

COMMENTARY

Teacher Participation in Content-Focused Professional Development and the Role of State Policy

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Recent research has demonstrated the potential for teacher professional development to enhance teacher learning, improve instruction, and increase student achievement. Nevertheless, research examining the relationship between state and local policies and teachers' participation in professional development is sparse. This connection between policy environments and teacher-based outcomes becomes increasingly important as educational reforms place new demands on teachers. Since professional development is a key mechanism to improving teachers' instruction and students' achievement, we address the extent to which state and school policy environments are associated with teachers' participation in content-focused professional development. We consider such policy environments within the context of both mathematics, a high-stakes subject area, and science, currently a low-stakes subject area.

In describing state policy environments along several dimensions, we seek to discover which types of policies are more or less influential in moving teachers into the types of professional development that research has shown to be most effective for improved teaching and learning.

Using a national sample of high school mathematics and science teachers from the [Schools and Staffing Survey \(SASS\)](#), we conduct a secondary analysis using a three-level hierarchical linear model (HLM) to predict teachers' level of participation in different types of professional development. We conduct separate analyses for mathematics and for science.

We find that the policy context at both the school- and state-level is more predictive of teacher participation in effective professional development in a high-stakes subject (mathematics) than a low-stakes subject (science). We also find that the alignment between state standards and assessments is a key attribute of state-level policies that tend to promote teacher participation in content-focused professional development in high-stakes subject areas. Even though state-level policies are important in promoting participation in effective professional development, we find that policy environments are strongest when they are closest to the teacher.

We conclude that both state- and school-level policy environments are associated with teachers taking high-quality professional development, but these findings are most pronounced in high-stakes subject areas. We also find that policies promoting consistency in the form of alignment between standards and assessments are perhaps the most important type of policies that

states can adopt to encourage teachers to participate in effective professional development.

The [full study](#) can be found in Kristie J.R. Phillips, Laura Desimone & Thomas M. Smith, "Teacher Participation in Content-Focused Professional Development & The Role of State Policy," *Teachers College Record* Volume 113 Number 11, 2011, p. [2586-2621](#).

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