



What Teachers Really Want: Teach to Lead Takes PD to a New Level

By Caitlin Casey and Richard Feistman

All too often, professional development (PD) gets a bad rap. At their worst, ineffective PD sessions are required obligations that detract teachers from valuable work time. Why should teachers be forced to spend non-instructional time engaging in activities that do not directly translate to their daily practice? Teachers' primary focus—enhancing student academic outcomes and social emotional development—is far more important, and PD should support those goals. According to an educator who earlier this year attended a Powered By Teach to Lead event on Math, Equity & Inclusion in Utah, good PD should allow teachers to “select a topic that is meaningful, and not just *sit*, but get actual work done!” That is a definition of PD at its best.

Imagine a PD model that supports professional growth, facilitates valuable networking opportunities, inspires curiosity, delivers implementable action plans, and empowers educators to improve the policymaking in their schools, districts, and larger communities. Powered By Teach to Lead Summits, which are part of a [Teach to Lead partnership between the U.S. Department of Education, ASCD, and Teach Plus](#), do just that and more to create opportunities for teacher leadership. According to attendees, the summits facilitate “critical conversations in a risk-free environment,” “networking with other professionals,” and “dedicated time with like-minded people to strategically work on a vision and plan.” One participant remarked: “The summit allowed [teachers] to pull voices and invested leaders from many areas together in one place to begin to share a vision and solve real problems.”

One example of how teacher leadership can lead to real problem solving is the work of a Wisconsin team exploring adaptations to their music program. They reported that the Powered By Teach to Lead structure created next steps for a concern they were already grappling with: “I was able to take what we discussed and some ideas for solutions back to my faculty the next day.”

Data collected from 197 teachers who attended seven Powered By Teach to Lead Summits across the country in 2018 provides critical insight on what teachers truly value and want to gain from PD: Goal-oriented action plans, sufficient resources and support, and collaboration. Ninety-four percent of summit attendees reported that they strongly agreed, or agreed, that the event was valuable for their professional growth. Overwhelmingly, teachers expressed gratitude for the collaborative component of the summits. According to a teacher who attended the Family Engagement Summit in Maryland, Teach to Lead events are unique because “unlike competitions, everyone...was so eager to work together and form connections, and working in teams where everyone is motivated to a common cause was remarkable.”

According to teachers, a “mixed format,” consisting of “presentations, team interactions, project development sessions, and working lunches,” supports their professional growth. [Teach Plus](#), which develops and empowers teacher leaders to take action in order to increase equitable opportunities for students, has partnered to support Teach to Lead because it also strongly advocates for a PD model rooted in collaboration, networking, and training. This Teach to Lead partnership between Teach Plus, ASCD, and the Department of Education seeks to ensure that strong teacher leadership is an inherent part of the teaching profession.

During the summits, teachers use a logic model to create a detailed, implementable action plan. The logic model requires teacher-led teams to identify a problem encountered in their professional practice, provide a rationale for why it needs to be addressed, set a goal, brainstorm outputs and outcomes, and identify the plan’s impact on students. Topics span a wide range, from enhancing the academic outcomes of English language learners, to supporting students with toxic stress, to prioritizing standards-aligned music instruction for elementary students. Regardless of their focus, all action plans aim to improve educational experiences for students and teachers.

Teach to Lead prioritizes bringing multiple educator and non-educator voices to the table to support true transformation in a community. Teachers have indicated that they deeply appreciate the mentorship of the “critical friends” from the 175 [supporting organizations](#) who play an important role in the collaborative logic model process. One teacher commented that the greatest strength of the summit was that “the critical friend was instrumental in moving us forward, answering questions, and giving us focus during this chunk of time to work toward progress.” Critical friends also find the experience to be “useful, dynamic, empowering, and inclusive.”

Finally, teachers appreciate the guidance and structure that hold them accountable during the events. According to one teacher: “The best part was having the time, resources, format, and schedule to work on valuable projects. Too often we have innovative ideas that don’t manifest

because we are attending staff meetings, grading student work, or completing club or coaching duties. It was a great way to force me to do nothing but work on this project.”

So, what’s the key to creating an effective PD framework? Teacher feedback indicates that what teachers *really* want is straightforward: an opportunity to self-create an actual actionable product created in a collaborative, structured environment that promotes strategic innovation, engagement, and educational equity for all learners.

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