



PD Survey 2014: A retrospective in brief



The Alberta Teachers' Association

www.teachers.ab.ca



The Alberta Teachers' Association

© Copyright 2015

ISBN 978-1-927074-30-5

Unauthorized use or duplication without prior approval is strictly prohibited.

Alberta Teachers' Association

11010 142 Street NW, Edmonton AB T5N 2R1

Telephone 780-447-9400 or 1-800-232-7208

www.teachers.ab.ca

One copy of this publication is available free of charge to all ATA members. ATA members who require more than one copy can view pricing and ordering information on the ATA website at www.teachers.ab.ca. Click on Publications> Other Publications or contact ATA Distribution at 780-447-9400 (Edmonton); toll-free within Alberta 1-800-232-7208.

Contents

Preface.....	5
Introduction.....	6
A. Spending on/Access to Professional Development.....	7
B. Time Allocations for Professional Development.....	10
C. Professional Learning Communities.....	13
D. Principles and Conditions to Support Professional Development.....	17
E. Teachers' Preferences in Professional Development.....	22
F. Growth Plans: Professional Autonomy, Successes and Challenges.....	25
A PD Retrospective in Brief: Past and Future Directions.....	31

Preface

One of the legislated objects of the Alberta Teachers' Association is to improve the teaching profession. Along with its 21 specialist councils, 10 conventions and local professional development activities, the Association's work to improve the teaching profession has included the analysis of research regarding effective professional development and, through a biennial survey, the gathering of perspectives from professional development (PD) planners who volunteer at the local level. These informants chair local PD committees, assess the needs of members, plan events, collaborate with other planners and advocate for effective professional development practices. They have identified key areas of unremitting concern regarding professional development conditions which, if addressed, could yield significant improvement to the impact professional development resources have teaching and learning.

The professional development of teachers involves both the individual self-directed responsibility for competence, and that of collective professional needs. As many effective educational changes involve change at the classroom level, a likely site of change is the school through the involvement of staff in collegial and collective action. Yet as teachers pursue their full responsibilities to serve an ever-diverse and demanding array of students, their primary professional and emergent learning needs may be role specific and uniquely practical. Meaningful learning must be embedded in the daily work life of teachers with adequate time and resources dedicated to support both individual and collective professional development endeavours.

Continuous professional learning is essential to maintain the currency of teacher practice. Well-designed and supported professional learning will result in teachers' enhanced ability to respond to diverse learner needs and a sense of self-efficacy in the context of formal standards of practice. To enable the kind of systemic metamorphosis needed to truly meet teachers' learning needs, multi-initiative whiplash, hastily implemented and trendy top-down improvement regimes must cease, the deleterious effects of the proliferation of these in recent years must be mitigated, and partners in education must commit to sustained, coherent and equitable professional development supports which honour the principles of adult learning.

This brief provides a comparative overview of respondents' perspectives in the 2010, 2012 and 2014 administrations of the PD Survey, augmented by samples of respondents' comments. The final section renews the Association's call for progressive professional development approaches along with specific suggestions to ensure that society's interest in public education is sustained by thoughtfully supported teacher professional development.

Special thanks to our cadre of local professional development committee chairs, whose voices are found throughout this brief, and the volunteers of our other professional development subgroups, whose tremendous volunteer work planning and executing professional development for teachers, by teachers is one of the Association's greatest assets. Dr Gaylene Schreiber, executive staff officer in the ATA's Professional Development program area was the primary researcher and author of this retrospective brief.

Gordon R Thomas

Executive Secretary

Introduction



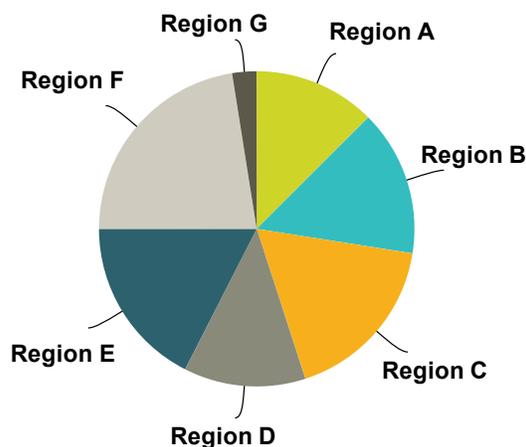
Despite the burgeoning body of literature and research that defines the characteristics of effective professional development, and substantive advocacy efforts at the provincial and local level, Alberta’s teachers continue to face similar issues regarding their own professional learning today as they did in 2010. In some instances, these stem from systemic inequities and dwindling provincial dollars for initiatives such as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), which in the past has contributed to purposeful professional learning. In other cases, teachers suffer through ambitious short-term initiatives that may do more to bolster the appearance of educational currency and innovation than to improve teaching and learning for teachers and students. In these instances, professional learning may actually exacerbate teachers’ workload issues, add to initiative overload and erode teacher self-efficacy.

The Professional Development Survey is completed by ATA local professional development committee chairs in collaboration with their committee members, and with the assistance of economic policy committee chairs. Professional development committee chairs are well positioned to serve as primary respondents as they engage in needs assessment, planning, designing and collaborating with others at the local level to address teachers’ professional development needs. The survey is intended to provide broad brushstroke information about provincial trends in teachers’ professional development experiences. The respondents come from every region in the province, with comparable representation from region to region. However, this study does not intend to be representative of all teachers’ experiences, nor to identify local or regional issues, but to provide sample responses from those who work to understand the professional learning circumstances of their local members.

This report is intended to provide a brief summary of selected data from the 2014 administration and compare data from the previous two administrations. Respondent comments are included in their own voices to provide context-specific reflections, and to demonstrate the range of contextual disparity that teachers encounter as they strive to keep their skills current.

For further information about previous survey administrations, please consult these related ATA publications: *Professional Learning for Informed Transformation: The 2010 Professional Development Survey* and *Creating Possibilities, Balancing Priorities—the 2012 Professional Development Survey*.

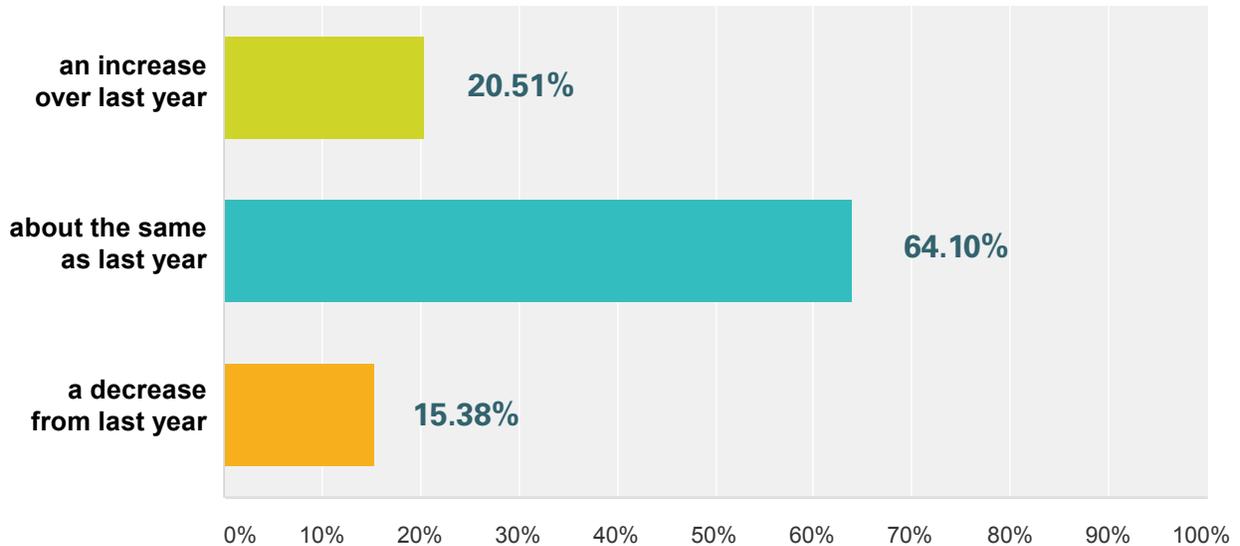
In which professional development region is your ATA local located?



The regions indicated are defined by geographical boundaries that intersect with the Alberta Teachers’ Associations’ locals, with the exception of Region G, which represents the francophone local that operates across the province. The 2014 administration of the PD Survey received a response rate of 73% compared to the 2010 (85%) and 2012 (87%) administrations.

A. Spending on/Access to Professional Development

Q1 Based on the data your ATA local PD committee has collected over the last two years, how does spending on professional development compare? Please check one.



	2014 (%)	2012 (%)	2010 (%)
An increase over last year	20.51	16.3	15.2
About the same as last year	64.10	72.11	63.0
A decrease from last year	15.38	11.6	21.7



The data in the three-year comparative chart indicates that there is approximately 4% movement from “about the same” to both “increase from last year” and “decrease from last year.” More respondents reported a decline in spending in the 2014 than in the 2012 administration, a response that was most apparent in 2010.



Respondents' Comments

“ When teachers ask for PD funds to cover the registration and travel for PD on a noninstructional day, the division should not also force us to pay sub costs for a sub who is not required. PD could then be scheduled (generally) on noninstructional days to reduce the overall cost of PD.

“ Both division and local PD funds are administered primarily on a needs basis. The division has that money built into various areas of school-based budgets.

“ The good part is, money is available to teachers when they request it. Bad side—not sure how many teachers know the money is there, or realize the ready availability, or how many schools consider that money to be for all the other substitute teacher costs before personal PD of their staff.

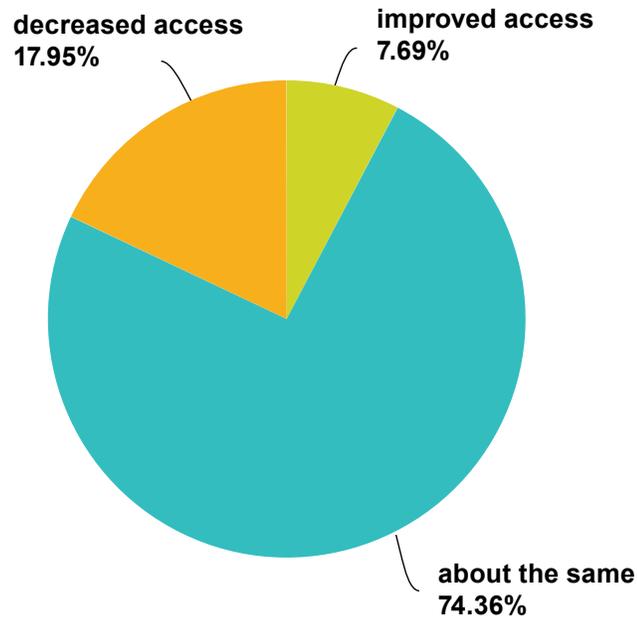
“ The withdrawal of AISI funding had a significant impact on the professional development budget.

“ Our district can point to exorbitant amounts being allocated to PD. They include all the release time provided throughout each school to learning coaches, tech coaches, special services facilitators, not to mention several assistant superintendents and other Central Office positions of “technology integration,” “inclusive learning services,” “learning supports,” etc. They have not only maintained funding at previous AISI levels—they have increased since then. The paradox is, of course, that most of our members are subjected to their PD, along with larger class sizes, and most certainly far fewer supports in the class.

“ Our local has allocated money (registration and sub costs) to teachers who want to attend a Specialist Council conference.

“ *In the absence of AISI dollars, PD opportunities have decreased significantly in our jurisdiction. We have early dismissal (one hour, six times per year) at the school level. We have two jurisdictional PD days where cross-school collaboration is encouraged. Release time varies from school to school to work on PGP goals.*

Q2 How would you describe overall access to professional development opportunities for teachers (ie, in terms of funding, time and the general program of PD in the district) as compared to the last two years? Please check one.



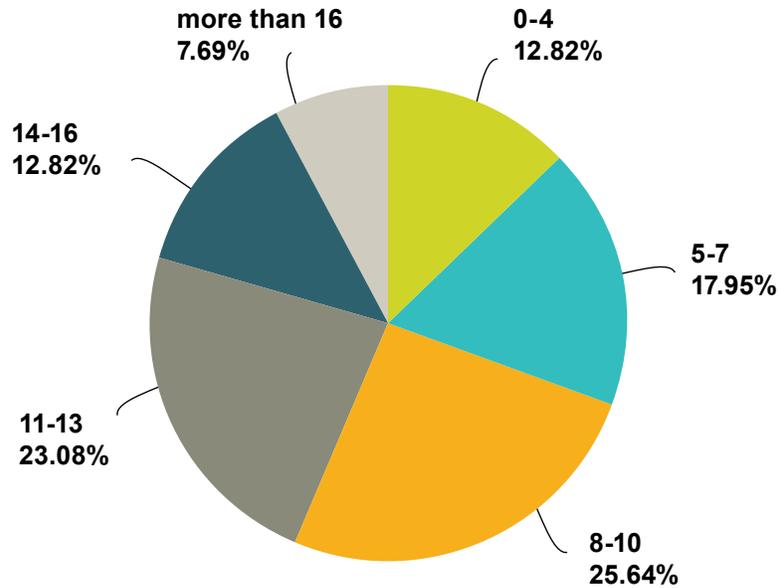
	2014 (%)	2012 (%)	2010 (%)
Improved access	7.69	10.9	13.0
About the same	74.36	73.9	67.4
Decreased access	17.95	15.2	19.6



Access to professional development opportunities has eroded since 2012, with 2014 increases to those observing “decreased access” and a steady decline of those observing “improved access” over three administrations of the survey.

B. Time Allocations for Professional Development

Q3 What are the total number of days allocated for teacher professional development for teachers in your local? Include all time in your calculations, including jurisdictional PD days, school-based PD days, ATA convention days, early dismissal for PD and any other calendared PD events.

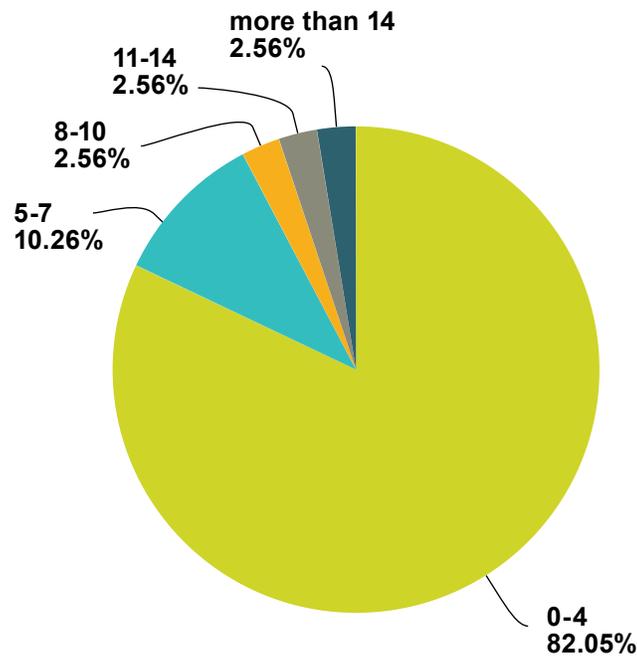


	2014 (%)	2012 (%)
0-4 days	12.82	2.1
5-7 days	17.95	21.3
8-10 days	25.64	29.8
11-13 days	23.08	31.9
14-16 days	12.82	4.3
More than 16 days	7.69	10.6



While there is some variation in the responses for each category, the general pattern is comparable to the 2012 administration, with outlier choices having diminished responses. There was an increase in respondents indicating 0-4 days (+10.72%) and 14-16 days (+8.52%) over the 2012 administration, with all other categories experiencing a decline in response rate in the 2014 administration.

Q4 How many days are allocated for districtwide professional development?



	2014 (%)	2012 (%)
0-4 days	82.05	72.3
5-7 days	10.26	23.4
8-10 days	2.56	2.1
11-14 days	2.56	2.1
More than 14 days	2.56	0.0



Year-over-year comparisons show a considerable reduction in respondents who reported 5-7 districtwide professional development days with a noticeable increase in the 0-4 category.

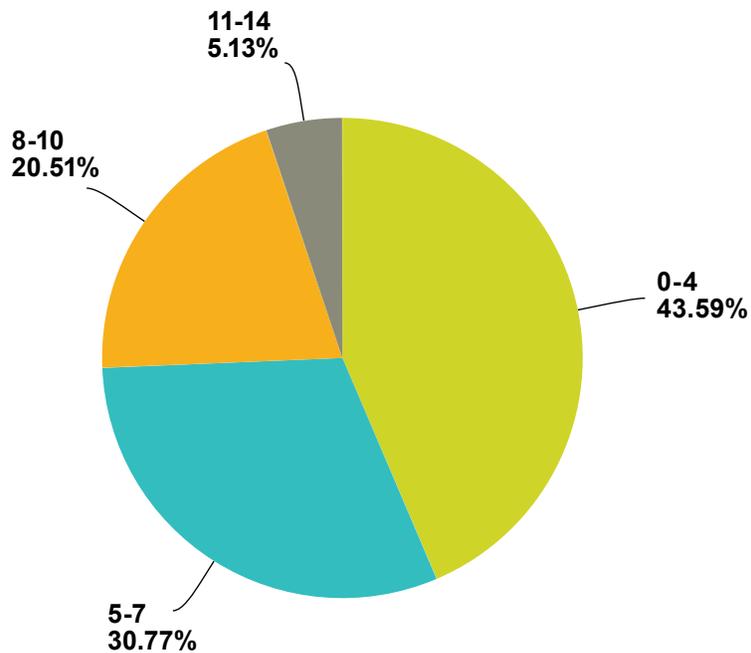


Respondents' Comments

“ Our high number of PD days are not true PD days. We have divisional days that are owned by the division.

“ We are very fortunate that we are allowed an ATA Institute Day; however, we are currently negotiating to keep that.

Q5 How many days are allocated for school-based teacher professional development?



	2014 (%)	2012 (%)
0-4 days	43.59	46.8
5-7 days	30.77	36.2
8-10 days	20.51	12.8
11-14 days	5.13	2.1
More than 14 days	0.00	2.1



There was a noticeable increase in respondents who indicated more than eight days allocated for school-based professional development, with reductions in those who indicated seven or less.



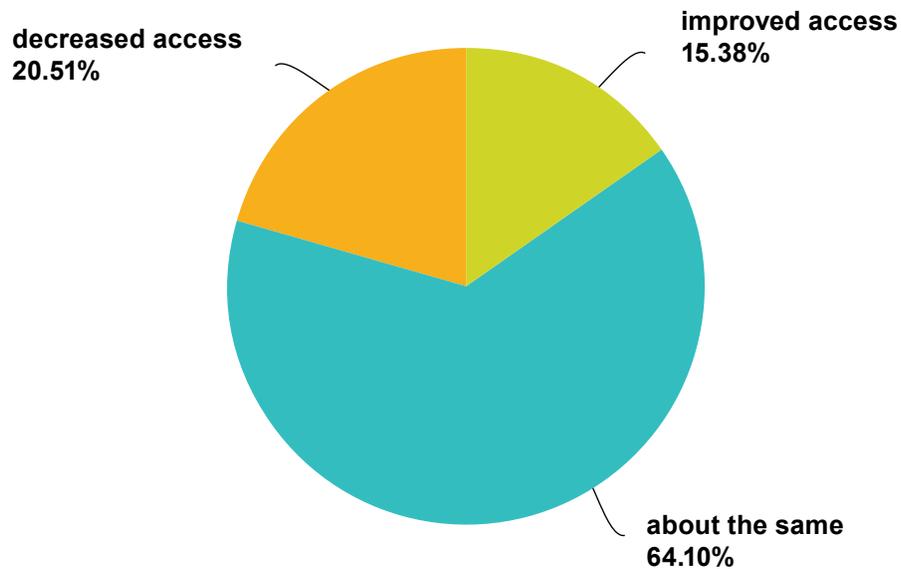
Respondents' Comments

“ Most PD decisions are site based. There seems to be a preference for teachers to have more power over their choice of PD. Teachers seem to like events that allow for collaboration. There is a preference for cohorts or site-based PD over district days.

“ *School-based PD days vary wildly depending on your school administrator.*

C. Professional Learning Communities

Q6 How would you describe teachers' ability to participate in Professional Learning Communities (ie, in terms of release time or other support)? Please check one.



	2014 (%)	2012 (%)	2010 (%)
Improved access	15.38	21.7	27.7
About the same	64.10	63.0	57.4
Decreased access	20.51	15.2	14.9



The three-year response chart above shows a steady erosion of teachers' ability to participate in professional learning communities. The comments reveal the complex intersection of competing interests in budgeting, timetabling and administrative practices.



Respondents' Comments

“ Our members often struggle to access PLCs that are self-prescribed, self-directed and self-enrolled versus the much more common school/district prescribed, directed and enrolled.

“ Only a few schools have PLCs because they have the staffing to allow for grade-level meetings. Most of our schools are spread out, so PLCs are difficult to organize during the school day.

“ PLCs are incorporated into the school day (most of the time). Some PLCs have cut back time due to the financial realities. They are often very successful and often teacher-directed. Certain agenda items reflect district- and school-based goals.

“ We have had a model of professional learning communities for 5+ years (two AISI cycles ago). We have early dismissal each Friday and our time is dedicated to teacher-driven, collaborative site, specific goals, following an overarching district goal.

“ PLCs have been used in our division for four years. Teachers can participate on a voluntary basis; school-by-school policy varies.

“ PLCs are hard when we only have one grade of each class. We have PLC time dedicated during our lunch hours for the past couple of years. This works well for our staff, and the students benefit from it. We are trying to embed the time next year. This will take away a full block of preparation time, but we will need to learn how to work better as a team for the benefit of students.

“ Our PLC meetings take place on Friday mornings, from 0815 to 0845, 15 minutes before class time, 15 minutes during what would be regularly scheduled class time. There needs to be teacher autonomy.

“ PLCs are very dependent on each school's administration as our division upholds site-based decision making, which ideally would include teacher release time, financial support and resources.

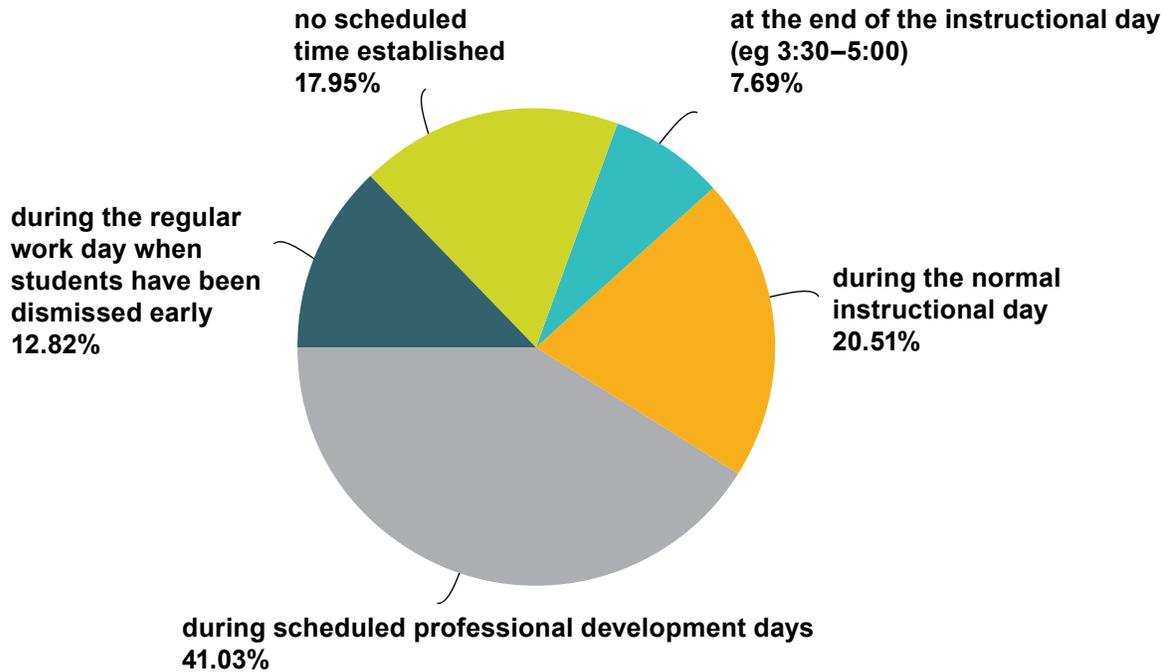
“ PLCs are mandatory and occur on districtwide PD days. District mandates the theme of PLCs or directs teachers into specific groups. Some schools also have school-based PLCs; however, subject matter is mandated so teachers have no choice in topics.

“ We meet bi-weekly either through online meetings or face-to-face meetings. We have face-to-face meetings monthly and online monthly as well. There are also PLC groups in some of the schools that meet daily.

“ In our site-based CLC (Catholic Learning Communities), we focus on schoolwide, but also grade-level or department-level goals. In addition, district departments in the junior and senior highs are allotted time to collaborate collectively.

“ *PLCs are very valuable when they are used properly and barriers are removed. As a rural district, it is hard to meet with other professionals and, in many cases, there is only one specialty teacher in a building. Also, it can be very tough when they are dictated by an agenda from Central Office as to what is required during that time. Professional collaboration is then unable to prosper due to someone else's agenda and teacher needs are not being addressed.*

Q7 What is the most common time for scheduled Professional Learning Community activities?



	2014 (%)	*2012 (%)
No scheduled time established	17.95	12.8
No professional learning communities	0.00	2.1
At the end of the instructional day (eg, 3:30–5:00)	7.69	14.9
During the normal instructional day	20.51	14.9
During scheduled professional development days	41.03	38.3
During the regular work day when students have been dismissed early	12.82	17.0
In the evenings or on weekends	0.00	0.0

*This question was new in 2012.



Scheduling for professional learning communities has shifted towards times during the normal instructional day or on professional development days, with movement away from during regular work days where students have been dismissed early. It is heartening to note that no teachers are scheduled to attend professional learning communities on evenings or on the weekend, and that no respondents said that there were no professional learning communities to take part in. The comments provided by respondents indicate that the challenges faced by teachers in their ability to participate in professional learning communities are similar to those faced in the allocation of time and resources of professional development more generally.

Q8 Please provide any further information about time or resources allocated to support professional development that will help contextualize your responses to the above questions.



Respondents' Comments

“ Schools that have grade-level PLCs organize their time to allow for scheduled meetings. Most schools, however, do not

have PLCs and do not have the ability to have them during the school day, either because of budget constraints or the lack of substitute teachers in the area.

“ Some PLC time is occurring after school and this contributes to increased workload and stress. The most effective PLCs and PD are during PD days or early release.

“ Teachers meet twice a month for embedded PD and appreciate two school-based PD days. Additionally, teachers participate in divisionwide PD twice a year.

“ Cohort meetings take place via Google Hangouts or Video Conference, starting at 1430 (early dismissal) until approximately 1600, every second month. Cohorts have also been given meeting time during two divisionwide PD days.

“ Our division has provided as much support as possible to implement PLC groups in our school division. We could not ask for more support from our administrative team.

“ Most PD Days consist of PLC time for two hours followed by one hour of PGP, lunch, then a two-hour staff meeting.

“ *To pay for a substitute teacher is not the answer. With past AISI monies, several teachers could take several days of substitute teacher time to collaborate with their colleagues. While this time is certainly beneficial, it was problematic at school: too many substitute teachers on site, the necessity to plan for your sub, etc. A built-in time in the timetable is preferable. Since the AISI money was withdrawn, we cannot rely on substitute teachers to provide release time.*

D. Principles and Conditions to Support Professional Development

Q9 In your context, to what extent are the following principles evident in implementing effective professional development planning practices? On a four-point scale, from rarely or not evident (1) to consistently evident (4).

	2014	2012	2010*
a) Professional development planning respects the professional judgment of teachers and the unique circumstances in which they teach.	2.58	2.47	3.59
b) Professional development is supported by adequate resources, including time and funding.	2.38	2.55	3.45
c) Professional development contributes to collaborative learning cultures.	2.78	2.81	3.86
d) Professional development is interactive, continuous and reflective and part of the day-to-day life of teachers.	2.32	2.21	3.28
e) Professional development is systemic, systematically planned and sustained.	2.57	2.49	3.49
f) Professional development is supported by a shared vision.	2.46	2.34	3.30
g) Professional development is supported by shared responsibility.	2.42	2.40	3.45
h) Professional development planning is evidence-informed and research-based.	2.50	2.60	3.78

*The 2010 administration featured a similar but not identical question that read “To what extent *have various partners been successful* in implementing effective professional development planning practices” with the same choices to the 2012 and 2014 administration. A straight comparison over three administrations would require quantification of the effect caused by the shift in the wording of the question. However, it seems clear that there is decreasing evidence of some principles in implementing effective professional development planning practices.



Respondents’ comments reveal some of the tensions encountered by teachers in their pursuit of professional learning in relation to these principles.



Respondents' Comments

“ There is not a lot of cohesion in PD planning across stakeholders. The Division has one pet theme that they push on staff—both at divisionwide days and dictated for school-based days. Most schools have not had much success getting someone other than the administrator(s) to plan out the allocated school-based days. These are often random topics across the eight or so days in the year... Because of all of that, there are certain topics that teachers absolutely do not want at Institute days, so it puts constraints on our planning. PD time seems to be dictated, but lacking buy-in.

“ While our PD committee is working really hard to provide quality PD Days, I do not think that we have a shared vision and a systemic approach to PD. It should also be noted that the needs are very different from one teacher to the other. In our local, for the last two years, the focus was on local expertise.

“ All members across our division were given their professional growth plans on standardized templates that included mandated district and school goals. Subsequent planning requirements and documentation were also mandated throughout the year, along with discussions on personal reflections. In many cases, members were told that their reflections were not adequate and that they had to do them again, some three times. Top down, more and more every year, our Central Office in large part determines and controls our PD. The norm is that our members are so “burnt out” with the jurisdiction and school PD that they have very little, if anything, left for their own.

“ *Consistency would be appreciated, so that all colleagues could benefit from PD.*

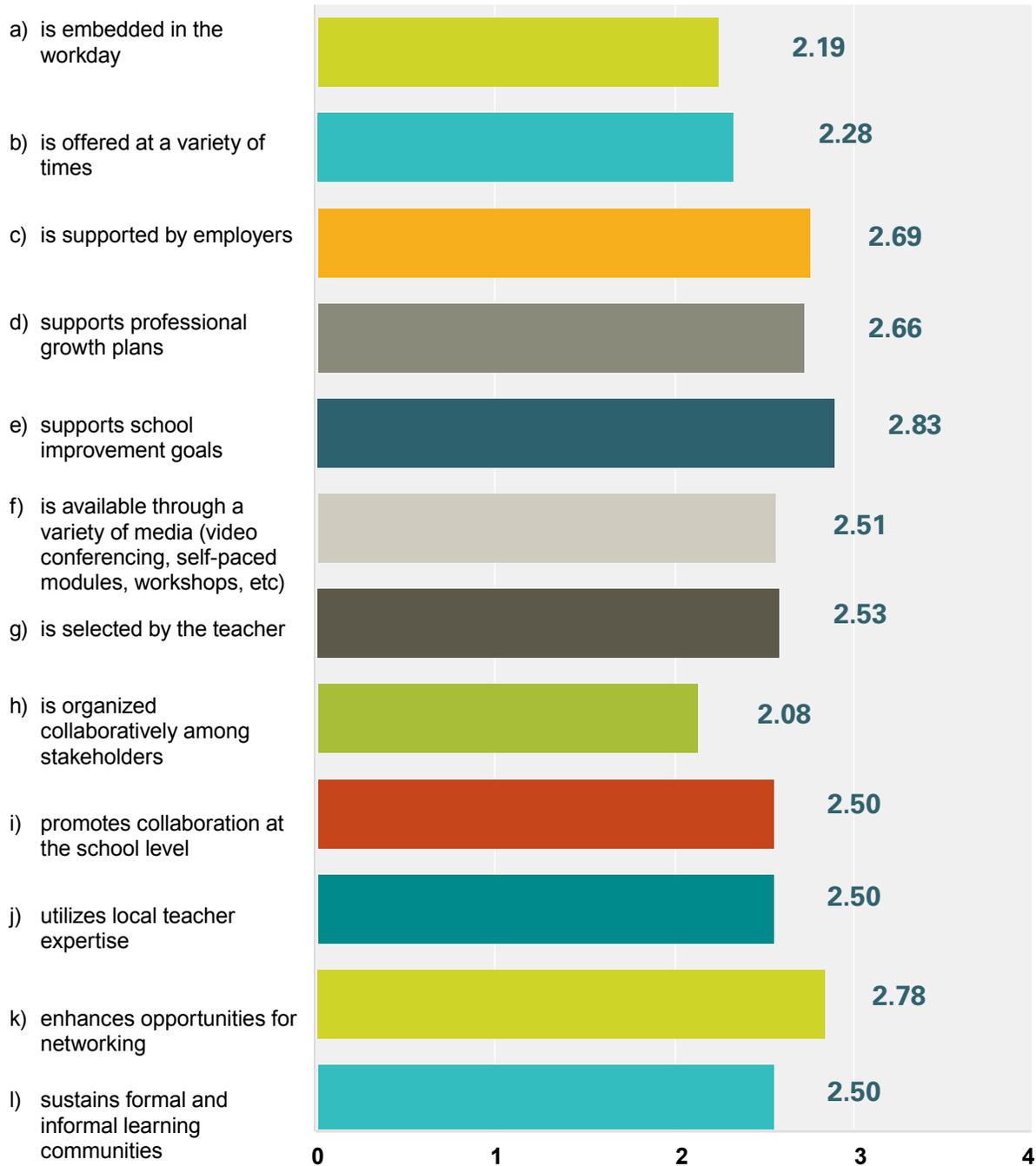
“ The majority of PD in our division is based on the division's goals and does not always reflect all the needs expressed by teachers and/or schools.

“ Need more funding and time allocated. Varies from school to school in the division

“ This is difficult to answer from a district perspective due to the site-based nature of professional development. While some schools plan exceptionally well for PD (based on teacher feedback), other schools are more reactive.

“ PD in our district is top-down and rarely includes input from teachers.

Q10 In your context, how evident are the following essential conditions for effective professional development? Please consider the following statements and select a rating on a scale of least evident (1) to consistently evident (4) for each one. In my local area, professional development...



	2014	2012	2010
a) is embedded in the workday	2.19	2.20	2.72
b) is offered at a variety of times	2.28	2.50	2.70
c) is supported by employers	2.69	2.98	3.28
d) supports professional growth plans	2.66	2.87	3.00
e) supports school improvement goals	2.83	3.09	3.30
f) is available through a variety of media (video conferencing, self-paced modules, workshops, etc)	2.51	2.59	2.83
g) is selected by the teacher	2.53	2.51	2.77
h) is organized collaboratively among stakeholders	2.08	2.33	2.64
i) promotes collaboration at the school level	2.50	2.47	2.94
j) utilizes local teacher expertise	2.50	2.61	2.96
k) enhances opportunities for networking	2.78	2.65	3.04
l) sustains formal and informal learning communities	2.50	2.38	2.85



The three-year chart above shows widespread and steady decline in the evidence of essential conditions for effective professional development since the first administration of this question in 2010.



Respondents' Comments

“ Please note in “d) supports professional growth plans” that our division mandates what is, at minimum, in our growth plan.

“ PD that reflects the divisional and school goals is well supported. Having more types of PD available podcasts, video conferencing, online, is needed because of our remote location.

“ Our division offers one ATA professional learning day for teachers in January. Teachers are working on learning objectives they have laid out in their professional growth plans during this time. There are no school-based or division-based conflicts on that day.

“ Through the regional consortium, PD is varied greatly with lots of opportunity for learning. However, access to time and money to support PD continues to be a problem for teachers.

“ Within our model, our division sets a priority, but then each school, and then each team, is able to fine-tune and interpret the goal to suit their own needs and their own students.

“ AISI funding cuts have affected some access to collaboration time; many schools have started book studies. We have a half-day PD day where teachers share their expertise and passion with fellow staff; we have four half-day scheduled collaborative afternoons; we have a districtwide PD library; we have monthly district-run PD events.



“ *The division is looking at increasing the amount of time devoted to individual teacher-selected PD for the following school year. Also, we are looking at more opportunities for our local to be working collaboratively with the division. Recently, an Administrative Procedure for Professional Learning was developed as a result of collaboration between our local PD committee and the school division.*

“ Local funding supports Specialist Council conferences. Local PD emphasizes Ed Camp models (teacher directed) and subject area/grade level cohorts (teacher directed).

“ The biggest emphasis in our PD is jurisdiction goals.

“ Some of our divisional days are completely directed by our board, so do not reflect a true PD plan.

“ More opportunities for collaboration between rural schools.

E. Teachers' Preferences in Professional Development

Q11 Based on the information you have collected, how interested would teachers in your ATA local be in the following opportunities? On a four point scale of little interest (1) to high interest (4).

	2014	2012	2010
a) book/article study group	1.69	1.76	2.15
b) independent professional reading	1.89	2.07	2.41
c) lesson analysis	1.86	1.98	2.29
d) university course	2.11	2.29	2.59
e) peer coaching	2.17	2.62	2.67
f) participating in an online webinar	2.00	2.20	2.49
g) collaborative lesson/unit planning	2.72	3.20	3.22
h) interschool/classroom visitation	2.64	2.80	2.72
i) Internet research	2.25	2.09	2.54
j) seminar or workshop	2.78	2.93	3.09
k) viewing online conference session	1.83	2.07	2.41
l) collaborative curriculum development	2.50	2.84	2.87
m) action research project	1.89	2.05	2.28
n) examining student work	2.42	2.64	2.87
o) online curriculum/teaching issues forum	1.78	1.96	2.22
p) mentoring a colleague	2.53	2.67	2.83
q) participating in a coaching relationship	2.33	n/a	n/a
r) attending an online conference	1.75	n/a	n/a



Collaborative undertakings with colleagues which focus on practical strategies related to teaching and learning continue to receive comparably favourable ratings. The year-over-year data shows persistent decline in teachers' interest in most choices of a professional learning type. While the list of 18 professional learning activities is not exhaustive, it does provide a range of individual and collaborative activities, and both technology mediated and in-person/traditional styles. From the respondents' perspective, teachers' overall enthusiasm for professional learning is diminished, and this appears to be across various styles of learning medium or activity. Research on the working lives of teachers indicates that the intensification of daily work demands and the hours required to complete teaching tasks has left little time or appetite for professional learning. For more information on teachers' working conditions see *The 2011/12 National Study on Balancing Work, Life and Caregiving in Canada: The Situation for Alberta Teachers* by Linda Duxbury and Christopher Higgins; *The New Work of Teaching: A Case Study of the Worklife of Calgary Public Teachers*; and *Transforming Our Future Together: The Conditions of Professional Practice in Rocky View Schools*, available from the ATA.

Q12 From the topics listed below, indicate the desire for professional development in the following areas in your local. Rank order with 1 being of greatest desire.

Rank Ordered from Most Desirable to Least	
1.	Working with all students in an inclusive classroom
2.	Differentiating instruction
3.	Teaching cross-curricular competencies
4.	Infusing literacy across the curriculum
5.	Developing a variety of classroom assessment approaches
6.	Assessing cross-curricular competencies
7.	Using assessment data to support teaching and learning
8.	Using digital teaching and learning resources
9.	Infusing numeracy across the curriculum
10.	Developing inquiry-based lessons
11.	Teaching in a culturally diverse classroom
12.	Meeting the needs of FNMI learners
13.	Strategies for teaching combined grade classrooms
14.	Selecting and assessing digital resources



This is the first administration of this question and is designed to provide information to guide professional development planning for PD service providers.

Q13 Question: What are other areas of professional development desired in your local?



Respondents' Comments

- “ Character education, for we have seen a greater focus on social justice in the last few years.
- “ Overall, math PD in the primary and elementary grades. PD for CTS courses/modules.
- “ Literacy, numeracy, cooperative learning, project-based learning, other forms of assessment (ie, performance, curriculum redesign, dual crediting). Depends on grade level and subjects (especially in a rural community).
- “ Peer collaboration, more individual and school-based PD options, more physical education, fine arts and noncore related PD options for teachers. Reflective practices and what makes quality teaching, opportunities for using divisional expertise in relevant PD areas, Assessment for Learning, Backwards by Design Planning.
- “ Infusing and utilizing educational technology.
- “ Teacher collaboration.
- “ Positive classroom dynamics, curriculum-specific resource development, positive pedagogical practices.

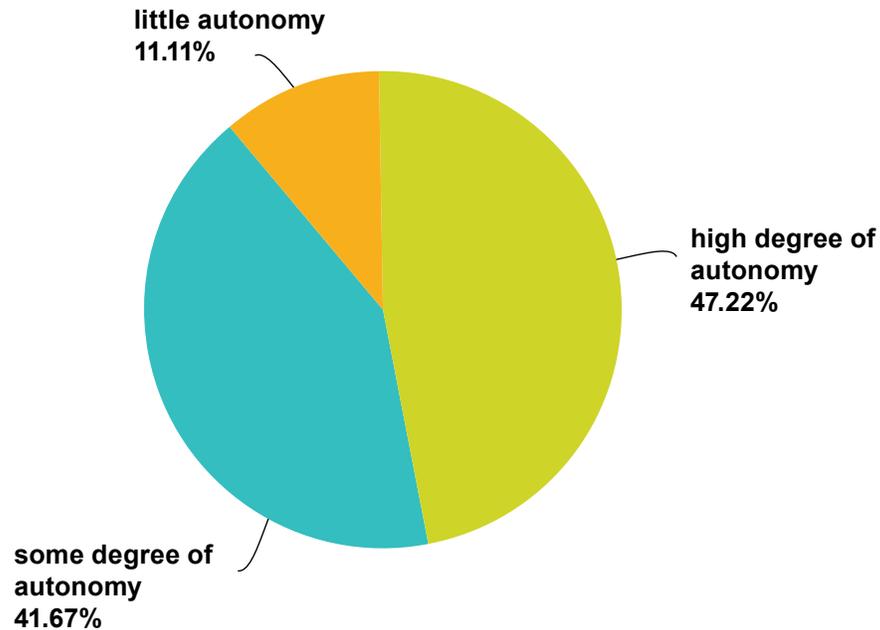
“ *Because our PLC is quite fluid, our schools and teams can easily focus their needs to their situations. We have spent the last two years on literacy. I have some concern that our teachers might not fully understand what they know. I would like to see more support on Inclusive Education (like UDL) and ELLs as well as some introduction to the competency-based curriculum that is being discussed.*



“ *Any amount of time embedded in the workday would be an improvement. Time for collaboration across schools, particularly in rural areas.*

F. Growth Plans: Professional Autonomy, Successes and Challenges

Q14 How much professional autonomy and choice are teachers given in developing and meeting the goals identified in their professional growth plans? Please check one.



	2014 (%)	2012 (%)	2010 (%)
High degree of autonomy	47.22	33.3	44.4
Some degree of autonomy	41.67	64.4	48.9
Little autonomy	11.11	2.2	6.7



The three year data demonstrates that teachers continue to struggle for autonomy when developing and meeting the goals in their professional growth plans, a situation that can contribute to cynicism and feelings of deprofessionalization among some teachers. The most noticeable erosion occurred between 2010 and 2012. Responses in 2014 demonstrate that the number of teachers who perceive a high degree of autonomy regarding their own growth goals has returned to approximately 2010 levels, but with a noticeable increase in the number of respondents who indicated “little autonomy.” Consistently, fewer than 50% of respondents feel that teachers enjoy a high degree of autonomy.



Respondents' Comments

“ We are given our growth plans, same one for all members, at each site on a standardized form, which includes both jurisdiction and school-mandated PD. We are told that we may choose to add our own goals to it. We are asked to sign it and hand it back in to our administrators.

“ Teachers are strongly encouraged to base their goals on the divisional and school goals.

“ Suggestions for incorporating school and district goals are given by administration.

“ Our division sets priorities for improvement plans, and our work is so focused that I fear teachers could steer towards divisional goals for their own personal professional growth plans.

“ Each school is different. Some have more flexibility, others have little choice. It can be driven by administration.

“ School-based improvement goals and division direction still seem to take precedence over individual teacher professional learning goals, making it difficult for teachers to implement and meet their PD goals.

“ There is a district PGP available and we are encouraged to use it.

“ We are free to do our own, untethered to school goals.

“ Although teachers often set goals that line up with their current teaching assignments, goals that explore outside of their area of expertise are not discouraged.

“ These are handled at a per-site basis. Administrators are aware of supporting teachers with their PGP's.

“ In the Catholic division, one goal must be faith-based. In the public division, one goal must be school-based and the other divisional-based.

“ All PD, except for the money from the ATA local, is directed by Central Office.

“ Teachers can use personal PD days/money to meet their goals.

“ *Teachers appreciate freedom and choice to improve themselves as teachers and to improve delivery of program.*

Q15 The completion of professional growth plans is a key component of successful PD programs. In your PD committee's view, what are the top successes for teachers in your context in developing and implementing their professional growth plans?



Respondents' Comments—Successes

- “ We can work together on team growth plans.
- “ Having a high degree of autonomy.
- “ Having feedback and discussions throughout the year on their PGP.
- “ Having funds available and time available. Ensuring personal choices.
- “ Differentiation is allowed and teacher autonomy supported. Teachers are provided with the resources they need to implement their goals.
- “ Access to online materials and regional consortium for resources.
- “ Well-supported and reasonable divisional goals.
- “ Collaborative teams at the school level to share ideas and workshops.
- “ Time in each professional learning day to work on individual growth plans.
- “ Teachers have autonomy over goals (in most cases). They are allowed time to complete growth plans and time to reflect upon and to review goals.
- “ They are teacher led and teachers can access their PD funds to attend courses, etc.
- “ Administrative support, access to cohorts in similar grade levels and/or subject areas.
- “ More school-based PD days than in previous years, allowing more time for PLCs. Increasing opportunities for individual professional growth. In our division, we were given one day devoted completely to individual teacher professional growth. There were no school-based or division-based PD requirements for that day. It was strictly devoted to the professional growth of our teachers. Increasing opportunities for collaboration between local PD committee and school division. Allows for more teacher direction (voice) when developing division PD plans.
- “ If teachers align with prescribed district goals, more money or time is available. Some individual teachers are willing to fight for their individual PGP goals.

“ *Teachers continue to grow as educators. The PGPs provide a framework to plan and track this growth. Lifelong learning is achieved by looking at strengths and weaknesses and working on one's own perceived professional weaknesses.*

“ Our collective agreement states that “individual teacher account funds (are) to be used for professional development activities that relate directly to individual teacher professional growth plans.”



“ Teachers are treated as professionals. They are given some flexibility in choosing goals which they believe will foster further growth in their professional development.

“ Some teachers and schools like to create their PGPs together as a group and focus their efforts around these goals throughout the year. This year, teachers were asked to create their own PGPs at the beginning of the year and then share them with other teachers at the first districtwide PD day in November. Teachers could then choose to align themselves with people with similar interests and work together on goals.

“ By providing individual PD funds, we allow for teacher autonomy.

“ An increase to autonomy and the resources to achieve the goals.

“ Access to individual PD funds to select PD activities that will allow them to address their personal growth goals.

“ Improved collaboration.

“ Personal choice.

Q16 The completion of professional growth plans is a key component of successful PD programs. In your PD committee's view, what are the *top challenges* that teachers in your context face in developing and implementing their professional growth plans?



Respondents' Comments—Challenges

- “ Our division has reverted back to the most authoritarian implementation we have ever experienced.
- “ Access to PD that is reasonably priced. Travelling to PD. Having to plan for time off for PD (sub plans). Having time/resources during the school day or throughout the year. In our division, school-based PD days tend to focus on the school goals. Most teachers have to implement their PGP's on their own time.
- “ Lack of subs available to cover classes. Time required to plan for subs with the possibility of not having certificated subs.
- “ Distance to travel to PD and coverage of costs.
- “ Lack of resources. Lack of TIME to collaborate with teachers and learn to use the resources. Lack of money. Teachers want choice to decide on goals and their implementation.
- “ Learning the technology needed for the daily work means less time for teachers to engage in teacher-led PD.
- “ Release time (due to shortage of substitute teachers), money to support travel and expenses for PD opportunities not in our local community (such as Calgary, Red Deer or Edmonton)
- “ Distances between teachers of similar assignments means that cohorts often must meet virtually.



“ *If goals are considered top-down, teachers do not buy in. If these goals can only be accomplished in a divisionwide setting, teachers may be faced with difficulties with technology, long drives to and from one's community, and lack of continuity from one session to the next.*

“ *Time for Implementation:* Too many other PD requirements that are not an individual choice, but are school- or division-directed PD decisions that take away time from teacher PGP's.

“ *Relevant Material:* Many teachers voiced a concern over relevancy of PD opportunities or areas such as physical education, CTS/CTF and fine arts. It presents a challenge when teachers are trying to improve in their specific teaching area. Many teachers who are specialists are forced to take more generic PD options.

“ *Windshield Time:* Our division is spread out over a large distance, making it difficult for teachers to attend; driving time is significant when travelling anywhere within the division. Thus, using local expertise within the division is so critical; it reduces the amount of drive time, while taking advantage of the local talent.

“ *Equity of PD Resources:* In our division, PD funds available at the school level are a site-based decision. There is no equity between schools on the amount of funds available for teacher PD. Some schools provide their teachers with \$500 for PD, while other schools provide nothing towards individual PD. Many teachers are paying out of pocket to attend PD opportunities of their choice.

“ District mandated goals and objectives severely interfere with individual autonomy and personal professional growth.

“ Some teachers feel pressure to align with school goals (mandated in some buildings).

“ Little access to job-embedded time and resources to assist in achieving the desired goals and growth.

“ Teachers are not given collaborative time, financial support.

“ Access to resources/activities due to many teachers being located in rural areas. Also, substitute teachers are limited for the same reason. Subs have to be paid for out of individual PD funds; funds don't cover costs once you take sub pay into account, thus teachers have to wait until their account balance is high enough to cover costs, sometimes several years. Some teachers are told what MUST be in their growth plans, which may be contrary to what their individual goals are.

“ Teachers are often directed by administration to focus their personal goals on school and district goals.

“ Lack of jurisdictional funding supporting PGP.

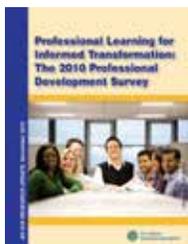
“ Limited release time, limited resources, mandated goals, no choice, limited budget.

“ *It is sometimes difficult finding reasonable PD opportunities that line up with PGP goals. With increased teacher workload/responsibilities in and out of school, some teachers don't feel that they can be away from their classroom.*

A PD Retrospective in Brief: Past and Future Directions



This retrospective of the last three administrations of the ATA PD Survey brings to mind an epigram attributed to Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr (1849): “the more things change, the more things stay the same” derived from his French “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” The adage suggests that tumultuous changes may not affect reality on a deeper level other than to affix the status quo. Much the same way, the promise of transformation that has characterized the education sector in Alberta since 2010 has to date yielded only small improvement in selected areas of the conditions surrounding teachers’ experiences of professional learning and a continued remarkable decline in many others.



Five years ago, in *Professional Learning for Informed Transformation: The 2010 Professional Development Survey*, the Alberta Teachers’ Association made the following observations (pp 30–32):

- Teachers should have access to professional development opportunities that are based on fundamental principles of adult learning, including the axiom that one size does not fit all.
- The PD survey suggests that, far too often, professional development resources fail to consistently address the specific needs of individual teachers.
- Teachers’ efforts to meet their unique needs are sometimes stymied by a lack of time, by a scarcity of funding or by pressure to adopt the goals of the greater body.
- The education system needs to develop enveloped, equitable funding structures to create professional development programs that address the complex learning needs of teachers.
- Transforming the education system will require professional development that focuses on content and research-based teaching and learning strategies, and that includes embedded opportunities for reflection and collaboration.

The conditions that gave rise to these observations in 2010 continue to constrain the best efforts of teachers and PD leaders to engender a culture of lifelong learning. These efforts are further strained by diminishing resources and compounded by untenable workload issues that can dampen any enthusiasm teachers might have for professional learning.



In *Creating Possibilities, Balancing Priorities—the 2012 Professional Development Survey*, the Alberta Teachers’ Association identified future priorities that could enable greater returns on social investment in professional

development (pp 28–29):

- A systemic commitment to foster the sustained growth of professional standards through the teacher professional growth plan process is needed to complement and balance the current emphasis on initiative-driven professional development.
- Teachers’ professional growth efforts would benefit from a concentrated effort to capitalize on the potential of the teacher growth plan process.
- Time set aside in the school year for PD should not be eclipsed by the ever-present demands to attend meetings or to perform noninstructional tasks. Professional learning can lose its lustre amid the competing demands for teachers’ time and energy.



*School jurisdictions,
ministries of government
and teachers will have*

*to establish and nurture common
ground to support teacher growth
and learning that is so critical to
serving the needs of a future Alberta
and maintaining the economic and
reputational advantages we have
enjoyed in the recent past.*

- Professional development must respect the principles of adult learning and recognize that teachers are in the best position to determine their own learning needs, and select or design opportunities that meet professional learning goals. To do less demonstrates a fundamental lack of respect for teachers as learners.
- Practices that place a low priority on the pursuit of teachers' self-identified growth goals should be discontinued.
- If education stakeholders truly desire the evolution of the education system, teachers require sufficient dedicated time to engage thoughtfully in both work tasks and professional growth.

The informants to this survey are individuals who volunteer their time and efforts to plan, organize, assess and advocate for professional development in their locals. The perspectives that characterize the 2014 respondents' negative responses are often disconcertingly similar to those of their predecessors. Without a pronounced escalation in the will of all stakeholders in education to collaborate toward positive changes, both students and teachers will be ill-served by poorly sustained or facile attempts towards supporting professional renewal. School jurisdictions, ministries of

government and teachers will have to establish and nurture common ground to support teacher growth and learning that is so critical to serving the needs of a future Alberta and maintaining the economic and reputational advantages we have enjoyed in the recent past.

To gain the full benefit of the social, temporal and fiscal investments made in teachers' ongoing skill development, the Alberta Teachers' Association renews its calls for the previous recommendations. Additionally, the ATA proposes key recommendations to prevent further deterioration of conditions for professional development in Alberta. The Association calls upon stakeholders to heed seven key recommended actions:

1. Ensure sufficient time is given to teachers when students are not in attendance, to
 - a) collaborate with their colleagues in a professional learning community setting to benefit student learning and mitigate teacher workload, and
 - b) address the goals of their personal professional growth plan;
2. Engage in deliberate teacher workload reduction strategies with an aim to creating time, space and resources that will encourage teachers to engage purposefully and effectively in skill renewal;
3. Enable local efforts to develop policy or secure provisions for teachers that support individually directed professional learning;
4. Reduce the number, variety and intensity of jurisdictional professional development initiatives to allow for sustained and focused teacher learning;
5. Promote a culture that values and invests in the development of contextually relevant and local teacher expertise;
6. Respect the autonomous development of professional growth plans by eliminating the use of mandated templates or externally derived, pre-determined teacher learning goals; and

7. Dismantle structures that bias the distribution of resources to support district and school goals over individually identified professional growth needs.

The Alberta Teachers' Association continues to advocate for effective professional development practices. Effective professional development must be coherent and involve active learning. To enable this, provincial, jurisdictional and school-based authorities should provide teachers with opportunities to adapt newly acquired theory and practices to their unique classroom situations in cyclical, embedded learning opportunities based on voluntary participation in collaborative structures. Collaboration models that engage teachers in shared attention to daily teaching tasks help teachers to address practical challenges by encouraging them to share knowledge, engage in reflective practice and assess the impact of their work.

As jurisdictions endeavour to make meaning out of educational policies and initiatives related to Inspiring Education, Alberta is balanced on the edge of a tipping point in education that will only be successfully transcended if policymakers critically examine current practices that diminish the engagement of teachers in their own learning and make teachers' self-identified learning aspirations a priority.



The Alberta Teachers' Association

The Alberta Teachers' Association
11010 142 Street NW
Edmonton AB T5N 2R1
Telephone 780-447-9400 or 1-800-232-7208
www.teachers.ab.ca