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Professional Development
At a Crossroads

To influence policy, the field must be able to articulate both what it is and how it can help teachers improve student achievement.

BY STEPHEN SAWCHUK

Perhaps no other aspect of the teacher-quality system in the United States suffers from an identity crisis as severe as that of professional development.

Few in the education field discount the eminently logical idea that teachers should be supported in the continuous improvement of their craft. But as a term for describing ongoing training investments in the teaching force, “professional development” has become both ubiquitous and all but meaningless.

Though frequently invoked by lawmakers and consultants, most recently in states’ applications for the federal Race to the Top competition, professional development plans generally incorporate little context about who will provide the training and for what purpose. That this situation endures, despite a focus during the past decade on data analysis and research to improve instruction, is both a testament to the complexity of the professional-development enterprise, and its greatest problem: Mediocre, scattershot training, apart from doing little to help students, is a burden for teachers.

“At some point, you are in this meeting and feel you’ve been there two million times before, and it starts to grate,” said Jess Rhoades Bonilla, an 11th grade English teacher in New York City. “It can be a teacher-morale issue as well as not a good use of time.”

New developments in education policy portend a crossroads of sorts for the field of professional development. For one, the idea of “teacher effectiveness” is now front and center on the state and national policy agenda. In theory, the idea dovetails with the goal of professional development: to ensure that teachers have opportunities to improve their craft and are given tools with which to do so, and that school systems have a way of determining whether students learn more as a result.

Yet advocates acknowledge that professional development risks marginalization in the teacher-effectiveness conversation unless it is able to articulate clearly its place in producing better teachers.

“The hard truth is that, until recently, the field of professional development has been underdeveloped and immature,” said M. Hayes Mizell, a distinguished senior fellow at Learning Forward, a nonprofit group and membership organization that works to improve the quality of ongoing training. “It has tolerated a lot of sloppy thinking, practice, and results. It has not been willing to ‘call out’ ineffective practice and ineffective policy. ... It has not devoted attention to outcomes.”

In this special report, Education Week takes a detailed look at some of the critical issues faced by those charged with upgrading the quality of post-preparation teacher training.

Among other topics, this package of stories attempts to offer new insights into some of the fundamental questions about such training’s research base, its cost and its implementation in districts, and the changing marketplace for professional-development providers. The report also aims to launch conversations about changes in the field, including advancement in the...
curriculum of professional development and a new focus on serving an increasingly diverse student population.

**CHANGING LANDSCAPE**

Teacher-quality policy has evolved dramatically since 1996, when Education Week last examined professional development in a special report. At that time, teacher quality was still largely defined by teachers' characteristics, such as the selectivity of teacher education program attended, credentials held, educational attainment, and state licensing status. But as analyses of longitudinal data linking teachers to student test scores have become common, researchers have discovered that such individual characteristics are by themselves only weakly predictive of student academic success.

In the past two years, policymaking has moved toward linking student outcomes to teacher performance. But as teacher tenure, hiring, seniority, and dismissal policies increasingly come under that microscope, comparatively little attention has been paid to ways to boost the effectiveness of the majority of educators who will remain in classrooms across the country.

From a policy standpoint, that could be partly because of the vast number of initiatives that purportedly invest in enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills. “We’ve recognized professional development as important, but we don’t have very clear standards for what we’re looking for and we don’t have much accountability for what teachers engage in,” said Jennifer King Rice, a professor of education policy at the University of Maryland, College Park. “It opens the floodgates for just about anything to be called professional development.”

Practices that fall under the broad heading conceivably include everything from teacher induction and contractually set in-service days to content coaching, recertification credits, and participation in professional associations and networks.

**OBSTACLES ABOUND**

In addition, scholars point to problems with how the training is selected and provided. “Every time the superintendent goes to a conference, the teachers get worried, because they know he’s going to come back with something he wants to try,” said Thomas R. Guskey, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Kentucky, in Lexington. “We should start where students’ weaknesses and shortcomings are and then seek strategies or techniques to help [teachers] understand those shortcomings.”

A popular model for doing that is the “professional learning community,” or PLC, in which school-level

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M. HAYES MIZELL
Distinguished Senior Fellow, Learning Forward
By Stephen Sawchuk

A no-proof-Positive for Training Approaches

Anecdotes about districts’ success stories with particular professional-development brands, services, and approaches are common in today’s marketplace. But is there proof that any of them actually work?

For the most part, the answer is no, according to scholars who have studied the link between postlicensure teacher training and student academic achievement. Reasons for that dearth of evidence include a general lack of rigor in education research, as well as specific obstacles that make studying professional development’s impact on student achievement a challenge.

Few studies of professional development employ scientifically rigorous methodologies. Their research literature on the training, scholars say, is largely qualitative or descriptive, and therefore not capable of answering nuanced cause-and-effect questions. At the same time, there are many problems with those programs and studies that do purport to tackle the student-achievement question. “First, the intervention itself should be workable, and some are not supported by theory or scientific action,” said Kwang S. Yoon, an analyst at the Washington-based American Institutes of Research who studies in-service training. “And the third piece is the intervention research itself. It may be weak in design.”

Supporters of the same way,” she said.

For a 2007 study, the U.S. Department of Education, Mr. Yoon and colleagues pulled more than 1,300 potentially relevant research studies of professional development conducted between 1986 and 2006. Only 132 specifically focused on K-12 in-service training and evaluating teaching.”

As such debates wind on, a variety of for-profit and nonprofit providers, both local and national, continue to populate a lucrative marketplace for professional development, and they are beginning to respond to the call to move training closer to schools. Federal data suggest that a steady increase in teacher hiring during the past decade may have been caused by the phenomenon of the instructional-coaching model for professional development. And federal data also document an increase in the number of teachers who report participating in a mentoring program.

What all the spending on personnel, programming, and teacher release time actually buys remains hard to determine, because districts typically amalgamate federal, state, and local dollars for those purposes—and do little to track their impact on teacher and student learning.

Despite all the challenges in the field, there are signs of rejuvenation, too. Providers of all sorts are creating new programming to respond to new needs, such as helping general teachers work with special populations of students.

On the cutting edge is a way of thinking about professional development that focuses not just on content but also on the minute-by-minute ways teachers make pedagogical decisions in classrooms.

And finally, there are teachers in every building and every school who are dedicated to constant improvement. They include teachers like Corey R. Sell, an 11-year veteran of the field who for years has grabbed bits and pieces of everything from academic journals to in-service workshops that he felt would make him a better teacher.

Now all that remains is figuring out how to get all teachers to share that degree of professional commitment. That is not an easy task, says the 5th grade teacher in Arlington, Va., who has advocated for their classroom doors and new ones come into a culture that’s not always committed to ongoing learning.

“If I could find a way to get my own school to be innovative, to disrupt itself,” Mr. Sell said, “I’d do it in a moment.”

Freelance writer Bess Keller contributed to this story.

Three of the Nine Studies, which examined summer institutes or workshops between five and 14 hours in length, showed no effect on student achievement. The studies that looked at teachers trained between 30 and 100 hours were correlated with positive student-achievement gains.

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Some scholars worry that the pendulum has already swung too far toward site-based development, without proper attention to how the training is structured and led.

“For a long time, most professional development was guided or directed by a central office or a regional office, and those efforts lacked the contextual relevance that was really necessary,” said Thomas R. Guskey, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Kentucky. “Now, we’ve swung the other way and said we have to be completely site-based. ... Solutions can’t always come from inside, and oftentimes the findings from research can be particularly instructive, but teachers need guidance and direction on what can be done to bring it to bear in their classrooms.”

Russell M. Gersten, a professor emeritus of education at the University of Oregon, seconds the idea that researchers need to do more to investigate features that seem to yield the most effective site-based training. He and colleagues crafted and tested their own approach for building 1st grade teachers’ capacity to teach reading comprehension and vocabulary, through facilitated study groups that met to discuss empirical reading research and create aligned lesson plans and instruction.

A randomized study of the approach conducted by Mr. Gersten and his team found that teachers aligned their practices with the research, producing modest but statistically significant progress on measures of oral-vocabulary development. Released this year, the study compared teachers in 19 schools receiving federal Reading First funding in three states.

Gains didn’t show up in other areas, but Mr. Gersten said his team is working on a larger-scale study with more statistical “power” to see if the results can be replicated.

A link to the studies is provided at edweek.org/links.

JESS RHoades Bonilla

High School of Telecommunications Arts and Technology
New York City
Age: 30
Years of teaching: 8

Jess Rhoades Bonilla recalls that professional development in her first year or two of teaching seemed useful. But that changed as another half dozen passed.

“After two or three years, I can’t say I enjoyed the PD that was given,” said Ms. Bonilla, who teaches at the High School of Telecommunications Arts and Technology in New York City. “It started to seem repetitive.”

She hadn’t lost her taste for learning. In those years, the 30-year-old Princeton University graduate earned a master’s degree in American studies and started work on an administrator’s license. She taught different grades and levels.

It wasn’t, as teachers often complain, that the central office was dictating content or making her trek across town for a silly workshop. Most of the professional development was homegrown.

Sometimes, she said, she learned a lot from her colleagues, importing techniques or materials to her own classroom almost right away. On other occasions, the sessions just weren’t what she needed—in the language of pedagogy, the instruction was “undifferentiated.”

“Plus, bringing teachers together from across the school was easy to overdo.”

If I ruled the world, I’d make more time for English and history teachers to collaborate together,” Ms. Bonilla wrote in an e-mail.

This past summer, she got her wish for intensive and subject-specialized professional development.

One of a select group of teachers from across the city, she spent five, eight-hour days in a creative-writing workshop led by a novelist-in-residence at the New York Public Library. “It was definitely the best professional development I’ve ever had,” she said. “So much of what I learned this summer I hope to re-create for my students.”

Meanwhile, Ms. Bonilla has hopes for the “inquiry groups” that will fill the two, 35-minute periods that her school devotes to professional development each week. Her group of three teachers shares students, its members teach English, history, and art, respectively. The trio is going to zero in on some aspect of better helping the students who are struggling readers.

Teachers were able to chose their own teams and topics. That, Ms. Bonilla said, was a good place to start.

—BEss KelLeR
District Strives for ‘Learning System’

The goal for administrators and teachers is to convert typically scattershot teacher training into a coherent, cohesive endeavor.

BY STEPHEN SAWCHUK
Lexington, Mass.

reo cookies, a veggie platter, and a lot of caffeinated beverages make up the afternoon reinforcements for the educators gathered in the basement of a converted school here in this leafy Boston suburb.

Over the course of the meeting on this fall day, the 18-member professional-development committee for the Lexington school system will cover a wide swath of topics about the ongoing training—everything from practical concerns about teacher enrollment in a district-sponsored course to philosophical ones about how to improve teachers’ ability to modify instruction based on analyses of student work.

Formed in spring 2009 by the district, in partnership with the local teachers’ union, the work group has a specific mission: to ensure that the pieces of the district’s continuing teacher training are congruent, of high quality, relevant to what teachers are doing in their classrooms, and widely accessible.

In the words of Superintendent Paul B. Ash, the Lexington district is trying to become a “learning system”—one that fosters teacher learning beyond the individual school level.

As it does so, the district is grappling with some of the challenges inherent in upgrading typically scattershot training into a seamless endeavor. Building teacher capacity to advance learning, after all, means moving from an individual exercise to a collective one. It relies on skilled teams in each school working effectively, as well as the provision of additional support when necessary for teachers, and for the teams, to overcome roadblocks.

And that is exactly what this committee has set out to do.

Since coming to Lexington in 2005, Mr. Ash has made the provision of professional development the hallmark of his leadership in this 6,300-student district. Training is now provided in a variety of formats.

Educators in each school are expected to engage in the central component—a minimum of one planning period a week devoted to grade-level or content teams, known at some schools as professional learning communities, or PLCs. Elementary teachers have some additional time on Thursdays, while other teachers and principals supplement the meetings by using contractual after-school Monday meeting time and additional prep periods for the collaborative work.

The idea is for the teams to devise common benchmarks for student learning, discuss how students perform against those benchmarks, and intervene and reteach as needed.

At Jonas Clarke Middle School, for instance, the three members of the 8th grade U.S. history content team used their collaboration time to craft a unit on the 2008 presidential election, after realizing that many students didn’t understand the distinction between a Republican and the political concept of “republicanism.”

This year, the team is working on ways to upgrade the history curriculum to include more primary sources, historical accounts, and materials beyond the scope of the textbook.

Ramille Romulus, a team member, said one of his group’s goals is to gradually raise expectations for students. As he puts it, “After a couple of years of getting things done, it’s time to move on to something higher.”

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

As simple as that concept of a school-based, inquiry-driven approach is in theory, it has not come to Lexington without some bumps in the road. For one, the culture of teacher autonomy at work in the United States is perhaps even stronger in a district that’s relatively wealthy and homogeneous than in one with myriad challenges.

“Because we are so high-performing, it’s difficult to excite people to thinking that they can do even better,” said Carol A. Pilarski, the assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional development.

Administrators and even teachers here like to refer to the
teaching corps as composed of “thoroughbreds”—confident, trained practitioners who excel in their content areas but also happen to be a bit stubborn.

Mr. Ash began the transition to collaborative work by requiring, starting in the 2005-06 school year, that teams at each school engage in a yearlong “action research” project. Teachers initially resisted, partly out of anxiety about meetings in which elementary and middle schools would share results from those research projects.

“We went through a big implementation dip, and I went through a tremendous backlash,” Mr. Ash said. “The union was upset; it felt teachers were overburdened, that there wasn’t enough training. ... But I knew that we weren’t going to change the culture until enough people had experienced the collaboration and saw that it was better.”

Now, five years later, educators are involved in more-frequent cycles in which they look at student work and devise strategies for improving their teaching. Principals and teachers here say they are starting to notice changes in teacher behavior and student outcomes as a result of the teamwork.

Whitney Hagins, the chairwoman of the science department at Lexington High School, says she can’t imagine teaching without her PLC. “It’s really opened teachers’ eyes to things that weren’t working,” she said. Her colleague Marie Murphy, the foreign-languages chairwoman, says that a once-static curriculum is now “alive and it’s always being challenged,” making it richer.

And Jeff Leonard jokes that he can hear the changes. The department chairman for performing arts, Mr. Leonard says the band’s rehearsal techniques have improved, and final performances now sound more cohesive. The work isn’t always easy. It is still difficult for teachers to talk about those instances when their instruction needs help, which is one of the reasons the most effective teams meet more than once a week in order to establish trust.

“For the formal meetings to be successful, those relationships have to be in place,” said Geetika D. Kaw, the science department chairwoman at Clarke Middle School.

Even then, according to Edward M. Davey, one of the teachers in the history content team at Clarke, a team can run into problems if it devises a test or plans a lesson without having a highly specific goal for what the teachers want to achieve through that activity. A conversation

“...I knew that we weren’t going to change the culture until enough people had experienced the collaboration and saw that it was better.”

PAUL B. ASH
Superintendent, Lexington Public Schools

FROM TOP: Edward M. Davey talks to his 8th grade social studies class about the burning of the British ship Gaspée, a harbinger of the American Revolution. He uses strategies he picked up in his professional learning community.

Mr. Davey, right, works with his PLC colleagues, from left, Kathryn Harper, Ramille Romulus, and David Vincent, to devise the best ways to teach students about reading and understanding historical texts.
Mich. District Adds Accountability Piece To Focus Training

As more professional development shifts from centrally mandated activities for all teachers to training that is more responsive to the contexts and students in each school, what’s the best way to keep it focused and of high quality?

The Carman-Ainsworth district in Flint, Mich., recently faced that dilemma. By working with its teachers’ union, the 4,600-student district has emphasized school-based professional development since 2004. Its bargaining agreement codifies a schedule that includes “late start” Wednesdays, when school is delayed by an hour and a half. Teachers have more than 20 such days a year to engage in working in grade-level or discipline-specific teams during that time.

Following a 2008 district-accreditation cycle, however, district leaders decided to see whether there were ways to improve the training. Teachers were given time to visit other schools and were interviewed in focus groups for their feedback. The information showed that teachers found value in the school teams, but also saw that the team work varied in quality from school to school.

That led to a predicament that Steve Tunnicliff, the district’s assistant superintendent, calls the “tight-loose” problem of school-based training—how much oversight administrators need to provide to school sites without being too prescriptive about their activities.

“It’s the total irony of [professional learning communities] in general—they seem so simple, but the implementation is extremely difficult,” Mr. Tunnicliff said. “When you’ve got these teachers, literally weekly, going off in their different areas, you need to develop some structure to make sure they’re following through with it.”

STRUCTURE ADDED

Last year, Carman-Ainsworth officials launched a system requiring teams to make presentations to other teams in their building. Three times a year, they must present the results of their inquiries in a “data cycle,” the steps they took to respond, and the results in student learning. In addition to those protocols, central-office staff members now participate in some of the Wednesday meetings.

“It kind of was a healthy accountability,” Mr. Tunnicliff said. “A structure for how you’re going to spend that [professional-development] time is pretty important. [The teams] can fall apart because they lose focus about what they’re trying to accomplish.”

Fred A. Burger, the president of the local affiliate of the National Education Association, said the structure has helped teachers articulate goals across related subjects. The biology PLC he belongs to, for instance, meets with the teams on chemistry and physical sciences in the school to make their presentations.

“What we see,” he said, “is that there are common themes we agree on—that every student should be able to write a lab report or apply the scientific method.”

OUTSIDE SUPPORTS

Getting the right system of checks and balances to keep site-based professional development from suffering from such mission drift is highly dependent on building-level leadership.

In Lexington, the principals who have embraced that form of teacher training, like Steven H. Flynn of Clarke Middle School, go out of their way to make sure that the time set aside for teacher teams is spent productively. Mr. Flynn’s schedule is organized so that he can spend 15 minutes apiece with the four teams meeting on a given day—or extra time with the groups that are struggling. And he keeps extensive records about what goals teams set out in every meeting and what they accomplished that day.

In addition to the school content teams, other professional supports abound, including at least one dedicated literacy and math specialist in each school and access to instructional-technology experts.

The most recent addition to the professional-development system was unveiled last spring: a series of free, voluntary after-school courses for teachers. The notion of such classes runs counter to the ideas of some professional-development advocates, who contend that most professional learning should be conducted on site.

But educators here stress that the district’s courses differ from the expansive menu that teachers typically select from to earn continuing education credits. In November of last year, Lexington officials conducted a survey of the district’s teaching corps and designed the courses in response to teachers’ top 10 priorities, which included expanding their repertoire of instructional strategies, analyzing student work, and integrating technology.

Crucially, the courses involve a follow-up coaching element based in schools, another feature teachers favored. A few weeks into a course, enrolled teachers have an opportunity to receive feedback on how well they’re implementing new strategies and techniques.

“Processing the information and coaching teachers on how to use it are vital, or else it sits in a bubble,” said Joanne Hennessy, the chairwoman of the professional-development body, which coordinates the course offerings.

For his part, Superintendent Ash argues that it’s crucial to bring fresh ideas to the educators engaging in professional development. Early in his tenure, he recalled, “one of my union presidents said to me, ‘What happens if [the school teams] can’t figure out what to do next?’ That’s why you have to have a learning school system, because teachers will run out of ideas,” he said. “I really think that the PLC is quite..."
Geetika D. Kaw’s tenure as a teacher in the same district for more than 10 years gives her a clarity of perspective on the waning and waxing of initiatives in Lexington, Mass.

Before the arrival of the current superintendent, Paul B. Ash, in 2005, she’d outlasted a “revolving door” of school leaders—and a corresponding number of professional-development initiatives.

“Some years we had a focus on technology, some years on differentiated instruction,” she said. “There was a level of frustration with what was being provided because we didn’t have much selection in terms of courses.”

Now, though, having a superintendent who has a clear vision about focusing on raising academic standards for students and on classroom strategies for improving instruction has helped give a more cohesive theme to professional development, Ms. Kaw says.

The professional learning community—or content team, as it’s known in her school—is the district’s core professional-development strategy. In her view, it has gone a long way to encourage the development of a common language and assessments for gauging the quality of instruction, while still allowing teachers to seek individual help if they need it.

There’s still room for growth in the system, Ms. Kaw says. For instance, she’d like to attend the 6th and 7th grade science-content-team meetings, in addition to the 8th grade one she now goes to, but the current school schedule doesn’t allow for that.

Still, Ms. Kaw has discovered ways in which she can build on the structure at the school. One of her goals as department chairwoman this year: take over other teachers’ classes on testing days, so that those teachers are free to observe how peers are leading their lessons.

“The key,” she said, “is to let people know I’m available if they need help.”

—STEPHEN SAWChUK

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They were nice people, but a little bit out of touch with what the school system wanted from teachers at that point.”

CONSTANT TWEAKING

It’s largely the work of the professional-development committee to make sure that all the professional-development layers come together. At a late-September meeting, committee members discussed suggestions for how to integrate the courses better with the other teacher supports.

One member suggested supplementing the courses with webinars so that teachers could easily access a refresher. Another teacher suggested there might be a way to encourage all members of a school team to attend a course together and so continue the work at their weekly meetings. A third teacher had a practical concern about group-based rather than one-on-one coaching: Would it require elementary teachers to be away from their own classrooms too often?

Debate of that nature may seem academic, but the leaders here stress that systems of support for teachers cannot afford to be static. They must undergo constant supervision and tweaking to meet teachers’ needs.

Still more challenges are on the horizon, because the shift has required Lexington teachers to take greater ownership of student success. That’s starting to raise delicate questions about teacher performance. In the words of Gary Simon, who chairs the high school math department, the team work has given birth to the idea that if students are underperforming, “it’s not that my students didn’t do well, it’s that I didn’t do well.”

But there is no question that the conversations will continue. Ongoing training is no longer a one-time event. At least as good, the in-person workshops seemed different. “The people teaching the workshops I went to were crisper, the content was more relevant to my classroom, and I came back with resources, such as a CD, that helped me use the content,” Ms. Kennedy said. “I did feel like, ‘Oh my gosh, I don’t know what I’m doing.’”

Ms. Kennedy recalled, “but a little bit out of touch with what the school system wanted from teachers at that point.”

In her first three years of teaching, Ann Walker Kennedy saw both lows and highs of teacher professional development. But by the end of her third year in the Baltimore schools, the highs were beginning to predominate.

If a teacher were to segue into teaching from a career in advocacy and casework for people with disabilities, Ms. Kennedy started work as a special education teacher after five weeks of intensive training and a short stint in a summer school classroom.

A last-minute change of assignment put her in charge of her own classroom of 2nd graders with disabilities at Harford Heights Elementary School, and she had never taught reading on her own. “I did feel like, ‘Oh my gosh, I don’t know what I’m doing.’”

Ms. Kennedy, who since this past summer has been teaching at a special education school run for the district by the Kennedy Krieger Institute, has given birth to the idea that if students are underperforming, “They were nice people.”

Ms. Kennedy recalled, “but a little bit out of touch with what the school system wanted from teachers at that point.”

By her third year—also Chief Executive Officer Andrés Alonso’s third year leading the district—Ms. Kennedy had noticed marked improvements in professional development. For one, the district was making use of online professional-development schedules and learning modules. The latter meant that some required learning and testing for teachers—such as mastery of the use of a new report card—could be completed anytime, anywhere online.

At least as good, the in-person workshops seemed different. “The people teaching the workshops I went to were crisper, the content was more relevant to my classroom, and I came back with resources, such as a CD, that helped me use the content,” Ms. Kennedy said.

At the same time, Harford Heights Elementary, which had not been meeting federal and state standards, got money for collaborative planning some afternoons and Saturdays for grade-level teams of teachers.

“If it’s Thursday, I’d know what’s going on in Ms. Nelson’s room, and I could check with her at the end of the day to see how it went,” Ms. Kennedy said, explaining that the common planning magnified the teachers’ ability to learn from one another’s experience.

“Being with my peers and getting information and being able to synthesize it with minds I know: If I could combine those things,” she mulled, “that would be the best PD.”

—BESS KELLER
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Providers Eye New Opportunities

BY BESS KELLER

People on the lookout for business opportunities have not often seen the glint of gold in helping teachers improve their craft. But the glint is brightening.

A potent combination of new federal money, a consensus around the importance of teacher effectiveness, and digital innovations has supercharged professional-development providers. Veterans are being joined as never before by new or expanded businesses.

In the late 1990s, venture capitalists and fund managers examined the education industry, with some even glancing in the direction of teacher professional development. But enthusiasm among advance-guard investors waned as businesses that managed K-12 schools struggled and as computerized lessons failed to narrow achievement gaps. The disappointments underscored that most of precollegiate education remains labor-intensive and change-averse—conditions that don’t promise much growth potential.

Still, engineers and entrepreneurs continued to pull digital wonders from their hats, and to a degree, the school market responded with demand. Then came the No Child Left Behind Act, meting out consequences to schools and districts that failed to raise student achievement.

With some 5,000 schools identified as wanting, the Obama administration has allocated nearly $17 billion for fixes. The NCLB law also requires that districts in trouble with its accountability provisions use 10 percent of their federal anti-poverty Title I money for professional development. On top of that, two federal programs that spotlight teachers, the Teacher Incentive Fund and the Race to the Top program, raised the ante on teacher effectiveness by billions more.

PROFITS POSSIBLE?

As a result, the lure is there, but are the profits? Responding to the recession, some school districts have been keeping more of their professional development in-house, an approach that helps save jobs by creating positions for coaches and professional developers. Plus, many districts are used to getting their professional development locally or regionally, often from former employees, universities, and smaller outfits whose people they know.

Rough estimates made three years ago by officials at the industry giant Pearson showed that about half of professional development then was provided internally or by regional education service agencies, a quarter by nonprofits such as universities, 15 percent by individuals from outside the district, and just 10 percent by for-profit organizations.

“So much of the PD market is local,” observed Stephanie Hirsh, the executive director of Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council), the membership organization for educators concerned with professional development. “It’s about hiring the [retired] principal or teacher who had expertise in the area.”

A SAMPLE OF PROFESSIONAL-DEVELOPMENT SUPPLIERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Examples of services offered</th>
<th>Headquarters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>ASCD (formerly Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development)</td>
<td>conferences, publications, “tools kits” such as Educating the Whole Child</td>
<td>Alexandria, Va.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Forward (formerly National Staff Development Council)</td>
<td>publications, conferences, 5-week e-learning programs</td>
<td>Dallas</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Council of Teachers of Mathematics</td>
<td>e-seminars and workshops, conferences, Reflection Guides</td>
<td>Reston, Va.</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Education Association</td>
<td>publications, Web learning</td>
<td>Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NATIONALLY ACTIVE CONSULTANTS</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Caulkins</td>
<td>elementary-level reading and writing instruction for teachers</td>
<td>New York City</td>
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<td>Richard DuFour</td>
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<td>Ruby K. Payne</td>
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<td>Grant Wiggins</td>
<td>curriculum-reform workshops and materials</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>FOR-PROFIT COMPANIES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Houghton Mifflin Harcourt</td>
<td>training for California K-6 English teachers using company reading materials in partnership with Pivot Learning Partners</td>
<td>Boston</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge Delivery Systems</td>
<td>online professional development</td>
<td>New York City</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laureate Education</td>
<td>Canter Courses, including Assertive Discipline</td>
<td>Baltimore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership and Learning Center</td>
<td>publications, courses, customized professional development</td>
<td>Denver</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pearson</td>
<td>Pearson Learning Teams, Assessment Training Institute, online teacher collaboration and courses</td>
<td>Saddle River, N.J.</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Improvement Network</td>
<td>Video Journal of Education, PD 360, TeachStream</td>
<td>Midvale, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachscape</td>
<td>online professional-development support and dialogue, classroom walk-throughs with mobile devices</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution Tree</td>
<td>publications, customized professional-development consulting, conferences, Marzano Institute partnership</td>
<td>Bloomington, Ind.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PRIVATE, NONPROFIT, RESEARCH &amp; DEVELOPMENT COMPANIES</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AED (Academy for Educational Development)</td>
<td>after-school science-program training</td>
<td>Washington</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eduventura</td>
<td>in-person and online professional development, development of teacher leaders</td>
<td>Charleston, W.Va., Nashville, Tenn.</td>
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<tr>
<td>McREL (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning)</td>
<td>Scaffolding Early Literacy program</td>
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<tr>
<td>WestEd</td>
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<td>San Francisco</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PUBLIC, NONPROFIT COMPANIES</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Broadcasting Service</td>
<td>PBS TeacherLine</td>
<td>Arlington, Va.</td>
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</table>
Jim McVety, a Bucks County, Pa.-based consultant to K-12 businesses, points out that state or district rules often make teachers put in “seat time” to get credits toward recertification or pay increases, and that such rules get in the way of online learning—one route to valuable economies of scale.

Schools are also looey about working with for-profit firms, several business executives said. “Unnecessarily phobic,” offered Scott C. Noon, the vice president for marketing of Teachscape, which focuses on high-tech professional development. That’s unfortunate, he continued, because nonprofits “typically don’t have the kinds of capitalization that for-profits do to invest in new technology.”

Whether the sector will offer significant new opportunities or just a tidy living for existing players is hard to say, according to Mr. McVety. At present, he concluded, “I’d retain a healthy degree of skepticism.”

TEXTBOOK GIANTS

Some education industry leaders are betting on opportunity. The big three of U.S. textbook publishing—Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, McGraw-Hill, and Pearson—have all “aggressively pursued” the professional-development market, according to a 2006 report from Simba Information, which tracks publishing and media businesses.

That pursuit has entailed both new partnerships and acquisitions. In a bold move this fall, for instance, Pearson bought the America’s Choice comprehensive-school-improvement program. It will operate alongside Pearson’s K12 Solutions business, the company’s existing effort to capture the market of schools that must make drastic changes under the No Child Left Behind law.

In 2005, Pearson bought the model the company now uses for its Learning Teams operation. Two of the three California researchers who developed the program, in which teachers are grouped for collaboration around meeting student learning needs, came to the company as well. The model is Pearson’s take on the wildly popular “professional learning community” approach to providing professional development and raising student achievement. Learning Teams aims itself at schools that are “in need of improvement” rather than those obligated under the federal law to make wholesale changes.

Beth Wray, the president of Pearson Learning Teams, said that programs for improving teaching and turning around schools were a “perfect complement to Pearson’s capacity in assessment and curriculum.”

Pearson trains district employees in the detailed model and gradually reduces its presence.

That flow can work as a business model, Ms. Wray explained, because currently “we’re only scratching the surface of schools failing to make AYP,” or adequate yearly progress, the bar states set for schools under the NCLB law.

Pearson’s global education sales in 2009 amounted to $8.8 billion, according to Susan Aspey, a company spokeswoman.

Like publishers that had years ago expanded into digital communications, companies that sell Web-based innovations for schools—online learning, for example, or software for staff management—can see a relatively short step into professional development.

Truenorthlogic, a Sandy, Utah-based provider of digital systems for tracking teacher licensing and professional development, formed a partnership this year with New York City-based Knowledge Delivery Systems, which creates online training programs. As a result, Truenorthlogic now offers its clients “anytime, anywhere” video lectures from gurus like Charlotte Danielson, the creator of a nationally known framework for evaluating teaching.

COREY R. SELL

Jamestown Elementary School
Arlington County, Va.
Age: 33
Years of teaching: 10

Like any elementary teacher worth his salt, Corey R. Sell is outgoing by nature—thoughtful, articulate, and inquisitive.

You wouldn’t expect someone with those attributes to have difficulty engaging in dialogues about the craft of teaching. But Mr. Sell, a fifth grade teacher, says his most rewarding professional-development experiences have tended to be those he’s gone in search of on his own.

“Sadly, I really think it’s an individualistic process for me,” said Mr. Sell, who is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in education at George Mason University, in Virginia. “I don’t think it should be that way. But... It’s usually me finding someone else to talk to or seeking out support.”

That pattern developed early in his career. At a former school, Mr. Sell eschewed the glossy, activity-filled publications for teachers, and instead, borrowed copies of journals from his principal that discussed empirical education research and its potential implications for classrooms.

Sometimes, he’s found talented colleagues who have been willing to talk about such developments, but there hasn’t always been a structure in place in his schools to guide conversations about practice.

As for formal in-service training, Mr. Sell, like many other teachers, can recount both good and bad professional development. Over the course of his career, he’s identified two common trouble areas in such training. One is practical—that such programs, while adding tools to his instructional repertoire, don’t focus as much attention on how to deploy them in a classroom.

The other problem is philosophical, in that most such training requires teachers to buy in to a certain model, program, or philosophy, while discouraging modification. “I think it’s a cultural thing about teaching,” Mr. Sell said about that anti-intellectual subtext. “I don’t think we really want teachers to think that much or that critically.”

He is considering a permanent move to higher education.

“I really think it’s the system that’s pushing me out,” said Mr. Sell. “It’s not the workload, it’s not the money; it’s that the system [for teacher learning] really isn’t bottom-up.”

—STEPHEN SAWCHUK

VENTURE CAPITAL

For entrepreneurs jazzed by new learning technologies, the NewSchools Venture Fund has been the place to go. Founded in 1998 by L. John Doerr, a leading Silicon Valley entrepreneur, and others, the nonprofit fund helps new education companies.

So far, most money has gone to charter school networks, but that is starting to change, said Julie Mikuta, the San Francisco-based fund’s partner for human capital.

Still, in early rounds of investing, only one teacher-professional-development company—Teachscape—received substantial money from the philanthropy.

Teachscape, also based in San
In 2007-08, Philadelphia spent a total of $162 million on all professional development.

Cost of Teacher Training

Lost in District Budgets

What constitutes professional development is so vague that school systems have a difficult time figuring out just how much they spend to help improve instruction.

BY STEPHEN SAWCHUK

In 2007-08, Philadelphia spent a total of $162 million on all professional development.

39% Estimated Salary Increments for Coursework

$63.4 MILLION

36% PD Initiatives

$57.9 MILLION

NOTE: Figures predate change in leadership.

SOURCE: Education Resource Strategies

...
Questions Arise On Credentials

They are politically tough to eliminate, but not correlated with teacher effectiveness outside the math and science fields, and generally unaligned with districts’ priorities for professional development. Nevertheless, salary differentials for teachers who earn additional course credits or hold advanced degrees—otherwise known as “lame” increases or the “master’s degree bump”—are among the costliest aspects of teacher development.

“It is so depressing, I have to say,” Paul R. Ash, the superintendent of the 6,300-student Lexington, Mass., school system, said of the cost. “You have to pay teachers what they’re worth, ... but the issue for me is whether that’s the best way to spend money to increase teacher capacity to increase learning. Is it? I don’t think so.”

An analysis released by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, located at the University of Washington, in Bothell, found that states spend millions of dollars paying teachers for earning extra credentials, even in fields like education or leadership that research does not associate with improved student learning.

As professional-development spending comes under the spotlight, a conceptual challenge awaits: Should those costs be considered and budgeted as part of spending on teacher professional development, or be reserved for a larger conversation on teacher pay?

Karen Hawley Miles, the president of Education Resource Strategies, a nonprofit organization that conducts analyses of district spending patterns, argues that such costs should be included in reviews of district spending on professional development, since they represent an investment in teachers’ knowledge and skills. In Philadelphia, her Newton, Mass.-based group found, the increments made up nearly 40 percent of total dollars invested in teacher training in 2007-08, outpacing even the amount spent on teacher coaching and in-service workshops.

Other finance experts aren’t convinced those costs should be budgeted as professional development. Allan R. Odden, a professor of educational leadership and policy analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, points out that private industries often compensate their employees more for earning degrees like M.B.A.s and for advanced certification.

“No private-sector company would consider increased salary for knowledge and skills in their training budget; that would be in their salary budget,” he argued. A more productive goal for districts would be to revamp the entire pay schedule, rather than tinker with just lane increases, Mr. Odden added.

Despite a resurgence of interest in alternative-pay plans, most districts have only gone so far as to offer bonuses on top of the salary schedule. Just a few have ever attempted to put in totally new compensation systems.

That’s the primary reason Mr. Ash, in Massachusetts, hasn’t attempted to tackle the issue.

“It’s hard in every way—it’s intellectually hard, it’s politically hard, it requires an enormous amount of persistence,” he said about changing the tradition of lane salary boosts. “You’re trying to overcome 80 years of history, ... and in the meantime, you’re paying for those courses forever.”

Questions Arise On Credentials

By Stephen Sawchuk

TIMOTHY KNOWLES, a former deputy superintendent of teaching and learning for the Boston school district, recalled a visit to the district by a British school-inspectorate team in 2002.

“It came home to me when Her Majesty’s Inspectorate said to us, ‘You have more time [for teacher learning] built into the fabric of the day than any schools we’ve ever seen anywhere, and you’re not using it,'” he said.

The situation, Mr. Knowles surmised, reflects the cultural norms of teaching in the United States. American education continues to prize teacher autonomy above the collaborative enterprise, in contrast to practices in higher-performing countries.

In fact, the traditional mode of scheduling scatters teachers’ daily preparation at different times from colleagues’ in the same subject or grade level, making it much harder for them to work together to improve practice.

Tom Odden, a professor of educational leadership and policy analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, points out that private industries often compensate their employees more for earning degrees like M.B.A.s and for advanced certification.

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–STEPHEN SAWCHUK
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THE UNION FACTOR

Such changes generally require delicate union-management partnerships. Collective bargaining contracts, for instance, specify whether some of the daily preparation hours teachers are entitled to be appropriated by building administrators for collaborative teacher learning.

Breaking those logjams can be tricky, but the number of districts that have done it shows it is not impossible. Beginning in 2004, administrators and union officials in Flint, Mich., for instance, used the collective bargaining process to institute a different school calendar, resulting in more than 20 late-start Wednesdays freeing up 75 minutes for teacher collaboration. The trade-off: slightly longer school days and a reduction of several half-days formerly spent on district-directed professional development.

Mr. Odden favors a more radical restructuring of school schedules that gives teachers time for collaboration in the regular school day and doesn’t detract from other in-service opportunities.

The 38,000-student Beaverton, Ore., district is now using such a model in several of its eight middle schools.

Cedar Park Middle School, for instance, uses a schedule that adds collaboration time for teachers in the same grade without lengthening the school day or taking away instructional minutes.

Eighth grade-level content teachers have a period that’s used on alternate days for small-group student interventions or for collaborative teacher learning. Their students take electives, like physical education or foreign language, during that time. Then, in the afternoons, the core-content teachers instruct in double-length classes.

The schedule comes with its own trade-off: somewhat larger class sizes.
Content Seen Lacking Specificity

Researchers are trying to identify the most beneficial information to give teachers to help them in their professional growth.

BY BESS KELLER

n the video clip, the middle school teacher stops in mid-step to fix her eyes on two students in the second row who have just exchanged mock jabs. In exactly the same tone that she has just used to tell the class she is passing out papers, the pony-tailed teacher pronounces the word “boys,” and the two combatants straighten up and fade into conformity.

The episode takes about four seconds. The goofing-off is nearly invisible to the untrained eye. But in the course of a few years, the teacher could save precious hours with such acuity.

“You did not lose any instructional time,” her teaching coach wrote approvingly after viewing the video of the lesson. “Good work.”

The program that includes that teacher and her coach, Sharon Deal, who taught for more than 25 years before joining the University of Virginia’s MyTeachingPartner, represents a new wave of teacher professional development. However many other shortcomings have kept professional development from boosting teaching quality, proponents of the approach argue, the lack of specific and concrete content may be the most serious.

What should teachers be learning? One answer stressed in the past decade is the how and why of student assessment. Another favorite topic is lesson planning. There’s general agreement that those skills are important, and yet both research and intuition suggest they are not enough. Nor will a merely broad-brush picture of effective teaching do the job.

For instance, many educators, researchers, and professional-development providers call for a positive climate in the classroom. While identifying such an aim is useful, teachers need to know the patterns of specific behavior, often interactions with students, that build and maintain a positive climate over time, according to Robert C. Pianta, the dean of the education school at U.Va. and the head of the research team behind MyTeachingPartner.

For some 15 years, Mr. Pianta has been delving into the quality of teacher interactions with students and testing those for effects on increased student learning. The MyTeachingPartner professional-development program is one result. It uses the Pianta framework to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses in teachers’ ability to, as one example, engage students.

Interested in those same interactions as a practitioner, Doug Lemov turned for enlightenment to master teachers he knows from his experience as an administrator for Uncommon Schools, a network of charter schools in New Jersey and New York. Mr. Lemov traveled to classrooms with a videographer to capture and classify the specific ways that accomplished teachers engage students, keep them on task, and get them through the rough spots of thinking hard. The result is the book Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College, published this year.

He says he learned that technique is often the missing link in superior teaching. “The thing that gets in the way of implementing strategies is technique,” Mr. Lemov said. “When our principals want to make our teachers better, they spend a lot of time working on technique.”

FOUNDATION INTEREST

Cheap and easy-to-use video technology is responsible for some of the burgeoning interest in teaching methods writ small, but video is not the only possible tool for either the research or the professional-development side of this work. Deborah Loewenberg Ball, one of the pioneers of looking in close
When I asked about differentiation or scaffolding for students who didn’t come to the table with ‘average’ grade-level background knowledge, everyone looked at me like a crazy person.”

**LAURIE HAHN GANsER**

Lanier High School  
Austin, Texas  
Age: 28  
Years of teaching: 4

Laurie Hahn Ganser, an English teacher for 9th and 10th graders, recalls a teacher-training session that was a disaster.

The teacher works in a school where 600 of the 1,470 students are English-language learners. She remembers that the leaders of that professional-development session had no experience working with reluctant learners or ELLs.

“When I asked about differentiation or scaffolding for students who didn’t come to the table with ‘average’ grade-level background knowledge, everyone looked at me like a crazy person,” she wrote in an e-mail. She said it was frustrating not to receive any suggestions for working with high-needs students.

Ms. Ganser has had a positive experience, however, with Quality Teaching for English-Learners, or QTEL, a professional-development program created by WestEd. She has attended two weeklong sessions with the program and been part of a leadership team for the three school years it has been implemented at Lanier High.

QTEL aims to train regular content teachers and ELL specialists in how to better engage English-learners in school. It focuses on preparing teachers to provide scaffolding, or supports for such students in the classroom.

The philosophy behind the program is that language is learned best in a social context.

Ms. Ganser says she appreciates how QTEL taught her concrete strategies based on research.

“I loved the QTEL professional development because I left feeling like I had specific scaffolding exercises that I could apply in my classroom immediately,” she said, “and I believed in the sociocultural theory behind the training.”

— MARY ANN ZEHR

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**PEDAGOGY vs. CONTENT**

In the jargon of education, the first approach is more focused on “pedagogical knowledge” and the second on “pedagogical content knowledge.” The latter represents the particular knowledge educators need to make a subject understandable to students.

Mathematics educators have put the strongest emphasis on content knowledge. Mathematicians build on itself more than other subjects do, the thinking goes, so students are more likely to end up stranded if teachers can’t help them grasp a concept or catch up with it later.

Any math professional devel-

---

**CONCRETE FEEDBACK**

In the case of the Pianta group, the comparisons extend over years and have involved about 5,000 classrooms, though the work on secondary-level teaching is just yielding its first results. One of Mr. Pianta’s findings drawn from several thousand pre-K-3 classrooms across the county is that teachers on average provide good emotional support and keep students organized for work fairly well, but do little to promote learning beyond the rote level. Many observers have suspected exactly that.

More recently, Mr. Pianta and his team have begun investigating whether the professional-development program based on their system pays off in student learning. Early results are positive because, the researchers conjecture, the system provides a framework for highly structured and specific feedback that is focused on behaviors with proven links to student learning. More general approaches to videotaped lessons, such as “reflection,” Mr. Pianta has written, don’t work.

Classroom observers tend to turn one of two ways in their work. Mr. Lenov, Mr. Pianta, and others take the position that many of the core elements of effective teaching transcend the subjects taught. Ms. Ball, Ms. Hill, and the Stanford researchers use a more subject-specific approach.
development that “is not designed to transmit mathematical understanding” is bound to fall short of what teachers and students need, said Julie Greenberg, the senior policy director at the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Washington-based research and advocacy group.

Andrew Chen, the president of EduTron, a for-profit group that has provided professional development for more than 1,000 Massachusetts mathematics teachers, agrees. In the United States, given inadequate student and teacher performance in math, content knowledge must take priority, he said.

So Mr. Chen, a physicist, doesn’t observe lessons, he gives them. Teachers become students, pushed out of their comfort zones by “serious” math problems a few grades beyond where they teach.

Pedagogical content knowledge “is very relevant, but it doesn’t address the deeper issue of weak content knowledge,” Mr. Chen said, adding that it is harder to observe lessons, he gives them.

The teacher and the coach discuss the clips by phone or Internet later, as trust builds, not so well. Room moments done well and, when the cycle begins again with the two deciding what next to work on, continuing for the length of a school year.

The basis for all that is an exhaustive catalog of putatively effective teacher behaviors, especially interactions between teachers and students, running the gamut from using a warm, calm voice to producing varied examples.

**PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT**

Ms. Grossman welcomes the different ways of parsing what teachers do and say in the classroom. Research should provide more and better clues about how fine-grained the picture of an effective teacher should be and how much it needs to include subject-specific detail, according to the Stanford professor.

“No one has the answer to the right grain size yet, nor subject specificity,” Ms. Grossman said. “With the variety of these different tools, we’ll be able to study it.” And by studying it, the researchers will improve professional development based on it, she believes.

Still, she is concerned about a cornerstone of changing teacher behavior. In addition to needing ways to represent the best teaching approaches and deconstruct them so they can be better understood, teachers have to practice. “They need lots of opportunities to try something out and get feedback, and preferably not in a high-stakes environment,” Ms. Grossman said.

Classroom-management guru Lee Canter has perfected coaching in real time, for instance, with the coach giving feedback as the teacher works in the classroom. Mr. Lemo’s work with teachers routinely includes role-playing, with the staff acting the parts of students and teacher. One teacher might play a child with his head down on the desk, while other students take turns handling the situation until there’s a teacher “who nails it,” Mr. Lemo said.

“If you are a high-ranking tennis player on the eve of a big match, it’s not so helpful for a coach to tell you, ‘You can win this thing if you charge the net,’” he said. Instead, “a great coach would have had you practice your backhand and forehand over and over in the weeks before.”

Coverage of leadership, human-capital development, extended and expanded learning time, and arts learning is supported in part by a grant from The Wallace Foundation at www.wallacefoundation.org.

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Texas District Targets ELL Teaching

Training is designed to help regular educators.

BY MARY ANN ZEHRTimelsaid stem iem eul

ot a school day goes by that Lau-rie Hahn Ganser doesn’t use some-thing she learned in a professional-development pro-
gram designed to help regular class-
room teachers reach

English-language learners.

The English teacher at Lanier High School has received extensive training and coaching from Quality Teaching for English Learners, or QTEL, during the three years the Austin district has implemented the program. Ms. Ganser is poised to become a coach herself as part of the 85,000-student district’s efforts to sustain the training without the consul-
tants it hired to launch it here.

Enough administrators at teachers at Lanier High have bought in to the program and carried out its strategies that district officials credit it for some positive academic outcomes for ELLs at the school.

For example, the achievement gap between English-learners and other students nar-
rowed during the first two years of QTEL im-
plementation for 10th grade English, math-
ematics, and science, and for social studies in
all grades. An evaluation conducted by the district of the first two years of the program concludes that it was “moderately effective.”

The professional development is intended to be a high school reform effort taken up by a whole school, not just the English-lan-
guage-learners department. Aida Walqui, the director of the teacher-professional-de-
velopment program for WestEd, and other researchers at the San Francisco-based re-
search and development nonprofit organiza-
tion developed the program. The Austin dis-
trict hired her and other WestEd consultants to carry out the training at two demonstra-
tion schools: Lanier High, a regular compre-
sensive high school, and International High, which has many English-learners. Nearly 600 of Lanier’s 1,470 students are ELLs. The philo-
sophy behind QTEL is that language is learned best in a social context, so lessons should be planned to engage students in structured so-
cial interactions about the academic concepts they’re learning. In other words, students are not learning and practicing English if teachers are doing most of the talking.

For each of the first two years of QTEL implementation, all teachers and adminis-
trators received at least six days of profes-
sional development. And many teachers got substantial additional training or coaching in their content areas. First, the WestEd consultants provided the coaching. Then, they trained a small group of teachers to be coaches. Next year, they’ll be on their own. A key part of the training is for teachers to learn how to provide scaffolding, or supports for ELLs in the classroom, with the goal of in-
creasing student engagement in the subject matter.

TAPPING CREATIVITY

A unit on poetry that Ms. Ganser recently taught to a mix of English-learners, former English-learners, and native English-speak-
ers illustrates how scaffolding works. One of the unit’s learning goals was for the sopho-
more students write a poem about their own iden-
tity. Ms. Ganser gave them the first line, “I am what I am.” But before she asked them to write a poem, she guided them in prelimi-
nary steps. They practiced the use of such literary elements as alliteration, metaphor, and diction, and filled out a chart about themselves focused on such topics as per-
sonality, appearance, culture, and music.

So when it came time to sit down and draft their poetry, they already had acquired skills and material to work with.

The supports were helpful even for stu-
dents who aren’t ELLs.

At first, 15-year-old Pedro-Juarez, who had missed the lesson about charting his ideas, sat at the poetry corner. “I don’t know what to write about,” he finally said when his teacher checked in with him. The youth’s first lan-
guage is Spanish, but he’s not an ELL.

The teacher gave him a copy of the chart that the other students had filled out. For the personality topic, he wrote “real calm.” For appearance, he wrote “white T’s.” Soon he was on his way in writing a poem: “I am what I am. I am what I am. I am a calm person who just likes to kick back. The old school Texas boy with the white T’s, Js [Michael Jordan tennis shoes], and fresh fade [a haircut style].”

Checking back in with Mr. Juarez, Ms. Ganser was pleased to see his creative juices start to flow. “QTEL,” she said in a later inter-
view, “is about tapping in to prior knowl-
edge before you set students loose.”

Meanwhile, Lanier High’s coaches are working to help other teachers get to the same place that Ms. Ganser is.

Jennifer Smith, the social studies and Eng-
lish coach, spends half her time in that role and half as a teacher. Lanier has another half-time coach for math and science.

On a recent day, Ms. Smith observed Guillermo Tabasco, a third-year world geog-
raphy teacher, deliver a lesson. Mr. Tabasco and Ms. Smith had met in advance to dis-
cuss the lesson. He hadn’t participated in QTEL coaching before.

Mr. Tabasco runs a tight ship. During the lesson, his 30 freshmen were quiet and seemed to follow his PowerPoint presenta-
tion about different kinds of maps and how to read them. He used a lot of visuals, which are helpful to ELLs. After introducing each concept, he asked students to answer a ques-
tion or two on their own.

After observing for about half an hour, Ms. Smith filled out a template with feedback for the teacher. In the final stage of the coach-
ing cycle, Mr. Tabasco and Ms. Smith met to re-
fect on the lesson.

Ms. Smith noted that only a half-dozen students had regularly responded to the teacher’s questions.

“Have you thought about how the students could be a little more engaged—with each other or with you?” she asked.

Mr. Tabasco suggested that he call on stu-
dents by name.

As they later wrapped up, Ms. Smith urged Mr. Tabasco to “slide” more interaction into his lessons and offered to set up an opportu-
nity for him to observe other teachers.

“Maybe they are doing something that I see helping a kid,” he said. “Maybe I can steal something from them.”

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