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New White Paper by Learning Forward and NCTAF Identifies Teacher Agency as Key Factor in Transforming Professional Learning

26 Teachers & School Administrators Highlight Promising Practices from California, Connecticut, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington, DC & West Virginia

WASHINGTON – March 7, 2016 – Learning Forward and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) released a white paper today on the role that teacher agency plays in creating successful professional learning opportunities.

The white paper, "**Moving from Compliance to Agency: What Teachers Need to Make Professional Learning Work**," defines teacher agency as "the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues."

DOWNLOAD WHITE PAPER: [*Moving from Compliance to Agency: What Teachers Need to Make Professional Learning Work*](#)

Clearly documented in this new resource is a distinction between professional development, where teachers are told what they need to learn, and professional learning, where educators are able to be included in planning school and district professional learning and choose options that address their own learning needs and that of their students. Nationally, the United States spends \$2.6 billion on professional development from the federal level, and at the state and district level approximately \$8,000-\$12,000 per teacher. However, there is consensus in the education community that professional development is often an empty exercise in compliance and does not improve professional practice.

"While agency is not a panacea for all that ails professional development, we have found in our research and interviews with teachers, that it makes the difference when educators are given a voice in choosing and shaping their professional learning options," said **Laurie Calvert, the author of the report and the education policy advisor for NCTAF and Learning Forward**. "Our goal is to help district and state education leaders understand how critically important teacher agency is, as well as its role in creating learning experiences that lead to mastery for both teachers and students."

Conditions for Teacher Agency

NCTAF and Learning Forward conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 26 teachers, former teachers who are now responsible for district-level professional development, and school administrators to better understand the disconnect between what teachers are experiencing and what they need in order to grow.

“When teachers are actively engaged in their own growth, and when they have sustained, relevant, job-embedded learning opportunities, it just makes sense that they would have greater success in developing the knowledge and skills they need to be their best,” said **Stephanie Hirsh, executive director of Learning Forward**. “The challenge is creating the learning systems and supports in schools and districts that make relevant and sustained teacher learning the norm rather than the exception,” Hirsh said.

The degree to which a teacher acts with agency in professional learning depends on a number of factors including both a teacher’s internal traits as well as a school’s structural conditions for professional learning. The research conducted surfaced the conditions that must be in place to encourage teacher agency. They are:

- **Systems that tap into teachers’ intrinsic motivations** – Instead of sitting in generalized professional development sessions, teachers long for opportunities to choose strategies that they can adapt for their own growth and to help their students learn.
- **Districts that abandon structures and traditions that don’t serve learning** – Major changes at the school system level are required. These include hiring principals who believe in professional learning and teacher agency; sharing decision making about professional learning; and ending programs and job descriptions that don’t meet teachers’ learning needs.
- **Education leaders who attend to the forest and the trees through system-teacher alignment** – Utilizing strategies that balance system needs with individual needs.
- **Schools and systems that treat teachers as allies** - Principals and system leaders have to engage with teachers differently. When system leaders treat teachers as allies and respect their expertise and opinions in education decision making, then school systems will be more likely to achieve their common goals.

“Encouraging teacher agency and developing professional learning systems takes time and fortitude, but the rewards for both teachers and students are huge,” said **Melinda George, president of NCTAF**.

“When we see the schools that have embraced teacher agency, it is clear that there is an understanding about how adults learn as well as the desire to be treated as professionals.”

Seven Strategies to Incorporate Teacher Agency

Teacher agency is not a one-size-fits-all program, the report notes, but there are seven key strategies that are broad enough to be customized for local learning needs. District and school leaders can adapt the following strategies within the context of their schools and communities to improve teacher agency in their professional learning systems.

- 1:** Make all professional learning decisions only in serious consultation with teachers and principals. Ensure at least 50% teacher representation on school and district teams that are responsible for every stage of decision making from planning and data analysis to design, implementation, and evaluation.
- 2:** Rethink organization of the school day so that educators have time to meet regularly to collaborate with colleagues to improve teaching and learning.
- 3:** Involve and support teachers in analyzing data and identifying teaching and learning challenges.

- 4: Establish learning communities where educators solve problems of practice and share responsibility for colleague and student success.
- 5: Give teachers choices regarding their professional learning, including who they work with and where they focus their learning.
- 6: Ensure that professional learning is for the purpose of continuous growth, not evaluation.
- 7: Resist the temptation to “scale up” or mandate a particular form of professional learning without thoroughly examining the context in which it will be implemented. Understand that learners must want to improve their practice and see how the learning opportunity will help them do so.

The white paper features districts that changed their professional development after teachers were given a voice to share what type of learning they needed.

Conclusion

NCTAF and Learning Forward stress that agency is not another program to be implemented, but a deep and meaningful shift in the responsibilities and roles that teachers play in their learning and in the relationships that teachers have with each other and with administrators. Teacher agency on its own won't transform professional learning. Without creating the conditions that encourage teacher agency, however, it will be nearly impossible to achieve professional learning's goals to ensure that every child has access to excellent teaching.

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Learning Forward is a nonprofit, international membership association of learning educators committed to one vision in K–12 education: Excellent teaching and learning every day. To realize that vision Learning Forward pursues its mission to build the capacity of leaders to establish and sustain highly effective professional learning. Information about membership, services, and products is available from www.learningforward.org.

The National Commission on Teaching & America's Future (NCTAF) is a nonprofit organization that was founded in 1994 as a bipartisan effort to engage education policymakers and practitioners to address the entrenched national challenge of recruiting, developing, and retaining great teachers in order to ensure that all students have access to quality teaching in schools organized for success. For 20 years, NCTAF has worked to drive and inform the national dialogue about the importance of great teaching, especially in hard-to-staff schools. NCTAF's research and recommendations inform innovations and improvements in teaching quality nationwide, focus attention on the importance of equitable distribution and retention of teachers, and promote promising practices for the development of teachers' skills and career pathways. For more information, visit www.nctaf.org. Follow NCTAF on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and subscribe to NCTAF's [News Digest](#).