



TRANSFORMING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Actions for States to Help Teachers Continuously Improve Their Instructional Practices

If schools want to significantly improve student outcomes, they need to help millions of hardworking teachers continuously improve their instructional practice. Yet in many districts, the professional development fails to produce positive changes in the classroom, despite substantial investments of money and time.

To develop their instructional practices, teachers require a professional learning system with four critical components: research-based instructional practices and materials; personalized and competency-based structures; intensive coaching and time for collaboration; and opportunities for advancement and recognition.

Districts can develop various ways to deliver—and pay for—these components which lead to high-quality professional learning. However, too few districts are doing so. This is where states come in. States that take the following five steps to support districts can help transform professional learning to benefit teachers and students.

5 Steps to Transform Professional Learning

1. Identify research-based instructional practices and materials.
2. Support personalized and competency-based learning structures.
3. Fund intensive coaching, provide time for collaboration and build social capital.
4. Create opportunities for advancement and recognition.
5. Build district capacity, coherency and aligned resources.

How States Can Transform Professional Learning for Teachers

Step	Teachers Need...	States Can...
Step 1: Identify Research-Based Instructional Practices and Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to research-based instructional practices and materials that are aligned to a high-quality curriculum. 	1.1 Create a list of research-based instructional practices and materials and incentivize districts to use them, including negotiating statewide contracts with materials providers.
Step 2: Support Personalized and Competency-Based Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional learning that addresses their individualized needs. • Expectations to demonstrate mastery of research-based instructional practices. • The ability to take necessary time to develop mastery. 	2.1 Subsidize a system of micro-credentials for the highest-value instructional practices. 2.2 Create competency-based requirements for relicensure; require each teacher to set and work on achieving annual professional learning goals focused on the research-based instructional practices he or she most needs to develop.
Step 3: Fund Intensive Coaching, Provide Time for Collaboration and Build Social Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective coaches to regularly work one-on-one with each teacher. • Regular time for collaboration with peers, facilitated by a coach. • An empowered school leader who can build a team of teacher leaders. 	3.1 Set expectations that every teacher receives effective coaching and sufficient time for collaboration; create state certification for instructional coaches and teacher leaders; focus school leader coaching and certification on building teams of teacher leaders. 3.2 Provide dedicated funding for coaching and collaboration, with specifics on coach selection and responsibilities as well as structure and focus of collaboration.



Step	Teachers Need...	States Can...
Step 4: Create Opportunities for Advancement and Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to advanced teacher roles. • Bonuses or salary increases for mastering new instructional practices. 	<p>4.1 Provide resources for districts to give salary increases to teacher leaders.</p> <p>4.2 Eliminate workshops or seat-time as meeting relicensure requirements.</p> <p>4.3 Encourage districts to recognize certain competency-based learning as being equivalent to master’s degrees in district salary schedules.</p>
Step 5: Build District Capacity, Coherency and Resource Alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The aforementioned four steps to be implemented well and coherently. 	<p>5.1 Negotiate statewide contracts with high-quality, capacity builders for districts; empower regional entities to build capacity of districts.</p> <p>5.2 Remove conflicting state requirements for professional learning and any state barriers to districts aligning their resources for professional learning.</p>

WHY STATES NEED TO TRANSFORM PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Teachers need support to learn new practices and grow professionally, and there is more research than ever about what makes effective instruction for students. Yet, the professional learning development teachers receive in many school districts is severely deficient.¹ States can—and should—play an important role on this crucial issue, yet state policymakers may feel that they have few tools to address a problem that seems inherently local in nature.

This brief identifies a series of steps states can consider taking to transform professional learning for teachers, by first clarifying what teachers need to develop new and improved instructional practices and then identifying steps states can take to support districts in ensuring that teachers get what they need.

New Challenges and Practices for Effective Instruction

- Teachers face increasingly diverse classrooms with more students facing educational barriers; therefore, effective differentiation of instruction is critical.
- Teachers are expected not only to help their students achieve more rigorous academic standards but also forge healthy relationships with their students so they grow socially and emotionally.
- Technology enables personalized instruction, but teachers need different practices to use these new tools effectively.
- There is more research on effective instruction, including the science of reading and the science of learning and development.
- New science standards require a fundamental instructional shift, with students driving their own understanding of phenomena.

¹ See TNTP, [The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development](#) (2015).



WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE

Before states can understand what to do, they must first understand what supports teachers need to learn new instructional practices or improve their existing ones. Based on research and experience, ExcelinEd presents four fundamental components, each of which must be present and working coherently with the others.

4 Components of a Professional Learning System

Component	Why It Is Critical	What This Requires
Research-Based Instructional Practices and Materials	Without aiming at the right practices, no amount of effort will improve student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research-based instructional rubric. Research-based practices for a specific area, e.g., early literacy science of reading. High-quality instructional materials aligned to high-quality curriculum.
Personalized and Competency-Based Structures	The ability to demonstrate the use an instructional practice is an essential goal of professional learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers to focus on practices they most need to develop. Rigorous requirement that teachers demonstrate mastery of each practice. Teachers to be able to take whatever time is needed to develop mastery.
Intensive Coaching, Time for Collaboration and Building Social Capital	Without sufficient support and time, teachers cannot continuously improve their instructional practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An effective coach who can work one-on-one with each teacher regularly throughout the school year. Regular time to collaborate and consult with peers, often facilitated by a coach. An empowered school leader who can build a team of teacher leaders.
Opportunities for Advancement and Recognition	Teachers deserve encouragement and recognition to continuously improve their instructional practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to advanced teacher roles, which provide recognition and responsibility while allowing teachers to stay in the classroom. Bonuses or salary increases for further developing instructional practices.

Component 1: Research-Based Instructional Practices and Materials

Professional learning must focus on the right instructional practices, those that are research-based and which, when done well, result in better student learning. Identifying these practices lets teachers know what strong instruction looks like. Without the right targets, the best designed professional learning cannot succeed.

To provide this component, teachers need a research-based instructional rubric which describes in detail what effective teaching looks like for a specific competency or series of evidence-based practices, like early literacy.² Teachers also need high-quality instructional materials, which incorporate research-based practices in a coherent, sequenced fashion and are aligned to a strong curriculum.³

² Two well-known instructional rubrics are the Marzano Instructional Framework and the Charlotte-Danielson Framework for Teaching.

³ See Ross Wiener & Susan Pimentel, The Aspen Institute, *Practice What You Teach* (2017). One additional benefit of providing high-quality instructional materials is that it reduces the time teachers need to spend finding or developing them, freeing up time for professional learning.



Component 2: Personalized and Competency-Based Structures

Once teachers have clarity on their instructional practices, professional learning can focus on the specific practices each teacher needs to develop.⁴ Under the current approach to professional learning, teachers typically proceed *en masse* through workshops and courses, getting full credit for—at best—a theoretical understanding of a practice. Yet, student learning is impacted only when a teacher can consistently and effectively use a research-based instructional practice under real and varied circumstances. The actual ability to use a practice needs to be the expectation of professional learning.

The actual ability to use a practice needs to be the expectation of professional learning.

High-quality micro-credentials are one way to provide personalized and competency-based structures. They are a competency-based validation that a teacher has mastered a critical classroom practice based on the evidence (e.g., a video) of the teacher using the practice effectively with real students in a real classroom.⁵ Teachers work on the practices they most need and take the time needed to master each practice before moving onto the next one.

Component 3: Intensive Coaching, Time for Collaboration and Social Capital

Research shows that instructional coaching and collaboration with peers are critical to professional learning.⁶ Teachers need multiple opportunities to see a practice, try it out, get feedback from skilled coaches and their peers, and repeat the process.⁷ They must feel safe to admit challenges and possibly fail at first. Yet, teachers often receive little high-quality coaching. Teachers have far too little time for collaboration, and the time they do have can be unstructured and unhelpful.⁸ They cannot regularly consult their colleagues and build strong relationship, or “social capital,” with their peers, who have tremendous expertise and experience.⁹

To remedy this, school leaders can help ensure that teachers receive enough high-quality coaching and collaboration time. While school leaders cannot provide sufficient support to teachers on their own—particularly in larger schools—they can create teams of teacher leaders and instructional coaches who spend a significant portion of their time supporting teachers’ professional growth.

Public Impact’s Opportunity Culture is an example of a well-designed coaching structure that has improved student learning. It extends the reach of the most effective teachers by letting them support teams of teachers, who are able to forge close relationships and consult each other on instructional practice.¹⁰

Component 4: Opportunities for Advancement and Recognition

Many teachers want to be able to improve their instructional quality and progress in their careers without having to leave the classroom. Recognition and rewards can provide additional motivation to help teachers undertake the significant effort necessary to learn new instructional practices and develop existing ones. Teachers who develop a specific set of instructional practices should be able to qualify for advanced roles as teacher mentors or instructional coaches, which would allow them to stay connected to classroom. Teachers also deserve bonuses or salary increases to recognize each research-based instructional practice they master.

⁴ For an entirely new practice, it could be that all teachers need to develop it.

⁵ See ExcelinEd, [Micro-Credentials: A Game-Changing Opportunity for States To Support the Professional Growth of Teachers](#) (2019).

⁶ See Matthew A. Kraft et al., [The Effect of Teacher Coaching on Instruction and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis of the Casual Evidence](#) (2018).

⁷ Without coaching, there is nearly no impact on practice. Teachers need on average 20 practice instances to master a skill. See Bruce Joyce & Beverly Showers, *Student Achievement through Staff Development* (2002).

⁸ See Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, [Teachers Know Best: Teachers’ Views on Professional Development](#) (2014); Teachers in the United States have very limited time to collaborate, much less than in other countries. See Timothy Walker, [“The Ticking Clock of Teacher Burnout,”](#) *The Atlantic* (2016)

⁹ See Carrie Leana, [“The Missing Link in School Reform,”](#) *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (2011).

¹⁰ See Ben Backes & Michael Hansen, CALDER, [Researching Further and Learning More? Evaluating Public Impact’s Opportunity Culture Initiative](#) (2018).



Coherency and Alignment

Each of these four components is critical to a professional learning system that enables teachers to continuously improve their instructional practices, and components must reinforce one another. As noted by the Learning Policy Institute, “The importance of providing professional learning in conjunction with model curriculum and classroom materials should not be underestimated.”¹¹ Coaching cannot succeed without focusing on research-based instructional practices.¹²

Proven professional learning models contain these interrelated components. In the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching’s (NIET) TAP System, teachers focus on a research-based instructional rubric that clearly describes what strong instruction looks like in the classroom. Based on this rubric, teachers receive continuous, job-embedded professional learning from specially selected and trained teacher leaders. Teacher leaders facilitate opportunities for teachers to collaborate weekly using a specific structure. Effective teachers receive performance-based compensation and access to advanced teacher roles. “Each of these elements is critical, and impact happens only when they are put together in a coherent way,” says Dr. Candice McQueen, NIET’s CEO.¹³

Each of these four components is critical to a professional learning system that enables teachers to continuously improve their instructional practices.

Addressing All the Components: Districts Doing It Right

Some districts are implementing professional learning systems with impressive results.

- **Summit Public Schools**, a group of charter schools known for its strong student outcomes, provides *eight weeks* of dedicated professional learning to every teacher every year. On top of that, teachers receive intensive instructional coaching. The professional learning is structured into four eight-week cycles during the school year, and it focuses on a highly developed instructional program with specific instructional practices. “Professional learning must be tied to coaching and aligned to the instructional program for it to be stamped into a teacher’s practice,” said Caitlyn Herman, the chief academic officer at Summit Public Schools.¹⁴
- **District of Columbia Public Schools** has implemented a professional learning system through its LEAP program where facilitated teams of teachers work on cycles of inquiry.¹⁵ The district also has performance-based funding and has seen strong improvements in student learning.¹⁶ The district worked with Leading Educators to develop this model.

WHAT STATES CAN DO TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE

Teachers require a professional learning system with each of four components implemented well and coherently, and districts need to develop various ways to deliver—and pay for—these components.

Yet, this is easier said than done. The fact that few districts reach this goal clearly indicates that districts need support. States can—and should—play an important role by setting policy, providing resources and facilitating district

¹¹ Linda Darling-Hammond et al., Learning Policy Institute, *Effective Teacher Professional Development* (2017).

¹² See New America, *No Panacea* (supra); Learning Forward, *High-Quality Curricula and Team-Based Professional Learning* (2018).

¹³ Interview with Dr. Candice McQueen, National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (Oct. 30, 2019).

¹⁴ Interview with Caitlyn Herman, Summit Public Schools (Oct. 18, 2019).

¹⁵ See Learning Forward, *The Path To Instructional Excellence and Equitable Outcomes* (2019).

¹⁶ See Neal Augenstein, “DC students make largest test score gains in 3 decades,” *WTOP* (Oct. 30, 2019).



collaboration. The table on page one shows at a glance the specific actions states can consider taking to help districts provide teachers what they need for professional growth, and the following sections provide additional details.

Step 1: Identify Research-Based Instructional Practices and Materials

1.1 – Create a list of research-based instructional practices and materials and incentivize districts to use them, including negotiating statewide contracts with materials providers.

There are thousands of instructional practices touted by various groups; many of them are not research-based or are so small in scale that they cannot impact student learning unless bundled with other practices. There are also a host of instructional materials, but only some of them are research-based. Teachers cannot be expected to review all of these options. Instead, districts need to identify the highest-value instructional practices and purchase the strongest instructional materials.

Because some districts may not have capacity to do this level of review, states can review the array of instructional practices and materials and create a list of those that have the strongest research and are most aligned with a high-quality curriculum. They can offer substantial financial incentives to districts to use these materials. States can also negotiate statewide contracts with the material providers at affordable prices, lower than most districts could secure on their own. Districts would still have choice, from among the high-quality options, or they would be able to use other materials at their own full cost.¹⁷

Louisiana, for example, worked with teachers to identify the strongest instructional materials. It then negotiated statewide contracts with the materials providers to reduce time-consuming local procurement processes.¹⁸

Step 2: Support Personalized and Competency-Based Structures

2.1 – Subsidize a system of micro-credentials for the highest-value instructional practices.

After identifying the instructional practices that have the strongest research base, states can subsidize a system of micro-credentials to facilitate teacher mastery of these practices. It takes capacity and resources to create such a system, and individual districts are less likely to do it on their own.

Arkansas, for example, has identified eight micro-credentials for early educators and has worked with districts so teachers can submit their evidence of mastery and have it independently reviewed.¹⁹

2.2 – Create competency-based requirements for relicensure; require each teacher to set and work on achieving professional learning goals focused on the research-based instructional practices he or she most needs to develop.

Many states require teachers to earn a certain number of credit hours to maintain their licenses. Teachers can often meet this requirement through workshops that generally produce little impact on practice. However, they are the easiest path for busy teachers. States can replace these requirements with a competency-based system linked to research-based instructional practices.

For example, elementary school teachers can renew their licenses by demonstrating mastery of a sequence of early literary practices based on the science of reading. Arkansas has created a teacher leader, or master teacher, license tier for teachers who earn micro-credentials on specific instructional practices.²⁰

States can replace these requirements with a competency-based system linked to research-based instructional practices.

¹⁷ If necessary, states can also work together to create free, high-quality materials, as some have done to help districts implement new science standards. See [OpenSciEd](#); Interview with Erin Hashimoto-Martell, Massachusetts Department of Education (Sep. 19, 2019).

¹⁸ See The Aspen Institute, [Practice What You Teach](#) (supra).

¹⁹ See ExcelinEd, [Micro-Credentials: A Game-Changing Opportunity for States To Support the Professional Growth of Teachers](#) (2019).

²⁰ Interview with Jason Lange, BloomBoard (Oct. 29, 2019).



States can also require teachers to work with their supervisors to develop personalized professional learning goals, which must include mastery of specific research-based instructional practices identified based on the needs of the teacher and district. Georgia has such a system.²¹

Step 3: Fund Intensive Coaching, Provide Time for Collaboration and Build Social Capital

3.1 – Set expectations that every teacher receives effective coaching and sufficient time for collaboration; create competency-based state certification for instructional coaches and teacher leaders; focus school leader coaching and certification on building teams of teacher leaders.

States can also set clear expectations that every teacher receives intensive coaching and has significant time for collaboration, with enough specificity about this means to ensure quality. To ensure that teacher leaders and instructional coaches have the skills needed to direct professional learning, states can establish specific licenses that are earned by demonstrating these skills, e.g., by earning micro-credentials. State can also require that principals receive coaching on building teams of teacher leaders, and they can focus their licensure and relicensure requirements on these skills.

In Louisiana, all new teachers are required to receive mentoring during their first year; teacher mentors must earn micro-credentials.²² A state can extend this concept to all teachers throughout their careers.

3.2 – Provide dedicated funding for coaching and collaboration, with specifics on coach selection and responsibilities as well as structure and focus of collaboration.

States can provide funding to help districts pay for coaching and teacher collaboration, one of the potentially more expensive components. The state funding must be specifically designated for this purpose; otherwise, districts will face significant pressure to use the funding for other purposes, like general salary increases. Iowa has invested heavily in instructional coaching. Districts receive \$333 per student, totally about \$160 million statewide. This has resulted in a massive increase in coaching by all districts. However, only some districts linked the coaching to an instructional framework.²³ This may be one reason why districts have seen limited impact on student learning.²⁴

Providing dedicated state funding is not enough; states need to make sure that districts use the funding effectively.

This shows that providing dedicated state funding is not enough; states need to make sure that districts use the funding effectively. To accomplish this, states can create rigorous standards for what skills instructional coaches must have and how they can demonstrate those skills. Louisiana, for example, requires coaches to earn micro-credentials demonstrating their abilities to support teachers in their professional growth.²⁵

States can also set clear expectations for what coaches do and how the coaching is part of an overall professional learning system that includes all of the critical elements. Indiana is supporting district use of TAP, Public Impact's Opportunity Culture or other coaching models that include specific components.²⁶ Similarly, North Carolina has helped districts expand coaching but set forth specific criteria for selection of coaches and indicated what they must do.²⁷ Finally, states can require that districts use the increased collaboration time to focus on research-based instructional practices with facilitation by instructional coaches.

²¹ See Melissa Tooley & Taylor White, New America, [Rethinking Relicensure](#) (2018).

²² See Maggie Q. Hannan et al., RAND Corporation, [Raising the Bar for Teacher Preparation](#) (2019).

²³ See AIR, [Strategies for Implementing the Teacher Leadership and Compensation Program in Iowa School Districts](#) (2018); recently, the state has supported districts in adopting research-based instructional frameworks. Interview with Lora Rasey, Iowa Department of Education (Nov. 14, 2019).

²⁴ See AIR, [Iowa's Teacher Leadership and Compensation Program: Findings From 2016-17](#) (2017).

²⁵ Interview with Hannah Dietsch, Louisiana Department of Education (Mar. 25, 2019).

²⁶ See Indiana [House Bill 1008](#) (2019).

²⁷ See North Carolina [Session Law 2016-94 \(House Bill 1030\)](#), Section 8.7 (2016).



Step 4: Create Opportunities for Advancement and Recognition

4.1 – Provide resources for districts to give salary increases to teacher leaders.

In addition to providing dedicated funding for instructional coaching, states can support higher salaries for teacher leaders. They would take on additional responsibilities, like instructional coaching and facilitating teacher collaboration, and should be selected based on their mastery of practice and ability to coach.

4.2 – Eliminate workshops or seat-time as meeting relicensure requirements.

States can eliminate policies that discourage teachers from learning new instructional practices. It is not enough for a state just to allow competency-based alternatives for teacher relicensure, as several states have done. As long as teachers can take workshops, many will take the easier path. This interferes with a district seeking to incentivize teachers to develop new instructional practices.

4.3 – Encourage districts to recognize certain competency-based learning as being equivalent to master's degrees in district salary schedules.

States can encourage districts to recognize competency-based learning as being equivalent to master's degrees in their salary schedules. This reduces the additional cost to districts of creating incentives for teacher leaders, instructional coaches and teachers who develop their practices.

Step 5: Build District Capacity, Coherency and Aligned Resources

5.1 – Negotiate statewide contracts with high-quality capacity builders for districts; empower regional entities to build district capacity on professional learning.

Districts need to pull together all the components into a coherent professional learning system. Effectively undertaking these important activities requires significant district skill. Districts need to build these capacities, often with the help of external resources. Given the many capacities districts need to develop and implement a professional learning system, states can identify and negotiate statewide contracts with high-quality, capacity-building providers. This process can make these services cheaper for districts and faster to secure.

Many states also have regional entities that support multi-district efforts. States can strengthen these entities and provide them with resources and a mandate to help districts in designing and implementing a professional learning system.

5.2 – Remove conflicting state requirements for professional learning and any state barriers to districts aligning their resources for professional learning.

Districts have a limited amount of time and capacity to support teachers each year. Yet districts are often required to implement new state initiatives and training requirements which distract from their ability to focus on the highest-impact instructional practices that their teachers need.

States can remove barriers that keep districts from aligning their resources for professional learning. For example, in North Carolina, districts are restrained from investing in instructional coaches who are part of a team of teachers but are not counted as providing instruction for class size calculations.²⁸ State can also ensure the alignment of federal resources, like Title II funding for professional learning, by providing clear guidance on the requirement that they pay for research-based activities.

²⁸ Interview with Brenda Berg & Leah Sutton, BEST NC (Oct. 7, 2019). The coach supports a team of teachers but is not counted as providing instruction for class size calculations.



WHAT'S NEXT?

Professional development has the potential to help millions of hardworking teachers cultivate their instructional practice to improve student outcomes. By taking specific steps, states can help districts create a professional learning system which empowers teachers to develop their instructional practice and improve learning for students.

If your state is interested in transforming professional learning for teachers, contact MatthewJ@ExcelinEd.org to learn how ExcelinEd can help.