

# “WE ALWAYS WANT TO GET BETTER”

## Teachers’ Voices on Professional Development

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**T**hrough the Innovative Professional Development (iPD) Challenge, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has invested in helping school districts and networks redesign their professional development systems to serve educators better and improve student performance. MDRC’s evaluation of *the iPD Challenge* involves case studies and multiple rounds of surveys, document collection, and interviewing during the first three years of the initiative. This brief — the first in a series — introduces the case study component of the evaluation and presents some early findings from interviews with teachers regarding their beliefs about instructional improvement and useful learning opportunities.

Recent educational reforms that provide more specific and higher standards for students call on educators to improve the quality of their instruction. The school districts and networks involved in the iPD Challenge aim to strengthen the support they provide to teachers to help them meet these new standards, in part by providing additional opportunities for teachers to learn with and from their colleagues and in part by improving the extent to which teachers’ professional development opportunities meet their needs. MDRC’s [evaluation](#) of this work explores the changes in professional development systems adopted by some of the districts participating in iPD and the subsequent changes in secondary school teachers’ professional development opportunities and experiences.

### LEARNING ON THE GROUND

The research team is conducting annual teacher and principal surveys in five districts, interviews with district staff members in those five districts, and case studies in two secondary schools in each of four districts (see “MDRC’s iPD Research and Evaluation”). The surveys will provide a

## MDRC's iPD Research and Evaluation

### Participating Districts

- Fresno Unified School District, CA
- Jeffco Public Schools, CO
- Lake County Schools, FL
- Long Beach Unified School District, CA
- Tulsa Public Schools, OK

### Data-Collection Activities

- Surveys of secondary school teachers and principals in all five districts
- Interviews with district staff members
- Interviews from eight case study schools (two in each of four districts), including 24 case study teachers and several school/instructional leaders in each school

broad overview of professional development opportunities, while the interviews and case studies will allow the research team to gain deeper insights into the experiences of those on the ground in schools. The case studies involve semiannual interviews with teachers and school leaders for the first three years of their districts' iPD implementation. The research team selected schools that have teachers who will be involved in the district's iPD initiative and that could be considered relatively typical of their districts: schools that are not among the highest or lowest achievers or unusual in their staffing, structures, student populations, and so forth.

Teachers have varied professional development needs, and some teachers may be enthusiastic while others may be reluctant to change their practice. MDRC therefore selected three teachers in each case study school with different amounts of experience, attitudes toward professional development and instructional improvement, subject areas, and demographic characteristics. The responses shared in this brief include data from initial interviews with 12 case study teachers in two of the four districts that will ultimately

be included, and represent their insights only about the types of professional development that they experienced prior to or in the early stages of their district's implementation of iPD.<sup>1</sup>

## INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

### Talking with Colleagues

Nearly all of the case study teachers reported that the most useful professional development opportunities involved learning from or with other teachers.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, teachers talked about collaborating to share ideas about teaching, discuss lesson plans, and analyze student work samples on shared assignments or assessments. Several teachers focused on collaboration that happened during work hours for extended stretches of time (that is, over more than a single planning period) and that occurred with colleagues in the same content area either within a school or across schools. One teacher explained, "Even though the content that we receive [in professional development] is excellent, sometimes it takes a little bit more for us to actually realize how to implement it and so this collaboration has been the strongest factor in our development." Several teachers also valued getting ideas from colleagues, then trying out those ideas in the classroom and coming back together to analyze the lesson and student work. One teacher said:

<sup>1</sup> This brief includes data from the initial round of interviews in spring 2014 in Fresno and Long Beach. Interview data from Tulsa and Lake County will be included in future analyses.

<sup>2</sup> The responses discussed throughout this section reflect teachers' perceptions of what helps them become better at their jobs. The elements they identify may not necessarily lead directly to improvements in their instruction or student achievement.

## SURVEY FINDINGS

### Learning Together. Learning More. Learning Differently.

In each iPD study district, secondary school teachers responded to surveys focused on their professional development experiences and attitudes the school year before iPD was launched. The survey responses indicated that teachers participated in many different types of professional development opportunities, which they rated as having varied levels of usefulness for their teaching practice. The activities teachers participated in most often were district- and school-based workshops, formal collaboration opportunities, and instructional coaching; many also reported using online resources. Collaboration with colleagues was consistently rated among the most useful activities, and more than half of all teachers reported wanting more collaboration time. In addition, across the five surveyed districts, approximately one-third of responding teachers wanted more professional development and two-thirds wanted to participate in different professional development activities than they had (a finding that will be further explored during interviews).

So if all you did was the [district professional development] component, and you never came together as [a school-based department], you would never actually translate that into the nuts and bolts of real assignments, real strategies, coming together and looking at actual student work. It would all be very abstract.... But then as [a school-based department] we can say, “Why do we think that happened [in the classroom]? Do we want to hold onto that as a strategy? Do we want to let it go? Do we want to try over with some modifications?”

While many teachers seemed to appreciate any opportunities to discuss their work with their colleagues, others agreed that working with colleagues at their own school was particularly important. One said, “Our school site has provided ... paid collaborative opportunities.... It really was [useful] because I could talk to other people ... in my grade level [who] teach the same thing that I do, and it made a huge difference.”

#### Seeing Colleagues in Action

About half of all teachers reported on the survey that they observed their peers, and several teachers said during interviews that classroom observations were useful for improving their practice. Specifically, some said that peer observations were particularly helpful in providing ideas for their own instruction. One teacher explained, for example, that it was helpful to “get out of your own classroom and to go into someone else’s classroom and see their strengths and how could that be applied in your room.... So now I’m just hoping that next year we’ll be able to go to different teachers in the department and keep the process going. Because it did help.” Another remarked that having a colleague come to her classroom to observe helped her diag-

nose what was difficult for her students: “That was cool.... It [helps] you refine the teaching, because there’s two people in here ... and that feedback has been really helpful.” In addition to peer observations, a couple of teachers also reported that observations from administrators that included targeted feedback helped them identify specific areas for improvement.

#### Making It Relevant

More than half of the current case study teachers also said that relevance to their classroom instruction was the main thing they used to judge whether or not a professional development activity was useful. Specifically they said they preferred to leave professional development sessions with things they felt they could implement in their classrooms right away. This idea was often connected to collaboration, as

## CASE STUDY

### Disengaging from Professional Development

Martin is a middle school science teacher with almost 10 years' experience in the district. He explains his desire to be the kind of teacher who appeals to students like he was as a child: "I went into teaching because at times I was really bored when I was a kid, and so ... when I teach, I think, 'Okay, is this boring? I'm not going to do it, then.'" While he is a relatively experienced teacher, Martin says he values the wisdom and expertise of his more veteran colleagues and sees collaboration with them as important to his own professional growth.

Martin describes his professional development activities at the time of the initial interview as "mostly worksheets and busywork," with time spent on "things that have nothing to do with our classroom." Martin explains that he would like support implementing instructional practices aimed at meeting the new Common Core standards, but professional development has not sufficiently met that need for him. He also feels disengaged from professional development offerings: "We have a meeting about something [and] we're not really sure why we're having this meeting." Commenting about the year's professional development, he says, "I don't think it's met my goals at all. I don't feel that it's been of value to me this year." He also expresses a desire for clear examples of the district's and school's expectations for his instructional performance, but he feels this clarity and consistency are lacking.

At the same time, Martin extols the new standards and assessments that allow him to address more meaningful science or math topics and processes for students, "teaching them how to learn instead of just straight ... facts." He also describes a series of professional development activities that he feels supported him and his colleagues in designing, implementing, and analyzing student writing tasks in his subject area: "It was really good for us to see other teachers evaluate what we did. Those were powerful times."

The research team will follow Martin and other teachers who have expressed some dissatisfaction with their professional development opportunities, tracking how continued work with implementing Common Core-type instruction and participation in iPD activities may influence their engagement with professional development over time.

many teachers described useful professional development opportunities as involving teachers working together to create lessons or classroom activities. One teacher described this collaboration as "a chance to create common assessments and come up with some lesson plans and some common things that work — they're good, they're rigorous." Another said, "I would love to leave there with ... ten activities instead of one or two.... So it's just the time in planning those effective activities."

While teachers were unlikely to suggest that improvements in their practice hinged on learning new content, a few indicated that it was helpful to them to search online or attend professional development sessions on content directly relevant to the subjects they taught. Finally, some teachers suggested that being given clear goals and expectations about their teaching or about the district's professional development plan augmented their learning by helping them see the connection to their work.

## CASE STUDY

### The Importance of Identifying Teachers' Needs

Dana is an experienced humanities teacher with almost 20 years in the classroom and multiple graduate degrees. Dana feels driven to improve continuously, stating: "I honestly feel that all teachers are learners and most of us think we are sincerely honest about our craft. We always want to get better."

Dana participates in the professional development offered through the district and school, but she feels the opportunities are limited and not as useful as they could be. Unlike in the past, she "hasn't really done any" district workshops this year; the workshops offered have focused on Common Core implementation in grades she doesn't teach. Dana finds value in collaborating with her department colleagues and finds that feedback on lessons is particularly helpful. She appreciates having had the opportunity to observe peers within her subject area, but she complains that the activity lacked follow-up from both her administrators and peers. Overall, Dana is disappointed by the lack of accountability following professional development activities and believes that the administration rarely offers continued support for implementation. She says, "The district does a great job providing professional development, but I think I needed more. I felt like I was missing something. Even now I feel like I'm missing something." Feeling unsatisfied with the professional development she has been offered, Dana has pursued additional opportunities on her own.

Dana wants the district to be better at identifying teachers' needs: "I think it would just be a matter of finding out the needs of the teachers. Those who feel they need to learn more — what is it you want to learn, what do you feel you need help on, what areas do you feel you need help with?"

While she is frustrated that the professional development activities currently offered don't meet her needs, Dana has positive feelings about her school culture and leadership and seems optimistic that the district should be able to meet her needs: "We do have a district full of well-trained and knowledgeable teachers that we shouldn't have to go out somewhere else to have professional development." Moving forward, the research team is interested in discovering whether Dana's professional development needs are better met as her district implements iPD.

#### Obstacles to Instructional Improvement

Teachers also discussed professional development experiences that they felt were not useful. Perhaps not surprisingly, these less useful activities generally represented the opposite of the features that teachers described as useful. Most teachers explained that the least useful activities were those that felt disconnected from their current or regular practice in the classroom. Several reported that they often felt unable to apply or implement what they learned in professional development. Others suggested that they did not get adequate follow-up to professional development or observations and did not receive

productive feedback to help them implement what they were learning. Teachers also reported frustration when time was not used well during professional development sessions; they wanted more active time with other teachers and less time as a passive audience.

#### THE PATH TO iPD

In the program design documents they submitted to take part in iPD, districts participating in the initiative made a priority of many of the features teachers identified in these interviews as useful and desirable. For example, districts

are creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate, either online or in person, and are focusing on improving instructional practices that meet the demands of the new standards.

As the research team follows case study teachers over time, it will examine whether teachers indicate having more opportunities to engage in activities they view as useful. It will also gauge whether teachers' opinions about what is useful change as their districts implement their iPD initiatives. At the same time, the research team

will continue work to identify the successes and **challenges** districts experience as they strive to implement changes in their professional development systems. Future briefs in this series will aim to both broaden and deepen the introductory analysis here and add two additional iPD districts. A next step will be to include the perspectives of school leaders and district administrators alongside the voices of the case study teachers to further illuminate the roles of teachers, schools, and districts in teacher learning and systemic reform. ■

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