



RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

MYTH-BUSTING RESEARCH SHEDS LIGHT ON WHAT WORKS

► THE STUDY

Hill, H.C., Papay, J.P., & Schwartz, N. (2022, February 15).

Dispelling the myths: What the research says about teacher professional learning. Research Partnership for Professional Learning.

Elizabeth Foster (elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org) is vice president, research & standards at Learning Forward. In each issue of *The Learning Professional*, Foster explores recent research to help practitioners understand the impact of particular professional learning practices on student outcomes.

Professional learning leaders are sometimes faced with skepticism about the expected impact of an investment in professional learning. Long-held myths and outdated notions about sit-and-get professional learning can act as barriers to thorough planning, appropriate funding, and sustained implementation of professional learning efforts.

Dispelling the Myths: What the Research Says About Teacher Professional Learning is a research brief that offers a direct, easy-to-read summary of evidence-based truths that practitioners can use to better understand the issues at hand and share with others as a way to advocate for effective professional learning.

The brief was published by the Research Partnership for Professional Learning (RPPL), a coalition led by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University that focuses on building the evidence base about professional learning that leads to improved outcomes for teachers and students. Through deliberate testing of multiple options for professional learning approaches and designs, RPPL's goal is to understand professional learning's effect on teacher and student learning.



MYTHS VERSUS TRUTHS

The brief names six common myths about teacher professional learning, then refutes them with the evidence-based reality.

Myth 1: Professional learning is a waste of time and money.

Truth: Evidence shows that professional learning can lead to shifts in teachers' skills and instructional practices and significantly improve student learning.

Myth 2: Professional learning is more effective for early career teachers and less effective for veteran teachers.

Truth: Professional learning has been shown to support teacher development at all levels of experience.

Myth 3: Professional learning programs must be job-embedded and time-intensive to be effective.

Truth: Programs of varying lengths and formats can produce wide-ranging effects, depending on how intentionally and effectively they are structured.

Myth 4: Improving teachers' content knowledge is key to improving their instructional practice.

Truth: Professional learning programs that target specific instructional practices are more likely to shift student learning than those with a focus on increasing content knowledge.

Myth 5: Research-based professional learning programs are unlikely to work at scale or in new contexts.

Truth: Programs can have positive effects across a wide range of schools, and strong implementation can help sustain effects at scale.

Myth 6: Districts and schools should implement research-based professional learning programs with no modifications.

Truth: Although educators should practice fidelity first, adaptation within guardrails is an important second step for making the learning relevant.

Each of these truths is presented with references to specific studies so that readers can delve into the specifics.

IMPLICATIONS

Learning Forward's experience supports the authors' assertion that "deeply rooted beliefs about effective teacher learning are not always supported by the most up-to-date research evidence." Our work is designed to keep stakeholders current with the field and in the habit of reflecting and revising their approaches as needed.

We aim to lower the many barriers to staying up-to-date, including educators' lack of time for and access to journal articles and the temptation to stick with what has always been done. The research cited in this brief can help us — and you, our readers — continue to lower those barriers.

For instance, in correcting the myth that professional learning is a waste of money, the researchers cite a recent meta-analysis of 60 studies on instructional coaching. That analysis found that "the difference in effectiveness between teachers with instructional coaches and those without was equivalent to the difference between novice teachers and teachers with five to 10 years of experience" (p. 3). This finding is useful for all of us in helping policymakers and budgeters overcome a narrow definition of professional learning as workshops or professional development days.

At the same time, the research brief can help those of us who are knowledgeable about effective professional learning recognize that we, too, have biases and blind spots. For example, professional learning leaders often call for professional learning to be job-embedded and sustained, but this paper puts the necessity of such structures under examination.

While the researchers acknowledge

that more time for professional learning means more opportunities to deepen educator learning, they point to research that found no difference in outcomes for programs that lasted over several semesters versus programs that concentrated the same number of hours in a shorter time frame.

They also note that while earlier studies pointed to the importance of professional learning being part of the workday over an extended period of time, newer studies provide a more nuanced look at this question, noting that professional learning that takes place away from the regular workday (such as during a summer institute) is sometimes more likely to boost student learning.

This is not to suggest that time and intensity of professional learning don't matter, but rather it reminds us that we may need to re-examine and rearticulate our definitions of sustained and job-embedded and also carefully consider when these design elements are more and less applicable. That spirit of reflection and openness to change are, after all, essential for professional learning leaders.

STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

RPPL's approach to examining professional learning data and using it to inform practice is consistent with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning. Looking to evidence and research is a concept woven throughout the standards, especially in the **Data** and **Learning Designs standards**.

The Data standard encourages educators to ground professional learning in evidence that it will achieve the intended goals and also reminds us to look at how context may influence results. Learning Designs speaks directly to understanding and effectively applying research, especially with regard

to how the planning and design of professional learning contributes to its quality, relevance, and effectiveness.

Several of the specific myths explored in this brief are relevant to the **Implementation standard**, especially those about the challenge of scaling research-based programs (myth 5) and the need for strict implementation fidelity (myth 6).

For example, the researchers report that two recent studies found professional learning implemented with some "adaptation with guardrails" had more of a positive impact on student outcomes than strict fidelity to the program design. As a result, the researchers recommend that educators begin by implementing the design as intended and then adapt as necessary, depending on factors such as educators' knowledge of students' needs and how the design aligns with or diverges from a school or district improvement plan.

Understanding the Implementation standard can help learning leaders get beyond the myths to recognize what matters in implementing professional learning, including what should be maintained and what can be adapted. This can help leaders feel confident to seek out approaches that have been shown effective in research studies, even if those approaches do not match exactly the population or context described in the research.

With the release of the revised Standards for Professional Learning this month, now is an ideal time to lift up research on professional learning designs and implementation. The articulation of long-held professional learning myths and research-based clarifications of those misunderstandings shines a light on the importance of being deliberate and intentional about how research and evidence inform professional learning decisions. ■