

# INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE

*HONORING TEACHERS' VOICES IN  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT*

June 2015



# INTRODUCTION

In partnership with administrators and parents, teachers work diligently day in and day out to help our students achieve their goals. We witness firsthand many great accomplishments in our schools and classrooms while also recognizing the deep gaps in student access and performance that persist in our education system, influenced in part by social and economic factors. We know from our own experience, and research confirms, that teachers are the most important school-based factor in closing these gaps and overcoming the external challenges our students face.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Research also shows that when teachers make noticeable improvements to their practice, the individual performance of their colleagues is improved as well.<sup>4</sup> For these reasons, it is wise to invest in constant support and regular growth opportunities that improve our content knowledge, deepen our pedagogical expertise, and strengthen our ability to serve the diverse needs of our students.

Unfortunately, our desire to be successful is not enough. Meaningful professional development (PD) is critical to identifying and expanding teaching practices that lead to student growth and achievement. However, PD as it stands is not fully meeting the needs of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers. Much of the time carved out for PD during the academic year is dedicated to communicating compliance-based content and processing student grades rather than developing our skills or participating in targeted growth opportunities. As a result, PD also fails to meet the needs of our students.

With the foundation of this shared perspective, we collaborated as a team of active classroom teachers and as members of Educators 4 Excellence to conduct research and engage hundreds of colleagues across the district through surveys and focus groups, and we propose recommendations that would readily and significantly improve teacher professional development and support.

*“When teachers do not have input into their own professional development, they are less likely to accept criticism and be held accountable for their own improvement. This hurts students and decreases the effectiveness of schools.”*

**Steven Fouts, Ed.D.**, Math teacher, Fredrick Douglass Academy High School

## VISION

**CHALLENGE:** The coordination and structure of PD in CPS are limited, resulting in drastic variation in the quality, content, and rigor of support and opportunities offered from school to school and across networks.

Currently, the district provides limited, quarterly professional development sessions for network leaders, principals and a select number of teacher facilitators on a short list of district-identified topics. This group is then charged with bringing district-level PD back to the school building and sharing it with teachers. All other PD sessions are delivered and managed at the network or school level and vary greatly in terms of frequency, duration and accountability. The strategic source list, provided by the district as a reference of approved external PD providers, supplies schools with valuable guidance, but

does little to ensure quality or consistency. While some teachers reported regular engagement in highly structured, school-based PD, the vast majority repeatedly emphasized that school and network-based PD does not adequately address teacher and student needs and is directly available to only a select few. This means that PD is not positively impacting instructional practice consistently throughout the district. Research underscores the critical importance of implementing sustained, results-based PD, aligned to district priorities and needs, with processes in place to evaluate and refine programming and ensure effectiveness at every level.<sup>5</sup>

**SOLUTION:** Refresh CPS's vision and scope for PD to incorporate teacher guidance and set a standard expectation of teacher PD that is consistent across the district.

*“Professional development in CPS just isn’t equitable. I see the math teacher, the reading teacher going to PDs all the time, learning new things and having time to connect with teachers from the same content area across the network, but for social studies teachers? Music teachers? There simply is no system in place. Because we don’t have the same opportunity to grow our practice, ultimately, it’s our students who suffer.”*

**Judie Stork**, Social studies and foreign language teacher, W.E.B. DuBois Elementary School

nearly

**60%**

of teachers

surveyed say they do not regularly incorporate strategies or information from PD they have received.

**50%**

of teachers

surveyed say they disagree or strongly disagree that they are consulted about school-based PD planning and content.

Source: E4E-Chicago survey of 220 Chicago Public Schools teachers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Create a Teacher Advisory Board (TAB):** Teacher input and feedback can drive and guide the development of a fresh, district-wide vision for meaningful PD. The TAB, created and managed by the district, should be selected through a rigorous application process and involve a selection method that prioritizes representation of teachers from each network, including various grade levels and subjects.

### **Set clear district-wide expectations for PD:**

A comprehensive review and report on the state of PD in Chicago Public Schools was last conducted over a decade ago in 2002.<sup>6</sup> A refreshed review of PD with teacher input is essential to establishing a strategic vision with specific criteria, including minimum expectations and time requirements for every school and teacher. While the district's vision would provide consistency and clarity, school control in selecting additional PD opportunities would remain in place. Though greater PD structure and vision are needed across the district, it is paramount that schools continue to have flexibility to choose non-district provided PD resources and opportunities as they are best suited to recognize the needs of their teachers and students.

**Reinstate a minimum of four professional development days within the contractual year devoted exclusively to teacher professional development:** Although we recognize that district resources are extremely limited, we strongly recommend that district leaders reinstate a minimum of four professional development days within the contractual year. Many teachers who participated in our survey, focus groups and outreach expressed that these days be evenly spaced out throughout the school year—perhaps at the end of each quarter to give teachers time to analyze student performance and identify effective strategies to maximize student learning before the end of the semester. The upcoming district-union contract negotiations in the 2015-16 school year provide a prime opportunity to revisit PD offerings and expectations.

In the event that reinstating full professional development days is not financially feasible at this time, we recommend that the previously discussed district-wide PD expectations include at least two district or network-based professional development opportunities where teachers are able to self-select sessions based on their instructional needs.

## ALIGNMENT

**CHALLENGE:** PD is not formally aligned with the REACH teacher evaluation system, resulting in professional development that is not reflective of teachers' respective growth areas as identified in evaluation feedback. CPS has made a significant investment in the REACH teacher evaluation system and undoubtedly makes significant investments in PD. A clear picture of CPS's overall investment in PD proves challenging to illustrate due, in part, to its disconnected structure. However, according to the CPS Professional Development Project, a study of CPS professional development conducted in 2002, the total annual expenditures for PD were estimated at \$190-\$200 million. One huge driver of this cost was the substitute teachers needed to cover teacher class time. Recent information from the CPS career portal shows the cost for a substitute is currently \$117.20-\$158.24 per day. These numbers illustrate the scope of our investment in teacher professional development, which in 2002 represented more than 5% of the district's operating budget.<sup>7</sup>

The disconnect between evaluation results and growth opportunities inhibits the district from maximizing its investments and the potential for significant instructional improvements. Furthermore, several who took the survey expressed a desire to have clear direction on how PD can serve their specific professional needs by sharing frustrations with the lack of support and ability to address growth areas in their evaluations.

*“As educators, we are asked to inspire our students to become lifelong learners, but as teachers we are rarely afforded that same opportunity when it comes to our own professional development. Too rarely are teachers included in determining and enrolling in PD that is specific to their needs.”*

*Alyson Stout, M.ED, Special education teacher, VOISE Academy High School*



**80%**  
of teachers

agree or strongly agree  
that PD should better  
align with the REACH  
evaluation system.

Source: E4E-Chicago survey of 220 Chicago Public Schools teachers.

Failing to provide clear resources that strengthen our practice contributes to a belief that the REACH evaluation is a punitive exercise rather than a supportive tool for professional growth. In order to improve how we teach, the REACH teacher evaluation process must provide both an evaluation of our work and aligned support for improvement.

**SOLUTION:** Growth areas identified in REACH evaluation results should be paired with suggested PD opportunities that address the skills or knowledge needing improvement.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**Provide principals with training and consistent guidance on connecting REACH with PD options:** Just as teachers need training to help differentiate their instruction to their students' varied needs, principals too need training to provide individualized support to teachers. Therefore, we recommend that the district prepare principals to leverage REACH evaluations as opportunities to identify specific resources that offer teachers instructional support. Resources would be housed and accessible across schools through the Learning Hub, CPS's collaborative platform devoted to employee learning and development (formerly known as Chicago Public Schools University). In addition, principals should be able to direct teachers to upcoming network and district-based professional development opportunities relevant to their professional needs.

**Create an automated system that connects REACH with PD options:** The Reflect and Learn system is a platform used by teachers and principals that houses pre and post observation conversations and ratings of the observation through a rubric and written feedback. Adding a feature that automatically populates Learning Hub resources based on a teacher's specific REACH evaluation results would simplify the training and communication needed for principals and teachers to make smart decisions around PD. Similarly, we further recommend that all

online PD resources along with internal and external PD opportunities be organized in the Learning Hub according to CPS evaluation domains and components. This will enable teachers to easily and independently identify supportive resources as professional needs arise.

**Create formal roles for experienced, talented educators to serve as PD providers:** The knowledge, experience and talent of CPS's highest-rated ("Distinguished") educators offer an untapped resource for supporting struggling teachers and disseminating best practices. We recommend that principals capitalize on the strengths of our distinguished educators to provide school-based professional development sessions on areas and topics of mastery. Participants in our surveys and focus groups routinely emphasized the lack of opportunities to participate in rigorous "lesson study" visits to observe and analyze exceptional teachers in action. To support principals in this effort, we further recommend that the district work with principals to organize paid substitutes or provide clear guidance on developing scheduling models that facilitate some out-of-class time for teachers. This will enable struggling teachers dedicated time to observe distinguished educators, virtually or in-real-time who can model methods and mentor them in their areas of needed growth. A study of National and State Teachers of the Year found that having accomplished teachers support new or struggling teachers was considered a highly important factor in improving effectiveness—both for the person receiving and providing the support.<sup>8</sup>

**Expand the CPS Framework Specialists program:** The Framework Specialist cohort, a partnership between CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union, is a highly-selective professional learning community of 80 teacher-leaders across the district who create resources, videos, and professional development to support teachers with the CPS Framework for Teaching (the rubric used in the REACH evaluation system). Based on survey and focus group feedback on this program, we urge CPS to expand the number of teachers served through this program or to

model current teacher-led PD after the program structure. We recommend providing an application-based system to train accomplished, highly rated teachers to provide professional development, mentoring, and classroom-based coaching for less proficient teachers across schools and networks. Distinguished educators serving as school- or network-based PD providers would receive additional pay, potentially funded by grants as in the Framework Specialist program, and would have more autonomy from some of the accountability structures required for teachers (i.e. less frequent principal observations).

## ACCESSIBILITY

**CHALLENGE:** Several high-quality, self-selected professional development opportunities are available through the Learning Hub. However, these resources are not successfully communicated, shared or accessible across schools or networks. Our experience, along with that of surveyed teachers, confirms that good professional development is hard to find. The vast majority of teachers surveyed have rarely, if ever, used Learning Hub resources and many are not even aware that the Learning Hub exists. Those of us who are aware of the Learning Hub find it difficult to navigate, insufficient in content and not aligned to REACH.

We also found that opportunities to share effective content and grade-level practices beyond our schools were virtually nonexistent.

**SOLUTION:** CPS should re-evaluate and streamline its current communication system to ensure that district resources are clearly and regularly shared with teachers through one coordinated system.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Develop a streamlined communication system for all internal and external PD opportunities:** Determining a more innovative and streamlined approach to communicating PD opportunities will allow for ongoing and consistent teacher engagement in potential growth and learning. The system could be as simple as a strategically scheduled email with alerts for upcoming events and newly available resources. The Teacher Advisory Board (or “TAB”) could serve as a contributing resource for providing input and feedback on the most effective way to notify teachers of PD opportunities. Aligned with earlier recommendations, this communication system should organize opportunities by REACH domains and components.

**Encourage and provide virtual and live spaces for sharing instructional best practices across schools and networks:** Avenues for formally and informally sharing best practices can include systems such as lesson study, a form of long-term professional development in which teams of teachers collaboratively plan, research, and study their lesson instruction as a way to determine how students learn best. Another great system is collaborative planning time among teachers, which would enrich the professional connections amongst educators and create an ideal forum to collectively improve student learning. The district could incentivize participation in these groups by offering Continuing Professional Development Units (CPDUs), which allow teachers to increase their base salary through lane credits. This would provide a low-cost way to enhance professional learning options.

*“Professional development should educate and develop teachers. But in most cases, teachers are not given a voice in designing or selecting their own professional development. Honoring teachers’ voices in how CPS schools, networks and the district structure our professional development will increase the predictability, consistency and accountability for all stakeholders. Teachers’ input will positively impact instruction and increase student learning.”*

**Brooke Craig**, First grade teacher, Morton School of Excellence



over  
**90%**  
of teachers

surveyed have rarely to never used district online PD resources via the Learning Hub, formerly known as CPS University.



more than  
**30%**  
of teachers

surveyed do not know how to access district or network-based professional development resources.

Source: E4E-Chicago survey of 220 Chicago Public Schools teachers.

## TEACHER VOICE

**CHALLENGE:** CPS teachers do not have transparent structures to provide or review feedback on PD resources and opportunities. While teachers provide feedback on PD sessions provided by district selected providers, the feedback is not public and, therefore, not useful for informing teachers on the content and quality of the PD provided. In addition, teacher feedback on school and network level PD is not consistently captured or shared to improve offerings.

In recent months, CPS has come under heightened scrutiny for decisions and investments made in principal PD.<sup>9</sup> Engaging educators in identifying and selecting teacher PD would not only result in a more strategic investment but also ensure shared accountability for results. Without feedback and guidance from teachers, PD remains a top-down decision.

**SOLUTION:** CPS should create accountability structures and systems that allow teachers to give feedback on the quality and effectiveness of professional development resources and trainings.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Include school and network-based PD in the Learning Hub and incentivize participation:** Presently, teachers are able to provide star ratings for professional development offerings that are entered into the Learning Hub. This feature enables teachers to see ratings from other teachers

and view their comments. However, entering PD into the Learning Hub is not a school or network level requirement. Requiring and incentivizing full participation from schools and networks in placing PD sessions on the Hub would create a greater line of sight into the areas for growth and more importantly, into promising practices at the school and network levels.

**Audit Learning Hub offerings and ratings to ensure quality and accountability:** On an annual basis, PD offerings on the Learning Hub should be audited to consider teacher feedback as one measure of PD quality. By analyzing trends from teachers' feedback, CPS can make more informed choices about what PD is offered and who is providing it.

**Incorporate teacher feedback on PD in administrator evaluations:** One factor in the Principal Practice rubric, used to evaluate principals, is to "create powerful professional learning systems,"<sup>10</sup> but currently teacher feedback is not included in a meaningful way. Teachers should be regularly surveyed on their perceptions of school leaders' ability to identify and provide high-quality PD to their staff. Formal incorporation of teacher feedback can be easily included as one of many measures of principal practice. If PD is an important priority for the district, it is critical that it is incorporated into the district accountability system.



*“Teachers need increased awareness and access to resources available to empower and support their students.”*

*DeJernet Farder*, First grade teacher, Morton School of Excellence

## CONCLUSION

At this critical juncture of limited resources and district transition, we urge our district leaders to define a comprehensive, district-wide vision for teacher professional development with teachers at the table. CPS teachers are an underutilized resource with significant potential to serve as partners in maximizing existing resources and elevating student achievement. To ensure student success, we must listen to the voices closest to their needs—the teachers who lead our classrooms.

## METHODOLOGY

Educators 4 Excellence-Chicago staff began surveying CPS teachers at school visits and networking events early in the 2014-15 school year to identify top-of-mind education issues for CPS teachers. A collection of nearly 350 topic identification surveys reviewed in March 2015 by over a dozen E4E-Chicago teacher leaders identified teacher professional development as an issue area in need of teacher input.

Five active CPS classroom teachers and E4E-Chicago teacher leaders came together to form the inaugural E4E-Chicago Teacher Action Team. The team worked together to gather input from teachers across the district, conduct research from leading experts, and meet Chicago-area stakeholders to form key policy recommendations for improving teacher PD. In addition to collecting 220 surveys from educators across the district, the E4E-Chicago Teacher Action Team also convened eleven focus groups over two months, engaging more than 60 teachers—both elementary and high school—in PD-focused discussions to help highlight key trends, identify gaps, and workshop potential solutions.

Over the course of two months, the Teacher Action Team met with Chicago-area PD experts and leaders, analyzed focus group and survey data, and reviewed and discussed leading research on the design and implementation of high-quality professional models. The recommendations presented in this paper are directly informed by survey data of CPS teachers and supported by research, focus group findings, and the team members' own experiences serving Chicago Public School students.

# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rivkin, S., E. Hanushek, and J. Kain. 2005. Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement. *Econometrica*, 73(2), 417–458.

<sup>2</sup> Sanders, W.L. and Rivers, J.C. 1996. Research Project Report: Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement. University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center.

<sup>3</sup> Rockoff, J. E. 2004. The Impact of Individual Teachers on Students' Achievement: Evidence from Panel Data. *American Economic Review* 94(2), 247–52.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, C.K. and Bruegmann, E. 2009. "Teaching Students and Teaching Each Other: The Importance of Peer Learning for Teachers." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 1(4): 85–108.

<sup>5</sup> DeMonte, J. July 2013. High-Quality Professional Development for Teachers. Center for American Progress.

<sup>6</sup> The Chicago Public Education Fund. August 2002. Chicago Public Schools Professional Development Project.

<sup>7</sup> Chicago Public Schools, Becoming a Substitute Teacher, retrieved at: <http://cps.edu/careers/pages/careers.aspx>.

<sup>8</sup> Behrstock-Sherratt, E., Bassett, K., Olsen, D., and Jacques, C. April 2014. From Good to Great: Exemplary Teachers Share Perspectives on Increasing Teacher Effectiveness Across the Career Continuum. NNSTOY, Center on Great Teachers & Leaders

<sup>9</sup> Fitzpatrick, L. 2015. CPS hires auditor to examine no-bid dealings in wake of federal probe. *Chicago Sun-Times*. Retrieved from: <http://chicago.suntimes.com/news/7/71/685640/cps-hires-auditor-bid-deals-resulted-giant-supes-contract>

<sup>10</sup> Chicago Public Schools. 2013. Principal Quality and Effectiveness. Retrieved from: [http://www.cpsboe.org/content/documents/principal\\_evaluations\\_012313.pdf](http://www.cpsboe.org/content/documents/principal_evaluations_012313.pdf)

## THE 2015 EDUCATORS 4 EXCELLENCE-CHICAGO TEACHER ACTION TEAM ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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*The text face is Bembo Regular, designed by Stanley Morison in 1929. The typefaces used for headers, subheaders, figures, and pull quotes are Futura Bold, designed by Paul Renner, and Vitesse, designed by Hoefler & Co.*

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