

# Pennsylvania Educational Leadership



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# Pennsylvania Educational Leadership

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# **Pennsylvania Educational Leadership**

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# Does an Autonomous Professional Development Model Reflect Professional Development Standards? A Mixed-Methods Case Study

Katia Ciampa, Zora M. Wolfe, William R. Merchant  
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*The purpose of this mixed-methods case study is to examine teachers' perceptions of their school district's autonomous professional development model and determine the extent to which their professional development experiences align with the attributes known to improve teaching practice and student achievement. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from Learning Forward's Standards Assessment Inventory (2011), which was administered to 191 elementary, middle, and high school teachers from a large, suburban public school district in the northeastern USA. Teachers were asked to rate the degree to which their school district's professional development model adhered to Learning Forward's (2011) seven professional development standards. Descriptive statistics revealed that of the seven professional development standards, "Leadership" ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = .89$ ) was the highest rated standard and "Data" ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) was rated as the lowest standard met by the teachers' school district. Issues that need to be addressed to facilitate the productive use of professional development standards in teachers' professional development will be explored. The findings from this study also inform future decision-making and improvements that can better satisfy the needs of teachers as agents in their professional development.*

In the current era of school improvement and education reform, the importance of supporting teachers in developing the skills and knowledge to increase student learning within their classrooms is beginning to be recognized (Zepeda, 2012). Research consistently shows that professional development is an essential characteristic that substantially increases student learning (Desimone, 2009; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001; Smith & Gillespie, 2007).

Regardless of its structure and format, professional development has often become a compliance exercise rather than a learning activity for most teachers, one of which they have limited choice (Gates, 2014). Even though effective professional development should demonstrate respect for teachers as professionals and as adult learners (DuFour & DuFour, 2013), and as professionals, all teachers are entitled to make choices regarding their professional development trajectories (Frost, 2012), fewer than one in three teachers in a Boston Consulting Group study reported having chosen most or all of their professional development opportunities, and nearly one in five never had a say in their professional development (PD). Allowing choice in professional development carries the potential to develop teachers' autonomy and voice, which enables them to enhance their teaching effectiveness (Frost, 2012). Specifically, this autonomy refers to teachers' capacity, and the exercise of that capacity, to act independently of another authority, and act as they see fit in relation to their own professional development goals (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

The school district featured in this mixed-methods study employs a unique autonomous model of professional development, which allows teachers to determine areas and activities in which they want to focus their professional development. In addition to regularly scheduled in-service teacher professional development days, which include formats to allow for choice (i.e., meetings, seminars and workshops), teachers can flexibly choose from multiple options both within and outside of the district to fulfill their additional contractual days of professional development.

The school district in this study has implemented this autonomous professional development model in a concerted effort to place teachers at the center of their own professional development and growth. However, the district was interested in exploring whether their intentions are being actualized to the fullest extent possible. Moreover, one of the challenges of professional development is navigating the tension between allowing the flexibility of self-directed learning and ensuring quality, effective, and standards-based professional development, particularly across a district comprised of a wide range of teachers at the elementary and secondary level (Sandholtz & Scribner, 2006).

High-quality professional development—when thoughtfully conceived, well-designed, and fully supported—is at the heart all successful educational improvement efforts (Corwin, Learning Forward, & National Education Association, 2017). However, understanding what high-quality professional development looks like does not guarantee that teachers actually experience it. Standards-driven professional development is the single most accessible means that teachers have to develop the new knowledge, skills, and practices necessary to better meet the diverse learning needs of their students (Crow, 2017).

In 2011, Learning Forward, the only nonprofit international membership association devoted exclusively to advancing professional development for K-12 student success, developed the most recent iteration of the Standards for Professional development in collaboration with 40 North American professional associations and education organizations, including the National Education Association (NEA). The seven Standards describe the essential research-based conditions and elements of professional development that lead to changes in teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student results (Corwin et al., 2017).

The standards are not a prescription for how education leaders and public officials should address all the challenges related to improving the performance of teachers and their students; rather, the standards provide a framework that ensures stakeholders at all levels consider the factors that support results-oriented professional development (Crow, 2017). Implementation of each Standard is required to realize the full potential of professional development. How does the professional development that teachers engage in compare to the Standards for Professional development (Learning Forward, 2011)? When professional development incorporates the indicators of effectiveness defined in the Standards, educator effectiveness and student learning increases (Corwin et al., 2017). This paper seeks to understand the teachers' perceptions of the quality of their district's autonomous professional development model using the Learning Forward Standards (2011) as a framework for professional development. Accordingly, the following research question guided this study: What are K-12 teachers' perceptions of the quality

of autonomous professional development as measured by the Standards for Professional development?

### **Literature Review**

Professional development has gone through a “reform” movement over the past decade. High-quality professional development (PD) has been linked to higher-quality teaching and subsequent student achievement (Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Desimone, 2009). Engaging and effective professional development for teachers remains a critical lever for districts in building the capacity of teachers to achieve ambitious student learning goals. The need for professional development is not in question: rigorous Common Core State Standards, changing demographics, and shifting priorities all require highly skilled teachers and leaders in every school (Crow, 2017).

Given the above concerns, it is of value to consider the alignment between professional development standards in practice and the relevant literature on professional development for teachers. Creating standards that span across a teacher’s career is a starting point in underlining the importance of professional development. There is a growing body of research on effective professional development opportunities. As will be described below, Learning Forward’s (2011) *Standards for Professional Development* outline the elements of and conditions required for impact-driven professional development. The seven standards, which have been adopted or adapted in 35 US states and in all of Canada’s 10 provinces and three territories, clarify what a system of effective professional development entails and shape directions for policy and system shifts that can make such professional development accessible to all educators. According to Learning Forward (2011), a nationally recognized organization dedicated to supporting high quality professional development for educators, “high-quality” professional development should be aligned with and measured by the following standards: Learning Communities, Leadership, Resources, Data, Learning Design, Implementation, Outcomes. These domains are a compilation of literature detailing characteristics of strong professional development (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001; Smith & Gillespie, 2007).

Teachers themselves must not be underestimated for the resources they bring to reforming professional development (Learning Forward, 2011). Accordingly, this study brings forth the voices of teachers who evaluated the extent to which their school district’s professional development model offers autonomy and choice while also displaying characteristics of established standards for professional development. The following section delineates whether and how each professional development standard relates to and can support teacher autonomy in their continued professional development.

### **Learning Communities**

The Learning Communities standard recognizes that “professional development that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment” (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 2). A professional development community (PLC) assumes that teachers are autonomous, continuous learners who reflect collaboratively on practice in an iterative cycle of grappling with novel ideas, applying these to practice, and reflecting individually and collaboratively on the effects (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006). This model

of self-development will be compromised if the system into which it is placed lays too many restrictions on teachers' autonomy.

Effective PLCs are school-based and integral to school operations, not held in 'one-off' sessions (Baker & Smith, 1999; Garet et al., 2001; Schechter, 2010). Specifically, a PLC is designed to be continuous and ongoing, involving follow-up and support for further learning on sustained and needs-based terms, obliging the learning teacher to direct their own learning (Stoll et al., 2006). It is suggested that this comes about because teachers who have entered learning communities tend to act more autonomously, developing greater confidence, a greater belief in their ability to make a difference to pupil learning, enthusiasm for collaborative working, and a greater commitment to changing practice and trying things out (Earley & Porritt, 2010; Stoll et al. 2006).

### **Leadership**

According to Learning Forward (2011), "Professional development that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional development" (p.2). This idea aligns with a transformational leadership model, which focuses on soliciting creative thinking, attending to individual needs, and articulating a clear vision. Transformational school leadership influences a teacher's autonomous motivation when the school leader develops a clear vision, frames school goals including high academic goals, and gains staff consensus on desired outcomes (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Transformational leadership dimensions (e.g. vision building, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration) were found to directly influence teachers' amount of motivation, which in turn affected students' achievements and learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Conversely, a transactional leadership model, focusing on efficiency and provision of rewards for complying with organizational rules, policies, and procedures (Bass, 1985), has been described as controlling and as hindering followers' self-determination and autonomy (Gagne & Deci, 2005).

### **Resources**

According to Learning Forward (2011), "professional development that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning" (p.2). For example, organizations must demonstrate their priorities through the allocation of resources—time, money, technology, educational materials, assessment, and personnel (Kwakman, 2003). In addition, in the context of this study, autonomy and support from colleagues are also identified as important job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Although policy makers have an interest in investments made to enhance professional practice and student learning outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), this interest should not disregard teachers' professional autonomy for enhancing their practice. Educators should assume control and responsibility for the professional development resources they use and need.

### **Data**

The fourth professional development standard, Data, refers to "professional development that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students, and uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional

development” (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 2). Data-driven decision-making is an effort to capitalize on information available at the school level to improve classroom instruction and, ultimately, the educational performance of students. As mentioned above, school districts are allocating resources to increase the use of student achievement data to inform instructional practices in schools. According to Huffman and Kalnin (2003), the process of collecting and evaluating data, as well as reflection, help teachers break the cycle of isolation, critically inquire about their teaching, and focus on evidence-based decisions. Any effective data-driven decision-making plan should be characterized by several common traits, one of which is that systems should provide teachers with sufficient autonomy to make site-based and data informed decisions (Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2010).

### **Learning Designs**

The Learning Design Standard states that “professional development that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes” (Learning Forward, 2011, p.2). Teachers’ professional development is largely a product of formal and informal social interactions among the teachers, situated in the context of their school and the classrooms in which they teach and distributed across the entire staff (Ross et al., 2011). Informal professional development opportunities, including the use of online learning resources, lend themselves to a self-directed learning experience, wherein learning occurs with a sense of autonomy, motivation, and learner control (Beach, 2017). For example, when given the opportunity, teachers might self-direct their learning by first identifying their needs. Then, teachers may decide which professional development approach will best meet their needs (e.g., face-to-face or online support).

It is important to note that strong professional development communities afford individual teachers a high degree of professional autonomy as they are a common identity and vision around teacher and student learning (Scribner, Hager, & Warne, 2002). Thus, communities should be thought of as autonomous yet collaborative learners who come together to share certain values and beliefs, but maintain an individual identity (professional autonomy and individual development) *and* concurrently belong to a professional development community (shared identity).

### **Implementation**

The Implementation standard deals with “professional development that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students and applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional development for long-term change” (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 2). Ownership or teacher autonomy is identified as an important influencing factor on implementation of professional development (Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2010). Tokar, Fischer, and Mezydlo Subich (1998) found that people with higher levels of control and autonomy fare better in change related processes. This may imply that schools at which the majority of staff members have higher feelings of control and autonomy implement educational changes more effectively than at schools where staff members have a diminished sense of control and autonomy.

## **Outcomes**

Learning Forward (2011) states that “professional development that increases educator effectiveness and results for students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards” (p. 2). As abovementioned, the major influence on teachers’ extent of autonomy occurred when the principal develops a clear vision, frames school goals and gains staff consensus on desired outcomes, and accordingly, professional development should align with the stated vision and outcomes. The provision of increased control and autonomy to teachers also leads to a greater sense of responsibility and motivation to implement organizational goals (Barnett & McCormick, 2003; Leithwood & Mascal, 2008).

## **Methodology**

Based on a mixed-methods case study design, the research was conducted in a large suburban public school district in the northeastern United States. Case studies are undertaken when educational researchers want to derive in-depth understandings of a phenomenon that is unique or unusual (Creswell, 2012). In this sense, this single-case design utilized methodological triangulation to strengthen the study of a single district’s professional development model (Patton, 2002). Qualitative and quantitative survey data were collected from the K-12 teachers to capture the participants’ experiences, attitudes, concerns, and needs regarding their professional development. Accordingly, this study used a triangulation mixed methods design in which the quantitative and qualitative datasets carried equal weight, priority, and consideration (Creswell, 2012).

## **Study Site and Participants**

The site of this study is a large suburban school district in the northeastern United States. The school district consists of one high school (grades 9-12), one middle school (grades 6-8), and seven elementary schools (K-5). In the 2015-16 school year, the district served 5,448 students and employed 424 teachers. The demographic makeup of the school was 80% White, 11% African American, 4% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 0.2% American Indian, and 2% multiracial, with 41% receiving free or reduced-price lunch, and 20% receiving special education services. The teachers in the district have an average of 15 years of educational experience in total, mostly within the same district.

## **Data Collection**

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected via an online survey. On the day of the survey launch, the survey link was emailed to 424 potential respondents from Domino School District (pseudonym used). Respondents were given three weeks to complete the survey. During the survey administration, three follow-up reminders were sent to maximize the response rate (Fan & Yan, 2010). A total of 191 responses were gathered from the survey, representing a 45% response rate, which is considered acceptable for Web-based instruments (Manfreda, Bosnjak, Berzelak, Haas, & Vehovar, 2008). Of the 191 participants, the majority were female (71.4%). In terms of experience, the plurality of respondents reported having between 17 and 25 years of experience (29.3%) followed by those with 11 to 16 years (24.4%), 5 to 10 years (22.8%), more than 25 years (12.7%), 1 to 4 years (9.1%) and lastly those with less than 1 year (1.6%). Similarly, when experience was measured within the teacher’s current school most had been employed between 10 and 20 years in the same school (36.9%), followed by 5 to 9 years (22.9%), 2 to 4 years (16.3%), 21 or more years (15.7%) and a year or less (8.2%). The

distribution among school settings was fairly even, with roughly a third of teachers employed at elementary (37.1%), middle (32.5%) or high schools (30.4%).

The first part of the online survey contained seven questions that addressed participants' demographic and background information (age, gender, years of teaching experience, etc.). The following Table 1 contains demographic information about the teacher respondents.

**Table 1.**  
*Demographics*

		Frequency	%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	67	35.1
	Female	124	64.9
<b>Experience</b>	Less than 1 year	2	1.0
	1-4 years	16	8.4
	5-10 years	44	23.0
	11-16 years	47	24.6
	17-25 years	56	29.3
	More than 25 years	26	13.6
<b>Years at current school</b>	0-1 year	14	7.3
	2-4 years	33	17.3
	5-9 years	41	21.5
	10-20 years	74	38.7
	21 or more years	27	14.1
<b>School setting</b>	Elementary	67	35.1
	Middle school	73	38.2
	High school	51	26.7
	Secondary (Middle and High combined)	124	64.9

The second part of the survey included 50 questions from the Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI; Learning Forward, 2011), a self-report instrument (see Appendix A) which measures the alignment between a school's professional development practices with the seven Standards for Professional development (Learning Forward, 2011). The seven standards are described above. This scale uses a unipolar response scale on a 5-point continuum (1 = Never, 2 = Seldom, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Frequently, 5 = Always). Sample closed-ended items include: "My school's leaders consider all staff members to be capable of being professional development leaders" (Leadership Standard) and "Teachers' input is taken into consideration when planning schoolwide professional development" (Learning Designs Standard). All items demonstrated strong factor coefficients, with an average loading of 0.83 which provides evidence of construct validity (Denmark & Weaver, 2012). Researchers also added 15 open-ended questions (see Appendix A) that asked participants to describe their level of satisfaction with their school's professional development model as it related to each professional development standard as well

as offer suggestions for improving the model to support autonomous, choice-based teacher professional development.

### **Data Analysis**

A mixed methods approach was used to gather and analyze quantitative and qualitative data. All quantitative analyses were performed using the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 23 for Windows (IBM Corp., 2014). All scores from the question items within each standard were combined into a single composite score to obtain the means and standard deviations (Table 2). To address the research question, a cutoff score of four or higher was chosen to indicate that a particular SAI construct was represented within a PD program at a “high standard” level (Table 3).

The results of the quantitative data (i.e., close-ended survey items) were analyzed using descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies, means, and standard deviations) and concurrently compared and integrated with the qualitative data (i.e., open-ended survey items). After several readings of the data files, the researchers linked the qualitative and quantitative data to this study's research question.

Qualitative data analysis included open coding and collapsing these data into the seven standards for professional development (Learning Forward, 2011). These data were used to create a narrative depiction of Domino School District that employs an autonomous professional development model. After several readings of the teachers’ responses to the open-ended items within each professional development standard, the researchers highlighted and coded recurring words, phrases, and patterns. The codes represented categories that were in response to the research question and specifically aligned one of the seven standards. The researchers selected the most frequently cited responses and illustrative quotes that were most representative of the findings for each professional development standard. The researchers coded all qualitative data independently, meeting subsequently to share individual interpretations and negotiate a shared understanding with any disagreements resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. In this way, analytic-inductive methods (Creswell, 2012) were used to separately draw findings and then collaboratively deduce the quality of professional development that was occurring in the school district, as reflected in the seven professional development standards (Learning Forward, 2011) and perceived by the teacher respondents.

### **Findings**

The following findings address the research question that focuses on the teachers’ perceptions of the quality of their district’s autonomous professional development model as measured by the seven standards for professional development (Learning Forward, 2011). Table 2 presents the individual SAI items that were averaged across their respective standard to create mean and standard deviation scores.

**Table 2.***Descriptive Statistics for SAI Standards*

<b>Standard</b> ( <i>n</i> = 190)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Learning Communities	3.12	0.79
Leadership	3.64	0.89
Resources	2.99	0.8
Data	2.83	1.05
Learning Designs	3.03	0.85
Implementation	3.01	1.01
Outcomes	3.25	0.95

A frequency analysis of these subscales means revealed that the majority were below the “frequently” (4) or higher cutoff (Table 3). Six of the seven subscale means were below 4 at a rate of greater than 70%. The findings from these tables will be discussed below.

**Table 3.***Frequency of Standard Being Rated “Frequently” (4) or Higher*

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Cutoff</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Community	< 4	159	83.2
	≥ 4	31	16.2
Leadership	< 4	112	58.6
	≥ 4	77	40.3
Resources	< 4	165	86.4
	≥ 4	25	13.1
Data	< 4	157	82.2
	≥ 4	33	17.3
Learning Design	< 4	158	82.7
	≥ 4	32	16.8
Implementation	< 4	147	77
	≥ 4	43	22.5
Outcomes	< 4	135	70.7
	≥ 4	54	28.3

*Note. Standards rated on 5 point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, 5 = always)*

## Learning Communities

Only 16% of all respondents ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = .79$ ) believed that the Learning Communities standard is *frequently* or *always* met at their respective schools. Thirty-one percent of teachers noted that their grade level and/or same-subject partners met informally every week and formally every month to collaborate on how to improve student learning. However, according to 17% of teachers, it was very difficult to collaborate (especially across grades and subject areas) due to scheduling conflicts, limited common planning times, lack of consistency, and a lack of organizational structure:

Learning communities struggle to perform well because of the large number of professionals involved and the difficulty of scheduling sessions when all can attend...many professionals are members of parallel learning communities. (Survey respondent 15)

Frustrating...teachers need time to meet and discuss and reflect and plan in order to be successful and in order to create learning environments where the students can be successful. We do not have this time during the school week. (Survey respondent 16)

The teachers expressed similar sentiments regarding the lack of preparation time built into their teaching schedules to meet with content- and grade-level teachers, which made the concept of professional development communities (PLCs) an infeasible reality. Moreover, the respondents noted that their PLCs were not monitored by the principal, but rather occurred informally in the hallways or between class periods. Additional challenges to scheduling consistent meeting times arose due to the teachers being on multiple teams. Teacher input and choice was limited as it related to degree of flexibility of schedules, decision making, and presence of common planning time.

## Leadership

Of the seven standards, Leadership was the highest rated standard ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = .89$ ). Forty percent of all teachers acknowledged that their school leader *frequently* regarded professional development as a top priority for all staff and provided teachers with equitable resources to support their individual and collaborative goals for professional development.

In response to the following question, “Based on your teacher performance data, please describe your level of satisfaction with the current professional development opportunities,” 20% percent of all teachers were “satisfied” with the offerings and administrator feedback which provided them opportunities for growth and professional development that catered to their needs.

I think by having teachers decide what topics to cover, it has allowed for more connection to what is needed and relevant to us...blanket in-services were not efficient or effective. (Survey respondent 22)

Administrator feedback I have received during the pre/post conferences (clinical observation cycles) has been helpful-I would rate that as highly satisfactory. (Survey respondent 35)

Although respondents appreciated being able to choose the topics for their professional development, they also indicated the desire to have more time for professional reflection. Respondents also wanted to be more involved in the initial planning of professional development opportunities and requested that their input be sought more frequently to assist in making professional development design and delivery decisions that would impact their own learning:

I would like more professional development opportunities related to how I will be evaluated. It is a new and fairly difficult process to wade through. Knowing the expectations ahead of time would be helpful. (Survey respondent 170)

Although an important part of the leadership standard is to develop capacity for professional development, when asked about their desire to teach a professional development course and their experience as a teacher leader, several participants shared responses that indicated that they did not see themselves as teacher leaders (n=8), that they did not see themselves having any area of expertise to offer to others (n=11), or felt uncomfortable teaching their peers (n=4).

## **Resources**

Only 13% of respondents reported that their professional development program *frequently* or *always* meets this standard ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = .80$ ). With regard to the item, “In my school, time is available for teachers during the school day for professional development” (Question item 15), and as mentioned above, the large percentage of respondents (42%) stated that very limited time was available during the school day to collaborate and plan with their colleagues.

However, to capitalize on existing resources within the district, the participating school district has also developed an in-house professional development program which comprises of face-to-face and online courses taught by expert teachers within and outside the school district. Thirteen respondents noted “the in-house courses” as their most valuable resource. The majority (60%) of respondents took these courses. As evidenced by the following quotes, the respondents enjoyed the in-house aspect of colleagues teaching colleagues:

Since all the "students" were colleagues it also offered great opportunities to collaborate, share experiences, and work across the curriculum. (Survey respondent 43)

I feel as if the instructors know what's going on within the district and have a pulse on the reality of academics today. This is different from university classes and that is why I prefer to take our district's courses over other universities or outside professional development courses. (Survey respondent 165)

Related to the Resources standard, respondents were also asked to rate the following item, “Teachers in my school have access to various technology resources for professional development” (Question item 18). Thirty nine percent of respondents reportedly *always* had access to various technology resources for professional development, including (but not limited to): curriculum-based (discipline-specific) technology resources such as professional

organizations and blogs (e.g., “International Literacy Association,” “Scholastic Top Teaching Blogs,” and “ASCD Smartbrief”). Finally, 4% of teachers attend state and national conferences related to their specialist area (i.e., “National Science Teacher Association,” “American Speech-Language-Hearing Association,” and “Council for Exceptional Children”).

### **Data**

In this survey, “Data” was the lowest rated standard ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). When the participants were asked about what types of student achievement data their school is currently using to plan professional development (Question item 27), 28% of the respondents assumed that state standardized tests or informal reading inventories (e.g., Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Reading Assessment) were used. However, a larger percentage (35%) of respondents indicated that they were unsure what types of data were used to plan professional development. Typical comments included the following:

I only know what is used in my class. Unfortunately, I think a lot of what we use are statistics and data from the state. There are few pieces of information that we use that are specific to my student achievement. (Survey respondent 47)

I am not aware of how our professional development is planned – the professional development plan is just provided to us. (Survey respondent 116)

Interestingly, although respondents reported that professional development within the school district is informed by data, presumably student achievement state data and Student Learning Objectives (SLOs), respondents were not privy to the specific types of data used to drive the district’s decision-making process.

### **Learning Design**

For this standard, only 13% of the participants answered that the district’s professional development *frequently* or *always* met this standard ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = .85$ ). However, the overwhelming majority of teachers expressed high levels of satisfaction with their school district’s autonomous professional development model as it provided teachers with valuable and differentiated professional development opportunities:

As a professional, I appreciate having the freedom to choose topics that benefits (sic) me the most. (Survey respondent 138)

It [autonomous model] provides me with the opportunity to support my own personal strengths and needs as a teacher. (Survey respondent 67)

It [autonomous model] is much improved and more motivating to learn about topics that are personally meaningful. (Survey respondent 138)

Teachers noted that although the district is making progress and getting better at providing choices, there is still room for improvement as the respondents were concerned that the available opportunities were less relevant, applicable, and hands-on:

I think that seminars with every level of education as a target audience are not always effective. For example, I attended a special education seminar run by a high school teacher. While the teacher was knowledgeable, they had far more support staff and resources available, so I could not apply the suggestions and strategies that he was offering. (Survey respondent 73)

I would like to see more choices and hands on applications that can be utilized immediately the next day in class to make my job more efficient. (Survey respondent 13)

Most professional development is done outside of the teaching day and feels disjointed. (Survey respondent 99)

Thirty-nine percent of respondents reported that they *seldom* “have opportunities to observe each other as one type of job-embedded professional development” (Question item 30).

Respondents were also asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the district’s professional development delivery model (i.e., face-to-face seminar/workshop, online learning [Question item 37]). Respondents were generally very satisfied with the delivery model; however, the perennial tension between face-to-face versus online instructional methods was evident where some teachers preferred one strategy over the other (e.g., “I learn better in a face-to-face, small group, hands-on setting” [Survey respondent 61] versus “We need more online learning opportunities” [Survey respondent 59]). Underlying this tension is the limitation of time. Respondents recognized that online courses offer more flexibility, “You can hold PLCs before and/or after school without having to worry about travel time” (Survey respondent 106). However, 10% of respondents recommended that a blended delivery model that combined online and face-to-face elements be implemented, and most notably, allowed teachers to select their preferred choice in the delivery model of their professional development opportunities:

Perhaps we could have a face-to-face seminar, followed by an online component. That way, you can leave the seminar with a plan, then discuss the implementation and effectiveness of your plan online with your colleagues. (Survey respondent 36)

Each person learns differently. Give teachers an opportunity to choose if they would like to do face to face or online learning for in-service days. (Survey respondent 46)

### **Implementation**

According to Table 3, 23% of the respondents felt that the district professional development *frequently* or *always* meets this standard ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ). However, the overwhelming majority of respondents (75%) agreed that the “primary goal for professional development in my school is [*always* or *frequently*] to enhance teaching practices to improve student performance.” Although 58% of the responses indicated that professional development was based on research about effective school change, specific comments related to lack of time (“There is not enough time to digest a concept in order to use it in the classroom” [Survey respondent 110] and “There is very little time for teacher reflection” [Survey respondent 20]) were noted as hindrances to fully implementing new professional development.

Although 39% of all respondents believed that their school *frequently* has a consistent professional development plan in place for three to five years, the following comments denote a lack of consistency with multiple initiatives constantly being introduced, and a lack of communication between administrators and teachers, which subsequently resulted in a lack of buy-in from some faculty:

It would be great if we picked an area to work on and stuck with that area for 3-5 years to see real change. Many of the initiatives that come through are discussed for a day or two, then forgotten. When I first started, there was a huge push to put reading into the classroom. This was used for 1-2 years, then the initiative was dropped. We used to have (name removed) Reads where students had 15 minutes of reading each day. It seemed that once English test scores were on the rise, we didn't have time in our schedule for those 15 minutes and the initiative was dropped. At a certain point in the cycle, you become skeptical and ask, "How much time should I invest in this? How long will this initiative last for?" (Survey respondent 2)

It seems to be consistently the case that there are many directives and initiatives that come down simultaneously or right on each other's backs that it can be hard to know where to focus our attention. (Survey respondent 150)

Although the teachers could aptly identify their school's learning goals for the upcoming year ("continue to improve student achievement and increase students' learning outcomes" [Survey respondent 49]) and realized the importance of "evaluating student materials to establish learning goals" (Survey respondent 55), the teachers expressed concern that too many changes or too many foci for professional development may interfere with teachers' implementation of professional development to improve student performance.

### **Outcomes**

Only 28% of the respondents indicated that the district *frequently* or *always* meets the Outcomes standard ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .95$ ). When asked about specific connections between professional development and outcomes, 40% felt that their professional development experiences *sometimes* connected with teacher performance standards, and 38% believed their school *sometimes* used student learning outcomes to plan professional development. Likewise, 41% of respondents reported that professional development in their school *sometimes* contributes to increased student achievement. When asked if their school's learning goals were met in the previous year, the majority (58%) of respondents were unsure:

I don't know that the learning goals-other than successfully reaching state testing outcomes-was (sic) ever presented. If they were, then those goals should be posted somewhere for repeated access and awareness. (Survey respondent 11)

I'm not sure if they were met. I don't think this was shared with us. I can only speak to my classes which met the learning goals that were expected. We don't often get concrete goals or data from the district - usually just test scores. No reflection was discussed at the end of the year. (Survey respondent 44)

I am not sure. It seems like there is never enough time allotted for professionals to sit together and discuss results. Everyone is expected to rush, rush, rush through curriculum which allows very little collaboration time to discuss important issues. (Survey respondent 140)

This finding also coincides with the teachers' previous responses regarding the types of data that were used to plan professional development. Although the respondents conceded that data, namely, state-level achievement data, were likely used to drive their professional development opportunities, the teachers were not sure what other types of data were used (if any) and whether their school's learning goals had been met. The teachers' responses indicate that they were not analyzing or interpreting data during their professional development meetings.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this mixed-methods case study is to examine teachers' perceptions of a school district's professional development model that offered them choice and autonomy. Learning Forward's (2011) seven standards for professional development were used to evaluate the success and shortcomings of a school district's autonomous professional development model. Three consistent themes emerged from the data: the importance of maintaining a transformative leadership style, the importance of recognizing teachers' as agents of their own professional development, and the importance of protecting time for professional development.

#### **Transformative Leadership**

The results of this study indicate that the school leaders at Domino School District are making improvements to their professional development model and providing more opportunities for teachers to make their own choices on professional development offerings. To some extent, the Domino School District administrators could be described as transformational leaders who consider their staff members' needs, display individualized consideration by attending to individual needs and differences, work toward higher levels of potential, provide intellectual stimulation, and challenge followers (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Survey respondents appreciated being able to autonomously choose the topics for their professional development which catered to their learning needs and style. Notwithstanding, the leaders at Domino School District also displayed characteristics of transactional or monitoring leadership, who maintained tight logistical control by checking on the progress and quality of work, and by monitoring and evaluating teachers' performance based on predetermined criteria (Bass, 1985).

A supporting "transformational" school leader seems to be an important factor. School leaders who express a clear vision for data use and transparency as well as established norms and goals for data use will likely have increased teacher autonomy, buy in or belief in the importance of data use in the school (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Although the respondents acknowledged that their schools used a variety of (quantitative) data to monitor the effectiveness of professional development, they were not privy to the specific types of data used to drive the district's decision-making process. Teachers also saw that the outcomes were not systematically applied to innovate teaching, school-wide curricula and/or school performance. School leaders used, for example, final standardized state scores to evaluate teachers' performance in general, but the results were not used for improvement-oriented actions, such as professional development.

Rather, teachers made assumptions about school or district wide professional development goals and could only identify their own individual professional development goals.

Even with a full choice model of professional development, governing bodies still impinge a school district's ability to implement a transformational leadership style due to accountability requirements, which affects professional development. New programs and initiatives, academic standards, and testing requirements of students have consumed resources for professional development and compliance (De Neve et al., 2015). Consequently, fewer resources remain to support individual or local professional development priorities. As noted by the teachers, a source of constraint came from educational authorities that have as their goal the regulation of teachers' actions which take the form of new curricular initiatives, pressures from state mandated testing, and standardized practices, to name a few. On the one hand, the school leaders were making a concerted effort to provide their teachers with more agency and choice in their professional development; on the other hand, the leaders were hampered by the constant rollout of state- and district-driven initiatives, making it difficult to complete goals and find common ground (Archibald et al., 2011). In line with this reasoning, Pelletier et al. (2002) demonstrated that teachers who perceived more pressure from above (e.g. the need to comply with a curriculum or with performance standards), often associated with transactional leadership (Quinn, 1988; Spreitzer et al., 1999), were less self-determined regarding teaching.

### **Teacher Agency**

Respondents in this study responded positively to and were very appreciative of the fact that the district implemented the autonomous model of professional development. According to Gates (2014), teachers who have more choice report much higher levels of satisfaction with professional development. Coinciding with the characteristics of successful job-embedded professional development, the in-house professional development program at Domino School District linked learning to the immediate and real-life problems faced by the teachers in their respective schools (Zepeda, 2012).

Although the teachers at Domino School District appreciated the latitude to choose their professional development courses, they still felt that they did not have an equal voice in decision-making regarding in-service professional development content and format. Relevance, immediate feedback, and transfer of skills into practice were three attributes of the district's professional development that were present albeit in a lesser degree (Zepeda, 2012). Respondents claimed that the content covered in their in-service workshops did not allow for immediate application, were not relevant to their current situation, and less tailored to the teachers' specific learning needs. Teachers sought greater input with regards to the delivery modes they would like to see being used while receiving in-service training.

Teachers at Domino School District seemingly assumed some control and responsibility for the professional development resources they used and needed. Teachers reported attending conferences and workshops, as well as participating in self-directed online learning experiences such as content-specific professional development websites, which lend themselves to greater learner control and autonomy, and ultimately intrinsic motivation to learn (Beach, 2017).

## **Protecting Time**

As expected, time is an important factor in professional development, even when a district employs a model of autonomous professional development. Structured time was overwhelmingly identified by teachers as a recurring concern and significant barrier to fully implementing new professional development, engaging in reflective practice, and coordinating PLC meetings with colleagues throughout the school day. With regard to learning communities, the teachers in this study noted that there was very little in-school preparation time for grade-level and cross-grade colleagues to collaborate, which made the concept of PLCs an infeasible reality. Instead, informal and often impromptu conversations occurred between colleagues in the hallways or between class periods. With teachers being on multiple teams, consistent meetings were difficult to schedule. As such, the district's model of professional development was compromised by excessive restrictions on teachers' autonomy; teacher input and choice was limited as it related to degree of flexibility of schedules, decision making, and presence of common planning time. Observing and reflecting on each other's practices and receiving feedback were not a part of the autonomous professional development model.

In addition to the need for common meeting times, many respondents indicated the desire to have more time for professional reflection. Respondents indicated that although they had less responsibility and input in making professional development design and delivery decisions, and viewed their appraisal process as short, infrequent, less transparent and open. Subsequently the teachers' performance evaluation process reverted to a minimalist approach that emphasized checklists at the expense of a more time-intensive professional approach supporting reflective practice (Fitzgerald, Youngs & Grootenboer, 2003).

## **Implications**

As one considers reforms to teacher professional development, this study highlights the importance of some ideas for districts to keep in mind: the importance of maintaining a transformative leadership style, the importance of recognizing teachers' as agents of their own professional development, and the importance of protecting time for professional development. Even when this district tried to align with established Standards for Professional development (Learning Forward, 2011) by providing teachers with choice around their own professional development, these themes were repeated throughout the teachers' assessment of their professional development.

Transformational leaders provide ample opportunities for: teacher self-reflection and goal setting; shadowing, coaching, and mentoring from peers and leaders; regular classroom observation; and the provision of constructive feedback as an ongoing dialogue not an annual discussion (Fitzgerald et al., 2003). Teachers' direct and continued involvement in and engagement with the development, implementation and review of any professional development and performance management process is critical to its success and longevity (Forde, McMahon, Hamilton & Murray, 2016). As the respondents noted, school districts need to be more transparent about how teacher and student data is being used to plan professional development, so teachers can be engaged with their leaders.

A reliable and user-friendly learning management system that serves as a repository for data and professional development resources will ensure that time is well spent, teachers have

instant access to school data and learning goals, and administrators can effectively arrange group professional development throughout the school year. Online resource documents might be created that contain domain-specific instructional strategies and sample assessments for teachers to reference during their meetings. An online learning management system that contains additional professional development resources provides a level of convenience, self-directed learning, and ongoing personalized support that conventional professional development does not (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2015).

Without question, the autonomous professional development model was driven by the desire to support teacher agency as it allowed teachers a moderate degree of autonomy and choice over their professional development. The balance between supporting teacher autonomy and meeting district- and state-driven goals and initiatives is a challenging feat for school leaders (Calvert, 2016). It is envisaged, however, that the participating teachers' responses offer useful conditions that, when adapted to suit local contexts, can help schools and districts move toward greater autonomy and high-quality standards-based professional development. For example, including teachers in the development and design of professional development for the district, or providing more opportunities for teachers to work with colleagues around their own problems of practice, can transform professional development by providing teachers with a greater sense of agency (Calvert, 2016).

In a learning community, teachers must be ready to confront the siloed way in which schools (i.e., middle and secondary schools) are organized (e.g., departments, grade levels, subject areas), and they must be committed collaboratively to provide support (Zepeda, 2012). Allocations for time should be considered by school district administrators when budgeting for teacher release time, such as block scheduling, hiring additional qualified substitute teachers, extending the school calendar, or changing existing faculty time commitments. A weekly, bi- or tri-weekly workday-scheduled staff meeting could be replaced with professional development activities, such as peer observations, debriefings, co-planning, and data analysis, rather than administrative business. In addition, by using videotaped observations regularly, school leaders can provide teachers with frequent, relevant peer observation experiences and immediate feedback that present fewer logistical challenges. In order to make these changes sustainable, schools should consider developing structures that embed professional development activities into teachers' daily work rather than adding them on to their existing responsibilities.

The highest priority should be implementing a schedule that allows sufficient time for professional development that allows teachers to master new curriculum. One-shot workshops, piecemeal information, or learning that bears no relevance to the teacher's classroom life will not suffice (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Instructional coaching can provide the expertise, collegiality, and job-embedded professional development needed to support teachers' execution of new initiatives, as they can identify teachers' instructional needs and provide continuous feedback (Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel & Garnier, 2009). In line with the autonomous professional development model, instructional coaches should ensure that the teacher maintains choice and voice regarding what and how s/he learns as well as maintains control over the methods and strategies employed (Louis, Hord & von Frank, 2016).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study exhibits some limitations that are worth noting. The reliance on a self-report survey method has advantages and disadvantages. Self-reports are beneficial as they often include high internal consistency and validity and are easy to administer and analyze (Creswell, 2012). They can also be valuable and reliable and can lead to accurate accounts of personal events, behaviors, and perceptions, especially given the anonymous nature of the survey administered in this study (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, the online survey format is a potential limitation because it may have been inaccessible to potential respondents who did not have access to the Internet.

Limitations of this study also stem from its scope, particularly the composition of the sample population. The survey was only administered to K-12 teachers working in the participating school district and the researchers did not garner the perceptions of administrators and other staff. Consequently, the findings of this study may not be generalizable. Future studies should include a larger, representative, national sample with K-12 teachers, administrators, and other staff from other school districts that employ a similar autonomous model of professional development. The credibility and accuracy of the findings could also be improved by triangulating qualitative and quantitative across multiple sources (i.e., focus groups, classroom observations, interviews, teacher performance evaluation data, student achievement data) which could add a level of confidence to the conclusions drawn from the study results.

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## Appendix A

### Information about You

We want to know about your professional learning experience at your school. Please choose the responses that most accurately reflect your own experiences at your school.

1. What is your current role?

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher             | <input type="checkbox"/> Principal                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assistant Principal | <input type="checkbox"/> Central Office Administrator (please specify): |  |

2. Gender:

- |                               |                                 |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Male | <input type="checkbox"/> Female |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|

3. What grade levels do you currently teach? (Check all that apply)

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-K                 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <sup>th</sup> grade | <input type="checkbox"/> 9 <sup>th</sup> grade  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kindergarten          | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <sup>th</sup> grade | <input type="checkbox"/> 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <sup>st</sup> grade | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <sup>th</sup> grade | <input type="checkbox"/> 11 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade | <input type="checkbox"/> 7 <sup>th</sup> grade | <input type="checkbox"/> 12 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade | <input type="checkbox"/> 8 <sup>th</sup> grade |   |

4. What subject(s) do you currently teach? (Check all that apply)

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> General Elementary (all subjects) | <input type="checkbox"/> History/Social Sciences | <input type="checkbox"/> Special Ed.             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mathematics                       | <input type="checkbox"/> The Arts                | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Science                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Foreign Languages       |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Language Arts/English             | <input type="checkbox"/> PE/Health               |  |

5. Experience Level as a Teacher

- |   |                                      |   |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 1 year | <input type="checkbox"/> 5–10 years  | <input type="checkbox"/> 17–25 years        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1–4 years        | <input type="checkbox"/> 11–16 years | <input type="checkbox"/> More than 25 years |

6. Years at Current School

- |                                    |                                      |   |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 0–1 years | <input type="checkbox"/> 5–9 years   | <input type="checkbox"/> 21 or more years |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2–4 years | <input type="checkbox"/> 10–20 years |   |

7. School Setting

- |   |                                     |                               |
|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Career/Technical | <input type="checkbox"/> Elementary | <input type="checkbox"/> High |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Early Childhood  | <input type="checkbox"/> Middle     |                               |

**Learning Communities**

*Standard: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment. Please rate the following items:*

	<b>Always (6)</b>	<b>Frequently (5)</b>	<b>Sometimes (4)</b>	<b>Seldom (3)</b>	<b>Never (2)</b>	<b>Don't Know (1)</b>
1. My school's learning communities are structured for teachers to engage in the continuous improvement cycle (i.e. data analysis, planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation).						
2. Learning community members in my school believe the responsibility to improve student learning is shared by all stakeholders, such as all staff members, district personnel, families and community members.						
3. My school system has policies and procedures that support the vision for learning communities in schools.						
4. All members of the learning communities in my school hold each other accountable to achieve the school's goals.						
5. Learning communities in my school meet several times per week to collaborate on how to improve student learning						
6. In my school, some of the learning community members include non-staff members such as students, parents, or community members.						
7. In my school, learning community members demonstrate effective communication and relationship skills so that a high level of trust exists among the group.						

**How would you describe the learning communities in which you currently participate?**

**Additional Comments/Suggestions:**

**Leadership**

*Standard: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning. Please rate the following items:*

	<b>Always (6)</b>	<b>Frequently (5)</b>	<b>Sometimes (4)</b>	<b>Seldom (3)</b>	<b>Never (2)</b>	<b>Don't Know (1)</b>
8. My school's leaders consider all staff members to be capable of being professional learning leaders.						
9. My school's leaders regard professional learning as a top priority for all staff.						
10. My school's leaders cultivate a positive culture that embraces characteristics such as collaboration, high expectations, respect, trust, and constructive feedback.						
11. My school's leaders are active participants with other staff members in the school's professional learning.						
12. My school's leaders advocate for resources to fully support professional learning.						
13. My school's leaders provide teachers with equitable resources to support our individual and collaborative goals for professional learning.						
14. My school's leaders speak about the important relationship between improved student achievement and professional learning.						

**Have you taken any Professional Institute Courses? If no, explain why.**

**If yes, please describe what course(s) you have taken and when?**

**Describe your overall experiences (i.e., what you liked, areas for improvement, and what you would like to see in the near future)?**

**Have you taught any Professional Institute Courses? If no, explain why. If yes, please describe what course(s) you have taught and when.**

**Please describe your overall experiences as a teacher leader (i.e., what you liked, areas for improvement, and what you would like to see in the near future)?**

**Additional Comments/Suggestions:**

**Resources**

*Standard: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning. Please rate the following items:*

	<b>Always (6)</b>	<b>Frequently (5)</b>	<b>Sometimes (4)</b>	<b>Seldom (3)</b>	<b>Never (2)</b>	<b>Don't Know (1)</b>
15. In my school, time is available for teachers during the school day for professional learning.						
16. Professional learning is available at various times, such as job---embedded experiences, before or after school hours, and summer experiences.						
17. Practicing and applying new skills with students in my classroom are regarded as important learning experiences in my school.						
18. Teachers in my school have access to various technology resources for professional learning.						
19. Professional learning expenses, such as registration and consultant fees, staff, and materials, are openly discussed in my school.						
20. Teachers in my school are involved with monitoring the effectiveness of the professional learning resources.						
21. Teachers in my school are involved with the decision making about how professional learning resources are allocated.						

**In your content area, what professional learning resources do you currently use to support your instructional practices (please be specific)?**

**In your content area, what professional learning resources would you like to have to support your instructional practices (please be specific)?**

**Additional Comments/Suggestions:**

**Data**

*Standard: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning. Please rate the following items:*

	<b>Always (6)</b>	<b>Frequently (5)</b>	<b>Sometimes (4)</b>	<b>Seldom (3)</b>	<b>Never (2)</b>	<b>Don't Know (1)</b>
22. My school uses a variety of student achievement data to plan professional learning that focuses on school improvement.						
23. My school uses a variety of data to monitor the effectiveness of professional learning.						
24. In my school, teachers have an opportunity to evaluate each professional learning experience to						

determine its value and impact on student learning.						
25. A variety of data are used to as assess the effectiveness of my school’s professional learning.						
26. In my school, various data such as teacher performance data, individual professional learning goals, and teacher perception data are used to plan professional learning.						
27. In my school, teachers use what is learned from professional learning to adjust and inform teaching practices.						
28. Some professional learning programs in my school, such as mentoring or coaching, are continuously evaluated to ensure quality results.						

**What student achievement data does your school currently use to plan professional learning?  
Based on your student achievement data, what topics/subject areas should do upcoming professional learning programs need to focus on (please be specific)?  
Based on your teacher performance data (Danielson’s Framework for Teaching Evaluation), please describe your level of satisfaction with the current professional learning opportunities provided.  
Based on your teacher performance data (Danielson’s Framework for Teaching Evaluation), please describe areas of professional learning you would like to focus on to positively impact student achievement.  
Additional Comments/Suggestions:**

**Learning Designs**

*Standard: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes. Please rate the following items:*

	<b>Always (6)</b>	<b>Frequently (5)</b>	<b>Sometimes (4)</b>	<b>Seldom (3)</b>	<b>Never (2)</b>	<b>Don’t Know (1)</b>
30. In my school, teachers have opportunities to observe each other as one type of job-embedded professional learning.						
31. Teachers in my school are responsible for selecting professional learning to enhance skills that improve student learning.						
32. Professional learning in my school includes various forms of support to apply new practices.						
33. The use of technology is evident in my school’s professional learning.						
34. In my school, teachers’ backgrounds, experience levels, and learning needs are considered when professional learning is planned and designed.						
35. Teachers’ input is taken into consideration when planning schoolwide professional learning.						
36. In my school, participation in online professional learning opportunities is considered as a way to connect with colleagues and to learn from experts in education.						

**Please describe your school district’s professional development delivery model(s) (i.e., seminar/workshop, institute, e-learning, coursework, coaching).  
Please describe your level of satisfaction with your district’s full-choice professional development model.  
Please describe your level of satisfaction with your district’s professional development delivery model(s) (i.e., seminar/workshop, institute, e-learning, coursework, coaching).**

**Please describe your level of satisfaction with your district’s teacher leader professional development model. Please share any suggestions you have for improvement your school district’s professional development (delivery) models (e.g., face to face and/or online learning).**

**Additional Comments/Suggestions:**

**Implementation**

*Standard: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for long--term change. Please rate the following items:*

	<b>Always (6)</b>	<b>Frequently (5)</b>	<b>Sometimes (4)</b>	<b>Seldom (3)</b>	<b>Never (2)</b>	<b>Don't Know (1)</b>
37. A primary goal for professional learning in my school is to enhance teaching practices to improve student performance.						
38. Professional learning experiences planned at my school are based on research about effective school change.						
39. My school has a consistent professional learning plan in place for three to five years.						
40. Teachers in my school receive ongoing support in various ways to improve teaching.						
41. In my school, teachers give frequent feedback to colleagues to refine the implementation of instructional strategies.						
42. My school’s professional learning plan is aligned to school goals.						
43. In my school, teachers individually reflect about teaching practices and strategies.						

**What are your school’s learning goals for 2016/17?**

**What are your own professional learning goals for 2016/17?**

**Additional Comments/Suggestions:**

**Outcomes**

*Standard: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards. Please rate the following items:*

	<b>Always (6)</b>	<b>Frequently (5)</b>	<b>Sometimes (4)</b>	<b>Seldom (3)</b>	<b>Never (2)</b>	<b>Don't Know (1)</b>
44. Professional learning experiences in my school connect with teacher performance standards (e.g. teacher preparation standards, licensing standards, etc.).						
45. Student learning outcomes are used to determine my school’s professional learning plan.						
46. My professional learning this school year is connected to previous professional learning.						
47. All professional staff members in my school are held to high standards to increase student learning.						
48. Professional learning at my school focuses on the curriculum and how students learn.						
49. Professional learning in my school contributes to increased student achievement.						

50. In my school, professional learning supports teachers to develop new learning and then to expand and deepen that learning over time.					
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**Were your school's learning goals met in 2016? If yes, how do you know? If no, explain why they were not met.  
 Were your own professional learning goals met in 2016? If yes, how do you know? If no, explain why they were not met and what your plans are for meeting them in the following school year?  
 Additional Comments/Suggestions:**

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# Revisiting IDEA: A Policy Analysis of Special Education Funding in Pennsylvania

Christopher Holland  
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*This paper examines how fiscal imbalances in special education funding among local, state, and federal governments led to greater inequity in services in Pennsylvania public schools. Drawing upon ethical perspectives of Nel Noddings' Ethics of Care and John Rawls' Veil of Ignorance, analysis into raw financial data reveal that disproportions in funding practices infringe upon the fulfillment of students' inferred needs. In particular, federal and state lawmakers continue to place an unfair burden on local school districts to finance special education services. Factors associated with the diverse socioeconomic characteristics of these localities translate to unequal levels of accommodation. To alleviate budgetary strains on local governments, this paper draws upon three distinct options, weighs the impact of their implementation, and develops a sensible policy recommendation for the future that calls on state lawmakers to consider changing funding formulae and their stance on charter schools.*

Passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA) required that public schools provide fair and equitable education to every student regardless of his or her disability (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975). Since then, provisions within the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) built upon EHA's foundations to ensure that educational institutions accommodate the needs for every student in a manner that is both inclusive and regularly monitored (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; U.S. Department of Justice, 2010).

Despite these legal protections, adequate funding for implementation continues to be a public concern and analysts should envision funding inequities as the result of social, political, and economic realities that support agendas that disregard the needs of special education students across Pennsylvania's public schools. This analysis assesses current special education funding inequities through an ethical framework that incorporates Nel Noddings' (2005) Ethics of Care and John Rawls' (2000;1999) Veil of Ignorance. Applying such an ethical lens allows policy analysts to see fiscal inequities and create solutions that ensures a more balanced approach to special education funding throughout the state.

## **Ethical Framework**

In order to fully assess special education funding among Pennsylvania public schools, policymakers should adopt an ethical perspective that combines principles of Noddings' (2005) Ethics of Care and Rawls' (2000; 1999) "Veil of Ignorance." Educational reform hinges on creating conditions that accommodate every student's needs. Noddings (2005) makes a distinction between expressed needs, or those needs that are directly communicated with the caregiver, and inferred needs, or those that are perceived by caregivers. Within the realm of education, Noddings claims schools are institutions that establish curricular policies according to inferred needs (2005).

Within the realm of educational policy, analysts should consider how current policies and system-wide practices both accommodate and infringe upon the fulfillment of students' needs, both inferred and expressed. Although Noddings advocates for schools and educators to consider both sets of needs in educational decision-making efforts, this paper examines funding among traditional public school districts and charter schools (Noddings, 2005). Therefore, this paper exclusively examines the inferred need of every student to receive an education that is both equitable and fully accommodating of their needs, regardless of learning disability.

Examination of funding inequities among charter and traditional public school districts requires an unbiased assessment of empirical data. Therefore, in addition to examining special education funding through the lens of Noddings' (2005) Ethics of Care, adopting principles explained by Rawls' (2000; 1999) "Veil of Ignorance" encourages unbiased perspectives and impartial assessment of funding realities and policy options. Through a "Veil of Ignorance," individuals discover the true nature of justice and the influence of social institutions by looking at an issue divorced from personal understanding of social and demographic conditions that define who they are and how they remain positioned within society (Rawls, 2000; 1999).

As a result, individuals who ascribe to Rawls' concept of justice as fairness would assess special education funding from an impartial perspective that specifically examines funding levels on federal, state, and local government levels. Therefore, this paper frames the problem of funding inequity as one that inhibits school districts' ability to fulfill the learning needs of its special education students and examines possible policy options through a "Veil of Ignorance."

### **Explanation of the Problem**

The key problem of this policy analysis concerns government funding associated with special education across three jurisdictional levels in the United States. The manner in which IDEA is currently financed throughout the nation leaves local governments (school districts) with the unbalanced burden of providing the most significant percentage of special education funding (National Education Association (NEA), 2015). As of 2014, local districts across Pennsylvania provided over 68% of special education funding (Hartman, 2016), which is the result of local districts' responsibility to finance IDEA mandates in spite of perpetual appropriation deficiencies of both the federal and state governments (Hartman, 2015; 2016).

Currently, IDEA holds public schools responsible for financing and providing a free and appropriate education for all students regardless of disability (IDEA, 2004; Turnbull, 2005). Under federal law, public schools must fund interventions that comply with a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) to both minimally reduce restrictive educative settings and appropriately protect students' civil rights (IDEA, 2004). The federal government also established a formula to determine the cost of appropriate IDEA interventions for students with disabilities. These expenses, labeled as "excess cost," are twice the cost of educating students without disabilities (IDEA, 2004). Since EHA's passage in 1975, the federal government promised to cover 40% of these expenditures (EHA, 1975), leaving a gap of 60% for those excess costs. Despite IDEA's support of these formula percentages, federal financial support for special education interventions remains far below minimal standards (NEA, 2015; Hartman, 2015; 2016).

These broken federal promises, coupled with inadequate state funding, has pushed the financial burden of IDEA onto the shoulders of local school districts in Pennsylvania (NEA, 2015; Hartman, 2015; 2016). Moreover, fixed budgetary allocation models that exist on federal and state levels of governance translate to inflexibility when it comes to accommodating changing special education expenditures (Hartman, 2016). Finally, the growing significance of charter school options within Pennsylvania places too high a financial burden on local governments who must pay tuition rates that far exceed the cost of district interventions (Hartman, 2016).

### Relevant Evidence

Today, the federal government has yet to cover its promise to fund the 40% of excess costs associated with special education. As of 2015, the national gap between full and actual funding of these costs was \$17,216,800,000 (NEA, 2015; See Table 1). Within Pennsylvania, the Federal Government fell \$630,900,000 short of its goal of financing 40% of excess costs (NEA, 2015; See Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Federal IDEA Funding Gap*

Jurisdiction	“Full Funding”	Actual Funding	Funding Gap
Pennsylvania	\$1,052,100,000	\$421,200,000	\$630,900,000
USA (all states)	\$28,714,600,000	\$11,497,800,000	\$17,216,800,000

*Note:* Adapted from “IDEA Funding Gap.” Copyright 2015 by the National Education Association. “Full funding” equates to funding 40% of the “excess costs” of educating students covered through IDEA.

Further investigation of special education funding in Pennsylvania explains additional fiscal allocation imbalances. Much of the burden of special education continues to fall squarely on local governments, especially within the past ten years (Hartman, 2016; 2015). From 2003 to 2014, the Pennsylvania State Legislature only slightly increased allocated special education funding despite massively growing expenditures (Hartman, 2016). This expansion of expenditures was the result of the school choice movement that increased charter school enrollment by 151% from 2004 to 2013 (Hartman, 2015). Even more significant was the 242.3% charter school special education enrollment increases that occurred over the same period (Hartman, 2015). This growth placed a strain on local districts who were mandated to provide charter schools with high tuition rates for special education students that exceed district intervention costs (Hartman, 2016). Table 2 shows how budgetary constraints for local school districts grew substantially over the course of this period.

**Table 2***Pennsylvania Special Education Funding Imbalances*

School Year	Expenditures	Federal Revenue	State Revenue	Local Revenue
2003-2004	\$2,164,110,266	\$51,321,596	\$858,988,986	\$1,253,799,684
2013-2014	\$3,809,154,850	\$225,235,128	\$976,595,729	\$2,607,323,993
Amt. Change	\$1,645,044,584	\$117,606,743	\$117,606,743	\$1,353,524,309
Pct. Change	76.0%	338.9%	13.7%	108%

*Note:* Adapted from W. T. Hartman, “Special Education Funding in Pennsylvania: The Effects of a Policy of Neglect.” Copyright 2016 by *Commonwealth*.

Proportionally, such revenue increases were so minimal that state fiscal contribution percentages decreased from 39.7% to 25.6% from 2003 to 2014 (Hartman, 2016; See Table 3). This, combined with the federal government’s continual inability to fulfill its promise of funding 40% of excess costs associated with special education placed greater financial stress on local school districts who have largely variable budgets and are legally bound to accommodate all remaining special education intervention costs beyond that which is supported by state and federal resources (Hartman, 2016). Table 3 shows how local school districts’ burden to provide enough revenues to cover additional special education expenditures grew over the course of ten years at a rate that was higher than both the Federal and state governments.

**Table 3***Percent Share of Special Education Revenues*

Year	Federal	State	Local
2003-2004	2.4%	39.7%	57.9%
2013-2014	5.9%	25.6%	68.4%
Change	3.5%	-14.1%	10.5%

*Note:* Adapted from W. T. Hartman, “Special Education Funding in Pennsylvania: The Effects of a Policy of Neglect.” Copyright 2016 by *Commonwealth*.

The evidence described in this section highlight significant funding inequities that unfairly burden local governments and leave school districts without necessary funding that could be used to finance special education interventions to accommodate students’ needs. As a result, policy actions focused on providing a more equitable educational experience for students should aim to improve funding disparities among the three jurisdictional levels to ensure that schools have the resources required to fulfill all special education students’ needs.

### **Policy Options**

Given the issues facing Pennsylvania school districts who bear the massive financial burden of funding IDEA interventions, there are three key policy alternatives that challenge the role of federal, state, and local governments with regards to funding IDEA provisions.

#### **Changing the Formula that Determines Spending**

The current formula that determines special education resource allocation in Pennsylvania does not adequately provide enough support to accommodate all students’ needs across all districts. Currently, Pennsylvania provides funding for districts based on the assumption that 16% of enrolled students qualify for IDEA accommodations (Pennsylvania State

Education Association, 2010; Special Education Funding Commission, 2013). This figure is based on the overall population of special education students across the state and does not account for districts that have higher and lower percentages of special education students (Satullo, 2015; Varine & Kurutz, 2014). Therefore, Pennsylvania provides funding regardless of both the actual special education expenses and the severity of students' disabilities (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2010; Varine & Kurutz, 2014). As such, one proposed alternative would be for the Pennsylvania State Legislature to abandon its "one size fits all," 16% formula and allocate funds based on the actual costs of providing specific special education services (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2010; Special Education Funding Commission, 2013).

### **Revisiting Formulae that Determine Charter School Funding**

Regardless of the 16% formula used to determine special education funding, Pennsylvania charter schools determine tuition rates for special education students based on total district expenditures per special education student in each district (Varine & Kurutz, 2014; Public Interest Law Center, 2016). Such tuition rates resulted in local governments providing more financial support for each special education student enrolled in a charter school than those attending their own district schools (Public Interest Law Center, 2016). In addition, in order to boost special education enrollment levels in charter schools, legislators allowed charter schools to allocate excess funding received from school districts to finance IDEA interventions into their general operating budgets (Hartman, 2016; Public Interest Law Center, 2016). Moreover, less than half of special education tuition payments made to Pennsylvania charter schools applied to instructional costs (Hartman, 2016). For example, during the 2013-2014 school year, approximately \$260 million was paid in excess to charter schools for special education services (Hartman, 2016). Rather than return this money back to school districts, charter schools directed funds to their general operations budgets (Hartman, 2016). Especially in districts with special education populations over 16%, actions like these exacerbate resource shortages for IDEA interventions for district students and greatly expand funding inequities between charter and district schools.

Therefore, another policy alternative would be for the Pennsylvania State Legislature to pass laws that better regulate special education payment formulae charter schools impose on local districts and require local governments to only pay charter schools the total costs associated with actual IDEA expenditures and not the current tuition rates that both exacerbates resource inequity among special education students and sustains district overpayments to charter schools (Hartman, 2016; Varine & Kurutz, 2014). Adjusting the formulae used to determine charter school allocations would provide students with a more equitable level of funding across all students, regardless of whether they are enrolled in a traditional district or charter school.

### **Resuming Work on H.R. 2902: IDEA Full Funding Act**

Currently, H.R. 2902: IDEA Full Funding Act is currently under review in the Education and the Workforce Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives. Originally introduced as H.R. 551 in 2015, the IDEA Full Funding Act has yet to receive consideration. Now, reintroduced as H.R. 2902, the Act continues to wait for any significant action by the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. Passage of this bill would support a specific timeline that significantly increases federal spending to fulfill the 40% excess cost threshold by

2027 and provide more financial assistance to local governments tasked with fulfilling the needs of special education students in their districts (IDEA, 2017). Therefore, a third policy alternative would be for Congress to take action and pass this Bill.

### **Criteria for Assessment**

Objective assessment of each option requires lawmakers to use the Veil of Ignorance to examine the political realities, long-term sustainability, and projected outcomes associated with special education funding. Within this paradigm, evaluation of each of the proposed solutions hinges on three critical attributes aimed at determining the viability of specific governmental actions in question. According to Bardach (2012), feasibility, efficacy, and equality are common attributes that analysts use to evaluate the sustainability of potential policy actions because they support the formulation of reasonable solutions that are realistic in their expectations.

Feasibility refers to a policy's ability to survive amidst current political realities (Bardach, 2012). Furthermore, it refers to policy that is both robust and comprehensive in the face of future uncertainties and changing political landscapes (Bardach, 2012). Finally, feasibility refers to a policy's ability to generate meaningful, long-term improvements within an institution (Bardach, 2012). In that capacity, given the policy quandaries described above, one must evaluate whether an alternative is feasible amidst political realities surrounding government spending, charter schools, and equality among all individuals regardless of ability.

In addition to feasibility, efficacy must be a core component of any policy evaluation that primarily focuses on government spending. Specifically, efficacious policies provide the greatest degree of improvement and benefit for particular financial investments (Bardach, 2012). As a result, one must assess whether the proposed alternatives ensure the coverage of necessary expenditures, reduction of wasteful spending, and generation of more accurate methods of determining revenue allocations.

Finally, the civil rights nature of IDEA assures that a free, appropriate, and fair education must be offered to every student, regardless of his or her need (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). As a result, each of the policy alternatives described above must be objectively judged according to their ability to both protect the rights of special education students and close gaps that perpetuate unequal educational opportunities for students with disabilities.

### **Assessment of the Potential Outcomes of Each Policy Option**

Forecasting potential outcomes that may result from the adoption of each of the proposed policy alternatives allows for tradeoffs to emerge and for governmental and educational leaders to develop a clearer perspective of current funding realities. The following section considers possible positive and negative outcomes associated with each of the proposed alternatives.

#### **State Level Spending Reformation**

If changed, the formula that determines spending at the state level would take into consideration actual costs more than broad statewide averages. The "one size fits all" approach of the 16% formula does not account for districts with higher populations of special education students, nor does it consider costs related to the severity of students' disabilities (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2010; Varine & Kurutz, 2014). By altering the formula, districts

with higher populations of special education students would receive additional state funding beyond that which they currently receive under the 16% formula (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2010). At the same time, however, it would also reduce the budgets of those districts whose special education students represent less than 16% of the district population.

Additionally, the state legislature should reform the manner in which charter schools determine special education expenditures by requiring districts to only fund actual IDEA expenditures incurred by charter schools, two results would likely occur. First, without influencing state resource allocations, such a change would reduce school districts' financial burden of paying current tuition rates to charter schools (Public Interest Law Center, 2016; Hartman, 2016). Second, because overpayments of IDEA services were reallocated to charter schools' general operating budget, such a formula change would substantially reduce charter school revenues to the point of significant budget cuts (Hartman, 2016).

### **Resuming Work on the IDEA Full Funding Act**

Passage of H.R. 2902: IDEA Full Funding Act will establish a timeline for the federal government to fully appropriate promises dictated by EHA and IDEA (IDEA, 2017). If passed, it would increase federal IDEA spending each year until the Federal Government achieves its EHA and IDEA goal of funding 40% of the excess cost of special education programs by 2027 (IDEA, 2017). Passage and adherence to the IDEA Full Funding Act can therefore greatly reduce the budgetary burden associated with IDEA on both state and local governments (Litvinov, 2015). Conversely, the Bill would also carry significant implications for the Federal Government who must close a current funding gap that would exceed \$38.5 billion dollars by 2027 (IDEA, 2017).

### **Policy Tradeoffs**

Several tradeoffs emerge when considering the implementation of one or more of the proposed policy alternatives. Adjusting the formula used to determine special education expenditures would allow Pennsylvania to allocate funding that accurately reflects the needs and population of special education students in each district (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2010). On the other hand, creating a more customized special education revenue formula system could create complex bureaucratic standards that assess the validity and cost-benefit aspects of each special education intervention. Additionally, those schools who previously benefited from the 16% formula would experience a budgetary loss that can be burdensome in the future.

Moreover, revisiting the manner in which school districts fund charter schools would reduce local districts' budgetary burden to fund expensive charter school tuition rates for special education students (Hartman, 2016; Varine & Kurutz, 2014). On the other hand, changing the formula could reduce charter schools' revenues to the point of significant budgetary duress. Given the political climate and relative support Pennsylvanians show towards charter schools and school choice, such a move would likely lead to political consequence for those lawmakers who support this reform.

Finally, if passed, H.R. 2902 would establish a timeline and budgetary guidelines that would lead towards meeting the 40% benchmark promised under IDEA (IDEA, 2017). Such a move would greatly ameliorate concerns as they relate to state and school district special

education revenues. Unfortunately, such an action would require the federal government to provide significant funding over the course of the next ten years to cover a significant budgetary gap (IDEA, 2017). Furthermore, there are no provisions in the Bill to ensure adherence to the established appropriation schedule. In that respect, it is very possible that this bill, like other EHA, ADA, and IDEA appropriation promises in the past, will not be successful.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Given both the implications surrounding the policy alternatives and the evaluation criteria described earlier, the best course of action would be for the Pennsylvania State Legislature to change the formula they use to determine special education funding. Furthermore, they should investigate the reasons that charter school special education expenditures continue to increase despite continual reports of overfunding practices. Given political realities that surround IDEA funding on a federal level, state and local governments must be more proactive in the way they address special education funding in Pennsylvania. Moreover, state and local lawmakers should be skeptical of any IDEA promise to fund 40% of excess costs (IDEA, 2017). Such a promise was made over 40 years ago and continues to be unachieved in a significant manner (For example, see EHA, 1975; IDEA, 2004; IDEA, 2017). Also, there are no provisions in the IDEA Full Funding Act that require the Federal Government to reach 40% by 2027 (IDEA, 2017). In that respect, the history of broken funding promises, coupled with steep budgetary implications make it rather unfeasible until the federal government takes action. Therefore, the spotlight falls on state and local policymakers.

Specifically, changing the statewide special education funding formula would provide districts that have high percentages of students with disabilities with more funding than those districts who do not have similar population proportions (Varine & Kurutz, 2014). This will likely require state officials to increase spending; however, given their pattern of pushing the fiscal burden of funding IDEA interventions onto local districts, the Pennsylvania State Legislature should significantly rethink special education revenues. Furthermore, funding would also shift away from an ineffective and unequal “one size fits all” formula to one that better reflects the actual costs of special education interventions (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2010). This will ensure that all students receive proper accommodations as guaranteed by IDEA (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2010). Finally, changing the special education funding formula would provide a more equitable and fair system of resource allocation across Pennsylvania’s population of special education students (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2010; Bardach, 2012).

Furthermore, Pennsylvania needs to investigate why districts continually overpay charter schools (Public Interest Law Center, 2016; Hartman, 2016). Questions must be raised about whether current models of funding encourage charter schools to barely accommodate students’ needs in order to pad general operations budgets with excess funds. Lawmakers need to ask if this presents a conflict of interest and explore whether returning these funds back to local districts would encourage charter schools to finance special education interventions in a much more significant way. Investigation into eliminating wasteful spending and assuring the rights of all students with disabilities encourages efficient spending, protects the civil rights of children with disabilities, and is a realistic, non-extreme action that respects the political beliefs of Pennsylvanians who strongly support school choice (Varine & Kurutz, 2014; Bardach, 2012).

## Conclusion

IDEA compliance continues to generate significant budgetary questions in Pennsylvania. This policy analysis examined how IDEA's implementation remains both insufficient on federal and state levels and unfairly burdensome for local school districts. In the end, a reconceptualization of the state special education spending formula, an understanding that the state must investigate ways to protect special education investments, and a strong skepticism of significant federal action would provide initial steps to alleviate the high burden local districts feel as they finance the majority of IDEA expenditures. Moreover, such actions would be an initial step toward ensuring IDEA compliance and guaranteeing the fulfillment of all needs among special education students throughout the state.

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# **English Learners and Instructional Strategies: Literature Review and Best Practices to Serve the Underserved**

Kris MacDonald  
*Independent Scholar*

Nonverbal communication accounts for 93% of every conversation a person has, but when someone cannot understand or follow the critical seven percent of the conversation that is verbalized, it can lead them to feeling stupid, frustrated, isolated, disengaged and even helpless and hopeless (du Pré, 2014; de Oliveira, 2011). There are 4.6 million non-native English speaking students in compulsory public education in the United States (McFarland, Hussar, de Brey, Snyder, et. al., 2017). Three percent, or more than 61,000 of those students alone, were enrolled in Pennsylvania schools, and they speak 229 different languages other than English (McFarland et al., 2017). The most popular language spoken by English Learners (ELs) is Spanish (McFarland et. al., 2017). In order for these students to succeed in American schools, there are a variety of strategies schools and instructors can utilize to best serve EL students.

## **Government Regulations for ELs**

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and altered educational parameters for English Language Learners (ELLs) (Norton, 2016). Now under this law, much of the decision-making for schools is at the state and local level rather than the federal (Norton, 2016). ESSA granted schools more flexibility in showing EL student progress as long as they align with state standards (Norton, 2016). Pennsylvania uses a standardized test, Assessing Communication and Comprehension in English State to State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs), annually to measure ELs' English proficiency in math, social studies, science and language arts through writing, reading, listening and speaking (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016a). Finally, ESSA also changed the terminology for these students once again now to ELs rather than ELLs or ESLs which meant English as a Second Language (Alicandri, 2016).

## **EL Characteristics**

Approximately 30 million families immigrated to the United States since the 1990s, vastly increasing the number of people living in America who do not speak English (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). Approximately 5.3 million of these students, or one of every ten, is in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade in public and private schools (Garcia, 2011). Anyone who does not speak English as their primary language is considered EL, even if they master fluency in the language later in life (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). English proficiency is far lower for EL students below sixth grade and improves by high school (McFarland et. al., 2017). It is theorized that the students gain proficiency in English by middle school, thus fewer students struggle in high school, but the struggle never goes away entirely (McFarland et. al., 2017). The majority of ELs are in compulsory education and face significant

challenges (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). Some are bullied for their accents or inability to express themselves in English properly, they are viewed as disabled, placed in remedial classes or are only taught vocabulary skills rather than language in context (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). Most importantly, ELs are underperforming in school 30 to 50% compared to their English-speaking counterparts (Garcia, 2011).

### **Teaching EL Students**

All languages evolve by incorporating words from other languages and even new words get created in order to label, identify and communicate (du Pré, 2014). Language is the basis for all of academics for explaining concepts, assessing skills, analyzing, critically thinking, applying abstract concepts and making connections across disciplines (DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker & Rivera, 2014). For years, teaching English to ELs has been superficial at best. It has focused on vocabulary, typically the most common goal is 2,000 words in English at the time the pupil is learning it, and grammar at the sentence structure level (DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker & Rivera, 2014). Linguists categorize grammar as the building blocks of all writing and synthesis of communication, so stopping at vocabulary development and simply the identification of parts of speech is not helping an EL develop language skills (DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker & Rivera, 2014).

### **Teacher Challenges**

Many schools struggle with how to best educate EL students – whether to fully immerse them in English classes all day, have them work with an aide, or put them in remedial courses instead of with their classmates (Samson & Collins, 2012). Every teacher encounters a diverse population of students, however, very few are formally trained in working with EL students since it requires an additional Pennsylvania certificate (Samson & Collins, 2012). While some districts with large EL populations may target the hiring of bilingual or EL-trained instructors, there should be support programs for general education instructors to work with EL students because implementing specialized pedagogical techniques and instructional methodology can lessen the gaps in EL achievement (Samson & Collins, 2012).

A study of junior high school instructors revealed their biggest insecurities in teaching EL students included not knowing how to elicit an EL's prior knowledge, how to practically assess their current abilities, and how to adapt their instruction for EL students (Moon, 2010). Additionally, the instructors in the study reported not knowing specific teaching strategies for EL students, receiving little to no training from their district on the topic, or knowledge about linguistic concepts to understand how language influenced learning (Moon, 2010). Another study of compulsory education teachers and EL specialists similarly revealed that despite how important multicultural education may be to them, they do not feel prepared to help EL students, they do not know particular instructional strategies nor have they had the training to help this population (Hite, 2015).

### **Teaching Strategies**

There are several strategies that general education instructors and districts can do to assist EL learners so no instructor feels like those studied by Moon (2010) and Hite (2015).

## **Inclusion**

The most important tool to help EL students is keeping them mainstreamed with their peers and not placing them in special education courses (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). Speaking another language is not a disability and EL students will learn faster and better with full inclusion, peer and instructor support (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). This is especially the case when a co-teacher is available to assist the students and instructors so they do not lose pace with the material (Goldstein, 2015). A co-teacher can assist the instructor in developing more EL-aware lesson plans, and can work with the student individually both in the class as it is happening or during a study period built into the student's schedule (Goldstein, 2015). Full immersion into fluently-English-speaking classes without any type of aide can be more counterproductive to ELs (Chen, 2016).

## **Calibration**

Frequently students excel in one class over another, regardless of language ability. This can be due to a student's interests but also is strongly influenced by the instructor's pedagogical methodologies. Students may get frustrated because another instructor runs their classroom differently. In many cases, a lack of calibration among instructors can leave students confused or uneasy. This is especially the case for EL students. In compulsory education, having calibration among instructors is pivotal for an EL student's success (Lathram, Schneider & Vander Ark, 2016). Instructors with EL students in their classrooms must use the same level of rigor in language development, instructional delivery, strategic inclusion of the student's native language and supplemental tools that increase in difficulty (Lathram, Schneider & Vander Ark, 2016). This calibration is even more important among charter schools as they are independently operated ("Improving," 2016).

All instructors in the district must be in alignment with how these students develop. For example, in their earlier years, EL textbooks may include more pictures and have both the native language and English translations available (Lathram, Schneider & Vander Ark, 2016). Later, texts may have fewer images and more of the student's native language with English translations until eventually the student uses the same English-only texts as their native-speaking peers (Lathram, Schneider & Vander Ark, 2016). It is essential to provide instructors with the training and tools they need, as well as EL assessments to make sure they are educating the students effectively and efficiently (August, Estrada & Boyle, 2012).

## **Remediation**

In addition to classroom support ELs may receive from aides, they also need out-of-class remediation. During this time, EL students need an outlet and support to express their personal concerns, emotions and stressors in addition to learning just material-related topics (Mansukhani & Chinchilla, 2013). Those working with the students should be in constant contact with the EL student's instructors to learn of their identified areas of concern and then compare them to the student's (Mansukhani & Chinchilla, 2013).

One of the strongest forms of remediation for an EL doesn't come from a qualified instructor, but from their participation in extracurricular activities, as it provides socialization and the immersion in the language accompanied by strong nonverbal cues (Mansukhani & Chinchilla, 2013). Schools have also developed peer "student study teams" for all students to

participate in for any kind of assistance (Mansukhani & Chinchilla, 2013). Also, students should not be removed from recess, gym or other social activities for remediation, but get assistance after school, or for short periods throughout the day, or even on weekends (Mansukhani & Chinchilla, 2013; Téllez & Mosqueda, 2015). Both increased time with instructors and an instructors' efficiency in teaching ELs will enhance an EL's success (Téllez & Mosqueda, 2015).

### **Global Learning**

EL students understand things best when they can see the bigger connection and how pieces relate to each other, so teachers can take an individualized concept and explain how it fits into their lives National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). Utilizing various activities to demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of what is being studied in one class and its connection to another, benefits all students, but especially ELs (Koelsch, Chu & Rodriguez Bañuelos, 2014). This does require concentrated and purposeful lesson planning (Koelsch, Chu & Rodriguez Bañuelos, 2014). Students can work in pairs with possible responses already listed on cards to aid in their class participation and understanding or charts illustrating how what a student is learning in math applies to science or history builds a connection in concepts, both known as Extended Anticipatory Guide Statements (EAG) (Koelsch, Chu & Rodriguez Bañuelos, 2014).

### **Technology**

In addition to remediation outside of the classroom, technology is a major source of support for EL students. Computer-assisted instruction consisting of word processing, simulation, application and practice can help ELs reinforce what they are learning in the classroom, as long as there are enough computers to accommodate each student (Keengwe & Hussein, 2014). Using class websites, blogs and smartphone applications can offer instructors another way to communicate with their EL students and parents National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). Other schools have utilized e-textbooks to enable students to translate the material when needed, and voice-recognition software to aid in transcription (Lathram, Schneider & Vander Ark, 2016). Studies have shown that EL students using some kind of technology while learning achieved more than ELs who did not use technology (Keengwe & Hussein, 2014). Increasing EL technology has been a multi-million-dollar business in recent years, that has also provided educators with training opportunities and support (Lathram, Schneider & Vander Ark, 2016).

### **Better Academic Literacy Training**

One of the strongest components for increasing EL academic success is teaching literacy properly. This depth of language is needed to express ideas, relate experiences and exchange new information (du Pré, 2014). Thus, instructors of ELs need to be able to teach language beyond spelling and basic grammar (Téllez & Mosqueda, 2015). Conversational English proficiency requires approximately three to five years, meaning an EL can hold a fluent conversation in English, however written skills take far longer (August, Estrada & Boyle, 2012).

Academic English is difficult not only for ELs but for native speakers as well, as it takes approximately four to seven years to master, so it is imperative that instructors understand how to connect linguistic techniques into their lessons (August, Estrada & Boyle, 2012; DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker & Rivera, 2014). For example, instructors can do this by stating a word and have the students express what that word means to them, rather than its denotative meaning (Koelsch,

Chu & Rodriguez Bañuelos, 2014). Instructors should be able to discuss syntax, lexicons, and semantics across concentrations to enable students to see vocabulary and conceptual connections (DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker & Rivera, 2014). This may require more continuing education for instructors from outside resources, or from internal English instructors who concentrate more on language than literature (DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker & Rivera, 2014).

### **Family Involvement**

Oftentimes when speaking of EL students, their home environment is overlooked. Nearly 25% of EL students go home to at least one parent who does not speak English and cannot receive proper help with homework, reinforcement of the language taught in school, signed permission slips, or even correctly packed items for a field trip based on the note sent home that they cannot read (Brown, 2015). Like any other parent, they want to see their children succeed and tend to rely more on the school district to support their children because they may be intimidated by cultural norms or their limited English skills (Prosise, 2008; Colorín Colorado, 2015). The children are the ones who suffer when they cannot receive the continued support that school districts expect from an English-speaking home environment and parent-teacher conferences are complicated when there is a language barrier (Education Law Center, 2016). Yet funding for school translators or interpretation services is viewed as non-imperative by numerous legislatures (Education Law Center, 2016). For example, The School District of Philadelphia serves one quarter of all of Pennsylvania's ELs, yet has been forced to cut half of their EL support and 35 bilingual teachers, therefore more funding is necessary to help these students and their families (Education Law Center, 2016).

Some things that districts can do with their limited funding to extend their reach to these students' homes is making the parents and families feel welcome at the school; holding workshops specific for EL families about reading to children, helping with homework or even language development; and sending materials home in the students' native language as well as English (Prosise, 2008). Inviting EL parents to serve as classroom aides, clerks or on-hand translators for a small hourly fee, especially if they are from a lower socioeconomic status also strengthens a family's connection to the district (Prosise, 2008). Providing free on-site child care, food and beverages and even transportation can also attract EL families to be more involved in school activities (Prosise, 2008).

Other strategies that require a bit more time and effort but are effective can include scheduling home visits, instructors and administrators learning some of that family's language, provide families one-on-one tours of the school, and arrange for the family to work with local agencies to develop their English skills also (Colorín Colorado, 2015). Offering EL families the opportunity to learn English along with their children helps them bond and reduces parental anxiety (Colorín Colorado, 2015).

### **High Expectations**

Additionally, teachers must set high expectations for ELs and push them to do what they do not even believe they can (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). With internal esteem issues working against them already, having an instructor believe in them and challenge them to reach goals they do not believe possible will increase not only their language development but eagerness to learn (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008).

## **Understanding and Including Their Culture**

When instructors take the time to learn their students' backgrounds, it builds rapport, and this cannot be truer to EL students (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). When a teacher is aware of the struggles the EL faces, in addition to the language issues, it can help facilitate a better relationship for learning (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). It also enables the instructor to find opportunities to include the students' cultures in the classroom (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). Encouraging ELs to educate others in the school and their class about their culture creates a stronger bond between the student and their peers and makes them feel more included in the educational environment (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008).

## **Implementing Best Practices**

There are essential components any school must have in order for its EL students to succeed. One component is the administrators' familiarity with ELs and their commitment to implementing, executing, and monitoring programs for those students to succeed (Garcia, 2015). In order for these programs to exist, however, there must be appropriate funds that are allocated properly. These programs must also be evaluated and assessed for them to be effective (Clair, 2014). Another is that there are enough personnel to handle the EL population in that school and they are properly versed on the legalities surrounding educating EL students (Garcia, 2015; Clair, 2014). Schools with the most success also have EL elements integrated in every aspect of their curriculum and extracurricular activities, and resources are allocated to properly support those programs (Garcia, 2015; Clair, 2014). Finally, successful compulsory schools use formal and informal assessment measures of students but most importantly, use ones that are meaningful for English Learners (Garcia, 2015). A rather obvious yet neglected point is that private schools, especially charter schools, cannot be successful with EL students if they do not admit them (Garcia & Morales, 2016).

## **Funding Best Practices**

Funding for EL programs is one of the biggest issues facing many schools, including those in Pennsylvania. A report by the Educational Law Center written by David Lapp (2014) stated that such a large number of underprivileged, disabled and EL students concentrated in such a confined area can be underserved due to funding.

One state has found a successful way to allocate funds and implement these best practices for its students. With the exponential growth of EL students in New York State Charter Schools, they underwent reform to best serve their students (Sattin-Bajaj & Suarez-Orozco, 2012). ELs were being underrepresented and thus not succeeding, especially in charter schools, prompting changes (Sattin-Bajaj & Suarez-Orozco, 2012). In 2010, there were 140 charter schools in the state serving more than 40,000 students, yet in 2014, changes in legislation enabled 260 new charter schools to open (Sattin-Bajaj & Suarez-Orozco, 2012). Nearly five percent of all of the students in the charter schools were ELs (Sattin-Bajaj & Suarez-Orozco, 2012).

One of the state's charter schools, Family Life Academy Charter School, serves students from kindergarten through grade five and over 40% of the student body is EL (Sattin-Bajaj & Suarez-Orozco, 2012). Stakeholders decided to implement a variety of strategies at Family Life Academy to best serve the high EL population (Sattin-Bajaj & Suarez-Orozco, 2012). A strong

focus on language development, meeting students' social and cultural needs, utilizing an immersion program, creating standardized practices for all instructors and administrators, providing ELs and instructors with a specialized EL aide and focusing on including every member of the school and student's family in the process and implementing block scheduling to allow students for more concentrated work time has made the school successful (Sattin-Bajaj & Suarez-Orozco, 2012).

Administrators at Family Life Academy also put their instructors through rigorous training and child study meetings to get to know every child in the school based on quantitative and qualitative data they collect through test scores, observations and teacher accounts (Sattin-Bajaj & Suarez-Orozco, 2012). The full-time data specialist that the school employs regulates these reports for the school (Sattin-Bajaj & Suarez-Orozco, 2012).

### **Discussion**

Compulsory educators share the same responsibilities to develop successful students, regardless of their race, background, disability or native language. English Learners are one of the most difficult populations to adequately serve because most general education instructors do not receive any formal training during their certification program in differentiating their instruction for ELs. Based on the available literature, it is imperative that schools take a multi-pronged approach to serve their EL populations. Preparing teachers, creating uniformity, teaching academic English, utilizing technology and including the students' families are some of the strongest elements charter schools can utilize and implement, leading to a successful school. School districts serve an important role for thousands of ELs in their communities, thus working with stakeholders to calibrate curriculum and instructional design can help any district be that much more successful.

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# **An Invitation to Write for Pennsylvania Educational Leadership**

*Kathleen Provinzano, Editor*

*Pennsylvania Educational Leadership* (PEL) is the professional journal of the Pennsylvania Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (PASCD). A peer-reviewed journal, PEL is typically published two times per year. Manuscripts are accepted year-round. Topics address the interests and concerns of Pennsylvania educators at all levels. We welcome a wide variety of manuscripts including (but not limited to) single study inquiries, qualitative and quantitative research, theoretical and conceptual pieces, historical analyses, literature reviews, action research, and first-person narratives. Manuscripts may address, among other topics, descriptions of curriculum improvement projects, discussions of trends and issues, views on instructional strategies, statements of theoretical positions, accounts of staff development and supervisory practices, reports of formal research projects and teacher inquiries. In addition, the journal welcomes practitioner's pages—non-research manuscripts written by practitioners for practitioners.

# Call for Submissions / Submission Guidelines

*Pennsylvania Educational Leadership* (PEL) is an electronic peer-reviewed journal that is published twice per year and accepts manuscripts year-round. Topics address the interests and concerns of Pennsylvania educators at all levels. We welcome a wide variety of manuscripts including (but not limited to) single study inquiries, qualitative and quantitative research, theoretical and conceptual pieces, historical analyses, literature reviews, action research, and first-person narratives. The Practitioners Page highlights the voices, thoughts, and opinions of educators in the field. Submissions for the Practitioners Page can take a variety of formats including (but not limited to) book reviews, policy reviews, and critical reflections on current educational issues and trends. Authors must indicate that the submission is intended for the Practitioners Page on the cover sheet.

Manuscripts should be emailed to Editor, Kathleen Provinzano (Drexel University) at [ktp37@drexel.edu](mailto:ktp37@drexel.edu). All submissions are initially reviewed by the editor. Submissions evaluated as appropriate for review are then sent to readers for blind review. Manuscripts should follow the guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association.

Before submitting a manuscript to PEL, please consider the following guidelines carefully: Your manuscript should be submitted as a single Word document and include:

- Abstract: Explain the purpose of the manuscript and the essential findings or discussion points (max 150 words) Note: abstract is omitted for Practitioners Page submissions.
- Body/text, tables, charts, figures/ appendices (if applicable), and references list (max 25 pages, including references). The manuscript should be typed in 12-point font, Times New Roman, with one-inch margins. The text should be double-spaced;
- The author(s) should remove any references that might be self-identifying from the body of the text to ensure blind review of the manuscript;
- The references page will follow the body of the text and any tables, charts, or figures. Please be sure to check that all in-text citations match references in the list and that the list is properly formatted using the APA guidelines. When possible, please include the Digital Object Identifiers (DOI) for all electronic sources.

The cover page must be a separate document and include:

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