

Reinvesting in Teachers

Aligning District Professional Development Spending to Support a Comprehensive School Reform Strategy

Version 5.6

By Karen Hawley Miles and Matthew Hornbeck*

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Comprehensive School Reform as the District “Engine” of Improvement

As “standards based reform” becomes central to school improvement efforts across the country, school districts face the critical challenge of rethinking how best to support teachers and schools in meeting higher standards. Some reformers envision districts simply disappearing as states funnel dollars directly to schools and close or take charge of those schools that fail to improve. Others point out that especially in urban districts, most schools and teachers will need help to close the daunting gap between the standards and current student performance.¹ These reformers know that a school-by-school approach – as opposed to systemic district level reforms – will not result in reform at scale. They view the district as a potentially powerful player in helping *all* schools reach higher standards.

However, most districts are not effectively organized to support schools in making the kinds of changes in instruction and organization required to reach higher standards.² There is mounting evidence that successful schools have a schoolwide or comprehensive approach to improving instruction, where staff agree on common research-based curriculum and instructional strategies, share their experiences with colleagues, consider each student’s instructional needs, and seek and receive feedback from each other on improving their practice. To do this, schools need to engage in effective and intensive professional development. As is well stated by the National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching (NPEAT), the professional development that is most likely to lead to improved student performance is offered to school-based teams of teachers, is continuous and involves follow-up and support.³

Comprehensive school reform designs incorporate these findings by providing schools with an integrated set of curriculum, assessment, instructional and governance practices. More importantly, many designs, such as New American Schools designs, provide staff with professional development and technical assistance to implement whole school reform.

New American Schools has focused on helping districts to rethink professional development spending because its designs provide the centerpiece for a districtwide professional development strategy. While the design teams do not substitute for all district professional development, they do provide intense technical assistance over at least three years to help teacher teams understand student performance priorities and to implement a whole school approach to reaching higher standards.

Comprehensive school reform designs provide an important district level complement to standards based reform. Many comprehensive school reform designs have already begun to show powerful improvements in student achievement at the school level.⁴ However, few districts have made the necessary organizational changes for comprehensive school reform designs to become

¹ See *Beyond Finger Pointing*, cite.

² The National Research Council Report on Testing, Teaching and Learning, 1999, p. 20

³ See the “Principles for Effective Professional Development” from the National Partnership for Excellence & Accountability in Teaching, September 1998.

⁴ For example, see results for Memphis schools implementing comprehensive school reform in Steven M. Ross, William Sanders, S. Paul Wright and Samuel Stringfield, “The Memphis Restructuring Initiative: Achievement Results for Years 1 and 2. Special Report to Memphis City Schools, June 1998.

the “engine” of districtwide improvement. For comprehensive school reform to become a force for districtwide change and not just individual school improvement, the entire district must realign its professional development activities and spending⁵ in order to:

- Help pay for the intensive school level and classroom level coaching required to implement comprehensive school reform designs and improve classroom instruction; and
- Provide professional development and other supports to schools and teachers that complements, but does not conflict with the school’s chosen comprehensive school reform design.

By realigning spending and reorganizing their support for schools, districts will be better able to sustain comprehensive school reform designs and become key players in helping all schools reach higher standards. Without district level support for comprehensive school reform, districts will continue to send conflicting and weak messages about what matters in improving classroom instruction.

New American Schools, with primary support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, has partnered with one or two reform-minded districts each year for three years to analyze spending on professional development and other instructional support. Findings from a total of four districts are presented in this brief.

The New American Schools initiative produces information that district leaders can use to highlight the need for change. The initiative also pinpoints specific dollars and activities that might be reallocated or combined to adopt comprehensive school reform designs that have a high impact on student learning. The brief focuses on professional development spending – particularly professional development as it is delivered by comprehensive school reform designs – as the most powerful lever for improving instruction.

Analyzing Professional Development Spending to Reorganize Around Comprehensive School Reform

Because districts do not take an integrated approach to professional development – they spread it over many departments and combine it with other activities – isolating and understanding these expenditures can be a complicated endeavor. The analysis begins by using standardized coding tools, developed by NAS, to code and analyze spending data in ways that are helpful to individual districts and comparable across districts.

The coding step is useful to understanding the main areas of professional development spending and identifies individuals that control or manage the dollars. We then take the analysis a step further by conducting interviews and working sessions with district staff to share and refine the data. During this step we ask district staff to detail the nature and type of activities.

⁵ Lessons from New American Schools’ Scale-Up Phase , Susan J. Bodilly, RAND, 1998

We collect and code expenditures from all funds in the five categories described below. Based on the data gathered in these categories, the spending analysis seeks to inform the development of a district professional development strategy.

1. *How much is the district spending on professional development?*

In reporting on professional development spending, most districts include only local dollars spent delivering courses and workshops. In order to take a more proactive, integrated approach to professional development, it is important to include two less conventional categories of spending:

- *Dollars dedicated to providing instruction-free time for teacher professional development.* Many districts include full or half work days for teachers in their calendar. Even though teachers negotiate extra salary dollars to cover these days, districts do not typically consider the cost of providing these days as a professional development expense. Including this cost is important because it highlights the fact that teacher time is the largest expenditure in professional development and puts a premium on making sure this time is used effectively.
- *All funding sources, including private funds that support district level initiatives.* Because funding often comes attached to specific goals and programs, many districts create separate programs and infrastructures to support them. But recent changes in federal funding requirements and new understandings and flexibility at the state level have created much more latitude for districts in combining funds to support integrated improvement plans.

2. *Who manages or controls professional development funds?*

This question has two important components. First, are the dollars controlled by schools, the central office, the union or elsewhere? Second, if the dollars are controlled centrally, which department manages them? It can be a challenge to determine which department and manager currently controls the spending and how much, but doing so is essential to knowing what spending to reorganize.

Districts often allocate money to departments that simply pass the money along to other departments. It is common to hear a district person say, “Even though it appears in my budget, I don’t know how it’s spent. I never see it.” The person who manages the funding can provide another level of information as to how the money is spent, which makes the analysis more meaningful and the reorganization of spending more effective.

3. *What does current spending buy?*

District staff may be surprised at what such an analysis reveals is being purchased under the current budget. Current spending usually buys resource teachers or consultants, substitutes who free teachers to participate in training activities, extra duty pay, travel and conference registration costs, software, and other items related – but not in an integrated or focused fashion – to

professional development. Prior to analysis, district spending is not typically organized around supporting at scale the startup costs associated with the full implementation of research based comprehensive school reform designs.

4. How is professional development funded – federal, state, local, or private sources?

Identifying all sources of funding is essential to the spending analysis and reorganization of funds. Several districts do not budget by departments using all sources. In essence each department’s budget consists only of local dollars – state and federal dollars are “managed” separately. Only by combining these sources can the district ensure that its activities are integrated to support schools and develop an aligned strategy to support comprehensive school reform designs.

In addition, because districts do fund professional development using a combination of sources each with different formulas and time frames, long range planning for professional development – the kind associated with comprehensive school reform designs – is rare. A combined look at the spending on professional development begins to enable more long range planning.

5. What is the topic of the spending (e.g., literacy, math, science, etc.)?

None of the districts we have studied to date have systematically tracked the topic of professional development spending. Districts that offer 30 or more professional development topics actually may impact teaching and learning less than districts focused on key areas such as literacy. There are many topics and training needs worthy of professional development spending, but this is an issue of breadth versus depth. Our analysis quickly highlights where districts invest minimal amounts in a large number of topics. For example, a district might offer a one-session workshop to a small number of teachers across the district on a particular topic. This kind of “one shot” professional development spending (with little or no followup) is very unlikely to result in changed teaching practice at the school level.

Findings from Four Districts

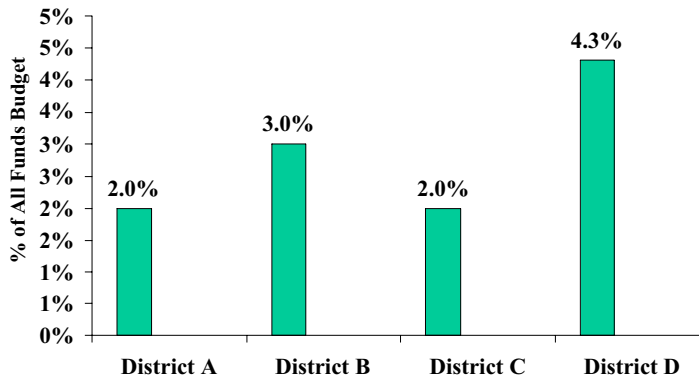
NAS conducted this analysis of professional development spending in four, large (greater than 50,000 students) urban districts, each engaged in implementing comprehensive school reform. The analysis revealed seven common findings.

1. Total spending on professional development varies significantly.

In these four districts, spending on professional development ranged from \$1,500 to \$5,000 per teacher per year and from 1.8% of the total “all funds” operating budget to 4.3%.

Professional Development Spending

Preliminary Findings in 4 large urban districts



Because we have standardized the collection and coding of data across districts, this information can be used to compare investment levels in professional development and, potentially, to argue for higher levels of funding. Though there is not a “right” level of professional development spending, early analysis by RAND shows that the more financial resources that districts provide to support the implementation of comprehensive school reform designs, the higher the level of comprehensive school reform implementation.⁶ And higher implementation dramatically increases the likelihood of improved student achievement.

2. *Districts spend more than they think on professional development.*

Ask district leaders what they spend annually and they will typically shrug, make a low guess or point to the budget item for “professional development.” Our analysis suggests that these estimates represent the “tip of the iceberg.” For example, District C reported \$460,000 dollars spent on “Strategic Professional Development.” Our analysis showed the district spent *nearly 20 times this amount*, or \$9 million to support professional development for teachers and principals.

The perception of low spending on professional development gets in the way of thinking big about what is possible if leaders are willing to challenge the current use of district resources. Providing expert coaching at the school and classroom level is labor intensive. Faithfully implementing comprehensive school reform designs and providing ongoing support can cost up to \$75,000 per school per year for three years. In the context of the perceived spending level in District C (\$460,000), investing \$75,000 a year to support reform at one school seems costly. But, in the context of a \$9 million budget, the investment seems more reasonable.

⁶ Sue Bodilly, Lessons from New American Schools’ Scale-up Phase, RAND, 1998. P. 99-103.

Again, our analysis helps district leaders to see what they are really spending on professional development and to plan for the implementation of research-based, replicable comprehensive school reform designs.

3. Teacher time is the biggest spending item.

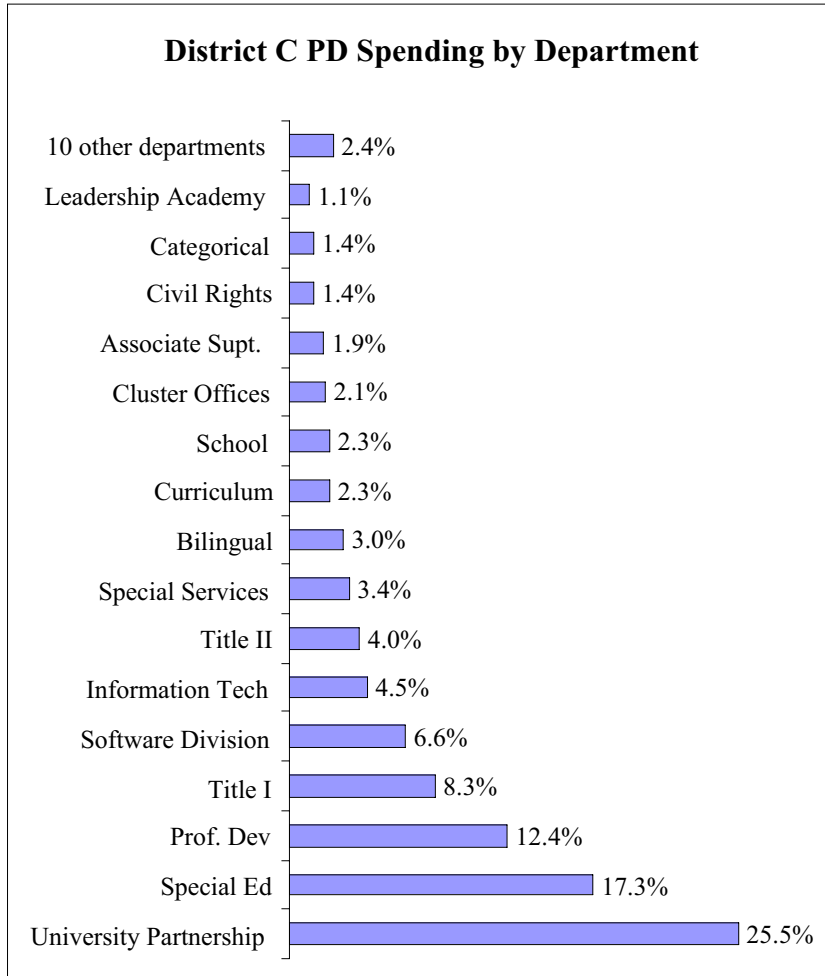
Districts allocate a large percentage of professional development dollars to free up teacher time, from 18% to 55% of their total spending on professional development. In most districts, instruction-free days provided for teacher planning and professional development are the largest component of this cost. Although comprehensive school reform designs provide tested best practices, in the districts studied there is little support or guidance for using teacher time effectively and no accountability to link activities to improved student performance.

4. Professional development spending is fragmented and uncoordinated.

In one district, 30 different units administered professional development funds and each of the four districts studied had more than ten departments. Usually just a few departments control the majority of district level spending on professional development. Typically, these include the curriculum and instruction department, the “official” professional development group, technology initiatives, Title I (if there is a separate department) and lead teacher and mentor teaching programs.

Often the departments providing the most funds for professional development are not those officially charged with “professional development.” As the chart below shows, in District C, the special education department accounted for more than 17% of all professional development spending while the technology departments accounted for 11%, and the traditional professional development department accounted for only 12%. Each district has found that departments have different, even conflicting strategies for delivering professional development.

Even spending within a topic is often not necessarily integrated. For example, a number of different departments may offer “literacy” activities that are uncoordinated and send inconsistent instructional messages. Comprehensive school reform designs that may meet the needs and goals of multiple departments are not presented or considered as tested ways to improve student achievement.



5. *Sometimes, large portions of spending are outside either district or school level control.*

In District C as the chart above shows, one-quarter of the district’s professional development spending is committed to a university partnership where the activities and use of dollars are largely determined by the university. In another district, the union controlled over half of the dollars that were used to support courses for individual teachers. If these resources are managed as tight partnerships where goals are shared and the partner is explicitly accountable for meeting district goals, this can be a very effective way of delivering services. However, in many districts, such partnerships and their substantial funds have become an expected part of business and highly protected “sacred cows” rather than dynamic flexible relationships that enhance district performance and support the implementation of comprehensive school reform.

6. *Districts rely heavily on “external” funds to pay for professional development.*

Each of the four districts studied relied on external funding sources to pay for close to half of all professional development. On average, districts used external sources for 46% of total spending on professional development. The range was from 43% to 50%. Typically, Title I, Title II (Eisenhower), and technology funds are the biggest external sources for professional

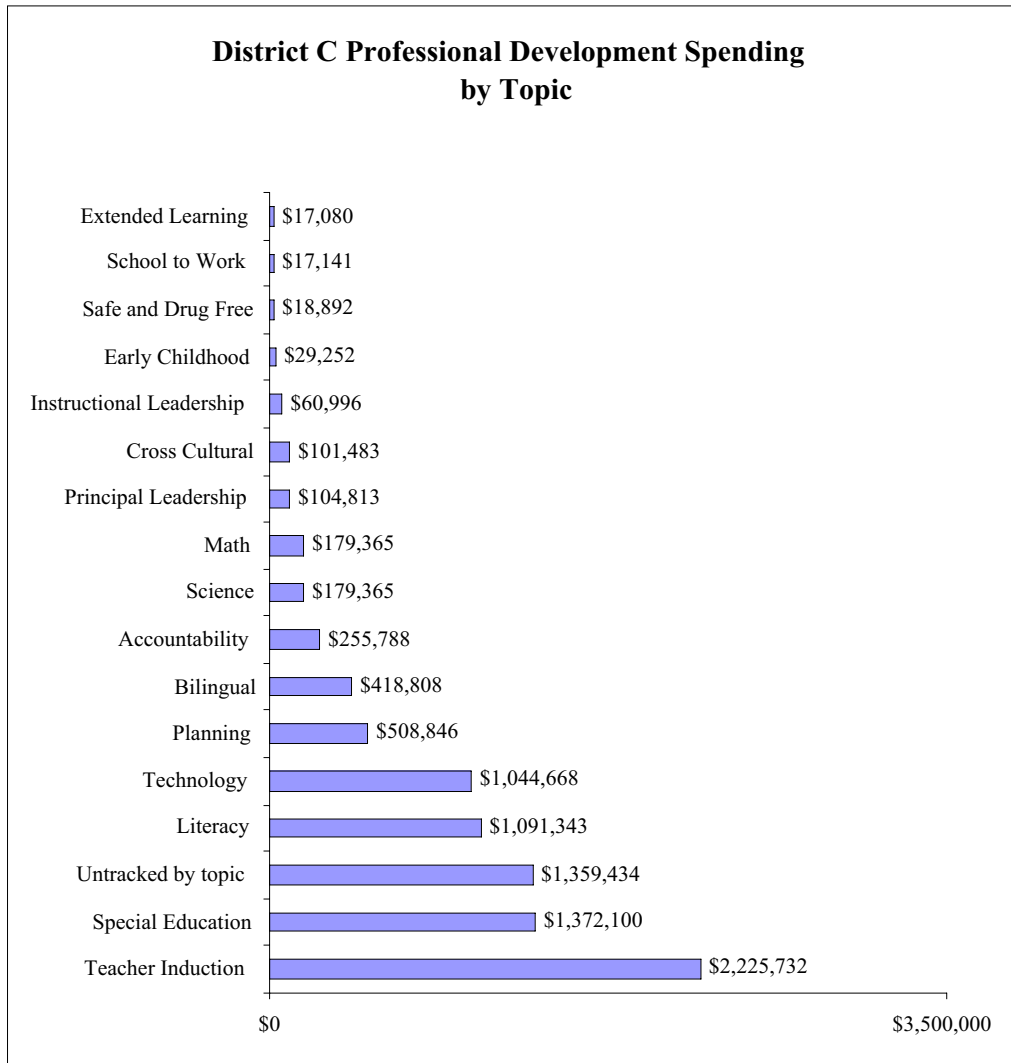
development spending. But IDEA, bilingual, and school to work funding can also be large sources. Multiple funding streams are partially to blame for the fragmentation of goals and the uneven delivery of professional development. A key challenge for districts is to reorganize professional development around strategies for improving schools – such as comprehensive school reform designs – instead of organizing it around funding streams.⁷

7. Spending is not focused on academic content.

Contrary to a comprehensive school reform strategy that focuses on a few academic content areas, we found district professional development spending to be quite dispersed by topic. Spending on literacy, math and science may be the largest expenditures, but there are still substantial funds that are aimed at a few dozen topics or that are not traceable by topic at all. In one district, spending on school based management and team process training far outweighed spending on instructional topics.

The chart below shows that in District C, training for new teachers tops the list of spending items at nearly one-quarter of all spending. This is followed by professional development in special education. Literacy is the third largest item representing 10% of spending. No other academic topic comes close to this total. About 10% of spending is simply untraceable by topic even after extensive interviews. This is because these funds were allocated directly to the school with no reporting or other accountability requirements.

⁷ For more information on funding and flexibility see www.policyexchange.iel.org and www.ctredpol.org.



Creating a Professional Development Strategy

The spending analysis described in this brief lays the groundwork for creating a coherent professional development strategy that supports the implementation of comprehensive school reform designs. Once this groundwork has been laid, the five main steps to creating a district professional development strategy are:

1. Defining professional development principles⁸ and a strategy for effective professional development that revolves around support for schools implementing comprehensive school reform designs. The strategy should define:
 - the goals and priorities for district sponsored professional development to support comprehensive school reform design implementation;

⁸ For a rich discussion of effective professional development, see Bruce Haslam’s *How to Rebuild a Local Professional Development Infrastructure*, part of the Getting Better by Design “How-To” series from New American Schools.

- the primary models or comprehensive school reform designs for delivering professional development to accomplish each goal – which, among other factors, should be based on a district consultation with representatives of comprehensive school reform designs and an understanding of the professional development offered by specific comprehensive school reform designs;
 - the spending levels for each professional development activity; and
 - the role of each department in implementing this strategy.
2. Aligning the professional development resources with district academic goals – especially literacy and math – and focusing spending on fewer topics.
 3. Re-examining the professional development activities of each major department involved in professional development to link these activities to the district’s student performance goals and to school-level efforts to implement comprehensive school reform designs.
 4. Creating more accountability for the quality of professional development by requiring integrated school-based professional development plans and making their review a central part of the planning, budgeting and evaluation processes.
 5. Creating a consolidated plan for the integration of external funds to support the professional development strategy.

Conclusion

Regardless of spending level, we find that creating a powerful professional development strategy that includes comprehensive school reform designs demands a detailed understanding of the dollars and people devoted to existing professional development activities. RAND and comprehensive school reform design research shows that schools need support over three to five years to fully transform. Making real changes will require more than one-time grants, it will require the redirection of substantial dollars from across the district – and from many worthwhile, but less effective activities.

Perhaps more importantly, if teachers can hope to find the time and energy needed to work together on student performance priorities, districts need to free them from activities that may distract from or conflict with their efforts. For comprehensive school reform to become the engine for districtwide change and not just for individual school improvement, the entire district must commit to realigning its professional development activities and spending.

About the Authors

Dr. Karen Hawley Miles, of Education Resource Management Strategies in Dallas, Texas, specializes in strategic planning in public schools and district and school resource allocation. She works with school districts nationwide to rethink the use of resources and the organization of districts and schools. She has worked to design school improvement and planning processes in several districts. Working at the intersection of research and practice, she has also coordinated national research projects of school district and school level resource allocation. She has focused especially on how districts and schools can find the necessary resources and time to invest in building teacher capacity. She co-directed the recent study by Economic Policy Institute, Where Has the Money Gone?, which traced the growth in school spending since 1967. She recently concluded a study for the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) on resource allocation in high performing schools. Prior to this, she worked at Bain & Company as a strategy and management consultant for hospitals and corporations. She has a B.A. in Economics from Yale University and a Doctorate in Education from Harvard University, specializing in school organization, change and finance.

Matthew Hornbeck, an education consultant, works with local school districts, nonprofits, and foundations to support and implement comprehensive school reform strategies. He works with Education Resource Management Strategies to help districts develop strategies that support teaching and learning. He has been central to the development of tools being used to define, track, analyze, and reorganize spending committed to instructional and school support in urban school districts. He directs the New American Schools CSRD Implementation Project. The Project supports and monitors the state implementation of the CSRD Program, a federal initiative to provide schools with resources to adopt research-based, replicable whole school reform designs. Prior to this, he worked for the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in Washington, DC. He has a B.A. from Bowdoin College, a Master's in Educational Administration from Temple University, and a J.D. from the University of Maryland School of Law. He is a graduate of the Baltimore City Public Schools where he later returned to teach.