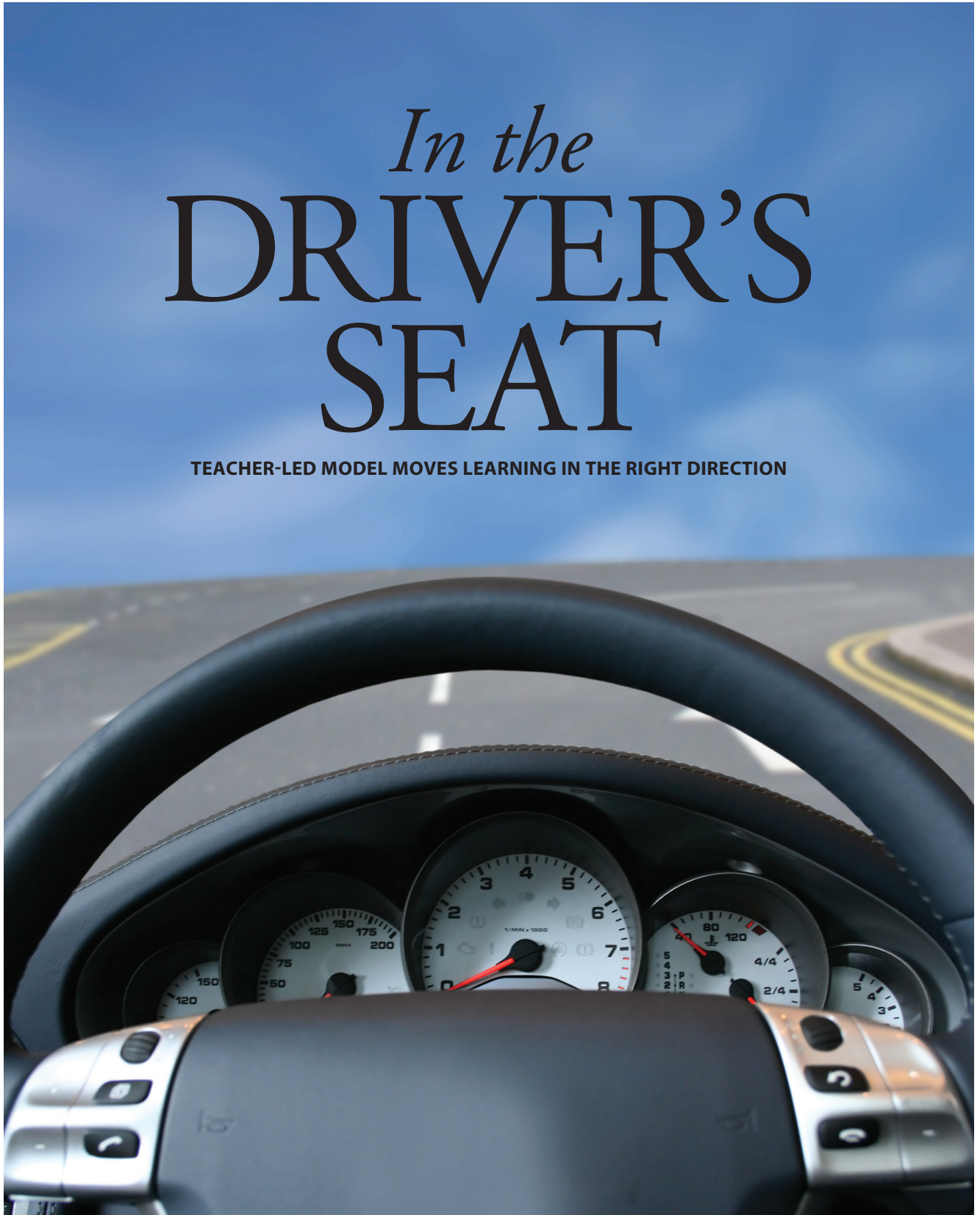# *In the* DRIVER'S SEAT

TEACHER-LED MODEL MOVES LEARNING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

By Lisa Sullivan and Theresa Westover

What happens when teachers are given funding and time to identify and develop targeted and innovative professional learning? This article focuses on lessons learned from grants funded through the California Department of Education that were designed to do just this.

As the state and the nation consider the best approaches to professional learning for educators (Gulamhussein, 2013) it is important to understand how this model worked and how it might inform state and national policy and practice. Common Core implementation is requiring the development of new models of professional growth in order to provide teachers with the support and relevant experience necessary to build their skills and expertise.

The grants were part of California's Teacher-Based Reform (T-BAR) program. (To learn more about the T-BAR program, see box at right.) The program's intent was to support teacher-driven professional development by allowing teachers to select professional learning that would meet their personal learning needs and be responsive to their local school context. Individual projects varied widely in subject area, targeted grade levels, and project details. The specific anticipated outcomes of each project also varied, although actionable professional learning enabling better support for student learning was a consistent theme.

The findings reported here are based primarily on a survey, administered in fall 2014, to all 287 participating teachers in one of the state T-BAR regions. We also conducted a case study examination of three teacher teams to augment survey findings. Questions probed the extent to which teachers' T-BAR project influenced their own professional growth, collaboration, and engagement, and how what they learned and did impacted their students, schools, and districts.

TEACHER SURVEY SUMMARY

Survey results suggest that, even with the widely varying project foci and local contexts, the majority of teachers felt that their participation:

- Increased confidence and pedagogical knowledge;
- Improved classroom instruction strategies;
- Eased the transition to Common Core standards and expectations; and
- Increased collaboration and leadership.

Teacher professional growth. As the table on p. 26 illustrates, the majority of the teachers report increased confidence and skills, improved ability to identify and meet individual student needs as well as improvements in student engagement and learning outcomes.

SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL IMPACT	
Outcome	Agree/ strongly agree responses
Increased support for teacher collaboration and leadership.	75%
Increased opportunities to influence teaching practices.	72%
Greater trust between teachers and administrators.	65%
Established grade- or content-level routines.	58%
Common professional learning time for teachers.	54%
School or district has formally adopted grant-related pedagogy.	33%
Changes in organization structures.	32%
Shifts in amount of support and feedback received from administrator.	24%

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL GROWTH	
Outcome	Agree/ strongly agree responses
Student learning outcomes have changed.	94%
Increased confidence.	90%
Integration of new strategies into daily practice.	91%
Creating new curriculum to meet student needs.	89%
Increased capacity to meet student needs.	82%
Think more systematically about teaching practice.	75%
Shifts in expectations of and ability to engage students.	66%
Ability to deliver high-quality instruction.	66%

Collaboration and leadership. Other outcomes for teachers include increased collaboration opportunities and efforts, as well as growth in their ability and opportunity to provide leadership at their site and, in some cases, district. For example:

- Nearly all respondents (89% to 92%) report routinely collaborating with members of their team and other teachers at their school. Somewhat fewer (65% to 77%) report routinely collaborating with teachers outside their schools or disseminating learning with other teachers via trainings, workshops, conferences, or publications.
- A high proportion (60% or more) of the teachers report taking on additional teacher leadership roles — e.g. serving as mentors, coaches, participating in peer observations — since having participated in the grant activities. About a quarter have taken formal leadership roles as instructional coaches, department lead or chair, or providing support for beginning teachers. A few (3% to 6%) have become district or school administrators.

As one teacher said: "The ability to collaborate professionally with colleagues at my site helped prepare me to effectively do so with many teachers across my district."

School and district changes. In terms of how this model may have contributed to systemic changes at the school or district level, evidence is encouraging but mixed. Most teachers report more collaboration and mutual respect among their colleagues and some specific systemic changes. Smaller proportions of teachers report widespread adoption of their grant-funded

project, changes in organizational structures, or shifts in their interactions with their administrators. Specific survey outcomes appear in the table above left.

The final question on the teacher survey asked teachers to describe the area where the grant had the biggest impact. Most commonly mentioned were increased collaboration, a growth in confidence, and overall professional growth. Several examples from these comments include:

- "It has opened my eyes to the enormous amount of support available to teachers and how it can impact your classroom if you take the time to reach out."
- "Looking at data regularly with colleagues, reflecting on my expectations, and creating indicators for success. Most importantly, I've become a leader in this kind of professional development, and each year, more teachers join us."
- "The leadership opportunity and the passion have impacted my confidence to teach other teachers and move into a teacher mentor or trainer role."
- "The ability to have developed a schoolwide interest in student-centered learning, spent time reflecting on my teaching practice with colleagues, and creating our own pathways toward goals, where teachers and administrators work as partners, has made for a profoundly satisfying and effective work environment."

Overall, the teacher survey findings showed that the majority of teachers felt that participating in the T-BAR grant had a positive impact on their teaching practice, their collaborations with colleagues, and student learning outcomes. Fewer teachers cited changes in levels of administrative support, trust between

administrators and teachers, and district-level changes based on the work.

TEAM CASE STUDY LESSONS LEARNED

Case study data included team planning forms, team interviews, and team reports from three teams. The case study results align with and elaborate on the themes identified from survey responses. Each team focused on different content and grade levels, but their activities had some common features that impacted success, including:

- A focus on a specific targeted learning need and population;
- A recognition of the value of collaboration to both their own learning and the success of their project; and
- Ongoing efforts to refine their interventions and activities as they progressed over time.

Overarching themes from the case studies center on collaboration, shared leadership and administrative support, and flexibility to context.

COLLABORATION

Teachers frequently mentioned having dedicated time to collaborate as a valuable component of the grant. For example, one team of teachers said that participating in professional learning together and having discussions about shared challenges and goals helped them become a much stronger learning community. The teams spoke about the power of collaborating on shared goals. As one elementary school teacher put it, "We needed observation, planning, and discussion time. So I think that is where most of our professional development has come from. Having someone come in to model or where we can watch each other. That idea of not only talking about what we are doing but seeing it in action."

Teachers described how building a collaborative community impacted their practice and gave them additional tools, resources, and information to build their skills and feel more successful. For example, several teachers on one team said that collaborating with their colleagues had shifted their thinking and provided support that helped them realize that they could help all students, even those who were having serious challenges. The teams also noted seeing increases in student engagement as a result of the work they were doing together.

SHARED LEADERSHIP AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Having administrators and district leaders support the work is important for sustainability and spread. There were contrasts among the teams in how they worked together and how active their administrators were in the ongoing work.

One team involved the principal on the project from the beginning. The teachers and principal attended a professional learning session together and developed a shared language. The principal supported the work the teachers were doing consistently and continued to provide dedicated time for the team

to meet.

Another team encountered some initial resistance from the district. They reported that working to overcome this resistance brought them together and helped them learn how to advocate as a team. Eventually, this team began receiving more support from colleagues and administrators after they made initial progress and developed resources to share.

The third team reported that one key vice principal was involved and advocated for their work. By the end of the grant, this team had started to gain more support from the district and was sharing their work with teachers from other schools.

The impact of administrative support — or lack thereof — was particularly important in terms of the extent to which teams were able to share their learning across the system and impact either school or district practice as well as evaluate their efforts using student level data collected at the school or district level.

FLEXIBILITY TO CONTEXT

The case studies illuminate the importance of context. Not only does the local context shape the focus of individual projects, but it also presents many of the implementation challenges teams face.

For example, local context impacted how widely colleagues appreciated or adopted a new strategy or approach, the extent to which they had or gained administrative support, and the extent to which they actively disseminated their learning among colleagues.

In addition, giving teams flexibility to adjust and modify their original plans over the course of their work was an important component of this model. Teams commonly mentioned how important it was to be able to refine their approach as they started doing the actual work and learned what additional steps they needed to take to reach their goal. Being flexible in allowing teachers to guide their learning is an important component in any professional growth model.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Results from the T-BAR survey and case studies suggest that the majority of T-BAR teachers found strong and lasting value from their participation in the project. Teachers report increased confidence and improved pedagogical practice, learning new content and teaching strategies, and an appreciation for the value of collaborative learning with their peers. Many report increased opportunities to develop as teacher leaders, sharing their new learning with other teachers at their school and/or district, and becoming mentors or coaches.

While individual teachers report positive results in developing teaching strategies and improving student learning, there is less evidence that this learning is being translated into policy or supported via organizational changes. Survey findings suggest that administrative support is critical to system change and facili-

on classroom practice and culture.

The districts will compile these identified areas, and the artifacts of their learning, to develop a sequence of online learning modules. These modules will be used to scale up the learning to all teachers across the districts.

School-based assessment literacy teams will share the results of their action research and open their doors to colleagues in a lab classroom model, giving all educators access to onsite support for continued professional learning around assessment literacy. Continued cross-district networking will strengthen these structures at the school level.

As indicated by the early results, student achievement in the classrooms of participating teachers shows evidence of improvement. The online learning modules, established instructional models, and onsite support from participating teachers will allow the districts to increase capacity and sustainability by expanding the professional learning throughout the districts. These school-level and cross-district structures for continuous learning provide a systematic approach to professional learning that will have a long-lasting and substantial impact on student learning.

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tating the process of sharing what the project teams have learned.

For this teacher-led approach to have a lasting impact beyond the direct participants and their close colleagues, administrative recognition, support, and participation is important. Administrators may need to redefine their expectations of professional learning in order to fully appreciate the value of teacher-initiated, locally developed interventions that are responsive to local needs and adaptable over time and setting.

Giving administrators and teachers the opportunity to learn together about effective strategies for organizational improvement, including teacher-driven change, can facilitate productive conversations, continuous learning, and a willingness to experiment with new approaches to professional learning. This may require some rethinking among administrators about the value of local solutions to local problems and the value of facilitating change that may not necessarily be the traditional top-down approach, but rather a more inclusive approach to encouraging innovation and teacher leadership.

At the same time, teachers may need to be open to some modification of the anything goes approach of T-BAR in defining both project goals and outcomes in order to more effectively identify and expand the impact of their professional learning.

It can be a delicate balancing act to retain the teacher-driven character of this model while garnering administrative buy-in that supports, without necessarily controlling, program activities. In particular, allowing teachers the time to collaborate, refine, and test their intervention over the course of several years may entail realignment or identification of new funding sources to support and disseminate the work absent external funding.

If funding is available for this type of model, we recommend having some common outcome measures (or a menu of common measures) across projects to more systematically accumulate evidence of the efficacy of this teacher-driven model of professional development. In addition, we recommend providing a structured mechanism for educators to share lessons learned and promising practices across teams and districts. This would help promote this model as well as provide an opportunity to share experiences and support ongoing collaboration.

There is an emerging interest in the field of education in adapting organizational development learning to school and district contexts. The T-BAR model of teacher-driven change and learning is compatible with this new perspective that recognizes schools and districts as entities capable of becoming continuous improvement learning environments with innovations emerging at all levels, not just from top-level leadership or external entities.

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