

# Perspectives in Practice



## Teacher Professional Development: A Question of Development, Growth and Currency

*Perspectives in Practice* is a series of briefing notes to promote discussion on select employment matters at issue in the K-12 public education sector. Each ends with a question to get the conversation started. Let us know what you think at [contact.us@bcpsea.bc.ca](mailto:contact.us@bcpsea.bc.ca).

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### **Making the Case for Professional Currency**

Recent research suggests that teacher quality is a significant influence on student achievement. Citing several studies, authors Linda Darling-Hammond and Robert Rothman write that “The evidence is clear that teaching is one of the most important school-related factors in student achievement, and that improving teacher effectiveness can raise overall student achievement levels.”<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, in *Teacher professional development: an international review of the literature*, Eleonora Villegas-Reimers states that “Teachers’ professional development has a significant impact on the success of educational reforms and on students’ learning.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, all professions recognize the crucial importance of professional development. One of the hallmarks of a profession is its commitment to ensuring that its members engage in a process of continuous learning so that they can maintain the profession’s standards and stay current with new knowledge and best practices. Professional development also plays an important role in keeping a profession’s members motivated and interested in innovation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Linda Darling-Hammond and Robert Rothman, “Lessons Learned from Finland, Ontario, and Singapore,” in *Teacher and Leader Effectiveness in High-Performing Education Systems*, edited by Linda Darling-Hammond and Robert Rothman, Alliance for Excellent Education and Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (2011), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Eleonora Villegas-Reimers, *Teacher professional development: an international review of the literature*, UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning (2003), p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education, “Teacher Excellence: Unlocking Student Potential through Continuing Professional Development”, [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/partnership/potential.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/partnership/potential.html).

Professions have devised various ways to ensure that their members stay up to date in their field of practice. Generally, professional regulatory bodies require that their members engage in specific professional development activities; failure to comply can result in a suspension of a member's credentials.

For example, the Law Society of BC requires that practising BC lawyers complete at least 12 hours of professional development in accredited educational activities each year, which can include taking courses, teaching and mentoring. And CGA-BC requires its members to accumulate 60 hours a year of professional development, consisting of a mix of both verifiable hours (such as attending courses and seminars) and non-verifiable hours (such as self-directed study or undertaking new responsibilities in a volunteer capacity). Both professional bodies impose fines for failure to meet the annual requirement, followed by suspending the member's certificate or requiring the member to attend a disciplinary panel hearing.

## **The Professional Development Landscape in Education**

Professional development is an ongoing process that allows an individual to refine their professional practice and enhance their skills and knowledge. For K-12 educators, professional development can include both formal learning activities (starting with teacher training and encompassing workshops, professional meetings and formal mentoring) as well as more informal initiatives (such as reading professional publications and self-directed learning).

Teachers' professional development begins with **pre-service training**, where both subject knowledge and pedagogical skills are developed. In BC, teacher education programs create opportunities for students to refine their knowledge and skills, and a required practicum enables students to apply theory in a classroom setting under the guidance of a more experienced teacher.

**Teacher induction programs** are considered a best practice in many jurisdictions, offering a structured mentoring environment for new teachers to develop skills and succeed. These programs may play a role in countering the sometimes high drop-out rate of new teachers. (In Ontario, for example, some 20 to 30 percent of new teachers leave the profession after three years.)

**In-service** professional development can take on many different forms. It can include the traditional model of workshops, seminars and courses, as well as mentoring relationships, self-directed study, classroom observations or collegial learning groups.

Within the broad category of in-service professional development, **staff development** generally includes all employer-initiated professional development designed to develop the staff as a whole and to either facilitate a workplace initiative or advance an issue of interest to the employer. It may include activities focused on the goals of school improvement, curriculum implementation, collaborative planning, goal setting or educational change. It also includes occupational health and safety issues, emergency planning and the introduction of required new technology or processes.

## Perspectives on Professional Development

### ***Best practices***

In terms of best practices, it is perhaps not surprising that research on effective professional development for teachers reflects the current understanding of the best learning environments for students. This means creating opportunities for professional development that are collaborative, connected to teachers' classroom practice, experiential and ongoing.

In this view, professional development is effective and meaningful when it meets the following criteria:

- "It must engage teachers in concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the processes of learning and development.
- It must be grounded in inquiry, reflection, and experimentation that are participant-driven.
- It must be collaborative, involving a sharing of knowledge among educators and a focus on teachers' communities of practice rather than on individual teachers.
- It must be connected to and derived from teachers' work with their students.
- It must be sustained, ongoing, intensive, and supported by modeling, coaching, and the collective solving of specific problems of practice.
- It must be connected to other aspects of school change."<sup>4</sup>

Effective professional development should be linked to the standards of practice defined by the profession's regulatory body. It must also balance the need to respect a professional's autonomy to decide upon his or her personal professional development goals, with the need to ensure that those goals are aligned with those of the employer.

### ***Professional autonomy***

The issue of professional autonomy<sup>5</sup> opens up an area of debate. Professional autonomy is critical to the BCTF's view of professional development activities, and this value is repeatedly emphasized in the *Members' Guide to the BCTF*. A key principle is that "Members have autonomy in making choices about their own professional development." Further guidance states:

That the member, as an autonomous professional, determines, in concert with BCTF colleagues and/or the local union, the content of professional development activities scheduled for professional development days, and further, that professional development days are not used for school goal setting and/or School Improvement Plans, marking accountability assessment tools, or voluntary activities (e.g., sports tournaments, science fairs, music festivals, drama productions.)

BCTF members are explicitly advised "of the potential pitfalls" of "administrator-driven professional growth plans" and are to engage instead in "voluntary, self-directed professional development planning."

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, "Policies That Support Professional Development in an Era of Reform," *kappanmagazine.org*, 92.6, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> Professional autonomy in this context is to be distinguished from collective agreement terms that speak to professional autonomy re professional practice and discretion.

### ***Who's responsible for professional development?***

The BCTF stakes a claim to being solely responsible for the professional development of teachers, stating in its *Members' Guide* that “individual members, school teaching staffs, locals, PSAs, LSAs, and the BCTF are responsible for planning, structuring, organizing and evaluating professional development programs and services for members.”

However, in BC, the professional development of educators is (by law) overseen by the BC College of Teachers, the statutory authority responsible for regulating the teaching profession. The College's mandate specifies that it is responsible for ensuring the competence of BC's educators by setting “standards for the education, professional responsibility and competence of certificate holders and applicants for certificates of qualification.”

When the College was formed under the *Teaching Profession Act* in 1987, it was mandated to have a professional development committee. That committee was to work with teacher education programs but was also tasked with carrying out, cooperating in or facilitating programs of professional development whose objects were to improve the quality of educational services and designed to ensure the currency of general teacher competence. This included developing specific programs to assist individual teachers and to work with Provincial Specialist associations to provide advice on professional development in specific fields of curricula<sup>6</sup>. That section of the *Teaching Profession Act* was amended in 1993 partly through the lobby of the BCTF and partly from the refusal of the College to act on professional development<sup>7</sup>. The committee was renamed the Teacher Education Committee and sections a, c and e were removed.

In theory, the College's mandate still gives it responsibility for ensuring that educators engage in ongoing professional development to meet the profession's defined standards of practice. However, as a result of significant dysfunction at the level of the College Council since its inception in 1987, the College has never taken responsibility for the professional development of educators beyond pre-service requirements.

Don Avison, in his October 2010 report assessing the College's performance against its mandate, concludes that the College does “reasonably well” at ensuring the pre-service competence of educators through its reviews of teacher education programs. However, Avison states that the College has avoided its responsibility of overseeing in-service professional development. He assigns the blame for this at the College Council:

Efforts to have the College take a greater role in on-going professional development, or even to simply take the responsibility for putting in place mechanisms that would permit the College to provide assurances to the public that members of the profession are maintaining appropriate levels of knowledge and competency, have been consistently frustrated at the Council level.<sup>8</sup>

Avison juxtaposes the approach of the BC College of Teachers with that of other regulatory bodies, who he says “take this responsibility very seriously and have developed comprehensive programs designed to ensure that members remain current in their respective areas of practice.”

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<sup>6</sup> Reference TPA 27.3.c,d, and e 1987-19-27, BC Reg.418/87, effective November 20, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Reference Bill 37—1993 Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 1993

<sup>8</sup> Donald J. Avison, *A College Divided Report of the Fact Finder on the BC College of Teachers*, (October 2010), p. 26.

Describing the “considerable level of resistance to even considering professional development and currency of practice,” he cites the BCTF’s addendum to its submission to his inquiry stating that “Competence is the responsibility of school districts, and is best handled at the school district level,” – a position that he says “either ignores or disregards the specific statutory responsibility” of the College and “appears to misapprehend the essence of what professional bodies are actually expected to do in discharging their responsibilities to protect the public interest.”

## Professional Development in BC

Professional currency, growth, development and engagement are central to ensuring an effective education system. There are series of structures, processes and practices that influence professional practice in K-12 public education. These include the regulatory framework established by the *School Act* and the *Teaching Profession Act*. Boards of Education as employers play a role. Collective agreements codify matters related to professional development and have the greatest influence on the nature, structure and practices of professional development. Provisions include:

- Professional development funding and control: provisions that provide funds for individuals, including who will contribute to the funds, the amount of funds, the purpose of the funds, and how the funds are distributed and/or accessed.
- Establishment of a professional development committee: provisions that outline who the committee will consist of, including the number of representatives from the union and the employer, the primary functions of the committee, such as the planning of professional development activities, and allocation of the professional development funds.
- Non-instructional days: provisions that outline the purpose of non-instructional days and who will plan and administer professional development activities during non-instructional days.

## For Reflection and Discussion

If you accept the proposition —*The evidence is clear that teaching is one of the most important school-related factors in student achievement, and that improving teacher effectiveness can raise overall student achievement levels* —is the current way by which we ensure professional currency the most effective?

If it is the most effective, why and how do you know (what evidence exists that supports the existing system)? If it is not how should the elements central to the maintenance of professional currency, growth and development be organized?