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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# The State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada



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# The State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada:

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

Globally, there is attention to identifying countries with higher educational achievement results and understanding what educational policies and practices may be contributing to such success. At the same time, there has increasingly been a focus on the importance of developing teachers and teaching as crucial for supporting students' learning and achievement. Canada has been recognized in international assessments, benchmarks, and research as a country with high educational performance and there is interest, within Canada and internationally, in knowing about approaches to educators' professional learning in Canada. However, as Canada's school education system is the responsibility of 10 provinces and three territories, there is limited Pan-Canadian data and research available to examine teachers' professional learning across Canada. This study sought to address this gap in available research by investigating, "What is the current state of educators' professional learning in Canada?"

## Why Is a Study of the State of Educators' Professional Learning Needed and Important?

If we do not raise Canadian voices and experiences to the forefront, much of the international debate will continue to be informed from evidence generated outside of Canada. However, this international debate has considerable influence on educational policies being developed and adapted currently within Canada. The purpose of *The State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada* study

is, therefore, to research, understand, and profile professional learning within and across Canada.

The intent is not to argue for a uniform approach across Canada; rather it is the opposite. The purpose is to understand, value, appreciate, and respect the rich mosaic of educational experiences and diversity of approaches and outcomes from professional learning within and across provinces and territories. While each province and territory is different, we have also identified that there are lessons to learn, opportunities to collaborate, and possibilities to co-learn from different – or similar – approaches to professional learning. We hope this report will stimulate further collaborative dialogue and actions.

## The State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada: Research Questions and Methods

### KEY SUB-QUESTIONS ADDRESSED IN THE STUDY WERE:

- 1** Why is a study of the state of professional learning in Canada needed and important?
- 2** What does existing research literature and available international, national, and provincial/territorial data indicate about the nature, experiences, and quality of professional learning within Canada?
- 3** What can be identified about the experiences of educators' engagements in professional learning? What benefits, challenges, and potentially promising practices from educators' experiences of professional learning can be identified?
- 4** How are school and system leaders engaging in and enabling professional learning within schools and for teachers?
- 5** What are the enabling conditions (policies, resources, capacity) for supporting research-based best practices for professional learning?
- 6** What implications arise from this study to further advance and improve the state of educators' professional learning in Canada?

The team of researchers conducted reviews of academic research literature concerning professional learning and of publicly available documents for Canadian provinces and territories and Pan-Canadian sources.

A national Advisory Group was formed and requested to provide relevant research, data, documents and examples of promising practices.

In collaboration with the Canadian Teachers' Federation, focus groups, conference calls, and requests for additional resources from teachers' organizations in Canada's provinces and territories were completed.

New empirical research was conducted through in-depth case studies in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, plus survey items administered in New Brunswick and focus groups held in Manitoba.

**Table 1:**  
Features of Professional Learning and Key Findings from *The State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada* study

Key Components and Features of Effective Professional Learning Identified in Review of Research Literature		Key Findings from Study of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada
<b>Quality Content</b>	Evidence-informed	Evidence, inquiry, and professional judgement are informing professional learning policies and practices
	Subject-specific and pedagogical content knowledge	The priority area identified by teachers for developing their knowledge and practices is how to support diverse learners' needs
	A focus on student outcomes	A focus on a broad range of students' and professionals' learning outcomes is important
	A balance of teacher voice and system coherence	The appropriate balance of system-directed and self-directed professional development for teachers is complex and contested
<b>Learning Design and Implementation</b>	Active and variable learning	There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to professional learning; teachers are engaging in multiple opportunities for professional learning and inquiry with differentiation for their professional needs
	Collaborative learning experiences	Collaborative learning experiences are highly valued and prevalent within and across schools and wider professional networks
	Job-embedded learning	Teachers value professional learning that is relevant and practical for their work; "job-embedded" should not mean school-based exclusively as opportunities to engage with external colleagues and learning opportunities matter also
<b>Support and Sustainability</b>	Ongoing in duration	Time for sustained, cumulative professional learning integrated within educators' work lives requires attention
	Resources	Inequitable variations in access to funding for teachers' self-selected professional development are problematic
	Supportive and engaged leadership	System and school leaders have important roles in supporting professional learning for teachers and for themselves

## What Are Findings about Educators' Experiences of Professional Learning in Canada?

The study began with an extensive review of research literature, which resulted in the identification of three key components and 10 features of effective professional learning (see Table 1). These features also share similarities to Learning Forward's (2011) Standards for Professional Learning which are: learning communities, resources, learning designs, leadership, data, implementation, and outcomes. As outlined in Table 1, the findings from this study in Canada are broadly consistent with the features of effective professional learning identified in the

research review. There are many commonalities between current policies, practices, challenges and contentions within Canada and wider debates and developments for educators' professional learning internationally. However, the study also identified some differences in conception and application of the features of effective professional learning within Canada. Sometimes these differences reflect the details of implementation within and across local contexts and for diverse professionals' and students' needs. However, these differences can go beyond minor nuances or adaptations to indicate important differences in the underpinning conception of the purposes, practices, and intended outcomes of professional learning within and across Canada. In the following sections, the key findings from *The State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada* study are summarized.

## Evidence, inquiry, and professional judgement are informing professional learning policies and practices

Examples of evidence-informed approaches to professional learning exist at all levels of the education system in Canada. Provincial Ministries/ Departments and professional organizations have engaged in reviews of professional learning research and needs analyses to inform their approaches to professional development.

For example, following an in-depth review of professional learning in Prince Edward Island, the government released *The Professional Learning Report* outlining a renewed vision for professional learning rooted in seven principles of effective professional learning: embedded in practice; research based; collaborative; evidence-based and data-driven; ongoing and sustained; individual and collective responsibility; and student learning.

**“ While data is used extensively it does not exclusively drive decisions. Rather, a professional process of inquiry and judgement are important to bring together a range of evidence and expertise.**

In Ontario, a Working Table on Teacher Development – including membership from the Ministry of Education and all education professional organizations – commissioned a review of research on teachers’ professional learning and development and considered a needs analysis conducted by the Ontario Teachers’ Federation to identify and recommend five characteristics for the design and provision of professional learning

for Ontario’s teachers: coherent; attentive to adult learning styles; goal-oriented; sustainable; and evidence-informed.

Evidence to identify professional learning needs is also being used. For example, a professional development planning cycle developed by the Alberta Teachers’ Association, Alberta Education, Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia, Alberta School Boards Association, College of Alberta School Superintendents, and Alberta Universities begins with conducting an environmental scan and a participants’ needs assessment.

Across the case studies conducted for this study, there were examples of school districts and schools engaging in processes of needs assessments, analysis of students’ work and learning, identification of professional needs, and engaging in and with research and inquiry to inform their professional learning priorities. In Alberta, for example, Fort McMurray Public Schools incorporate Professional Learning Fridays (PLFs) into the district calendar, 14 full days where teachers gather together to network around problems of practice including reviewing student data and a process of professional inquiry and judgement. In another example, Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB), Ontario, moved to having School Learning Plans (instead of School Improvement Plans) which include a school self-assessment, teacher and student voice and input, and alignment with district goals.

Evidence from research and from a range of data are being drawn on and used to inform provincial policies, professional development processes, and areas of focus within provinces and territories, districts, and schools. While data is used extensively it does not exclusively drive decisions. Rather, a professional process of inquiry and judgement are important to bring together a range of evidence and expertise.

## The priority area identified by teachers for developing their knowledge and practices is how to support diverse learners' needs

In a survey conducted for this study in New Brunswick, “Supporting diverse learners’ needs” was identified as the most needed area of professional development (56% of respondents). Across the case study findings, teachers were seeking professional development to equip them to support all learners, including attention to diversity, inclusion, equity, and poverty. There is a specific need to support teachers’ knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal people; this priority is further required to support the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Attention to appropriate professional learning content is needed: in a national survey by the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, the majority of teachers (63%) reported being most satisfied with approaches to professional learning involving cultural teachings and school visits by an Elder/knowledge keeper (CTF, 2015).

Subject-specific content knowledge continues to be important. The level of need, however, varies by individual, career stage, school panel, and school systems. In a Pan-Canadian survey, 50% of new teachers reported being well prepared at the start of their career; 66% of elementary teachers were likely to view professional development as an opportunity to deepen their subject matter knowledge, compared to 50% of secondary teachers (Kamanzi, Riopel & Lessard, 2007). In the New Brunswick survey for this study, 36% of respondents identified “subject matter content” as the area of professional development most needed by teachers; whereas 34% of respondents identified this as the area least needed.

Across Canada, the availability of subject-specific professional development varies. For example, in the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP), teachers’ participation in science-related

professional development days ranged from 23% of survey respondents in Anglophone schools in British Columbia participating in nine or more days to 64% of respondents in Francophone schools in Manitoba and Ontario not participating in any science-related professional development days (O’Grady & Houme, 2014). The need for subject and pedagogical professional development is also affected by changes in curriculum; for example, the introduction of a new curriculum in British Columbia has resulted in the development of Provincial Curriculum Days, in partnership between the Ministry of Education, British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, British Columbia School Superintendents’ Association, and British Columbia Principals’ and Vice-Principals’ Association. The introduction of coding and computational thinking for all students, K-12, in particular, means teachers in British Columbia need professional development to build new technological knowledge.

Overall, priority professional learning needs for teachers are knowledge, skills, and practices to support diverse learners’ needs. This includes attention to developing teachers’ pedagogical, subject, curricular, technological, and cultural knowledge linked to students’ needs and wider educational, social, and political changes.

## A focus on a broad range of students’ and professionals’ learning outcomes is important

A focus on student outcomes is considered important in the content for and intended benefits of professional learning in Canada. In the New Brunswick survey items, teachers were asked to identify their priority professional needs linked to the 10 principles of effective professional learning identified in the research review (Table 1); the majority of respondents (56%) selected a focus on student outcomes as the top priority.

Professional learning focused on improving student achievement can benefit improved achievement results and reduced gaps in performance.

For example, in British Columbia, the Changing Results for Young Readers (CR4YR) initiative was implemented as a collaborative inquiry project intended to increase the number of children who are engaged, successful readers. Participating districts and teachers had a variety of networking opportunities, shared resources through facilitators and Early Reading Advocates, and engaged in ongoing dialogue. To track the impact of CR4YR, teachers tracked one child from each classroom in the project, from November 2014 through May 2015. Analysis of 311 complete case records indicated that 96% of the vulnerable students selected for the case studies showed growth in reading for meaning. Furthermore, there were substantial decreases in the gaps between student literacy achievement: over 60% of students had progressed more than one year during the 8-month project.

While a focus on students' learning outcomes is important, the Canada study findings also indicate a concern that student outcomes should not be interpreted narrowly as achievement results primarily on standardized assessments or test scores. Broader student learning and well-being along with equity processes and outcomes are important to focus on and develop as well. For example, in CR4YR, teachers were most likely to focus on

increasing student confidence (75%), followed by personal responsibility and motivation (72%).

Furthermore, processes and outcomes related to professionals' own efficacy, learning, practices, and well being are considered to be central in the content and design of professional learning in Canada. For example, in the CR4YR, benefits for teachers' confidence and their engagement in professional collaboration and inquiry were identified with benefits for their understanding of literacy, use of a range of instructional strategies, and their capacities to engage students in the joy of reading. Similarly, the Collaborative Inquiry for Learning – Mathematics (CIL-M) in Ontario recognized the need to support changes in teachers' efficacy, beliefs, and practices before improving students' efficacy, expectancy, and achievement for mathematics. The importance of professionals' own learning needs and outcomes is a key element of teachers' organizations' agreements across Canada.

Overall, the study findings indicate that valuing, respecting, and promoting a range of professionals' and students' outcomes is important in Canada. Student achievement matters; however, outcomes are not only about test scores. Generally, professional learning content needs to develop teachers' efficacy, knowledge, and practices in order to support students' efficacy, engagement, learning, and equity of outcomes.



## The appropriate balance of system-directed and self-directed professional development for teachers is complex and contested

The balance of system-directed contrasted with self-directed professional development for teachers was one of the most prevalent and contentious themes in the study's findings. In practice, teachers are engaged in both professional development provided or required by their school, district, or larger education system and also in self-directed professional learning. In Saskatchewan, for example, 95% of teachers reported participating in employer-directed professional development and 79% reported participating in teacher-led professional development (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2013). Generally, a balance between professional development linked to overall system goals and also professional learning for teachers' specific needs is considered important and can be reflected in teachers' professional development or performance plans. Black Gold School Division, for example, has partnered with the local branch of the Alberta Teachers' Association to develop a framework for professional learning that combines school division, school-based, and teacher-led professional development over a series of eight days throughout the school year.

Issues and concerns about teachers' ability to exercise professional judgement over their own learning needs and exert their autonomy over selecting and leading professional learning were identified. In a Pan-Canadian survey, the majority of teachers responded that they have some authority to make decisions about their professional development (55.5%), but the majority also perceived that this autonomy has reduced and eroded over the past five years (53.5%) (CTF, 2014). In response to the question *"How has your level of autonomy in choosing your own PD changed over the past five years?"*

in the New Brunswick survey for this study: 36% of respondents reported less autonomy; 34% reported more autonomy; 16% reported continuing low autonomy; and 14% reported continuing high autonomy. In a related question, 94% of respondents reported that some (60%), most (28%), or all (5%) of their professional development is mandated. "Mandated" professional development may be important to support system- or school- changes, priorities and goals, for example the need for professional learning to support curricular reforms. However, there is also a need for teacher choice and voice over elements of their professional learning. For example, Ontario's Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) supports teachers to undertake self-directed professional development and develop their leadership skills for sharing their professional learning and practices. Teachers may develop proposals that align generally with school, district, and provincial priorities. Importantly, teachers choose what specific aspect of the topic they will investigate, how they will develop their own professional learning, and how they will (co)lead the learning of other professionals. The opportunities for teacher choice, voice, and leadership through the TLLP are highly valued by participants and are contributing to wider system improvements and students' learning through developing professional learning, knowledge, skills, practices, and resources.

Overall, the findings indicate that system- and school-directed professional development can be important to support current priorities; however, such development also needs to be balanced with flexibility for teachers and other educators to identify specific professional learning needs for themselves linked to their students, schools, and contexts. Opportunities for teachers to lead their own learning, and that of their colleagues, can benefit individual and collective professional learning and support changes in practices to benefit students' learning.

## There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to professional learning; teachers are engaging in multiple opportunities for professional learning and inquiry with differentiation for their professional needs

Like their students, teachers need access to multiple and varied opportunities to learn new content, gain insights, and apply new understandings. The vast majority of teachers in Canada (90% and above) are engaging in professional learning. A clear finding is that there is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach to professional development in Canada nor should there be. Teachers are engaged in multiple and varied professional learning activities: 80% of respondents to the New Brunswick survey reported participating in three or more professional development activities over the past year.

Workshops and collaborative professional learning opportunities are the predominant forms of activity; these are also perceived as the most beneficial forms of professional learning in surveys of teachers. It is important that teachers have opportunities to collaborate with peers and engage in teacher-led workshops and also have access to opportunities to engage in and with external expertise and sources of professional development. Differentiation for professional learning needs, career stages, working contexts, and personal circumstances is also important.

Overall, the Canada study indicates that teachers are engaging in a range of professional learning activities differentiated to their professional needs and inquiry processes to support their students’ needs.

## Collaborative learning experiences are highly valued and prevalent within and across schools and wider professional networks

Educators value collaborative learning experiences. Examples of collaborative professional learning opportunities exist within and across all levels of the education systems in Canada – international, across provinces and territories, within provinces and territories, within and across districts and schools, and school-based – and take many forms, from system-initiated networks, school collaborations, and forms of professional learning communities to teacher-led communities of practice and collaborative inquiry processes.

Networks can be developed to support collaboration within provinces and territories. For example, the Growing Innovation in Rural Sites of Learning is a partnership between the University of British Columbia and the B.C. Ministry of Education. From 2011 to 2016, school districts embarked upon a total of 30 inquiry-based projects seeking to enhance school, parent, community connections; student engagement, success, and well being; and improved teacher practice within areas such as differentiation, inquiry-based learning, place-conscious learning, assessment and the renewed British Columbia curriculum.

In Teachers in Action, a partnership project between Memorial University of Newfoundland and Hibernia Management and Development Corporation, the goals are to: enhance teachers’ learning and classroom practice in K-9 science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); develop high levels of STEM literacy in primary/elementary children; create a model of teacher professional learning that reflects current research about how people learn, with particular emphasis on STEM education; and foster communication and collaboration among stakeholders at all levels in STEM education.

Teachers define research areas based on professional interests and classroom needs; make decisions about their own professional needs; work collaboratively in school-based teams; and engage in cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

Teacher organizations are also providing opportunities to support school collaborative learning and inquiry. For example, using funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) funds and supports Collaborative Learning Communities (CLCs) to enable teachers to meet in groups to discuss mutual interests and concerns about teaching and learning. In interviews with teachers participating in CLCs, participants were highly positive about the opportunity for teachers to collaborate on a priority need that they had identified and have the time and opportunity for shared dialogue, inquiry, and learning. Participating teachers explained that students drive the questions or areas of inquiry that are often addressed in the CLCs. Depending on the specific focus of the CLC, teachers reported seeing benefits for students' engagement, learning, and achievement; in supports for specific students; and in communicating with parents. In another example, networking beyond their own province, the Alberta Teachers' Association is partnering on the FinAl (Finland and Alberta) and NORCAN (Norway, Alberta, and Ontario) networks to bring together schools from the participating jurisdictions in mutual sharing and learning.

The Canada study findings indicate the value and prominence of a range of collaborative professional learning opportunities within and across schools and wider professional networks. However, as discussed below, there are challenges of time and supports for collaborative professional learning opportunities integrated within the working day and work lives of educators.

## Teachers value professional learning that is relevant and practical for their work; “job-embedded” should not mean school-based exclusively as opportunities to engage with external colleagues and learning opportunities matter also

Across the case study interviews, a key finding was the importance of professional learning that is practical and relevant to teachers' needs. In focus groups conducted with a total of 79 participants for the British Columbia case study – “relevant” was the second most important factor identified for effective professional learning (time was the first).

Induction and mentoring for new teachers is an important form of practical and relevant professional learning. However, only Ontario and the Northwest Territories require teachers to participate in a formal induction program and the Yukon requires teachers to complete 50 hours of professional learning to receive their permanent teaching certificate. Findings from the case studies including Ontario's New Teacher Induction Program and British Columbia's New Teacher Mentorship Project indicated positive reciprocal learning benefits for mentors and mentees, including practical, professional, and emotional support.

In most provinces and territories, induction and mentoring is a more informal and/or variable process. Examples include beginning teacher conferences and mentoring programs operated by teachers' organizations (Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia) or hybrid programs jointly run by school boards and professional organizations, which are sometimes funded at least in part by the Ministry (British Columbia, Yukon, Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Nunavut, Newfoundland, and Labrador).

Unfortunately, variable approaches also mean that induction and mentoring are not available in all school districts and schools. The majority of teachers across Canada do not have a formal mentor and have not been offered the opportunity to have one. This is highly concerning and requires attention.

Peer coaching is one widely accepted application of job-embedded professional learning. Typically designed to enable teachers to observe their peers teaching and provide feedback, it can be a powerful and important learning process. However, peer mentoring or coaching was not a widespread practice in the Canada study findings. The main source of feedback to teachers was school principals as part of formal observations and appraisals. It is concerning, therefore, that only 52% of teachers in Alberta reported that the feedback they received led to positive changes in their teacher practices (compared to an average of 62% of teachers across 35 countries participating in the Teaching and Learning International Survey, TALIS) (OECD, 2013). The further development of appropriate mentoring and use of feedback is needed.

**“ Surveys of teachers and school principals in Canada indicate weekly working hours ranging from 48 to 59 hours, considerably above the 38.44 hours per week working reported on average across 35 countries participating in TALIS (OECD, 2014).**

As well as school-based, “job-embedded” professional learning, professional development can be embedded in relevant and practical learning without being within a school or classroom. Interviewees commented on the importance of opportunities for teachers to get out of their own school and expand their professional networks, to learn new ideas, to see new practices and access new resources, for example through conferences, workshops, institutes, participating in professional

organizations, completing graduate studies or other qualifications, and online networking.

Overall, the Canada study findings indicate the importance of professional learning that is relevant and practical for teachers. Professional development can be “embedded” in someone’s work without being physically located within someone’s workplace. Most important is new learning and co-learning that has the potential to be embedded in the professionals’ needs and can contribute to changes in their knowledge, skills, and practices.

### Time for sustained, cumulative professional learning integrated within educators’ work lives requires attention

Teachers in Canada spend an average of two hours during the work week on professional learning. This is equivalent to an average of 76 hours of professional learning time during the school year, which is within the range of time considered to have the potential for sustained impact on professional development and student learning *if* it is sustained, cumulative, quality learning. However, the vast majority of professional development activities that teachers are engaged in are shorter-term, frequently a day or half-day or a series of days.

Across the case studies, the longest examples of sustained professional learning were generally 12 to 18 months for teacher inquiry projects. There is strong interest in Canada for developing sustained inquiry and professional learning, both for individual teacher action research projects and for collaborative learning communities and equivalents, supported with external expertise, resources, funding, and time. There is a need also to develop approaches that support a coherent sequence of cumulative and sustained professional learning, which can be achieved through a flexible series of activities and/or through engagement in longer-term programs.

Challenges of time for collaborative professional learning were identified across the case studies. In contrast to countries like Singapore where professional learning time is scheduled into the school day, time for professional learning communities is not routinely part of teachers' work days in Canada. In Alberta, alongside moves to emphasize school-based professional learning communities, a survey of teachers revealed that only 21% of teachers reported time for professional learning communities during the normal school day and 18% reported that no specific scheduled time existed (ATA, 2015).

Some districts and schools are creatively attempting to address issues of time for collaborative professional learning. For example, in Jasper Place High School, Alberta, the regular monthly staff meeting was replaced with weekly, 50-minute professional learning meetings before school. Five days from the regular school schedule were replaced by "alternative learning opportunities" (ALOs) where teachers can spend half the day on their own self-directed action research projects and the other half of the day is provided for students to have flexible learning and enrichment experiences. In Edmonton Public West 6 network, the school schedules now include a 1 pm dismissal every Thursday. One Thursday a month is used for school staff meetings and two others are used for School Specific Learning (SSL). Once a month, teachers also gather to work in inter-school teams called Planning and Sharing Networks (PSNs). Interviewees involved in both of these examples were very positive about the benefits of time and opportunities for collaborative learning within and across schools.

Issues of time are not simply about number of hours dedicated to professional learning activities, but also about the balance of overall time involved in teachers' (and school and system leaders') daily work compared to time available for their own development. Surveys of teachers and school principals in Canada indicate weekly working hours ranging from 48 to 59 hours, considerably above the 38.44 hours per week working reported

on average across 35 countries participating in TALIS (OECD, 2014). If additional time is to be provided for professional development within the school day, there needs also to be attention to what other time is going to be reduced rather than further expanding workloads and absorbing work intensification.

The provision of release time within professional development initiatives and the allocation of professional activity/development days for teachers' professional learning is beneficial. Particular challenges for sustained professional learning exist for teachers who do not have a full-time contract. During periods of unemployment or short-term employment, teachers often do not have access to (or ability to afford) professional learning opportunities that may be beneficial to support their continued development and enhance their career prospects.

The Canada study findings include promising and creative practices for scheduling, release time, and professional development days to support professional learning. However, issues and challenges of time were prevalent and require further attention to ensure that professional learning can be integrated into teachers' working hours.

### Inequitable variations in access to funding for teachers' self-selected professional development are problematic

The main obstacles to participation in professional development are time and funding. The availability and allocation of funding for professional development varies extensively within and across provinces, territories, districts, local associations, and schools. Funding is affected by changes in government and by larger economic and political shifts. For example, after 14 years of funding the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS), this initiative was ended by the government in 2014 resulting in schools and districts currently

attempting to keep the essence of school-based collaborative learning from AISI but without equivalent resources.

As teachers perceive an increasing proportion of their professional development is mandated or directed by the education system they work in, the provision of government, district, or school resources to support release time and professional learning activities is vital. Targeted funding, subsidies, and grants can influence participation in specific professional learning opportunities. For example, in Ontario, subsidies for Advanced Qualifications in mathematics resulted in over 5,000 teachers and other education professionals participating in these courses within one year. Nearly all participants (96%) indicated that the subsidy influenced their decision to take the math courses, and 32% indicated that they would have not taken the courses without the subsidy (Yashkina, 2016).

Every teacher organization in Canada has clauses concerning professional development in their collective agreements. However, the level of local professional development funds varies markedly, from under \$100 to over \$2500 being available for individual teachers across different local agreements. In the Northwest Territories, for example, teachers can be reimbursed up to a maximum of \$2500 per year for online distance credit courses and

summer credit and non-credit courses. Teachers are also eligible to apply for Education Leaves with Allowances to devote a year to pursuing a course of study either onsite or online.

While differentiation to meet individual needs is important, a major finding across the case study interviews in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario and focus groups in Manitoba was inequitable variation in access to professional learning activities between districts, geographic areas (urban/rural), Anglophone and Francophone schools, and for teachers without a permanent contract. Inequities and inadequacies in funding to cover the cost of professional development expenses, supply cover to enable teachers to leave their classroom, travel (if required) particularly in rural and remote areas, and to support beginning teachers or teachers without permanent contracts, have negative consequences for teachers' ability to participate in professional learning. Availability and costs of external expertise, in terms of supply cover and also professional development providers, are also obstacles to the provision and uptake of professional development.

Overall, the Canada study findings indicate that there are inequitable variations in access to funding for teachers' self-directed professional development, which requires attention.



## System and school leaders have important roles in supporting professional learning for teachers and for themselves

*The State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada* included the research question: How are school and system leaders engaging in and enabling professional learning within schools and for teachers? Throughout the research conducted, school leaders and system leaders at the provincial level, in regions, and in districts were actively engaged in supporting and contributing to teachers' professional learning. Frequently professional associations for system and school leaders, such as Directors of Education, Supervisory Officers, Trustees, Principals and Vice-Principals, are collaboratively engaged in contributing to the development and/or delivery of professional learning opportunities. Teachers in the case studies appreciated when school, district, and provincial leaders supported their professional learning, took an interest in what they were learning, and celebrated their work.

How formal leaders support professional learning varied and there were some tensions in conceptualization and practice. Supportive and engaged leadership could be interpreted as championing and co-learning with their staff with positive intent and outcomes. However, for some teachers, formal leaders' attempts in provinces, districts, and/or schools to create coherence and coordination could be perceived as controlling and undermining teachers' own professional judgement. The appropriate engagement of formal leaders includes consideration of when to be actively involved, when to be in a facilitating or enabling role, and when not to be directly involved to enable teachers to lead their own learning.

Importantly, formal leaders in schools and districts also require support for their own professional learning. For teachers who select a career trajectory into formal leadership roles and administrative responsibilities, there are qualifications, professional development requirements, and professional standards associated with the principalship and superintendency across Canada.

Nevertheless, the availability of external support and/or mentoring for leaders at different stages in their career trajectory is a challenge, for example for new Vice Principals, aspiring principals and district leaders. There is a lack of a leadership strategy or supports for 'middle leaders' such as Heads of Department, Instructional Coaches, Curriculum Coordinators or specialist teachers.

**“Importantly, formal leaders in schools and districts also require support for their own professional learning.”**

Consistent with the findings for teachers, school and system leaders are engaged in active and variable learning, collaborative learning, and job-embedded learning experiences. School leaders benefit from opportunities to engage in collaborative learning communities within and beyond their school buildings. Nevertheless, school and system leaders across the case studies commented on challenges and issues of time, work load, and work intensification which could be obstacles to engaging in their *own* professional learning, as well as facilitating and enabling their teachers' and other staff members' professional development.



## What Enabling Conditions Are Present in Canada?

Across Canada, professional development is considered to be a legal right and responsibility of the teaching profession. There are high levels of support for the principle and practice of educators' professional learning. Teachers in Canada have university-level qualifications and are expected to uphold high professional standards. Commitments to collaborate and partnerships working among and between educators' professional organizations and government, while sometimes fragile, are common across Canada. Professional organizations play an active role in advocating for and providing professional development to support their members. Governments and Ministries/ Departments of education also play a key role in developing enabling conditions for professional learning, including professional standards, frameworks, teacher and leadership development policies, system-initiated professional development, and funding for participation in professional learning activities. School districts and schools also support and provide professional development opportunities for their staff.

More broadly, political, economic, and social shifts in provinces and territories and in the wider national and international context matter. Canadians generally value education, including respecting the professionals that work in education, and support expenditure and policies for the development and well-being of children, young people, and adults. At the same time, economic downturns and austerity have affected the prioritization and level of funding for education in general and for professional development.

Professional development conditions are also affected by social contexts, for example the importance of educators being equipped to support all students to succeed in highly diverse communities and classrooms and the vital importance of acting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations to ensure awareness and understanding of Aboriginal knowledge, history, culture, and traditions. For educators, the political, economic and social contexts of their work matter. Furthermore, the emotional contexts matter – whether teachers feel valued, trusted and respected matters, including concerns about ensuring teachers' own ability to access, choose, and direct their professional learning.

## What Implications Arise from this Study to Further Advance and Improve the State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada?

*The State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada* study's starting point was a recognition of the importance of educators' professional learning, yet limited Pan-Canadian research or data were available on this topic. Beyond the specific findings, perhaps as importantly, our study benefited tremendously from researchers and educators engaging in discussions within and across Canada, sharing experiences, and creating potential for learning together. We encourage further Pan-Canadian research, dialogue, and action in collaboration between research, professional, and policy communities.

In the context of debates and contention about approaches to teacher and leadership development globally and within Canada, this study investigated “what is the current state of educators' professional learning in Canada?” The findings indicate a mosaic of professional learning experiences, opportunities, promising practices, and challenges within and across Canada. The research concludes that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to professional learning and nor should there be. The findings indicate the importance of differentiation for professionals' and students' needs rather than standardization of approaches. There are differences in details between and within provinces and territories, between and among different professional groups, across locations and contexts, and for individual educators' needs and their students' needs.

Nevertheless, there are commonalities across the findings within Canada linked to features of effective professional learning: the importance of combining evidence, inquiry, and professional judgement to inform professional learning; the priority of developing teachers' knowledge and practices to support diverse learners' needs; the valuing of a broad range of students' and professionals' learning outcomes; the need for relevant, practical, and collaborative learning experiences within and beyond school walls; and the role of system and school leaders in engaging in their own learning and supporting teachers' and students' learning.

There are many exemplary and promising practices to share and learn from within Canada. There are also common challenges: time for professional learning integrated within the work day; inequities in access to and funding for professional learning; and contentions in the balance between system-directed and/or self-selected professional learning for teachers. Our findings include schools, districts, and systems that have successfully targeted funding for professional learning, resourced release time and professional development days, adapted school schedules for collaborative learning time, developed a range of professional learning encompassing system-, school- and self-directed opportunities, and created professional development experiences across career stages, professional needs, and personal circumstances.

That is not to say that all issues have been addressed. Indeed, where there are persisting challenges, inequities, and issues, we suggest further dialogue and action are required across Canada to raise these priorities and seek solutions. The issues are not limited to only one location or one group. There is a priority need for collective attention and action.

The study's conclusions are that the overall state of educators' professional learning is vibrant – there is high interest and activity to support professional learning in Canada. The features of effective professional learning identified in the research review are evident within and across Canada. There are also opportunities for further development of professional learning including continued dialogue, sharing of promising practices and attention to common challenges on a Pan-Canadian level, as well as action within provinces and territories. This is vital to inform evidence grounded in practice of the possibilities for effective professionally led professional learning on a global stage of debates concerning educator quality and development.

It is our collective responsibility to ensure that Canada's educators and students have access to, and engagement in, the highest quality learning opportunities and experiences.

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