

# IDENTIFYING THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS FOR TEACHERS FROM NON-EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUNDS

**Brian Uriegas, Ed.D.**

Stephen F. Austin State University

## Abstract

*With the introduction of the District of Innovation designation, many Texas school districts have started the practice of locally certifying teachers/instructors to teach courses in areas such as career and technical education (CTE). Many of these new instructors have professional experience and training but not possess background knowledge in areas related to teaching in a school setting. In this qualitative research study, I surveyed and interviewed school principals and locally certified teachers to gain their perspective on areas where deficiencies may exist as it relates to classroom teaching. The results of this study identified areas of needed professional development for locally certified teachers and yielded potential ideas for smaller, rural school districts to create individualized, collaborative professional development programs.*

Keywords: Professional development, District of Innovation, rural education, career and technical education

---

## Introduction: Districts of Innovation

The District of Innovation concept was passed by the 84th Legislative Session in House Bill 1842 in 2015, giving traditional school districts most of the flexibilities available to Texas' open enrollment charter schools and the ability to exempt parts of the Texas Education Code (Brantley, 2018). A District of Innovation may adopt a plan that includes exemptions from most of the same state laws that are not applicable to open enrollment school districts (Uriegas, 2020). Some districts opt to use the designation for single exemptions such as an earlier start date for the school year, while other districts use the designation in multiple areas such as teacher contracts, teacher appraisals, class size ratio and attendance rules. The Texas Education Agency (2017) states that among the areas of exemption through the District of Innovation Designation, school districts can locally certify teachers for employment. This function allows school districts to hire industry experts to teach courses related to career and technical education even though they lack traditional teaching credentials or a background in an educational field. To date, 898 school districts are designated as districts of innovation (Texas Education Agency, 2020).

Many districts in Texas have used the need for career and technical education (CTE) teachers as part of their rationale when applying for the District of Innovation designation (TCTA, 2017). This function has allowed small rural districts to offer an increased number of CTE programs and courses with the goal of providing students with career related knowledge, skills and experience. Being able to locally certify teachers, as a function of the District of Innovation designation, has allowed school districts to hire industry professionals to instruct CTE courses without holding a traditional teaching certificate or having a background in education. Districts have also utilized the ability to locally certify teachers to address shortages in other fields not related to career and technical education. For small, rural school districts being able to fill vacancies with locally certified teachers has created increased course offering opportunities for students.

## Literature Review

### Professional Development

“Professional development (PD) is common in the teacher landscape and often takes the form of workshops arranged for and provided by schools, districts, and educational cooperatives” (Wake & Mills, 2018, pg. 90). While industry professional instructors can provide expertise in training and experience, the majority do not come from an educational background as it relates to pedagogy and best practices. School districts, and specifically principals, are tasked with developing these instructors’ abilities to teach in a manner that is conducive to learning while also capitalizing on the manner of training that is normally utilized on the job. While the primary form of professional development, most training sessions are typically only evaluated for attendee satisfaction (Gaumer-Erickson et al, 2017).

Ensuring that the training of teachers is effective is a key component of training programs. Low quality training can often be more detrimental to teachers than no training at all. Sawyer (2018) states that teachers do not find the professional development and instructional support provided to new teachers to be consistent, relevant, or effective. If this is the case for new teachers coming from teaching certification programs, then negative effects of bad professional development are even more significant for new teachers with no educational background, knowledge or training. The goal for principals and school leaders is to find or create professional development that builds on the instructors’ knowledge to strengthen their ability to deliver that knowledge in a way that best allows for student learning. Additionally, teachers must also be able to self-assess and make decisions about their professional development needs that will enhance their teaching ability and address any deficiencies that may exist, especially for those from non-educational backgrounds. Locally certified teachers often do not possess the necessary pedagogical background that is necessary for effectively teaching students.

**Quality Professional Development.** Zhang (2017) states that there exists a lack of understanding regarding the professional development needs of teachers. While opinions on the areas of concern might differ from teachers to principals, the fact remains that there is a need for professional development in various areas related to topics such as pedagogy, classroom management, planning, and instruction. Studies show that teachers needed improvement in multiple areas of pedagogical content knowledge: learners, instructional strategies, curriculum, and assessment (Zhang, 2017). Providing professional development opportunities for all teachers is an important factor that contributes to student and teacher success. However, those opportunities must focus on the areas of need for teachers. There is a tendency for professional development activities to focus more on technology than of pedagogy (Mahlangu, 2018). Understanding how to teach should be the first priority in training sessions for all teachers. The focal point of professional development for new teachers should be pedagogy. The importance of professional development is magnified for teachers who are locally certified and lack the educational background related to the art of teaching. Although many characteristics of effective professional development have been identified, such programs still struggle to demonstrate successful results (Olofson & Garnett, 2018). The essential characteristic of professional development that makes it successful is the level of quality. High-quality, evidence-based professional development is essential to ensure that teachers obtain the knowledge, strategies and skills necessary to positively impact student learning (Gaumer-Erickson et al, 2017).

**Individual Professional Development Plans.** Individualized learning allows students to be provided with resources based on the student’s individual needs (Truckenmiller, Yohannan & Cho, 2020). As student learning should be individual and unique, professional development must also be individualized. While all teachers can utilize some of the same professional development concepts, the material they teach dictates that not all delivery methods can be identical. “While the traditional PD models may not be well received, teachers could use support in the form of relevant, personalized, and responsive PD” (Wake & Mills, 2018, pg. 91). Additionally, by focusing on individual professional development needs of teachers, principals can better address deficiencies that would enhance classroom pedagogy.

The individualized professional development model has demonstrated to not only be effective; it also creates equity in instruction (Gunn, 2015). By creating individualized professional development for all teachers, but specifically locally certified teachers, school leaders can provide better opportunities for students to receive quality instruction from industry

experts while training these experts in the best ways to deliver that instruction to ensure student learning. Allowing teachers to build their own professional development plans is critical to maximizing their training opportunities while also growing their knowledge (Jackson, 2016). By focusing professional development on individual teachers' needs, the quality of those focused trainings would increase and the specific needs of each teacher could be addressed.

**Cost Saving Through Shared Collaboration.** One area of concern for principals in small, rural districts is the financial aspect of providing individualized professional development. In a time where state budgets continue to shrink, adding expenses is less than desirable for many districts. Federal and state funding mandates have created the need for partnerships and collaboration (Farnan et al., 2019). Many rural districts within close proximity to each other have created collaborative partnerships for offering career and technical education courses and programs. The premise is that each district will provide a career prep program open to students from all the participating schools (Hands, 2010). Students from different districts can attend classes at different neighboring schools so that they have access to courses and programs that are of interest but may not be offered at their home campuses. Among the programs offered, students can take courses in agriculture, skilled trades, business, and health related fields (Stone, 2014).

### Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the professional development needs of locally certified teachers. High school principals from rural districts submitted responses to a survey about the use of locally certified teachers as instructors of career and technical education courses. The results of these principal interviews yielded concerns about problem areas for locally certified teachers in the areas of pedagogy, planning and turnover. The results also prompted the researcher to widen the study to include locally certified teachers from these campuses. Teachers were surveyed and interviewed about their experiences, their concerns and what supports they felt were needed for them to be successful.

Qualitative surveys and interviews of principals and locally certified teachers identified areas of needed professional development that would benefit teachers from non-educational backgrounds. The results yielded conversations regarding how to address individual teachers' needs through professional development. Additionally, ideas on how to cost effectively provide this individualized professional development were discussed.

### Participants

Participants included an initial 50 principals rural South and East Texas school districts that were classified as UIL divisions 3A or smaller (University Interscholastic League, 2020). The breakdown of participating principals was as follows: 34 males and 16 females. The age range of participating principals was 32-64 years old. There were approximately 42% White, 27% African American, 23% Hispanic, and 8% two or more races participants.

Participants also included 50 teachers who were locally certified through the District of Innovation designation. All participating teachers were employees on the campuses of the participating principals. The breakdown of participating teachers was as follows: 27 males and 23 females. The age range of participating teachers was 24-57 years old. All participating teachers had 1-5 years of teaching experience. There were approximately 63% White, 17% Hispanic, 15% African American, and 5% two or more races participants.

### Data Collection

A five-question survey was developed based upon factors identified in the review of literature related to teacher professional development needs (See Appendix). The survey was also designed to gather information about the new teachers who were locally certified through the District of Innovation designation, which included the number of courses these instructors teach, courses that they teach. A willingness to participate in the study was also determined.

Surveys were electronically distributed to 50 principals in rural East and South Texas high schools classified as 3A or smaller. From the initial survey information, interview questions were created for follow up interviews to discuss in detail,

ideas and concerns related to professional development needs of locally certified teachers that do not have background knowledge or experience with teaching practices (Appendix A). After the surveys were returned, 20 principals were selected for follow-up interviews. Participating principals could choose between face to face and Zoom interviews or could respond to interview questions via e-mail.

Following a preliminary analysis of the results of principal surveys and interviews, a second tier of survey and interview data was added. In this second tier, the researcher surveyed 50 locally certified teachers to acquire information on years of experience, courses taught and willingness to participate (Appendix A). These locally certified teachers were also identified from the participating principals' campuses. Following the survey, a group of 35 teachers were selected to participate in follow up interviews (Appendix A). Participants were interviewed via Zoom or through e-mail response to examine their perceptions of their own professional development needs.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data can be analyzed through content, narrative, and discourse analysis or by using grounded theory (Bhatia, 2018). Content analysis is used to analyze responses from interviewees while narrative analysis stories from interviewees that attempt to answer the research questions (Bhatia, 2018).

Content analysis was used to determine courses taught along with career experience and professional development attended prior to the conclusion of their first year of teaching. Data related to content areas and professional experience along with professional development attendance, were organized and categorized to look for patterns of commonality. Specifically, the data was analyzed to determine if there were commonalities in professional development for teachers in similar content areas from different school districts.

Narrative analysis was used in analyzing the various experiences that participating teachers described in the classroom or within the classroom setting. Data collected from teachers was analyzed and categorized by areas or perceived strengths and weaknesses, self-identified professional development needs and areas of concern regarding teaching. Then, the data collected from both principals and teachers was triangulated to examine emergent patterns of professional development needs based on courses taught, professional experience, and areas of deficiency. Specifically, data was analyzed to examine the areas of perceived strengths and weaknesses, as well as perceived professional development needs, and determine whether they were similar or different across the perspectives of teachers and principals.

### **Results**

Results indicated that principals view pedagogy as the primary area of need in terms of professional development for locally certified teachers. 82% of participating principals stated that pedagogy was the area where they observed the greatest deficiencies. Specifically, principals felt teachers struggled with transferring the training used in the professional world, to instruction in an educational setting. The overarching consensus of the principals was that the locally certified teachers had the greatest difficulty understanding the difference between "showing" students how to do something and "teaching" students how to do it. Results also revealed that while pedagogy was the greatest concern, most professional development was not specific to pedagogical needs. Fewer than 10% of the participating principals stated that their professional development plans were individualized based on teachers' needs. The consensus was that most professional development was done at the district level and was generally a "one size fits all" model.

Results of the teachers' surveys and interviews showed that lesson planning and classroom management were the areas of most concern. 62% of the teachers felt that learning to effectively plan a lesson in regard to time management, was the most difficult challenge. 37% of the teachers felt that being able to keep students on task without disruptions, was their biggest area of deficiency. Ironically, almost every participant felt they had no issues with teaching students how to perform the technical tasks associated with their content (pedagogy). When asked about professional development, participating teachers felt that the professional development they experienced was not as applicable to their content because it was academic based not technical based. Participating teachers also felt that it would be beneficial to have professional

development that is individualized based on their needs but that it was unlikely to happen based on the fact that they are only on campus for one - three periods per day.

### **Implications**

The educational significance of this study is that it provides school leaders with information about the professional development needs of locally certified teachers. The findings produced by the surveys and interviews lead to conversations about professional development needs, individualized professional development plans and inter-district collaboration in providing professional development opportunities. All teachers have differing needs when it comes to classroom success. While these needs include the areas of pedagogy, classroom and time management, instructional strategies and lesson planning, needs specific to each teacher will vary. It is important to recognize that all teachers, especially those from non-educational backgrounds, require professional development activities that address their specific needs. If teachers' needs could be addressed in the same manner that individual students' needs are met, each individual teacher would become a stronger teacher.

The findings further recognize that barriers exist in creating individualized professional development plans and point to possible ways on how public school districts, particularly Districts of Innovation, can provide individualized professional development in a time when numerous budget restraints exist. If school districts could work collaboratively on providing professional development, the individual needs of teachers could be met while enabling school districts to alleviate some of their financial burden. Districts could develop and offer specific professional development opportunities that target specific needs, deficiencies or concepts. Teachers from different districts would have access to professional development that specifically meets their needs. Teachers participating in these collaborative professional development sessions would create networks for teachers who share similar experiences, content areas and concerns related to their areas of deficiency (Hrastinski & Rising, 2020). Participating districts could provide and share a wide array of professional development opportunities without the financial burden of having to fund all of them individually. For teachers, this could provide collaborative training sessions with colleagues on similar content areas that are experiencing the same classroom struggles, obstacles or just want more training in a specific area. Most significantly, teachers would receive professional development geared towards their specific needs.

### **Conclusions**

In this study, content and narrative analysis of the data showed that a majority of campus principals felt that professional development in the area of pedagogy was the most important area to address concerning locally certified teachers. It was believed that while many of these teachers understand their areas of expertise and how to perform the associated tasks, they struggle with how to instruct others in a manner that truly teaches them the process in a way that students can understand and retain. The study also revealed a similar pattern consistent among the locally certified teachers who felt that they were teaching the material adequately and also acknowledged areas of needed professional development.

Principals acknowledge that individualized professional development would be ideal in addressing the needs of each individual teacher but also recognize that there are substantial obstacles that impact their ability to do so, such as budgets and resources. One potential solution would be for neighboring districts to partner in providing professional development opportunities. Through this collaboration school districts could address individual needs in a cost-effective manner. The end result: better trained teachers who are, therefore, better able to impact student understanding and success in the classroom.

## References

- Bhatia, M. (2018). Your guide to qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods. Retrieved from <https://humansofdata.atlan.com/2018/09/qualitative-quantitative-data-analysis-methods/>
- Brantley, V. (2018). *Districts of innovation: An action research narrative inquiry exploring leadership, sustainability and the empowerment of local governance in a rural northeast Texas school district* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, TX.
- Farnan, S., Seeger, V., Gray Smith, L., & McBride, M. (2019). "What's in it for us?" How a mutually beneficial partnership changes the landscape of educational practice. *Planning and Changing*, v49 n1-2 p20-36.
- Gaumer-Erickson, A.S., Noonan, P.M., Brussow, J., & Supon-Carter, K. (2017). Measuring the quality of professional development training. *Professional Development in Education*, 43(4), 685-688, DOI: [10.1080/19415257.2016.1179665](https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2016.1179665)
- Gunn, C. D. (2015). *Transformative leadership: building social equity through individualized professional development* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Missouri-Saint Louis, Saint Louis, MO.
- Hands, C. M. (2010). Why collaborate? The differing reasons for secondary school educators' establishment of school-community partnerships. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 21(2), 189-207. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243450903553993>
- Hrastinski, S. & Rising, M. E. (2020) Communities, networks and ICT professional development across schools in close physical proximity. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 29:2, 219-229, DOI: [10.1080/1475939X.2020.1733062](https://doi.org/10.1080/1475939X.2020.1733062)
- Jackson, K. N. (2016). *Peer led and individualized professional development for teachers in a 1:1 implementation* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Edwardsville, IL.
- Mahlangu, V. P. (2018). Introductory chapter: Reimagining new approaches in teacher professional development. In V.P. Mahlangu (Ed), *Reimagining New Approaches in Teacher Professional Development*. IntechOpen, DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.81120.
- Olofson, M.W., & Garnett, B.R. (2018). Measuring the impact of professional development for student-centered pedagogies: a mixed-methods study. *Professional Development in Education*, 44(3), 342-355, DOI: [10.1080/19415257.2017.1347805](https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2017.1347805)
- Sawyer, L. B. (2018). *Perceptions of new teachers on the professional and instructional support for new teachers* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Walden University, Minneapolis, MN.
- Stone, J.R., III. (2014). More than one way: The case for high-quality CTE. *American Educator*, v38(n3), p4-11. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1044087.pdf>
- Texas Association of School Boards. (2016). *Districts of innovation*. Retrieved from <https://www.tasb.org/Services/Legal-Services/TASB-School-Law-eSource/Governance/Districts-of-Innovation.aspx>
- Texas Classroom Teachers Association (2017). *Districts of innovation: The reality*. Retrieved from [https://tcta.org/node/14394-districts\\_of\\_innovation\\_the\\_reality](https://tcta.org/node/14394-districts_of_innovation_the_reality)
- Texas Education Agency. (2020). *Districts of innovation*. Retrieved from [https://tea.texas.gov/Texas\\_Schools/District\\_Initiatives/Districts\\_of\\_Innovation/](https://tea.texas.gov/Texas_Schools/District_Initiatives/Districts_of_Innovation/)
- Truckenmiller, A. J., Yohannan, J., & Cho, E. (2020). Linking reading assessment data to instructional planning: A component skills approach. *Communique*, v48, n7 p15-18.
- University Interscholastic League (2020). *UIL reclassification and realignment conference cutoff numbers*. Retrieved from <https://www.uil.texas.org/athletics/conference-cutoffs>
- Uriegas, B. (2020). Providing post-secondary options for low-income students in rural schools: A study of a rural South-Texas school district. In H. C. Greene, B. S. Zugelder, & J. C. Manner (Eds), *Handbook of Research on Leadership and Advocacy for Children and Families in Rural Poverty*. IGI Global. [http://doi:10.4018/978-1-7998-2787-0](https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-2787-0)
- Wake, D., & Mills, M. (2018). Edcamp: Listening to the voice of teachers. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 27(3), 90-106.
- Zhang, M., Parker, J., Koehler, M., & Eberhardt, J. (2015) Understanding in-service science teachers' needs for professional development. *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, 26:5, 471-496, DOI: [10.1007/s10972-015-9433-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10972-015-9433-4)

**Appendix A**

## Principal and Teacher Survey and Interview Questions

**Initial Principal Survey**

1. Do you offer Career and Technical Education courses?
2. Are these courses taught by teachers who were locally certified through the use of the District of Innovation designation?
3. How many CTE courses are offered using locally certified teachers?
4. How many locally certified teachers are on your campus, and for how many periods per day?
5. When would be the best time to schedule an interview?

**Principal Interview Questions**

1. What general Professional Development do all teachers receive?
2. Are there additional PD requirements for locally certified teachers?
3. What issues related to classroom instruction, pedagogy or management do your locally certified teachers experience most often?
4. Are these struggles directly related to a lack of educational training backgrounds, in your opinion?
5. Are there other PD trainings that you feel would be most beneficial to locally certified teachers?
6. Are you planning to require any specific PD trainings prior to next school year?
7. What types of trainings do you recommend- online, face to face, hands on with mentor, etc?
8. What are your thoughts on individualized PD plans for all teachers, but especially locally certified teachers?
9. What are your thoughts on collaborative PD between neighboring school districts?
10. Do you have any additional comments or information you would like to share related to PD and locally certified teachers?

**Initial Teacher Survey Questions**

1. Are you a locally certified teacher?
2. Do you teach Career and Technical Education courses?
3. How many CTE courses are you currently teaching per day?
4. What is your professional background?
5. When would be the best time to schedule an interview?

**Teacher Interview Questions**

1. What do you feel are your strengths?
2. What do you feel are the areas you struggle with most?
3. What do you feel were the biggest obstacles when you started teaching?
4. What Professional Development did you do prior to teaching?
5. Are there additional PD requirements for you during the year?
6. Do you attend PD that is specific for you?
7. Did you experience issues with classroom management, instruction, planning, etc?
8. Do you feel that these struggles are directly related to the fact that you don't have an educational background?
9. Are there other PD trainings that you feel would be most beneficial you?
10. Do you have any additional comments or information you would like to share related to PD and locally certified teachers?