TN EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE

What We Need to Know to Improve Professional Learning: Questions to Drive a Research Agenda

Improving professional learning is less about knowing which program to adopt than knowing how to align resources and effort. Such was the underlying message when a group of educators, policymakers, and academics came together early in 2017 to prioritize questions for a new research agenda. Convened by the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA), these stakeholders spent two days discussing what knowledge gaps most need to be filled for the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) to promote more effective professional learning across the state.

The group identified five topics of significance for research. For each, they clarified what they meant, why it mattered, and how new knowledge could support TDOE efforts. TERA's intent is to use this guidance to create a coherent body of knowledge, rather than a set of discrete studies, that's both informed by these questions and that emerges, on an ongoing basis, from earlier TERA work. This snapshot highlights the topics and subsequent questions. A more in depth treatment of each appears in the brief *What We Need to Know to Improve Professional Learning: Questions to Drive a Research Agenda.*

🕐 The Amount And Use Of Time

That professional learning takes time is of little dispute. But what constitutes time for effective professional learning is less obvious. Along with the use of time, we don't know much about how time for professional learning should be allocated.

To address these gaps in knowledge, TERA will consider the following questions as it plans new studies:

- *What are the variations across the state and across districts in how much time is spent on professional learning?*
- *What are the most significant barriers that limit the allocation of time for professional learning in schools?*

- *How is time for professional learning used in places where professional learning goals are being achieved?*

🔄 The Conditions For Effective Feedback

Feedback is information that helps people understand what they should keep doing, and what they should change. We don't have a good understanding of what happens inside schools where teachers make effective use of feedback, and how that differs from what happens in schools where teachers don't. Nor do we know how schools can transform the quality of their feedback, and how state and local leaders might promote such transformation in different contexts across a state.

To address these gaps in knowledge, TERA will consider the following questions as it plans new studies:

- *What conditions predict teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness of feedback?*
- *What conditions predict the effectiveness of feedback?*
- *What conditions predict the effectiveness of specific professional learning opportunities?*
- *What do teachers' social networks for feedback look like, and what is the quality of these networks?*

📖 Variations In Access To Professional Learning Opportunities

Variations in access to professional learning likely contribute to differences in the quality of teaching and student learning. We don't have good data on the contexts in which important opportunities are lacking. As a result, we can say little about the size of those gaps, what's creating them, and how they may lead to differences in the quality of teaching and student learning.

To address these gaps in knowledge, TERA will consider the following questions as it plans new studies:

- *Where do you find the greatest variability in access to important aspects of professional learning?*
- *How are patterns of growth in educator effectiveness related to the availability of professional learning opportunities?*
- *What kinds of changes in policy and/or practice could be tested to see if they reduce variations in access to professional learning?*

Teacher Self-Reflection And Assessment

Effective self-assessment and reflection occurs when people accurately recognize their own strengths and areas for improvement, and then take appropriate action. There are big gaps in our understanding about what leads to teachers being more or less accurate in their self-assessment, and what makes it more or less likely that they take appropriate action to improve their practice.

To address these gaps in knowledge, TERA will consider the following questions as it plans new studies:

- *To what extent is there alignment between teachers' diagnoses of their own needs, diagnoses by external evaluators, and the needs addressed by the professional learning that is available/provided to those teachers?*
- *What are the characteristics of a self-assessment process that leads to improvements in teaching or student learning?*
- *To what extent is professional learning optional for educators, why do they choose what they do when it is optional, and when is the ability to opt in beneficial?*
- *What are the school conditions that predict the extent to which reflection and self-assessment leads to improvements in teaching and student learning?*

Coherent Instructional Systems

Classroom instruction is shaped by numerous elements over which education leaders hold sway. These elements form a coherent system when they work together to promote a shared understanding of effective instruction. In a coherent system, each part contributes to clarity about student learning goals and how to meet them. We need to identify if there are sources of misalignment – from materials (e.g., curriculum guidance), to accountability mechanisms (e.g., evaluation), to structures for professional learning (e.g., PLCs), to state and district mandates – and understand how coherence may be promoted effectively in different contexts.

To address these gaps in knowledge, TERA will consider the following questions as it plans new studies:

- *How and to what extent is there currently alignment or coherence across the different units of the state education department tasked with helping to develop district capacity for instructional improvement?*
- *How and to what extent are schools and districts currently providing coherent professional learning opportunities for various role groups?*
- *How can the state department of education support districts to develop coherent professional learning systems and cultures?*

How the Questions Were Developed

As a research-practice partnership, TERA engages practitioners throughout the research process. Practitioner involvement in the design, execution, and interpretation of studies increases the odds of producing relevant and useful findings.

The process proceeded from brainstorming to prioritization and refinement. The goal was to understand how those in the broadly representative group thought about the challenges of professional learning, as well as their objectives for professional learning and the biggest barriers they saw as getting in the way of meeting those objectives. The push to turn practical imperatives into questions for researchers made for vigorous but ultimately productive discussions.

What's Next?

As was said repeatedly during TERA's convening, what's needed is a clear picture of "what it looks like and sounds like" when professional learning is effective. Since the convening, TERA and the TDOE added new items related to professional learning to the 2017 version of the Tennessee Educator Survey and outlined two major studies based on the discussion at the convening – one will use direct observation to capture teachers' professional leaning experiences over time, and another will use measures of effectiveness to identify conditions that predict educator growth. Additional studies will be planned based on how well they add to or compliment these early projects. As these studies come together, the intent is that they contribute to a research-based framework and set of principles to guide state efforts to continually improve professional learning.