

# Exploring the Professional Learning Landscape in Tennessee



*A Brief On Reimagining State Support For Professional Learning*

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## Introduction

According to the 2019 Tennessee Educator Survey, a majority of teachers in the state spend at least 40 hours per year on professional learning activities. However, we don't yet know much about how teachers across the state spend their time as they participate in professional learning. Accordingly, as Tennessee districts consider how best to build systems of high-quality, job-embedded professional learning for all educators, it is critical to first understand the current landscape of professional learning across the state.

Prior research on professional learning indicates that ongoing, collaborative, job-embedded, and content-specific learning opportunities are most likely to create opportunities for teacher learning.<sup>1</sup> However, teachers across the country often report that the professional learning opportunities offered to them fall short of these ideals.<sup>2</sup> Using responses from the annual Tennessee Educator Survey, this brief zooms in on the professional learning experiences of teachers in Tennessee and examines whether teachers have access to regular and helpful professional learning opportunities. Unlike many other studies on educator professional development, this brief goes beyond an evaluation of a single program or examination of one district's practices.

Our findings suggest that although teachers frequently engage in professional learning, they may not always be investing time in professional learning activities that they consider helpful in making instructional decisions. In addition, there is considerable variation in the reported professional learning experiences across teaching assignment, schools, and districts in the state.

<sup>1</sup> Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2011; Lynch et al., 2019  
<sup>2</sup> Gates Foundation, 2014; Johnston & Tsai, 2018

## Specifically, we identify three key findings:

- 1 *While most teachers regularly engage in collaboration, many do not regularly participate in other learning activities that they rate as instructionally helpful.*
- 2 *Professional learning experiences vary across grade-level and subject-area assignments with self-contained elementary and English language arts teachers reporting the most frequent, most helpful, and most content-relevant professional learning activities.*
- 3 *Teachers often have limited choice over their formal professional development, but those with more choice rate it more helpful.*

## Policy Implications:



At the **state level**, examining how professional learning differs across the state will allow policymakers to better support districts in providing adequate and effective professional learning opportunities for all teachers.



At the **district level**, district leaders may want to carefully consider how to offer more personalized professional learning choices for all teachers and avoid one-size-fits-all approaches to professional learning.



At the **school level**, identifying the options available to teachers across subjects may help principals work with district leaders to facilitate content-relevant professional learning for more teachers.

## How We Examine Teacher Professional Learning Experiences

This study uses data from the 2019 Tennessee Educator Survey. One third of surveyed teachers—over 12,000 teachers across the state—answered randomly assigned questions on professional learning experiences. These teachers represent 143 districts and 1,695 schools across the state.

The survey asked teachers to report on how frequently they engaged in specific activities that we categorized into three distinct types of professional learning:



Category of Professional Learning	Description
Professional Development	Formal training opportunities, such as workshops, webinars, conferences, or graduate/continuing education classes
Personalized Support	One-on-one support provided through mentoring, coaching, or other individual partnerships formed with other educators
Collaboration	Collaboration, formal and informal, in which teachers work together on instruction or student learning

When teachers indicated that they had participated in a specific professional learning activity, they were then asked to rate how helpful it had been in making instructional decisions. While we believe how teachers rate the helpfulness of professional learning is an important signal of its quality, we cannot directly measure whether a teacher’s participation in any specific activity led to instructional changes or student learning.

In addition to survey data, this study uses TERA administrative data on school, staff, and student information drawn from the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years. This allows us to examine how reported professional learning experiences vary across teacher, school, and district characteristics.

## What We Know From Past Research On Professional Learning

Many educational researchers have focused on identifying features of professional learning that are associated with changes in instructional practice and improvements in student learning, and their reviews typically conclude that professional learning is most effective when it is content-specific, collaborative, and ongoing.<sup>3</sup> For example, a recent analysis of 95 experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations of professional development for math and science teachers found that PD has larger effects on student achievement when it focuses on teacher knowledge or student learning in a specific content area and when it includes opportunities for collaboration.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a review including 56 experimental studies of coaching programs concluded that coaching is more effective when it includes group training and focuses on specific content areas.<sup>5</sup> The evidence about whether the overall duration of professional learning models (e.g., total contact hours or frequency of teacher engagement) is related to effectiveness is more inconsistent, but most researchers warn against one-time or infrequent professional learning approaches.<sup>6</sup>

3 For example, see Blank & de las Alas, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kennedy, 2016; Kraft et al., 2018; Lynch et al., 2019; Yoon et al, 2007

4 Lynch et al., 2019

5 Kraft et al., 2018

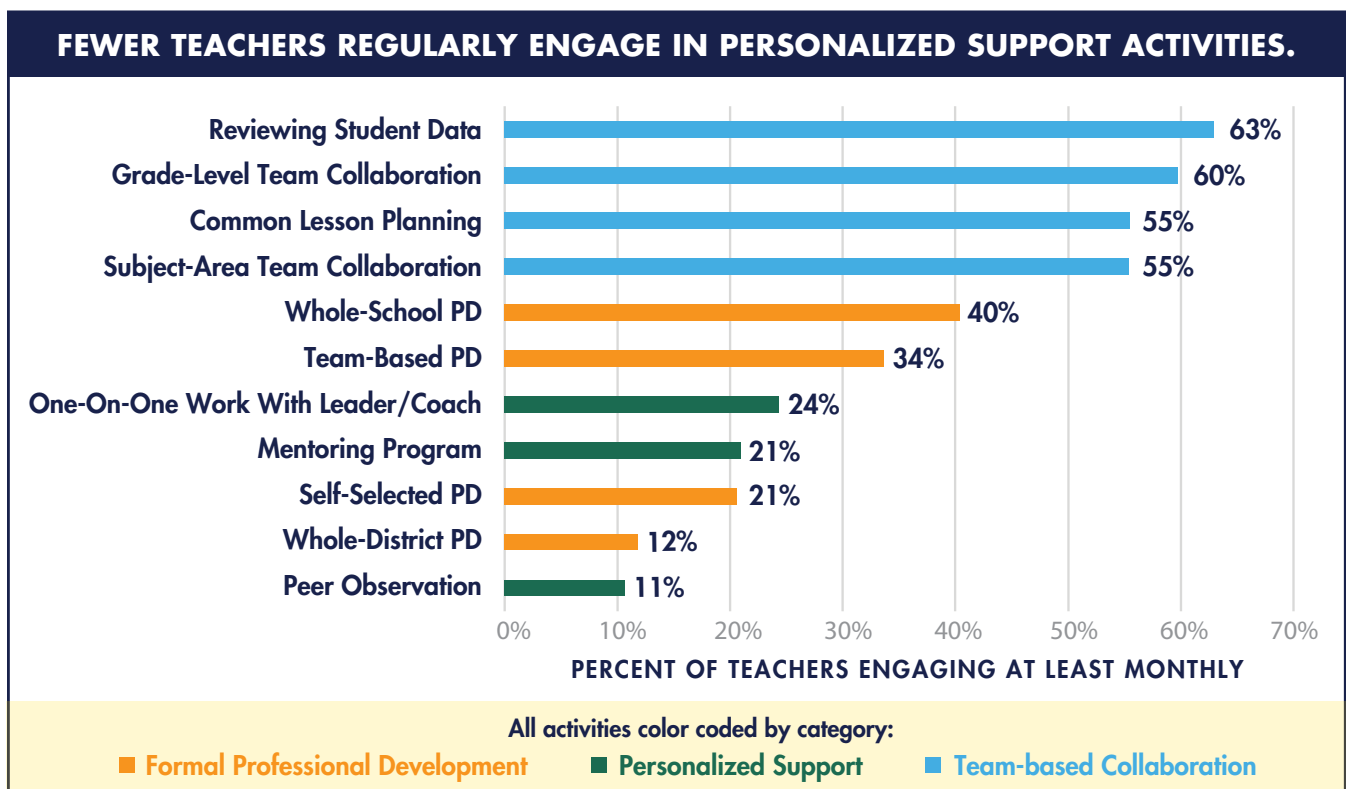
6 Some meta-analyses (Kraft et al., 2018; Lynch et al., 2019) do not find an association between the duration of professional learning and effectiveness while others do (Yoon et al., 2007). Research on the relationship between instructionally-focused teacher collaboration and student achievement outcomes also tend to conclude that more frequency is associated with greater student achievement gains (Goddard et al., 2015; Ronfeldt et al., 2015).

## 1

### WHILE MOST TEACHERS REGULARLY ENGAGE IN COLLABORATION, MANY DO NOT REGULARLY PARTICIPATE IN OTHER LEARNING ACTIVITIES THAT THEY RATE AS INSTRUCTIONALLY HELPFUL.

Almost all teachers (93 percent) reported regularly engaging in at least one professional learning activity (regular engagement is defined here as at least monthly). As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of teachers regularly engage in team-based collaboration—such as common lesson planning, meeting with a grade-level/subject-area team, or reviewing student data with fellow teachers—and formal professional development. Fewer teachers report regularly engaging in personalized support. For example, only one-quarter of teachers report regularly working one-on-one with a coach or leader on instructional issues.

**FIGURE 1**

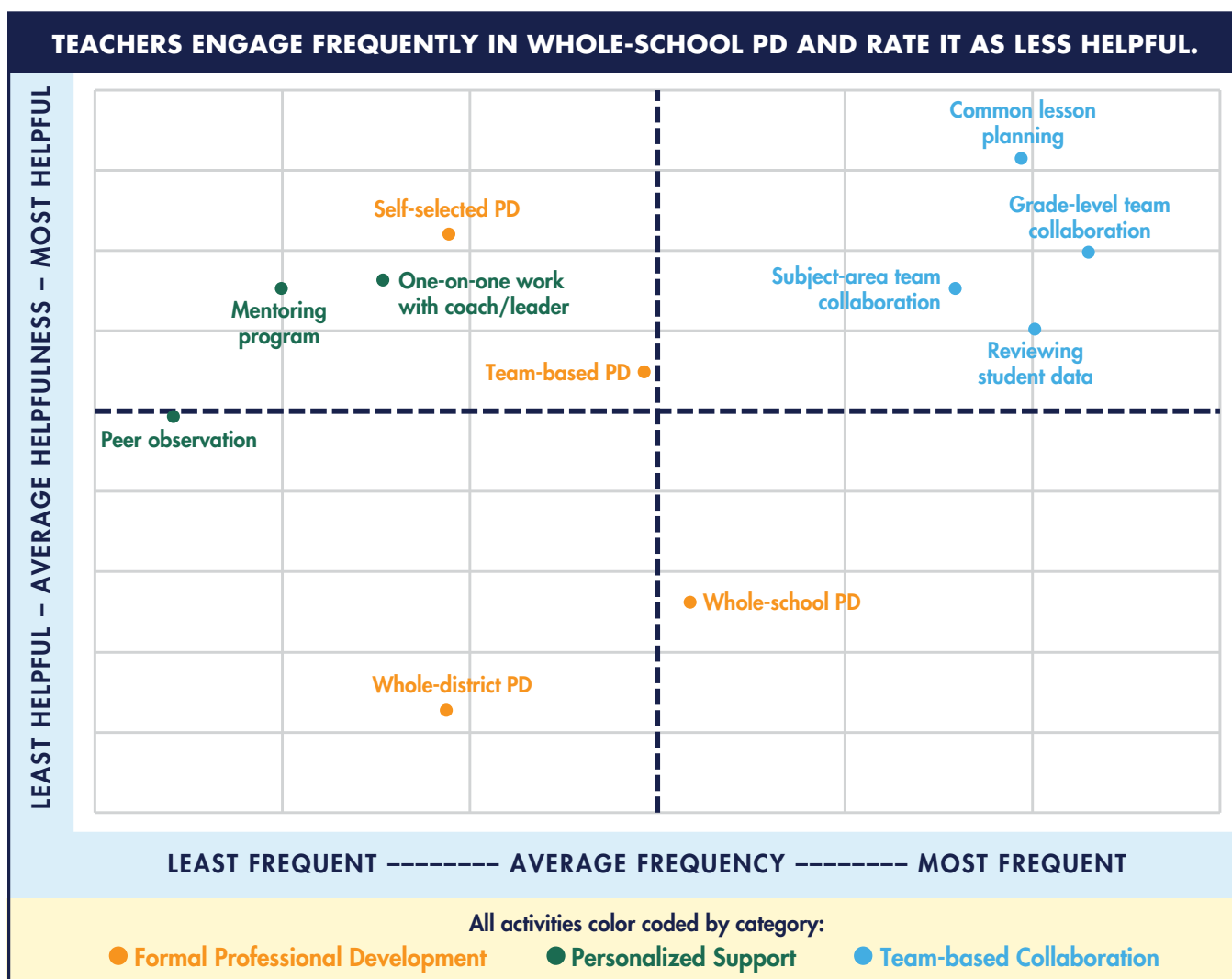


In addition to frequency, we examine how teachers rate the extent to which various professional learning activities help them make instructional decisions. About 45 percent of teachers in our sample report engaging in at least one activity that didn't help them or only somewhat helped them in making instructional decisions in their classroom. Further, about one-quarter of teachers report regularly engaging in an activity that they did not rate as instructionally helpful.



In Figure 2, we illustrate the average frequency and average perceived helpfulness of specific professional learning activities. Across the three categories of professional learning, we identify different patterns in teacher reported frequency and helpfulness. For professional development, more teachers report regularly engaging in whole-school PD but rate it as less helpful, while fewer teachers regularly engage in self-selected PD but rate it as much more helpful. Similarly, fewer teachers regularly engage in personalized support activities—such as mentoring or one-on-one work with a coach or leader—but rate these activities as more helpful. Along with self-selected PD, these activities are most likely to address specific needs of teachers. This pattern suggests that schools and districts may want to create more opportunities for such self-directed learning for teachers. Finally, more teachers regularly engage in collaborative activities—including meeting with instructional teams, common lesson planning, and reviewing student data—and tend to rate these activities as instructionally-helpful.

**FIGURE 2**

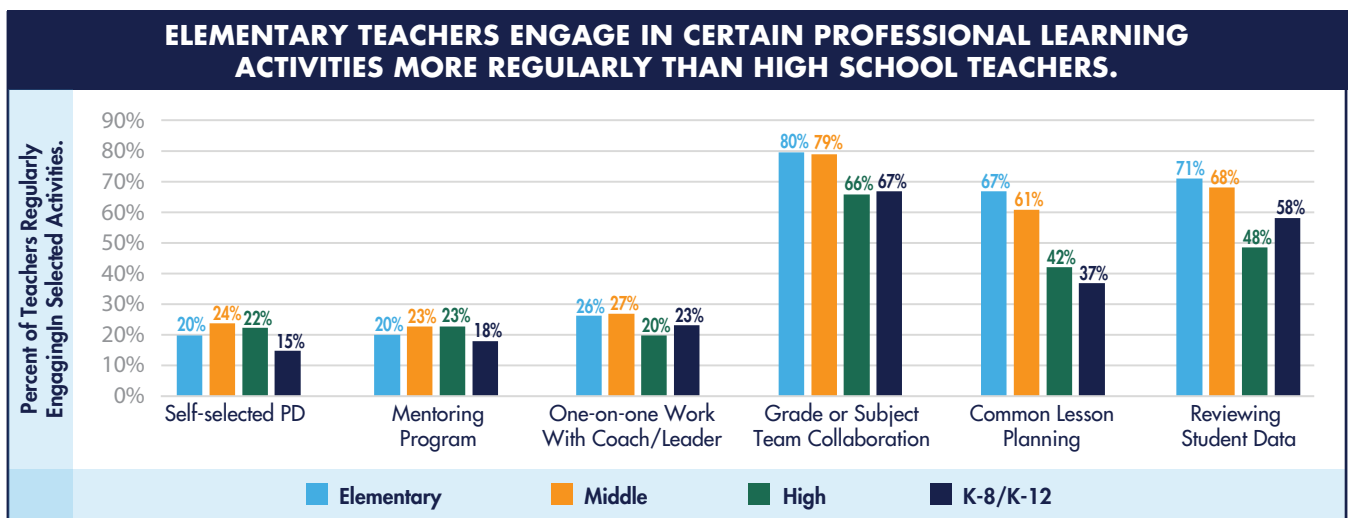


# 2

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES VARY ACROSS GRADE-LEVEL AND SUBJECT-AREA ASSIGNMENTS WITH SELF-CONTAINED ELEMENTARY AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHERS REPORTING THE MOST FREQUENT, MOST HELPFUL, AND MOST CONTENT-RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES.

Teachers likely have different professional learning experiences depending on their grade-level and subject-area assignment. Indeed, elementary teachers tend to report engaging most frequently in professional learning, especially team-based collaboration, and tend to rate these activities as more instructionally helpful. In Figure 3, we illustrate how frequently teachers across school level report engaging in the professional learning activities rated as most instructionally helpful. In Figure 4, we illustrate differences in how teachers rate the instructional helpfulness of these activities across school level. While the frequency and helpfulness of self-selected PD and mentoring do not vary much by school level, high school teachers report less frequent and less helpful professional learning across the other activity types. The largest differences occur between elementary and high school teachers for common lesson planning and reviewing student data, with high school teachers engaging in these activities less frequently and rating these activity as less helpful. It's possible that high schools are less likely to create formal structures—such as common planning time—that encourage these activities.

**FIGURE 3**



**FIGURE 4**

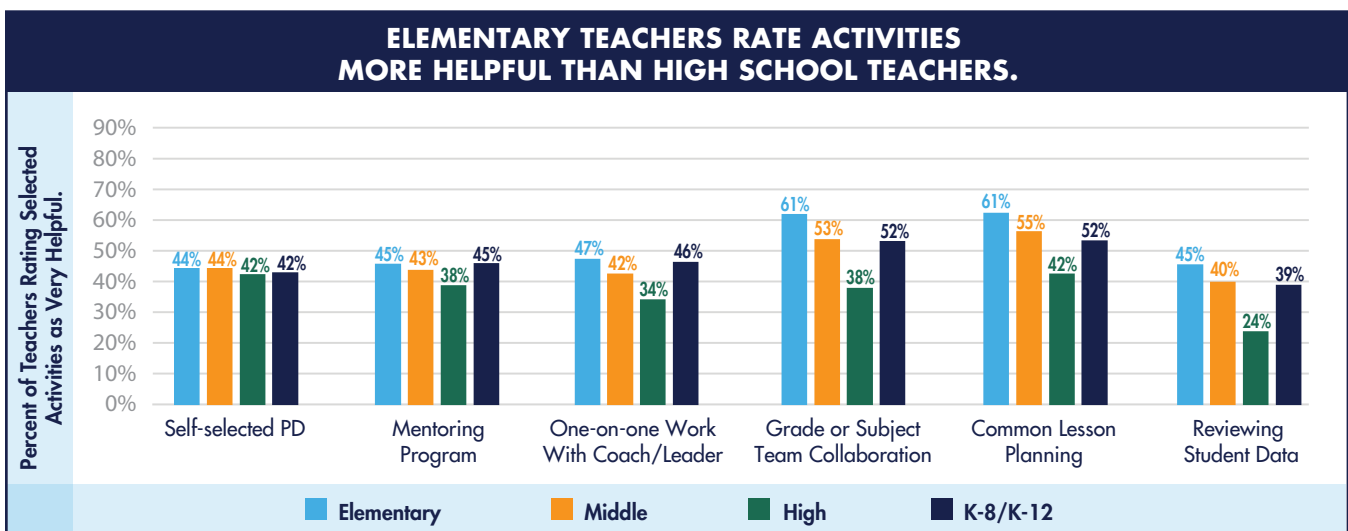
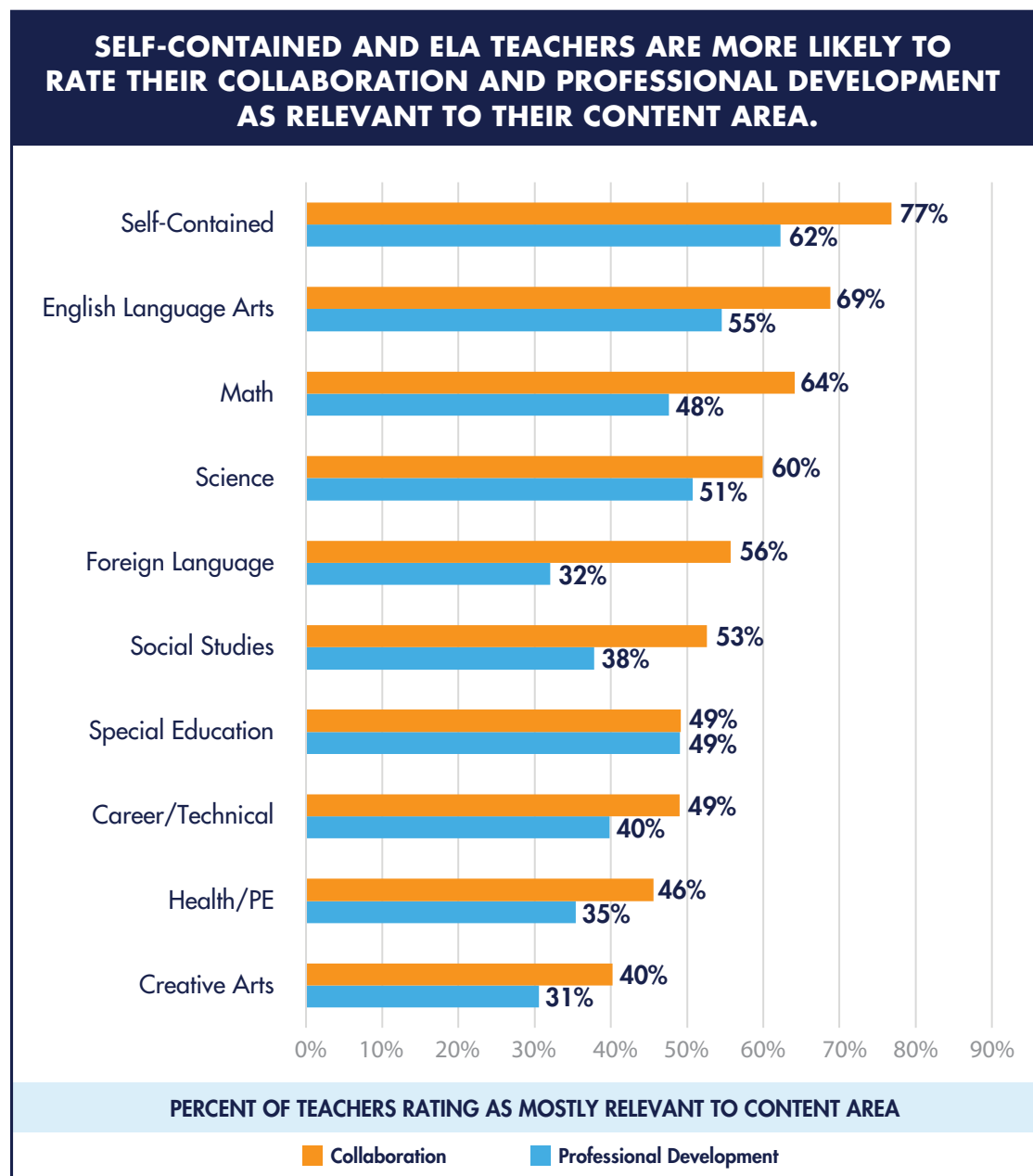


Figure 5 shows how teachers of different assignments rate the content relevance of their professional development and collaborative time. Teachers who rate their PD or collaboration as more content-relevant are also more likely to agree it leads to instructional improvement and more likely to rate it as instructionally helpful. Since most collaborative activities are organized around grade-level and/or subject-area teams, it is not surprising that more teachers rate their collaborative time as content-relevant than their professional development. Self-contained elementary teachers and English language arts teachers are more likely to rate their collaboration and PD as mostly relevant to their content area. In contrast, social studies teachers and teachers in the special areas are less likely to rate collaboration or PD as most relevant to their content area. These findings indicate that teachers in certain subject areas have fewer options for professional learning that relates specifically to the content that they teach.

**FIGURE 5**



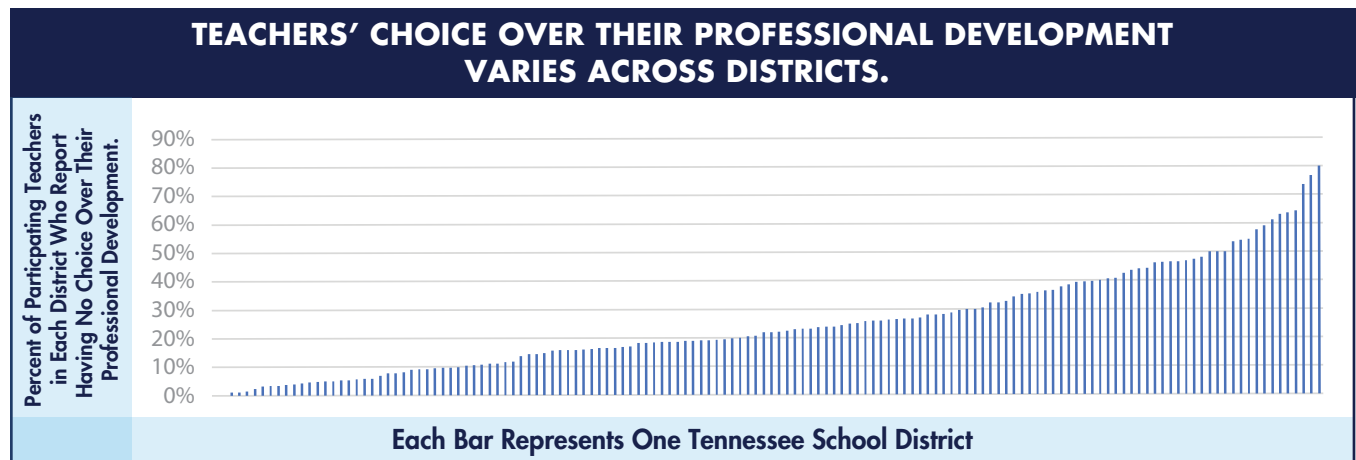
# 3

## TEACHERS OFTEN HAVE LIMITED CHOICE OVER THEIR FORMAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, BUT THOSE WITH MORE CHOICE RATE IT MORE HELPFUL.

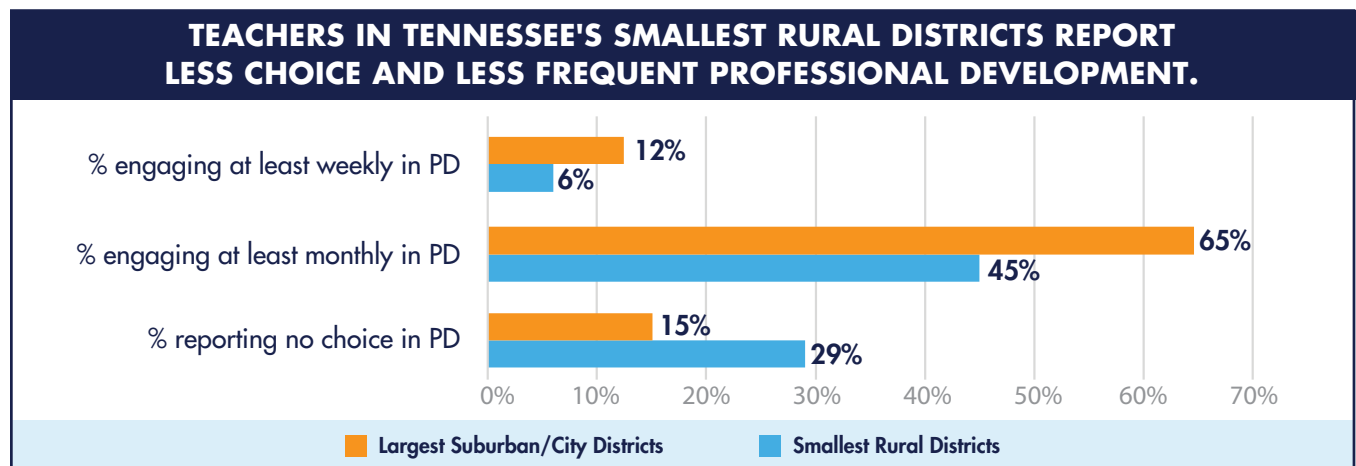
Given the considerable amount of time teachers spend participating in professional learning activities, it is critical to learn more about what agency they have over their learning and what they say is most helpful to them as they seek to improve their instructional practice. Similar to results that we have reported previously from the [2018 survey](#), we find that approximately half of teachers responding to the 2019 Tennessee Educator Survey indicated that they had little choice over their professional development (with 19 percent reporting that they never chose their professional development and 36 percent reporting that they only chose in a few cases).

Further, teachers' agency over their professional development varies across districts. Figure 6 illustrates the percentage of responding teachers in each Tennessee school district who indicated that they had no choice in their professional development. There are 41 districts in which at least one-third of responding teachers report having no choice over their professional development. In 15 districts, at least half of responding teachers report having no choice over their professional development. Almost all of these districts are small districts with 10 or fewer schools, and teachers in these districts report engaging less frequently in professional development overall. In Figure 7, we compare teacher responses about their professional development experiences in the state's smallest rural districts (50 districts that have fewer than 10 schools) with teacher responses in the state's four largest school districts (all urban/suburban districts with more than 50 schools). These findings suggest that certain districts may have fewer resources to offer professional development choices to their teachers.

**FIGURE 6**



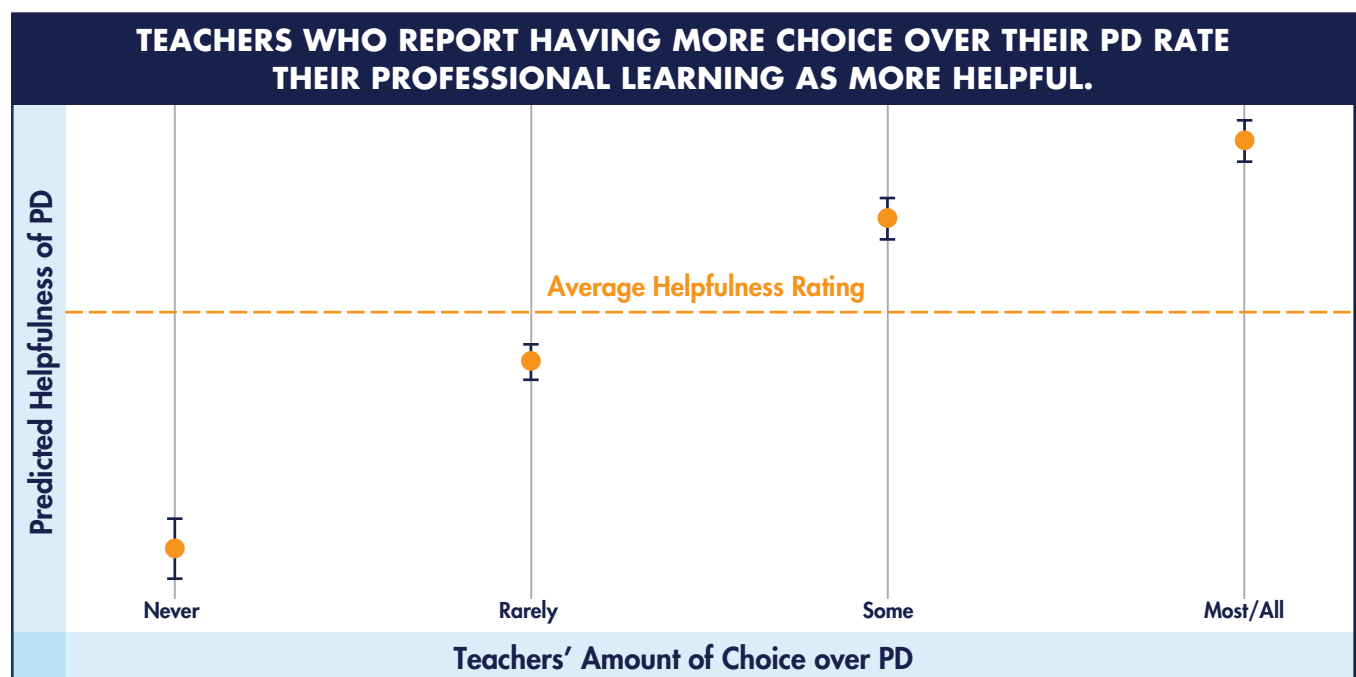
**FIGURE 7**





Even when accounting for their district context (e.g., district size and geographic location), teachers who report having more choice over their professional learning activities also tend to rate these activities as more helpful. As illustrated in Figure 8, teachers who report never having a choice over their professional development rate their PD as significantly less helpful, on average, than teachers who report having more choice.

**FIGURE 8**



We find similar patterns when examining teachers' agency over their collaborative activities and the extent to which they rate collaboration as helpful. On average, surveyed teachers report that approximately 40 percent of their collaborative activities are determined by school and district administrators, and this administrative oversight is negatively associated with how teachers rate the helpfulness of their collaboration. These results are not surprising given that prior research suggests that content-relevant and job-specific professional development is most effective for teachers.<sup>7</sup> When teachers have limited choice, professional learning may be less relevant to their work. In particular, mandated district-wide and school-wide professional development or collaborative activities are unlikely to meet the individual needs of each teacher.

<sup>7</sup> Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2011; Gates Foundation, 2014; Garet et al., 2001; Wei et al., 2010



# CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Results from the 2019 Tennessee Educator Survey indicate that teachers engage in professional learning in Tennessee quite often but that not all teachers report regularly participating in professional learning that they find helpful. These trends in professional learning activities can provide valuable insights as we seek to better support teacher development in the state.

## Policy Implications



At the **state level**, examining how professional learning differs across the state will allow policymakers to better support districts in providing adequate and effective professional learning opportunities for all teachers. In particular, our findings indicate that some smaller districts may struggle to offer professional development choices for their teachers and that teachers in the special areas are less likely to participate in professional development that is content-relevant. Since it may be difficult for districts to offer professional learning supports for specialized content areas, state or regional organizations may be better positioned to offer content-specific professional learning for these teachers.



At the **district level**, district leaders may want to carefully consider how to offer professional learning choices for teachers. District leaders should be skeptical of a one-size-fits-all approach to professional learning. In particular, teachers rate whole-district and whole-school professional development as much less instructionally helpful. Our survey data indicates that there are districts with more than half of teachers who reported having no choice over their professional development, so districts may want to think more about ways to incorporate teacher feedback in professional learning. Additionally, district leaders could examine ways to increase access to self-selected professional development and personalized support (such as instructional coaching) for teachers across school level and subject areas.



At the **school level**, principals may want to consider how to address the reported differences across teaching assignments. For example, ELA and self-contained elementary teachers appear to have the most frequent and helpful professional learning experiences, but special area teachers report less frequent professional learning and are less likely to rate their PD or collaboration as relevant to their content area. Teachers are already reporting spending considerable time on professional learning, so principals should be thoughtful about how to ensure that this time is both relevant and instructionally helpful. School leaders may want to consider ways to allow teachers across subjects more choice in selecting relevant professional learning.

## Future Research

Future TERA research will aim to examine whether engagement in specific professional learning activities is related to instructional improvement or student learning gains. In the meantime, this work demonstrates the need for leaders to examine professional learning opportunities in their area in order to give teachers the best chance for continued improvement.

