



Reforming Professional Development to Improve Literacy Outcomes in Nevada

Nevada currently faces significant challenges in literacy. Only 27 percent of fourth grade students and 30 percent of eighth grade students were proficient in reading on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). We have identified professional development for teachers as an essential driver for improving literacy outcomes for Nevada's students.

This paper aims to answer two fundamental questions:

1. What are the shortcomings of current professional development efforts in Nevada and what steps should school districts take to improve the quantity, quality, and consistency of professional development?
2. How are existing funds available for professional development spent in Nevada and how can resources be reprioritized to improve this critical educational component?

Many professional development efforts in place at Nevada's schools are grounded in research-based best practices. These practices call for professional development to be sustained and embedded in the classroom. However, these practices have not been implemented with fidelity and literacy outcomes for students remain unacceptably low. Our analysis indicates that several key barriers exist to providing quality professional development programs, including lack of coordination of efforts within school districts, lack of standards for training provided by local educational agencies, inconsistent implementation and quality of programs, limited resources and time, and lack of effective evaluation mechanisms.

Given limited resources, we examined what current federal, State, and local resources are available to fund professional development and how those resources are being used. Statewide, school districts and the Regional Professional Development Programs budgeted \$70 million in 2013-14 for professional development activities, which is approximately \$158 per pupil. While this amount represents only 2 percent of budgeted expenditures for 2013-14, it is a substantial amount given that the majority of funds (54 percent) were budgeted for instructional staff, leaving limited funds for all other uses. The principal funding source for professional development is Title I, Part A (Education for the Disadvantaged) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), but districts also use a variety of other State and federal funds such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). School districts spend the majority of professional development funds on salaries.

We found that districts are not maximizing use of federal funds available for professional development. In 2012-13, school districts Statewide carried over \$21.3 million in Title I, Part A funds to the following fiscal year. While the amount of carryover varies from year to year, it represents unspent funds that could be prioritized for one-time professional development activities in Title I schools. In addition, with no State directive to use a set portion of federal ESEA or IDEA funds for professional development, districts are not required to prioritize spending for this use. Consequently, districts are using funds for a variety of purposes, some of which have generated positive outcomes for students and others which have not.

To improve the quality of professional development with the objective of boosting literacy outcomes in Nevada, we recommend that the state and school districts make the following policy changes:

State-level recommendations

1. Adopt legislation requiring the Nevada State Board of Education to adopt uniform professional development standards that apply to the Regional Professional Development Programs and Local Educational Agencies. The standards must ensure that the training provided is of high quality and is evaluated to determine the impact on instruction and student achievement.
2. Adopt legislation requiring the Nevada State Board of Education to establish specific percentages of the following funding sources that must be set aside for professional development:
 - a. ESEA Title I, Part A funds;
 - b. ESEA Title I Section 1003(a) funds for Focus Schools;
 - c. The set-aside equal to 5 to 15 percent of Title I, Part A funds for low performing schools required by the ESEA waiver; and
 - d. The IDEA early intervening services set-aside.

School District-level recommendations

1. Program Recommendations
 - a. Prioritize improving the quality of professional development.
 - b. Provide a coordinated, coherent professional development program that is driven by needs instead of funding requirements.
 - c. Improve the quality of implementation to ensure that every teacher has access to effective professional development.
 - d. Create structured time for teacher collaboration by standardizing school schedules and funding approaches so that schools have designated time each week for collaborative models such as Professional Learning Communities.
 - e. Encourage innovation by allowing schools the flexibility to design their own training models and require rigorous evaluation of the results.
 - f. Shift the focus of evaluation from measuring participants' reactions to evaluating the effectiveness of implementation and the impact on student learning.
2. Fiscal Recommendations
 - a. Utilize Title I carryover funds for evidence-based, one-time professional development activities at Title I schools.
 - b. Critically analyze return on investment of existing spending of federal funds and eliminate expenditures shown to be ineffective based on national research and/or local results to free up funding for professional development.
 - c. Develop strategies to coordinate funding to implement the coherent professional development program designed by the district.

Conclusion

Improving teacher professional development is one part of a comprehensive set of reforms needed to improve literacy outcomes in Nevada. Our review of current professional development efforts in Nevada suggests that it is not sufficient to simply invest in research-based practices. Rather, it is just as important to put an infrastructure into place that generates buy-in from all levels of the educational system, creates incentives for teachers to improve instruction, and ensures that practices are implemented with fidelity. Systems also need to be in place to promote innovation while demanding accountability. Providing high quality professional development to every teacher will require a substantial investment of time and resources. We identify existing funds that are not being fully expended, as well as other funds that could be reprioritized for professional development. Using professional development to improve teacher quality will help improve literacy outcomes to ensure that all of Nevada's students are ready for the next generation of jobs that demand a highly literate and skilled workforce.