Agency is a hot topic in the education community right now. Educators at all levels are asking how they can give -- or help students develop -- ownership of their learning, allowing them choice and flexibility in terms of learning environment, subject matter, pace, and more. In other words, they want to empower students.

Less discussed, but equally important, is how to give educators themselves agency, both over their work environments and over their own professional learning. I wrote last month ("Three-Step Method to Increase Teacher Voice") about a survey from the Center on Education Policy that suggests that teachers lack agency. It found that only 53% of teachers believe that their opinions are factored into decision-making at their school. It also found that teachers' perceptions of whether their opinions are factored into school-level decisions appear to be related to job satisfaction.

What happens when we look specifically at professional learning?

It's no secret that, by and large, educators are frustrated with the professional development opportunities offered by their school and district. Teacher surveys from a number of different sources have repeatedly shown that teachers view these opportunities as disconnected from their daily work and believe that they don't often help them improve their practice. But schools and districts spend an enormous amount of resources -- including time and money -- on these professional development opportunities each year. So how can we make them more relevant to educators?

**Teacher Agency and Professional Learning**

A recent white paper from Learning Forward and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF), *Moving from Compliance to Agency: What Teachers Need to Make Professional Learning Work*, draws from interviews with teachers and administrators to report on the current state of professional development and what it will take to transform it to really support educator learning. The findings? For many educators, "professional development has long been an empty exercise in compliance." The recommended change: greater attention to teacher agency.

The report defines teacher agency as:

> The capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues.

And while it acknowledges that the degree to which an educator acts with agency includes internal factors (such as the educator's motivation to learn), it focuses on the school's structural conditions for professional learning as a way to increase agency. For example, it calls for systems to tap into teachers' intrinsic motivations, giving teachers the opportunity to construct solutions to the real challenges they face in the classroom, rather than sit in generalized professional development sessions. It also suggests that districts abandon structures and traditions that don't serve learning (including programs and job descriptions that
Tying Action

In addition to general strategies to improve teacher agency in professional learning systems, the paper also offers a number of concrete steps for district and school leaders, including:

1. **Make all professional learning decisions only in serious consultation with teachers and principals.** Ensure at least 50% teacher representation on school and district teams that are responsible for every stage of decision making from planning and data analysis to design, implementation, and evaluation.

2. **Rethink organization of the school day** so that educators have time to meet regularly to collaborate with colleagues to improve teaching and learning.

3. **Involve and support teachers in analyzing data** and identifying teaching and learning challenges.

4. **Give teachers choices regarding their professional learning,** including whom they work with and where they focus their learning.

5. **Resist the temptation to "scale up" or mandate a particular form of professional learning** without thoroughly examining the context in which it will be implemented. Understand that learners must want to improve their practice and see how the learning opportunity will help them do so.

These changes may represent a major shift in the practice and culture of many schools and districts. While change is hard, the opportunity that these actions provide to increase teacher agency -- and to transform professional learning opportunities -- is worth it.

Do educators have agency over their professional learning opportunities in your school? Please share your stories in the comments section below.

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