

Policy Brief: Supporting Teacher-Driven Professional Learning in Utah

08/30/2024

Empowering Utah teachers with more control over their professional learning is crucial to addressing teacher burnout and improving instructional practices. Nathan Justis' research highlights that when teachers choose their learning experiences—such as small group collaborations and accessing relevant expertise—they are more engaged and effective. By supporting teacher-driven professional learning, education leaders can better retain teachers and enhance student success.

POLICY BRIEF

Supporting Teacher-Driven Professional Learning in Utah

Nathan Justis, Ph.D.

By empowering teachers with more ownership over their professional learning, education leaders can increase teacher engagement, reduce teacher attrition, improve their organization's ability to adapt to change, and better support student success. Granting teachers agency over their professional learning also aligns with best practices in adult learning (Knowles et al., 2014).

SOURCES & READING RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief summarizes a dissertation study entitled "Teacher's Perceptions of Free Professional Learning Networks and Teams," conducted by Nathan Justis at Utah State University (2023). <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/tdt/1294/>

Jones, W. H., & Dwyer, S. (2014). How teachers learn: The roles of formal, informal, and independent learning. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 62(3), 347-364.

Justis, N., & Reiva, L. (2023). *Teacher staff meetings: The Learning Professional*. 141x. 18-19.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2014). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. Routledge.

Marshall, D. T., Pringle, T., Neugebauer, R. M., & Shannon, D. M. (2022). *Why teachers are leaving and what we can do about it*. Phi Delta Kappan, 104(2), 4-11.



Utah State University

BACKGROUND

Teachers leave the profession at high rates, citing feeling undervalued and overwhelmed (Marshall et al., 2022). While much is known about formal teacher professional development, more needs to be understood about the professional learning opportunities teachers initiate and pursue for themselves. Understanding teacher-driven professional learning is critical and can be a valuable tool for supporting teacher well-being and instructional improvement.

KEY FINDINGS FROM SURVEY OF 1,693 UTAH TEACHERS

School-based teams and conferences/workshops are primary teacher-selected professional learning sources. Social media provides less frequent but helpful support as well. Teachers report decreased motivation, engagement, and learning in obligated professional learning spaces compared to chosen ones. Teachers actively seek ideas from experts in personalized, collaborative spaces, directly relevant to their practice. From a teacher's perspective, many required, school- and district-mandated professional learning spaces often lack these features.

In ideal professional learning spaces, teachers envision:

- Collaborating with peers in small groups
- Accessing knowledgeable others for relevant expertise and ideas
- Engaging in iterative learning processes
- Exercising agency over the timing, topic, pace and format of professional learning

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase teacher agency over their professional learning by providing choice in topics, timing, and format. Consider repurposing some staff meetings for more teacher-led professional learning (Justis & Deiva, 2023) and inviting teachers to share their learning throughout the year with colleagues.
- Foster school-based learning communities where teachers collaborate to address shared challenges of their choosing.
- Connect teachers with relevant expertise, both within and beyond their schools.
- Design professional learning as sustained learning processes, not one-off events.
- Include administrator and teacher perspectives in planning for teacher professional learning.
- Study further the impact of teacher-driven vs. obligated professional learning on changes in instructional practice and student learning.