

Bridging the Gap



Paving the Pathway
from Current Practice to
Exemplary Professional Learning

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Foreword

Over the last decade, the field has been bombarded with report after report admonishing professional learning for America's teachers as poor quality, misaligned with teachers' needs and ineffective. With each report, it seems, there are cries for improvement — but little happens. The slow pace of change, however, doesn't stem from apathy. The tone of most reports is optimistic; teachers, they often report, can benefit from professional learning when done well. So what impedes progress toward the improvements to professional learning that could transform teachers' experiences and help them improve their craft?

Many school districts have records filled with valuable data about professional learning — and may even be able to connect its influence over time with teachers' pedagogical practice and student outcomes. Yet they lack the tools to translate those data into actionable strategies for improvement. We think three big impediments are in the way.

First, leaders face the need for common language around quality. Although terminology abounds, there is not much specificity about what terms look like in practice or whether various terms are naming the same or different phenomena. Even

if negotiation is required, establishing a common language will help set the foundation on which meaningful improvement efforts may be built.

Second, leaders lack clarity about how to analyze current offerings and assess where improvement is necessary. Once terminology is clear, it can be connected with metrics that meaningfully assess whether professional learning offerings meet with the definitions of each term, deviate slightly or wholly miss the mark. Much like the terminology itself, metrics may be thoughtfully negotiated by experts and practitioners, but clarity is key.

Third, leaders need a feasible pathway from where a school or districts begins to where they aim to go. Metrics become meaningful when they are applied to the real data available to school and district leaders about the professional learning they offer and the professional learning they select to provide in the future. When metrics are applied to available data, leaders can prioritize feasible improvements and make progress toward shifts in school culture and professional learning expectations that can result in improved outcomes for teachers and students.

Researchers at the Frontline Research & Learning Institute sought to address these challenges with the report, ***Bridging the Gap: Paving the Pathway from Current Practice to Exemplary Professional Learning***. Building from the premise that data — data that already exists for most districts and can easily be collected by others — can power change when used with a common language and common metrics for quality. The report builds from the new definition of quality propounded by the ***Every Student Succeeds Act*** by establishing clear definitions of each key term — including sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused. Taking insight from numerous studies and research reports over the last two decades, these definitions reflect an amalgamation of uses by researchers and practitioners. They may not be perfect, but they are a clear starting place.

With definitions in hand, the researchers developed easily measurable metrics for each term and explored the utility of the definition by applying it to data collected from over two hundred school districts. Although the findings reflect the need for major improvements to professional learning nationwide, they also provide a much-needed baseline from which school and district leaders may begin advancement efforts.

The findings paint a dark portrait: Only about 20% of professional learning opportunities offered today meet with the new federal criteria for quality. It's little wonder that teachers often report feeling their time could be better used on work outside of the professional learning now available to them. Even as the work is daunting, however, the opportunity is enormous. Consider the possibilities of improvement if school leaders focused on making improvement in just 15% of professional learning offerings each year. The gap could be closed in just over five years. Perhaps that is not fast enough — but considering the long history of suboptimal professional learning, even small steps are essential.

Bridging the Gap offers a practical pathway toward improvement for teachers and students. By harnessing the power of extant data, the Frontline Research & Learning Institute has provided a tool that can transform the way school and district leaders think about and select professional learning experiences for teachers — and it can empower teachers to leverage their own decision-making power too. The time has come to stop bemoaning professional learning — and start fixing it.

Beverly Perdue

Former Governor, North Carolina

About the Authors

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About the Institute

The Frontline Research & Learning Institute generates data-driven research, resources and observations to support and advance the educational community. The Institute's research is powered by Frontline Education's data and analytic capabilities in partnership with over 7,500 K-12 organizations and several million users nationwide. The Institute's research reports and analysis are designed to provide practical insights for teachers and leaders as well as benchmarks to inform strategic decision-making within their organizations.

Research, writing and design of this report was sponsored by the Frontline Research & Learning Institute.



With Gratitude

The authors wish to thank members of the Frontline Research & Learning Institute Advisory Council, the review team at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Research and Reform in Education and our respective teams at Frontline Education and Whiteboard Advisors for their expertise, insight and review of *Bridging the Gap*.

Executive Summary



For **4** out of the **6** criteria, 80% or more of the professional development offered and participated in by teaching professionals **failed to meet the federal definition.**

Bridging the Gap is a four-part series designed to help practitioners decode the new federal definition of professional development — and understand how new requirements align with their current professional learning practices. The analysis also provides practitioners a framework for reviewing their own practices and developing plans for improvement. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) provides the most prescriptive federal definition of high quality professional learning in the nation's history. But while the definition offers six specific criteria (sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven and classroom-focused), it does not define what those criteria mean or how to measure them.

In this first report, researchers at the Frontline Research & Learning Institute unpack the new federal definition, alongside consensus insights from over thirty years of research, to place the law's more specific language in the context of longstanding professional development policy and practice. Based on that analysis, they establish a framework to determine whether professional development was aligned with each criterion. With permission from partner school districts across the country, the Institute used the framework to compare the definitions of each of the six criteria with five years of anonymized data on the professional development experiences of over 100,000 educators.

The analysis reveals that for four out of the six criteria, 80% or more of the professional development offered and participated in by teaching professionals failed to meet the federal definition. In other words, the clear majority of professional learning experiences offered to and engaged in by U.S. educators over the past five years are not aligned with the new definition or priorities for professional development under ESSA.

Introduction

Sadly, all too many teachers hit an improvement ceiling early in their careers.¹ Neither pre-service training nor in-service professional development² have kept pace with teachers' immediate instructional needs or been appropriately designed and implemented to help them develop skills that will assist in their efforts to serve the students in the classroom. That's not for a lack of research on what works; significant scholarly attention to effective adult — and specifically teacher — education and development techniques has shed light on the most effective learning designs for cultivating teacher talent — as well as unintended consequences and pitfalls.³

The **Every Student Succeeds Act** provides the most prescriptive federal definition of professional learning in the history of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

In 2015, Congress tried to close the gap between the research and practice by incorporating new expectations in conjunction with its \$2.25 billion annual investment in high quality teachers and leaders. The *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* provides the most prescriptive federal definition of professional learning, suggesting that investments focus only on professional development that is "... sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused..." [S.1177, §8002 (42)]. The definition goes on to address specific outcomes professional

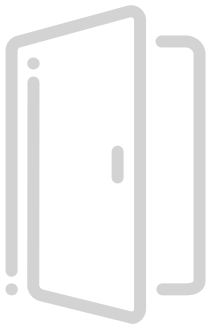
1 TNTP (2015). The Mirage: Confronting the hard truth about our quest for teacher development. Retrieved from <http://tntp.org/publications/view/the-mirage-confronting-the-truth-about-our-quest-for-teacher-development>

2 The term "professional learning" is preferred to "professional development" because it provides a broader, more accurate description of the concept. However, professional development is used to describe activities in this report to maintain consistency with common terminology.

3 Darling-Hammond, L., Chung Wei, R., Andree, A., & Richardson, N. (2009). Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

development should achieve and encourages ongoing efficacy studies to gather data that may be used in decision-making. The extended definition has been widely lauded by independent teacher professional support organizations and associations.

The **Every Student Succeeds Act** opens the doors for a more comprehensive, aligned system of supports throughout an educator's career.



The *Every Student Succeeds Act* opens the doors for a more comprehensive, aligned system of supports throughout an educator's career. But policy is a blunt instrument. The new federal law sets a standard for investments in professional learning that must be implemented by states and districts to have the highest probability of being effective. Fortunately, the law contemplates the critical role that states can play in opening doors to higher quality and more relevant continuing education. And in doing so, ESSA establishes opportunities for innovation and improvement that have the power to transform historically ineffective professional development to elevate teacher practice and advance better outcomes for students.

So what does the new federal law call for in practice? And how does new language square with the literature on best practices and pitfalls? Where are law and practices aligned? And how can data help us understand the gaps? This report begins with a primer to help make sense of the new law and then provides a framework to evaluate whether professional development meets the requirements of the new law.

Education Law and Professional Development

In 1965, the entire federal law governing education, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, was 32 pages long and addressed teachers three times: to ensure they had access to the findings of research on education, to ensure they had instructional resources and to ensure they were adequately trained for their jobs. Fifty years later, the Act — as reauthorized in the form of ESSA — is 1,072 pages long and requires that teachers and principals participate in professional learning that is defined in accordance with consensus definitions of rigor and quality. During the intervening period, a tremendous amount of idiosyncratic research and informal experimentation in schools created normative practices that diverged pointedly from research and best practice. The first commitment to teachers — ensuring access to the findings of education research — was effectively lost.



1965 = **32**
PAGES >> 2016 = **1,072**
PAGES

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* presents an unprecedented opportunity to deliver on that commitment. For decades, educators have borne the burden of finding their own paths to classroom management, integrating new standards and curricular expectations, and meeting the needs of each individual student they serve. Teaching is often depicted as an isolating profession, with infrequent opportunities to observe and share best practice with effective peers. Teachers and leaders deserve better, and students will be the primary beneficiaries of systemic improvements.

Methodology

The new federal law draws upon a consensus understanding of the tenets of high-quality professional development. These terms, however, are not defined in the law or supporting guidance. Understanding whether current professional development practices match with the new federal definition, therefore, requires a first step of defining the terminology and then matching the definitions with transparently measurable metrics.

The process of establishing definitions began with a review of literature on professional development, informed primarily by the publications of the nation's leading professional development association, Learning Forward.⁴ Using these references, the Institute developed succinct, measurable definitions that may be used by other researchers as well as state and district leaders to assess their own professional development alignment with the federal definition. Those definitions are presented below as a framework against which data from Frontline Education's partner districts were measured.

The data used in this study were collected through Frontline Education's professional learning management system (formerly MyLearningPlan PDMS) with permission from participating districts. Data were anonymized and analyzed to determine the extent to which the professional development being offered and corresponding enrollments met the terms of the ESSA definition.

Institute researchers operationalized each term in accordance with generally agreed upon, research-based definitions. Each term was also assigned specific metrics by which to measure the alignment between the definition of the term and the extent to which professional development activities matched it. These metrics (further defined below) were selected from many possibilities, but they emerged as the

⁴ Learning Forward defines itself as "the only professional association devoted exclusively to those who work in educator professional development."

strongest available indicators. States and districts are encouraged to build upon or modify these metrics to match with their own contexts.

In accordance with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, professional learning should always be aligned with professional practice standards. For the purposes of this analysis, the Institute employed the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards as a reference point because they serve as the basis for most states' professional practice standards.⁵ The InTASC standards' alignments were reviewed by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) for accuracy.⁶ School systems endeavoring to continue to measure their own progress will need to identify specific metrics (these or others) they will use to measure effectiveness and have a means to benchmark themselves against those metrics — both based on their own progress as well as comparisons to school systems nationally.



...ultimately, a roadmap to higher quality, research-aligned professional learning opportunities for teachers.

There are, of course, limitations to the conclusions reached in this series of reports. The data relied upon was self-reported by participating districts and without the benefit of a consistent framework for describing activities or a common understanding of each of the individual field definitions. Thus, the Institute relied upon experience with district policies and practices along with additional, available data points as evidence of the extent to which school systems are offering

⁵ Council of Chief State School Officers. (2011, April). Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Model Core Teaching Standards: A Resource for State Dialogue. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.ccsso.org/documents/2011/intasc_model_core_teaching_standards_2011.pdf

⁶ Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) inspected each individual state standard aligned by the Frontline Research & Learning Institute in relation to the applicable InTASC standard and indicated whether they agreed with the alignment designation. Where there were discrepancies, the standard alignment was changed to reflect the CRRE recommendation. The review is entitled "JHU-CRRE, Standards Alignment Review, 2016."

professional development programs that align with ESSA criteria. This report, therefore, represents a starting point with the aim of, over time, developing a more consistent framework for reporting and, ultimately, a roadmap to higher quality, research-aligned professional learning opportunities for teachers.

Decoding the New Definition

ESSA legislates that professional development is aligned with high quality research and with evidence that it improves teaching and learning.

ESSA legislates that professional development is aligned with high quality research and with evidence that it improves teaching and learning. Research to date has shown that professional development teachers typically experience is mostly ineffective in improving pedagogical practice or student outcomes — but even the professional development literature itself suffers from lack of rigor.⁷ A 2007 review of over 1,300 research works addressing the efficacy of professional development found that only nine met What Works Clearinghouse standards of rigor. A 2014 review of math professional development in the U.S. found that of 643 published studies, 32 were conducted with an efficacy research design and only six were adequately rigorous to make any causal inferences.⁸ As a result, clarity on what makes professional development effective does not come directly from rigorous research.

⁷ Yoon, K. S., 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>

⁸ Gersten, R., Taylor, M.J., Keys, T.D., Rolfhus, 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>

Nonetheless, the new law defines quality professional development in terms of six criteria. These six criteria grow from consensus definitions that have emerged from the literature on what works in professional learning, including many that are observational in nature. Because of the nature of the criteria and their sources, the Institute has established specific definitions for each criterion and linked each with at least one measurable metric to assess whether professional development is meeting the definition or not. The following definitions guide the research shared in this and subsequent reports:



Sustained: taking place over an extended period; longer than one day or a one-time workshop.



Intensive: focused on a discreet concept, practice or program.



Collaborative: involving multiple educators, educators and coaches or set of participants grappling with the same concept or practice and in which participants work together to achieve shared understanding.



Job-embedded: a part of the ongoing, regular work of instruction and related to teaching and learning taking place in real time in the teaching and learning environment.



Data-driven: based upon and responsive to real time information about the needs of participants and their students.



Classroom-focused: related to the practices taking place during the teaching process and relevant to instructional process.



Data Set

3,227,306

ENROLLMENTS ACROSS

376,908

ACTIVITIES COMPLETED BY

107,870

TEACHING PROFESSIONALS IN

203

SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Data used in this study were gathered from activities offered and enrolled in between July 1st, 2011 and June 30th, 2016 in 203 school systems across 27 states.⁹ The study examined 376,908 activities completed by 107,870 teaching professionals. The total number of enrollments across activities was 3,227,306. For the purposes of this study, data were limited to activities offered to instructional staff. From that group, data were further refined to include individuals defined by their districts as having instructional classification with no administrative access. The resulting pool of analyzed activities applied only to individuals with instructional responsibilities such as teachers and school librarians (referred to as teaching professionals though out this report) and excluded those with limited or no instructional responsibilities, such as paraprofessionals and school principals.

All data used in this study was reported by individual school systems' users. Typically, when a new activity is entered into the professional learning management system, either by a school system leader an instructor or participant, it includes essential logistical information (e.g., time, duration, location) and is defined in accordance with criteria that include professional development format, provider and related professional standard(s). In many cases, additional options available for individual criteria are configured directly by the school system.

⁹ Professional development activities offered are those that are provided on a menu from which educators may select; activities that are enrolled are those activities that educators engage in.

Figure 1:
Participating Schools by Size and Geography

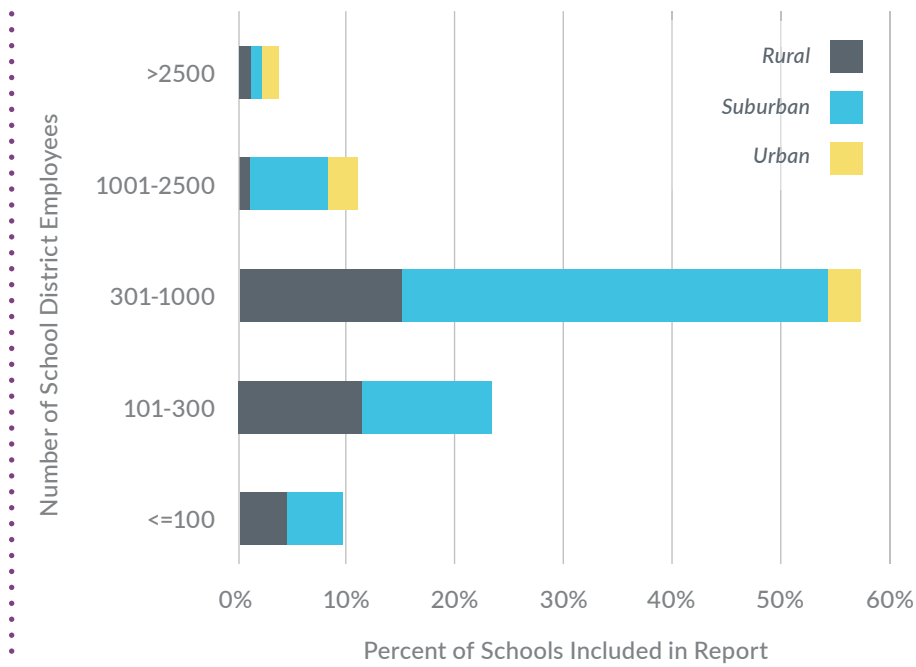


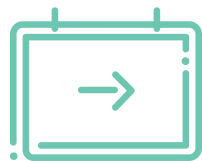
Figure 1 above summarizes the size and geography of participating school districts. States represented by the study are Alaska, Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Illinois, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

The State of Professional Development

Over the last **5** years:

The majority of professional development falls short of the ESSA definition.

Based upon a systematic review of the alignment between the terms used in the definition and the characteristics of the professional development enrollments examined, the Institute’s research suggests that the clear majority of professional development over the last five years falls short of the ESSA definition of professional development. Analyses of alignment with each criterion are presented below. Although each criterion is presented independently, professional learning offerings should be aligned with all the terms in concert — not just a subset — to meet with the definition. Subsequent reports will provide deeper analysis and address next steps.



Sustained

Sustained professional development can be understood as the regular engagement with or learning about a particular subject for a meaningful period. Learning Forward clarifies that professional development that is sustained lasts more than the term of one day or a short, self-contained workshop.¹⁰ The 2009 definition of professional learning from the group specifies that professional learning “occurs several times per week” and is part of “a continuous cycle of improvement.”¹¹ Available data were analyzed for the number of learning activities offered as one-time, short-term events and educator preferences for short- versus long-term activities as demonstrated by enrollments.

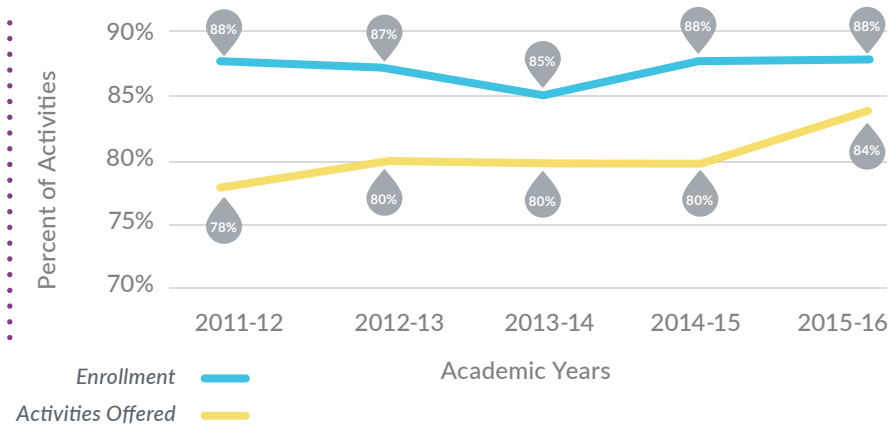
¹⁰ Ensure Great Teaching for Every Child. (Apr. 2009). Learning Forward, NSDC Policy Points, 1(2). Retrieved from <https://learningforward.org/docs/pdf/policypoints4-09.pdf?sfvrsn=0>

¹¹ Hirsh, S. (2015, December). New bill offers a good start on defining PD. Learning Forward Blog. Retrieved from <https://learningforward.org/publications/blog/learning-forward-blog/2015/12/18/new-bill-offers-a-good-start-on-defining-pd#.VwZrLRMrJhE>

87% of professional development activity enrollments were not sustained.

80% of activities offered over the past five years have been offered as one-time activities and these activities accounted for 87% of all corresponding enrollments. Only 20% of enrolled activities met more than one time and only 13% of the activities teachers enrolled in were made up of more than three meetings. The finding also indicates that the percentage of teaching professionals that chose to participate in short, rather than ongoing, events has remained nearly stable. Further, the percentage of one-time activities offered has been slowly increasing over the five-year period – perhaps to meet with demand, or perhaps driving the changing demand (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2:
Incidence of One-Time Professional Development





Intensive

Intensive professional development can be understood as a thorough engagement with a specific issue, concept or program. While the intensity of content is challenging to measure, the proxy of time may be used to assess whether intensity might be achieved. A 2007 study indicated that professional development that shows a positive effect on student achievement averages 49 hours focused on the same content or skill and that 14 or fewer hours on a focused topic does not yield any significant effects on student outcomes.¹² To assess intensity, researchers at the Institute examined the total length of time dedicated to individual professional learning activities.



The average professional learning activity was not intensive; in fact, it was only one third as long as the minimum that may be required to affect teaching or learning improvements. The average length of time teaching professionals spent in individual professional development activities was 4.5 hours. The average total amount of time spent in all professional development each year was 41 hours – but the activities appeared to be fractured into distinct content and programs that didn’t allow for intensity in any one issue, concept or program based upon their format, standards alignment or title (see Figure 3 below).¹³ Figure 4 below outlines the average number of hours that individuals spent in PD aligned to each of the InTASC standards. The range of between 5.18 and 7.74 hours further supports the finding that these activities are not focused on the same content, and therefore not intensive.

¹² Yoon, K. S., 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>

¹³ Data based on hours awarded by the provider or school system. It does not include credits awarded. (Activities awarded hours represent 95% of all activities.)

Figure 3:
Average Length of Enrolled Activities and Average Number of Hours Employees Participate in PD per Year

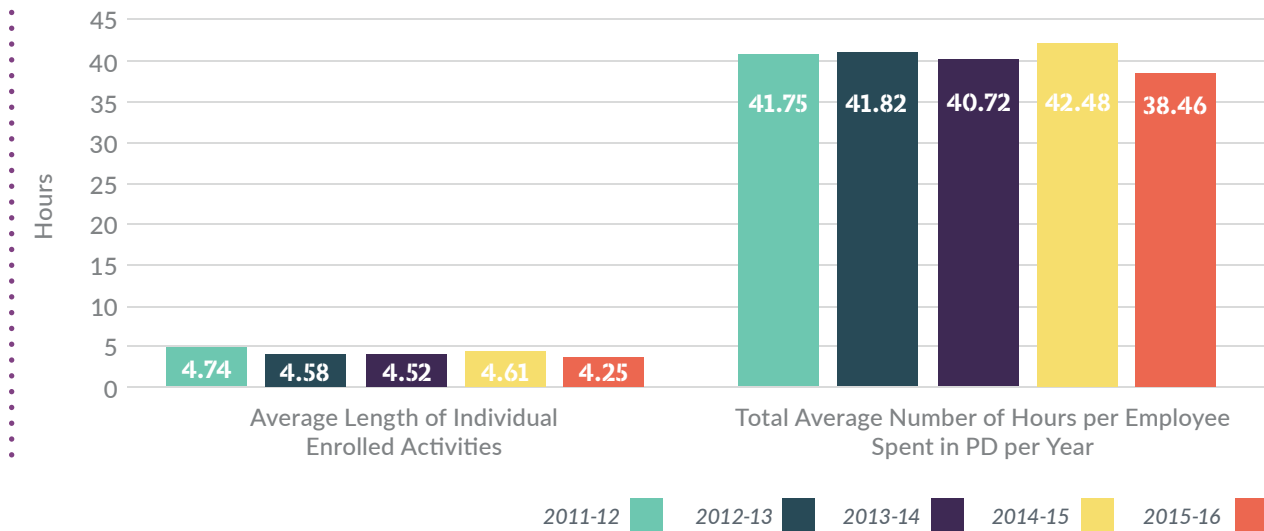
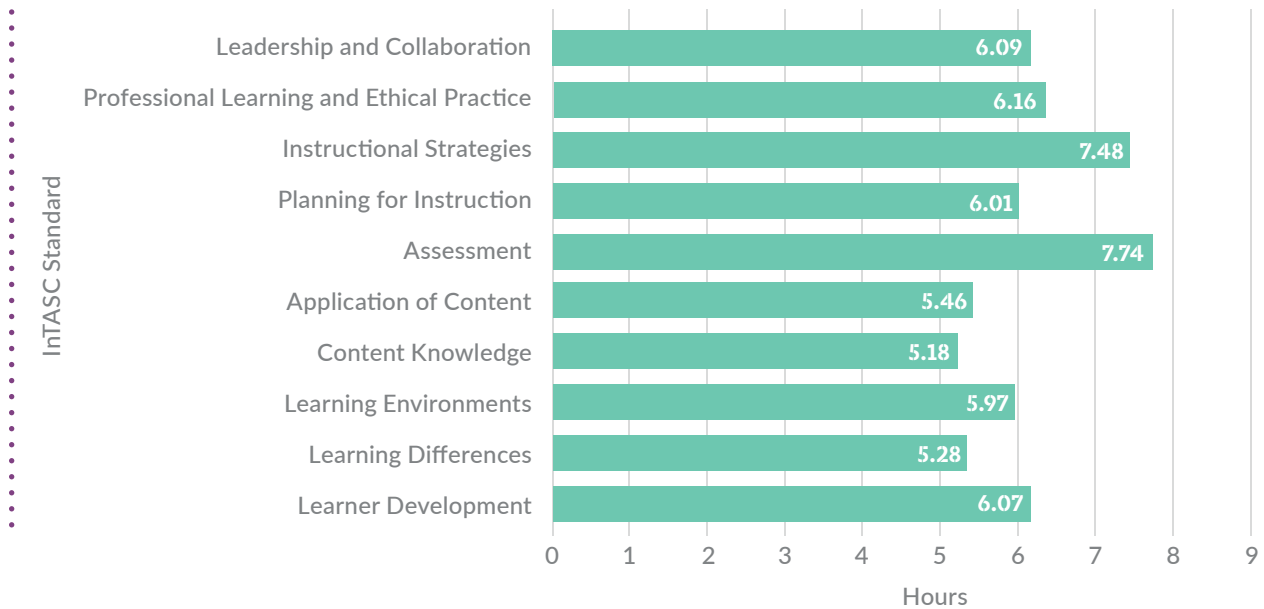


Figure 4:
Average Activity Hours per Year by InTASC Standard¹⁴



¹⁴ Includes only activities that are aligned to a standard



Collaborative

Collaborative professional development can be understood as learning that is co-constructed by two or more educators. The value of co-construction is that each participant contributes his or her own experience and thinking in a way that can lead to synergistic insight. A 2016 report from the Learning Policy Institute defined collaborative learning in which “teachers... together grapple with issues related to new content and instructional practices” as a key practice in high-quality professional development.¹⁵

“Although Learning will occasionally happen in workshops and courses, most of it will occur as teachers plan lessons together, examine their students’ work and plan improvements based on various data.”

To understand whether professional development activities were collaborative, researchers at the Institute examined the extent to which offerings were offered as workshops, which were more likely to be single events, versus on-going activities that provided opportunity for colleagues to engage with one another. According to Dennis Sparks, former Executive Director of the National Council for Staff Development (now known as Learning Forward): “Although Learning will occasionally happen in workshops and courses, most of it will occur as teachers plan lessons together, examine their students’ work and plan improvements based on various data.”¹⁶ Workshops may include collaborative components however, they do not consistently meet the definition of collaborative as provided above.

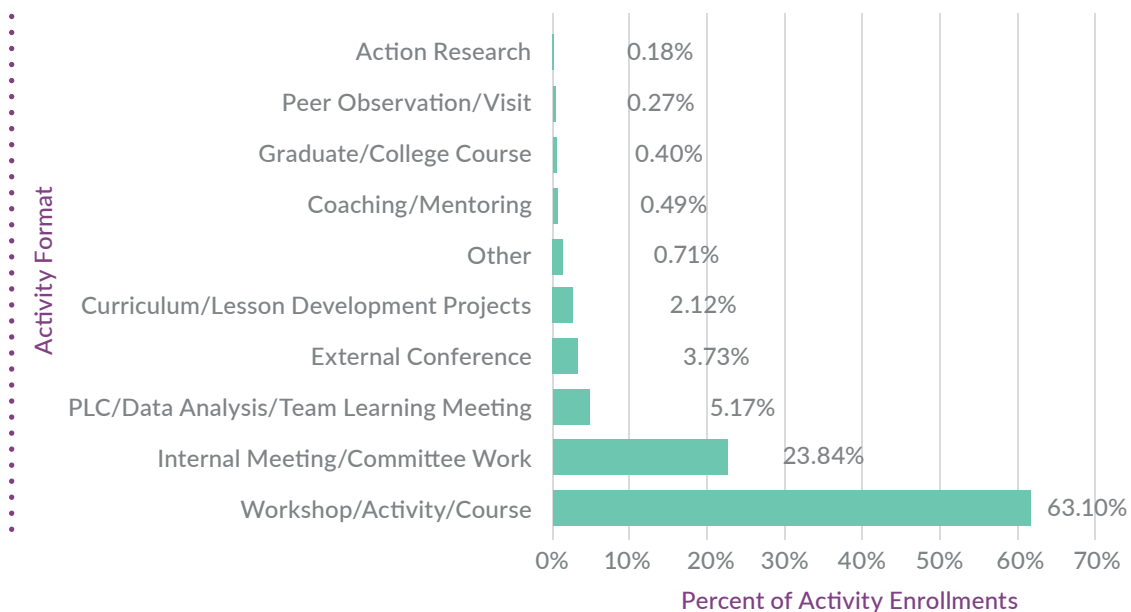
15 Darling-Hammond, L., Bae, S., Cook-Harvey, C.M., Lam, L., Mercer, C., Podolsky, A. & Leisy Stosich, E. (2016). Pathways to New Accountability Through the Every Student Succeeds Act. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Pathways_New-Accountability_Through_Every_Student_Succeeds_Act_04202016.pdf

16 Sparks, D. (1998 April). Teacher expertise linked to student learning. Results, 2.

9% of activity enrollments were in formats that inherently include collaborative learning designs.

Formats that lend themselves to collaboration, such as on-going professional learning communities, require multiple meetings over an extended period. Only about 8% of activities offered and 9% of activity enrollments were in a format considered collaborative in nature¹⁷ (see Figure 5 below). Activity formats considered collaborative include professional learning communities, data analysis, team learning meetings, curriculum or lesson development projects, coaching, mentoring or peer observations or visits.

Figure 5:
Percent of Activity Enrollments by Activity Format



¹⁷ Collaborative activity formats are defined as PLC/Data Analysis/Team Learning Meeting, Curriculum / Lesson Development Projects, Peer Observations and Coaching Mentoring



Job-Embedded

Job-embedded professional development can be understood as learning that takes place as an integrated part of day-to-day professional practice. It has been further defined as “teacher learning that is ... designed to enhance teachers’ content-specific instructional practices with the intent of improving student learning... consisting of teachers assessing and finding solutions for authentic and immediate problems of practice as part of a cycle of continuous improvement.”¹⁸

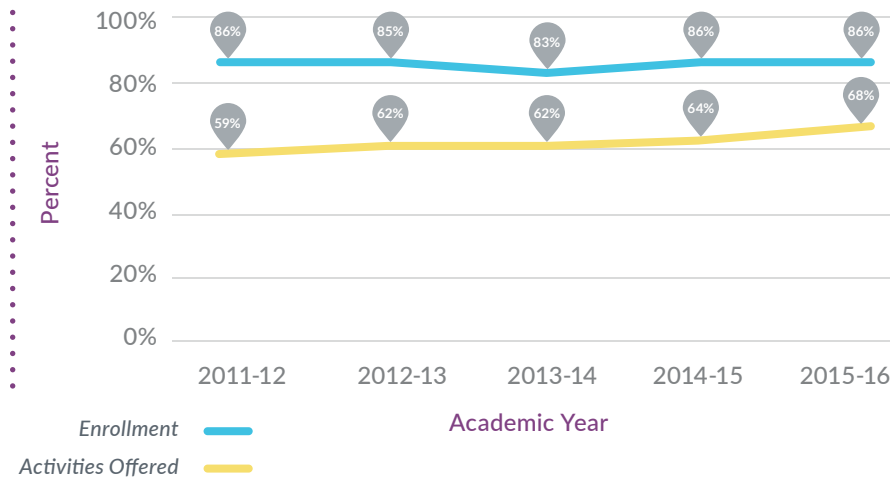
Job-embedded professional development can be understood as learning that takes place as an integrated part of day-to-day professional practice.

To understand whether professional development activities were job-embedded, researchers at the Institute examined the extent to which offerings were provided by third parties. Third parties are defined as any provider of professional development that is not the participant’s own school system. For example, a third-party provided (or external) activity may be one offered by a regional service center, a teacher development center, an online provider or a conference host.

¹⁸ Croft, A., Coggshall, J. G., Dolan, M., Powers, E and Killion, J. (2010). Job-Embedded Professional Development: What It Is, Who Is Responsible, and How to Get It Done Well (Issue Brief), p. 5. Washington, DC. National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality. Retrieved from <https://learningforward.org/docs/pdf/jobembeddedpdbrief.pdf>

37% of all activities were offered by third parties rather than by the participant's school system. External conferences (77%) and university-provided courses (85%) are the professional development formats most often offered by third parties. Five-year trends consistently show the percentage of enrollments in in-house activities being higher than the percentage of activities offered in-house, indicating that teaching professionals are often choosing to participate in activities offered by their own school system over those provided by others (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6:
Activities Offered and Enrollments within the School System



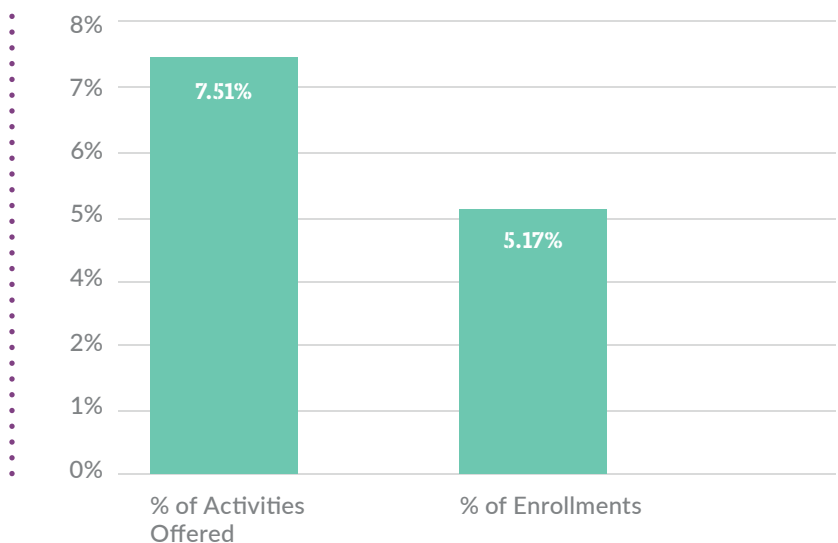


Data-Driven

Data-driven professional development can be understood as that which is based upon information about the needs of the participating teachers and their students, as well as larger trending needs of most or all teachers or students, such as training on new learning standards. It further relies upon efficacy evidence to match responsive practice with available data.¹⁹

8% of activities met criteria for data-driven. Researchers at the Institute analyzed activity formats and found that 92% of offerings and 95% of activity enrollments were aligned to an activity format other than professional learning communities, data analysis and team learning meetings (See Figure 7 below). This, coupled with the finding that less than 5% of activities include a focus on data or assessment, suggests that PD has not been based upon and responsive to real time information about the needs of the participants and their students.

Figure 7:
Alignment to data-driven PD Activity Formats



¹⁹ Learning Forward Data Standard for Professional Development: <https://learningforward.org/standards/data>

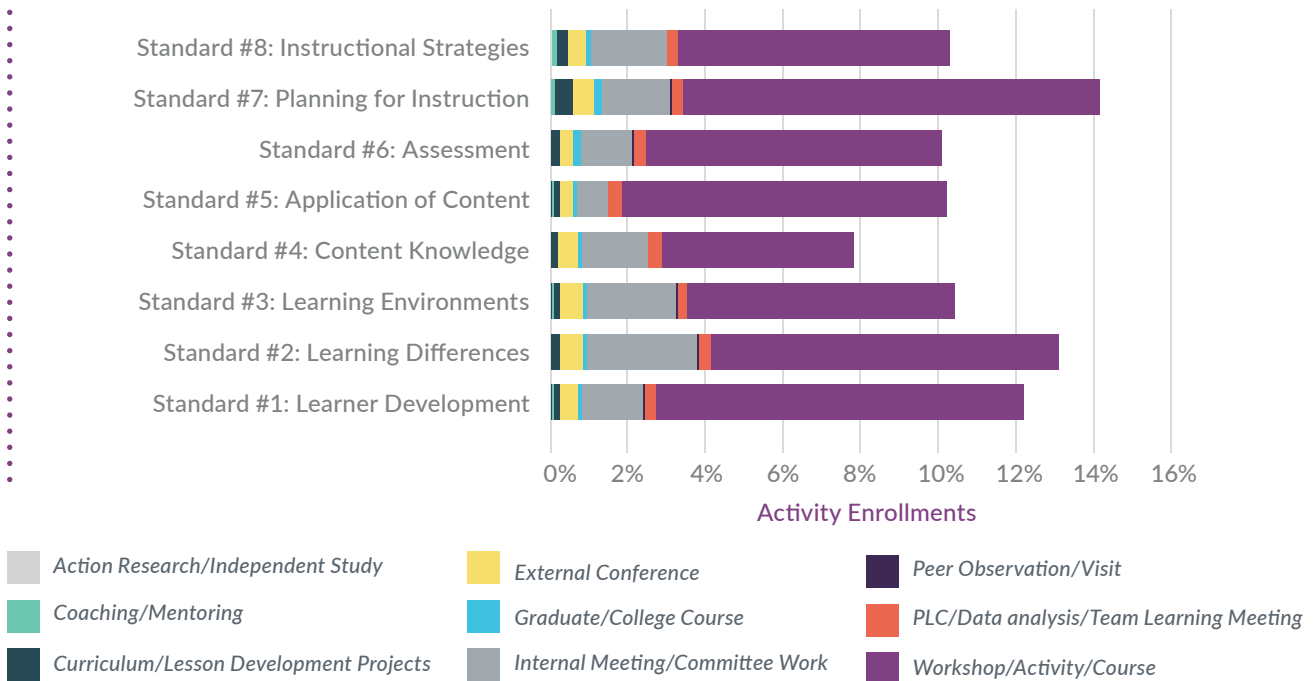
Classroom-Focused

Rather than being theoretical or aspirational in nature, classroom-focused professional learning supports immediate work required to succeed in the classroom. The first eight InTASC standards, which emphasize the learner and learning, content and instructional practice, serve as the key indicators of classroom-focused professional learning.



85% of activities were aligned with at least one classroom-focused InTASC standard. Most activities failed to align with two or more standards. However, the standards have been carefully constructed to address discrete aspects of the professional work of teaching. Thus, this alignment rate is considered strong. Of the Standards, Planning for Instruction saw the greatest number of activity enrollments. (see Figure 8 below).

Figure 8:
Activity Enrollments by InTASC Standard Alignment



Implications and Next Steps

State and school system leaders have a unique opportunity to rethink their professional development programs and use data to gain actionable insights into their progress.

While some potential bright spots should be noted, the clear majority of professional development offerings and enrollments over the past five years do not meet the minimum threshold of the ESSA definition of professional development. While it is clear, for example, that school districts have worked to align their professional development efforts with standards for teaching, there is clearly much work to be done. Further, for most of the metrics explored, the examination of professional development experiences offered, enrolled in and tracked have been moving further away from more effective professional development.

These findings present state and school system leaders with a unique opportunity to rethink their professional development programs and use data to gain actionable insights into their progress. This report provides a high-level summary of more intensive forthcoming analysis. Each of the three additional installments will more deeply explore two of the six characteristics of professional development, with an emphasis on exploring examples of aligned, efficacious programs that are helping teachers — and students — to improve. In addition, each new report will offer actionable strategies that state, district and school leaders can use to establish and track clear metrics for future professional learning efforts as a means to ensure professional learning for teachers improves over time.

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* offers a unique and critical opportunity to transform teacher professional development in the United States into a world class continuing education system for professional teachers. It's up to individual leaders across all systems to take up the mantle of high-quality professional learning and use data to make transformational improvements.

Over time, tracking alignment with the definition will help identify gaps and establish pathways for improvement.

Readers of this report can start now. *Bridging the Gap* advances actionable definitions of each criterion in the new federal definition of high-quality professional development – something district and school leaders can begin to employ as a benchmark for the professional learning offered to teachers and leaders right now. Over time, tracking alignment with the definition will help identify gaps and establish pathways for improvement. Each of the reports that follow will provide key examples and specific strategies for responding to those gaps and mapping a meaningful pathway.

Key Terms

Teaching professionals

Educators who are users of the Frontline professional learning management solution whose jobs are classified by their employers as instructional with no administrative access. This typically includes classroom teachers as well as other professionals such as librarians, counselors. Generally, it does not include administrators, paraprofessionals or non-instructional support staff.

Activity

An activity is any professional learning experience offered to a teaching professional. Activities that constitute professional development are determined by the school systems and may have varying formats or structures; for example, they may be scheduled or ad-hoc, face-to-face or online, one-time or ongoing, job-embedded, individual study, meetings or group work.

Offered activities

Professional learning opportunities available to teaching professionals to choose from. Activities are considered any opportunity provided by school systems (or provided by an outside organization and tracked by the school system) and may include compliance-based professional development (for example, child abuse identification) as well as professional development focused on teacher practice or content.

Enrolled activities

Professional learning activities in which educators engage. The term also includes count of individual enrollments in an activity. One activity most often has multiple enrollments, referring to the multiple individuals that participate in the activity.

Evidence

Information about an instructional strategy, intervention, or teaching program derived from means such as observation or experience in a non-standardized setting.

Research

Information about an instructional strategy, intervention or teaching program derived from experimental or quasi-experimental testing.

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