

Shifts in Reform Influence How and What Teachers Learn

As the context changes, expectations for teacher learning also change.

By **Milbrey W. McLaughlin**

The education reform environment has changed dramatically since 1995 when Linda Darling-Hammond and I wrote “Policies That Support Professional Development in an Era of Reform.” Fifteen years ago, strategies to provide for teachers’ learning took center stage as reformers struggled to respond to the dual challenges of changing student demographics and demands that American teachers equip students with “21st-century skills.” Issues of teachers’ effectiveness continue to mobilize education policy in 2011, but emphasis has shifted from teachers’ professional growth to their accountability for student achievement. With No Child Left Behind’s focus on test-based accountability, teachers’ learning and professional development took a back seat to student outcomes on standardized tests and schools’ Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Many states followed NCLB’s lead, implementing education accountability systems characterized by a single-minded emphasis on testing to assess schools’ performance.

Ideas about promising approaches to teachers’ professional development also have changed. Practitioners and researchers now highlight the powerful and particular contribution of school-based professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs, embedded in the school context, can provide learning opportunities rooted in students’ work as the basis for ongoing collaboration around school improvement. Information about a broad array of student skills and competences, and inquiry into how classroom practices support or hinder student success, especially that of low-performing students, engage effective PLCs. This perspective moves attention from a preoccupation with the content of “inservice” or other external professional development resources to in-school strategies that can create and nurture a vibrant PLC.

These shifts in reform focus and ideas about effectual professional development often conflict. Ironically, the contemporary climate of high-stakes accountability can create disincentives for teachers to attend to more than standardized test scores; to engage in candid, tough discussions about practice; or to try new ways of improving the success of underachieving students. Pressure to improve school test scores encourages focus on those students who need just a few more points to meet a standard — the so-called bubble students — and on students’ test-taking skills, rather than their learning.

But an even more significant obstacle to the collaborative, ongoing, and frank discussions about data and student progress found in strong teacher learning communities lies in teachers’ general lack of knowledge about how to understand the data available to them, how to develop assessments of student progress specific to their classrooms, and how to link data to action. Arguably, today’s most important professional development needs involve resources and opportunities for teachers to gain the knowledge and confidence required to make effective use of information about student learning and skills, to develop and evaluate an instructional action plan, and to engage in collaborative inquiry work. These resources include such supports as onsite coaches, data-support teams, technical advisers at the district level, and desktop computers that provide easily accessible, up-to-date information about students. Teacher education programs also should equip teachers-to-be with the capability to generate and use data. Yet too few programs do so, and so fail to provide teachers with 21st-century skills.



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“Policies That Support Professional Development in an Era of Reform,”
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