

TEN KEY FINDINGS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN OREGON

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Educators and researchers agree strengthening teacher quality is the most effective way to boost academic achievement for all students and believe rigorous and focused professional development can play a key role in improving teaching practices. In Oregon, stakeholders see professional development playing a critical role in supporting the implementation of rigorous diploma requirements, which will be phased in over the next years. Yet, here and elsewhere, little is known about what's currently delivered and accomplished through professional development activities. Professional development is highly decentralized, with the most important work conceptualized and undertaken at the school-level. Fiscal accounting of the investment is incomplete, and officials struggle to evaluate outcomes.

To shed light on this critical, but poorly understood, area of education policy, the Chalkboard Project commissioned two complementary reports to review the scope and quality of professional development activities in Oregon. The first report, entitled *Professional Development in Oregon*, draws on recent surveys of teachers and administrators from across Oregon and discusses what teachers want through professional development, what they get, and whether they find the activities useful. The second report, entitled *Nurturing Quality Teachers: A Profile of the Successes and Challenges of Six Oregon Districts*, provides an in-depth look at how six small to mid-sized districts implement and finance professional development.

Looking across the two companion reports, ten key findings emerge as worthy of consideration as policymakers consider improvements to professional development policy.

1. **A majority of Oregon teachers deem their professional development “useful” but they are less satisfied than teachers in other states.** In the 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), most Oregon respondents deemed their professional development activities “useful” or “very useful”. The periodic national survey, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), asked teachers, including a sample from 180 Oregon schools, about professional development in four categories: the teacher's specific subject area, reading instruction, discipline, and education technology. Satisfaction levels were highest for professional development related to the teacher's own subject content (68 percent) and lowest for

discipline-related professional development (58 percent).

While the SASS does not survey sufficient numbers of teachers to support precise state-by-state rankings, the data do suggest groups of states in which teachers are generally more or less satisfied with their professional development opportunities. The SASS data show Oregon teachers fall on the less satisfied end of the scale in each of the four professional development categories. In the states with highest levels of reported satisfaction, including Vermont and Utah, teachers report more hours of engagement.

2. **Time available for professional development varies considerably across Oregon districts.** A review of contracts and school calendars for the six districts indicated that compensated professional development time ranged from as few as 32 hours annually to as many as 106. The districts with more time had created weekly job embedded professional development opportunities (1-2 hours per week) *and* also maintained periodic, full day professional development sessions.

An annual statewide survey of school administrators, conducted by the Oregon Department of Education, also suggests wide variations in professional development time. Ranking individual schools by those with the least- to most “target staff development time” shows the 10th percentile school reported 16 hours for the 2005-06 school year while the 90th percentile school reported 69 hours.
3. **Small districts lack infrastructure to win grants targeted to professional development and also report inequitable access to high quality training programs.** Administrators, in small and large districts alike, argued that the scale economies enjoyed by larger districts increased the opportunities for professional development. The superintendent of the smallest of the six districts, which enrolls about 1,000 students,

said the district’s size and remoteness restricted its professional development options and has hindered implementation of a writing program adopted by other, larger districts. The cost of quality training was simply too high given the relatively small number of teachers in his district. Meanwhile, the superintendent of the largest district interviewed—about 15,000 students—recognized his broad autonomy in tailoring a training approach that met his teachers’ specific needs. Larger districts also reported better capacity to write, win, and manage federal grants to support professional development.

4. **School Board policies and collective bargaining agreements generally establish how much professional development time is available.** Through our interviews in six districts, we found that agreements between school boards and teacher unions establish the amount of time available for *compensated* professional development. Resources for compensated professional development exist in the gap between instructional time (with a minimum number of hours mandated by the state) and total teacher contract time. Between the boundaries of contract and instructional time, compensated professional development competes with holidays, personal leave, planning, grading, and conference time. So, generally speaking, the more teacher contract time that districts and unions create in addition to state-mandated instructional time, the greater is the opportunity for compensated professional development.
5. **Professional development content is developed primarily at the school, team, or teacher levels.** Across the six interviewed districts, officials conveyed clearly that the leaders of individual schools drove the content of professional development. All described similar collaborative processes through which principals, teachers, and site councils developed school improvement

plans with student learning goals and tailored professional development activities to support them. Within the schools, small working groups—typically called professional learning communities—develop plans specific to grade levels or content subjects. The composition of the groups differs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Elementary working groups are more likely organized by grades, and middle and high school groups by subject. Beyond an annual “State of the District” meeting and occasional trainings, district-wide implementation of professional development is the exception, not the rule, in the six districts.

6. **Decentralization of professional development to schools, and smaller teacher workgroups, makes it difficult for district officials to characterize professional development content.** Officials in the six interviewed districts said the substance of professional development is documented in numerous plans and progress reports exchanged between teachers and principals, but none of the six districts makes a formal attempt to assemble the plans and summarize activities across the district. Officials could point to a number of broadly implemented educational strategies that generated related professional development activity, including DIBELS reading assessment, Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) for English language learners, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Response to Intervention (RTI).

The 2003-04 SASS sheds some light on what’s delivered. For example, an estimated 90 percent of Oregon’s elementary teachers and 75 percent of secondary teachers reported they had received some amount of professional development related to the subject area they taught. However, only a minority of surveyed teachers indicated they had received intensive professional

development in their subject area—defined here as more than 33 or more hours annually.

7. **Districts are transitioning to “job embedded” professional development to foster collaboration and mentoring.** Interviews with officials in six districts found leaders who are embracing job-embedded professional development: activities that are linked to the day-to-day operations of the school, take place throughout the year, and are designed at the school-level. Four districts have created weekly early release periods to accommodate on-going teacher collaboration throughout the year. The policy sets aside an hour or two per week during which small groups of teachers share teaching lessons, examine achievement data and student work, and revamp school or department improvement plans. Another district uses a second form of on-going, on-site professional development through its use of job coaches and mentors. The district employs coaches for literacy and math, a science consultant, and a part-time analyst to review assessment data and develop instructional strategies.

SASS responses suggest that, in 2003-04, the degree of collaboration and mentoring in Oregon was roughly in line with US norms. Nearly 70 percent of Oregon teachers reported some amount of collaboration. Meanwhile, 46 percent either mentored a colleague or were mentored themselves. Both numbers are identical to the national rates.

8. **Districts struggle to link professional development activities to student achievement or even to changes in instructional practices.** School districts face an on-going challenge to assure coherence and sustainability of high quality professional development that changes teachers’ classroom practice sufficiently to increase student achievement. By their own accounts, districts make only modest attempts to evaluate the effects, of or

monitor satisfaction with, their professional development efforts. Formal, third party evaluations of any aspect of professional development activities are rare. Looking across our six districts, the notable exception was a sizable inter-district mathematics collaboration, which will be evaluated through a National Science Foundation grant. Short of formal evaluations, districts pointed to some positive achievement trends in reading and writing that followed targeted professional development efforts in those areas.

9. **Teacher professional development is a sizable enterprise.** ECONorthwest estimates the six districts spent between 2.2 and 3.6 percent of their operating budgets on professional development in 2005-06. These shares are comparable to those reported in national studies. The estimate includes the direct spending on coaches, consultants, materials, travel and tuition reimbursement routinely reported by districts as “instructional staff development” in their budgets. However, unlike traditional district accounting, the estimate additionally incorporates the share of salaries and benefits paid to teachers when they participate in compensated professional development activities. Assuming Oregon districts across the state invested an average 3 percent of operating budgets on professional development, total spending exceeded \$130 million in the 2005-06 school year.
10. **Interviewed officials called for more time devoted to professional development.** “Time’s the biggest issue,” said one official, and across the board, colleagues in other districts agreed educators need more time for collaborative professional learning and planning. In the two districts without early release agreements, the perceived need was acute. In the early release districts, officials were grateful for the extra time they had negotiated but called for increased

professional development time before, during, and after the school year.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

NEXT STEPS to assure increased student achievement and powerful teaching and learning in every Oregon classroom:

1. **Equity:** Develop partnerships with schools, districts, ESDs, higher ed. and public and private educational organizations to support equitable time, access, and delivery of in-depth, sustained professional development.
2. **Quality:** Adopt standards for professional development. The National Staff Development Council has identified quality standards for professional development that are research based and have been adopted by over 30 states. Align the standards with state and district educational goals—particularly the implementation of the new high school diploma.
3. **Professional Learning:** Establish an electronic learning network to share research and best practices and allow teachers to reach beyond their own schools to collaborate and investigate new teaching and learning strategies.
4. **Time:** Encourage state and local policy makers to invest more time and resources for professional collaborative learning that is linked to increasing student achievement.
5. **Accountability:** Support accountability systems that link school district improvement plans and goals to school and classroom level professional development that will provide evidence of increasing student learning growth. Including systems to more reliably report districts’ time and fiscal investments in professional development, the content and nature of program delivery, and the perceived and measured effects on teaching practice and student achievement.