

Aurora Public Schools (APS) serves 39,000 students who represent over 130 different countries and languages.<sup>1</sup> In a district this diverse, there is a great need for highly-effective educators skilled in facilitating equitable and rigorous instruction.

Like many school systems, Aurora Public Schools devotes a substantial amount of district resources on professional development, funding both internal APS facilitators (which includes teacher-led options, hourly time cards, and “agreement for services”) as well as external vendors. Of available funds for the 2015-2016 school year, APS is currently spending more than twice as much on external contracts compared to internal contracts for district level professional learning (Professional Learning Department, Aurora Public Schools, 2016). Aurora teachers spend over eight full school days a year participating in professional development activities.<sup>2</sup> Additional time commitments, expectations, and structures exist at the school level, such as job-embedded professional learning communities or collaborative team planning meetings, a common practice in most schools.

We are Teach Plus/AEA Local Change Agent Fellows who are working toward solutions and recommendations on this issue. We believe that both the Aurora Education Association (AEA), as a voice of our teaching force in Aurora Public Schools, and our district play a critical role in helping teachers answer the question: “How do I become a better teacher and address the varying needs of my students?”

As a result of our advocacy with AEA to prioritize teaching and learning, we have created the AEA Teaching and Learning Committee. To ensure that the committee is responsive to staff needs when it comes to professional development, we conducted this research to develop a set of actionable recommendations. We wanted to know the following:

1. Are teachers in Aurora satisfied with the professional development they currently receive?
2. Do teachers who design their own professional learning plans report higher levels of satisfaction with their professional development?
3. Do teachers value professional development differently based on who is delivering it?

## Research Method

Between November 9, 2015 and December 7, 2015, we worked with the AEA to administer an online survey to current teachers in Aurora Public Schools, including approximately 1,580 association members who teach kindergarten to grade 12.

During the one month in which the survey was open:

- 524 teachers responded (a response rate of 33 percent).
- Of the 524 responding teachers, 42 percent are elementary school teachers, 23 percent are middle school teachers, 25 percent are high school teachers, and 14 percent teach multiple or other grade levels.
- Forty percent of respondents have less than 10 years of teaching experience, 41 percent have between 10 and 20 years of experience, and 20 percent have more than 21 years of teaching experience.
- The sample includes teachers from all five learning communities of Aurora: 20 percent teach in Community A, 28 percent teach in Community E, 17 percent teach in Community L, 21 percent teach in Community P, and 14 percent teach in Community E.

## Key Findings

**Finding 1:** The majority of Aurora Public School teachers are not satisfied with their professional development, nor do they believe it is tailored to their needs.

**Finding 2:** Aurora Public School teachers report higher levels of satisfaction when they are able to design their own professional learning plans and have a clear understanding of the process.

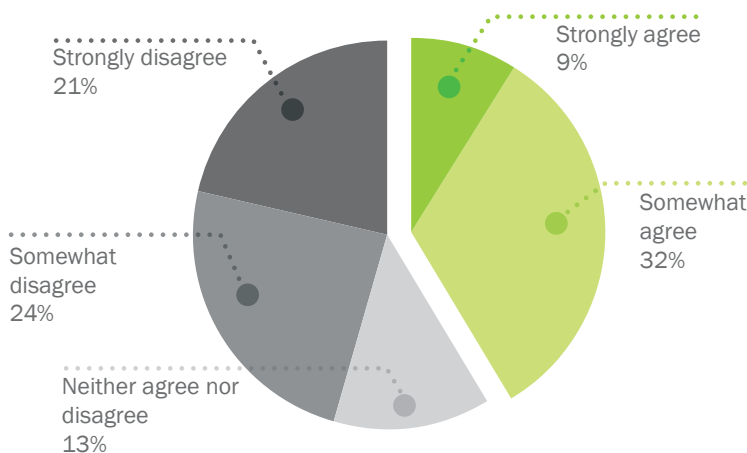
**Finding 3:** Aurora Public School teachers find professional development offered by teacher peers more valuable than professional development from other sources, such as external consultants.

### FINDING #1:

## The majority of Aurora Public School teachers are not satisfied with their professional development, nor do they believe it is tailored to their needs.

Overall, the majority of Aurora teachers in our survey did not report that the professional development they receive improves their own performance and that of their students. When asked about school-level professional development, 45 percent of teachers disagreed with the statement, “My professional development offered by my school improves my performance as well as my students’ performance,” 13 percent said they neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 41 percent of teachers agreed (See Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> They had similar perspectives on district-level professional development, with a split of 37 percent agreeing and 44 percent disagreeing that professional development offered by the district improved performance.<sup>4</sup> While teachers reported slightly higher levels of satisfaction with professional development offered by their schools, there is a clear need for improvement in both settings.

Figure 1. Question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: My professional development offered by my school improves my performance as well as my students’ performance?” (n=463)



Additionally, most teachers do not feel that their professional development is focused on areas where they need to improve their teaching. Only 31 percent of respondents agreed the their professional development is tailored to the areas in which they need the most growth, while the majority (54 percent) disagreed.<sup>5</sup> These results are consistent across learning communities, suggesting that the lack of satisfaction with professional development is not unique to any school or P20 learning community.<sup>6</sup>

## **FINDING #2:**

# **Aurora Public School teachers are more satisfied with their professional development when they are able to design their own professional learning plans and have a clear understanding of the process.**

In the 2014-15 school year, a stipulation was added to Aurora’s Master Agreement that allows teachers to collaborate with administration to “develop an individualized professional learning plan to meet their professional needs.”<sup>7</sup> Given our findings, this was a policy move in the right direction. Nearly all teachers (90 percent) who responded to our survey identified self-directed professional development as valuable. Most teachers also reported that they understand how to develop an individualized learning plan.<sup>8</sup> Sixty-three percent of respondents agreed that they are “knowledgeable about the process for developing an individualized professional learning plan to meet their professional needs,” and only 19 percent disagreed.<sup>9</sup> Teachers in our survey also expressed a clear desire for more tailored professional development. As one K-8 art teacher explained, “Teachers want a distinction between regular classroom needs and specialist needs. I’d like to see a class on the culture, languages, and arts of the neighborhood I teach in. Classes that are brought into our buildings (as opposed to us driving out) would be helpful since buildings operate on different schedules.”

Teachers who were satisfied with their professional development were also more likely to say that they understand the process for developing an individualized professional development plan. Of the 103 teachers who reported being satisfied with both their school-level and district-level professional development, 80 percent said that they are knowledgeable about the process for developing an individualized professional development plan. However, of the 127 teachers who said that they are dissatisfied with the professional development they receive from their school and district, significantly fewer (54 percent) reported understanding this process.<sup>10</sup> There is a clear gap in satisfaction with PD between teachers who understand how to develop their own learning plans and those who do not.

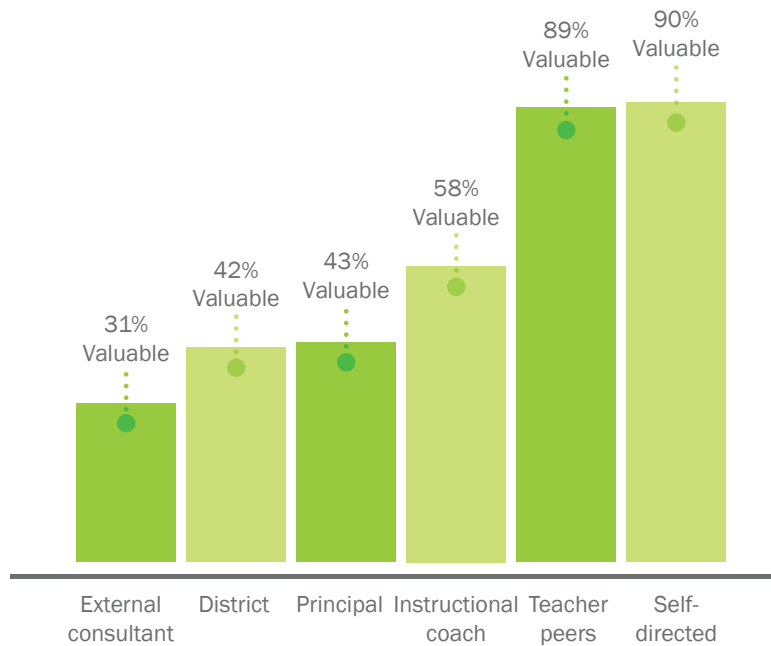
## **FINDING #3:**

# **Aurora Public School Teachers find professional development offered by teacher peers nearly three times more valuable than professional development from other sources, such as external consultants.**

In the 2014-15 school year, a stipulation was added to the Master Agreement between the Aurora Public Schools Board of Education and the Aurora Education Association that allows teachers to collaborate with administration to “develop an individualized professional learning plan to meet their professional needs.” Given our findings, teachers believe that this is a policy move in the right direction. Teachers in our survey identified a large discrepancy in quality between professional development from different sources. When we asked teachers to rank the value of the professional development they receive from different sources, they reported self-directed professional development and professional development led by their colleagues as the most valuable. Professional development led by external consultants and principals received the lowest ratings. Teachers said that professional development offered by teacher peers was nearly three times as valuable as professional development offered by external consultants. Specifically, 89 percent of teachers said that professional development led by teacher peers was valuable, while only 31 percent thought professional development led by external consultants was valuable (See Figure 2).<sup>11</sup> One veteran math teacher explained that she believes teacher-led professional development is the most powerful form of learning. Her school designed a rotating schedule to empower teachers to lead their peers in technology integration that enhances student learning. She commented that, “It was a powerful experience to learn from other teachers who live and breathe teaching every day. Plus, the ‘expert’ was in the building, so if we had questions after the PD, we knew who to talk to.”

Figure 2. Question: “In your career, how valuable would you rate professional development you have received from the following sources?” (n=465)

Too often, teachers in our district do not have opportunities to learn from their peers. Instead, we rely on professional learning structures such as standalone workshops, often led by external consultants or district leaders removed from classroom teaching. As one middle school teacher told us, “We had four 90 minute sessions that were basically



lectures on adolescent brain development. It was interesting from a biological stance, but there was very little opportunity to transfer the content into practice.” These isolated and disjointed experiences do not lead to improvement and growth in teacher practice or impact on student learning.

Given the value placed on self-directed and teacher-led professional learning, it is clear we need to capitalize on the internal talent and expertise of our staff. The new federal law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), provides funding to every state that can be used to create opportunities for effective teachers to lead evidence-based PD for their peers. This is an ideal opportunity for our state to fully support teacher-led professional development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Collaborate to build systems and protocols for evaluating teacher satisfaction, improvement in practice, and student-learning growth as a result of professional development — then use the results to drive future offerings.

We recommend implementing a consistent and standardized way of evaluating professional development and allocating funding based on effectiveness tied to the [Teacher Quality Standards](#) and current evaluation rubric and system. Aurora district leaders should build on current structures and opportunities for feedback, such as district in-service surveys and recent listening session data. They should work in collaboration with the AEA Teaching and Learning Committee, at minimum on a quarterly basis, to identify, strategize, and implement changes, revisions, and improvements in professional learning between district leadership and the field.

### 2. Create supports and allocate resources for teachers and administrators to co-develop individual professional learning plans that address teacher strengths and weaknesses in order to meet students’ needs.

- Training on Individual Plans:** District leaders should work with the AEA Teaching and Learning Committee to train teachers and principals at the beginning of the school year on implementing the contract language around individualized professional development plans. The plan should address each teacher’s professional growth goals, driven by self-assessment and prior evaluation data.

- **Map Professional Learning Offerings to Evaluation Standards:** District and school leaders should give teachers professional development choices in both content and modality (self-directed, virtual, face-to-face, instructor-led, blended, etc.) The menu of professional development options and process for creating a plan should be clearly communicated and offered to teachers so that learning can be differentiated and self-directed. Courses can also be offered through The Colorado Education Association’s online platform, Co-Pilot, so that online, blended learning and virtual Professional Learning Communities opportunities across the state are available.

### **3. Reinvest current professional development dollars in ongoing, teacher-led professional development opportunities.**

If we value shaping a successful future for all students, we must incentivize and scale teacher expertise. Teachers should be given opportunity, encouragement, and support to lead professional learning. Teacher leaders can be selected through a rigorous process and trained to facilitate adult learning. This means shifting current professional learning dollars spent on external consultants and vendors to teacher-led options which also builds capacity within APS. By shifting the emphasis toward compensating and internally developing teachers, we will be able to closely monitor the results and create a culture of collaboration and teacher agency. While a smaller portion of the budget should continue to be allocated for external experts to support internal development of culturally-responsive pedagogy and 21st-century learning frameworks, over time more and more of the expertise should be cultivated and scaled from within our schools.

## **CONCLUSION**

In order to meet the growing needs of Aurora’s diverse student population and close the achievement gaps that exist across our learning communities, we must ensure that every student has access to quality educators who teach in culturally-responsive and relevant ways. In turn, Aurora’s educators need time, differentiated choices, structures that promote meaningful collaboration, opportunities to lead their peers, and ongoing, systemic support to continually reflect and refine their practice.

Teachers who have choice, agency, and ownership of their professional development will create classrooms where student choice, agency, and ownership of learning thrive. Our system must model what is best for our students. Such efforts will not only benefit individual practitioners and classrooms, but bolster teacher recruitment, retention, and effectiveness, and strengthen our district as a whole by leveraging our greatest asset: human capital.

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# ENDNOTES

1. See Aurora Public Schools (2015). *Fast Facts about APS*. Retrieved from: <http://aurorak12.org/communications/docs/General.pdf>
2. See Aurora Public Schools 2015-16 Conventional Calendar (2015). Retrieved from: <http://aurorak12.org/docs/aps-convcal-2015-16.pdf>.
3. Question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: My professional development offered by my school improves my performance as well as my students’ performance?” (n=463) Responses: “Strongly agree” (9.3 percent), “Somewhat agree” (32.2 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (12.7 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (24.0 percent), “Strongly disagree” (21.4 percent), “Unsure” (0.4 percent).
4. Question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: My professional development offered by my district improves my performance as well as my students’ performance?” (n=464) Responses: “Strongly agree” (7.8 percent), “Somewhat agree” (29.5 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (17.0 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (21.3 percent), “Strongly disagree” (22.4 percent), “Unsure” (1.9 percent).
5. Question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: My professional development is tailored to the areas in which I need the most growth?” (n=466) Responses: “Strongly agree” (6.4 percent), “Somewhat agree” (24.7 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (14.4 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (25.5 percent), “Strongly disagree” (28.8 percent), “Unsure” (0.2 percent).
6. Question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: My professional development is tailored to the areas in which I need the most growth?” Teachers from Learning Community A (n=90). Responses: “Strongly agree” (3.3 percent), “Somewhat agree” (25.6 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (15.6 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (20.0 percent), “Strongly disagree” (34.4 percent), “Unsure” (1.1 percent). Teachers from Learning Community E (n=134). Responses: “Strongly agree” (8.2 percent), “Somewhat agree” (23.9 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (14.9 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (30.6 percent), “Strongly disagree” (22.4 percent). Teachers from Learning Community L (n=77). Responses: “Strongly agree” (9.1 percent), “Somewhat agree” (32.5 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (10.4 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (27.3 percent), “Strongly disagree” (20.8 percent). Teachers from Learning Community P (n=94). Responses: “Strongly agree” (5.3 percent), “Somewhat agree” (14.9 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (13.8 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (27.7 percent), “Strongly disagree” (38.3 percent). Teachers from Learning Community S (n=67). Responses: “Strongly agree” (4.5 percent), “Somewhat agree” (29.9 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (14.9 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (19.4 percent), “Strongly disagree” (31.3 percent).
7. See Aurora Public Schools Board of Education and Aurora Education Association (2014). *Agreement between Aurora Public Schools Board of Education and Aurora Education Association*. Retrieved from: <http://hr.aurorak12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/64/2013/06/Master-Agreement-2014-20-Final.pdf>.
8. Question: “In your career, how valuable would you rate professional development you have received from the following sources?” Self-directed (n=462) Responses: “Very valuable” (50.0 percent), “Somewhat valuable” (39.8 percent), “Neither valuable nor not valuable” (4.1 percent), “Somewhat not valuable” (1.3 percent), “Not at all valuable” (0.9 percent), “Unsure/Not applicable” (3.9 percent).
9. Question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I am knowledgeable about the process for developing an individualized professional learning plan to meet my professional needs?” (n=463) Responses: “Strongly agree” (18.6 percent), “Somewhat agree” (44.7 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (14.5 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (12.3 percent), “Strongly disagree” (6.9 percent), “Unsure” (3.0 percent).
10. Question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I am knowledgeable about the process for developing an individualized professional learning plan to meet my professional needs?” Teachers who reported being satisfied with school and district-level PD (n=103) Responses: “Strongly agree” (17.5 percent), “Somewhat agree” (62.1 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (10.7 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (3.9 percent),

“Strongly disagree” (1.9 percent), “Unsure” (3.9 percent). Teachers who reported being dissatisfied with school and district-level PD (n=127) Responses: “Strongly agree” (18.9 percent), “Somewhat agree” (34.6 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (15.7 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (16.5 percent), “Strongly disagree” (11.8 percent), “Unsure” (2.4 percent).

11. Question: “In your career, how valuable would you rate professional development you have received from the following sources?” Teacher peers (n=465) Responses: “Very valuable” (54.2 percent), “Somewhat valuable” (35.1 percent), “Neither valuable nor not valuable” (4.9 percent), “Somewhat not valuable” (1.9 percent), “Not at all valuable” (2.8 percent), “Unsure/Not applicable” (1.1 percent). Instructional coach (n=461) Responses: “Very valuable” (25.8 percent), “Somewhat valuable” (31.9 percent), “Neither valuable nor not valuable” (10.2 percent), “Somewhat not valuable” (8.9 percent), “Not at all valuable” (16.1 percent), “Unsure/Not applicable” (7.2 percent). Principal (n=458) Responses: “Very valuable” (10.9 percent), “Somewhat valuable” (31.7 percent), “Neither valuable nor not valuable” (19.9 percent), “Somewhat not valuable” (14.4 percent), “Not at all valuable” (19.0 percent), “Unsure/Not applicable” (4.1 percent). District (n=459) Responses: “Very valuable” (8.5 percent), “Somewhat valuable” (33.6 percent), “Neither valuable nor not valuable” (18.3 percent), “Somewhat not valuable” (19.8 percent), “Not at all valuable” (16.3 percent), “Unsure/Not applicable” (3.5 percent). External consultant/partner (n=462) Responses: “Very valuable” (11.7 percent), “Somewhat valuable” (19.7 percent), “Neither valuable nor not valuable” (13.9 percent), “Somewhat not valuable” (7.6 percent), “Not at all valuable” (16.2 percent), “Unsure/Not applicable” (31.0 percent). Self-directed (n=462) Responses: “Very valuable” (50.0 percent), “Somewhat valuable” (39.8 percent), “Neither valuable nor not valuable” (4.1 percent), “Somewhat not valuable” (1.3 percent), “Not at all valuable” (0.9 percent), “Unsure/Not applicable” (3.9 percent).