

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

I Want to Know More

A *Leadership in Action* Supplement

I Want to Know More is a selection of information and resources for education leaders, parents, and community members who want to learn more about the teaching and learning strategies taking place in today's most innovative high schools.

"The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers."

—*How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*

What Are Professional Learning Communities?

We know that great teachers can change a student's life. And every day, we are finding out more and more about what makes great teachers great. Excellent teaching is the foundation of our best schools, since the quality of our schools cannot—and does not—exceed the quality of its instruction. Yet how can we make sure that every student receives the best teaching possible?

The answer is not as simple as **we need more great teachers**—what we need, it turns out, are **strong communities of teachers** working cooperatively and purposefully. When educators discuss what works and what doesn't, when they share their best lessons and techniques, and when they work together instead of working in isolation, student performance not only improves, but schools become more energized and fulfilling places to work.

Something to Think About

According to *Primary Sources: 2012*, a national survey of K-12 teachers, American teachers only spend about 3% of their workday collaborating with colleagues—and yet nearly 90% believe that greater collaboration is critical to retaining good teachers. The survey found that supportive leadership, a collegial school culture, greater collaboration with colleagues, and stronger professional development were the most important factors when it came to retaining effective teachers (in comparison, only 16% of surveyed teachers reported that performance-based pay is important). Another study, *The Status of Professional Learning*, found that American teachers spend far more time instructing students (more than 1,000 hours a year) than teachers in other developed nations (the average is only 664 hours for secondary schools). Teachers in the United States typically spend about 80 percent of their work time instructing students, compared to about 60 percent in other countries, which gives teachers much more time to collaborate, learn together, and develop effective lessons and instructional techniques. In most countries, about 15 to 20 hours per week is spent on tasks related to teaching, such as preparing lessons, meeting with students and parents, and working with colleagues; in contrast, American teachers generally spend 3 to 5 hours a week on lesson planning, which is typically done independently. And in countries with the highest performing school systems, the amount of time spent on planning, preparation, and professional development can be even higher—in Singapore, for example, the government requires and pays for 100 hours of professional development for every teacher, every year.

The Attributes of High-Impact Learning Communities

A large and growing body of research has revealed that teacher-driven “professional learning communities” may just be the most effective, affordable, and sustainable school-improvement strategy around. The strategy is called many things: *professional learning groups, collaborative learning communities, critical friends groups, communities of practice*. In Japan, they call it *lesson study* or *lesson research*. Regardless of the name, effective professional learning communities share several critical features:

- Teachers work together to improve instructional quality and diversify instructional techniques.
- Time for meetings is built into the school day—in other words, it’s an expected teaching responsibility, not an optional add-on that competes with out-of-school personal time.
- Groups work collaboratively toward common goals and expectations. For example: all professional learning groups will (1) identify and monitor student learning needs, (2) engage in constructive peer observation and feedback, (3) co-develop and refine lessons and instructional techniques, (4) improve support systems to help all students succeed, and (5) ensure that every student receives a personalized learning experience in the classroom.
- Meetings are run by teacher-facilitators who have been trained in effective group-facilitation strategies—in many cases, by an experienced professional learning community trainer or organization.
- Meetings are guided by norms—a set of expectations for conduct that group members collaboratively develop and agree on. A norm might address logistics (*Start meetings on time, stick to the agenda, and end on time*) or interactions (*Listen attentively to colleagues and make sure feedback is respectful and constructive*).
- Meetings follow clear, purposeful agendas that are developed by facilitators in response to identified student or teacher learning needs.
- Facilitators use protocols—a set of parameters or guidelines developed by educators to structure professional conversations and help keep them focused and productive.
- Group members look at examples of teacher work (lesson plans, syllabi, assessment materials, etc.) and student work (writing samples, completed projects, scored assessments), and they offer colleagues feedback on how to improve products, practices, and student results.
- Group conversations are respectful, constructive, objective, and goal-oriented. Inappropriate behavior, negativity, complaints, and digressions are not tolerated—facilitators quickly step in and guide the conversation in a more productive direction.
- Conversations are objective and factual—teachers review data on student performance, cite specific examples, and refer to research or other concrete evidence to support their points, rather than falling into assumptions or generalizations.

Teacher Learning: What Matters?

In the February 2009 “How Teachers Learn” issue of *Educational Leadership*, Linda Darling-Hammond and Nikole Richardson conducted an extensive review of research on professional development for teachers and isolated the attributes that had the greatest impact on teaching quality and student achievement.

Research supports professional development that:

1. Deepens teachers’ knowledge of content and how to teach it to students;
2. Helps teachers understand how students learn specific content;
3. Provides opportunities for active, hands-on learning;

4. Enables teachers to acquire new knowledge, apply it to practice, and reflect with colleagues;
5. Is part of a reform effort that links curriculum, assessment, and standards to professional learning;
6. Is collaborative and collegial; and
7. Is intensive and sustained over time.

Research does not support professional development that:

1. Relies on the one-shot workshop model;
2. Focuses only on training teachers in new techniques and behaviors;
3. Is not related to teachers' specific contexts and curriculums;
4. Is episodic and fragmented;
5. Expects teachers to make changes in isolation and without support; and
6. Does not provide sustained teacher learning opportunities over multiple days and weeks.

The National Staff Development Council's Status of Professional Learning Study

In 2008, the National Staff Development Council enlisted a team of researchers from the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education to undertake a three-part, multiyear [Status of Professional Learning](#) research study intended to measure the effectiveness of professional learning in education. This comprehensive research project investigated professional learning communities and teacher professional development both in the United States and abroad. Given the utility of this research for schools and educators, several of its major findings and conclusions are worth mentioning in detail here:

- Sustained, intensive professional development for teachers is related to gains in student achievement.
- Teachers need substantial professional development in a given area—close to 50 hours—to improve instructional skills and student learning; most professional development in the United States is significantly shorter than the 50 hours required to transform practice.
- Collaborative approaches to professional development—particularly school-supported professional learning communities—can promote improvement not only in the classroom, but throughout a school.
- Effective professional development shares four high-impact attributes: (1) it is intensive and ongoing; (2) it is focused on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; (3) it is connected to and aligned with other school initiatives; and (4) it builds strong working relationships among teachers.
- Most professional learning in the United States appears to consist primarily of short-term conferences and workshops, which are beneficial, but less likely to lead to significant improvements in school culture, working relationships, or student performance and educational outcomes.
- Teachers in the United States report relatively little professional collaboration on curriculum design and instructional practices, and when collaboration is present it tends to be weak and not focused on strengthening teaching and learning in the classroom.
- The top professional-development priorities identified by teachers are (1) learning more about the content they teach, (2) improving classroom-management skills, (3) teaching students with special needs, and (4) using technology effectively to enhance teaching and learning.
- American teachers, unlike many of their colleagues around the world, bear much of the cost of their own professional development.

- The United States is far behind other countries when it comes to providing public school teachers with opportunities to participate in extended learning opportunities and productive collaborative learning communities that allow teachers to work together on instructional planning, learn from one another through mentoring or peer coaching, conduct research on the outcomes of classroom practices, and collectively guide curriculum, assessment, and professional-learning decisions.
- Nations that outperform the United States on international assessments invest heavily in professional learning for teachers, and they build time into the school workday for ongoing, sustained teacher development, collaboration, and planning.

Harnessing Teacher Knowledge

Created by the Great Schools Partnership for the U.S. Department of Education's Smaller Learning Communities Program, ***Harnessing Teacher Knowledge: A Guide to Developing School-Based Systems for Professional Learning and Planning*** is a comprehensive suite of resources designed to help school administrators and teacher-leaders engage in a thoughtful self-assessment process as they work toward creating a high-functioning professional learning and planning culture in their school. Intended primarily for practicing educators, the resource nevertheless provides a detailed description of professional learning communities and how they work in a school.

Research on professional learning communities, common planning time, and teacher collaboration over the past few decades has isolated certain characteristics and strategies that appear to have a significant impact on instructional quality and student achievement. Rather than promoting a specific model or program, *Harnessing Teacher Knowledge* distills a variety of features and practices that can help schools efficiently and effectively build a collaborative, job-embedded, teacher-driven professional development program. The tool also includes several supplemental resources.

Harnessing Teacher Knowledge can be downloaded for free from the Great Schools Partnership (greatschoolspartnership.org/resources/harnessing-teacher-knowledge) and U.S. Department of Education (www2.ed.gov/programs/slcp/resources.html) websites.

Still Want to Know More?

If you are interested in the foundational research behind many of the ideas discussed in the Leadership in Action series, we recommend our [Global Best Practices Research Summary](#), which is available on the [New England Secondary School Consortium website](#).

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is a new england secondary school consortium resource

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