Chances are your professional development isn’t working how you’d like. That’s not a guess; it’s a fact backed up by data from study after study.

In a recent study of nearly 3,000 education professionals, for example, PD was considered the #1 challenge administrators faced in the 2016–17 school year and a top obstacle to integrating technology into the classroom. When you look at what types of PD are being offered, a key aspect of the problem becomes clear—the large majority of PD is being offered as an event, not as a process.

The Not-So-Ideal (But Common) PD Scenario

It’s your worst nightmare: a district professional development (PD) day that consists of lectures with little to no relevance to your daily work responsibilities. Upon leaving the room, any information is promptly forgotten and all handouts are relegated to the bottomless pit of your least favorite desk drawer with all the rest of the mementos of professional development days gone by.

Believe it or not, this scenario is common. A study by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation revealed some dismal statistics:

- $18 billion spent on PD annually
• Only 29% of teachers are “highly satisfied” with PD offerings
• Two-thirds of teachers do not believe PD has improved
• Many teachers do not believe that PD is relevant to the new realities they face in the classroom

The Way PD Should Be

The good news is that principals, teachers, and researchers generally agree on what constitutes high-quality professional development—the training is directly related to skills and understandings in specific content areas; it takes place over time as opposed to one-and-done; it is collaborative, inquiry-based, driven by teachers themselves, and embedded in daily work experiences; and it is informed by student performance data.

To create PD opportunities that meet these high standards, professional development should be tailored to meet the needs of individual teachers. The top three barriers to effective PD are all things that can be addressed by good leadership—time for teachers, time for school leaders to support teachers, and a reduction of teacher administrative tasks (e.g., paperwork) in favor of time spent on instruction. For other needs, you need to obtain useful data.

The Road to Exceptional PD: First Collect the Data

Get the Data: Observations

It’s important for you or other lead learners to see instruction firsthand as it is happening via formal or informal classroom observations. You can do this a number of ways (see this blog post to learn how to use your LMS for observations), but there are four key components to a trustworthy observation system:

1. A proven, research-based, clear rubric for evaluation
2. Well-trained observers able to provide accurate feedback
3. Oversight/monitoring of observer accuracy
4. Oversight/monitoring of the overall observation system

High-quality, targeted feedback is critical to effective teacher observation. Helm and St. Maurice (as cited by Stronge, Richard, and Catano) spoke to the importance of two-way communication between the teacher and principal (or other instructional leads), maintaining a balance between past performance and future goal-setting, and recognizing strengths while identifying areas for improvement.
improvement. For example, in Ohio, this has taken the form of focusing on one area of reinforcement and one area of refinement during each formal observation cycle.

Remember, you are not just evaluating the teaching; you are evaluating evidence of student learning. If students are not engaged in the lesson or demonstrating difficulty mastering key lesson concepts, the teacher may need additional training in those areas. In the words of Todd Whitaker, “teachers know the best they know how.”

Get the Data: Students

Student data is a powerful source of information. Take the time to analyze and interpret data from multiple sources to gain insight and identify instructional patterns.

For example, did you just assign a quick exit assessment? You can look for patterns across all responses to identify a key concept that may need to be re-taught the next day, and that re-teaching opportunity may look different for different groups of students, meeting their needs.

The bottom line? Student data is a reflection on the student’s engagement, effort, and learning, but it is also a reflection on the teacher. Look for trends—if all students scored poorly on a particular content standard or indicator, a teacher might need help in that area.

Get the Data: Surveys and Needed Assessments

We know from the theory of andragogy that adults have a psychological need to direct their lives and their learning, so let teachers tell you what they need help with by soliciting their ideas for what PD would be most effective. Just as we are called to meet students where they are when planning classroom lessons, ask teachers how they learn best, what concepts should be directly modeled for them during the professional development opportunity as it applies to their work assignments, and ask about their previous experiences with professional development in general.

As Marge Scherer observed, it used to be that a successful PD experience was measured informally by observing the number of smiles on faces at the conclusion of a PD experience. You owe it to teachers to dig deeper than that to find out what they really want and need.

Organize the Data: Learning Management Systems (LMSs)

Learning management systems can be an immensely useful way to organize the above data to find a path forward. LMSs help educators track student performance and activity against content standards. LMSs also
Observers themselves must be trained and encouraged to develop inter-rater reliability in order to improve evaluation and teacher training. The objective is to accurately match individual teacher strengths and needs with engaging and purposeful PD experiences. That starts with an accurate analysis of those strengths and needs.

Once strengths and needs are accurately identified and discussed (with teacher participation and input), teachers can engage with professional development in personalized ways.

Extended PD Lessons and Showcase Best Practices

The ability to tie performance data to particular people and their practices equips instructional leads with powerful stories that can inspire faculty and promote best practices. Using a common communication platform (social media, your LMS, etc.), these stories can be shared across your school or district.

Before you know it, teachers who were inspired by their colleagues’ stories adopt similar practices and provide more fodder for spreading best practices like wildfire. If these stories you are sharing relate to the topics discussed during PD sessions, then you’re invariably extending PD throughout the year.

Personalized, Self-Paced, and On-Demand PD

Offering online PD options allows teachers to complete training in areas of interest at their own pace. This can be used to supplement more formal PD events or even offered as a completely self-paced or on-demand program.

Using your LMS to host these options offers many benefits in this process. It enables instructional leads to model best practices to teachers and allows them experience them as students would (an opportunity nearly half of the institutions in this study miss out on). This can be necessary to bridge the gap between intangible concepts and actual tactics.

Another benefit of using your LMS to offer online PD opportunities is the ability to track teacher progress,

The use of an LMS for PD also continues to feed the data machine you can use to make more strategic decisions.
differentiate to meet individual or group needs, and provide a centralized place for just-in-time resources and ongoing support.

The use of an LMS for PD also continues to feed the data machine you can use to make more strategic decisions. Understanding which teachers need more coaching and on which concepts is a huge boon to instructional leads and their impact.

Finally, a PD course or collaborative group within your LMS may be the perfect environment for teachers to share their success, practices, and support—as described in the previous point.

Targeted Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Having a deeper understanding of strengths and needs of your faculty via data enables institutions to group faculty into relevant professional learning communities (PLCs). Whether you take a formal approach (differentiated from the top down) or informal approach (allowing teachers to choose their groups/interests) to this model, it’s a proven means to elevating teacher capacity and confidence.

Peer-Led PD

Teachers demonstrating strong positive data in a particular area can become true teacher leaders, providing professional development directly to their colleagues. This goes beyond sharing the success of those who you want faculty to emulate to actually allowing your teacher leaders to lead workshops and provide hands-on support.

The End of One-Size-Fits-All

The days of expensive, irrelevant (dare we say tortuous?) professional development are numbered. You can be a part of this shift by using student and teacher data and, importantly, teacher participation to develop ongoing, meaningful, targeted professional development opportunities for your hardworking professional educators.

Watch this short video walkthrough to see an LMS designed to help you measure and magnify the impact of your initiatives.