



# **Creating Possibilities, Balancing Priorities— the 2012 Professional Development Survey**



The Alberta  
Teachers' Association

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ISBN 978-1-927074-09-1

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## Preface

Public education has long been seen as an equalizing force that creates opportunity for all citizens. Yet teachers are preparing students for a future world we cannot predict with any reasonable assurance. This challenge is keenly felt in classrooms that are populated by high numbers of students with increasingly diverse learning needs and inundated with frequently emerging new technologies, by teachers who struggle to balance a multitude of expectations, while maintaining caring relationships with each student.

Teachers practise in schools engaged in a broad range of improvement initiatives, bolstered by jurisdictions and governmental ministries that seek to capitalize on the potential of the school to shape our future society. Within this milieu, teachers seek to enhance their own professional knowledge and skills to meet the often significant and always immediate needs of the individual learners they work with each day. It is a truism that no real change can occur in schools without the wholehearted, sustained efforts of teachers. But the converse is also true: teachers are unable to engage in the deep reflective learning necessary to shift practice without supportive environments that honour their desire to pursue self-identified learning goals. If they are to lead the informed transformation of Alberta's education system so that it meets the changing needs of students and society, teachers must be supported to meet their professional learning needs.

This study reports the results of research the Association undertook during the 2011/12 school year to assess the landscape of teachers' professional learning. The study shows that essential conditions for effective professional development have declined, and that promising practices identified in research have not been adopted consistently throughout the province. Moreover, the competing agendas for teachers' learning have created a paradoxical situation—teachers are in the best position to determine what professional learning they need, but they are often unable to devote themselves to self-identified learning goals due to extraordinary work demands and a plethora of external professional learning mandates. PD planning is often being done in a manner that does not respect the professional judgment of teachers or the unique context in which they teach. The final section of this report provides some suggestions as to how to capitalize on the strengths and promising practices in the current professional development structures to reduce the barriers to effective professional development.

Many people contributed to the study and the resulting report. Special thanks to the chairs and members of ATA local professional development committees and economic policy committees and to the ATA's corps of professional development facilitators, whose time, effort and expertise made this research possible. Dr Gaylene Schreiber, executive staff officer in the ATA's Professional Development program area, was the primary researcher and author of this report.

*Gordon R Thomas*  
*Executive Secretary*

## Introduction

At its best, professional development is thoughtfully planned, coherent with teachers' practical context and learning preferences, supported with sufficient resources and sustained over time. However, as the workload of teachers has increased and classrooms have become more complex, the conditions under which teachers attempt to engage in professional learning have deteriorated. Ironically, just when deep, practice-challenging professional development is more important than ever, teachers seem to have less time and autonomy to engage in reflective practice and growth.

There is a growing consensus among Canadians of all backgrounds that investment in education is an inherently valuable social good. But in order to capitalize on our social investment in children, we must also attend to the learning needs of teachers. This study suggests that professional development opportunities vary considerably from one jurisdiction to another. Within jurisdictions, multiple initiatives are supplanting time and energy that could be better dedicated to the support of teachers' self-identified learning goals. There is a trend toward system-directed professional learning at the expense of individually-selected professional learning. To balance priorities, all stakeholders must consciously dedicate time and resources to teachers' learning needs, especially those that fall outside systemwide initiatives. PD planners must establish teacher advisory structures to inform planning at every stage if we are to create a coordinated and collaborative learning milieu.

This survey was administered to local PD committees through the leadership of local professional development (PD) committee chairs and regional PD facilitators. Local economic policy committee (EPC) chairs provided valuable assistance to the process. Given that 87 per cent of locals responded, the survey constitutes a reliable representation of teachers' perspectives on professional development activities across the province. The survey consisted of an online form that invited participants to respond to various numerical and descriptive scales, with spaces to add descriptive comments. The survey was available from November 2011 to April 2012 to ensure that PD chairs had sufficient time to gather data from their representative committee members and incorporate broad perspectives into their responses. The data was gathered using a mixed methods approach. Corroboration was provided through a process by which respondents (or their delegates) received and collaboratively analyzed aggregate data and provided their perspectives on the conclusions that could reasonably be drawn from the data set.

## Executive Summary

Professional development is one of the most important factors in the transformation of Alberta's education system. As teaching and learning become more complex, sustaining and enhancing teacher practice and teaching quality is increasingly imperative. Teachers require the ability to actively improve their practice through collaboration that is embedded in the daily pattern of practice, and informed by values of equity, professional autonomy and innovation. However, recent data indicate that the profession has some way to go to achieve this preferred state.

### Support for Professional Development

In the 2012 survey, spending on professional development (PD) has remained primarily stable, with 72.1 per cent of respondents reporting spending has remained about the same over the last two years, compared with 63 per cent in 2010.

There was a modest increase in respondents who indicated that access to professional development remained about the same, but 15.2 per cent of respondents noted a decrease in access, compared with 19.6 per cent in 2010. When considered cumulatively and in consideration of 2009 survey data, when 0 per cent of respondents noted a decrease in access to professional development, there does appear to be a steady erosion of teachers' access to PD opportunities. Additionally, while academic leave provisions exist either in policy or collective agreements for the majority, 20 per cent of respondents reported that provisions had not been accessed, in some cases for many years. In specific instances, either no one had applied because the financial benefits were not sufficient, or applications were made but not approved. Of further note is the considerable disparity across the province in the time allotted by jurisdictions for professional development activities, with about three-quarters of the teachers enjoying

8 or more days dedicated for professional development, and one-quarter having less than 7 days dedicated for professional development.

Teachers reported a wide variety of times when professional learning communities (PLCs) were scheduled to meet, citing scheduled PD days as the most common time. Of concern are those teachers who reported no scheduled time for PLCs (12.8 per cent) and those who were scheduled at the end of the instructional day (14.9 per cent). It was not clear whether or not these time structures were designed to give maximum latitude to prospective voluntary participants, or if they were assigned duties added on to teachers' already long list of responsibilities that must be accommodated outside of instructional time. In the literature on effective professional development practice, it is noted that time to engage in professional development is successfully augmented by dedicated time for self-reflection (Klein and Riordan 2011) and opportunities for teachers to define their own learning questions, construct new knowledge and renew themselves and their practices (Maloney, Moore and Taylor 2011).

### Professional Development Planning and the Importance of Teacher Voice

Professional development planning and implementation is a complex undertaking; it is essential to develop a coherent plan and coordinate key elements for effective planning practice. Teachers' sense of professional development planning practices was comparable to the 2010 survey, but a noteworthy exception was evident in the substatement, "a) PD planning respects the professional judgment of teachers and the unique circumstances in which they teach." Teacher responses showed a considerable decrease in the rating for this statement. Teachers continue to report lower ratings regarding the extent to which PD is interactive, continuous and

reflective, and regarding shared vision and responsibility for PD.

Remarkably, the average rating of every response statement regarding essential conditions for effective professional development was *diminished* in the 2012 survey compared with 2010. There was a remarkable shift in respondents' perceptions about the statement, "(PD) is embedded in the workday." In 2010, *no* respondents rated this as "rarely or not evident," compared with 23.9 per cent of respondents who said "rarely or not evident" in 2012. This is also reflected in the recent ATA Member Opinion Survey (MOS), in which the majority of teachers surveyed (65.9 per cent) did not have time for PD during the school day (ATA 2012a). This is particularly troubling, because contextual, job-embedded professional development is well regarded among scholars as an essential component of effective professional development (Nelsen and Cudeiro 2009; Hirsh and Killion 2008; Killion and Williams 2009).

Other essential conditions for effective professional development such as "is selected by the teacher" and "is organized collaboratively among stakeholders" received lower ratings, resulting in a chilling reduction of those conditions that honour the principles of adult learning and effective PD practices. It is essential that teachers are actively involved in determining professional development directions to engender a collective sense of agency (Kragler, Martin and Kroeger 2008; Behrstock-Sherrat and Cogshall 2010), which lies at the heart of teacher self-efficacy (Pella 2011).

## Teachers' Preferences and Perceptions about Professional Growth

Research and literature note that coherence and relevance are critical elements for effective professional development (Garet et al 2001; Darling-Hammond and Richardson 2009). It is interesting to note that teachers' preferred

professional learning activities have a direct relation to their everyday pedagogical tasks and may be reflective of teachers' desire for professional learning structures that are immediately connected with practical issues within their teaching context. Practical, contextual learning supported by opportunity for self-reflection is seen as an effective method to bring about belief change in teachers (Opfer and Pedder 2011). Teachers reported more interest in interactive learning activities over solitary learning, and less interest in online professional development endeavours. Teachers had greatest interest in mentoring, peer coaching, collaborative planning, interschool/classroom visitation, and collaborative curriculum development.

There was a noticeable change in respondents' perspectives on teachers' autonomy in developing and meeting their professional growth plan goals. The largest category was "some degree of autonomy," which increased to 64.4 per cent (from 48.9 per cent in 2010). However, the majority of gains made in this area can be attributed to a decline in the number of respondents who answered "high degree of autonomy," which significantly decreased to 33.3 per cent in 2012, from 44.4 per cent in 2010. The number of respondents who answered "little autonomy" also shrank, to 2.2 per cent in 2012, from 6.7 per cent in 2010. Responses in categories of "high autonomy" and "little autonomy" decreased to create a sizable increase in the "some autonomy" category. It is interesting to compare these responses with the 2012 ATA MOS, where, in response to the statement, "I have the autonomy to choose the professional development that best meets my needs and the needs of my students," 26 per cent of respondents disagreed, with a further 9 per cent unsure. Teachers support the growth plan model and principles and feel considerable affinity and investment in the professional growth plan process. In order to maximize the effectiveness of the growth plan model, teachers' voice and choice should be of premier importance.

## Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)

In some districts, central office staff have seized control of AISI initiatives and distorted the purpose and potential of AISI by using resources for routine managerial purposes or to focus on raising test scores in particular curricular domains. Yet in others, where AISI is seen to have flourished, teachers and school principals are intimately involved in identifying areas of school improvement that need site-based research and attention, and enact this work with the support of the school, community and central office staff. Evidence of increased centralization of AISI projects can be found in data that illustrate that more than 800 unique site-based projects in Cycle 1 (2000–03) had shrunk to 135 large system-level “umbrella” projects in Cycle 4 (2009–12).

The teacher’s already tenuous influence on AISI projects has declined in all three areas: at the school and jurisdiction levels and in terms of PD support for projects. Teacher influence on professional development support for projects took the hardest hit, with respondents’ average rating decreasing from 2.91 in 2010, to 2.69 in 2012, on a five-point scale. At the school level, the already weak rating of 2.98 in 2010 slipped to 2.82 in 2012. Jurisdictional influence changed the least, with an average rating of 2.29 in 2012, compared with 2.33 in 2010. It is clear from the range of descriptively reported practices that teachers are still not being consistently and systematically included in every stage of AISI project planning.

A significant percentage of respondents (38.1 per cent) indicated that they had noticed a decrease in *access* to AISI-related professional development over the last year, with only 7.1 per cent indicating an increase. Teachers desired the continuation of and further refinement of AISI programs and valued the contribution AISI projects made to the practical research base and their professional knowledge.

## Beginning Teachers, Substitute Teachers and Teachers New to the Province

Beginning teachers are supported primarily through mentorship programs, designed and supported by locals and jurisdictions. Some respondents wrote of extensive mentoring programs for teachers new to the profession, the jurisdiction or subject/grade, with release time to meet with mentors, attend sessions and access resources. Overall, the trend was toward formal programs, collaboratively designed and supported. These multifaceted programs were often offered jointly by jurisdictions and locals, and funded by both parties. There appeared to be growth in the length of mentorship programs, with frequent examples of mentoring beyond the first year, into the second, third and even fifth year. This is consistent with teachers’ overall interest in mentoring and peer-coaching endeavours. Support for beginning teachers’ attendance at the ATA Beginning Teachers’ Conference was consistently high.

Dedicated resources for substitute teachers’ professional development continue to vary widely and are often absent at the local level. The lack of professional development opportunities for substitute teachers is striking. Opportunities are often not tailored to substitute teacher needs or are not advertised in a way that would inform them of the opportunities available. This is especially disheartening for substitutes who are new teachers and are looking for full-time teaching positions. Overall, there appeared to be a greater awareness of the need to support substitute teacher development.

About 32 per cent of respondents reported that there was no professional development support structure in place for teachers new to the province or country. Another 39 per cent indicated that these teachers were treated as teachers new to the profession. Only a few respondents reported efforts to meet the specialized needs of this group. During a one-year period between 2011 and 2012, 46 per cent of all first-time applicants to the Teacher



Qualifications Service had taken some or part of their studies outside of Alberta, an increase from 43 per cent in 2010. It continues to be of considerable importance that PD leaders address the complex needs of the teachers whose practice or preparation has taken place outside of Alberta in order to maintain the vitality of the profession.

## **Professional Development for Administrators**

There is a significant increase in district-focused professional development programming and support for administrators, including aspiring, new and veteran administrators. About 40 per cent of respondents identified formal programs

to support leadership growth. The programs are varied, including leadership pools; master's program cohorts; administration mentorship programs that may include release from classroom duties; and evening/supper club sessions that focus on leadership topics.

Veteran administrators enjoy a variety of opportunities for professional growth. Many jurisdictions arrange for a retreat experience for administration; respondents also reported regularly scheduled cohort meetings for administration, including ongoing evening programs structured similarly to those offered to new administrators, but with advanced content. Overall, there is a significant increase in district-focused professional development programming and support for administrators.

# Research Method

## A. Instruments

An online survey was used to collect data from local professional development (PD) committee chairs and committees. Appointed by members of their local, PD chairs assess the needs of teachers in their area, plan professional development events and evaluate professional development programs. PD chairs were invited to respond to a variety of questions designed to capture information about the number and nature of professional development opportunities available in their area. Most questions involved rating some aspect of professional development on a graded scale for which descriptors were provided. In the case of most questions, respondents could also add comments. Forty-seven of the Association's 54 locals (87 per cent) responded.

Participants were asked to rate: (a) the ability of teachers in their area to participate in professional development programs and professional learning communities, and (b) the extent to which various partners were able to implement successful planning practices. In another question, participants were provided with a list of conditions essential for professional development and asked to assess the extent to which those conditions were evident in their area. Still another question asked participants to assess the interest of teachers in their area in each of a number of specified professional development activities. Another question asked respondents to assess the degree to which teachers in their area had autonomy with respect to developing and pursuing a professional growth plan and to comment on the challenges and successes facing teachers in developing and implementing a growth plan. Other questions prompted PD chairs to assess the extent to which teachers had a role in choosing how their jurisdiction used funds obtained from the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement. Finally, participants were asked to comment on the professional development opportunities available in their area for the following groups of teachers: new teachers, substitute teachers, new and veteran administrators, teachers aspiring to administrative positions, and teachers new to the province or country.

## B. Process

Based on versions of the survey administered in previous years, the 2012 survey was piloted with members of the Association's corps of professional development facilitators (a group of practicing teachers whose primary role is to support PD chairs in their locals), as well as with executive staff officers in the Association's Professional Development program area. The survey was then revised on the basis of the feedback obtained. Once the survey had been administered and the data collected, the aggregate raw data was presented for confirmation to professional development chairs and committee members attending the Professional Development Course at the ATA's 2012 Summer Conference. The conference delegates analyzed the data on a question-by-question basis. Their observations informed the writing of this report.

## C. Timeline

The survey was introduced to PD chairs and Economic Policy Committee chairs by memo in October of 2011. The link to the online survey was emailed to PD chairs on November 15, 2011 along with a reminder that responses were due by March 1, 2012. PD facilitators and PD executive staff officers helped professional development chairs complete the survey.

## D. Respondents

The survey was administered to the professional development chairs in each of the Association's 54 locals across the province. PD chairs provide leadership with respect to professional development in their area by conducting needs assessments, planning and implementing professional development initiatives, administering funds both through teacher committees and in collaboration with other PD providers, sitting on jurisdiction planning committees, and assisting school-based professional development committees. Although they work at the local level, PD chairs also provide advice to the provincial Association.

# Teachers' Professional Development Opportunities in Alberta

## A. Spending on Professional Development

Respondents indicated that overall spending on professional development has remained primarily stable; 72.1 per cent of respondents reported spending has remained about the same over the last two years, compared with 63 per cent in 2010. Fewer respondents noted a decrease in funding (11.6 per cent in 2012, compared with 21.7 per cent in 2010), with a modest increase in respondents who reported an increase in funding (16.3 per cent in 2012, compared with 15.2 per cent in 2010). Figure 1 below provides a summary of responses.

## B. Access to Professional Development Opportunities

As can be seen in Figure 2, there was a modest increase in the number of respondents who indicated that access remained about the same from 67.4 per cent in 2010 to 73.9 per cent in 2012. 15.2 per cent of respondents noted a decrease in access, compared with 19.6 per cent in 2010, and 10.9 per cent noted increased access, compared with 13.0 per cent in 2010. However, when considered cumulatively with 2009 survey data, when 0 per cent of respondents noted a decrease in access to professional development, there does appear to be a steady erosion of teachers' access to PD opportunities.

Figure 1. 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.

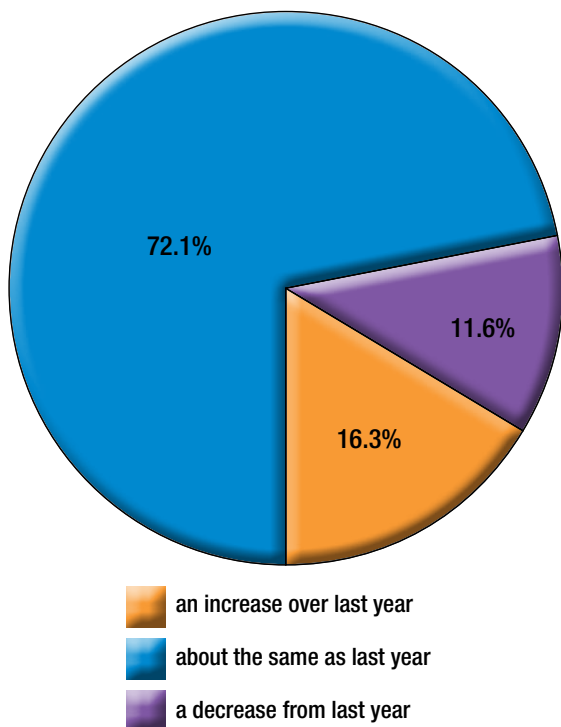
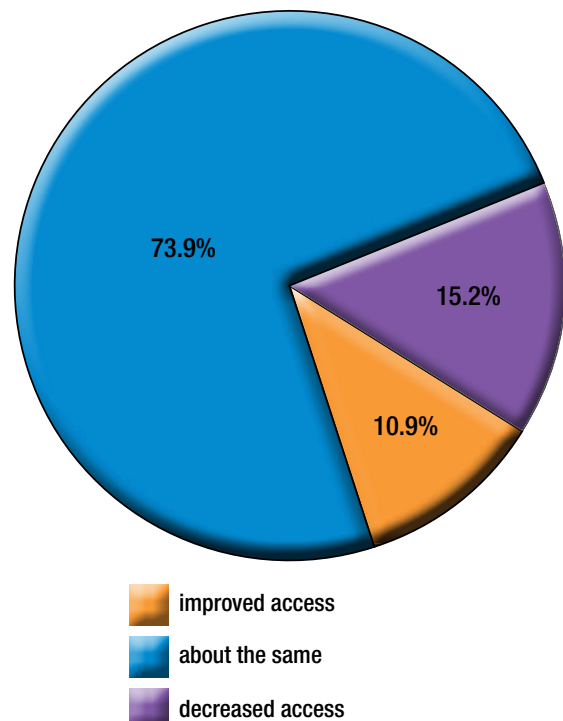


Figure 2. How would you describe overall access to professional development opportunities for teachers (ie, in terms of funding, time and the general program of PD in the district) as compared to the last two years? Please check one.

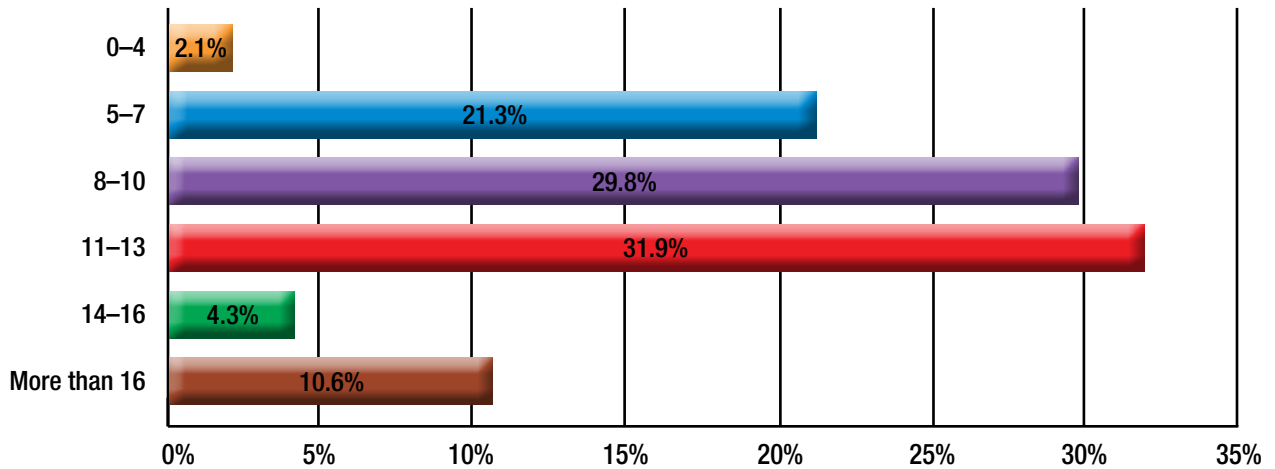


Some participants also indicated anecdotally that there were concerns about access to academic leave provisions, which are often granted at the discretion of the employer. While provisions exist either in policy or collective agreements for the majority of respondents, 20 per cent of respondents reported that provisions had not been accessed, in some cases for many years. In some instances, no one had applied because the financial benefits were not sufficient; in other instances, applications were made but not approved.

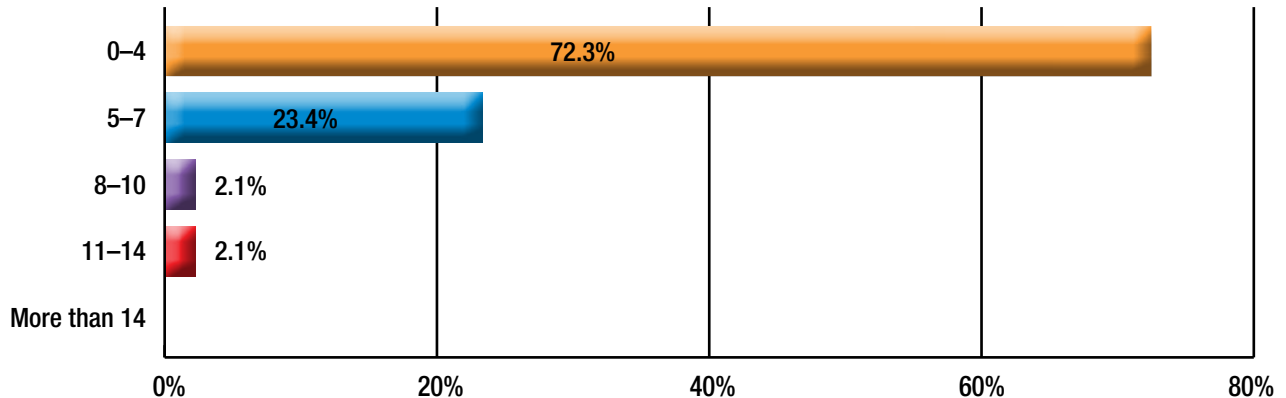
### Time Provisions

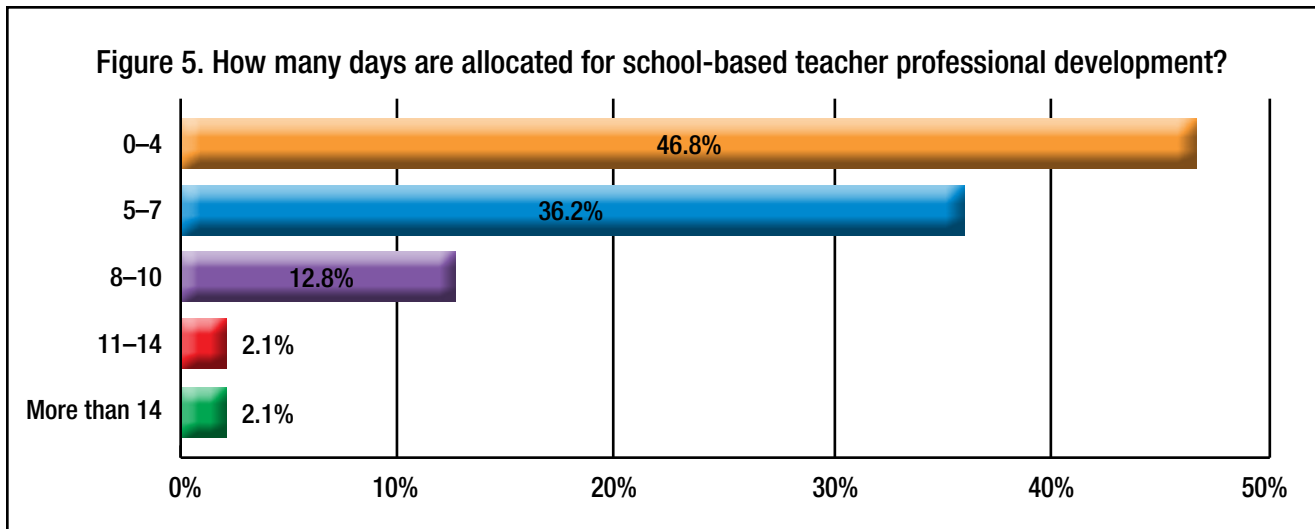
During the 2012 PD survey administration, respondents were asked to detail the time provisions allotted to teachers in the jurisdictions associated with their local organizations. Figures 3, 4 and 5 reflect questions revised from previous administrations of the PD survey. In the 2012 administration, the previously open-response fields were replaced by closed-response fields with selected ranges. The 2012 administration also saw an increase of

**Figure 3. 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.**



**Figure 4. How many days are allocated for district-wide professional development?**





about 15 per cent in the number of respondents. These two factors make specific year-to-year comparisons inappropriate. However, the data below clearly suggests that there are considerable discrepancies between jurisdictions in the numbers of days allotted for professional development activities, with 76.6 per cent of the teachers enjoying eight or more days dedicated for professional development, and 23.4 per cent having less than seven days dedicated for professional development. These figures include the two convention days reserved for teachers through legislation. The majority of respondents (72.3 per cent) noted that there were between 0–4 days allocated for district-wide PD, with only 4.2 per cent noting the number of days as greater than 8. Comparatively, 17 per cent of respondents indicated that 8 or more days were allocated for school-based PD. This may indicate a trend for jurisdictions to designate more time for school-based professional development.

Literature on effective practices suggests that schools and jurisdictions must provide considerable time for sustained professional development, especially if change in practice is the goal (see Darling-Hammond and Friedlander 2008; Darling-Hammond et al 2009; Levin, 2009). Time to engage in professional development is successfully augmented by dedicated time for self-reflection (Klein and Riordan 2011) and opportunities for teachers to define their own learning questions, construct

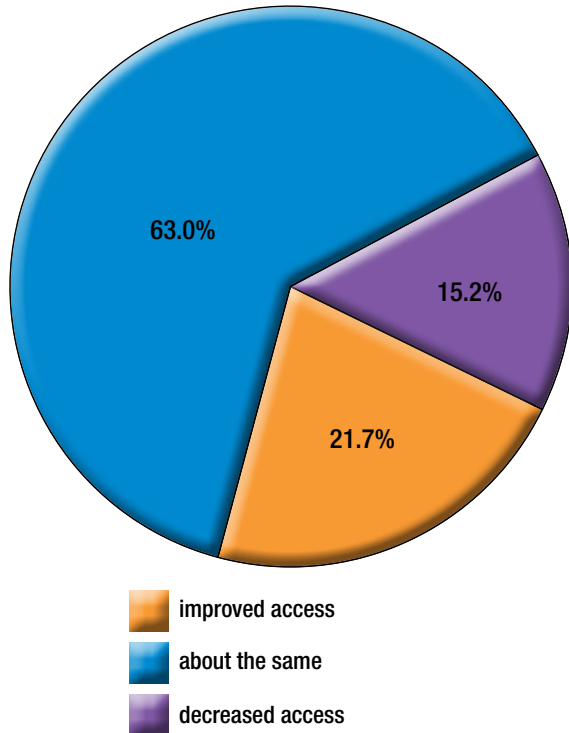
new knowledge and renew themselves and their practices (Maloney, Moore and Taylor 2011).

### C. Ability to Participate in a Professional Learning Community

Professional learning communities, whether in virtual space or face-to-face, are seen as important aspects of teacher learning. Since teacher practice is conducted in a socially and culturally laden environment, learning structures that understand the socially constructed nature of practice can create the necessary conditions for transformations in teacher perspectives and pedagogy (Pella 2011; Drago-Severson 2011).

Teachers' ability to participate in a professional learning community was generally maintained between 2010 and 2012. As seen in Figure 6, respondents noted teachers' ability to participate as about the same, with 63 per cent of responses, an increase over 57.4 per cent in 2010. There was a decline in the numbers of responses indicating improved access from 27.7 per cent in 2010, to 21.7 per cent in 2012. Respondents noted decreased access from 15.2 per cent in 2012, up marginally from 14.9 per cent in 2010. From these numbers, it appears that fewer teachers are experiencing an increase in access, but there has not been a corresponding decrease in access. Access has generally remained stable since 2010.

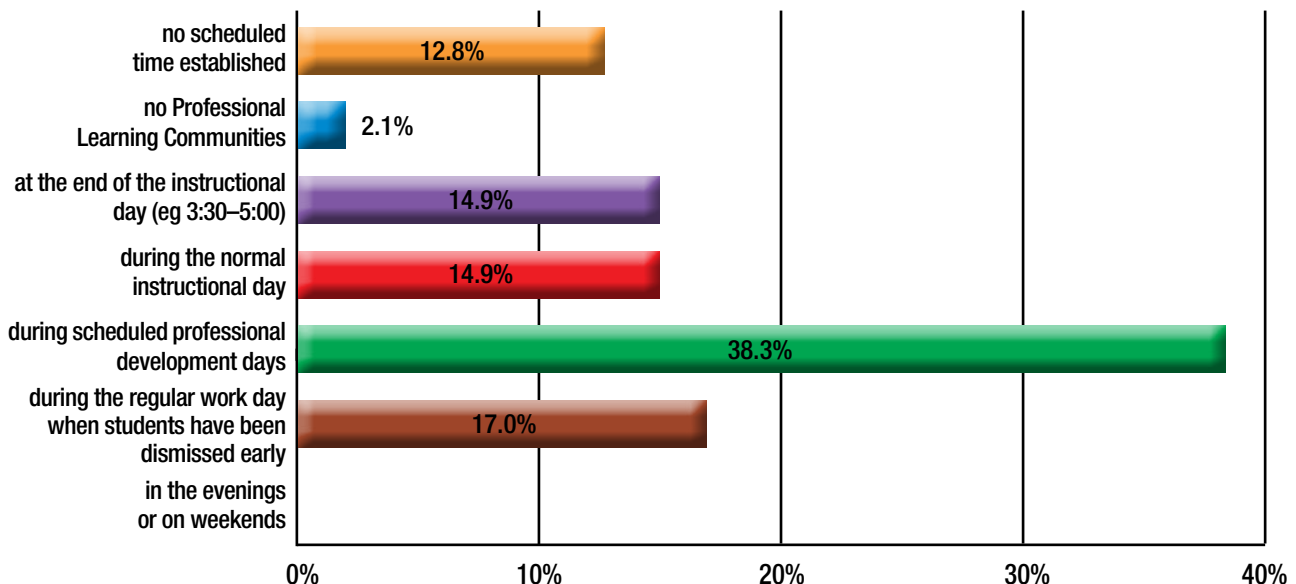
**Figure 6. How would you describe teachers' ability to participate in Professional Learning Communities (ie, in terms of release time or other support)? Please check one.**



When asked to report when professional learning communities (PLCs) were scheduled to meet, teachers reported a wide variety of times, as seen in Figure 7, citing scheduled PD days as the most common time. Teachers also attended PLCs during the regular instructional day (14.9 per cent), and during the regular work day when students have been dismissed early (17 per cent), demonstrating willingness on the part of some school jurisdictions to embed professional learning communities during the regular work day.

Recent data on teacher workload indicates that teachers' work is intensifying. A small sample of teachers tracked an average of 55 hours per week; in another study, 45.6 per cent of a larger sample of surveyed teachers (n=1,058) indicated that they are unable to balance their personal and work life. (ATA 2012a, 2012b). Of some considerable concern are those teachers in the 2012 PD survey administration who reported no scheduled time for PLCs (12.8 per cent) and those who were scheduled at the end of the instructional day (14.9 per cent). It was unclear whether or not time structures were designed to give maximum latitude to prospective voluntary participants, or if they were assigned duties added on to the teachers' already long list of

**Figure 7. What is the most common time for scheduled Professional Learning Community activities?**



responsibilities that must be accommodated outside of instructional time.

The numbers related to the previous series of survey questions reveal only part of the story. Participants' descriptive responses further revealed the variety of resources, structures and philosophies engaged in the local and jurisdiction level to respond to contextual and community needs. Participants noted a vast array of funding structures and possibilities employed by boards and locals alike, and cited a plethora of calendar plans and funding parameters to support professional development. Some respondents positively reported peer-observation opportunities, communities of practice days, coordinated release time to allow for collaboration and grade-level collaboration meeting days. Some respondents noted that interschool inequity has created some friction, while others noted that even though there was more time and money allotted to professional development, it constituted "more PD controlled and organized by the Board." One respondent wrote "No money, no time, no energy," but despairing descriptive responses in this section tended to be fewer than cautiously optimistic responses. The prevalence of site-based decision making and budgeting practices has resulted in a fragmented array of professional development supports, even within jurisdictions. While this does not embrace the coordinated, comprehensive approach reflected in the literature on promising practices (Guskey 2009; ATA 2010b), it does reflect an ongoing and deliberate attempt to respond to contextual factors and create professional learning experiences that make effective use of the resources available within given parameters.

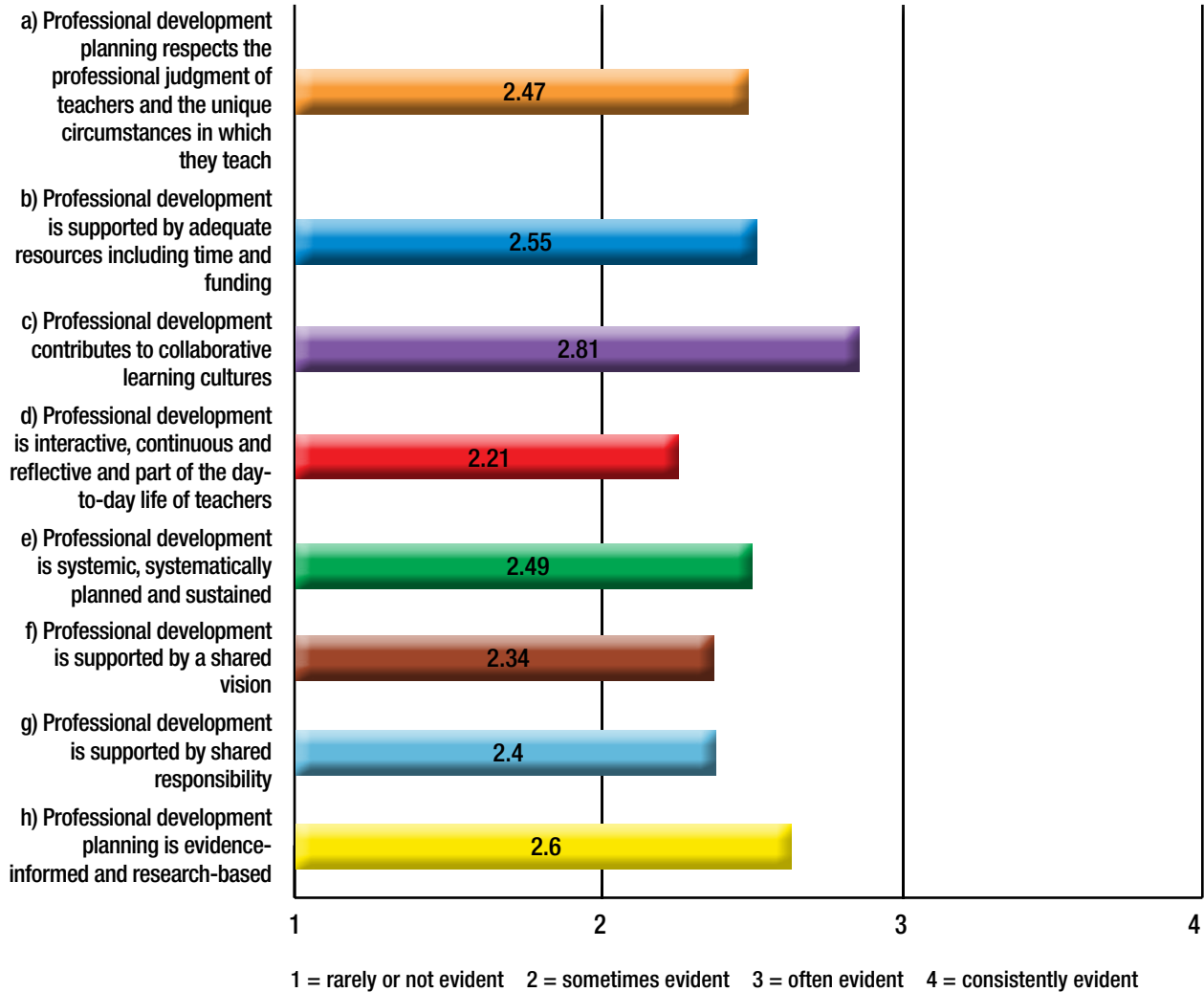
## D. Successful Professional Development Planning

Teachers continue to experience PD that contributes to collaborative learning cultures, planned through evidence-informed and research-based processes. However, teachers

continue to report lower ratings regarding both the extent to which PD is interactive, continuous and reflective, and shared vision and responsibility for PD. The graph in Figure 8, shows a distribution of responses among the question substatements that is comparable to the 2010 survey. The singular noteworthy exception was evident in the substatement, "a) PD planning respects the professional judgment of teachers and the unique circumstances in which they teach." Teacher responses showed a considerable decrease in the rating for this statement. When scale differences between the two administrations are adjusted for, the 2010 rating was 2.87, compared with a 2012 rating of 2.47, on a four-point scale, revealing teachers' sense that this principle is decreasingly evident in professional development planning.

Just under half of respondents chose to add additional comments to support their answers, and their comments reinforce the observation that professional development planning continues to be an endeavour that, in many jurisdictions, is mandated in a top-down fashion to support jurisdictional goals. Planning practices were usually positively reported where teachers had strong representation in formal planning structures—for example, through joint planning councils or cochaired collaborative committees. Conversely, in one case it was noted that, "the collaborative jurisdiction committee was dissolved ... [which] distinctly reduces sharing of ideas or input from teachers." In other instances, the vision and responsibility for PD were, as participants noted, "distributed by our district" or "determined at the district level" with "little capacity to address unique learning needs or contexts." However, several jurisdictions were reported to have renewed their efforts to engage in collaborative planning and coherent and sustained planning, often around AISI projects. It is essential that teachers are actively involved in determining professional development directions to engender a collective sense of agency (Kragler, Martin and Kroeger 2008; Behrstock-Sherrat and Coggshall 2010), which lies at the heart of teacher self-efficacy (Pella 2011).

Figure 8. In your context, to what extent are the following principles evident in implementing effective professional development planning practices?



## E. Essential Conditions for Effective Professional Development

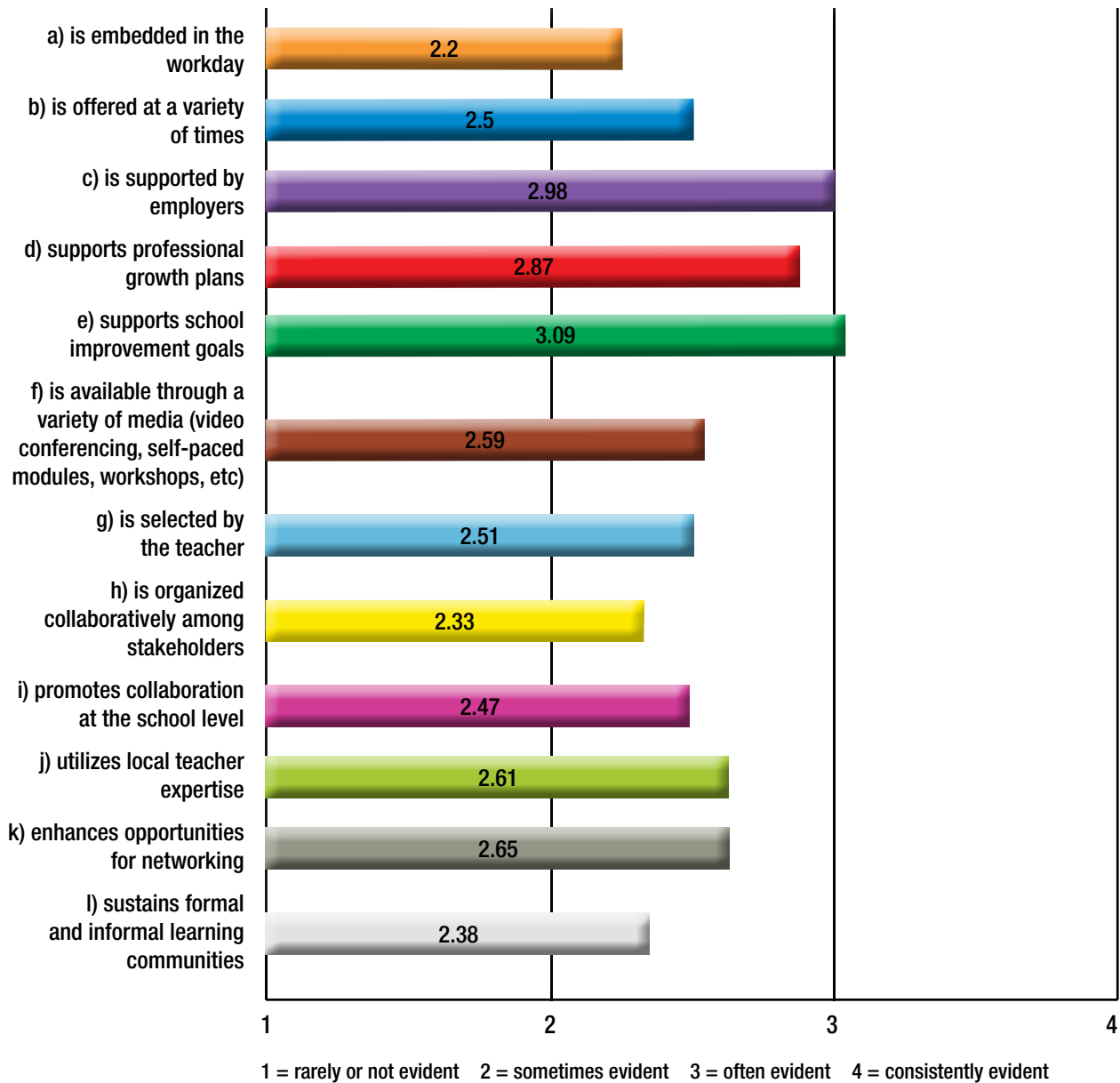
For each of the essential conditions for effective professional development statements in Figure 9, the majority of respondents rated each essential condition as being either “sometimes evident” or “often evident.” General trends remained similar: statements which had higher ratings retained these over time. For example, “is supported by employers,” “supports school improvement goals” and “supports professional

growth plans” were reported higher than other statements, in both this and the 2010 administration.

However, without exception, the overall average rating of each of the essential conditions statements decreased between the 2010 and 2012 survey administration. The decreases in evidence rating varied from a decrease of 0.13 (on a four point scale) for the statement “supports professional growth plans” to a 0.52 decrease for the statement “is embedded in the workday.” Other notable declines in rating between 2010 and 2012 include “sustains formal



**Figure 9. In your context, how evident are the following essential conditions for effective professional development? Please consider the following statements and select a rating for each one. In my local area, professional development...**



and informal learning communities” (-0.47), “utilizes local teacher expertise” (-0.35) and “promotes collaboration at the school level” (-0.50). This troubling trend can best be seen when we compare the rating distribution on

each of the substatements. Figure 10 shows the 2012 response details.

There was a remarkable shift in respondents’ perceptions about the statement “is embedded in the workday.” In 2010, *no* respondents rated

Figure 10. In your context, how evident are the following essential conditions for effective professional development? Please consider the following statements and select a rating for each one. In my local area, professional development...

	rarely or not evident (1)	sometimes evident (2)	often evident (3)	consistently evident (4)	Rating Average
a) is embedded in the workday	23.9%	<b>41.3%</b>	26.1%	8.7%	2.20
b) is offered at a variety of times	13.0%	32.6%	<b>45.7%</b>	8.7%	2.50
c) is supported by employers	2.2%	23.9%	<b>47.8%</b>	26.1%	2.98
d) supports professional growth plans	0.0%	28.3%	<b>56.5%</b>	15.2%	2.87
e) supports school improvement goals	0.0%	13.0%	<b>65.2%</b>	21.7%	3.09
f) is available through a variety of media (video conferencing, self-paced modules, workshops, etc)	6.5%	<b>41.3%</b>	39.1%	13.0%	2.59
g) is selected by the teacher	8.9%	37.8%	<b>46.7%</b>	6.7%	2.51
h) is organized collaboratively among stakeholders	13.0%	<b>50.0%</b>	28.3%	8.7%	2.33
i) promotes collaboration at the school level	6.7%	<b>48.9%</b>	35.6%	8.9%	2.47
j) utilizes local teacher expertise	6.5%	34.8%	<b>50.0%</b>	8.7%	2.61
k) enhances opportunities for networking	2.2%	41.3%	<b>45.7%</b>	10.9%	2.65
l) sustains formal and informal learning communities	8.9%	<b>53.3%</b>	28.9%	8.9%	2.38

this as “rarely or not evident,” but that zero has turned into 23.9 per cent of respondents in 2012. This is also reflected in the recent ATA Member Opinion Survey (MOS), in which the majority of teachers surveyed (65.9 per cent) did not have time for PD during the school day (ATA 2012a). This is particularly troubling because contextual, job-embedded professional development is well regarded among scholars as an essential component of effective professional

development (Nelsen and Cudeiro 2009; Hirsh and Killion 2008; Killion and Williams 2009).

Other select essential conditions for effective professional development that experienced overall declining ratings saw considerable erosion in the rating “consistently evident.” For example, the essential condition “utilizes local teacher expertise” was rated by 26.1 per cent of respondents as consistently evident in 2010, but slipped to 8.7 per cent in 2012. Comparable

trends in “enhances opportunities for networking” (31.9 per cent in 2010, to 10.9 per cent in 2012) and “sustains formal and informal learning communities” (21.7 per cent in 2010, tumbling to 8.9 per cent in 2012) depict a chilling reduction of the conditions that honour the principles of adult learning and effective PD practices.

Of further concern are noticeable increases in the lower rating of “sometimes evident,” in several statements, including “promotes collaboration at the school level” (from 29.8 per cent in 2010, to 48.9 per cent in 2012) and “is available through a variety of media” (from 21.3 per cent in 2010, to 41.3 per cent in 2012). A close examination of the specific rating choices of respondents demonstrates that evidence of essential conditions for effective professional development has declined in each area, and that the change is pronounced when the rating distributions are compared.

## **F. Teachers’ Interest in Professional Development Activities**

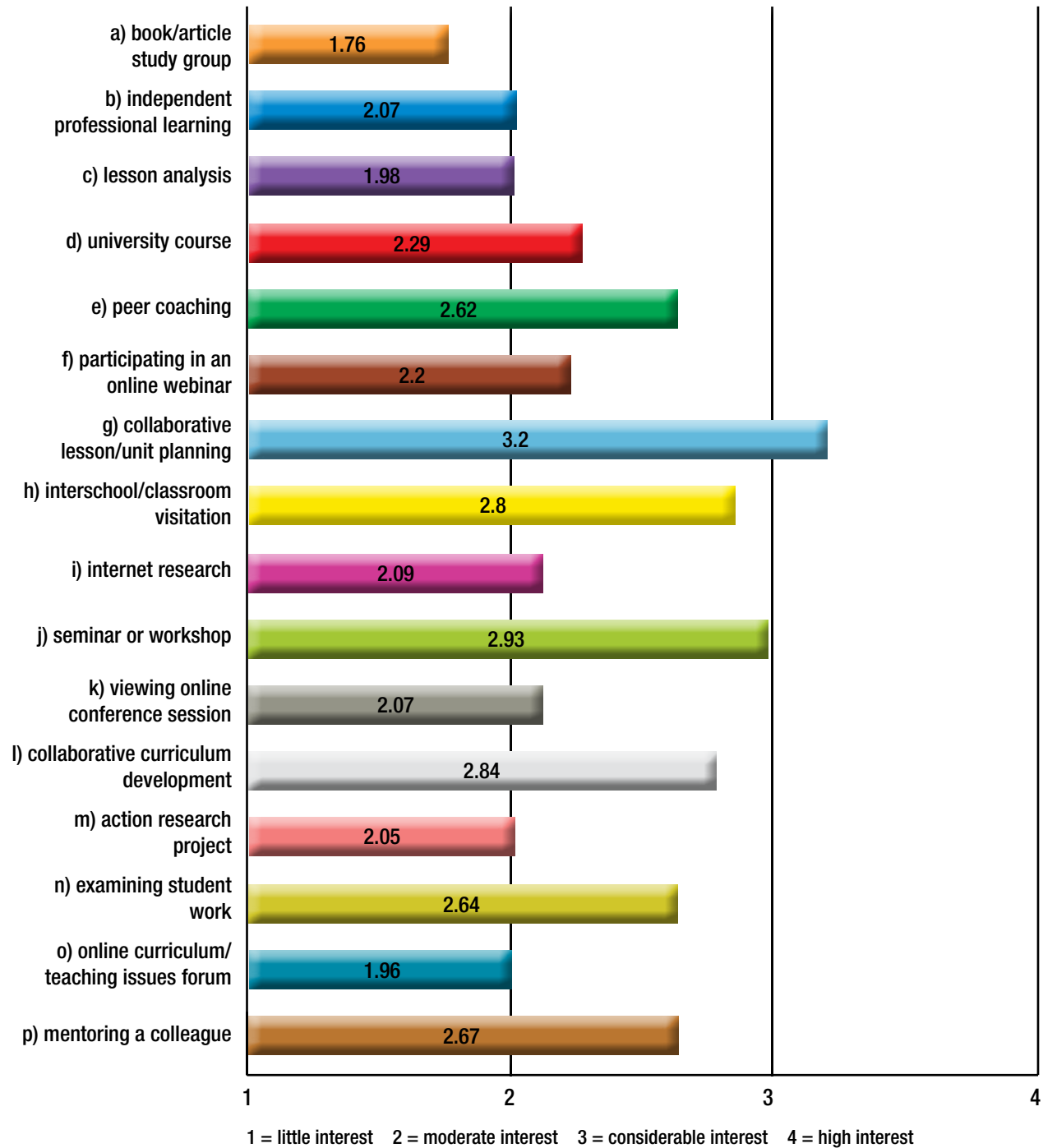
There was an overall decrease in teachers’ reported interest in selected professional development opportunities, with all but two of the choices seeing some decrease in average ratings on a four-point scale. Overall patterns of preference were consistent with previous data from 2010: teachers were reported to be more interested in interactive learning activities over solitary learning, and responded less favourably to online professional development endeavours such as online curriculum forums, webinars and online research. This may be because online PD does not require the same kind of scheduling considerations as collaborative ventures, and

may be seen by teachers as a time-consuming add-on to their already busy worklives.

From the choices given, respondents indicated that teachers had the greatest interest in mentoring, peer coaching, collaborative planning, interschool/classroom visitation and collaborative curriculum development. Research and literature note that coherence and relevance are critical elements for effective professional development (Garet et al 2001; Darling-Hammond and Richardson 2009). It is interesting to note that teachers’ preferred activities have a direct relation to their everyday pedagogical tasks and may be reflective of teachers’ desire for professional learning structures that are immediately connected with practical issues within their teaching context. Practical, contextual learning supported by the opportunity for self-reflection is seen as an effective method to bring about belief change in teachers (Opfer and Pedder 2011). It may also be reflective of the extraordinary workload issues faced by teachers and a desire to engage in learning processes that support increased efficacy in teaching tasks.

Professional development opportunities less directly related to pragmatic concerns were not rated as top choices as seen in Figure 11, although some, such as “examining student work” and “seminar or workshop” saw favourable ratings in 2012, similar to 2010. In the last two survey administrations, the overall relative rankings remained comparable but the spread between rankings grew more pronounced. Since this question was new in 2010, this difference may be attributed to PD planners’ increased awareness of their constituents’ interests in the recent survey question administration or in changes to the way respondents gather data from their constituents.

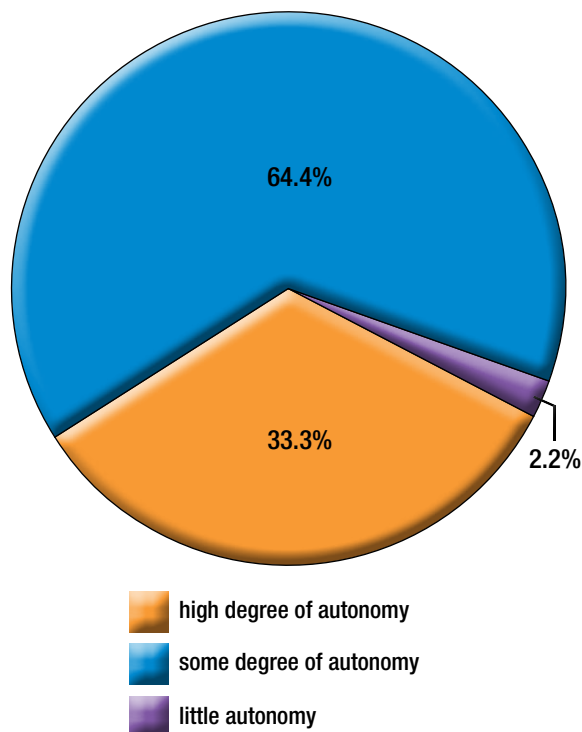
Figure 11. Based on information you have collected, how interested would teachers in your ATA Local be in the following professional development opportunities?



## G. Individual Growth Plans

There was a noticeable change in respondents' perspectives on teachers' autonomy in developing and meeting their professional growth plan goals as seen in Figure 12. The largest category was "some degree of autonomy," which increased to 64.4 per cent (from 48.9 per cent in 2010). Unfortunately, the majority of gains made in this area can be attributed to a decline in the number of respondents who answered "high degree of autonomy," which significantly decreased to 33.3 per cent in 2012, from 44.4 per cent in 2010. The number of respondents who answered "little autonomy" also shrank, to 2.2 per cent in 2012, from 6.7 per cent in 2010. Responses in categories of "high autonomy" and "little autonomy" decreased to create a sizable increase in the "some autonomy" category. It is

**Figure 12. How much professional autonomy and choice are teachers given in developing and meeting the goals identified in their professional growth plans? Please check one.**



interesting to compare these responses with the 2012 ATA MOS, where, in response to the statement, "I have the autonomy to choose the professional development that best meets my needs and the needs of my students," 26 per cent of respondents disagreed, with a further 9 per cent unsure. An examination of PD survey respondents' descriptions of challenges and successes with the growth plan process reveals further emerging trends and issues.

### Growth Plans: Successes and Challenges

Open-ended responses were solicited on questions that asked respondents to detail both challenges and successes experienced in development and implementation of growth plans by teachers in their local area. The body of responses as a whole revealed respondents' comprehensive understanding of the interrelated elements and the tensions inherent in competing priorities within teachers' professional work and learning.

- Respondents noted that there were many organizations offering a wide variety of professional development topics, but also noted that once a teacher had gained initial exposure and practice implementing new learning, it was often difficult to obtain deeper expertise in the topic, in part due to availability.
- Respondents observed that growth plans were effective in holding teachers responsible for their own growth, and were most effective when they were revisited and reflected upon throughout the year, and periodically in conjunction with an administrator or a collegial team.
- Some respondents noted that time for reflection, consultation and collaboration was rare—in some cases neglected—and this hindered the efficacy of the process. Respondents positively cited situations in which time was allotted for consultation with administration and collaboration in pursuit of teacher professional growth goals.
- Several respondents indicated that where administration did not participate

meaningfully, the growth plan process lost rigour and importance for teachers. This observation intersects directly with the issue of school administrator workload and the impossible demands placed on school leaders.

- The overwhelming majority of respondents commented on the considerable tension between teachers' desire for growth goals based on their own skills and context and higher administration expectations that teachers align their growth plans with system or school goals. One respondent captured this overarching concern by saying:  
 "When teachers are allowed to develop TPGPs that truly reflect their own needs and goals versus contrived goals that fit the school's/division's goals, they feel the highest degree of ownership. This sense of autonomy leads to "real" growth plans rather than a make-work paper project."  
 Interestingly, 25 per cent of the ATA 2012 MOS respondents disagreed with the statement, "My employer respects my professional autonomy"; a further 23 per cent were unsure.
- In their responses, teachers noted that resource decisions were often site based, leading to concerns about equity and access. This was particularly true when teachers sought specialty area support, which may not be readily or locally available.
- Respondents noted that time designated as professional development time had in some cases replaced preparatory time, or included other noninstructional duties such as staff meetings or IPP completion. This may explain apparent increases to PD time: designated time to create the optics of professional learning support, but filled with noninstructional obligations.
- Respondents noted that where structures supported autonomous goal development and implementation, with collaborative and consultative structures readily available, teachers found growth plans an effective way to increase self-efficacy.

Overall, it is encouraging that respondents appeared to feel considerable affinity and investment in the professional growth plan process. The concerns voiced indicate that, in

principle, teachers support the growth plan model and principles; ideally the growth plan process guides and empowers them to achieve their own professional growth goals.

## H. AISI Projects and Professional Development

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) has not had a stable dynamic between the years 2010 and 2012 in its funding or support from teachers across Alberta's school jurisdictions.

In some districts, central office staff have seized control of the initiative(s) and distorted the purpose and potential of AISI by using resources for routine managerial purposes or to focus on raising test scores in particular curricular domains. Yet in others, where AISI is seen to have flourished, teachers and school principals are intimately involved in identifying areas of school improvement that need site-based research and attention, and enact this work with the support of the school, community and central office staff. Evidence of increased centralization of AISI projects can be found in data that illustrate that more than 800 unique site-based projects in Cycle 1 (2000–03) had shrunk to 135 large system-level "umbrella" projects in Cycle 4 (2009–12).

There has been a concerted effort by the AISI Partners Steering Committee to devise governance structures that support teacher efficacy for the site-based AISI projects. As Dr Dennis Shirley notes in relation to AISI, "the peer factor of inquiry into improved learning for students bears more promise than the fear factor of external accountability and control" ([www.teachers.ab.ca/Publications/ATA%20Magazine/Volume-91/Number-4/Pages/Clutching-defeat.aspx](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Publications/ATA%20Magazine/Volume-91/Number-4/Pages/Clutching-defeat.aspx)).

Another factor affecting AISI between 2010 and 2012 was the political decision of the Alberta government to dramatically reduce AISI funding by 50 per cent in light of budget shortfalls. With AISI, Alberta has developed a model of professional learning across schools and jurisdictions that has attracted the attention

of educators and policy makers worldwide, yet the mass reduction of funding to AISI had an immediate effect on the ability of its participants to support innovation in their AISI projects.

In the 2012 administration of this survey, respondents reported that teachers’ already tenuous influence on AISI projects had declined in all three areas: at the school and jurisdiction levels and in terms of PD support for projects. Teacher influence on professional development support for projects took the hardest hit, with respondents’ average rating decreasing from 2.91 in 2010, to 2.69 in 2012, on a five-point scale. At the school level, the already weak rating of 2.98 in 2010 slipped to 2.82 in 2012. Jurisdictional influence changed the least, with an average rating of 2.29 in 2012, compared with 2.33 in 2010. However, when considering that these numeric averages are on a five-point scale as shown in Figure 13, it is clear that teachers have been relegated to a marginalized position of influence in the direction of AISI projects overall, and teachers feel largely underrepresented in AISI priorities.

An examination of the distribution of respondents’ choices in Figure 14 reveals an overall move toward the “limited” category compared to 2010, with some encouraging declines in the “none” category. However, the data reveals equally discouraging declines at the “high” level, particularly at the school level and in PD support for projects. For example, in 2010,

28.9 per cent of respondents rated teachers’ influence at the school level as “high,” a number that slid alarmingly to 15.6 per cent of respondents in 2012. Similarly, teachers’ influence over professional development supports were rated as “high” by 20.5 per cent of respondents in 2010, which deteriorated to only 13.3 per cent of respondents in 2012. In spite of this, respondents continue to indicate that teachers have greater influence in determining priorities at the school level and in terms of PD support than they do in jurisdiction priorities.

While teacher respondents rated their overall influence as poor, they articulated a variety of methods employed at the jurisdiction level to gather input from teachers. Only a few respondents indicated through their comments that there were no or negligible attempts made to consult with teachers. Others noted future jurisdictional plans to seek teacher input. Many respondents noted that teachers’ input was gathered at the school level by administrators, with some formal whole-staff processes and often informal information gathering. Some respondents noted that determining and influencing project priorities fell to school administration. About a third of respondents noted existing or emerging structures designed to ensure classroom teacher participation in project priorities, and these ranged from steering committee representation from the local to individual school site representation, with input

**Figure 13. To what degree do teachers in your local have influence in determining potential project priorities?**

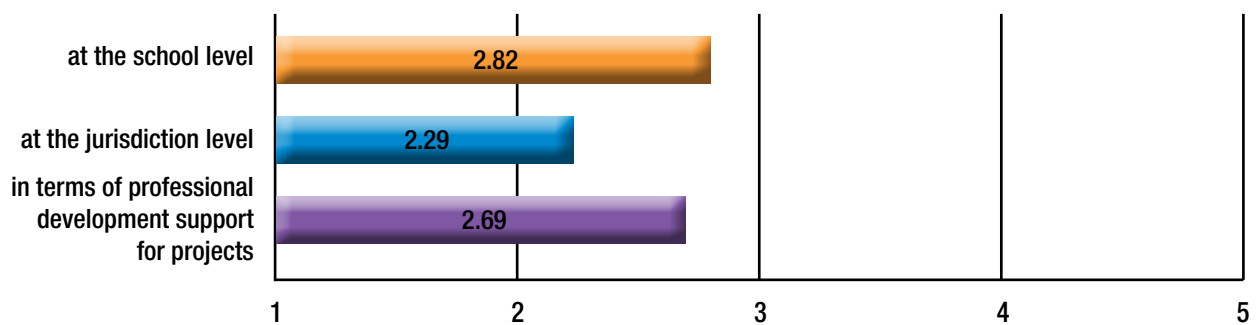
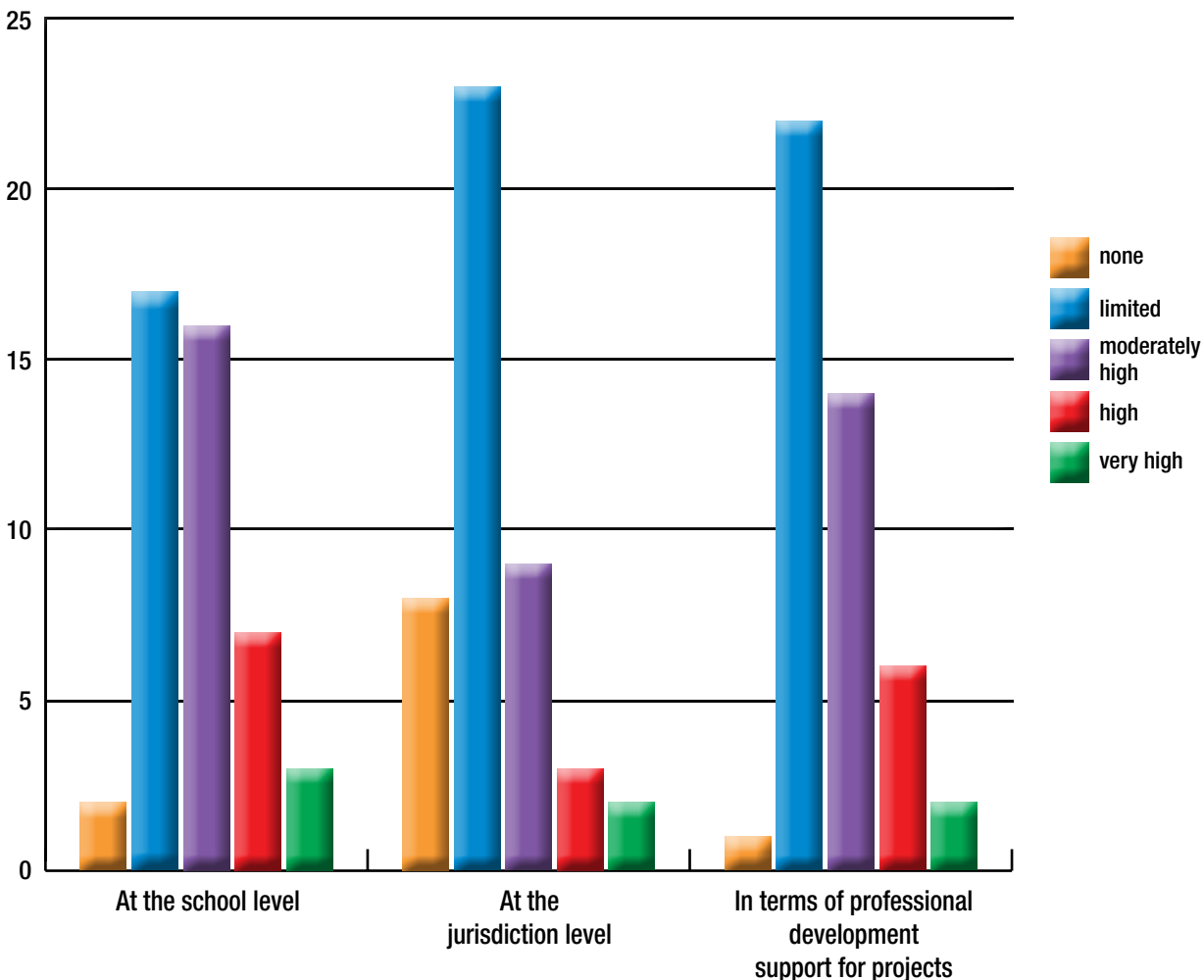


Figure 14. To what degree do teachers in your local have influence in determining potential project priorities?



structures such as surveys and even a world café process undertaken by one jurisdiction to solicit input. Jurisdictional leaders may be aware of the need for teacher input, and many may attempt to gather data; however, teachers still feel excluded from determining priorities. It is clear from the range of reported practices that teachers are still not being consistently and systematically included in every stage of AISI project planning. With systemic and consistent inclusion of teachers’ perspectives and school-based, teacher-led and directed innovation, AISI projects have the potential to transform all of

Alberta’s schools into centres of research and innovation.

### Access to Professional Development for AISI Projects

A new question in the 2012 survey administration delved more deeply into concerns about PD in support of AISI projects. While the previous segment asked about teachers’ influence, a subsequent question asked about teachers’ ability to access professional development related to AISI projects. The results were disturbing—38.1 per cent of respondents



indicated that they had noticed a decrease in PD access over the last year, with only 7.1 per cent indicating an increase (see Figure 15). Because of the nature of the question, there is no way of knowing if this represents a decrease over a previously high level or a low level that has seen further disintegration. However, it is clear over multiple survey administrations that AISI project considerations tend to dominate professional development planning at the jurisdiction level and tend to command much of the PD resources at the jurisdiction and site-based level. That teachers are expressing significant decline in their access to professional development is not surprising, given changes to AISI funding allocations. Respondents' supporting comments revealed that many jurisdictions were forced to make up the deficit in funding for projects in order to maintain existing practices and structures. Where that

wasn't possible, significant reductions in access to PD were felt at the school and teacher level, endangering AISI-related PLCs, reducing formal learning opportunities and decreasing access to lead-teacher support. Clearly, the once fruitful ground for innovation sustained by research and collective professional learning, both previous hallmarks of AISI, is under siege as reduced funding and increased emphasis on accountability reporting alter the landscape of AISI.

### Suggested Improvements for AISI Success

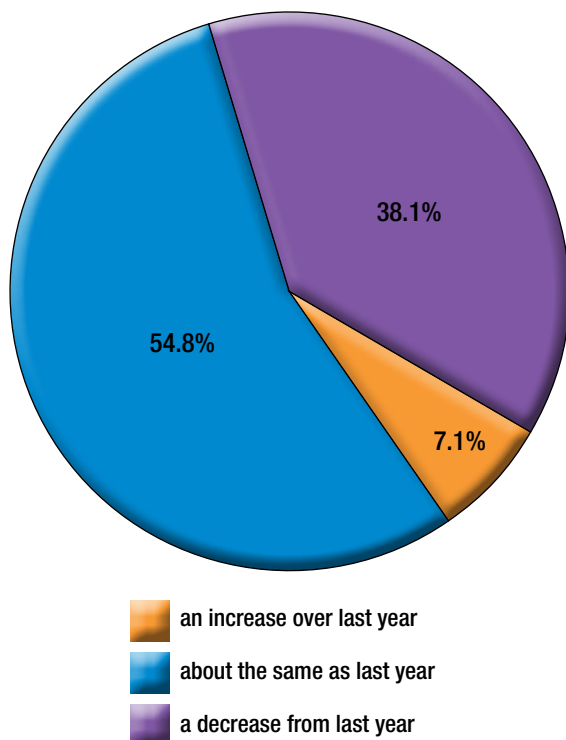
Respondents were asked to provide specific suggestions for improvements to the AISI process that would enhance the success of AISI. They were asked to provide suggestions at the school, jurisdiction and provincial level; some clear themes emerged despite the great variety of projects and processes undertaken among jurisdictions. At each level, respondents called for increased, stable funding that was accessible in a transparent and equitable way. Main themes identified at each level are indicated below.

### School- and Jurisdiction-Level Improvements

Many of the themes that emerged at the school level were also cited at the jurisdiction level, with respondents noting that jurisdictional approaches in AISI were key drivers of site-based practices.

- Many respondents sought the opportunity to have greater site-based influence on project choices. They desired the ability to shape jurisdictional projects to their school's specific context and desired support to work in collaboration with other schools.
- Respondents called for increased teacher choice and input in determining project parameters and goals and professional development supports, some noting that they desired opportunities for involvement of their ATA local leaders.
- Teachers suggested a shift toward more authentic project requirements geared toward relevant school and teacher needs.

Figure 15. How would you rate access to professional development through AISI projects over the last year?



- Teachers sought the freedom to use contextually appropriate tools and strategies both to engage project goals and assess progress, rather than prescribed or standardized measures. They desired data collection that would directly enhance classroom teaching and learning.
- Teachers sought additional release time to engage in collaborative teaching, meet with learning coaches, engage in subject-specific collaboration with respect to AISI, and participate in related PLCs.
- Respondents noted a need for clear communication of vision and project goals and for ongoing shared decision-making processes. A number of respondents asked for clarity regarding AISI processes, parameters and goals, and clear delineation between AISI and other initiatives.
- Respondents indicated that promising practices developed through AISI should be extended over a five-year time frame, and supported by consistent and sustained funding over that length of time and beyond. Respondents expressed the view that it takes longer than three years to fully realize the potential successes of AISI and to capitalize on them.

### **Suggestions for Provincial Improvements**

- The majority of teachers asked for funding: consistent, sustainable funding, with money targeted for professional learning in jurisdictional structures that were transparent and had increased accountability. As one respondent wrote, “The jurisdiction must have full and open disclosure and accountability for the province to maintain continued funding that is fair and equitable across the province.”
- Respondents also noted that increased flexibility would improve AISI—flexibility to have more than one project, extend existing projects, and lengthen the cycle to five years to allow better planning and development of new practices.
- A few respondents suggested that provincial-level consultation with teachers would be helpful to design improvements.

It is clear that teacher respondents valued AISI projects, were interested in further opportunities for authentic participation and wanted greater latitude in the decision making and the actualization of the project. It was also clear that they desired continuation of and further refinement of AISI programs and valued the contribution AISI projects made to the practical research base and the body of professional knowledge.

## **I. Professional Development Programs for Specific Teacher Groups**

### **Beginning Teachers**

Respondents reported a wide range of mentorship program practices, with an equally broad range of funding structures. In some locals, there were sustained programs that involved initial orientation, sustained by mentor/protégé partnerships that were augmented by mentorship programming. Some programs comprised primarily multi-day jurisdictional orientation, occasionally further supported by a divisional mentor teacher or a principal at large, but often unsupported throughout the year. Some respondents wrote of extensive mentoring programs for teachers new to the profession, the jurisdiction or subject/grade, with release time to meet with mentors, attend sessions and access resources. These multifaceted programs were often offered jointly by jurisdictions and locals, and funded by both parties.

There appeared to be growth in the length of mentorship programs, with frequent examples of mentoring beyond the first year, into the second, third and even fifth year. Several respondents noted informal school-based mentorship arrangements, and only one indicated that a previously established formal mentorship program was now defunct. Overall, the trend was toward formal programs, collaboratively designed and supported. Fourteen of 43 responses indicated a shared-cost arrangement between school division and local, 16 indicated that the program was funded

completely by the division, 1 indicated that the program was sustained entirely by the local, and several responded that there was no budget source for the programs, which occurred on teachers' own time with volunteer support. Most often, responses indicating no budget commitment were attached to informal site-based programs or programs consisting solely of initial orientation days. Of further interest to the Association will be reports that mentorships are sometimes mandatory. This is a practice not supported in the mentorship literature, which strongly advocates for voluntary participation supported by scheduled release time for collaboration and peer observation (Feiman-Nemser 2001).

Support for beginning teachers' attendance at the ATA Beginning Teachers' Conference was exceptionally high: 19 locals reported that they supported attendance, 16 locals reported cost sharing with jurisdictions and 4 locals reported that jurisdictions solely bear the cost of release and subsistence to attend. Of 45 responding locals, all but one cited active levels of encouragement and support to attend.

### **Substitute Teachers**

Dedicated professional development offerings and resource structures for substitute teachers' professional development continue to vary widely and are often absent at the local level. While respondents noted that substitute teachers are usually invited to attend school-based, local, jurisdiction and convention PD days at no cost to themselves, the potential that attending a PD day may result in a lost paid work day is a deterrent to participation by substitute teachers, who often teach for more than one jurisdiction. Financial support to defer costs associated with professional development attendance, for example at the ATA Substitute Teachers' Conference or conventions, is more likely to be offered by the local than the jurisdiction. There were, however, a few reports of small sums (between \$150 and \$500) dedicated to support substitute teacher learning at the jurisdiction level, or substitutes being paid to attend professional development. One respondent noted a collaborative effort between

the substitute teachers' committee and the jurisdiction to offer PD sessions throughout the year. One respondent noted that the collective agreement with the jurisdiction gave substitute teachers the same access to PD as other teachers after 25 days of service. Overall, there appeared to be a greater awareness of the need to support substitute teacher development, but as yet, no local reported that it or its associated jurisdiction had developed specific content for programs of support designed to meet the needs of substitutes.

This finding is concurrent with other research conducted by the ATA (2011). As one respondent in that study reported:

The lack of professional development opportunities for substitute teachers is striking. Such opportunities are often not tailored to our needs or are not advertised in a way that would inform us of the opportunities available. This is especially disheartening for substitutes who are new teachers and are looking for full-time teaching positions. In this case, professional development is important but seemingly impossible for us. Furthermore, the costs associated with some of these opportunities are simply too high to be practical. Not only are we missing a day of work (for which we will not be paid) but we are required to pay the full amount for these opportunities, an amount that often cannot be subsidized or reimbursed.

### **Teachers New to the Province or Country**

About 32 per cent of respondents reported that there was no professional development support structure in place for this growing segment of the profession. Another 39 per cent indicated that teachers new to the province or country were treated as teachers new to the profession, and were invited to participate in mentorship programs, the ATA Beginning Teachers' Conference and jurisdiction orientation days. A handful of respondents noted that these teachers were treated the same as any other teacher or deemed the responsibility of the school. Only a few respondents reported efforts to meet the specialized needs of this group. One respondent

indicated that this was not yet an issue that needed to be addressed. During a one-year period between 2011 and 2012, 46 per cent of all first-time applicants to the Teacher Qualifications Service had taken some or part of their studies outside of Alberta, an increase from 43 per cent in 2010. It continues to be of considerable importance that PD leaders address the complex needs of the teachers whose practice or preparation has taken place outside of Alberta in order to maintain the vitality of the profession.

### **Administrators: Aspiring, New and Veteran**

Approximately one-third of respondents were unaware of any formal programs available to assist teachers who aspire to administration positions in their growth as leaders. However, it is clear from many respondents' submissions that some jurisdictions are responsive to issues of succession planning. About 40 per cent of respondents identified formal programs to support leadership growth. The programs are varied, including leadership pools, entered by the teacher's application or sometimes nominated by a principal; master's program cohorts; administration mentorship programs that may include release from classroom duties; and evening/supper club sessions that focus on leadership topics. One respondent described the jurisdiction's support program this way:

Our jurisdiction holds evening courses for teachers interested in possibly pursuing administration. Participants are assigned to a small group with a principal facilitator. They go through various articles, case studies and discuss real-life administrator issues happening today. There is usually a theme to the evening, for example, communication or human resources, with a keynote speaker first. There is generally about a month between sessions, giving teachers time to do the readings as well as post reflections in an online forum. Depending on the school, aspiring leaders who have made their intentions known are often asked to serve in an "acting administrator" capacity at school on days when both administrators are out of the

building. Similarly, these teachers are often invited to sit on school-based committees for things like budget planning and school education plans.

Other respondents noted bursaries and funds available to pursue individual courses or conferences to support leadership development, often administered through the local. Well-designed programs for teachers aspiring to administration are likely to yield benefits to the jurisdiction through enriched application pools, and provide early orientation to those who step into administration roles.

New administrators are also supported through sessions offered by the jurisdiction- or the local, often planned throughout the year, sometimes in cohort models and, infrequently, collaboratively offered between the local and corresponding jurisdiction. Many locals and jurisdictions share costs to support new administrators' attendance in programs such as *Start Right* and *Leadership Essentials for Administrators* or the *Educational Leadership Academy*. About half of respondents cited new administrator mentorship programs, with pairings between new administrators and experienced or senior central office administrators. About one-quarter of respondents said there were no formal programs offered: one respondent noted that opportunities for new administrators in his/her area consisted of "death by fire." Ideally, programs offered to support new administrators should include preparation in practical matters such as timetabling and in building relationships (ATA 2009). It should also include a review of evaluation structures that encourage administrators to engage in self-reflection and identify sources of evidence of their growth. A model project conducted in Alberta identifies these as two components of a professional model that enhances the leadership practices of school administrators (ATA 2010a).

Veteran administrators enjoy a variety of opportunities for professional growth. Many jurisdictions arrange for a retreat experience for administration; respondents also reported regularly scheduled cohort meetings for administration, including ongoing evening

programs structured similarly to those offered to new administrators, but with advanced content. In some districts, administrators are provided with regular inservicing in support of jurisdiction or AISI initiatives, and most respondents noted that funds were available to administrators to attend conferences annually. A small number of respondents indicated that the local PD committee was engaged in programming designed specifically to meet the needs of administrators, in dedicated sessions or during institute days. About 20 per cent of respondents were unable to identify PD opportunities for veteran administrators, sometimes indicating “nothing” or “limited” or noting that opportunities were the same as for classroom teachers. 84 per cent of respondents indicated that veteran administrators’ PD was funded primarily through the district, with several locals providing support for local or provincial ATA sessions and conferences.

Overall, there is a significant increase in district-focused professional development programming and support for administrators. This is accompanied by the notable absence of participants reporting that administrators achieve their professional growth through conferences, sometimes outside the province or country, as was previously reported (ATA 2010b).

For all leaders—aspiring, new and veteran—respondents revealed an emphasis on district-based professional development that denotes an increase in context and community-based professional development for administrators over previous years. It would be useful to directly examine administrators’ perceptions about their own professional development needs and preferences to determine how effectively this shift is supporting administrator growth.

## Discussion and Future Directions

### Capitalizing on Current Structures

Effective professional learning cannot be expected to occur without dedicated support. With the reality of teachers' increasingly intense professional lives, it will be the responsibility of all to ensure that professional learning policies and structures are maintained and strengthened.

Jurisdictions are important and invested partners in any professional learning endeavour. Jurisdictional leaders should regularly consult with teachers in planning for system and individual professional growth programs. Teachers' efficacy can be significantly enhanced where genuine efforts are made to engage them in decisions related to their professional learning needs.

To alleviate the perception that PD is being done *to* teachers rather than *for* teachers, local PD committees, specialist councils and convention associations also need to have key ongoing roles in advisory and planning processes to contribute to a comprehensive and coordinated professional development planning approach.

*Teacher-led PD advisory and planning committees are the natural centre of any professional learning endeavour that is committed to supporting enhanced practice.*

### Committing to Professional Growth

Teachers believe the professional growth plan process is an important part of their ongoing commitment to augment their pedagogical capacities. Teachers continue to see the Teaching Quality Standard as a foundational document in the development of their professional growth plans. Teachers' growth potential over the trajectory of their career is considerable if it is focused on the key characteristics identified in the professional standards.

For teachers, the challenge lies at the heart of the "expert learner" paradox they live. Teachers continually learn in response to the day-to-day classroom challenges, including increased classroom diversity, new reporting technologies, evolving Web tools, new curricular demands and assessment practices. However, there are

competing expectations around professional development, which are further confounded by the limited time and resources available to support teachers in these endeavours. Jurisdictions expect that their teachers will acquire the theoretical and practical knowledge required to support the jurisdictional vision of teaching and learning and act in related district initiatives. But teachers also need to engage in specific professional development related to their assessment of their own professional learning goals, in the context of the classroom and the Teaching Quality Standard. Teachers' self-identified professional learning goals should be supported with adequate job-embedded time to engage in recursive learning that includes practice, peer-collaboration, and self-reflection. Without support to engage meaningfully in the pursuit of their learning goals, teachers will be hindered in their efforts to enhance their skills.

*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.*

### Creating Time Mindfully: Balancing Priorities

Time for teacher professional learning is an essential element of effective professional learning. Mindful protection of teachers' learning time is also needed in the ever-competing demands of the school. A balanced approach to priorities would take into consideration the time needed within the workday for instructional and administrative tasks, as well as professional development and collaboration. Time set aside in the school year for PD should not be eclipsed by the ever-present demands to attend meetings or to perform non-instructional tasks. Professional learning can lose its lustre amid the competing demands for teachers' time and energy.

*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. Without this element, it is unlikely that the social investment in professional development will produce compound returns.*

### **Building on Successful Practices**

Initiatives such as AISI have yielded many lessons. As a result, teachers value opportunities to participate meaningfully in AISI projects and believe their involvement contributes to their professional knowledge. Teachers directly involved in the design and implementation of projects report greater satisfaction with AISI, and see the initiative as an important part of their professional development. Successful AISI projects reinforce what the research tells us about effective professional development endeavours: there needs to be dedicated time, shared decision making and leadership, and sustained funding to support professional learning.

Effective professional development programs should also borrow from successful mentorship programs that include time for mentor teachers to both meet with their protégés and inform mentorship program development, and afford protégés time to work with their mentors and collaborate within a network of experienced teachers.

### **Professional Learning Communities Work**

Professional learning communities have evolved considerably over the last decade. In some cases, PLCs have been mandated, co-opted and over-structured. Yet in other situations, they have thrived and evolved into communities of practice through which teachers can explore issues of practice in novel ways. Teachers can enhance their exposure to new practices and engage in learning relevant to their own professional growth goals by integrating daily teaching tasks and collaborative learning opportunities. For example, when teachers have time to co-design lessons or produce engaging curricular materials and collaborative assessments, the result is stronger collective and individual pedagogical practice.

*Education stakeholders must ensure that teachers' professional learning is conducted within a supportive and supported community of practice which applies and extends successful professional development practices.*

### **Put the Professional Back Into Professional Learning**

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. To alleviate some of the inadequacies in the current system, teachers should be involved in all decisions about professional learning. In the competition for priority, teachers' individual growth needs are routinely sacrificed. Practices that place a low priority on the pursuit of teachers' self-identified growth goals should be discontinued. Teachers are expressing the view that the current system clearly lacks balance.

*If the education system truly desires reflective learning by teachers that will challenge philosophical beliefs and result in transformed practice, it must first balance its priorities and make space for deep professional learning at both individual and collective levels.*

Effective professional development and learning, undertaken in a supported, coherent, coordinated and collaborative manner, has the potential to substantially contribute to professional practice and teacher efficacy. As educators and public education stakeholders alike strive to enrich Alberta's already high-performing education system, it will be important to augment their efforts with responsive and responsible professional development practices that empower teachers to fulfil their highest learning aspirations for themselves and their students. When professional growth is supported at the individual level, the commitment and professionalism of the collective is enhanced, resulting in a strong teaching profession, able to respond to the changing needs of society.

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This report is part of a research series published by the Alberta Teachers' Association. Further background information about the research studies cited in the publication is available from the Alberta Teachers' Association, 11010 142 Street NW, Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1; phone 780-447-9400 (in Edmonton) or 1-800-232-7208 (elsewhere in Alberta).

ISBN 978-1-927074-09-1

PD-86-25 2012 11