



How to Ensure a Return on Your **Professional Development** Investment

A Must-Have Guide for Educators Interested
in Effective Professional Development

KAPLAN

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Introduction

Whether you are a director/principal, a teacher, or a caregiver, you know that professional development is an important component in creating successful educational environments in which both educators and children can grow. Not only can professional development help educators become the best at what they do, it can also positively impact student learning and the overall community. According to NAEYC, the definition of professional development includes initial preparation and learning experiences that are “designed to improve the knowledge, skills/behaviors, and attitudes/values of the early childhood workforce” (“What Is Professional Development in Early Childhood Education?”). However, professional development cannot accomplish these goals and purposes if it is not adequately addressing the needs of schools and educators.

Are you tired of bad professional development experiences? Learn how you can make the most of professional development opportunities with the tips and strategies shared in this guide.

Professional development is a big investment—it takes time, money, and planning to implement correctly—and the last thing anyone wants to do is invest in professional development that ends up being useless or ineffective. When educators sit through bad professional development experiences or the community does not see changes/improvements in classrooms and schools, people start to think of professional development as a costly, required inconvenience that may not be as important as they once thought. Even though school districts and educators want more effective professional development, there is also some worry about being able to fund those programs, especially with recent budget cuts causing many schools to reduce their professional development spending (Gulamhussein).

Yes, professional development can be inconvenient and costly, but that does not mean you or anyone else should give up on such an important part of education. You can always replace ineffective professional development with effective professional development, and even though professional development is often a requirement, it is also an opportunity to invest in yourself, your school, and your students. However, you cannot make the most of that opportunity or get a return on your professional development investment unless you understand the current state of many professional development programs and recognize the principles that make professional development effective.

Why Many Professional Development Programs Need a Major Overhaul

There are a number of professional development programs and options available for educators, but not all of them are effective or worth the investment. A recent report found that 90 percent of U.S. teachers have participated in professional development, but the majority of those teachers believe that professional development opportunities (with the exception of content-related training) are not useful or effective in the classroom (Darling-Hammond et al.). The ineffectiveness of many professional development programs has garnered professional development a bad reputation in recent years—even some teachers now consider professional development to have more negatives than positives.

The good news is that people are aware of the problem: “Everyone on all sides of the education reform and improvement debate agree that what most teachers receive as professional opportunities to learn are thin, sporadic, and of little use when it comes to improving teaching” (DeMonte). When people are aware of a problem, a solution usually follows, and there have been a variety of studies and reports identifying where professional development is missing the mark. This is a promising sign that professional development may get the overhaul it needs, but until that happens, it is important that you understand why professional development programs need to move away from the status quo:

1. The United States is falling behind in professional development for educators

Due to the effects of globalization on the national and world economy, a lot of emphasis is now placed on student performance in the United States and around the world. According to a recent report published by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) and School Redesign Network at Stanford University, the United States is “squandering a significant opportunity” to improve student performance by investing in quality professional development for teachers (Darling-Hammond et al.). “Other nations, our competitors, have made support for teachers and teacher learning a top priority with significant results. In these countries, students learn and achieve more. Teachers stay in the field longer and are more satisfied with their work. Educators take on even more responsibility for improving what happens in the buildings” (Darling-Hammond et al.).

The success other countries have experienced by choosing to invest in and emphasize professional development indicates that the United States has to do the same if we want to bridge the gap in both teacher and student learning. The authors of the NSDC and School Redesign Network report cite the following findings as examples of how the United States is falling behind in professional development for educators:

- Teachers in the United States often have to pay the majority of the cost of their professional development, especially in regards to their travel costs, workshop fees, and college expenses.
- Few schools in the United States provide teachers with opportunities to participate in extended learning opportunities and productive collaborative communities.
- Schools in the United States often ask or expect teachers to complete professional development opportunities outside of working hours and on their own time, while other countries typically include ongoing professional development and collaboration in teachers’ regular work hours.
- When compared to teachers in other countries, teachers in the United States spend about 20 percent more of their time teaching students instead of working together to improve and develop curriculum and instruction. (Darling-Hammond et al.)

Taking these issues into account and placing more importance on teacher learning will only benefit educators and students. As Ben Johnson explains in his Edutopia article “Why Quality Professional Development for Teachers Matters”, teachers cannot control student learning but they can influence learning environments and invite children to learn. Helping educators become the best at what they do is one of the best ways to support student learning and ultimately increase student and school performance.

2. Traditional one-time workshops are still a major part of professional development

Workshops are what most people envision when they think of professional development, but traditional one-time workshops are not very effective when it comes to helping educators learn the skills they need to be better instructors. “The one-time workshop assumes the only challenge facing teachers is a lack of knowledge of effective teaching practices and when that knowledge gap is corrected teachers will then be able to change” (Gulamhussein). However, that assumption is not correct, which means traditional one-time workshops do not adequately address educators’ needs and consistently overlook educators’ true challenges. In her report for the Center for Public Education, Allison Gulamhussein cites the implementation of new teaching methods in the classroom as being teachers’ biggest challenge.

The ineffectiveness of one-time workshops does not mean workshops cannot be effective or play a major role in professional development. In fact, workshops can still be powerful professional development experiences if the right tools are used and the workshops are

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done correctly. For example, needs assessments often play a large role in making workshops more effective (Alber). Professional development providers can use a needs assessment to ensure that educators’ needs are met through the workshop and its content. Completing a needs assessment before a scheduled workshop can also help professional development providers better address teachers’ struggles with implementing new teaching practices in the classroom—something that will be increasingly important in the coming years.

3. The future of the education system in the United States is dependent upon professional development and teacher training

Perhaps the biggest reason professional development has to change and move away from the status quo is that the recent education reforms in the United States will require effective, high-quality professional development. Even though professional development has developed a bad reputation and there are many problems that must be fixed, the education industry has recently made a large bet “on the power of professional support to change teaching and boost student learning...Almost every presentation or speech or conversation about educational reform inevitably includes some reference to the amount of support and training teachers and administrators will need in order to make key reforms real and effective in the classroom” (DeMonte).

Many states have either adopted the Common Core State Standards or are in the process of making their own education reforms for elementary schools and upper grade levels. Preschools and child care centers are also shifting their curricula/programs to include more opportunities to teach critical, exploratory, and investigative thinking in addition to school readiness skills and basic STEM/STEAM concepts. These new shifts and reforms “represent a retreat from the traditional rote, fact-based style of instruction toward teaching that fosters critical thinking and problem solving” (Gulamhussein).

Since many of these reforms will transform the education system and change teaching at a fundamental level, professional development for educators has to evolve and offer solutions and training for

21st century learning and instruction. Investing in teacher learning is the best way to increase student learning and achievement in the classroom. Put simply, “teacher learning is the linchpin between the present day and the new academic goals” (Gulamhussein).

Understanding professional development’s current shortcomings and why it must change will ultimately help you identify and make good professional development investments.

The Principles of Effective Professional Development

As professional development programs and providers start to provide more training and learning opportunities that better address the needs of educators and the challenges of teaching, you will want to research your options and look for effective, high-quality professional development. So, how can you tell the difference between effective professional development and ineffective professional development? While it is not as easy as one may think, there are a few principles that you can use to define effective professional development:

1. **Professional development needs to be an ongoing experience for educators.** Short one-time professional development experiences are less likely to make a large impact on instruction due to educators not having enough time to efficiently absorb and practice new methods. Experiences that are a continuous process and provide extended learning opportunities help educators master new skills and instructional methods and also have a better chance at positively impacting student learning. (Gulamhussein; Darling-Hammond et al.)
2. **Professional development needs to be job embedded as much as possible.** Teachers have to have the opportunity to apply what they are learning in their classrooms. Job-embedded practice and learning opportunities help bridge the gap between understanding a new method or concept and actually implementing it in the classroom. (DeMonte; Darling-Hammond et al.)
3. **Professional development needs to provide support for teachers during the implementation stage of using a new instructional method in the classroom.** “If school districts want teachers to change instruction, the implementation stage must be included and supported more explicitly in professional development offerings, as this is the critical stage where teachers begin to commit to an instructional approach” (Gulamhussein). Providing support during the implementation stage ensures that a new instructional method has a good chance of being effective in the classroom.
4. **Professional development needs to offer content that is specific instead of generic.** The content that professional development offers educators should be specific to a goal, a discipline, a grade level, or a developmental stage. Relevant, specific content that addresses the needs of educators and the children they teach is much more useful than the general principles and topics associated with trainings and professional development opportunities that involve the whole staff. (Gulamhussein; Darling-Hammond et al.)

Did you know that Kaplan offers customizable training and implementation packages with coaching and consulting from leading education experts?

5. **Professional development needs to be engaging and use varied approaches to support learning for both groups and individuals.** “Teachers’ initial exposure to a concept should not be passive, but rather should engage teachers through varied approaches so they can participate in making sense of a new practice” (Gulamhussein). Whether information is being presented to a large or small group, varied approaches also make it possible to present content in ways that complement educators’ individual learning styles.
6. **Professional development needs to include modeling as major parts of teacher training.** Research has shown that modeling plays a vital role in helping educators understand new instructional methods. Demonstrations of new practices allow for active learning and help educators understand how new practices can be used in real classrooms. Hearing about a new method or skill will not be as effective as taking it one step further and seeing it being used by someone who has already mastered the method or skill. (Gulamhussein; Darling-Hammond et al.)
7. **Professional development needs to promote collaboration among teachers.** Collaboration is an excellent way to provide support for educators, especially for educators new to the profession, but educators are often not given the time needed to collaborate with one another. This can be detrimental to both student and teacher learning, because productive collaboration usually leads to better teaching and instruction and also helps educators solve problems they are dealing with in the classroom. (DeMonte; Darling-Hammond et al.)

Remember, effective professional development is also defined by success. Check to see if the professional development opportunities you are considering have good reviews. Positive testimonials and feedback from current and past participants usually indicate a successful and effective program. Just be sure the reviews and testimonials you see are from actual participants and not fake or paid endorsers.

Getting the Most Out of Your Professional Development Investment

Once you know how to recognize effective professional development programs, you can choose the professional development opportunities that work best for you and your individual situation. Here are a few tips and reminders on how to get the most out your professional development investment:

- **Look for professional development options that are customizable and offer content geared toward specific goals, disciplines, developmental stages, or grade levels.** Any professional development options you choose should support your specific needs and be relevant to teaching the children in your care. (Gulamhussein; Darling-Hammond et al.)
- **Look for professional development options that include modeling and provide implementation support and job-embedded learning opportunities.** All of these factors are essential to effective professional development and play major roles in ensuring that educators understand and implement new instructional strategies in the classroom. (DeMonte; Gulamhussein; Darling-Hammond et al.)
- **Look for professional development options that encourage collaboration and help educators develop positive working relationships.** Collaboration and the presence of positive working relationships support teacher learning while also creating positive work environments. Educators are much more likely

to enjoy their work when a professional development plan allows for collaboration and gives educators more opportunities to problem solve together. (DeMonte; Darling-Hammond et al.)

- **Look for professional development options that incorporate technology in a variety of ways.** Whether it's online professional development, online discussion boards, engaging digital presentations, recording a lesson for coaches to review, or training in new technology, professional development options that incorporate technology tend to improve teacher instruction and keep educators updated and involved with changes in education. (DeMonte)
- **Look for professional development options that align with your school's priorities and goals.** Professional development experiences that align with standards, priorities, and goals are likely to have a larger impact on instruction and student learning. "If [educators] cannot easily implement the strategies they learn, and the new practices are not supported or reinforced—then the professional development tends to have little impact" (Darling-Hammond et al.).
- **Look for professional development options that provide support for educators at all stages of their careers.** Providing support for every type of educator (new, established, experienced, in training, etc.) is essential to creating an environment that encourages professional growth while also giving educators the tools and resources they need to learn new methods and skills.

What are your specific professional development needs? Kaplan offers a variety of online and on-site professional development opportunities for both early childhood and elementary educators.

This list of tips is a great resource for ensuring that the professional development investments you make will be effective in meeting your professional development needs. Whether the professional development training is approved in your state and whether you receive continuing education units (CEUs) for completing the training are two other factors you also need to consider. Make sure you know which factors are most important to you and understand how the experience will benefit you when considering a professional development opportunity.

Conclusion

In his Edutopia article "Why Quality Professional Development for Teachers Matters", Ben Johnson points out "exceptional teaching inspires exceptional learning", which is why professional development for educators truly matters. Investing in effective professional development is essential to the future of our education system and is the key to both teacher and student success. Major changes to professional development may take time to implement, but you can ensure a return on your professional development investment now by understanding what makes professional development effective and knowing what factors to look for as you decide which professional development programs and offerings work best for you.

KAPLAN

Professional Development

Accessible, Affordable, Approved

Effective, high-quality professional development for both early childhood and elementary educators

- Customizable training with rich, engaging content
- Coaching and consulting from leading education experts
- Complete implementation packages
- Workshops that effectively address teachers' struggles in the classroom
- Inspirational presenters and thought-provoking presentations
- A focus on teacher and student learning

At Kaplan Early Learning Company, we work hard to ensure that the professional development opportunities we offer embody the principals of effective professional development and are beneficial to our customers. We believe that effective professional development requires modeling and research-based practices to be embedded in trainings and other professional development formats. Our professional development offerings include a variety of online and on-site professional development opportunities for both early childhood and elementary educators.

To meet your specific professional development needs, we offer customizable training, coaching and consulting from leading education experts, and complete implementation packages. You'll find that our workshops effectively address teachers' struggles in the classroom and that our presenters have plenty of practical experience that they draw from to create engaging, thought-provoking presentations. Kaplan is dedicated to both teacher and student learning, and we hope to support your professional growth. For more information about our professional development offerings and how we can help you, visit www.kaplanco.com/profdev. You can also contact us by email at training@kaplanco.com or by phone at 1-800-334-2014 ext. 3252.

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