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How Professional Development for Teachers Works

by Laurie L. Dove

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Introduction to How Professional Development for Teachers Works

Teachers are lifelong learners. In fact, ongoing education is a requirement for teachers of every public school level, from kindergarten through 12th grade. Known as professional development, this education -- usually in the form of workshops, seminars and training courses -- helps teachers stay up to date with new trends and learn fresh strategies, techniques and methods for classroom challenges. The overriding idea behind professional development is that increased knowledge helps teachers improve student achievement. That's because professional development focuses on what each teacher needs to fine-tune his or her classroom practice.


But before any professional development can take place, a teacher must first become certified. In all 50 U.S. states, the standards for becoming a public school teacher -- either as a generalist teaching a grade level or as a specialist teaching a specific subject -- are similar: Earn a bachelor's degree, take a state-mandated teaching examination and fulfill a few other requirements, such as specific education courses or student teaching experience. Additionally, a teacher can earn national certification that's accepted in all states [source: [All Education Schools](#)].

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Professional development courses help teachers improve their skills and, ideally, rise among the ranks.

Once a teacher is in the classroom, his or her teaching license will come up for renewal every few years. To recertify, professional development is required. For example, in Kansas -- as in most states -- new teachers operate under an initial license. After five years of teaching and completing professional development, one can earn a "professional" license; and at the 10-year mark, one can earn an "accomplished" license for finishing a professional development plan and passing a test [source: [KSDE](#)]. Many states also require teachers to complete a certain number of professional development hours each year [source: [ADE](#)].

But there are plenty of reasons -- beyond license renewal -- for teachers to continue their education. Sometimes there are financial incentives, such as salary increases. But often, the rewards aren't found just at the completion of professional development, but all along the way. According to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, professional development transforms the nation's best teachers. "It's a lot of hard work but arguably the most important growth and learning you're ever going to have as a teacher," he said [source: [NBPTS](#)]. There's little doubt professional development can be a boon, but why don't all teachers have one universal route for continuing their educations? We'll explain on the next page.

Teaching Teachers How to Teach

Watch this TED video featuring Alan Kay, perhaps one of the best teachers of teachers in the world. If you've ever wondered how to teach your kids or students...watch this guy. He actually makes the Pythagorean theorem fun and interesting. (March, 2008)



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Professional Development Plan for Teachers

Each teacher creates an individualized professional development plan based on the age of students in his or her classroom, the subject taught or any specialized knowledge he or she desires to learn, such as instruction techniques for special education students. These personalized plans usually detail the teacher's goals, the resources necessary to gain these new skills and the expected outcome. Often, the professional development plan must align with district, state and national standards, as well as fit within the framework of the National Staff Development Council -- the largest nonprofit professional association that deals with educator development [source: [NSDC](#)]. A supervisor, such as the school principal, or the local school board approves each teacher's plan. Because the plan can vary from teacher to teacher, there isn't one clear-cut path to professional development.

In addition to individualized professional development plans, many school districts create staff development plans designed to enrich the careers of teachers and other employees, including paraprofessionals who assist in the classrooms. This means administrators bring in special speakers or trainers, on the district's dime, to instruct school staff as a group.

Either way, all this training costs money. In fact, the expense per teacher for district-wide training can cost up to \$6,600. Local school districts generally foot the bill, while the state and federal government kicks in a portion through grants and other funding [source: [New Teacher Center](#)].

But what about the cost of a teacher's individualized professional development plan? Who pays for this series of outside-the-classroom workshops, seminars and trainings? Most of the time, teachers pay out of pocket for their own professional development. In many states, the costs aren't even tax deductible [source: [Hatch](#)].

Teachers fulfilling their own personalized development plans also have to identify where they're going to find the training they need. These resources are often found through interest-based associations, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, or through broad-based professional organizations, such as the National Education Association. Plus, more teachers than ever are furthering their careers through training -- without ever leaving home. Read on to the next page to find out how.

Professional Development Workshops for Teachers

Whatever the professional development route a teacher chooses, one thing's for sure: He or she must meet certain professional obligations depending on the school, district, state and subject of certification.

Much of the teacher training outlined in individual professional development plans still takes place in off-site workshops, conferences and training sessions. Sometimes, a teacher's personal plan intersects with district-wide training. This learning often takes place in the school itself and can be targeted to a teacher's specific needs, such as the age of the students being instructed or the subject being taught. Teachers can collaborate with each other about instruction issues, as well as observe other teachers in the classroom, receive coaching or mentoring, or set off on a self-prescribed research mission. Experts are brought in for in-service training, a time in which teachers are released from teaching duties during regular school hours so they can hone new skills.

In addition, an increasing number of teachers are receiving training outside these traditional settings. Many teachers are turning to online sources that provide individualized professional development. While learning at home has its advantages -- such as flexible scheduling and no commutes -- there's another distinct advantage budget-strapped school districts are discovering, too. Online resources aren't as expensive. Instead of bringing in experts to offer pricey daylong presentations, there are low-cost or even free online lessons available -- many of which can be integrated into a district's existing improvement initiatives [source: [Rebora](#)].

Of course, public school teachers aren't the only ones who continue to improve their craft through workshop training. Private school teachers, such as those who instruct using the Montessori method, also are encouraged to complete professional development courses. However, these courses -- whether math, music, special needs or leadership -- are tailored to the Montessori style, which allows children to learn at their own pace. Some Montessori professional development courses offer dual credit toward a master's degree [source: [NAMTA](#)]. If a teacher is leading Montessori classes in a public school partnership, teacher certification through the state -- as well as a Montessori training organization -- is required. In this case, a teacher would be subject to the professional development required to renew his or her state teaching license.

With all the types of professional training available, teachers are sure to benefit from honing their craft, but these programs aren't without their downsides. On the next page, we'll take a look at some of the pros and cons of professional development programs for teachers.

Benefits of Professional Development for Teachers

School districts' pay scales often include increases for teachers with higher education and licensure



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In-person workshops allow teachers to get immediate feedback on what they're learning.

levels, and those both require the expense of professional development. Teachers with national board certification, for example, can expect a salary increase for the life of the certificate (10 years before renewal) [source: [NBPTS](#)]. Plus, a National Research Council report found that teachers with national board certification take on other school leadership roles, stay in the classroom longer and support new or struggling teachers.

But there are a few downsides to professional development, too. For example, it can be time-consuming and costly. In the United States, each state determines the number of instructional school days per academic year, but the average is 180 [source: [TimeandLearning.org](#)]. However, as many teachers quickly discover, the school year is a bit longer for them. That's because there are usually about four or five teacher training days, or in-service days, built into the school district calendar each year. In addition, teachers are often required to spend time training during the summer and holidays.

In the District of Columbia, for example, teachers are granted five in-service days during the school year, but an equal number of professional development days must take place in August before the school year starts [source: [DCPS](#)]. While this district-sponsored training won't come out of a teacher's paycheck, completing an individualized professional development plan probably will. There are a number of free or low-cost resources on the Internet, but online college courses can run \$300 or more per credit hour, and on-campus courses may cost even more [source: [Degree Directory](#)]. Workshop or conference attendance can range from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand, depending on transportation arrangements and additional books and materials.

Despite the effect on the bottom line, professional development can boost teachers' careers, preparing them for supervisory positions and helping them get pay increases. And, when teachers participate in professional development, it can be good for the students, too. Students of national board certified teachers who completed additional professional development courses have been shown to score higher on achievement tests [source: [NBPTS](#)]. For many teachers, accomplishments like this make the investment in professional development well worth the effort.

Want to learn more about what it's like to be a teacher? Check out the links on the next page.

Lots More Information

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School-day Development

Professional development courses take up some of a teacher's free time, but what about the school day? That lets them try out new instructional approaches -- and get immediate feedback -- while school's still in session. It's also a better time to get support from mentor teachers. Unfortunately, allowing time for training activities during the school day creates a logistical dilemma. Along with in-service days, some districts opt for early-release or late-start days, so teachers can learn new skills without their students around. In addition to rescheduling buses and employees, and in some cases before- and after-school child care programs, it can be a challenge for teachers to have an in-depth lesson in only an hour or two [source: [NCREL](#)].

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