

THE MIRAGE

Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DO WE KNOW HOW TO HELP TEACHERS GET BETTER?

It's a critical question: By helping more teachers succeed in the classroom, we could put more students on the path to success.¹ For decades, conventional wisdom has been that if we could just get teachers the right type and right amount of support, educational excellence would be right around the corner. Just how to support teachers has been the preoccupation of school systems and organizations like ours, as well as the subject of countless research studies, op-eds and books.

Most discussions about teacher development presume that we already know the answer. *Of course* we know what good professional development looks like; we just haven't been able to do it at scale for all teachers, yet.²

We thought so, too. Two years ago, we embarked on an ambitious effort to identify what works in fostering widespread teacher improvement. Our research spanned three large public school districts and one midsize charter school network. We surveyed more than 10,000 teachers and 500 school leaders and interviewed more than 100 staff members involved in teacher development.

Rather than test specific strategies to see if they produced results, we used multiple measures of performance to identify teachers who improved substantially, then looked for any experiences or attributes they had in common—from the kind and amount of development activities in which they participated to the qualities of their schools and their mindset about growth—that might distinguish them from teachers who did not improve. We used a broad definition of “professional development” to include efforts carried out by districts, schools and teachers themselves.

In the three districts we studied, which we believe are representative of large public school systems nationwide, we expected to find concentrations of schools where teachers were improving at every stage of their careers, or evidence that particular supports were especially helpful in boosting teachers' growth.

After an exhaustive search, we were disappointed not to find what we hoped we would. Instead, what we found challenged our assumptions.



FINDINGS

Districts are making a massive investment in teacher improvement—far larger than most people realize.

We estimate that the districts we studied spend an average of nearly \$18,000 per teacher, per year on development efforts.³ One district spends more on teacher development than on transportation, food and security combined.⁴ At this rate, the largest 50 school districts in the U.S. devote at least \$8 billion to teacher development annually.⁵ Furthermore, the teachers we surveyed reported spending approximately 19 full school days a year—nearly 10 percent of a typical school year—participating in development activities. After a little more than a decade in the classroom, an average teacher will have spent the equivalent of more than a full school year on development.⁶ This represents an extraordinary and generally unrecognized commitment to supporting teachers’ professional growth as the primary strategy for accelerating student learning.

Despite these efforts, most teachers do not appear to improve substantially from year to year—even though many have not yet mastered critical skills.

Across the districts we studied, the evaluation ratings of nearly seven out of 10 teachers remained constant or declined over the last two to three years.⁷ Substantial improvement seems especially difficult to achieve after a teacher’s first few years in the classroom; the difference in performance between an average first-year teacher and an average fifth-year teacher was more than *nine times* the difference between an average fifth-year teacher and an average twentieth-year teacher.⁸ More importantly, many teachers’ professional growth plateaus while they still have ample room to improve: As many as half of teachers in their tenth year or beyond were rated below “effective” in core instructional practices, such as developing students’ critical thinking skills.⁹

Even when teachers *do* improve, we were unable to link their growth to any particular development strategy. We looked at dozens of variables spanning the development activities teachers experienced, how much time they spent on them, what mindsets they brought to them and even where they worked. Yet we found no common threads that distinguished “improvers” from other teachers. No type, amount or combination of development activities appears more likely than any other to help teachers improve substantially, including the “job-embedded,” “differentiated” variety that we and many others believed to be the most promising.¹⁰

School systems are not helping teachers understand how to improve—or even that they have room to improve at all. Teachers need clear information about their strengths and weaknesses to improve their instruction, but many don’t seem to be getting that information. The vast majority of teachers in the districts we studied are rated Effective or Meeting Expectations or higher,¹¹ even as student outcomes in these districts fall far short of where they need to be. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that less than half of teachers surveyed agreed they had weaknesses in their instruction.¹² Even the few teachers who did earn low ratings seemed to reject them; more than 60 percent of low-rated teachers still gave themselves high performance ratings.¹³ Together, this suggests a pervasive culture of low expectations for teacher development and performance. These low expectations extended to teachers’ satisfaction with the development they received. While two-thirds reported feeling relatively satisfied with their development experiences,¹⁴ only about 40 percent reported that most of their professional development activities were a good use of their time.¹⁵



In short, we bombard teachers with help, but most of it is not helpful—to teachers as professionals or to schools seeking better instruction. We are not the first to say this: In the last decade, two federally funded experimental studies of sustained, content-focused and job-embedded professional development have found that these interventions did not result in long-lasting, significant changes in teacher practice or student outcomes.¹⁶ And while countless other studies have been undertaken, researchers summarize the evidence base as weak and the results mixed at best.¹⁷

In spite of this, the notion persists that we know how to help teachers improve and could achieve our goal of great teaching in far more classrooms if we just applied that knowledge more widely. It's a hopeful and alluring vision, but our findings force us to conclude that it is a mirage. Like a mirage, it is not a hallucination but a refraction of reality: Growth is possible, but our goal of widespread teaching excellence is further out of reach than it seems.

Great teaching is very real, as are teachers who improve over time, sometimes dramatically so. Undoubtedly, there are development experiences that support that improvement. But we found no clear patterns in these success stories and no evidence that they were the result of deliberate, systemic efforts. Teacher development appears to be a highly individualized process, one that has been dramatically oversimplified. The absence of common threads challenges us to confront the true nature of the problem—that as much as we wish we knew how to help all teachers improve, we do not.

We say this with humility. In the course of our own work over the last two decades, we have made the same assumptions, missteps and miscalculations as the districts we studied. It is this experience that drives us to do better and urge others to do the same.

We believe it's time to take a step back in our pursuit of teacher improvement and acknowledge just how far we stand from the goal of great teaching in every classroom, even as we recommit ourselves to reaching it. We have no excuses—we cannot blame a lack of time, money or good intentions. Instead, we must acknowledge that getting there will take much more than tinkering with the types or amount of professional development teachers receive, or further scaling other aspects of our current approach. It will require a new conversation about teacher development—one that asks fundamentally different questions about what better teaching means and how to achieve it.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Some may argue that we should drop our investment in teacher development in response to these findings. We disagree. Instead, we believe districts should take a radical step toward upending their approach to helping teachers improve—from redefining what “helping teachers” really means to taking stock of current development efforts to rethinking broader systems for ensuring great teaching for all students. While we found no set of specific development strategies that would result in widespread teacher improvement on its own, there are still clear next steps school systems can take to more effectively help their teachers. Much of this work involves creating the conditions that foster growth, not finding quick-fix professional development solutions. To do this, we recommend that school systems:

REDEFINE what it means to help teachers improve

- Define “development” clearly, as observable, measurable progress toward an ambitious standard for teaching and student learning.
- Give teachers a clear, deep understanding of their own performance and progress.
- Encourage improvement with meaningful rewards and consequences.

REEVALUATE existing professional learning supports and programs

- Inventory current development efforts.
- Start evaluating the effectiveness of all development activities against the new definition of “development.”
- Explore and test alternative approaches to development.
- Reallocate funding for particular activities based on their impact.

REINVENT how we support effective teaching at scale

- Balance investments in development with investments in recruitment, compensation and smart retention.
- Reconstruct the teacher’s job.
- Redesign schools to extend the reach of great teachers.
- Reimagine how we train and certify teachers for the job.

ENDNOTES

¹See for example: Chetty, R., Friedman, J., & Rockoff, J. (2011). *The Long Term Impacts of Teachers: Teacher Value-added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood*. (NBER Working Paper No. 17699). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research; Aaronson, D., Barrow, L., & Sanders, W. (2007). Teachers and student achievement in the Chicago public high schools. *Journal of Labor Economics*, Volume 25(1), 95-135; Rivkin, S. G., Hanushek, E. A., & Kain, J. F. (2005). Teachers, schools, and academic achievement. *Econometrica*, Volume 73(2), 417-458; Rockoff, J. E. (2004). The impact of individual teachers on student achievement: Evidence from panel data. *American Economic Review*, Volume 94, 247-252.

²There are many reports, papers and op-eds that could be cited. The following is just a sampling, meant not to call attention to one organization or person over any others: Archibald, S., Coggeshall, J., Croft, A., & Goe, L. (2011). *High Quality Professional Development for All Teachers: Effectively Allocating Resources*. Washington, DC, National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality; Berry, B. (2014, November 19) De ja Vu in American education: The woeful state of professional development. Retrieved from: <http://www.teachingquality.org/content/blogs/barnett-berry/d%C3%A9ja-vu-american-education-woeful-state-professional-development>; Gulamhussein, A. (2013). *Teaching the Teachers: Effective Professional Development in an Era of High Stakes Accountability*. Alexandria, VA: Center for Public Education. Learning Forward. (2015, March 17); PD Brain Trust Wants your Input on Professional Learning Redesign. *Education Week*. Retrieved from: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning_forwards_pd_watch/2015/03/pd_brain_trust_wants_your_input_on_professional_learning_redesign.html; Wei, R. C., Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, F. (2010). *Professional development in the United States: Trends and challenges*. Dallas, TX: National Staff Development Council.

³The average cost per teacher across Districts A, B and C using the Medium tier estimate is \$17,811.83.

⁴The sum of the total cost of transportation, food services and security from the fiscal year 2014 budget in District B was compared to the Low tier teacher improvement cost.

⁵This analysis is based on the 2011-12 ranking of the 50 largest school districts in the nation by student enrollment (most recent year available). National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *Table 215.10: Selected statistics on enrollment, teachers, dropouts, and graduates in public school districts enrolling more than 15,000 students: Selected years, 1990 through 2011*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_215.10.asp; United States Census Bureau. (2012). *Public Elementary-Secondary Education Finance Data*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/govs/school/>

⁶These calculations use average "hours a month" of support from the Teacher Survey: About how many hours in a given month, on average, do you spend engaged in some sort of professional development activity: a. Organized/run by your district; b. Organized/run by your school; c. You pursued independently. Total Average Hours a Month=16.60 (n=9,075). Assuming nine months in a school year, an eight-hour teacher workday and 198 days in a school year, this results in 9.43% of the year and 149.39 hours. These numbers represent District A, B and C combined.

⁷74.14% of teachers in District A (n=8,724) and 56.95% of teachers in District B (n=1,812) did not improve their evaluation rating from 2011 to 2013; 63.06% of teachers in District C (n=4,044) did not improve their evaluation rating from 2012 to 2013. These percentages are based only on teachers with evaluation ratings in all indicated years but exclude teachers who earned the highest possible evaluation rating in both years.

⁸Because we cannot identify years of teaching experience past year 10 in District B, this district is excluded from the analysis. However, results held when we used years of district experience instead. Sample sizes varied by experience and district but were always above 250.

⁹These percentages are 51.52% in District A (n=5,765), 53.11% in District B (n=1,654) and 45.99% in District C (n=3,540). See Technical Appendix: Analysis for definition of "effective."

¹⁰See Technical Appendix: Analysis for definitions of growth and analysis approach. See Technical Appendix: Appendix B for detailed outcomes and variable definitions.

¹¹All districts use a 5-point final evaluation rating scale. For Districts A and C, the bar for Effective or Meeting Expectations includes teachers in the top three rating categories. For District B, this includes the top two categories.

¹²Teacher Survey: I have weaknesses in my instruction. (*Strongly agree, Agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree*). 46.82% Strongly agree or Agree (n=9,003)

¹³Teacher Survey: How would you rate the current quality of your instructional practice with 1 being Ineffective and 5 being Highly Effective? (Please note that these categories do not need to directly align with the rating scale in your district.) (1 (*Ineffective*), 2, 3, 4, 5 (*Highly Effective*)). All districts use a 5-point final evaluation rating scale. For Districts A and C, "low rated" teachers include the bottom two rating categories. For District B, this includes the bottom three rating categories. 62.14% of "low rated teachers" selected 4 or 5 (n=8,798)

¹⁴Teacher Survey: Are you satisfied, overall, with the professional development you receive from your school and district? (Yes/No). 67.47% Yes (n=9,567)

¹⁵Teacher Survey: The majority of the professional development I receive from my school and district is a good use of my time. (*Strongly agree, Agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree*). 41.45% Strongly agree or Agree (n=9,799)

¹⁶Garet, M. S., Cronen, S., Eaton, M., Kurki, A., Ludwig, M., Jones, W., Uekawa, K., Falk, A., Bloom, H., Doolittle, F., Zhu, P., & Szejnberg, L. (2008). *The Impact of Two Professional Development Interventions on Early Reading Instruction and Achievement* (NCEE 2008-4030). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education; Garet, M. S., Wayne, A. J., Stancavage, F., Taylor, J., Walters, K., Song, M., Brown, S., Hurlburt, S., Zhu, P., Sepanik, S., & Doolittle, F. (2010). *Middle School Mathematics Professional Development Impact Study: Findings After the First Year of Implementation* (NCEE 2010-4009). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.; See also: Arens, S. A., Stoker, G., Barker, J., Shebby, S., Wang, X., Cicchinelli, L. F., & Williams, J. M. (2012). *Effects of curriculum and teacher professional development on the language proficiency of elementary English language learner students in the Central Region*. (NCEE 2012-4013). Denver, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education Learning; Bos, J., Sanchez, R., Tseng, F., Rayyes, N., Ortiz, L., & Sinicrope, C. (2012). *Evaluation of Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) Professional Development*. (NCEE 2012-4005). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

¹⁷See for example: Gersten, R., Taylor, M. J., Keys, T. D., Rolhus, E., & Newman-Gonchar, R. (2014). *Summary of research on the effectiveness of math professional development approaches*. (REL 2014-010). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>; Hill, H. C., Beisiegel, M., & Jacob, R. (2013). *Professional Development Research: Consensus, Crossroads, and Challenges*. Educational Researcher; Suk Yoon, K., Duncan, T., Lee, S. W.-Y., Scarloss, B., & Shapley, K. (2007). *Reviewing the evidence on how teacher professional development affects student achievement* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2007-No. 033). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>



