



# ESSA: Good News or Old News?

5 Thought Leaders Weigh in on the  
Every Student Succeeds Act's Definition  
of Professional Development

## INTRODUCTION

Last fall, the U.S. waved goodbye to the much-reviled era of No Child Left Behind. On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which passed by a large margin in both the Senate and the House.

Among other provisions, the law returns greater power to states in determining how to evaluate schools and approach teacher evaluations. It also provides a detailed definition of professional development, calling for activities that: *“are sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven and classroom focused...”*

We know that high quality teaching is crucial to student success. The value of professional learning is not in dispute. But will ESSA’s definition of professional development truly lead to changes in practice? Is it truly “new”? Is it enough?



**We spoke with five forward-thinking educators to get their perspective.**

- **Marguerite Dimgba** | Professional Learning Director, Greece Central School District, New York
- **Alan J. Ingram, Ed.D.** | Education Consultant
- **Alisia Moutry, Ph.D.** | Regional Director for the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT), University of Kansas; Education Consultant
- **Dr. James Stronge** | Founder, Stronge & Associates
- **David Weber, Ed.D.** | Director of Curriculum – Educational Programs and Assessment, Hatboro-Horsham School District, Pennsylvania

[Note: this interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.]





# Professional learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act



## The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has issued a “new” definition of PD, calling for it to be sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven and classroom-focused. What’s important about this definition?

### DR. ALAN J. INGRAM:

What I think is probably most important in terms of the new definition is that it's aligned to the professional development standards that Learning Forward established. Having some alignment between what the definition is, and what the standards are, is a critical step in helping people embrace not only the definition, but also the standards, and helps people see how those two things work in tandem for the benefit of children.

The one characteristic that sticks out to me the most is the classroom-focused piece. Teacher training or professional learning just for the sake of learning, with no expressed interest in making sure that there's some relationship to the classroom and how well students perform, is ludicrous.

### MARGUERITE DIMGBA:

It's funny because I was reading it and it made me sort of laugh because I don't really feel like it's new. I've been doing this for 15 years and we've always talked about professional learning being job-embedded and sustained. I think sometimes what's new or gets hyper-focused is the notion of data-driven. Sometimes I feel like people are so focused on the numbers that they forget that we're in the business of educating children. I think data is certainly important, but lately, especially with a lot of new education laws, we get a little hyper-focused on the “data-driven.”

### DR. JAMES STRONGE:

The intention is to make professional learning impactful. That's a good thing for certain. But how do we know if all of those attributes will make professional learning impactful? If you could operationally define and document those attributes, is one more powerful than the other? I don't know. I think a lot of what is being said in ESSA regarding professional learning is still a bit speculative.

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- Dr. Alan J. Ingram





## The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has issued a “new” definition of PD, calling for it to be sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven and classroom-focused. What’s important about this definition?

### DR. DAVID WEBER:

What jumped out to me is the job-embedded aspect. “Job-embedded” would to me imply that instructional coaching is one of the ways that they expect for this to be carried out. I think instructional coaching is a really solid way for teachers to get some collaborative feedback. It tends to be a lot more real-time as well. Sometimes the data analysis, or the data-driven strategies, can be well after the fact. But job-embedded strategies tend to be real-time strategies, and collegial in nature, so that teachers are working with other teachers to improve their own practice.

### DR. ALISIA MOUTRY:

I think professional learning has been so far away from that [new definition]. I think that teachers have received a lot of professional learning, but it hasn't been based upon what the classroom and the teacher really were looking for. Sometimes it has been a district initiative, like the flavor of the month. “This is the hot topic, we're going to give it to all our teachers.” But how was that decision made that this professional development is what was needed?

What’s happening now is getting to really look at data and say, “What do we need to do to ensure that the instruction will help move that data?”



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- Dr. Alisia Moutry



## Was there anything important left out of ESSA's definition of professional development?



“ The thing that was left out of the definition that I think is important is 'personal.' ”

- Dr. David Weber

### DR. DAVID WEBER:

The thing that was left out of the definition that I think is important is “personal.” We've done a lot of one-size-fits-all strategies. Ironically, a lot of the professional development that we've done is trying to emphasize to teachers how one-size-fits-all strategies don't work for students. I want to see some aspect of our professional development practices really become very personal for a teacher: a balance between district or state level initiatives and the teacher's own sense of what they need to personally pursue to become better.

### DR. ALISIA MOUTRY:

I think the definition should have included some type of ongoing coaching with specific feedback. Coaching is what will help it to become job-embedded, and will help it to stay classroom-focused. You get this one-day or this three-day workshop, and then it's done. I feel like all professional learning should include some type of a coaching component that's a follow-up, ongoing for the rest of the school year.





# The state of professional learning today



## Why isn't professional development leading to more improvement in teaching practice?

### DR. ALISIA MOUTRY:

It's about the professional development and the need not being aligned. I use this analogy: If I have a foot pain, I really need the podiatrist to check my foot out. If I'm going to the chiropractor for my back, that chiropractor may be doing a heck of a job. That chiropractor may have been at the top of his class — but it's not my back, it's my foot. I'm making that connection to professional development. I also think that's why sometimes teachers feel very hesitant to go to PD a lot, because professional development is thrown on them, and it's not the doctor they believe they should be seeing.

### MARGUERITE DIMGBA:

I think sometimes people try to implement a new program and they want to see results right away. One of the things that we're doing in our district this year is really looking at the whole child, the social/emotional needs of the child, because the kids that we have today are really different than the kids that may have been in school systems 10, 20, 30 years ago in terms of the high increase in poverty and trauma.



*It's about the professional development and the need not being aligned.*

- Dr. Alisia Moutry





## Why isn't professional development leading to more improvement in teaching practice?



### DR. JAMES STRONGE:

One of the things that I've found in a study that I've been doing on the world's best school systems is that they figure out what works, what has promise for working, and they stick with it. Japan is a really good example. They'll figure out an innovation that they want to invest in, and they will invest in that for maybe a decade or longer, and they stay with it. That's not the US model.

We think we have to have something glitzy every 18 months, and constantly are trying something new. We're constantly reforming and never changing.

### DR. DAVID WEBER:

There's much more competition for time than there used to be. I really feel in the last 5 to 10 years that different legislation and state mandates have cut into time, and make it really difficult for districts to provide the kind of opportunities for teachers that we'd like to provide. Knowing that better instruction is the number one thing that leads to better student achievement, I think it's fair to ask the question, "How many of those things are directly tied to better instructional practice in the classroom by teachers?"

*“ We think we have to have something glitzy every 18 months, and constantly are trying something new. We're constantly reforming and never changing. ”*

- Dr. James Stronge



## Data suggests that the total number of hours individual educators have spent in PD activities (and the duration of those activities) has decreased over the last 5 years. In your opinion, what has contributed to this?

### DR. ALISIA MOUTRY:

I would probably begin to think about just the lack of resources — and when I say resources, I mean dollars. Even if it's something that I need, if I've already done my budget and [that money is] already spoken for, I'm either finding outside sources to help cover some of those costs, or I have to say, "Not this year, I'll wait until next year."

Also, time. Schools and districts only have so much time that they can spend on professional development. How do you balance getting all the non-negotiables, the policies and procedures, taken care of within professional development, and then, "Oh by the way, if we've got time, then we can do some instructional-type professional development for folks"?

### DR. DAVID WEBER:

I wonder if there's not some unintended consequence to saying, "Here's a benchmark for the time that you're expected to spend to professionally develop yourself." What happens once you've met that benchmark? Do you think, "Okay, I've done enough development now, I don't need to worry about getting out to the workshops?" I wonder if by setting a quantitative benchmark for professionalism, we've made some unintended consequence for teachers that says, "Oh, well now I've done enough professional growth."

### DR. JAMES STRONGE:

Who cares? If we weren't getting results from professional learning five years ago, and we've decreased it today, that's probably a smart move. If we're not getting any better results, stop doing it.

*I wonder if there's not some unintended consequence to saying, 'Here's a benchmark for the time that you're expected to spend to professionally develop yourself.' What happens once you've met that benchmark?*

- Dr. David Weber



## Teacher engagement in professional learning has often been cited as something districts struggle with. In your mind, what are the best ways to increase engagement?

### MARGUERITE DIMGBA:

I think carving out time during the workday. For a number of years a lot of our [professional learning] was outside of the workday. It's hard for people — some people coach, have a second job, they have families, etc.

We have what's called a shadow day program, where teachers have the opportunity to observe one another in the practice. Let's say I'm a new second grade teacher. I observe someone who's been teaching second grade for five or six years. I can really focus in on classroom management and look at strategies within our building that are working with our kids and how to connect with them. Those are really the best types of professional learning.

### DR. DAVID WEBER:

I think the feedback that we get from our teachers about the sessions that they find engaging involve them having some choices — this session, or that session? So there's a level of personal selection and interest involved. I think the sessions where leadership is shared, when teachers lead the sessions themselves, so that they're very collegial in nature, tend to be a little bit better received by our folks. Then some autonomy on the part of the teacher — in dialog with colleagues, but mostly in the way that they're able to take the learning from the session and apply it. I think those things tend to lead to the best kind of response that we get in the sessions that we run.



*We have what's called a shadow day program, where teachers have the opportunity to observe one another in the practice... Those are really the best types of professional learning.*

- Marguerite Dimgba



## Teacher engagement in professional learning has often been cited as something districts struggle with. In your mind, what are the best ways to increase engagement?



### DR. ALAN J. INGRAM:

Not listening to teachers is a critical mistake, and it's one that I think we often overlook. I don't think people do it intentionally, but sometimes we don't have the necessary feedback loops in place to make sure that we're hearing from teachers in terms of what their unique needs are, and what they value. Too often, when we look for solutions, we look externally...In many cases, we have great teachers who've been doing great work and have demonstrated not just their capacity, but their passion for teaching.

Trying to tap into that is really important, but you have to be intentional about it. Building trust and having teamwork and transparency are all important values. Not just with students and families, but with classroom teachers, instructional leaders, building administrators. I think you've got to make sure that people know that you genuinely care and are concerned about them. That you're trying to recognize their value and voice through feedback loops, tapping into and developing teacher-leaders.

“ Not listening to teachers is a critical mistake... ”

- Dr. Alan J. Ingram





# Looking to the future



## What's one thing districts should be thinking about in professional learning, but aren't?

### DR. JAMES STRONGE:

[Districts need to be] more focused on outcomes. Looking at results and never letting up on that is the right thing to do. "Is it making any difference? Does it work?"

### MARGUERITE DIMGBA:

Really customizing professional learning to meet the individual needs of educators — not just one-size-fits-all.

*“ Really customizing professional learning to meet the individual needs of educators — not just one-size-fits-all. ”*

- Marguerite Dimgba

### DR. ALAN J. INGRAM:

When I think about developing and building the capacity of administrators and teacher leaders, I think about alignment, making sure that there's some connection between what we're training on, what we're saying is important, narrowing that focus and making sure that it's aligned to our vision, mission and priorities of the district.

Making sure that there's a safe and cooperative learning environment, not just for students, but for the adults in the system as well. Paying attention to climate and culture, and then making sure that there's support for the things that we're investing in for professional learning — making sure that we try to leverage our resources in a way that's smart, because we can't do everything.

### DR. ALISIA MOUTRY:

Some school districts really spend time and resources on it, but when it's time for a budget cut, the first thing that goes is coaching. But when people actually get a chance to have time with a professional coach, someone that's truly there for them, and are able to benefit from a great coaching session based upon something specifically in the classroom, I can guarantee you that that feedback really can be used to move a teacher from one place to the next, to a higher level of instruction.

*“ But when people actually get a chance to have time with a professional coach... I can guarantee you that that feedback really can be used to move a teacher from one place to the next, to a higher level of instruction. ”*

- Dr. Alisia Moutry





## What are the most effective ways school districts can use technology to enhance professional learning? What about video in particular?

### DR. JAMES STRONGE:

Point number one: Direct in-person training is not going away. Number two: There are enormous opportunities for combined innovative multimedia approaches. Number three: Doing cross training that would have live facilitators or in-person trainers with follow-up or preservice before that occurs with the videos, multimedia and so forth, are great trends that I would suggest there.

### DR. ALAN J. INGRAM:

Video-based reflection, and its impact on teaching practices, is huge. I'm not sure if districts are taking advantage of that as a potential solution. The other thing when I think about technology and professional learning in general, I always think about making sure that it's relevant, and that it's job-embedded. Teachers and administrators and folks in the building, they can't see this as "one more thing."



“ There are enormous opportunities for combined innovative multimedia approaches. ”

- Dr. James Stronge



## What's the “next big thing” in professional learning? What will we be talking about in 5 years that we aren't now?

### DR. DAVID WEBER:

Something that's certainly gaining a lot of momentum right now, and I think is going to continue to gain momentum, is the idea of micro-credentialing. This is going to become a relatively commonplace practice. It's almost a happy medium for what I was talking about earlier, making sure that our teachers have some choice.

### DR. ALAN J. INGRAM:

Professional learning beyond the walls that we have traditionally thought of them. That just opens up all kinds of possibilities – everything from virtual schools to blended learning to technology as part of teaching and learning solutions. And technology not for the sake of technology, but looking for a way to help teachers see how it can help them do their jobs better and help kids learn better.

### DR. ALISIA MOUTRY:

Based upon what's happening all over the world right now, from politics to a lot of the racial tensions around the United States, we're probably going to be focusing a lot more on culturally responsive teaching... Working with families and community folks is going to be really important.

### DR. JAMES STRONGE:

My concern is that we may be just simply cycling back around and talking about the same things again, giving them different titles. If we go back five years previously, it's not so different than what we're talking about today. If we go back 10 years ago, 15 years ago, what have we learned and what have we put into practice? Are we any better?

### MARGUERITE DIMGBA:

I believe the “next big thing” in professional learning is individuals customizing their own professional learning. Educators want a menu of choices and learning platforms that will provide “just in time” professional learning that can be implemented in the classroom right away.

*“We're probably going to be focusing a lot more on culturally responsive teaching...”*

- Dr. Alisia Moutry



## ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS



### MARGUERITE DIMGBA

Marguerite Dimgba is Professional Learning Director at Greece Central School District in New York, the eighth largest district in the state. Marguerite has developed a series of portfolio classes and support systems as a result of the 2004 NYS portfolio requirement for initially-certified teachers, and co-authored the book *Teacher Portfolios for the Annual Professional Performance Review*. Marguerite is a mentor to New York State Teacher Center Directors and classroom teachers, and coordinates the Greece Central mentor program. She has presented at various Professional Learning forums, and serves on the New York State Teacher Center Steering Committee as well as the Greater Rochester Teacher Center Network. She holds a Masters degree in Educational Leadership and a Bachelor of Arts degree in French and Political Science from the University of Vermont, and has studied French and International Law at the Université Paul Valéry in Montpellier, France. Marguerite also serves on the board of directors for the Genesee Valley Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.



### ALAN J. INGRAM, ED. D.

Alan Ingram is an education consultant with state and district level experience in policy creation, program implementation, and labor-management-community collaborations. He served for three years as Deputy Commissioner at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and previously served for four years as Superintendent of Public Schools in Springfield, Massachusetts. He has also provided program leadership in a variety of roles in Oklahoma City Public Schools, and previously spent 22 years in the U.S. Air Force, attaining the rank of Chief Master Sergeant. Dr. Ingram holds a Bachelor of Science from the University of Maryland University College, a Master of Arts from Webster University and a Doctor of Education in Education Administration, Curriculum and Supervision from the University of Oklahoma. He is sought as a presenter at state and national conferences and is also a Broad Superintendents Academy Fellow.



### ALISIA MOUTRY, PH. D.

Alisia Moutry, Ph.D., is a native of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She is a proud product of the Milwaukee Public School system. She received her Bachelor of Science in Special Education with an emphasis on Learning Disabilities (K-9) from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater in 1990. She has earned a Master of Science in Curriculum and Instruction and a Master in Educational Leadership both from National Louis University in 1996 and 2006. In September 2010, Dr. Moutry became the President of her own company, 4AM. Educational Consulting, LLC. Dr. Moutry stays close to her passion for teaching, learning and leadership by taking on independent consulting roles as technical assistance support, adjunct professor, guest lecturer and/or performance coach at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Cardinal Stritch University, Mequon-Thiensville School District, Milwaukee Area Technical College, and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. In addition to her own consulting company, she works part-time for the University of Kansas as a Regional Director for the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) which is a federally funded national K-8 technical assistance center.



### DR. JAMES STRONGE

James H. Stronge is President of Stronge and Associates Educational Consulting, LLC, an educational consulting company that focuses on teacher and leader effectiveness with projects internationally and in many U.S. states. Additionally, he is the Heritage Professor in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership Area at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia. His research interests include policy and practice related to teacher quality and teacher and administrator evaluation. His work on teacher quality focuses on how to identify effective teachers and how to enhance teacher effectiveness. Dr. Stronge has presented his research at more than 350 regional, national, and international conferences and conducted workshops for educational organizations throughout the U.S. and internationally. Additionally, he has worked extensively with local school districts on issues related to teacher quality, teacher selection, and teacher and administrator evaluation. Dr. Stronge has been a teacher, counselor, and district-level administrator, and has authored, coauthored, or edited 30 books and more than 150 articles, chapters, and technical reports.



### DAVID WEBER, ED. D.

David Weber, Ed.D., is Director of Curriculum – Educational Programs and Assessment for the Hatboro-Horsham School District in Pennsylvania. A longtime middle school math and science teacher, he is passionate about student-centered learning, equitable practices, and using evidence to refine instructional practices. Currently, David is excited to be a part of district initiatives aimed at designing deeper learning opportunities for all students and the successful implementation of 1:1 technology initiatives.



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