

# TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN THE UNITED STATES:

## Case Studies of State Policies and Strategies

### SUMMARY REPORT



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STANFORD CENTER FOR  
OPPORTUNITY POLICY IN  
EDUCATION

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\*The co-authors are equal collaborators in writing this report.

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Policy shapes practice, and the increasingly important realm of professional development is no exception. In order to identify effective professional development policies and strategies, a Stanford University research team examined the policy frameworks supporting high levels of professional development activity in four states.

The states—Colorado, Missouri, New Jersey, and Vermont—were selected as “professionally active” based on evidence of high levels of teacher participation in professional development in the 2008 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), administered by the National Center for Education Statistics, and the teacher surveys associated with the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); a reputation in the literature for enacting reforms that are consistent with the research base on “effective” professional development; and improvements in student achievement as measured in the 2009 NAEP. Students in all four states scored above national averages on the NAEP. Teachers in all four states had high participation rates in a wide range of professional development, from teacher induction to curriculum support and study groups focused on specific subject areas. While their approaches to professional development vary, the four states share a number of key characteristics and face similar challenges, which are outlined in this policy brief. All have professional development standards, induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers, and a state-level organization or professional board that oversees teacher licensing, professional teaching standards, and professional development. Most also require professional development plans for teachers and minimum levels of professional development for license renewal. All provide a range of supports and incentives for professional learning.



The authors found that state policies and systems that ensure accountability and monitor professional development are critical factors in implementing effective professional development across a variety of local districts, schools, and contexts. But to ensure the quality of that professional development, it is equally critical to couple state efforts with professional associations and intermediary organizations that help extend the reach of state agencies, offer learning supports of many kinds, and provide a voice for local stakeholders and outside experts.

# LESSONS FROM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN FOUR STATES

With policymakers, school leaders, and education experts increasingly recognizing teacher effectiveness as a key to improving student learning, growing attention and resources are being devoted to developing effective professional development for educators.



State laws and regulations have long required teachers to complete continuing education as part of license renewal requirements. But the recent decade of school reform that placed a premium on improving school and student outcomes has led to unprecedented investments in professional development in many states. Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind in 2001, Title II has provided nearly \$3 billion annually to states and districts to improve teacher qualifications and teacher quality, among other uses, with nearly 40 percent of that being used for professional development in 2009, as reported by the U.S. Department of Education. But when “implementation defines the outcome,” as has been suggested by much of the existing research on policy effects, it has become increasingly critical for

state policymakers to ensure that their investments in professional development are being implemented in meaningful ways and producing results for educators and students.

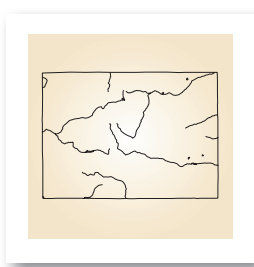
Despite the unprecedented nationwide investment, teachers’ access to—and participation in—professional development varies widely, according to a new study that takes a deeper look at the policy frameworks that undergird professional development in four states. The four geographically diverse states studied—Colorado, Missouri, New Jersey, and Vermont—have made significant gains in student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, scoring above the national average, and showed evidence of high levels of teacher participation in professional development in the 2008 SASS or on other indicators of access to professional learning. In New Jersey, the intense access to professional learning occurred especially in the so-called Abbott districts, a group of high-poverty districts receiving an influx of funding under a court decision to equalize school funding.

The four states represent pockets of promising practice—environments in which innovative approaches to school and instructional improvement, including ideas about formative assessment and progress monitoring, needs-based and data-driven decision making, the importance of leadership and leadership teams, and professional learning communities, have gradually gained a foothold.

We found that state policies and systems that ensure accountability and monitor professional development, when coupled with intermediary organizations that help extend the reach of state agencies, support professional learning, and provide a voice for local stakeholders and outside experts, are among the key factors in implementing effective professional development across a variety of local schools and districts.

# STATE SNAPSHOTS

While their approaches to professional development vary, the four states—Vermont, New Jersey, Missouri, and Colorado—share a number of key characteristics and face similar challenges. All have professional development standards, induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers, and a state-level organization or professional board that oversees teacher licensing, professional teaching standards, and professional development. Most also require professional development plans for teachers and minimum levels of professional development for license renewal. All provide a range of supports and incentives for professional learning.



**COLORADO.** Colorado's professional development initiatives have long been characterized by local control and an infrastructure of independent providers, although the Colorado Department of Educa-

tion has increasingly used regulations, incentives, and initiatives to drive instructional improvement and professional development. Districts are required to provide a state-approved induction program for beginning teachers, and teachers must complete 90 hours of professional development every five years for license renewal. Initiatives focused on improving mathematics and literacy instruction, such as \$99 million in Read to Achieve grants over five years, have also provided funding for schools to improve instruction in targeted areas.



**NEW JERSEY.** New Jersey has undertaken both statewide efforts and intensive investments in a set of high-poverty districts that received an infusion of funds following the Abbott court decision. Statewide

professional development requirements for teachers were established in 1998. Since then, the Professional Teaching Standards Board, which is comprised of a majority of teachers and other stakeholders, has created structures and standards for reflective and collaborative professional development work, through consultation with national experts. Beyond requiring mentoring for new teachers, as well as data-driven professional development plans, New Jersey requires that school-level committees follow state professional development standards and state content standards to create school professional development plans that feature collaborative practices, including professional learning communities.



**MISSOURI.** Missouri is unique in how it provides funding for professional development efforts. The Outstanding Schools Act requires districts to allocate 1 percent of state funding to local professional devel-

opment efforts. An additional 1 percent of the state's overall budget is dedicated to statewide professional development, which helps support a network of 11 regional professional development centers (RPDC). Overseen by the Missouri Department of Education, the RPDCs provide a common vision for supporting high-quality teaching through professional development. While funding for the centers was withheld in the budget downturn of 2010, nine of the 11 centers have found alternative funding sources and their efforts, along with many local initiatives, continue.



**VERMONT.** A state with a history of innovative educational work and reform efforts that include portfolios, locally designed standards work, and job-embedded professional development, Vermont is characterized by an environment that values innovation but resists regulative

interference. Regional and local efforts to support curriculum, instruction, and assessment are supported by a variety of universities and professional associations. The state is attempting to coordinate statewide professional development and allow districts to pool resources and share knowledge through state-supported Educational Services Agencies and intermediary organizations, such as Teaching All Secondary Students (TASS).

# KEY FINDINGS

In examining the key characteristics of these four states, we identified four key factors that determine the impact of state policy on effective professional development: leadership, infrastructure, resources, and the ability of professionals and innovators to shape strategies through intermediary organizations or independent providers that provide professional development in the state.

## ■ Leadership.

An increased emphasis on school accountability as a strategy to guide instructional improvement and student achievement has resulted in a stronger focus on professional development, particularly in tested subjects such as literacy and mathematics. When decision-making on professional development and other school improvement policies is shared among a broader group of professionals, the strategies look quite different from those designed purely from the top down.

## ■ Infrastructure.

State policies that establish and support an infrastructure for implementing professional development are critical. That infrastructure can be created either through formal structures such as regional professional development centers, or by investing in initiatives to build local or regional capacity and partnering with professional organizations or providers.

## ■ Resources.

State funding affects the ability of states and districts to implement instructional improvement initiatives thoughtfully and effectively. States can earmark funds specifically for professional development, provide indirect funding through technical assistance units or statewide initiatives, or leverage federal funds in areas where their school improvement strategies are aligned with federal goals.

## ■ Intermediaries and outside providers.

Leveraging professional organizations and independent providers to provide professional development is a common strategy, but a provider's authority seems to influence how effectively it can connect the state's vision to local needs.

Looking more closely at the four professionally active states that we studied, we found varied approaches to professional development policy and implementation, including differing levels of support and control at the state level and divergent strategies for monitoring and delivering professional development.

However, these states shared characteristics that contributed to their success, including:

## Developing multiple accountability systems.

Guidance and oversight are key leadership roles played by state education agencies in these states with high levels of professional development activity. Rather than just issuing mandates, the states employ overlapping systems, including the guidance offered by professional development standards and other regulations, district and school committees overseeing professional development at the local level, and monitoring efforts such as surveys that gauge teachers' satisfaction levels with professional learning experiences and studies linking professional development to changes in teacher practice and student learning. Individually, these policies exert modest leverage, but when taken together, they can create a coherent system of policies and mechanisms for enforcing, monitoring, and enabling policy implementation at the local level. Specific strategies include local professional development committees, which create professional development plans that are aligned with state standards but based on local needs, as well as individual professional development plans for teachers, which engage educators in the process and provide a mechanism to evaluate the quality of the continuing education to prevent it from becoming merely an exercise in accumulating credits and hours.

## Monitoring quality.

Three of the four professionally active states have established mechanisms for monitoring both the level of participation in professional development as well as the quality of professional development offerings throughout the state. Missouri monitors both district usage and satisfaction levels of teachers participating in selected professional development events, as well as recently conducting a professional development audit using student achievement as one indicator of quality. Colorado recently began conducting a biennial teaching conditions survey that queries teachers about the quality of their professional development opportunities. New Jersey also requires that county

boards review district professional development plans, and has monitored the progress of its 33 Professional Learning Community (PLC) Lab Schools by administering the NSDC's Standards Assessment Inventory (a teacher survey), which assesses the degree to which the NSDC Professional Development Standards are evident in school practice.

### **Requiring induction and mentoring programs.**

All four of the states in this study also shared a commitment to the professional development of beginning teachers. At least two of these states, Colorado and Missouri, have had their requirements for induction on the books for two or more decades. New Jersey and Vermont incorporated induction requirements more recently. Colorado, Missouri, and New Jersey have requirements for induction and mentoring as well as mechanisms for enforcing these requirements. All three states have standards for their induction and mentoring programs and require that all educators with initial or provisional licenses complete induction and/or mentoring to advance to a professional license. Vermont does not have this kind of enforcement mechanism; thus, only 59 percent of beginning teachers in the 2008 Schools and Staffing Survey reported participating in an induction program. Nonetheless, 78 percent reported having a mentor. In Colorado, close to 91 percent of beginning teachers reported participating in an induction program, in part because of multiple means to enforce the induction requirement by holding both teachers and districts accountable.

### **Adopting the Professional Learning Community model.**

All four of these professionally active states have embraced the use of school-based professional learning communities—collaborative teams which focus on professional development and key school improvement initiatives—as a strategy to increase teacher capacity and improve student outcomes. While none of the four states explicitly requires all schools to have PLCs, Vermont requires them in all underperforming schools in their third year of corrective action, while Colorado's statewide Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative, a model for identifying and addressing the needs of students with disabilities, requires the participation of school teams that include special education and regular instructional staff members, parents, and students. New Jersey's local professional development planning process also requires collaborative work and the state supports a network of PLCs. In Missouri, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education offers ongoing training, technical assistance, and support for its PLC project through regional centers across the state. Several hundred schools now participate in the initiative.

### **Partnering with professional organizations.**

These professionally active states have partnered with outside organizations, particularly when focusing on specific subject areas, as they created their own infrastructure to support professional development. Colorado's state education department, for example, developed a Colorado Math Intervention Team, comprised of a number of professional organizations, including an organization of math teachers and an organization focused on learning disabilities. Missouri fosters Writing Project sites associated with universities and professional organizations. Vermont and New Jersey feature a wide array of active professional associations. In part an acknowledgement that state education agencies have limited capacity and influence, these partnerships also bring together key stakeholders and outside organizations, such as universities and independent professional development providers, that can foster innovation in professional development offerings. These partnerships allow for the development of an infrastructure for professional development alongside but not within the state education agency and provide fertile ground for the best ideas and approaches to flourish and rise to the top.

### **Creating networks of intermediary organizations.**

Across the four states, intermediary organizations have emerged as a common strategy for providing instructional program supports to schools. Many of these organizations are regional bodies that provide instructional support to local schools, such as Education Service Agencies in Vermont, Regional Professional Development Centers in Missouri, Colorado's Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and the Educational Information and Resource Center (EIRC) in New Jersey. These closer-to-the-ground organizations are able to provide assistance to schools and districts in a way that the state departments cannot. They often act as a "sense-making filter" that links state goals with those charged with carrying them out, and create professional development capacity—offering expertise, coordination, coaching, and other supports. While intermediary organizations and independent professional development providers are often the strongest source of innovation, these states have maintained an important role in setting the conditions and contexts for professional learning, defining the standards that govern the development and delivery of professional development, and encouraging local districts to implement innovative approaches, such as Vermont's Formative Assessment Pilot Program and Colorado's Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative.

**Addressing federal mandates and accountability requirements in constructive ways.**

Each of the case study states has benefited from federal resources under No Child Left Behind, as they have provided much-needed funding that would not otherwise be available for instructional improvement in high-need schools (e.g., Title I school and district grants), improving the overall quality of the teaching workforce (e.g., Title IIA school grants), and providing professional development in specific areas such as science, math, and instructional technology (e.g., Title IIB and IIC grants). While taking advantage of these resources, all four states have sought to leverage federal policy productively, without restricting their focus to narrow types of instructional improvement defined only by basic skills test scores.

While there are examples of narrowly configured professional development focused solely on raising test scores, most of the efforts undertaken in these states were designed to deepen teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills more broadly. The turnaround initiatives required of low-performing schools offer one example of how states can address federal mandates in ways that support effective professional development. In Vermont, for example, "program improvement" schools in their third year of corrective measures are required to create PLCs,

in addition to spending 10 percent of their funds on professional development. The state's support for PLCs focuses their efforts on collegial learning aimed at broadening teachers' repertoires and focusing on deeper learning for students. The same is true of ongoing school improvement efforts.

In Colorado, staff collaboration in cycles of school inquiry around needs identification, developing and implementing strategies, and progress monitoring is a built-in feature of many of the federally funded school improvement initiatives, e.g., School Improvement Grants, the state's Closing the Achievement Gap grant, the federally funded PBIS initiative, and the IDEA-funded RTI initiative. These approaches build teacher capacity to evaluate and improve their own teaching and students' learning.

Involving outside groups, including professional organizations and regional support networks, in these efforts also plays a key role. Because they are not regulatory agencies required to enforce compliance, these organizations are able to support a more transformative approach to school and classroom change. In the current high-stakes accountability environment, the role of professional organizations and intermediaries is critical to sustain innovation and forward thinking work that can go beyond a compliance perspective.





# POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Research evidence supports the notion that investing and supporting professional development that is ongoing, intensive, and connected to practice and school initiatives; focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; and builds strong working relationships among teachers makes a difference in student achievement. While there is no direct causal evidence between the robustness of the policy frameworks in the four states studied in this report and increases in student achievement, education leaders and policymakers can gain from these experiences some valuable insight into policy levers that may be effective in their states. This research suggests that a number of elements may be important to state success in building strong opportunities for professional learning. These include:

## 1. A common and clearly articulated vision for professional development that permeates policy and practice.

All four states we studied had developed standards around professional development, which are reinforced in consistent ways by multiple policies and structures. While 35 states have either adopted or adapted Learning Forward's standards for professional development, it's equally important that those standards match expectations for teacher licensure and renewal and are understood and emphasized by all organizations involved in delivering professional development throughout the state. In New Jersey, for example, county professional development boards review plans developed by school and district committees to ensure they meet the expectations laid out by the state's Professional Teaching Standards Board, while in Vermont, teachers are required to submit portfolios that show evidence of appropriate professional development, as defined by the state standards, as part of the licensure renewal process.

## 2. Effective monitoring of professional development quality.

While many states have created professional development standards, and some have increased investment in professional development, few have found ways to monitor and improve the quality of their services. Missouri's efforts to monitor district usage of professional development services offered by the state's regional professional development centers and survey teachers who have participated in selected professional development events are examples of ways states can begin auditing the usage of these services and the satisfaction levels of those who use

them. Both Missouri and Colorado have begun to look at the relationship between professional development initiatives and student achievement gains. Although making attributions is challenging when many factors are at play, the effort to consider outcomes focuses attention on student learning. Another way to follow professional development to the local level and evaluate its quality is through the use of local professional development committees that both develop plans and examine the strategies and outcomes of professional development for individual teachers and schools, as in New Jersey and Vermont. And in Vermont, where teachers present a portfolio of their professional learning to the committee, teachers' judgments about what supports their learning are made visible and can be factored into school and districtwide planning.

## 3. Mentoring and induction requirements that are linked to and create a foundation for ongoing professional learning.

While many states now require induction programs for beginning teachers, one finding of this research is that teacher participation in states that have a mechanism for enforcing the implementation of these programs – for example, as a condition for a professional or continuing license – can be significantly higher than in those that do not. Research has also shown that induction programs that include a mentoring component are stronger than those that do not. Induction programs linked to statewide teaching standards, as in all four states, and to ongoing professional development, as in the individual professional plans New Jersey requires of all its teachers, are other promising practices.

#### 4. An infrastructure of organizations for facilitating professional development.

For professional development to make a difference in practice on a wide scale, it must be embedded within a comprehensive system of learning and improvement that readily supports teachers' work—and it must be sustained, connected to content standards, and supported by coaching and reflective inquiry. This kind of pervasive professional development does not occur without considerable work within schools to facilitate professional learning, augmented by a stable infrastructure of organizations prepared to offer ongoing support. Recognizing that state education agencies have limited resources to provide professional development across an entire state, all four of the states we studied created or encouraged innovative professional development networks that leverage and connect the efforts of professional groups and intermediary organizations with those of schools. Colorado, for example, leveraged an organization of math teachers and another focused on learning disabilities to build a math intervention program, while Missouri developed a network of state-run regional professional development centers that support districts and help review their school improvement plans. New Jersey and Vermont also support a variety of initiatives focused on curriculum, assessment, and professional learning communities with the help of regional intermediaries, universities, and other professional organizations. Each of these external assistance agencies adds opportunities for professional learning that enhance or extend what individual schools and districts are doing or that provide expertise in areas where schools and districts are building their own capacity.

By working with professional organizations, content-area experts, universities, and private providers, states ensure that a wide range of players contribute to innovation in the design and implementation of professional development. Incorporating local control and oversight of professional development, as New Jersey has done with its school, district, and county professional development boards, also ensures that state priorities are meshed with specific local needs.

#### 5. Stability of resources.

Over recent years, all four states have used a combination of state, federal, and local resources and incentives to encourage and extend professional learning opportunities. While limited resources are inevitable in the current budget climate, these states have sought to protect professional development funding in innovative ways. Missouri, for example, identified alternative revenue sources when funding for its state-run regional professional development sources was cut, while Colorado and others have used federal grant money tied to initiatives such as Reading First and IDEA to bolster professional development in those areas. A commitment to maintaining a base of opportunities will be critical to their success and that of other states in the years ahead.

While state policy can be a potent lever for mandating and enforcing professional development requirements, it is a rather blunt instrument when it comes to the quality of implementation, particularly as federal mandates have prompted many states to narrow the focus of professional development and other school improvement initiatives to basic skills in tested subjects. For that reason, the use of intermediaries that can balance state requirements with local needs, as well as partnerships and initiatives with professional organizations that give voice to the input of teachers and subject-area experts, can help strengthen the reach and capacity of budget-strapped state education agencies and improve the quality of delivery.

At the same time, states can help lead and encourage innovative learning opportunities for students and teachers, as we saw in New Jersey's and Missouri's support for professional learning communities, Vermont's support for portfolio and performance assessments, and Colorado's adoption of Response to Intervention and its use of data-driven decision-making in its major instructional improvement initiatives.

Professional Development Policy Provisions in Four States				
Feature	COLORADO	MISSOURI	NEW JERSEY	VERMONT
<b>Standards for PD</b> √ - yes √/ - includes mechanism for enforcement / monitoring	PD guidelines for license renewal	√/	√/	PD guidelines for license renewal
<b>State Resources for PD</b> (√) - indirect funding through other state department units that implement PD)	(√)	√	(√)	(√)
<b>State-level Professional Teaching Standards Board (or similar board)</b>	√	√	√	√
<b>District or School-based PD Committees Required</b> (or similar body, e.g., local standards board)		√	√	√ (for individual license renewal)
<b>Individual PD Plans Required for All Teachers</b>		√	√	√
<b>PD Requirements for License Renewal</b>	√	√		√
<b>Role of PD in Teacher Evaluation</b>		√	√	
<b>Role of PD in Career Paths / Ladders</b> (e.g., Master Teacher license)	√			
<b>Induction/ Mentoring Policies or Programs</b> √ - yes √/ - indicates mechanism for enforcement / monitoring (e.g, program approval process, induction required for license advancement)	√/	√/	√/	√
<b>State Mechanism for Monitoring PD Quality</b>	√	√	√	
<b>Support for National Board Certification</b> √ - state subsidy for application √/ - state monetary or license advancement incentive	√/	Federal subsidy; local monetary incentives	Federal subsidy	License advancement incentive
<b>Role of Professional Learning Communities in State Policy for PD or School Improvement</b> (√) Encouraged, not mandated in all schools	(√)	(√) School PD committees required	(√) School PD committees required	√ Mandated in schools not meeting AYP (3rd year "corrective action")



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