

# Our Professional Perspective

**INVESTING IN BRIDGEPORT TEACHERS'  
GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

**June 2014**

**"Ultimately, providing more effective professional development isn't about benefiting teachers—it's about benefiting students. If the United States is truly serious about helping every student succeed, we will invest in research-based professional development programs that get us there, and we'll have the patience to let them work."**

**DENNIS VAN ROEKEL**

*President, National Education Association<sup>1</sup>*

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**OVERALL, HOW MEANINGFUL TO YOUR EVERYDAY WORK IN YOUR CLASSROOM ARE THE DISTRICT-PROVIDED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SESSIONS THAT YOU RECEIVE?**



**HOW STRONGLY DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT: "MY DISTRICT INVESTS IN MY DEVELOPMENT AS A PROFESSIONAL?"**



# Letter

## TO THE BRIDGEPORT SUPERINTENDENT AND BOARD OF EDUCATION

We know from our own experience, and research confirms, that teachers are the most critical school-based factor affecting student learning.<sup>1</sup> Preparing our students for college and career in our evolving world requires that we constantly hone our craft. Bridgeport teachers are up for this challenge: We are lifelong learners and crave the opportunity to grow as professionals.

To help inform this paper, we surveyed nearly 10 percent of Bridgeport Public School teachers across diverse content areas, grade levels, and teaching backgrounds. We found that our current model of professional development simply does not meet the needs of the talented and knowledgeable teachers in our district. In fact, only 5 percent of teachers reported receiving meaningful professional development from their school or our district in the past year. We must do better.

We came together as a team of Bridgeport teachers to answer the question: What does a system of meaningful professional development look like? Recognizing the current financial constraints of the district, we added a second question: What concrete and realistic steps can Bridgeport take that will have a tangible impact on teaching and learning? To help answer these questions, we examined effective models of professional development and drew on our own experiences as educators. The result is a set of four research-based recommendations that we believe will dramatically improve professional development and teacher growth in the district. We believe our recommendations are critical to transforming our district into a place where students and teachers are active participants in a community of learning.

**We therefore call on the district to collaborate with teachers to provide meaningful professional development that elevates the teaching profession and increases student learning throughout Bridgeport.**

In partnership,

Educators 4 Excellence-Connecticut 2014 Teacher Action Team on Bridgeport Professional Development

## RECOMMENDATION 1

# Vision

“I’ve been teaching in this district for almost 20 years. In that time, I’ve only attended two valuable professional development sessions given by the district that were worth applying in my classroom. This is unacceptable. The district needs to take the lead in ensuring that professional development in Bridgeport is high quality, and that it actually improves teaching and student achievement.”

**Annmarie Kennedy**, *High School Mathematics, Central High School*

**Problem:** Professional development sessions are inconsistent and disconnected.

**Solution:** The district will create and commit to a clear, actionable, student-focused vision for professional development.

While professional development time is built into our district’s contract, valuable hours set aside for teachers to learn and grow often go unused or are dedicated to inconsistent and disconnected workshops of poor quality. We therefore find ourselves adapting our teaching methods to countless new initiatives with little to no support. This

causes confusion as the lack of focus trickles down from the district to schools, from schools to teachers, and from teachers to students. In order for teachers to hone their craft and positively affect student learning, the district must create and commit to a clear and actionable vision for professional development.

This vision, which must be both ambitious and realistic, should direct the priorities for Bridgeport educators and students in the upcoming years. It is critical that this vision is created in collaboration with teachers (see *Recommendation #2*); is founded on research-based practices that lead to improved student outcomes (see *Recommendation #3*); and provides opportunities for teachers to personalize their learning and drive their own improvement (see *Recommendation #4*).

## SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

It is not enough for the district to create a vision. Too often, we've seen words on a page that don't translate to reality in our classrooms. Once a vision is developed, there must be a commitment for follow-through with fidelity. The district has a responsibility to communicate that professional development is a top priority in Bridgeport and must support principals in working with teachers to develop effective programs tailored to their students' needs. The district should also provide continuous checks to ensure that school-level professional development is high quality, connected to the district vision, and ultimately leads to positive student outcomes.

## AUTONOMY

The district's vision must also leave room for schools to tailor and select the type and content of professional development that is right for the individual needs of their teachers and students. The central office has funds dedicated to the "recruitment, development, and retention of high-quality teachers,"<sup>22</sup> but currently does not give principals the authority to direct their portion of the resources to meet the professional development needs of their staff. The district should clearly communicate to principals how much money they have to spend on professional development, and then give them the authority to allocate those funds to support the needs of their teachers and students. For example, giving schools control over their professional development funding could allow principals to set aside money to send teachers to out-of-district trainings.

Teacher Annmarie Kennedy discusses the need for improved professional development with colleagues.



## RECOMMENDATION 2

# Voice

“Teachers know what they need to improve their teaching and help their students. A doctor wouldn’t give a prescription without finding out from the patient what’s wrong, so why would a district give professional development without asking teachers what’s needed?”

**Annie Wellington**, *High School English, Central High School*

**Problem:** Teachers lack a voice in the current system of professional development.

**Solution:** Teachers will be active participants in selecting, leading, and evaluating professional development.

As Bridgeport educators, we demand to be active participants in our own professional learning. Currently, we are not consulted on content, methods, or delivery, which leads to both teachers’ and students’ needs not being met. This top-down structure leaves us disinvested in our professional development and builds a wall of distrust between the district and teachers on the ground.

To address this widespread disengagement, the district must include teacher voice in all decisions related to professional development. Research shows that collaboration between district-level staff, who have a broad perspective, and educators, who have an understanding of school-level challenges, is critical for professional development to be effective.<sup>3</sup> We see three major opportunities for the district to include teacher voice: selecting, leading, and evaluating



professional development. We know that when teachers are active participants in the conversation, they will be more invested and engaged, will demand higher quality training, and will commit to implementing what they learn in order to increase student achievement.<sup>4</sup>

## SELECTING

Because educators are the professionals on the ground working with students each day, we have the experience and expertise to determine the areas where we need the most support.

The district can ensure that teachers have a voice in the professional development selection process by:

- Creating a district-level teacher advisory council to provide input on the district's vision for professional development
- Convening focus groups at the district, school, and department levels to provide input about the content and type of professional development
- Supporting schools to convene teacher committees that work with principals to analyze student data to assess school needs and to create annual professional development plans

- Training administrators to work with teachers to create individualized professional development objectives as part of the goal-setting portion of the evaluation process (see *Recommendation #4*)

## LEADING

Teachers in Bridgeport have a wealth of untapped content knowledge, and many are looking for leadership opportunities within their schools and district. Empowering teachers as facilitators of professional development promotes the sharing of best practices, both in content and delivery. Several districts have shown that effective professional development does not necessarily require additional expenditures to hire experts from outside the district.<sup>5</sup> We could follow these districts' lead and use the educators in our own talent pool as facilitators, allowing us to develop and cultivate leaders from within while saving money for our district.

The district can provide teachers with leadership opportunities by:

- Empowering teachers to facilitate professional development aligned with the district's vision, both at the school and district level

## TEACHERS WEIGH IN ON **SELECTING** PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**OVER  
HALF**

of Bridgeport teachers have never been asked for input on the topics of professional development.

**66%**

of Bridgeport teachers believe that being able to vote on the topics of professional development would make professional development more meaningful.

Bridgeport Teacher survey (n=100)

Educators 4 Excellence-Connecticut, March 2014

## TEACHERS WEIGH IN ON **LEADING** PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

# ALMOST HALF

of Bridgeport teachers would be willing to lead professional development for their peers.

# 57%

of Bridgeport teachers believe that professional development would be more meaningful if it were teacher-led.

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Bridgeport Teacher survey (n=100)

Educators 4 Excellence-Connecticut, March 2014

- Sending teachers interested in receiving training to out-of-district programs and giving them the opportunity to lead related sessions at the school or district level
- Providing training for teachers to become peer coaches to give other teachers real-time feedback to drive their growth and provide them with support

### EVALUATING

The only way to truly determine whether professional development is effective is to understand whether it led to the implementation of new strategies resulting in improved student outcomes. By reflecting on our practice and analyzing our own student data, we can give the best feedback as to whether professional development is leading to positive, actionable changes in our instruction and leading to gains in student achievement.<sup>6</sup> We believe that if the district is responsive to feedback from teachers regarding the quality of professional development, teachers will feel shared ownership over the district's vision for success.

The district can actively seek feedback by:

- Training teachers to analyze their own student data to determine whether their professional development is leading to improved outcomes for their students
- Creating systems to collect and analyze feedback from teachers (and students where appropriate) at the school and district levels
- Consulting with teacher committees and focus groups
- Using the information gathered to immediately improve professional development



Teachers Amy Henson and Sylvia Pierzak prepare to present research on high-quality professional development to colleagues.

## RECOMMENDATION 3

# Impact

“We, as teachers, do what we do every day so that we can lead our students to success. But without the time and space for us to improve our skills, our teaching is not changing, so our students’ learning isn’t changing.”

**Caroline Gray**, *Third Grade, James J. Curiale School*

**Problem:** Professional development in Bridgeport does not positively impact student learning.

**Solution:** Bridgeport schools will adopt evidence-based professional development practices that improve student outcomes.

Currently, only one-third of Bridgeport elementary school students perform at grade level in reading and math. At the high school level, grade-level proficiency drops to 11% in math and to 8% in reading.<sup>7</sup> We know our students are capable of more. Research shows that high-quality professional development—that is tailored, collaborative, and sustained—has a positive and significant impact on student outcomes.<sup>8</sup> To ensure Bridgeport students graduate high school well prepared for college and career,

the district must adopt evidence-based professional development practices that better support teachers in meeting our students’ needs.

### TAILORED

The district should offer professional development that is tailored to specific disciplines and grade levels. Our professional development needs are as diverse as the

students we teach: We cannot improve our practice to meet our students' needs with a "one-size-fits-all" approach to professional development. Research confirms that professional development is most effective in changing teacher practice and improving student learning when it addresses specific disciplines and grade-level content.<sup>9</sup>

## COLLABORATIVE

The district should create a professional development system that encourages teacher collaboration. Although time for professional development is built into our contract, the district and schools have not supported teachers in using that time for meaningful collaboration. Collaborative professional learning often includes co-planning, working together to evaluate instructional materials and analyze student data, and pushing each other to become better teachers. In districts we studied,<sup>10,11,12</sup> this collaborative learning led to increases in student learning; changes in teacher practice and higher quality instruction; staff collegiality and an increased willingness to share best practices; and more success solving difficult school problems and improvements in whole school culture.

## SUSTAINED

The district should extend and sustain professional development over the entire school year. For decades, teacher professional development in our district has come in the form of occasional, one-off workshops, typically lasting less than a day, each focusing on a discrete topic, and without follow-up or support. This model is insufficient to foster improvements in teacher practice and student learning.<sup>14</sup> Effective professional development is sustained throughout the school year and incorporates real classroom practice throughout the implementation stage.

## COLLABORATION IN ACTION

An example of collaborative professional learning is Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs are teams of teachers working together to troubleshoot and experiment with new teaching practices. Through ongoing conversations and deep examination of practice, PLCs provide teachers with the support to learn about, implement, and reflect on new skills and strategies.<sup>13</sup>

## WHY CONSISTENCY MATTERS

- Practitioners need at least 20 opportunities to master new teaching skills.<sup>15</sup>
- When educators spend 49 hours per year on a specific topic, student achievement increases by more than 20%. However, when educators spend only 5 to 14 hours per year on a specific topic, there is no statistically significant impact on student learning.<sup>16</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION 4

# Ownership

“If the professional development I receive is informed by my evaluation, it will allow me to align my goal setting specifically to my needs. The district and I both bear a responsibility to ensure my growth as a professional. That’s the whole point of professional development.”

**Amy Henson**, *Sixth Grade, Geraldine W. Johnson School*

**Problem:** Teachers do not take ownership of their own professional learning.

**Solution:** Teachers will direct their learning by setting personalized goals that are aligned to their evaluations, by actively engaging in targeted professional development, and by holding themselves accountable for applying new skills and making progress toward their goals.

As described earlier, professional development in Bridgeport has been inconsistent, has operated without teacher voice, and has not improved student learning. As a result, teachers have lost faith in the professional development system. We believe the district can rebuild this trust by following our recommendations to provide

high-quality professional development: setting and executing a clear vision, including teacher voice at all levels, and ensuring that professional development leads to increased student learning. Once the district has made these critical changes, we call on our fellow educators to approach professional development with fresh eyes. If



## TEACHER OWNERSHIP

We believe high-quality professional development provides the district the opportunity to reposition teacher evaluation as constructive rather than punitive. This is also an opportunity for the district to support teachers in taking ownership of their own learning. Specifically, evaluations could help teachers define their areas for growth and set personalized professional development goals.

these changes are made, we must take ownership of our professional growth by setting personalized goals informed by our evaluations and holding ourselves accountable for achieving the goals we set.

Currently, administrators rate teachers as needing improvement in particular areas but do not provide them with opportunities to address those areas for growth. Teachers are then judged on achievement of these goals, even though they have received little to no support

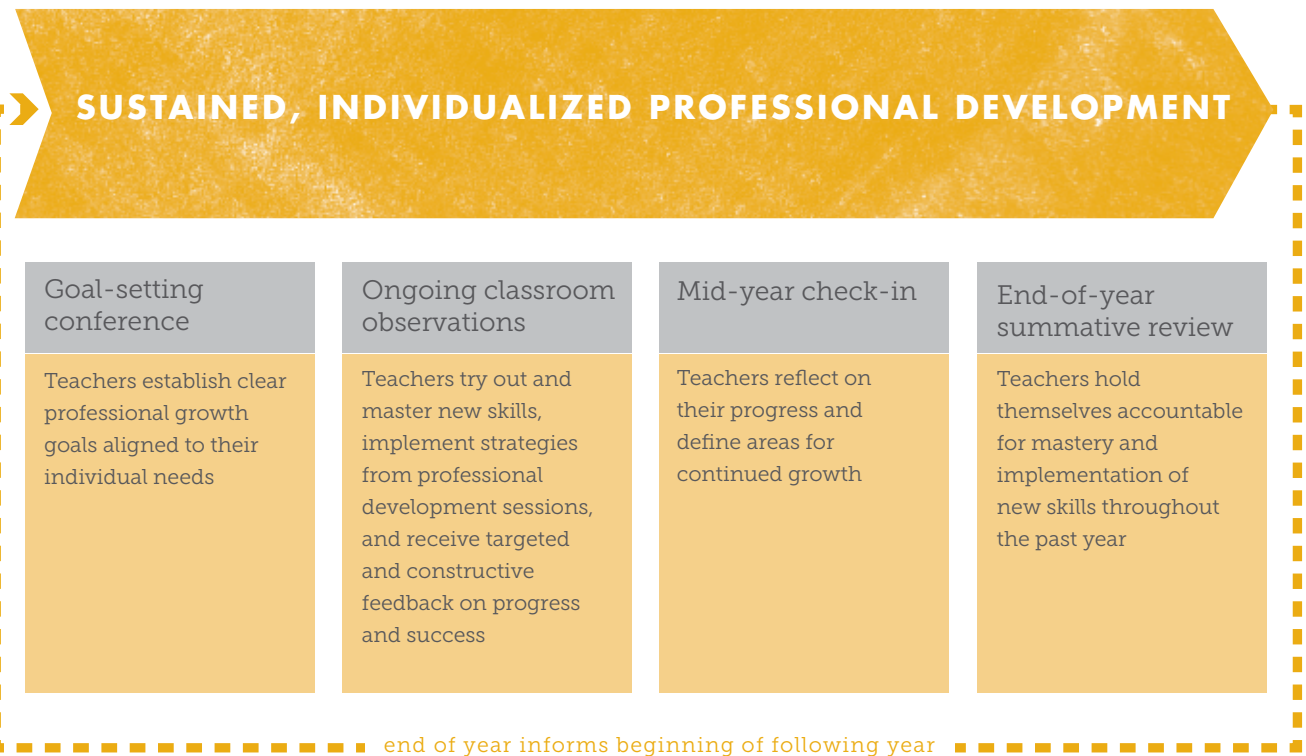
from the district or their schools. To create a system in which teachers take ownership of their learning, the district should support schools in aligning professional development with Connecticut's System for Educator Evaluation and Development (SEED). Specifically, teachers, in conversation with their administration, should set annual goals for student learning and classroom practice. We should then be able to select and engage in district-provided professional development that is aligned to these goals. The observations and check-ins required by the

teacher evaluation system could be used as opportunities for conversations about teacher growth. Additionally, coaches could use observations to support teachers as they apply in their classrooms what they learned at professional development sessions (see *Recommendation #3*). If teachers are supported in learning and applying new skills and strategies to reach their goals, they will be willing to set ambitious growth targets for themselves and will hold themselves accountable to achieving them. We believe that this targeted, aligned, and supportive professional development will lead to improved professional practice and gains in student learning.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHERS TO OWN THEIR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WITHIN THE SEED TEACHER EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

AUGUST

JUNE



### KEY

- Component of SEED<sup>17</sup> framework
- Opportunities for teacher ownership





Teacher Patrick White provides feedback on a colleague's proposed recommendation to improve professional development.

**“Reforms that invest time  
in teacher learning and give  
teachers greater autonomy are  
our best hope for improving  
America’s schools.”**

**LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND,**  
*Professor, Stanford University's  
Graduate School of Education*

# Conclusion

To ensure our students achieve their full potential, we need high-quality professional development. Our district must create a vision for professional development that includes teacher voice in all stages of the process, that is based on research-proven strategies to improve student outcomes, and that empowers teachers to drive their own learning. We believe that Bridgeport has an opportunity to transform teaching into a true profession: one where we are able to learn and grow, where we take ownership of our work, and where we hone the skills we need to serve the students who inspire us.

# Teacher Action Team Process and Methodology

## IDENTIFYING E4E'S POLICY FOCUS

E4E-CT convened more than 10 focus groups, school visits, and networking events, and held more than 100 individual conversations with Bridgeport teachers to identify the most important and impactful policy issues facing Bridgeport Public Schools. Elevating the quality of professional development emerged as one of the most critical issues for improving teaching and learning in Bridgeport.

## REVIEWING RESEARCH

The Teacher Action Team met for four weeks to review survey data, read and discuss research on models of high-quality professional development, draw on their own experiences in Bridgeport Public Schools, and craft recommendations for the Bridgeport School District.

## CONDUCTING LOCAL RESEARCH

The Teacher Action Team surveyed 100 Bridgeport Public School teachers, including E4E-CT members and nonmembers, to gather critical input to inform our recommendations.

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Walker, Tim. "No More 'Sit and Get': Rebooting Teacher Professional Development." NEA Today. N.p., 29 Apr. 2013. Web.)
- <sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. "PISA 2012." (2012)
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "Improving Teacher Quality State Grants." Title II, Part A. (2006).
- <sup>4</sup> Blazer, Christie. "Literature Review on Professional Development for Teachers." Office of Accountability and Systemwide Performance - Miami Dade County Public Schools (2005).
- <sup>5</sup> Stacy, Michelle. "Teacher-led Professional Development: Empowering Teachers as Self-advocates." The Georgia Social Studies Journal (2013).
- <sup>6</sup> Gulamhussein, Allison. "Teaching the Teachers: Effective Professional Development in an Era of High Stakes Accountability." Center for Public Education (2013).
- <sup>7</sup> DeMonte, Jenny. "High-Quality Professional Development for Teachers." Center for American Progress (2013).
- <sup>8</sup> "State of the Child in Bridgeport." Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition (2013).
- <sup>9</sup> Gulamhussein (2013).
- <sup>10</sup> Blank, Rolk K., Nina De Las Alas, and Carlise Smith. "Does Teacher Professional Development Have Effects on Teaching and Learning?" (2008).
- <sup>11</sup> Dunne, Faith, Bill Nave, and Anne Lewis. "Critical Friends: Teachers Helping to Improve Student Learning." Phi Delta Kappa International Research (2007).
- <sup>12</sup> Little, Judith W. "Norms of Collegiality and Experimentation: Workplace Conditions of School Success." American Educational Research Journal (1982).
- <sup>13</sup> Yoon, Kwang S., Teresa Duncan, Silvia Lee, Beth Scarloss, and Kathy L. Shapley. "Reviewing the Evidence on How Teacher Professional Development Affects Student Achievement." Institute of Education Sciences (2007).
- <sup>14</sup> Darling-Hammond, Linda, Ruth Chung Wei, Alethea Andree, Nikole Richardson, and Stelios Orphanos. "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession." National Staff Development Council (2009).
- <sup>15</sup> Yoon et al., 2007.
- <sup>16</sup> Joyce, Bruce R., and Beverly Showers. Student Achievement through Staff Development. 3rd ed. ASCD, 2002. Print.
- <sup>17</sup> Yoon et al., 2007.
- <sup>18</sup> Connecticut Department of Education. SEED Model Overview. Web.  
[http://www.connecticutseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/SEED\\_Regional\\_Roll\\_Out.pdf](http://www.connecticutseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/SEED_Regional_Roll_Out.pdf).
- <sup>19</sup> Darling-Hammond, Linda. "The Quiet Revolution: Rethinking Teacher Development." Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.  
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar96/vol53/num06/The-Quiet-Revolution@-Rethinking-Teacher-Development.aspx>, n.d. Web.

## THE EDUCATORS 4 EXCELLENCE-CONNECTICUT 2014 TEACHER ACTION TEAM ON BRIDGEPORT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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**For far too long,** education policy has been created without a critical voice at the table—the voice of classroom teachers.

Educators 4 Excellence (E4E), a teacher-led organization, is changing this dynamic by placing the voices of teachers at the forefront of the conversations that shape our classrooms and careers.

E4E has a quickly growing national network of educators united by our Declaration of Teachers' Principles and Beliefs. E4E members can learn about education policy and research, network with like-minded peers and policymakers, and take action by advocating for teacher-created policies that lift student achievement and the teaching profession.

Learn more at [Educators4Excellence.org](https://Educators4Excellence.org).

