

POCKETS of EXCELLENCE

Study explores how policy affects professional learning in 4 high-performing states

By Ann Jaquith, Dan Mindich, and Ruth Chung Wei

According to national survey data (NCES, 2004, 2008), access to and participation in professional development varies widely across states (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010), and the quality of professional development across most states is far from meeting research-based definitions of effective professional development, with a few pockets of excellence in some states. In this study, *Teacher Professional Learning in the United States: State Policies and Strategies*, we look into those pockets of excellence and examine the policies and professional development strategies of a few high-performing states and their districts through case studies.

The goal of this study is to deepen our understanding of the kinds of policy contexts that may be connected to excellence in professional development at local levels. We began by conducting a broad scan of past and current state policies that support professional development in each state. We investigated the specific professional development programs, initiatives, and structures in each state and the conditions that supported these efforts. In doing so, we were able to draw some conclusions about the role of state policy and other factors that might be linked with

This article is based on *Teacher Professional Learning in the United States: State Policies and Strategies*. This is the third in a three-phase study by Learning Forward and the Stanford University School Redesign Network that explores the status of professional learning in the United States. The final report, to be released in November, will include the full case studies examining state-level policies related to professional development. Reports from the first two phases of the study are available at

www.learningforward.org/stateproflearning.cfm.

high-quality professional development.

Four high-performing states (Vermont, New Jersey, Missouri, and Colorado) were selected based on high levels of teacher participation in professional development on the 2007-08 Schools and Staffing Survey (NCES, 2008), a reputation for enacting policies that are consistent with research on effective professional development, and improvements in student achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2009). We also looked for states with geographic and demographic diversity within and across states, as well as diverse policy contexts.

FINDINGS

The table on p. 53 displays some of the major state provisions directly related to professional development that are common across the four states.

This snapshot indicates that most have several common features supportive of professional development. Most:

- Have professional development standards; have a state-level body that oversees teacher licensing, professional

teaching standards, and professional development;

- Require individual professional development plans for teachers;
- Require minimum levels of professional development for license renewal; and
- Require induction and mentoring for beginning teachers.

Two states provide monetary subsidies for teachers seeking National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification.

Of the four states, Missouri has the

strongest system in place for ensuring that state-level policies are enacted locally through a guaranteed level of state and local funding of professional development, district and school-level professional development committees, individual professional development plans, and a means for the state to monitor districts' use of regional professional development centers and participant satisfaction.

- **State case studies**, pp. 54-55
- **Policy strategies and contexts**, p. 56

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY PROVISIONS IN FOUR STATES

Feature	COLORADO	MISSOURI	NEW JERSEY	VERMONT
Standards for professional development	Professional development guidelines for license renewal only.	Includes mechanism for enforcement/monitoring.	Includes mechanism for enforcement/monitoring.	Professional development guidelines for license renewal only.
State resources for professional development	Indirect funding through other state department units that implement professional development.	Yes.	Indirect funding through other state department units that implement professional development.	Indirect funding through other state department units that implement professional development.
State-level professional teaching standards board (or similar board)	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
District or school-based professional development committees required (or similar body, e.g. local standards board)	No.	Yes.	Yes.	Yes (for individual license renewal).
Individual professional development plans required for all teachers	No.	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
Professional development requirements for license renewal	Yes.	Yes.	No.	Yes.
Role of professional development in teacher evaluation	No.	Yes.	Yes.	No.
Role of professional development in career paths/ladders (e.g. Master Teacher license)	Yes.	No.	No.	No.
Induction/mentoring policies or programs	Includes mechanism for enforcement/monitoring (e.g. program approval process, induction required for license advancement).	Includes mechanism for enforcement/monitoring (e.g. program approval process, induction required for license advancement).	Includes mechanism for enforcement/monitoring (e.g. program approval process, induction required for license advancement).	Yes.
State mechanism for monitoring professional development quality	No.	Yes.	Yes.	No.
Support for National Board Certification	State monetary or license advancement incentive.	Federal subsidy only; local monetary incentives only.	Federal subsidy only.	State subsidy for application.
Role of professional learning communities in state policy	Yes.	Yes. (School professional development committees required.)	Yes. (School professional development committees required.)	Yes. (Mandated in schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress.)

COLORADO

As a local-control state, Colorado's policies and strategies have been shaped by a seemingly contradictory set of conditions. On the one hand, Colorado has a long history and climate of innovation that has allowed independent professional development providers to build the infrastructure needed to meet school and district needs and to influence the instructional improvement approaches of the state's Department of Education. On the other hand, over the last two decades of standards-based systemic reform, the state has seen an increasingly tighter regulatory environment in which federal and state mandates, supported by grant funding incentives as well as sanctions, have driven the kinds of professional development demanded by local districts.



The Colorado Department of Education has increasingly used regulations and incentives to drive instructional improvement and professional development. The Educator Licensing Act of 1991 requires all districts to provide a state-approved induction program and also requires teachers to complete 90 hours of professional development every five years for license renewal. While the state has no professional development standards, it does have guidelines for the content and type of professional development that qualifies for license renewal.

In the last decade, the state has focused on improving mathematics and literacy instruction. The Colorado Department of Education conducted statewide reviews of student performance and engaged with stakeholders across the state to revise its model content standards. The state has also invested its own state funding, including \$99 million in Read to Achieve grants over five years, to support schools working to improve reading instruction. These investments build on previous state efforts to improve literacy instruction, such as the Colorado Basic Literacy Act of 1997.

Because of the Colorado Department of Education's limited capacity and resources to provide professional development broadly, it relies on an infrastructure of independent professional development providers. These organizations appear to align with federal and state mandates for results-driven professional development aimed at improving student achievement.

MISSOURI

Missouri's professional development efforts are noteworthy for the enduring support of state policy makers over the past several decades. In 1993, the Outstanding Schools Act established that in order to be eligible for state aid, a district must allocate 1% of monies received to the professional development committee for spending on professional development of certified staff. In addition, another 1% of the state budget is dedicated to statewide professional development. The act also stipulated that three-fourths of the budget allocation must be spent in the year in which it was received and investment in teacher professional learning became ongoing and continuous.

The act also specified that each school's professional development committee will determine how the mandatory professional development funds will be spent in conjunction with the local school board to meet the district's comprehensive school improvement plan goals. All schools are furnished with state professional development guidelines, which were developed by a state advisory committee that included teachers, administrators, professional associations, and personnel from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and are updated frequently. The legislative investments that Missouri has made have produced two substantial dividends: 1) local systemic capacity to provide effective supports to low-performing schools across the state, and 2) a robust network of regional resource-rich professional development centers that share a common vision for supporting high-quality teaching.



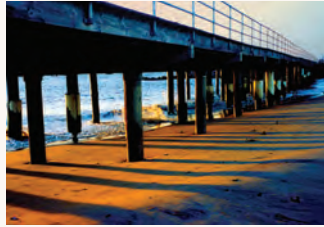
Missouri's network of 11 regional professional development centers was established by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in 1992. These centers have become a linchpin in the state's efforts to build educators' professional capacity to develop engaging learning environments and provide high-quality instruction. In 2010,

the governor cut state funding for the regional centers. However, nine of the 11 centers have found sufficient alternative funding sources to remain viable.

NEW JERSEY

Twelve years ago, New Jersey had no professional development requirement for teachers nor a cohesive plan for schools and districts to focus their efforts.

In 1998, as a result of discussions between the commissioner of education and the New Jersey Education Association, the Department of Education created a minimum professional development requirement for teachers and a governing system led by the Professional Teaching Standards Board.



Comprised of a majority of teachers along with a diverse group of other educators and community members, this group met with national experts, reviewed research, and shared expertise to create governance structures, standards, and planning and approval tools to guide professional development at all levels in the state.

Today, New Jersey requires that new teachers receive high-quality mentoring, and all teachers must create data-driven personal professional development plans to reach a minimum of 100 hours of embedded or external learning per five-year cycle.

Similarly, New Jersey code states that school-level committees should follow state professional development standards and state content standards to create school professional development plans. These plans are collected by district-level committees and evaluated by a county panel, keeping the work local and the responsibility on schools to identify needs and develop action plans.

To do this work, schools are encouraged to develop professional learning communities. The standards board and other organizations have prepared schools by creating a common language around professional learning communities, supplying training materials, and offering coaching support. A range of providers from university-based networks to private professional organizations support professional learning needs as well.

The New Jersey example demonstrates a state's ambitious efforts to use a grassroots team to create policy that requires changes in the way schools do professional development and a support network to build the necessary capacity.

VERMONT

Vermont has a history of innovative educational work and reform efforts with roots in state policy and local initiatives that value teacher and community input. Ideas such as portfolios, locally designed standards work, and job-embedded professional development have been part of Vermont's educational practice for a long time.

However, application of these largely nonmandated innovations has been uneven, and while Vermont ranks high on tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, there is a sizable gap between high- and low-income students. With a 20% drop in Department of Education positions due to the economy, the state's ability to have an integral role in much of the work that needs to be done is limited.

Educational service agencies and other state-supported intermediary organizations such as Teaching All Secondary Students work in conjunction with school districts to fill that gap by supplying training and project evaluation and to pool resources for districts and schools to meet their professional development needs and share knowledge. Furthermore, organizations such as the Vermont Math Initiative, with state and university ties, have provided access to deeply thoughtful professional development for teachers across the state.

Vermont has benefited from coaching through state-supported programs such as the Formative Assessment Project, which used external coaches to help schools build capacity to take on whole staff curricular change, and through local use of teacher leadership.



Vermont continues to search for what University of Vermont professor Charles Rathbone called its "center" (Rathbone, 2000). To achieve that goal, Vermont is balancing the Department of Education's role in coordinating statewide, coherent professional development on a shoestring budget in an environment that values innovation and state vision but resists regulative interference.

KEY FACTORS IN STATE POLICY

The four state cases suggest that the professional development focus, the strategies used to implement professional development, and the extent to which professional development is widely available are shaped by several policy-related factors. Policies related to a state's **leadership, infrastructure, and resources for professional development** are three factors that play important roles in shaping the quality of professional development in each state. Another important factor we observed was the **position and role of intermediary organizations and professional development providers** in relation to state education agencies.

Leadership. In all states, we saw an increasing focus on school accountability as a strategy to guide instructional improvement and student achievement, resulting in a stronger focus on professional development in tested subjects such as literacy and mathematics. At the same time, how those accountability measures are implemented varies across states.

Professional development strategies employed by a state also seem to depend on who is allowed to participate in making decisions regarding instructional improvement, accountability policies, standards revision, and professional development initiatives. When state leaders value the expertise of professionals and make room for distributed leadership, policies and strategies to improve professional

learning and instruction look quite different from those that are designed purely from a top-down perspective.

Infrastructure for professional development. State policies that establish and support an infrastructure for implementing professional development are a second critical factor. Some states deliberately created formal structures, such as regional professional development centers, educational service agencies, or boards of cooperative educational services, to provide professional development services, particularly for remote areas. In some cases, these organizations serve as administrative units or pool resources in ways that make it possible for small districts to access essential services. In others, these organizations are responsible for meeting the needs of local schools as well as directly supporting the state's accountability initiatives.

In other cases, the state may have invested in specific initiatives to build regional or local capacity by training leaders. State agencies have also partnered with professional organiza-

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tions and providers with similar goals, recognizing the limitations of their own influence and capacity.

Resources. State policies related to professional development resources affect the ability of states and districts to implement instructional improvement initiatives thoughtfully and effectively. As noted above, Missouri demonstrated a commitment to support professional learning by appropriating funds specifically for professional development. Other states provide indirect funding through state department units that provide training and technical assistance, or through state initiatives, such as Colorado's Read to Achieve and Closing the Achievement Gap.

In this period of economic recession and budget crises at all levels, resources play a critical role in shaping professional development. All four states in our study face severe challenges in their ability to support professional development, often having to make difficult choices to cut programs.

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The position and role of intermediaries and independent providers in relation to the state education agency. Local and regional professional development organizations, including formal intermediaries such as regional professional development centers and educational service agencies, are a common strategy for providing professional development to schools. Analysis suggests that opportunities differ depending on the provider's relationship to the state system. A provider's positional authority seems to influence how effectively the provider can connect the state's vision to local needs. For example, in Missouri, regional professional development centers have a formal role in the state's accountability system and were directly funded by the state (although this changed in 2010 due to state budget cuts). This em-

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powers the regional professional development centers to have a greater role in translating state policies into practice at the local level. In contrast, in Colorado, where the boards of cooperative educational services are independently funded and primarily accountable to member districts, professional development decisions are driven by district needs rather than by the state's vision. This has implications for state policies aimed at building capacity and expanding professional development that directly advances the state's instructional and school improvement priorities.

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