

# POLICY MEETS PRACTICE

DISTRICTS FEEL THE IMPACT OF STATE REGULATIONS

By Helen M. Hazi and Daisy Arredondo Rucinski

**S**tewart Thorson, principal of New Century Technology High School in Huntsville, Alabama, develops plans for his school's professional learning in an environment restricted by state regulations.

In Alabama's Title I and low socioeconomic status schools and through initiatives such as Blue Ribbon Schools and the State Department of Education's Plan 2020, individual, school-, and district-level professional learning plans are tied to school improvement goals and monitored and evaluated at each level — with online monitoring at the state department level.

The regulations require local committees, special coordinators, and state-approved providers, with on-site review of the professional learning's impact for Title I schools. Thorson sees these restrictions as “good — if a school is ready,” especially for specific targeted professional learning initiatives. This includes project-based learning, which requires 100% buy-in of faculty and high levels of parent involvement. So, if a school has not done the prepa-



ration work with its stakeholders, it will not qualify for the funding.

A national network of online activities and assessment surveys are the source of professional learning for this particular initiative. However, Thorson points out that if a school is not ready for the specific initiative selected at the

state level, choices are limited because funds for other options are not provided and often not available from other sources unless the school can garner private funding.

EDUCATE Alabama, the newly adopted professional teacher evaluation system, views professional learning as the primary function of the evaluation process and requires that all teachers identify areas for improvement and develop goals for their own professional growth.

Thorson views this as limiting because principals must support teacher growth on teacher-identified goals, rather than assisting teachers with choosing improvement goals the district may want the teacher to work on. While Alabama allows districts to opt out of the EDUCATE Alabama evaluation process, Thorson doesn't know of any school district that has elected to do so.

"Opting out of EDUCATE Alabama is probably an option as long as your district has a process that includes all the same components as the state system," Thorson says.

### A NEW ACCOUNTABILITY

Thorson's experiences at New Century Technology High School illustrate the changes to professional learning — and how that intersects with teacher evaluation — since passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Before No Child Left Behind, specific types of professional learning were left to local discretion. Since then, the legislation introduced a new kind of accountability in states as well as a definition of high-quality professional learning.

In 2010, states were challenged to develop effective teachers and principals. In *A Blueprint for Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), federal policy linked the results of teacher evaluation to professional learning and told school districts to use funds "to foster and provide collaboration and development opportunities in schools and build instructional teams of teachers, leaders, and other school staff, including paraprofessionals, to support educators in improving their instructional practice through effective, ongoing, job-embedded, professional development that is targeted to student and school needs; ... Funds spent on professional development and class size reduction must be aligned with evidence of improvements in student learning" (p. 15).

At the state level, the National Governors Association advocated for changes in professional learning in a policy brief (Grossman & Hirsch, 2009) that acknowledged its many prob-

lems, including limited impact despite considerable resources. The policy brief called for changes that focused professional development on student learning.

### CHANGES IN STATE STATUTES

States began to intervene in local policy and practice as they modified teacher evaluation statutes. Some states' statutes required the presence of evaluation systems and their approval, receiving results and handling appeals, approving remediation plans, and conducting on-site reviews. Some also required training in evaluation systems (Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2009).

As states changed professional learning, they have required more of practitioners in local school districts. According to an analysis of state professional development statutes (Arredondo Rucinski & Hazi, 2008; Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2014), some states added standards to statute. Some adopted Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), while other states developed their own professional learning standards. However, most states haven't linked professional development to teacher evaluation through their statutes. Many states require school or district plans for professional learning. Some require state approval of their plans. Only a few states require professional learning to be tied to local school improvement efforts. However, a few other states only require professional learning plans in schools that are found to be low-performing.

Some states require teachers to create individual plans for their professional growth or certification renewal. Interestingly, some states require districts to evaluate the impact of their professional learning. Only a very few have a state plan for professional learning.

Other requirements that have begun to appear foreshadow the incremental creep of state control. These include:

- A local professional learning committee or council;
- A directory or list of approved providers for professional learning;
- Approval of professional funds;
- An on-site review of professional learning;
- A special office or coordinator for professional learning; and

**A look at trends across the U.S. identified strategies that district leaders can use — regardless of their state's current regulations — to improve professional learning.**

- Input of parents, community, and business into professional learning.

While most states don't link teacher evaluation to professional learning, some have done so in statute in various ways. These include:

- Professional learning required in individual improvement plans;
- Professional learning for those needing improvement;
- Evaluation tied to licensure renewal;
- 90-day action plan and dismissal; and
- Failure to participate in professional learning is neglect of duty.

These data show that states are trying to improve teacher quality by improving local professional learning through statute. Of course, this does not account for changes they have made through state regulations or through offering incentives. Professional learning is a big expenditure, and schools, state boards of education, and state departments of education are under scrutiny to make improvements. The question is whether changes to teacher evaluation will result in the hoped-for improvements to teacher quality.

These changes to state statutes appear to be the result of the first three of four recommendations from the National Governors Association:

- Gather and use student achievement data to assess the effectiveness of professional development;
- Use teacher evaluations and student learning data to create individualized development plans for teachers;
- Establish research-based state standards to create a vision for high-quality professional development; and
- Create an incentive-driven professional development initiative for teachers to acquire advanced skills (Grossman & Hirsch, 2009, p. 1).

### A DISTRICT'S EXPERIENCE

According to Kathryn Sprigg, director of assessment for the Highline School District in suburban Seattle, Washington, professional learning plans are required for individual teachers by the schools in her district and tied to school improvement plans, with impact evaluated and reported to districts.

These plans are required in Washington Administrative Code (the state's regulations), by special projects, and by specific financial incentives. Districts use local committees, state-approved providers, and special professional learning coordinators. Funds are approved at both district and state levels. Officials conduct a consolidated on-site review on a regular basis.

Sprigg says the regulations have "probably enhanced what is done locally because they have caused strategic plans to be more focused and have thus resulted in more specific training.

"In addition, the state provides personnel for training for some school improvement projects and for teacher evaluation

processes."

Washington's districts are required to select one of three teacher evaluation systems — Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, the Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model, or a process designed by the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership called the 5 Dimensions of Teaching & Learning.

In Washington, professional learning has become part of teacher evaluation because it is required by individual improvement plans and for those needing improvement. Professional learning is tied to licensure to the extent that professional learning credits are specified for advancement from provisional to professional certification and teacher tenure.

### WHAT SCHOOL DISTRICTS CAN DO

Looking collectively at these trends, we identified strategies district leaders can use — regardless of their state's current regulations — to improve professional learning.

- Follow best practice so that you are ready in case state or federal legislation is enacted.
- Become familiar with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning and consider subscribing to them locally. You can follow their spirit without formally adopting them for your district.
- Always link your district and school professional learning to areas in need of improvement and each school's formal school improvement plan. As you provide assistance to school principals in their planning, ask questions that will help them best use limited resources.
- Evaluate the success of your professional learning offerings. This type of impact data, different from teacher opinions about impact, will position you to apply for grants, communicate district success, and position you to be a leader in your region or state.
- Leverage professional learning funds to those schools with the best plans and proposed use. Consider whether schools should apply for funding to the superintendent and whether funds should be awarded based on the best proposals. To build in continuity and long-range thinking, give priority to proposals that are student data-driven with sufficient follow-up, encourage teachers helping other teachers, and employ a team approach to multiyear efforts.
- Establish professional learning communities with teams of teachers in high-need grades and subjects.
- Provide a professional learning track for individual teachers whose evaluations indicate needs, and offer individualized, differentiated assistance. While schools and their teachers are in a high-stakes climate, be cautious with using the results of student testing as the sole measure of a teacher's ability, especially in situations where you have not carefully evaluated the alignment of tests, texts, and teaching. Be wary, too, of evaluation systems that prescribe a specific

way of teaching as the single best approach for all subjects, grades, and student populations.

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Inspire learning, not dread

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formation system that seeks feedback as a fundamental way of doing business. This requires that professionals understand that coming to know is a shared journey, not a fixed destination.

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Partners with a purpose

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helpful. We are able to analyze data that are specific to my class.”

- “The experience was not negative, but it provided corrective measures that I needed. You need a flexible, open mind to advance learning and teaching skills.”
- From a first-year teacher: “I came into teaching with these ideas about how I would be very lecture-based and students would keep these big notebooks. But I have learned a lot. I have kept the lecture format, but I have implemented strategies that make them more responsible for their own learning. And students have taken more of an interest in the class because they get the hands-on experience and they are learning for themselves instead of just having someone tell

them what to do.”

These examples show that a teacher evaluation system with improving teacher effectiveness as its purpose and professional learning as its core can be successful at nurturing professional growth and fostering increased student learning.

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