

Bridging the Gap



PART 3

Collaborative & Job-embedded

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About the Institute



The Frontline Research & Learning Institute generates data-driven research, resources and observations to support and advance the education community. The Institute's research is powered by Frontline Education's data and analytic capabilities in partnership with over 9,500 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*.

Introduction

The third in a four-part series exploring the new federal definition of professional development, this report offers insights gleaned from data gathered from a representative sample of 203 school districts over five years across the United States. These data demonstrate the current state of professional learning and opportunities to make quality improvements on dimensions of collaboration and job-embeddedness. The first report, *Bridging the Gap: Paving the Pathway from Current Practice to Exemplary Professional Learning*, established specific definitions of each of six criteria for quality set forth in the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, including sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven and classroom-focused. Findings from the initial report made clear that professional learning needs tremendous improvement to be effective. This report will build upon the first and second, adding clarity and practical steps toward improving the extent to which professional learning effectively serves the learning needs of educators and their students.

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Although this series of reports breaks apart each of the six quality criteria and addresses them independently, professional learning should incorporate all six criteria to be most valuable and effective. With each report in the series, considerations for quality professional learning will grow more complex as more criteria are laid on to the rubric of efficacy. Nonetheless, small steps and attention to discrete criteria are an important pathway toward improvement and leaders need not be overly concerned about making progress on all dimensions at once. Over time, working to connect all six indicators for improving professional learning will help to further improve both coherence and quality.

How Collaborative and Job-Embedded Related to Other Quality Indicators

The second report in this series delved deeply into the practical work of making professional learning more sustained and intensive. These indicators are fundamentally about the number of learning touch points and the duration of touch points required for educators to master concepts and skillsets. The report concluded that two dimensions should guide improvements in the domains of sustained and intensive:

- *What do stakeholders agree is the minimum number of times and the minimum amount of time required to build mastery of a concept or skillset?*
- *How should the number of times and amount of time required be moderated based upon the nature of the concept or skillset (e.g. the complexity of the material, the novelty of the material, etc.)?*

By considering these two dimensions, the work of eliminating activities that fail to meet the minimum threshold becomes far simpler. Rather than emphasizing only the content of professional learning, decision-makers must also consider whether the content can be mastered in the time allotted. If not, the conversation must shift to grapple with whether the content is a priority in terms of its alignment with educator needs and whether a smaller subset of the content should be carved out so educators may truly master it before continuing.

The nature of collaborative and job-embedded indicators parallels sustained and intensive in that they must also be evaluated in accordance with these three dimensions:

- *How must professional learning be organized so educators can work together through the learning process (collaborative)?*
- *How can professional learning be integrated meaningfully into the daily work of educators so it is immediately relevant (job-embedded)?*
- *How does the content of the work influence the parameters for collaboration and job-embeddedness?*

The extent to which professional learning is collaborative and job-embedded should also be considered in terms of the unique learning environments in which educators are operating:

How do the availability of learning partners and the environment in which the educators are working inform the meaning of collaboration and job-embeddedness?

The next two sections explore these three questions as they relate to collaborative professional learning, and then as they relate to job-embedded professional learning.

Figure 1:

Definitions of Key Professional Learning Terms



Sustained \sə-'stænd\ adjective;
taking place over an extended period;
longer than one day or a one-time workshop.

KEY METRIC:
Activity enrollments consisting of more than three meetings

finding:
13%



Intensive \in-'ten(t)-siv\ adjective;
focused on a discreet concept,
practice or program.

KEY METRIC:
Average length of PD activities (in hours)

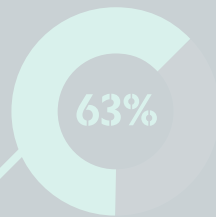
finding: **4.5 hours**



Job-embedded \-'jəb, im-'be-dəd\ adjective;
a part of the on-going, regular work of instruction and related to teaching and learning taking place in real time in the teaching and learning environment.

KEY METRIC:
Activities offered within the school system

finding:



Collaborative \kə-'lə-bə-,rätiv\ adjective;
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.

KEY METRIC:
Enrollment in an activity with a collaborative format

finding: **9%**



Data-driven \-'dei.tə,driv.'n\ adjective;
based upon and responsive to real time information about the needs of participants and their students.

KEY METRIC:
Activities offered aligned to a data-driven format

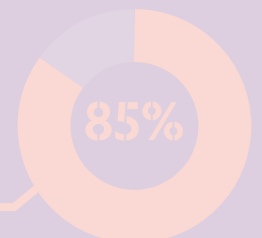
finding:
8%



Classroom-focused: \-'klas,room, 'fookəst\ adjective;
related to the practices taking place during the teaching process and relevant to instructional process.

KEY METRIC:
Activities aligned with classroom-focused InTASC standards.

finding:





Harrison Central School District: An Exemplar

The diversity
of school
needs requires
targeted
support
from district
leadership
as well as
empowering
principals and
school leaders.

Located just outside New York City in Westchester County, New York, Harrison Central School District is a suburban system of six schools educating approximately 3,600 students. The district is geographically large compared to neighboring districts resulting in four distinctive communities differentiated, among other factors, by socioeconomics. The four neighborhood elementary schools range from very low need to upwards of 30% of students receiving free and reduced lunch. The diversity of school needs requires targeted support from district leadership as well as empowering principals and school leaders. Michael Greenfield, the district's Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, recognized the need for strong training to support leadership at all levels and partnered with his leadership team to design a professional learning program to support the effort.



Collaborative

Among the six quality professional learning indicators in the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, collaborative is perhaps the most recognizable. Unfortunately, it also suffers from such popularity that it is among the more over-used and misunderstood terms in common parlance. The definition of collaborative can vary tremendously depending upon where and how it is used. This series of reports proposes a specific definition that elevates both the fundamental role of collaboration and the specific aim of collaborating for the purpose of learning. Collaboration in the context of professional learning is about people working together to achieve a shared understanding of a concept or to develop the same skillset. Readers are encouraged to explore specific definitions that best meet their contexts and district or school needs. All readers should make the definition meaningful by “operationalizing” it – or clarifying what is meant by people, working together, and shared understanding. Table 1 on the following page provides some guiding questions for consideration as well as example answers. Note that the order of the three parts is reversed because the desired outcome (shared understanding) should be the target to which everything else aligns.

Collaboration in the context of professional learning is about people working together to achieve a shared understanding of a concept or to develop the same skillset.

Table 1:

Questions and examples to guide clarification of collaborative professional learning.

	Key Questions	Example
Shared Understanding	<p>What is the learning objective?</p> <p>What will participants know and be able to do as a result of the learning?</p> <p>How does this translate to practice in the learning environment?</p> <p>How does it relate to other professional competencies that educators have or are building?</p> <p>How will we know if professional learning improves student learning?</p>	<p>All participants will...</p> <p>... understand conceptually the instructional shifts required by college and career-ready standards</p> <p>... be able to observe and provide feedback on the effectiveness of instructional shifts</p> <p>... be able to execute the instructional shifts in practice and reflect on strengths and weaknesses</p> <p>... be able to identify baseline metrics and measure changes in student learning outcomes</p>
Working Together	<p>What kind of learning process leads to the learning outcome?</p> <p>How should people engage with one another to advance the learning process?</p> <p>What struggles might be required to advance understanding?</p> <p>How will feedback loops and other communication cycles inform learning?</p> <p>How will the group identify shared blind spots and address them?</p>	<p>... read and learn together from an expert about instructional shifts away from current practice</p> <p>... experience instructional shifts together as observers and as teachers</p> <p>... practice identifying strengths and weaknesses together</p> <p>... practice delivering to others and using feedback on practice</p> <p>... together, evaluate and continuously improve instruction aligned with shifts</p>
People	<p>Who are the participants that need to learn (are the appropriately matched together or divided by prior knowledge)?</p> <p>What background knowledge, skills and experience is required to advance learning?</p> <p>What relational dynamics will facilitate working together?</p> <p>Who is able to participate and when?</p>	<p>... include outside content and procedural experts</p> <p>... include teachers by subject area and three-grade band (e.g. K-2, 3-5, etc.)</p> <p>... include instructional coaches and leaders</p> <p>... include on-going engagement among all participants</p> <p>... include online and in-person meetings</p> <p>... include reading and coursework conducted independently and discussed during meetings</p>

The preceding table provides questions that can be applied to all types of professional learning. The example is related to mastery of the instructional shifts related to implementation of college and career-ready standards. Recall from Part 2 or this report series that sustained and intensive professional learning requires a careful winnowing of learning priorities. The example here demonstrates that effective collaboration can look differently depending upon what is required of learners. Operationalizing collaboration may mean establishing two or three specific definitions aligned to each learning priority during each school year.

Learning Reciprocity

Collaborative learning is also characterized by reciprocity. All participants in the learning process should be sharing responsibility for both teaching and learning from one another. Which role is played by whom might be influenced by prior knowledge, stage in the learning process, or position — among other considerations. The key to achieving reciprocity is to establish clarity about what each role entails and working norms that enable every participant to shift back and forth between the roles of learner and educator during the learning process. Norms are especially important when participants include individuals at different levels within a hierarchical organizational structure who may inadvertently resort to the norms of their positions instead of the roles they should be playing in the collaborative learning setting. Professional learning groups might be established for discrete learning outcomes (e.g. to establish shared understanding of early elementary literacy instruction aligned to college and career-ready standards) or they might be established for all professional learning objectives throughout a school year. Either way, norms and roles will help facilitate each participant's ability to learn and contribute by establishing clear, shared responsibilities.



Harrison Central School District: Redefining Community through Schools

Like many peer school districts, Harrison Central began with a professional learning program that relied heavily upon external experts to provide training to teachers. Consultants provided programming that met with broad criteria, but weren't necessarily matched to individual teacher needs. Over time, the approach proved insufficient to meet teachers' needs. Teachers worked together with school and district leaders to reimagine professional learning as a process that matched the careful crafting and differentiation teachers were already providing to students. By partnering with the teaching force through the leadership of the union, the entire community has built a robust program — as well as a commitment to continuous improvement. Today, hallmarks of the program include:

- *Teachers serve as learning facilitators for each other, making the process reciprocal and on-going*
- *Almost all professional learning is provided by staff in the schools and district, which helps connect the content directly with relevant needs*
- *All educators have at least 20 hours of professional learning time per year, which can be dedicated to grade-level or departmental learning*
- *The majority of teachers participate in the district's extensive in-service program throughout the year including the summer months*
- *The school district also observes four superintendent conference days*
- *Educators participate in a minimum of six hours of professional time each month for teacher-designed or selected learning such as professional learning community or co-observation time*

Informal Learning Strategies

Leaders may also foster collaborative professional learning in more informal ways, or through shared learning activities that deviate from traditional afterschool or day-long workshops. The first report in this series evaluated whether professional learning was collaborative by investigating the incidence of learning formats that do and do not facilitate collaboration. Figure 2 below summarizes activity format by those offered and enrolled in on average over the last five years. Recall that enrollments versus offerings demonstrates the popularity of formats among participants regardless of what is offered.

Figure 2:
Learning Format by Offering and Enrollment
(Average from July 2011 - June 2016)

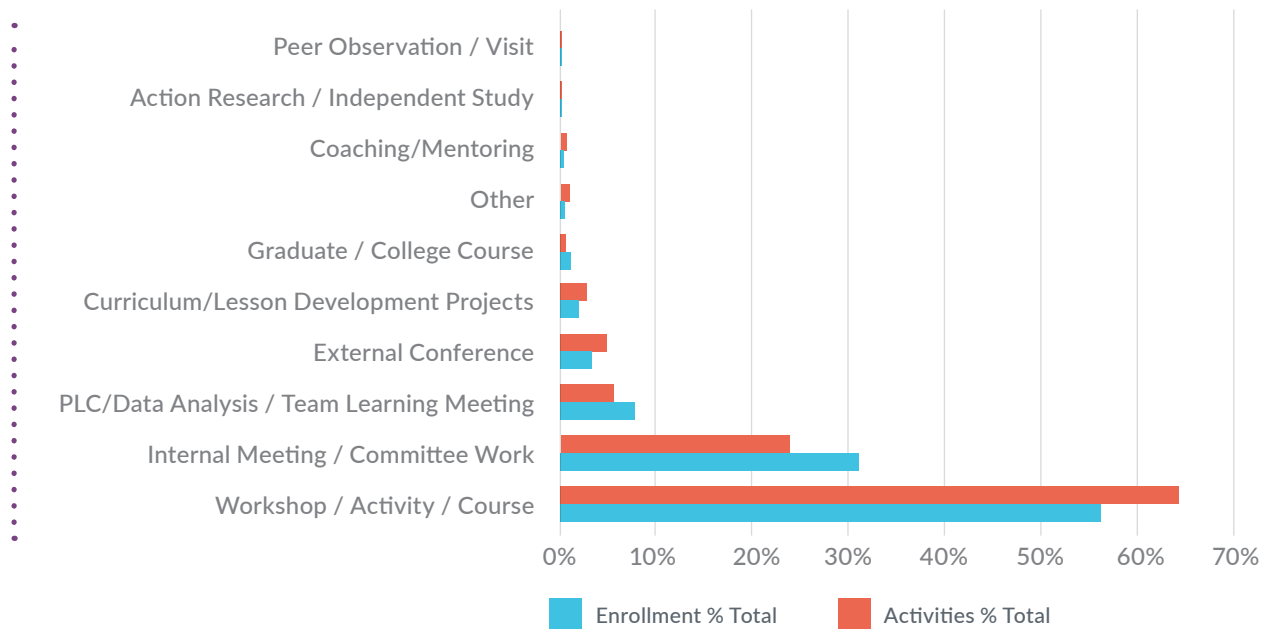


Figure 2 demonstrates a resounding preference for workshop format activities among participants. Workshops are rarely sustained or intensive, and they are also rarely collaborative or job-embedded. Some may argue that well-designed workshops encourage people to work together. The problem is, collaboration is not simply a matter of working

together. Rather, collaboration is about achieving a shared understanding through authentic engagement with others. While the means (working together) is important, it is the end (shared understanding) that should drive high-quality collaboration. This distinction can help decision-makers achieve better professional learning by taking a critical look at what is currently offered and considering ways to ensure it leads to shared understanding. Table 2 below provides a few examples of ways that traditional formats could be modified to become collaborative.

Table 2: Ways to make traditional professional learning activities more authentically collaborative.

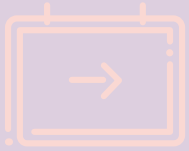
Activity	Typical Challenges	Example Improvements
Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expert-to-novice instruction Short duration Decontextualized content Single product or skill outcome Not personalized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expert-educator reciprocity Meetings together, shared between-meeting work Professional learning priority Multiple competency-based outcomes Group-led objective setting and learning
Internal Meeting or Committee Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work conducted independently Focused on logistics or implementation Problem-solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work together to pose and respond to problems of practice Emphasize individualized competency development toward a shared practice Rotate teaching-learning opportunities
Graduate Coursework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taken independently Removed from instructional context Emphasize content knowledge Based on availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include colleagues or create a shared learning group Select coursework or instructor based upon identified competency need; request instructor reciprocal engagement on competency development Focus on sharing relevant content with colleagues Enroll when needed or as part of a shared knowledge-gathering process

Achieving collaborative professional learning will require a commitment by decision-makers to clarify what collaboration means in connection with learning priorities for the school, district and individual educator. Leaders are encouraged to think as broadly as possible about creating learning communities that can effectively work together to achieve shared understanding. Sometimes these communities must be built within schools. Many times, they may be built among schools or even among educators all over the world. Technologies can facilitate access to experts on specialized subject areas, time for educators to work together asynchronously and opportunities for educators to connect with others elsewhere in the world who share disciplinary teaching responsibilities or expertise. These types of connections can facilitate collaboration for one learning priority, but also establish the framework for group-driven learning throughout participants' careers.

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Figure 3:

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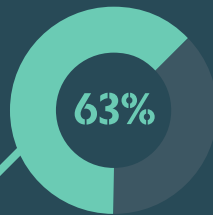
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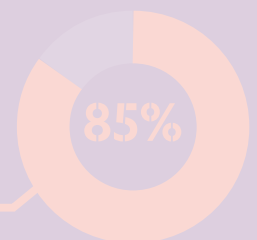
finding:
8%



Classroom-focused: \-'klas,room, 'fəʊkəst\ adjective;
related to the practices taking place during the teaching process and relevant to instructional process.

KEY METRIC:
Activities aligned with classroom-focused InTASC standards.

finding:





Job-embedded

Like collaborative, job-embedded professional learning often suffers from uncertainty about what it really means. This series defines job-embedded learning as a part of the *on-going*, regular *work of instruction* and related to teaching and learning taking place in *real time* in the teaching and learning environment. Professional learning is not job-embedded simply because it takes place during work time or in the learning environment. Rather, it is job-embedded if it is related to a specific educator learning outcome, is purposeful and is directly connected with the practices of teaching and learning

that educators are engaged in during their current work. In some cases, professional learning may be job-embedded if it meets these criteria but it takes place outside of a school day or at a site away from a school. However, it must always be firmly yoked to work educators are currently doing and be practically implemented into instruction or instructional support right away. Table 3 provides an example of rubric categories by which to evaluate job-embeddedness of professional learning activities.

Table 3: Sample rubric categories for evaluating job-embeddedness.¹

Activity	Regular and on-going	Related to current instruction	Applicable to current teaching or coaching	Integrated into teaching and learning environment	Overall job-embeddedness
Lesson-study	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Independent action research	No	Yes	Maybe	Maybe	Moderate
Classroom management workshop	No	Maybe	Yes	No	Low/Moderate
Graduate class on school law	Yes	No	No	No	Low

¹ For a more comprehensive set of examples and non-examples, see *Job-Embedded Professional Development: What It Is, Who Is Responsible, and How to Get It Done Well* (April, 2010), <https://learningforward.org/docs/pdf/jobembeddedpdbrief.pdf>.



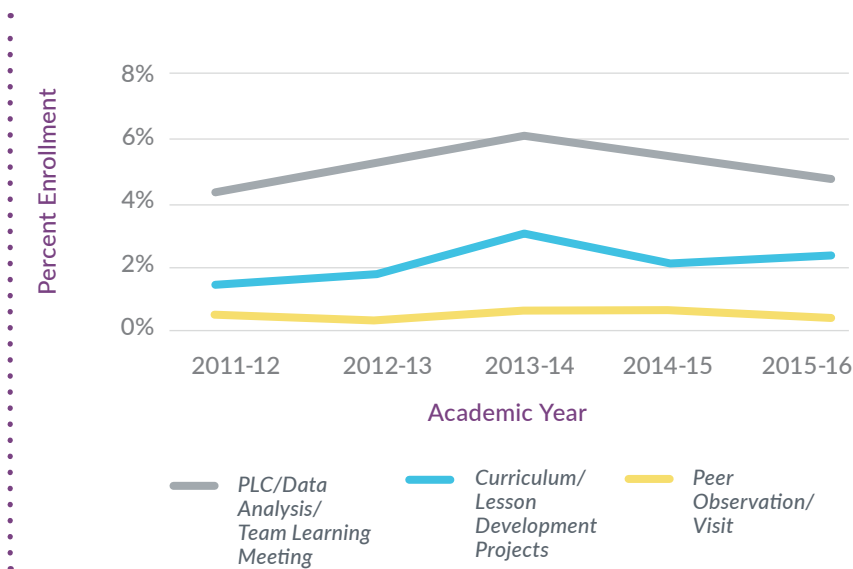
Harrison Central School District: Study Groups

Study groups — which use an action research framework to identify, investigate, and address challenges — have been a core model for professional learning in Harrison Central Schools. Educators elevate and engage in study groups based upon their own identified needs and challenges. When a teacher would like to initiate a study group, she or he proposes the issue for examination to peers and administrative leaders who evaluate whether a study group is appropriate. If so, the teacher must collaborate with peer educators to design an inquiry-based approach. Typical study groups begin in the summer months and continue throughout the year with about 15 hours of investigation and discussion. The process, although sometimes arduous, has been identified by teachers as the most effective form of professional learning they experience. In addition to study groups, educators and leaders work together to develop curriculum that is coherent within and across grade-levels. The approach offers deep collaboration opportunities — and also exposes educators to peers with whom they may not otherwise have much opportunity to work. The process lays a foundation for building teams that bring challenges to one another to grapple with and address.

Content and Organization

As Table 3 above demonstrates, whether activities are job-embedded depends upon how they are organized and what they address. While some formats lend themselves more naturally to providing job-embedded learning, considering these formats as the only approach to job embedded learning is limiting. Learning Forward identifies the following as job-embedded formats: action research, portfolios, coaching or mentoring, lesson study, case discussions, data teams, study groups and critical friends groups. However, the research from the *Bridging the Gap* study, described in Figure 4 below, has shown that participation in these types of activities has not increased significantly over the previous five years.

Figure 4:
Activity Enrollments by Year for Job-Embedded Activity Formats



Activity enrollments from SY11-12 through SY15-16 show *low frequency of enrollment* in activities commonly designed to be job-embedded.

Related to Educators' Daily Work

Job-embedded professional learning activities such as the above examples are not becoming more prevalent. To address that reality, decision-makers should be evaluating activities' degree of job-embeddedness not based on the broad type of activity, but on the ways the activity meets specific criteria of job-embedded. Although researchers and practitioners have highlighted the importance of activities taking place with students, relating to current students, or in the school, these indicators themselves are insufficient for an activity to be characterized as job-embedded. While the likelihood of job-embeddedness increases with proximity to the classroom, activities such as asynchronous discussion groups that share and grapple with problems of practice throughout an instructional cycle can be both job-embedded and highly valuable to instructional improvement.

Decision-makers should be evaluating activities' degree of job-embeddedness not based on the broad type of activity, but on the **ways the activity meets specific criteria of job-embedded.**

Bridging the Gap Part 1 evaluated whether professional learning activities offered across sample districts were job-embedded based upon whether they were offered by the school or district. This metric, while imperfect, relies on the premise that professional learning cannot be job-embedded if it's designed and delivered by providers outside the school environment. (To further clarify the distinction, this report emphasizes the entity offering the activities rather than the physical location of the activities.) Findings indicate that most professional learning — about 63% — is currently offered by schools or districts. Educators are enrolling in these activities at an average rate of about 86%, which suggests they prefer these options. Professional learning decision

makers, however, are cautioned to consider two points when evaluating whether their professional learning activities are truly job-embedded: (1) proximity to the learning environment is only part of the story; activities may be proximate but still not immediately relevant to everyday practice and (2) degree of job-embeddedness may vary depending upon the extent to which learning activities meet each part of the definition. If learning activities meet some but not all of the sample categories from Table 3 above, for example, they can and should be improved over time.

Modify Expectations for Common Formats

Among the activities that did not classify as school or district-offered, the most popular formats were graduate-level courses and conferences. There is nothing inherently bad about these types of activities; they offer a fundamentally different value proposition than school or district-provided professional learning. Whereas coursework and conference attendance may strengthen background knowledge, expand awareness of new research and practice and facilitate valuable professional connections, they are typically disconnected from daily practice. Although these qualities are independently valuable, school and district leaders wishing to make professional learning more job-embedded can consider ways to modify coursework and conference experiences to make them more related to and immediately relevant to instructional practice. For example, coursework may be better connected to daily practice by adding regular reflection work between teacher and coach during the period of

Whereas coursework and conference attendance may strengthen background knowledge, expand awareness of new research and practice, and facilitate valuable professional connections, **they are typically disconnected from daily practice.**

the course that connects problems of practice with lessons learned in the class. Conference attendance may be preceded with a concerted effort to identify practical questions that can be explored in formal and informal ways by selecting and attending specific sessions, connecting with experts, etc. While neither of these make the activities job-embedded per se, both shifts can improve utility and ensure that teacher time and resources are well-spent.



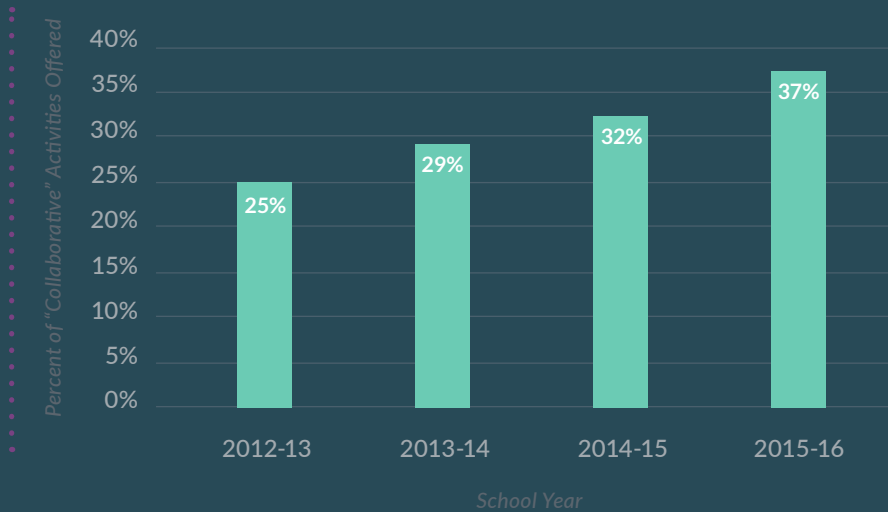
Harrison Central School District: Measuring and Sustaining Success

Shifting the professional learning framework has been an on-going reflective process for Harrison Central Schools. Over the last four years, professional learning has become increasingly collaborative and job-embedded. Figure 5 on the following page summarizes the advancement in average activities offered that are collaborative according to the definition used by *Bridging the Gap*.



Table 5:

Percent of activities offered to teachers in Harrison County that are considered “collaborative” in accordance with the ESSA-aligned definition.




Nevertheless, progress is on-going. Leaders in the district have spent the last half year reviewing and evaluating all offerings to understand which professional learning is working and what needs improved, overhauled, or eliminated. So far, educators have expressed a strong sense of pride and satisfaction with the evaluation process and have demonstrated commitment to continuing to make improvements. Going forward, the coalition of teachers and leaders will work together to gather data on efficacy, evaluate how much learning is influencing teaching and work toward a design in which the system is *able to serve the challenge of ensuring every educator receives the support needed to be effective.*



Connecting Collaborative and Job-embedded with Sustained and Intensive

Part 2 of this series highlighted a practical process for arriving at meaningful definitions of sustained and intensive professional learning. The report concluded with a basic framework for establishing key planks in the bridge between current practice and meaningful, effective professional learning by measuring baseline practice, setting goals and measuring progress. The same key steps apply to transforming professional learning into a more collaborative, job-embedded experience for educators. First and foremost, stakeholders must agree on a meaningful definition of these terms. The definitions of each ought not deviate significantly from what is supported by research, but they need not match this report's definitions precisely either. Definitions should be meaningful to everyone they affect – and also measurable. Establishing clear metrics, which may also vary from those provided in this report series, helps understand current practice and set challenging but achievable goals for improvement. Whereas professional learning, on average, is not collaborative in nature, much of it is job-embedded according to *Bridging the Gap* metrics. If leaders set their own metrics and realize similar findings, they may elect to focus attention on improving collaboration before turning attention to job-embeddedness.



After setting clear goals, decision-makers must identify strategies for improvement. This report offers sample tools, such as ideas for improving collaboration in Table 2 and categories for a job-embeddedness rubric in Table 3.² School and district leaders as well as teams of teacher leaders can develop additional tools to support and measure improvement over time. As professional learning improves, leaders may find that core challenges to achieving high quality shift and present new issues to tackle. By establishing role responsibilities for measuring and evaluating improvements over time, key decision-makers can ensure that what begins as a long-term goal for improving professional learning transforms into a continuously improving cycle of evaluating and boosting quality of professional learning. Ultimately, linking teacher and leader learning to student outcomes will help realize the exciting potential to maximize the quality of professional learning so that it is not only more relevant and enjoyable to educators but also directly benefits students.

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² For additional tools and support for improving professional learning, see https://www.frontlineeducation.com/Frontline_Research_Learning_Institute/Home.html.

Learn More

For more insights into K-12 education, visit

FrontlineInstitute.com

About the Institute

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