



Breaking the habit of ineffective professional development for teachers

Professional development can significantly improve teacher effectiveness and student achievement. But school systems must start thinking strategically about their programs.

**Kartik Jayaram,
Andy Moffit,
and Doug Scott**

A teacher professional-development (PD) program that is integrated with a system for evaluating teachers' strengths and areas for improvement can provide a serious boost to teacher performance and student outcomes. Many systems invest significant sums in PD programs but do so as a habit, tending to offer the same set of training courses each year without regard for how they might fit into a comprehensive program or how effective they are—even when teachers complain that some of the courses are not useful. According to a recent

survey, 59 percent of teachers found content-related learning opportunities useful, fewer than half found PD on non-content-related areas useful, and only 27 percent of teachers rated the training they received on student discipline and classroom management as useful, though this topic is a frequent challenge and a key to enabling student learning.¹

School systems need processes to ensure that teacher PD programs contain high-quality content to help their teachers master valuable skills

relevant to their individual development needs. We sought out ideas on what such processes might look like based on our extensive global experience and research² in education and other sectors into topics related to talent management, training, and professional development. We studied school systems at the national, state, and local levels, as well as other leading educational institutions and public- and private-sector organizations. This article highlights five promising ideas that we identified: (1) base the PD program on a vision of effective teaching; (2) segment teachers and deliver PD strategically; (3) make coaching the centerpiece of PD; (4) move from “push” to “pull,” so that teachers get what they want, when they want it; and (5) only offer PD with demonstrated impact.

1. Base the PD program on a vision of effective teaching

To ensure that a PD program works with a school system’s evaluation and performance-measurement schemes, everyone in the system—from the superintendent to teaching assistants—needs to share the same vision that demystifies what effective teaching looks like and establishes a foundation for productive conversations about strengths and areas for improvement.

Districts that do this well codify their vision through comprehensive rubrics that include such items as effectiveness of classroom management and pedagogical practices, clarity of lesson goals and objectives, an ability to engage students regardless of differences in learning styles, and an ability to differentiate instruction across a range of abilities. No consensus has yet been reached on which rubrics best correlate with improved student outcomes, but research on the issue continues, most notably in the Measures of Effective Teaching project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

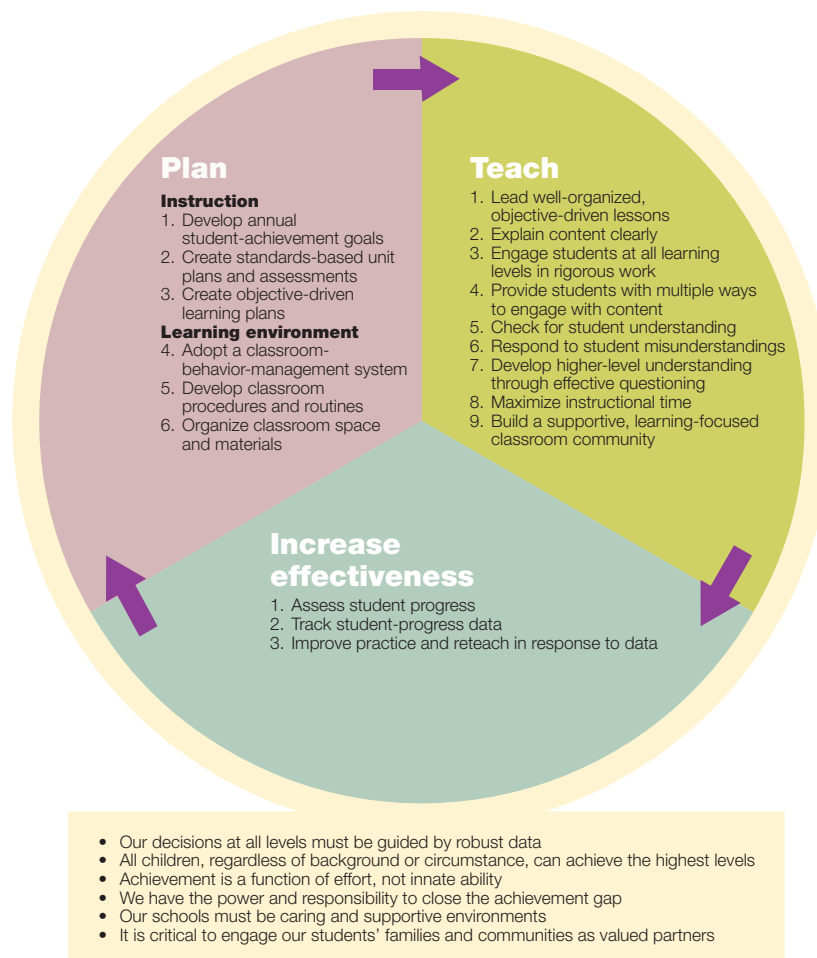
More important, however, is that a shared working definition is attainable and critical. It can be adjusted as the research evolves. The agreed-upon definition then can serve as a coordinating principle for aligning the evaluation, PD, and performance-measurement programs. All three programs should work together to improve outcomes: teachers get evaluated via multiple measures based on specific competencies that relate to the definition of teacher effectiveness, professional-development programs work to improve teacher performance on the competencies that are evaluated, and performance-measurement metrics track improvement on those competencies. Working from this vision, every development opportunity needs a clear link to the definition of effectiveness and a change in teaching practice that can be objectively observed and measured.

For example, in Washington, DC, the public school system developed the Teaching and Learning Framework to outline clear expectations for all educators (Exhibit 1). This guides both the teacher-evaluation system and related PD activities. The framework consists of three parts—plan, teach, and increase effectiveness—and each part consists of multiple objectives with clear definitions of performance. For instance, there are nine “teach” dimensions, including topics such as “explain content clearly” and “engage students at all learning levels.” Each dimension is then clearly defined. So, for example, the lowest level of performance for the dimension “engage students at all learning levels” is when lessons are not accessible to students, are teacher-directed, and provide limited opportunities for student practice and demonstration. Achieving top performance requires meeting several detailed criteria, including knowing every student’s learning level

¹Alethea Andree, Ruth Chung Wei, Linda Darling-Hammond, Stelios Orphanos, and Nikole Richardson, *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*, National Staff Development Council, 2009 (www.learningforward.org).

²This includes school-system experience in more than 50 countries and extensive research, including recent publications such as the following: Byron Auguste, Paul Kihn, and Matt Miller, *Closing the talent gap: Attracting and retaining top-third graduates to a career in teaching*, September 2010 (mckinseysociety.com); Michael Barber, Chinezi Chijioke, and Mona Mourshed, *How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better*, November 2010 (mckinseysociety.com); and Michael Barber and Mona Mourshed, *How the world’s best-performing school systems come out on top*, September 2007 (mckinseysociety.com).

Exhibit 1

A clear vision should drive professional development.

Source: District of Columbia Public Schools Teaching and Learning Framework

and ensuring the lesson takes each one into account.

2. Segment teachers and deliver PD strategically

A critical challenge for most systems in providing effective PD is striking the right balance between

offering one-size-fits-all and “every teacher is different” approaches. The pressure of limited resources requires that districts ask, “Where will my investment bring about the greatest improvement in teacher practice and student achievement?” Teacher segmentation is a tool to address that question.

Segmentation is the process of dividing a system’s teachers into groups based on shared characteristics. Many leading organizations across industries segment their employees by experience level and job performance and then offer different development opportunities to the

various segments (Exhibit 2). For example, all new teachers at Teach For America and The New Teacher Project go through rigorous preparation before they start teaching. For more tenured individuals who struggle, Minneapolis Public Schools invests in peer assistance and review,

Exhibit 2

Employee performance and experience drives development needs.

Performance	High	<p>Procter & Gamble</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a marketing academy to build common knowledge foundation and standard way of doing business (eg, 1-page memo) 	<p>Long Beach Unified School District</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducts formative assessments to identify targeted PD¹ needs for Year 2 teachers 	<p>GE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides leadership training in Crotonville as incentive for top performers <p>Long Beach Unified School District</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targets its PD based on teacher groups (eg, teacher leaders)
	Medium			<p>Johnson & Johnson</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convenes formal sessions on J&J Credo as unifying theme for all employees <p>China</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires all teachers to observe colleague sessions each term
	Low	<p>Teach for America The New Teacher Project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds a 5-week, 70-hours-per-week induction to provide intensive core skills training, including classroom-leadership experience and observation • Uses online training to provide common language for analyzing effective instruction 	<p>Minneapolis Public Schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses peer assistance and review to provide intensive PD for teachers who do not meet evaluation standards 	
		Low	Medium	High
		Experience		

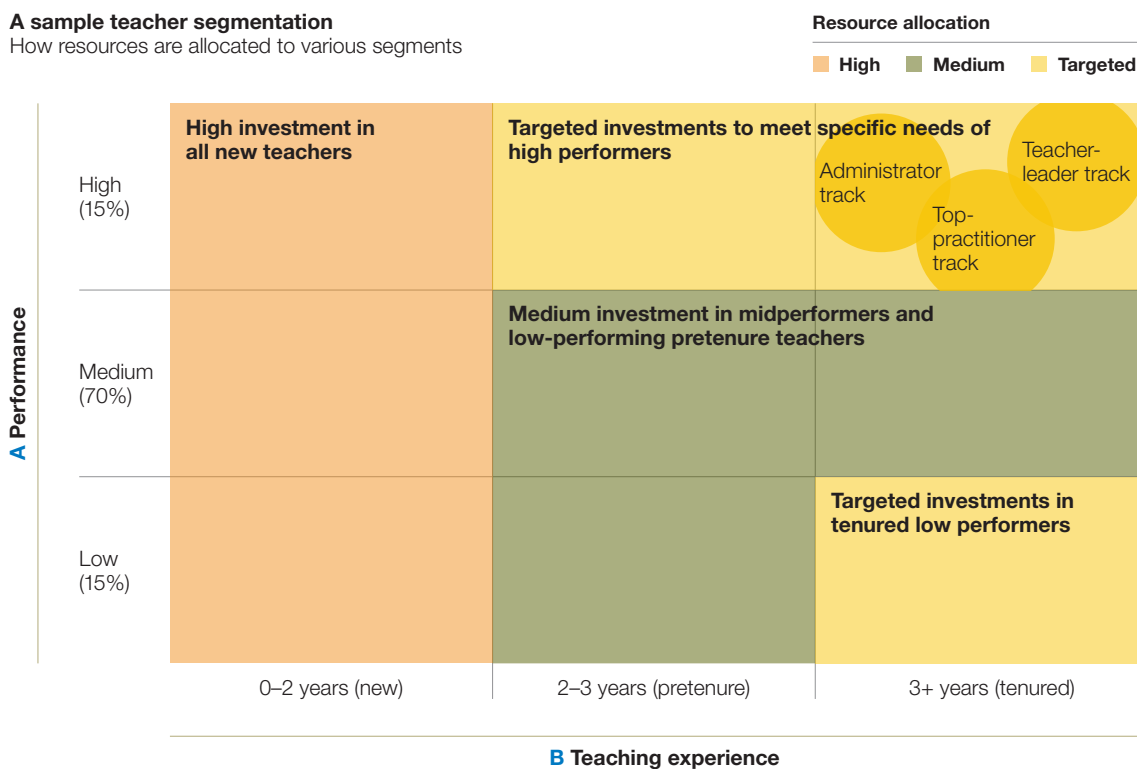
¹Professional development.

Exhibit 3

Segment teachers into groups according to shared characteristics.

A sample teacher segmentation

How resources are allocated to various segments



Other contextual factors (eg, new to the system, new to a high-poverty school, new to a given content area or concentration of student need such as special education) should also be considered in developing the segmentation strategy.

and Long Beach Unified School District conducts formative assessments to tailor support for second-year teachers. A private-sector example comes from General Electric, which sends its top performers to the company’s facility in Crotonville, New York, for leadership training.

Exhibit 3 is a sample segmentation of teachers using experience and performance as the primary measures.³ The school system’s leadership would use this matrix to decide which PD programs to offer the different segments and how much to

invest in the development of each. Ensuring a solid foundation for new teachers, emphasis on basic skills for struggling teachers, and insight into specific issues to help move teachers from good to great are all areas in which thinking about segments provides focus. In the example illustrated, the school system does not differentiate among new teachers based on performance, because most new teachers typically struggle with the same issues. After the second year, however, performance becomes an important differentiator.

³In addition to performance and experience, teacher training can also be segmented based on other contextual factors, such as subject taught (special education, for example) and school characteristics (a high number of students below the poverty line, for instance).

As shown at top right, for high-performing teachers with more than three years of experience, the segmentation goes one step further. People in this group are likely to have different career aspirations—opting either for the teacher or the administrator tracks—and the corresponding competencies and development opportunities should be tailored accordingly.

Segmentation also can help schools resolve key questions about their PD programs. At the most

basic level, segmentation develops a fact base that can help administrators resolve arguments previously fueled by anecdotes and intuition, such as how much of the professional-development budget should be spent on helping tenured teachers with medium performance scores. Exhibit 4 provides an illustrative scorecard that shows how a district could use the segmentation to better understand the effectiveness of its PD strategy. Such an approach would illuminate facts such as the money spent per teacher and the

Exhibit 4

Use scorecards to refine segment-specific offerings.

ILLUSTRATIVE

Segment: Post-tenure, medium-performing trackers

<p>Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in differentiated instruction based on last year's evaluation data Institute new math PD¹ vendor given poor results and feedback Increase spend on targeted coaching 	<p>Segment portion of total %</p> <p>Teachers 40</p> <p>Spend 32</p> <p>Students 39</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$800 per teacher \$815 per student 80% district average
<p>Change in teacher evaluation % Return</p>	<p>Change in student performance % Return</p> <p>Math</p> <p>Proficient 40 → 38</p> <p>Nonproficient 60 → 62</p> <p>Reading</p> <p>Proficient 60 → 65</p> <p>Nonproficient 40 → 35</p> <p><i>\$X per new proficient student</i></p> <p><i>\$X per new proficient student</i></p>
<p>Comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New math PD not driving improvement results High overall return in improved teacher ratings vs other segments 	

¹Professional development.



associated improvements in student performance and teacher competence. The district could then decide where its investments are making a difference and improve its approach accordingly.

3. Make coaching the centerpiece of PD

Many methods—from lectures to professional learning communities to coaching to technology-enabled learning programs—can be used effectively to improve teacher practice. But open, straightforward, in-person coaching is the most effective way of delivering immediate feedback and advice on specific classroom practices. Because coaching is so customized, it can create faster and deeper insights for teachers about what can work in their classrooms, thus creating inflection points in their practice. Great advice from a trusted coach is often cited as making all the difference.

It should be no surprise that this type of interaction can be powerful for teachers. Boston Public Schools, a system recognized for significant gains in achievement, uses a range of coaching methods to support new teachers. Elements of the coaching program include assigned mentors, “teacher developers” who receive stipends for supporting teachers in their buildings, “networkers” deployed to the lowest-performing schools to build connections between new teachers and veterans, and online mentoring for second- and third-year teachers who opt to participate.

In Singapore, the Teacher’s Network models several powerful ways in which peers and professional-development experts collaborate. One aspect of the network is learning circles, in which 4 to 10 teachers work with a facilitator to solve common problems using discussions and

action research (that is, the iterative process of reflecting on current teaching practices and planned experimentation with new ones). The groups meet for eight two-hour sessions over the course of 4 to 12 months. The network also provides teacher-led workshops in which teachers present to each other and share insights and friendly criticism in a collegial fashion.

Many districts argue that a coaching-based strategy, while effective, is prohibitively expensive. However, if districts were to consider the costs and benefits of all the different delivery methods they might employ and decide only to continue using methods that produced the best return on investment, they would probably think differently. For example, a much more focused way of building a cost-effective development strategy might be to ask, “Which \$80,000 investment will most affect student outcomes by the end of this year: hiring a full-time, experienced coach to provide intensive in-classroom coaching to 15 new or struggling

teachers, or holding a two-day offsite with the entire staff of a high school?” This type of trade-off discussion can be very persuasive in moving a district toward coaching strategies.

4. Move from ‘push’ to ‘pull’

Whether a PD program uses coaching or some other delivery method, two essential success factors are that individuals be aware of and committed to the need to improve. Successful programs move participants along a spectrum of skill and awareness: at first, participants may not know what skills they lack. But through observations of peers, effective teacher evaluations, a comparative review of student outcomes, student surveys, or conversations with effective coaches or principals, teachers can come to recognize the specific skills they need to build to reach the next level of competence. Awareness of the need to build skills is essential, and even the most robust PD opportunities will fail without it. Teachers also must be committed to their own personal growth—and most of them

Awareness of the need to build skills is essential, and even the most robust PD opportunities will fail without it

already are. As teachers become aware of how they can improve, gain access to development opportunities that will help them improve, and see how their improvement will benefit their students, their commitment grows. Teachers with this awareness and commitment will seek out the PD offerings aimed at developing the skills they need.

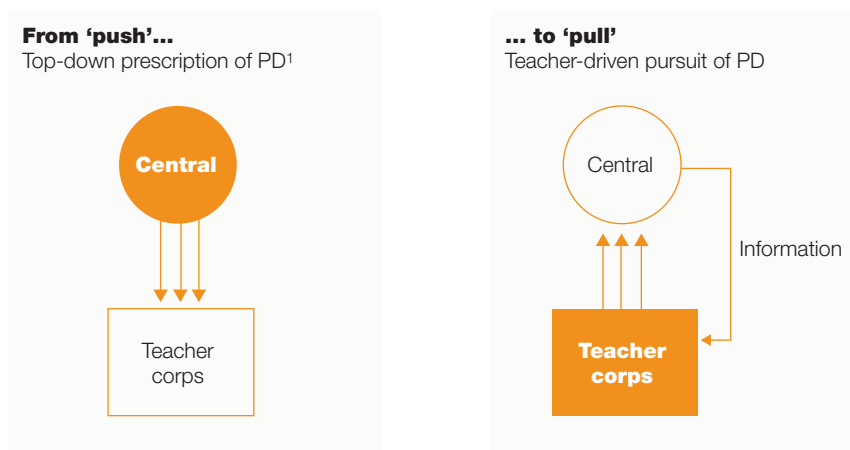
Therefore, districts can better fit PD to teacher needs and engage them in improving their skills by changing their programs from a “push” to a “pull” model. This means creating a quasi marketplace whereby teachers use feedback from their evaluations and knowledge of the segments

to which they belong to choose from the district’s easy-to-navigate set of PD offerings (Exhibit 5). Several private-sector companies have shifted to this type of professional-development model. Panasonic, for example, lets its employees choose from more than 250 professional-development offerings based on their development needs and job responsibilities. Best Buy adopted its “results-oriented learning environment” (ROLE) after becoming frustrated with a one-size-fits-all approach to employee development. The company developed the program based on feedback from its employees, who were looking for the freedom to choose among a wide variety of options.

Exhibit 5

Move from ‘push’ to ‘pull.’

CONCEPTUAL



Center prescribes PD based on high-level results

- Limited information on “why”
- Minimal customization
- Limited choice for teachers

Teachers have limited choice

Center provides information and options

- Individual teacher-development needs
- Which PD can address which needs
- Which PD is high quality and highly rated

Teachers empowered to own their development

- Choice on how to address needs
- Transparency and understanding of “why”

¹Professional development.



The pull approach puts the power to improve squarely in the teacher's hands, and it brings needed clarity to the district's role, which is to identify a teacher's development needs through observation and evaluation, communicate those needs in a compelling and easy-to-understand way, provide high-quality options for teachers to pursue aligned to each segment's needs, make those options easy to find and participate in, and ensure accountability for performance. For example, Best Buy's ROLE program balances the freedom it gives employees to choose their own development paths with a "validated certification program," which helps ensure that employees apply what they learn in training programs to their interactions with customers.

After a common induction program for all new teachers (which essentially would remain a push model), the pull model would allocate to every teacher a certain number of credits to use on the

PD programs he or she believes are relevant to individual development needs. The result would be that the district has control over what it spends on teacher development. Teachers will be more invested in PD programs that they have chosen for themselves.

Some districts may be uncomfortable moving to a 100 percent market-based approach to PD. Those that want to assert some measure of control over the choices teachers make would need to develop an appropriate communication strategy for recommending one development path over another. Regardless of how much freedom of choice the district offers its teachers, all PD must be aimed at ensuring the teacher meets the district's vision for teacher effectiveness. And as school systems and unions work together to develop better recognition systems and career paths for outstanding teachers, make the granting of tenure a much more rigorous process, and deal



Principals and teachers should have the opportunity to rate PD activities to determine how well what was learned worked in practice

more effectively with ineffective teachers, the importance of quality and choice in professional development will become even more critical. If a district's development efforts are ineffective and over-prescribed, it will be difficult to find common ground with teachers' unions on consequences for poor performance.

5. Only offer PD with demonstrated impact

There are different ways to evaluate the impact of a PD activity. In most cases, objective metrics and the resources to gather the necessary data are scarce. Where the cost and scope of an activity is broad (for example, new teacher induction), this may warrant a true research-based evaluation of a development activity. In other cases, the district might want to rely on its principals and teachers to provide—and its vendors to collect—feedback.

Principals and teachers should have the opportunity to rate PD activities to determine how well what was learned worked in practice. These rating opportunities should be offered both immediately and after a reasonable period of time. The reason for the second rating is to give a new idea a chance of surviving what may be negative early responses or to show that it actually worked.

Districts could require vendors to include and implement their own rigorous evaluations of their work. Vendors that fail to demonstrate results would face contract termination, and teachers would be assured that the district will discontinue any offerings that do not receive largely positive feedback. Districts should build scorecards for each offering and for each vendor, and they should use them to decide which offerings and vendors are doing well and should continue, as

well as which are not working and should be discontinued. Although general measures of teacher performance—such as changes in their annual evaluations or in their students’ assessment scores—could be included in these evaluations, it is more difficult to link these outcome metrics to a specific PD activity. Therefore, districts should not rely on them too heavily when assessing a vendor.

Only offering PD with demonstrated impact—and avoiding the temptation to “fill time”—sends several good messages. To teachers, it is a clear statement that the district values their time, contractually agreed upon or otherwise, and that the central office will hold itself to high standards in the same way it holds teachers to high standards. To principals, it signals that the central office will not waste their teachers’ time. It pushes vendors to bring their best to the system, to uphold high quality standards, and to make sure their offerings make a difference for students and are well received by teachers. And finally, it pays

respect to the value of the trust and resources that taxpayers commit to public education.



Every teacher, at every level of experience and performance, can improve in some way. And every professional, in every industry, needs guidance from others on what needs to improve and how to go about improving it. Without breaking the habit of bad PD, opposition to reform efforts will remain, students will be deprived of the effective teaching they need, and improved outcomes will be slow to materialize. While many reform topics are contentious, taking a more systematic and effective approach to developing teacher talent is an area where districts and teachers’ unions can and must collaborate. ○