



This is an excerpt from *The State of Educators' Professional Learning in Alberta: Executive Summary* (Learning Forward, 2018), part of a series produced by Learning Forward. Coinciding with the 2016 Annual Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, Learning Forward commissioned and supported a study of professional learning across the nation of Canada.

A research team led by Carol Campbell, associate professor of leadership and educational change at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, examined the professional learning that educators experience in the provinces and territories of Canada. The study identifies key components and features of effective professional learning and highlights findings from what educators in the nation experience.

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## New report in Canada study series focuses on Alberta

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### DEMOGRAPHICS AND GOVERNANCE

As Canada's fourth most populated province, Alberta is a multilingual and ethnically diverse province with a population of 4.1 million people, mostly concentrated in its cities and their surrounding suburbs.

Children can attend private or charter schools, though 97% of the province's 690,844 students are enrolled in one of the 2,388 publicly funded schools, about 9% of which identify as First Nations, Metis, or Inuit (FNMI) (Alberta Education, 2016a). Education for First Nations students living on reserves is the responsibility of the federal government.

The provincial Ministry of Education, known as Alberta Education, is responsible for developing curriculum, overseeing assessment,

and setting the policy direction for education, including making provisions for the funding of public education.

Local governance is the responsibility of the 63 publicly funded school authorities (Alberta Education, 2016b). All of the about 40,000 teachers and administrators employed by school boards in Alberta are members of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), the only teacher organization in the province.

### POLICY AND COLLECTIVE AGREEMENTS

For much of Alberta's history, the educational climate has been one of collaboration, consultation, and high regard for the teaching profession. Within this context, professional learning has been a core feature of Alberta's education system. Like most Canadian jurisdictions (Campbell et al.,



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2016, 2017), opportunities for teacher professional development in Alberta vary considerably, with a combination of district-led, school-based, and teacher-selected learning experiences.

At the district level, each district is required to submit a three-year strategic plan to Alberta Education. This plan outlines the major goals of the district and, as such, district-led professional learning typically serves to aid the district in meeting these goals. Similarly, schools must submit yearly improvement plans to the district that guide the content of school-based professional learning.

The *Teacher Growth, Supervision, and Evaluation Policy* (Alberta

Education, 2015a) requires all employed teachers in the province to complete an annual growth plan that outlines learning goals and activities the teacher intends to engage in over the next year. Teachers may identify a combination of district, school-based, and self-selected learning experiences to facilitate the plan.

In many districts, access to a minimum number of paid professional development days is guaranteed through the collective bargaining process at the local level. These days are typically a combination of district-led and school-based initiatives, often provided by the Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia,

established in 1997 to serve as hubs for professional development services at the local, regional, and provincial level. Some collective bargaining agreements also allow professional leaves for study purposes at a university.

Individual teachers in most ATA locals can also apply for monetary assistance to participate in conferences, workshops, seminars, or other self-selected professional development through staff development funds financed by the district. Some districts have additionally established their own professional development policies, reorganizing the school calendar to create additional time for job-embedded teacher collaboration

through early release of students or whole days where students are not attending school.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The capacity for teachers to achieve their professional growth plan goals is contingent on access to quality professional learning opportunities. From 2000 to 2014, teacher professional learning in Alberta was heavily influenced by the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI).

Aligning with the key components of effective professional learning identified in our larger studies of professional learning in Canada (Campbell et. al, 2016, 2017), at its core, AISI was a variety of government-funded, teacher-led, action-research projects aimed at improving student learning at the local level.

It was job-embedded, collaborative, engaged teachers in collecting and analyzing data, and was heavily supported with allocated time and other monetary resources. According to Shirley & McEwen (2009), it was the movement away from a conservative and traditional route of professional growth toward a “more collective understanding of peer learning” (p. 55) that made the AISI model successful.

Building on insights gained from AISI, in 2006, the ATA partnered with Alberta Education, the Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia, the Alberta School Boards Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, and Alberta Universities to develop the document *A Guide to Comprehensive Professional Development Planning* (Education Partners, 2006), which stresses that planning for professional learning should encompass a broad range of activities to balance the needs of the individual, the school, and the district.

To achieve this, professional development in Alberta has typically

taken many forms: action research, classroom observation, mentoring, coaching, study groups, conferences, curriculum development, post-secondary courses, workshops, seminars, and collaborative learning experiences.

The ATA (2010) also developed a framework for professional development that identified three components that should be present in all professional learning opportunities:

- 1. Process:** Professional development should encourage teachers to explore, reflect critically on their practice, and take risks in the planning and delivery of curriculum.
- 2. Content:** Professional development should use current research highlighting effective teaching and learning strategies.
- 3. Context:** Regardless of the professional development activity, a teacher’s professionalism is recognized as well as his or her judgment in determining his or her needs.

After a series of budget cuts to education, funding for AISI ended in 2014, leaving individual districts and schools to build the next generation of collaborative, teacher-led professional development in Alberta without any formalized government funding support.

That being said, many of the commitments and ideas that associated with AISI live on in the current system in other ways. Exemplars of current high-quality professional learning can still be found in various locations across the province.

The ATA is also heavily involved in the provision of professional learning experiences through its international research partnerships and a host of other teacher conferences and ongoing projects, including an instructor core of exemplary classroom teachers

who design and deliver workshops to teachers across the province.

While it is apparent that some forms of current professional development carry the spirit and essence of AISI, the lack of provincial-level support for job-embedded and collaborative teacher learning has limited access of such experiences for many of the province’s teachers. Further, the degree to which teachers have professional autonomy to develop and meet the learning goals in their growth plans also varies across the system.

For instance, in the ATA’s biannual survey of professional development chairs, from 2010 to 2014, fewer than 50% of respondents indicated that teachers enjoy a high degree of autonomy in determining their professional growth goals (ATA, 2015).

Similar results were obtained by the ATA’s most recent member survey, where 30% of the over 800 respondents indicated that they disagree (22.49%) or strongly disagree (7.65%) that their school district recognizes their need to determine their own professional growth priorities (ATA, 2016).

Likewise, almost all the teacher and principal respondents discussed the importance of teacher autonomy in choosing and leading their own learning experiences, and the consensus was that professional development of the future needed to further acknowledge the power of self-selected opportunities to impact practice.

Advocating for increased teacher autonomy, however, does not mean that participants did not see the importance of system-led professional learning. Rather, many noted that system-led and mandated forms of professional learning in many instances dominated teacher learning opportunities, arguing for a more balanced approach that allowed for additional teacher-led learning

experiences alongside system-led initiatives.

Experiences with professional development are also impacted by teacher workload, an issue that has increasingly become a hot-button topic in Alberta given the rapid pace of educational change and curriculum renewal.

In 2013, after an extended stalemate over contract negotiations, the Progressive Conservative government legislated a new contract but agreed to commission a workload study to examine the issue more thoroughly. Gathering data from over 3,300 teachers and 300 principals over 44 weeks, analysis of self-recorded day-logs revealed an average work week of 48 hours for teachers and 50 hours for principals (Alberta Education, 2015b).

For teachers, over 80% of their school day was devoted to either instructing (59%) or preparing and planning to instruct (22%). Within this context, it was no surprise that participants we spoke with noted the challenge of workload and job demands with respect to engaging in meaningful and effective professional development.

Consequently, focus group participants noted that future professional development needed to take place during regular work hours to ensure that the learning was maximized. However, job-embedded professional learning encompasses more than those learning activities that take place within the school context.

Rather, participants advocated for continued opportunities to learn together with colleagues from within and beyond their own schools. Time for reflection, discussion, and the sharing of practices was viewed as paramount to the future of professional learning. Likewise, in a recent study the ATA conducted on professional development and self-efficacy, 80% of respondents reported their best professional learning

as “collaboration with colleagues” (Beauchamp et al., 2014).

## CONCLUSIONS

- Some teachers continue to have access to high-quality professional learning.
- However, access and availability depends on district and school leaders’ commitment to collaborative, job-embedded, teacher-led professional learning.
- Teachers have some choice of learning opportunities.
- Higher teacher workloads due to budget cuts constrain time for professional learning.
- The question for the future is how to make high-quality professional learning experiences accessible for all teachers in the province.

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