In contrast, it could also signal a desire to transfer this task to others and actually be a reflection of dissatisfaction with time constraints inherent in a teacher's job. Impromptu notes in the survey margins addressed the issue of work-life balance and indicated a reluctance to consider professional development because of time frustrations.

### IS THERE A FULLY DEVELOPED GROUP?

The professional phase teachers were noticeably absent in terms of requesting specific professional development. In fact, they often wrote in the margins of the surveys their desire not to attend workshops on documenting student progress or working with gifted and special needs students. Teachers in this phase rated both of these variables as having less potential benefit than did teachers in any of the other phases. This lower rating by the professional phase teachers compared to the ratings given by expert and distinguished phase teachers seems surprising. However, when considered in relation to the continuous reflection and growth seeking of the expert and distinguished teachers, it makes sense that they would perceive more benefit from developmental activities than those teachers who are in the professional phase.

Disturbingly, the disparity between professional and expert phase teachers for these variables may indicate the beginnings of persistent or deep withdrawal in the professional phase teachers. If so, these areas could be of key importance in identifying absence of a perceived need for learning about current research and best practices. Clearly, professional development for teachers in this phase presents a major challenge to school administrators given that the phase with the largest number shows the least interest in professional development activities.

### SUPPORTING THOSE WITH EXPERIENCE

Teachers in the expert phase could be a valuable resource to assist with apprentice teacher growth and represent a group rich with possible ideas and opportunities for administrators and staff developers. In addition, expert and distinguished teachers are most interested in influencing school or district policy.

These factors are not surprising given that teachers in this phase are more comfortable with their teaching responsibilities and have enough experience to voice thoughtful opinions re-

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garding policy. In addition, they perceive a greater benefit from this activity than their colleagues do in the apprentice and professional phases. Further, expert and distinguished teachers perceived a greater interest in leadership and in delivering formal or informal training sessions for colleagues than apprentice or professional phase teachers. Writing for publications and presentations is an area for which teachers in the expert and distinguished phases expressed interest as well. Teachers in the expert phases saw a greater potential benefit in learning about current research and best practices.

Overall, the study supported the idea that interactive professional development has a role in educator learning and in establishing learning communities. As anticipated, educators at different phases in their careers hold distinctly different perceptions of their development needs. The study confirms that apprentice teachers perceive a need for development activities addressing their immediate needs in relation to their students. We also see that expert and distinguished phase teachers represent an area of great potential, based on their perceived needs and willingness to become involved in educational and administrative realms. The area of more challenge than others is supporting the professional teacher. Clearly, we need additional research to determine methods to engage this well-educated and professionally mature group, and to best take advantage of their expertise for coming generations of teachers.

### REFERENCES

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