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United States Making Mixed Progress in Improving Teacher Learning

Mentoring and Support for New Teachers Has Increased, but the Nation Is Moving Backward In Providing Ongoing, Intensive Professional Development that Improves Student Learning

New Professional Development Access Index Reveals that AR and UT Provide Most Frequent Professional Learning Opportunities followed by CO, KY, NC, OR, and SC

WASHINGTON, D.C. – August 26, 2010 – The United States is making some progress in providing increased support and mentoring for new teachers, according to a new report that analyzes the status of professional learning in the United States. However, the nation is moving backward in providing the vast majority of teachers with the kind of ongoing, intensive professional learning that research shows has a substantial impact on student learning.

The new report, *Professional Development in the United States: Trends and Challenges*, examined 2008 data from the federal government’s Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and other sources. It summarizes Phase II findings of the three-part Status of Professional Learning study launched in 2008 by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) and a team of researchers from the School Redesign Network (SRN) at Stanford University. It also assesses each state on the quality of their professional development across 11 indicators that comprise a newly-developed Professional Development Access Index, which indicates that Arkansas and Utah have by far the most frequent professional learning opportunities for teachers in the categories covered by the survey, followed by Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oregon, and South Carolina.

In 2008, teachers nationwide had fewer opportunities in most areas to engage in sustained professional learning opportunities (e.g. those lasting more than one day) than they had had four years earlier. They were also half as likely to report collaborative efforts in their schools as teachers did in 2000.

“The good news is that we are doing more to support new teachers and increase opportunities for professional development in key areas. The bad news is that we are not doing enough to ensure that the vast majority of teachers and school leaders already in schools receive the kind of ongoing, intensive professional learning that research shows has a substantial impact on student learning,” said Linda Darling-Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Teaching and Teacher Education at Stanford University, the principal investigator of the study. “States and districts need to introduce more effective and systematic approaches to supporting, developing, and mobilizing educators.”

Mixed Picture of Progress

The new data reveal patterns similar to those discovered in the 2009 report, with some improvements, but also some losses. The percentage of beginning teachers (those with 5 or fewer years teaching) who reported participation in an induction program during their first year of teaching has steadily increased, with 74 percent reporting participation in an induction program in 2008 (a nearly 6 percentage point increase from 2004). Similar increases were also seen in the percentage of beginning teachers that reported working with a master/mentor teacher, participating in seminars or classes for beginning teachers, and having common planning time.

Overall, the percentage of all teachers who reported participating in professional development on the content of the subjects taught, the uses of computers for instruction, reading instruction, and student discipline and classroom management increased slightly from 2004 to 2008.

However, the intensity of the professional development has declined in most of these areas. The report found significant *increases* in the percentage of teachers who report having received short-term professional development (8 hours or less) across key areas and *decreases* in those reporting longer-term professional development.

Analysis of a broad range of studies indicates that the kind of sustained professional development that increases student learning requires between 49 and 100 hours of contact on a single professional development focus. However, the report notes that in most areas, teachers were receiving less than 8 hours of training on a given topic, and the average reported number of hours of professional development in the United States was only about 44 hours *combined* across all six topic areas.

“We must ensure that every educator has access every day to effective professional development, which addresses student performance data, evidence-based teaching strategies, and ongoing assessment of its impact on teaching and student learning,” said Stephanie Hirsh, NSDC’s executive director. “Through structured collaboration and unyielding expectations for more effective professional development – promoting shared responsibility for student success across grade levels, subjects, and schools – the best teaching practices will spread from classroom to classroom and ultimately school to school.”

Additional Findings

- Well under half of teachers reported access to professional development on teaching students with disabilities (42 percent) and teaching English language learners (27 percent), consistent with previous years’ findings.
- Teachers in urban and rural schools and schools with the highest Free and Reduced Lunch and minority enrollments participated in induction programs less often than teachers in suburban schools and schools with fewer low-income and minority students.
- Elementary school teachers, teachers in urban schools, and teachers in schools with the highest populations of minority students and English language learners, as well as in schools with the highest Free and Reduced Lunch program enrollments, had significantly higher participation rates in professional development on most topics, with the exception of the use of computers.
- The top three topics for further professional development remained almost the same from 2004 to 2008, with very small increases in the percentage of teachers ranking content of the subject taught as the top priority (24 percent) and student discipline/classroom management as the next priority (20 percent). There was a tie for the third place ranking: teaching students with special needs and use of computers in instruction were both ranked as the top priority by 14 percent of teachers.
- A majority (56 percent) of beginning teachers with 5 or fewer years of teaching experience reported that common planning time was available to them as an induction support. However, teachers report an average of only 2.7 hours a week for collaboration.

Studying Professional Development across States

To provide an in-depth picture of professional development across states, the 2010 NSDC/SRN study identified the availability and quality of professional development across 11 criteria. States like Arkansas and Utah stand out for their higher levels of access to professional development for teachers, along with Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Oregon.

The report found significant variation among states in providing professional learning opportunities. For example, the range in the average cumulative hours of professional development across states varied from 33 hours in Oklahoma to 56 hours in Arkansas and Arizona. In most states, the intensity of professional development was low across topics, but in a few outlier states, including Arkansas and Vermont, a majority of teachers report a more intensive 16 or more hours of professional development on the content of the subjects taught.

The study also identified wide ranges in participation in states across several topics of professional development. Participation rates varied by 48 percentage points, for example, for use of computers from Rhode Island (41 percent) to Arkansas (89 percent) and by 40 percentage points in classroom management. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of Arkansas teachers, for example, received professional learning in this area, compared with less than one-third (28 percent) of teachers in Maine.

The final phase of this study will include in-depth case studies of several states and districts that show evidence of exemplary, research-based practices and increases in student achievement. The concluding report will identify a set of state and/or national policies that can lead to more effective local professional development.

Copies of the report and executive summary are available online at www.nsd.org/stateproflearning.cfm.

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National Staff Development Council is a nonprofit membership group representing more than 12,000 educators committed to effective professional development for every educator every day. NSDC recognizes the singular purpose of effective professional learning as ensuring great teaching for every student so that all students achieve at high levels.

The School Redesign Network at Stanford University engages in research and development to support districts and schools that are equitable and enable all students to master the knowledge and skills needed for success in college, careers, and citizenship.