

PRINTABLE ARTICLE

What Makes Professional Development Effective? Research-Based Characteristics and the ESSA Definition

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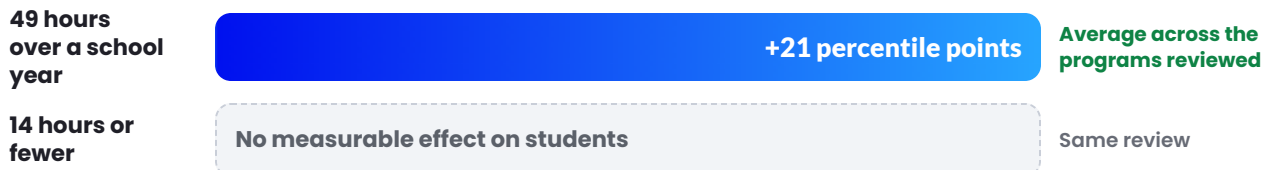
Every fall, school and district leaders make decisions about how to spend professional development dollars. Some of that money comes from local budgets, and a large share comes from [Title II, Part A](#), which arrives in two installments and must be spent on activities that meet the federal definition of professional development. You have many options for professional development, like conferences, workshops, in-person trainings, online trainings, coaching, and more. The difficult part for you, though, is determining which professional development activities will be the most effective for your teachers.

This article gives you some ideas on what effective professional development means. In this article, you will first learn about the research on what effective professional development looks like, summarized in seven characteristics that you can use as a checklist. The second is the definition of professional development written into the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which determines whether an activity is an allowable use of federal funds. Understanding this in more detail will help you choose professional development that improves instruction and also withstands a compliance review.

Why the Quality of Professional Development Matters

Teachers are the most important in-school factor in student learning, and professional development is the primary method that a school can use for supporting and improving a teacher who is already working in the classroom. When designed well, professional development improves what teachers do in the classroom and, as a result, how their students learn. When professional development is poorly designed, it wastes time and produces little to no measurable change in the classroom.

YOON AND COLLEAGUES, 2007 · REVIEW OF NINE STUDIES

Hours of professional development, and what students gained

Duration is not the only thing that matters, but it is the clearest dividing line in the research: short, one-off sessions did not move student achievement.

In one review of nine studies, Yoon and colleagues (2007) found that professional development programs averaging 49 hours over a school year raised student achievement by about 21 percentile points, while programs of 14 hours or fewer showed no measurable effect on students. In another review, Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan (2018) analyzed 60 studies of instructional coaching and found meaningful effects on both teaching practice and student achievement, with the strongest results in programs that combined coaching with structured content and in smaller, more targeted programs. And, in a longitudinal study, Kraft and Papay (2014) followed teachers over ten years and found that teachers working in schools with strong professional environments, including effective professional development, improved 38 percent more than teachers in schools with weak professional environments.

60

Studies of instructional coaching analyzed by Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan (2018)

38%

More improvement for teachers in schools with strong professional environments

10 years

Length of the Kraft and Papay longitudinal study behind that finding

These findings are important because choosing the right kind of professional development, sustained over time, helps improve performance and makes the spending of your Title II allocated funds justified.

The Seven Characteristics of Effective Professional Development

The most widely cited framework for evaluating professional development comes from the Learning Policy Institute. Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) reviewed three decades of research and identified 35 rigorous studies that linked professional development to changes in teacher practice and improvements in student outcomes. Across those studies, effective professional development shared seven characteristics. You can use these as a checklist when comparing options for your own school or campus to help ensure you are meeting all or most of these characteristics for effective PD on your campus.

1 Content focused

Effective professional development concentrates on teaching strategies tied to specific curriculum content, such as elementary mathematics, early literacy, or secondary science. Allowing teachers to be able to connect what they are learning to their specific content areas makes the PD much more effective. Generic sessions on broad topics where teachers aren't able to connect what they are learning to their own classroom are less likely to change classroom practice than sessions built around the material teachers actually teach.

2 Incorporates active learning

Teachers learn the way students learn. Professional development that asks teachers to design lessons, try strategies, analyze student work, and practice new techniques produces more change than professional development delivered as a lecture. If a professional development only includes a passive lecture where teachers are unable to think through how it can be applied to their own classroom, they are less likely to take that content back and implement it.

3 Supports collaboration

Effective professional development creates space for teachers to share ideas and work together, whether in grade-level teams, departments, or cross-school groups. By hearing other teachers' ideas, learning how colleagues are using the professional development learning, and applying it to their classroom, it allows teachers to gain more context into what works and what doesn't, and it often helps teachers connect more deeply with the PD concepts if they are able to collaborate with others.

4 Uses models of effective practice

Teachers benefit from seeing what the new practice looks like. Lesson plans, unit plans, sample student work, video of classroom instruction, and written cases give teachers a clear picture of the target. When teachers have real examples to consider, real resources to analyze and think through how to use in the classroom, and specific ways to implement the concepts, they are more likely to use the concepts themselves in the classroom.

5 Provides coaching and expert support

Access to an expert, whether a coach, a mentor, or a course facilitator, allows teachers to get help with their individual questions and to adapt a strategy to their own students. And, when professional development is structured in a way that allows teachers to have a plan to practice implementation after the session, it allows a campus administrator to follow up and support the teacher as he or she practices implementation in the classroom.

6 Offers feedback and reflection

Effective professional development builds in time for teachers to reflect on what they tried or what they want to try, receive input, and make adjustments. Without this step, teachers often try new strategies once and abandon them; or try them and don't realize when something is or isn't working.

7 Is of sustained duration

Teachers need adequate time to learn a new practice, try it in the classroom, reflect on the results, and try again. This is why the research consistently favors professional development that unfolds over weeks or months rather than a single day. Giving teachers access to the professional development they need on an ongoing basis, rather than, for example, once during an in-service training, means they get consistent support throughout the school year.

No single program will be equally strong on all seven characteristics, and the report carefully notes that these features work together rather than in isolation. When you evaluate an option, the useful question is how many of the seven it addresses and how well, and what you would need to add locally to cover the rest.

What ESSA Says Professional Development Must Be

The Every Student Succeeds Act includes its own definition of professional development, found in [Section 8101\(42\)](#) of the law. If you are spending Title II, Part A funds, this definition is the standard your activities must meet. Under ESSA, professional development activities must be an integral part of school and district strategies for giving educators the knowledge and skills to help students succeed, and they must be:

ESSA § 8101(42) · THE SIX REQUIRED DESCRIPTORS

Every activity paid for with Title II, Part A must be all six.

Sustained

The statute defines sustained as “not stand-alone, 1-day, or short-term workshops.” A single in-service day or conference session does not qualify on its own. Professional development qualifies when it continues consistently over the school year.

Intensive

Intensive refers to the depth of learning the content rather than the length of a particular training. Professional development meets this descriptor when it goes deeply into a focused set of practices, with teachers studying, practicing, and refining each one, rather than approaching a topic at the surface level.

Collaborative

Teachers must learn together, and not in isolation. This can take the form of things like: providing feedback on each other’s ideas, grade-level teams working through the same content or planning together after a training, PLC discussions built around what teachers tried, or peer observation and shared planning.

Job-embedded

The learning must be connected to teachers’ daily work in their own classrooms with their own students. Job-embedded professional development asks teachers to apply a strategy in a real lesson, rather than just learning something in isolation as a theory.

Data-driven

Professional development must be chosen and shaped in response to evidence of need, such as assessment results, walkthrough data, or teacher evaluation trends. It should also use data during the learning, so that teachers examine student work or classroom evidence to judge whether a strategy they are implementing is working.

Classroom-focused

The content must center on instruction: what teachers do with students, how they teach specific content, and how they respond to student learning. Basically, if a teacher can leave the training and walk back into the classroom to implement something new or improved, then it would classify as classroom-focused.

EIGHTEEN ALLOWABLE ACTIVITY TYPES

The statute then lists eighteen kinds of activities that can meet this definition, including improving teachers' subject-matter knowledge, developing classroom management skills, training teachers to use data and assessments, supporting teachers of English learners and students with disabilities, providing follow-up training to ensure that new skills are used in the classroom, and regularly evaluating professional development for its impact on teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

THE TWO FRAMEWORKS, SIDE BY SIDE**ESSA DEFINITION****RESEARCH CHARACTERISTIC****Sustained**

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Sustained duration**Collaborative**

→

Supports collaboration**Classroom-focused****Job-embedded**

→

Content focus**Active learning****Models of practice****Data-driven****Evaluate impact**

→

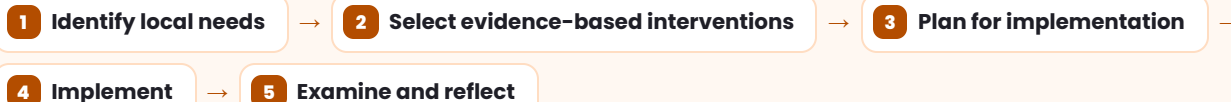
Feedback and reflection

Notice how closely the ESSA definition tracks some of the research and its conclusions that you reviewed earlier in this article. “Sustained” corresponds to sustained duration. “Collaborative” corresponds to supports collaboration. “Classroom-focused” and “job-embedded” correspond to content focus, active learning, and models of practice. “Data-driven” and the requirement to evaluate impact correspond to feedback and reflection. Congress wrote the definition after the research on effective professional development was well established. In practice, professional development that satisfies the seven characteristics will nearly always satisfy the ESSA definition.

Putting Both Frameworks to Work

The U.S. Department of Education’s [non-regulatory guidance on using evidence](#) recommends a five-step cycle: identify local needs, select relevant evidence-based interventions, plan for implementation, implement, and examine and reflect. The seven characteristics and the ESSA definition fit inside that cycle. Here is a practical sequence you can follow when planning professional development for the coming year.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION · USING EVIDENCE



The seven characteristics and the ESSA definition both fit inside this cycle. The sequence below is how that looks in practice on a campus.

1 Start with your data, not with a catalog.

Identify the specific instructional need you are trying to address, such as reading comprehension in grades three through five or classroom management among first- and second-year teachers. Or, maybe you have a specific teacher who is struggling in one area. The ESSA definition requires professional development to be data-driven, and a documented needs assessment is the first step.

2 Screen your options for professional development against the seven characteristics of effective PD.

For each option you are considering, note which of the seven characteristics it addresses on its own and which you would need to supply locally. An online course, for example, may be strong on content focus, models of practice, and sustained duration, while your campus supplies the collaboration and reflection through team meetings.

3 Check the ESSA definition.

Confirm that the activity is sustained rather than a single event, that it is connected to classroom practice, and that it fits within one or more of the eighteen listed activity types. If an option is a one-day workshop, ask yourself what follow-up you would be able to add to make it sustained and job-embedded.

4 Write down your rationale.

For most professional development, you can record the need you identified, the activity you selected, the research that supports that type of activity, the change in teacher practice you expect, and the student outcome you expect to follow.

5 Plan the evaluation before you start your PD.

ESSA lists regular evaluation of impact among the activities that count as professional development. Decide in advance what you will collect: completion records, teacher reflections, walkthrough data, and a student measure tied to your original need.

How Model Teaching Courses Fit This Framework

Model Teaching offers [professional development courses for schools and districts](#) that are designed to meet the standards described in this article. Each course is content-focused, addressing a specific instructional topic such as checking for understanding, explicit instruction, classroom management, or reading instruction, and each is built around models of practice, including lesson examples, downloadable planning tools, and classroom scenarios. Courses require teachers to apply the strategies in their own classrooms and reflect on the results, supporting active learning and reflection. Because terms are over 12 months, schools can select courses for their teachers over time, ensuring sustained duration. What's even better is that courses can be personalized for each teacher or teacher group's specific needs, allowing you to choose PD based on need.

Courses for schools and districts

Content focused on a specific instructional topic

Models of practice, planning tools, and scenarios

Applied in the classroom, then reflected on

12-month terms, so learning is sustained

Model Teaching courses are designed to support the instructional leadership already happening on your campus. They work best when a leader has identified a clear need, selected courses that address it, and built in the local collaboration and reflection that turn individual learning into schoolwide practice. To learn more, you can read about [how Model Teaching courses work](#) or [request a quote for your campus here](#).

[Build a quote for your campus](#) · quotes.modelteaching.com

Frequently Asked Questions

Does a one-day workshop count as professional development under ESSA?

Not on its own. The ESSA definition specifically states that professional development must be sustained and “not stand-alone, 1-day, or short-term workshops.” A one-day event can be part of a professional development plan if it is followed by ongoing, job-embedded activities such as coaching, collaborative planning, or a course that extends the learning over time.

What does a written rationale need to include when designing a PD plan?

You want to be sure that you can connect a documented need to a chosen activity, explain why research suggests the activity will address that need, and describe the outcomes you expect. A one-page document is usually sufficient, and it should be kept with your Title II records.

Can online, self-paced courses meet the seven characteristics?

Online courses can be strong on content focus, models of practice, active learning, and sustained duration, depending on their design. Many online courses also allow for some kind of online collaboration through discussion board posts, too. But they typically depend on the school to supply collaboration and structured reflection, which is why the research recommends pairing any course with team discussion, coaching, or a similar local structure to not only ensure appropriate collaboration but also to support fidelity in implementation of the concept at the campus level.

How do I evaluate whether the professional development worked?

Plan the evaluation at the start, and collect evidence at multiple levels: participation and completion, teacher learning, changes in classroom practice, and student outcomes tied to your original need. Thomas Guskey's five-level model for evaluating professional development is a widely used structure and a good next step once your plan is in place.

About This Article

Model Teaching publishes this guidance to help school and district leaders plan professional development that improves instruction and meets federal requirements. Federal guidance and district circumstances change, so always confirm current requirements with your state education agency or federal programs office.

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