

# DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR

# NEWS

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Examining context and challenges in measuring investment in professional development: *a case study of six school districts in the Southwest Region*



The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 places special emphasis on ensuring that every child has access to highly qualified teachers and requires states to set standards so that all teachers are highly qualified. These standards generally require continuing professional development for teachers. As a result, many states and local school districts are funding teacher professional development, and NCLB targets federal funding, particularly through Title I and Title II, to support these activities. To be successful, however, investment in professional development must be managed and implemented properly.

### The Purpose of the Research

Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest (REL Southwest) stakeholders in the region identified a need for information about the cost effectiveness of professional development. As a result, REL Southwest initiated a study of six school districts in the Southwest Region to learn more about how to collect the necessary expenditure and cost data to support such an examination.

## Types of Professional Development

The study defines *professional development* as all activities that help education professionals develop the skills and knowledge required to achieve their school's education goals and meet the needs of students. Previous literature defines two main types of professional development: traditional and integrated.

Traditional professional development activities, such as conferences, college courses for credit, and workshops, can raise teacher awareness and deepen knowledge and skills but have been criticized as being ineffective in providing teachers with tools to foster meaningful changes in student practices (Loucks-Horsley et al. 1998).

Integrated professional development activities, which includes teacher collaboration during common planning periods, teacher mentoring, academic coaches, and observation of other teachers, are viewed as having a more positive impact on teacher skills and knowledge because they allow sustained, intensive, and active learning, and teachers tend to integrate such learning into their daily professional lives (Garet et al. 1999; Garet et al. 2001). In addition, a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (1999) found that many teachers believe that integrated professional development activities are more helpful than traditional forms of professional development.

## School Districts in the Study

A sample of six school districts in four of the five Southwest Region states—Arkansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas—participated in the study. These districts varied in location, size and student characteristics. Targeted districts in Louisiana were dropped because of Hurricane Katrina.

## State Requirements and Support for Professional Development

These four states have policies and practices in place that impact the implementation of professional development activities at the local level and can significantly influence how districts plan and allocate resources. Examples of these policies and practices in all four states are:

- Requiring districts to develop school improvement plans that address district or school-level professional development.
- Designating professional development as a prerequisite for professional staff to renew certification.
- Expecting districts and teachers to document or report professional development activities generally by goals, types, and sometimes hours.

Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas require a minimal amount of professional development for teachers and administrators to renew their licenses. Arkansas, New Mexico and Texas require teachers and administrators to develop an individual professional development plan to address improvement needs and strategies.

## District Delivery and Support for Professional Development

The districts in the study used various strategies to deliver professional development that supports the overall education goals of the district and meet the needs of individual teachers. These strategies include:

- Offering in-service days or other incentives such as stipends and release time for professional development.
- Organizing a mentor or teacher induction program for new teachers.
- Hiring academic coaches and content chairs to support professional development.
- Contracting with consultants and presenters to organize or provide professional development.
- Using the train-the-trainer model to train teachers who will in turn train other teachers.

## District Tracking of Professional Development

The six districts in this study use various approaches to document professional development. As of 2005 – 2006, only the Oklahoma district had a comprehensive electronic system to track professional development with some detail. Their reporting system monitors traditional and integrated professional development by purpose, goal, object, objective, grade level, and content area for all in-district and out-of-district activities. Online systems in two other districts merely allowed staff to register for different professional development activities.



## Key Findings: District Spending on Professional Development

During 2005 – 2006, spending on professional development among the six school districts in the study was about \$150 to \$600 per student—or 2 to 9 percent of the district budget and \$2,475 to \$8,670 per full time equivalent teacher.

However, these figures likely underestimate the full investment in professional development in these districts because of the inability to track more integrated professional development activity that is a natural part of a teacher's work day or week. The two Arkansas districts spent a higher percentage of their budget on professional development because of the higher number of professional development hours required in Arkansas.



The professional development spending estimates in the table below include personnel and nonpersonnel resources associated with:

- Coordination and administration of professional development at the district level.
- Participation in or provision of professional development involving teachers (including academic coaches and mentor teachers).
- Provision of professional development for school leadership staff, instructional support staff, and pupil support staff.

Professional development activities in the six districts were funded largely through state and local funds, ranging from 58 to 89 percent of the total combined funding through local, state and federal funds. Federal funding ranged from 11 to 42 percent of the combined total. Most of the federal professional development spending came from two sources—Title I Part A (Grants to Local Education Agencies) and Title II Part A (Teacher and Principal Training and Recruitment Fund).

TABLE 1  
Estimated professional development spending in six study districts, 2005/06

State and urbanicity	In-service time for professional development provided by district	Number of professional development hours required by state for licensure	Professional development spending per full-time-equivalent teacher <sup>a</sup> (\$)	Professional development spending per student (\$)	Professional development spending as a share of total budget (percent)
Arkansas, small town	10 days (60 hours)	60	6,726	565	8.6
Arkansas, mid-size city	10 days (60 hours)	60	8,670	599	7.1
New Mexico, small town	5 days (30 hours)	0	3,132	223	2.4
New Mexico, suburb	5 days (35 hours)	0	3,007	151	1.8
Oklahoma, suburb	5 days (30 hours)	15	2,578 <sup>b</sup>	149	2.9
Texas, city	5 days (35 hours)	30	2,475	159	1.9

a. Professional development dollars per full-time-equivalent teacher is a common metric used for comparison across districts, because approximately half of all district budgets are spent on teachers—the primary instructional resource. The numerator in this ratio, however, includes spending for professional development on some nonteaching staff, including instructional support staff and administrators.

b. Because Oklahoma records expenditures through its district accounting system with detailed use of district accounting and object codes and because the state has a comprehensive professional development tracking system, these estimates may be more accurate than those for districts that do not have comprehensive expenditure records or data systems.

Source: Based on data obtained from district expenditure reports, planning documents, payroll data, and information from districts' professional development tracking databases (see appendix B).

## Key Questions for District Administrators

This research provides district administrators with valuable information about current professional development policies, practices and spending in six school districts in four of the five Southwest Region states. Given the significant role that professional development plays in ensuring that all students are taught by highly qualified teachers, additional questions need to be answered to guarantee that this investment of federal, state, and local dollars is cost-effectively improving teachers' classroom practices and, as a result, increasing student learning.

### Key questions to consider:

- Should a comprehensive online system that tracks costs by type of professional development—both integrated and traditional—assist your school district in determining the cost effectiveness of your professional development program?
- How can district use professional development cost data to analyze the impact of professional development activities on student learning outcomes?

To access the full report, *Examining context and challenges in measuring investment in professional development: a case study of six school districts in the Southwest Region*, visit <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=164&productID=113>

To learn more about the REL Program, REL Southwest and research that can benefit you, visit <http://edlabs.ed.gov> or <http://edlabs.ed.gov/RELSouthwest>

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