

The Landscape of Learning:

How Districts Shape
Teachers' Professional
Learning Opportunities



Olga Pagán
Research Scientist
Annenberg Institute at Brown University
Research Partnership for Professional Learning

Yuno Hamaguchi
Research Project Manager
Annenberg Institute at Brown University
Research Partnership for Professional Learning

About RPPL

The [Research Partnership for Professional Learning \(RPPL\)](#) is a collective that brings the teacher professional learning field together to study which practices support teacher learning and increase equitable student outcomes.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the RPPL organizations, researchers, and district and system leaders who provided thought partnership in creating this report.

This report was made possible by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the funder.

Contributors

District Spotlight Interviewees in Alphabetical Order by Last Name

Katya Denisova

Director of Professional Learning, Baltimore City Public Schools

Amber Hill

Director of Professional Development and Programming, School District of Philadelphia

Brittney Houston

Director of Professional Learning and Leader Development, Denver Public Schools

Brian Keefer

Executive Director of Professional Learning and Leadership Development, Fulton County Public Schools

Michelle Kim

Director of Professional Development and Programming, School District of Philadelphia

Jenna Martin

Manager of Learning and Development, Denver Public Schools

Meredith Mehra

Deputy Chief of the Office of Professional Learning, School District of Philadelphia

Beth McAnally

Director of Professional Learning, School District of Philadelphia

Daria Silvestro

Executive Director of Teacher Development, School District of Philadelphia

Carmen Stagg

Manager of Professional Learning, Denver Public Schools

Lisa Steele

Director of Professional Learning and Leadership Development

Jacob Stefan

Director of Teacher Development, Chicago Public Schools

LaTia Taylor

Program Manager for New Teacher Induction and Mentoring, Chicago Public Schools

Emily Work

Director of Professional Development and Programming, School District of Philadelphia

Katie Walsh

Director of Professional Development and Programming, School District of Philadelphia

David Williams

Deputy Chief of Academics, Metro-Nashville Public Schools

Danyelle Willis-Hargust

Director of Special Projects, School District of Philadelphia

Table of Contents

4 Executive Summary

NATIONAL DISTRICT DATA

4 Introduction

5 Distribution of PL Activities

16 Participation by PL Activity

24 Frequency of PL Activities

28 Facilitation

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHTS

7 Introduction

9 Denver Public Schools

12 Chicago Public Schools

17 The School District of Philadelphia

21 Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

25 Baltimore City Public Schools

29 Fulton County Schools

32 What District Leaders Can Learn

34 References

35 Methods Appendix

Executive Summary

Despite the promise of teacher professional learning (PL)'s impact on student outcomes (e.g., Lynch et al., 2025; Ventista & Brown, 2023), surprisingly little is known about how districts actually decide what PL to offer, to whom, and under what conditions. Participation in PL is nearly universal—over 90% of teachers engage in some form annually (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Goldring et al., 2013)—yet teachers report highly variable experiences, shaped by factors ranging from individual need to local policy context (Patrick et al., 2025). Behind that variability lies a set of decisions that tend to get overlooked—the choices districts make in the planning and design of PL.

Those decisions are being made in an increasingly complex environment. Districts are navigating simultaneous pressures—widespread adoption of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), persistent teacher shortages, and unstable budget conditions—while trying to design PL that is responsive to the real needs of their educators and students. The field has seen a notable shift toward Curriculum-Based Professional Learning (CBPL), which aligns PL directly with HQIM use in classrooms, moving away from generic pedagogical strategies and toward practical, job-embedded application (Hill & Papay, 2022).

Whether and how districts are translating those field-wide shifts into coherent decision-making frameworks remains unclear. This report takes up that question, describing both the breadth of what teachers experience and the strategic choices that shape those experiences. We draw on two complementary sources: a survey of early-career teachers in large school districts across the United States, and in-depth interviews with PL leaders across six of those districts. Together, they offer a picture of what PL looks like on the ground, and the system-level decisions that produce it.

NATIONAL DISTRICT DATA

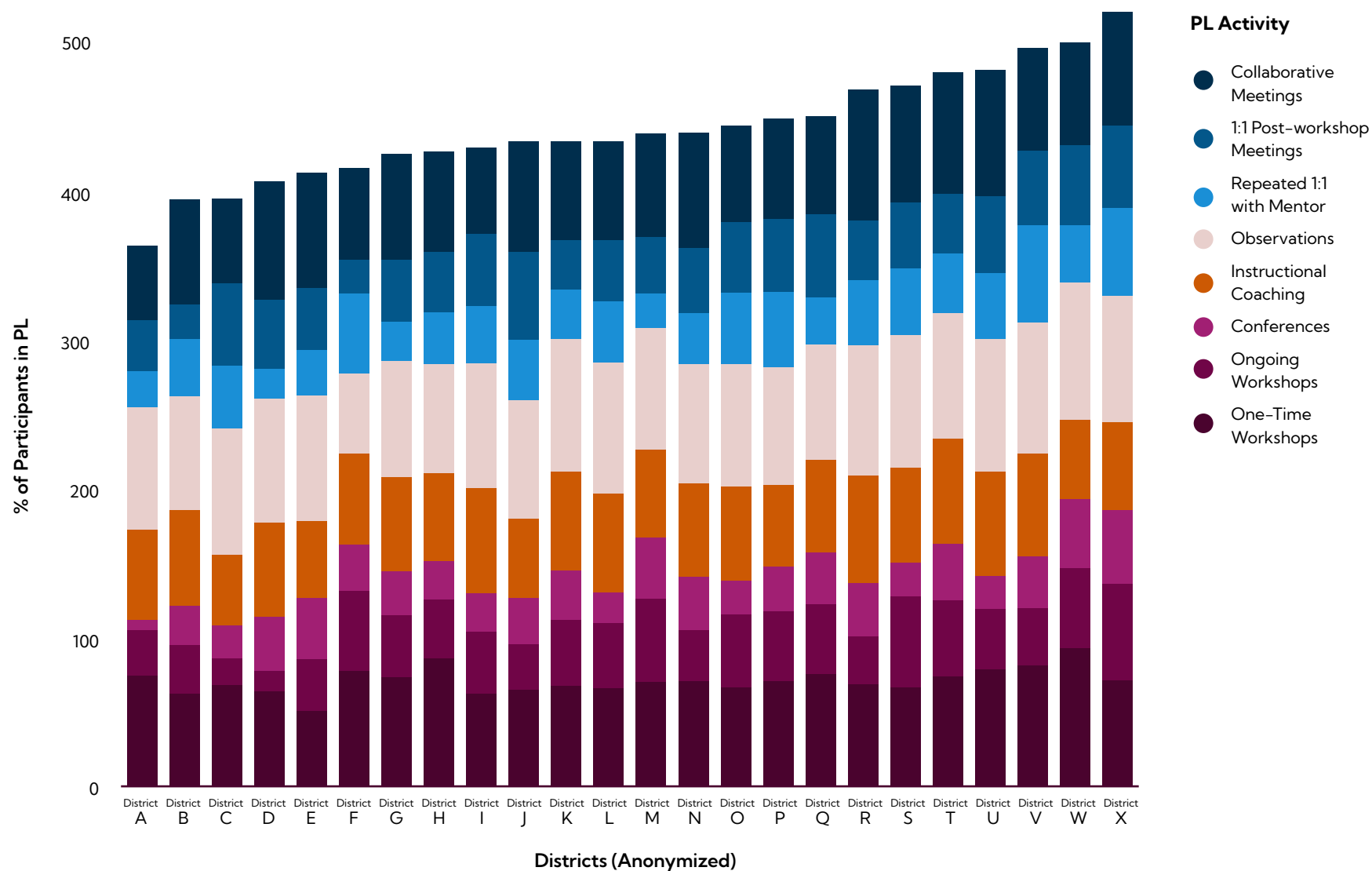
What types of PL do early career teachers experience?

To understand the range of PL activities that early-career teachers experience, we analyzed data from RPPL's ongoing research partnership with TFA, drawing on a survey of Corps Members (CMs) during the 2024-2025 school year. The survey asked about the PL activities engaged in by these first- and second-year teachers separate from their TFA experience and conducted as part of their regular employment. Because CMs are placed across a wide range of large school districts nationwide, this dataset offers a rare window into PL participation across contexts, something most district-level data cannot provide.

PL offerings look very similar across districts, but individual teacher experiences vary considerably.

- Most districts offer a similar mix of PL activities; the differences lie in which teachers participate in which activities.
- Across all surveyed districts, the average teacher participates in between 3.2 and 5.0 unique PL activities, resulting in a collective average of 4.3 activities per year.
- Only 0.3% of the shared variance in the number of PL activities attended can be attributed to the district level (ICC = 0.003). The remaining variance belongs to the individual teacher.

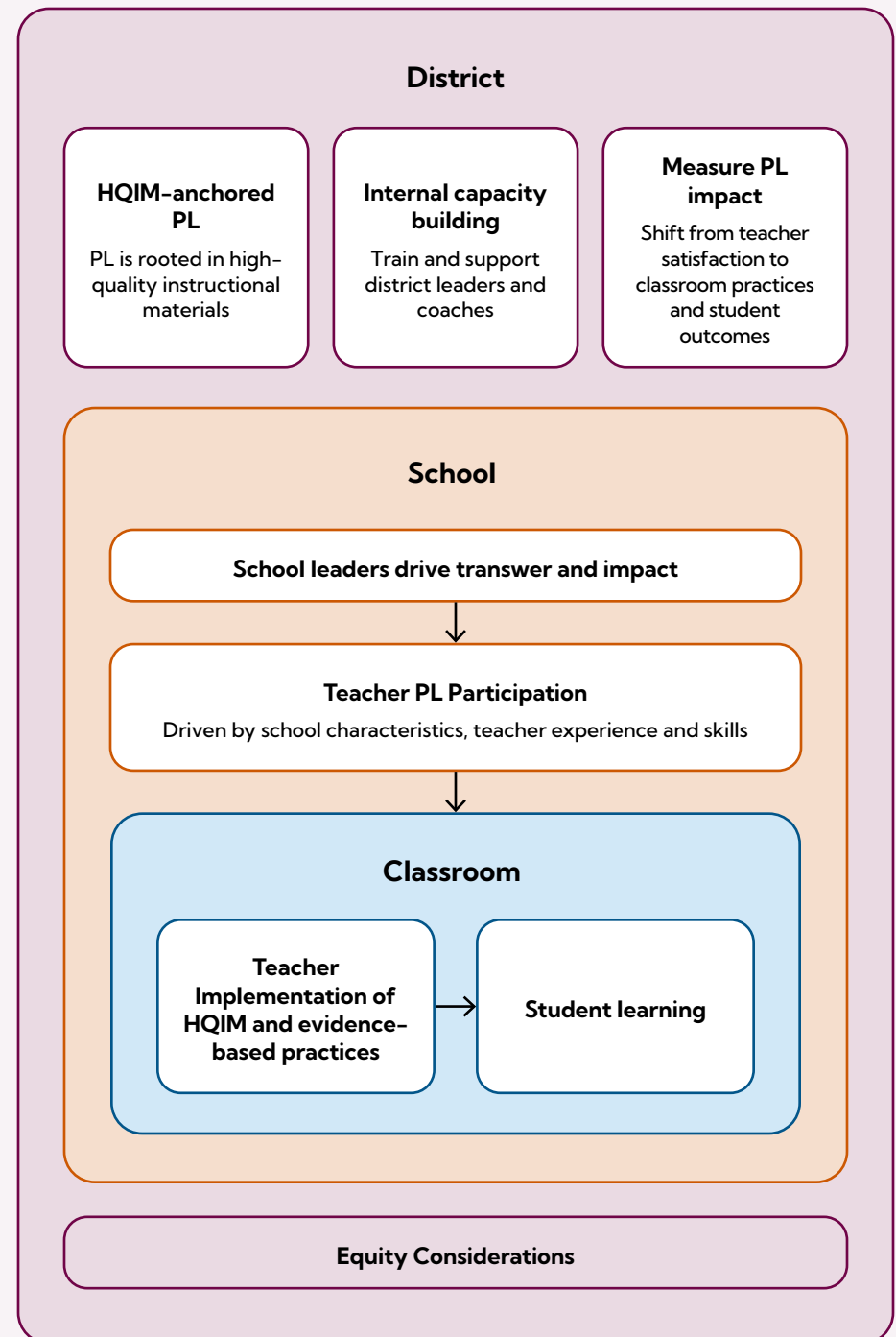
Figure 1. School districts vary little in how their overall PL participation is distributed across activities.



Beneath the surface, districts are strategically designing PL—not by what they offer, but by how they build it.

Almost every district in the national TFA sample of large districts offers coaching, collaboration, workshops, observations, and other common structures (see Figure 1). Variation in participation is driven more by individual teachers and schools than by district membership itself. But our in-depth interviews with districts reveal that the most important district decisions are happening beneath the surface. Districts are not primarily differentiating themselves by what PL activities they offer. They are differentiating themselves by how they design the conditions under which those activities happen.

Individual teachers, not district membership, appear to be the main driver of PL participation—a finding with important implications for district PL strategy. It does not mean district-level decisions are irrelevant. Rather, it suggests that district PL policies may be operating less as direct drivers of individual teacher participation and more as conditions that enable or constrain what happens at the school level. The in-depth spotlights below bear this out: in every district we profiled, the most consequential PL decisions involve structuring the conditions under which school-based learning takes place, through coaching infrastructure, collaboration protocols, facilitator training, and curriculum alignment.



District Spotlights

We conducted interviews with PL leaders across six school districts that appear in the TFA survey dataset, selected to represent a range of approaches to coaching, collaboration, facilitation, and system design. While each spotlight district is one of the 100 largest school districts in the country, they range in size from 102 to 630 schools, and span the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and Mountain regions.



Across different contexts, the six districts are converging around a common set of directional shifts:

- **Anchoring PL in HQIM.** Every district has moved away from abstract, generic PL toward learning that is anchored in the specific curriculum teachers use daily. The message across districts is consistent and reflects what the current research base has shown: PL connected to high-quality materials leads to greater student gains (Davis et al., 2017; Lynch et al., 2025; Taylor et al., 2015).
- **Measuring beyond participation and satisfaction to transfer and impact.** Several districts are moving beyond satisfaction surveys to ask harder questions: Is what teachers learned showing up in their classrooms? Are students performing differently as a result? Though this work is still emerging, the shift is clear—districts want evidence that learning changes classroom practice and student outcomes.
- **Using equity as an organizing principle for PL design.** Rather than treating PL as uniformly available to all teachers, several districts are making deliberate choices about where to concentrate resources. Whether based on schools' student characteristics, or based on teachers' experience and skill levels, equity concerns are shaping structural decisions, not just rhetoric.
- **Building internal capacity for sustained improvement.** Several districts are deliberately investing in growing their own facilitators, coaches, and leaders who can uphold the work over time. The through-line is sustainability—districts want PL infrastructure that lives within the system itself, owned by the people who do the work every day.
- **Balancing district-level strategy with school-level ownership.** Every district spotlight, in some form, identifies principals and instructional leadership teams as the linchpin of PL quality. Yet they each land in distinct places along a spectrum of centralization they are actively calibrating. While district centralization buys equity and coherence, it requires strong enforcement mechanisms and risks becoming compliance-driven if schools aren't genuinely bought in. Autonomy buys ownership and contextual relevance, but risks the inconsistency and quality gaps that several districts were explicitly trying to escape. Our spotlight districts provided different examples of how to centralize the quality bar (shared frameworks, curriculum, standards) while preserving local control over implementation.

District Spotlights

Rather than aiming for generalizability, this set of spotlights prioritizes depth of understanding, particularly given the field's current moment: as more districts move toward HQIM adoption, questions about how to design PL that supports effective implementation are increasingly urgent. All six districts profiled here anchor their PL in a strong evidence base, grounding teachers' learning experiences in district-approved HQIM, providing structured time for collaboration and instructional coaching, and endeavoring to measure impact beyond teacher satisfaction (RPPL, 2025). At the same time, each is navigating local challenges by tailoring its approach to local contexts and needs. Together, they demonstrate how leaders can balance adherence to the evidence base with contextualization, making them information-rich cases well-suited to close examination of these design questions in practice.



Below, we highlight and describe a key PL strategy that each district is employing to address their specific challenges. Each strategy has implications for teachers' access to high-quality PL.

- In response to inequitable student outcomes across the district, **Denver** is unifying their schools under a shared vision for PL.
- **Chicago** has taken their approach to ameliorating inequities a step further, pivoting from a broad, "à la carte" model to a deep, targeted system where schools serving students with the highest needs are receiving coordinated support.
- **Philadelphia** and **Nashville** provide examples of ingraining high-leverage PL structures into the fabric of their districts. Nashville is transforming how teacher collaboration is embedded within every school's culture, while Philadelphia is building out their multi-layered system of coaching to meet growing demand.
- When faced with a set of fragmented PL trainings, **Baltimore** leaders have standardized the quality of PL offerings by developing a body of expert facilitators grounded in principles of adult learning.
- Finally, in their pursuit of developing internal capacity, **Fulton County** designed an entire PL program that has created pathways that allow educators to advance in their careers, boosting teacher retention and ultimately, student gains.

The spotlights highlight how districts are evolving in a particular direction: away from PL as a disconnected set of activities, and toward PL as an ecosystem—one that is curriculum-connected, internally sustained, leadership-dependent, and increasingly held accountable to what actually changes in classrooms and for students.



"From A District Of Schools To A School District"

How Denver Is Unifying Their Schools Under A Shared Vision For Professional Learning

Challenges

- Persistent student inequities across schools
- Teacher contracts that do not require attendance at PL

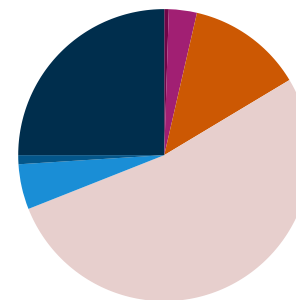
Strategies

- Establish a unified and codified district vision for PL
- Maintain active communication with school leaders, including a year-long PL scope and sequence
- Develop shared quarterly learning objectives
- Tie all PL sessions to student data

Denver Public Schools

198	Schools
6,324	Teachers
89,210	Students
\$1.46B	SY26 Budget

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



●	American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.5%
●	Asian: 3.1%
●	Black/African American: 12.8%
●	Hispanic/Latine: 52.6%
●	Multiethnic/Multiracial: 5%
●	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 1%
●	White: 25%

0.5%	Multilingual Learners
3.1%	Economically Disadvantaged
12.8%	Students With Disabilities



Denver is shifting from school autonomy to a unified, equity-driven system with shared expectations.

Denver Public Schools articulates in its mission that “educational equity is our collective responsibility.” To achieve that mission, the district is moving away from being a collection of individual schools operating largely on their own terms, **toward a more unified, coherent system with shared expectations for instruction and PL**. Brittney Houston, Director of Professional Learning and Leader Development, attributes the origins of this transformation to Dr. Alex Marrero, Superintendent, who drove the articulation of a strategic roadmap built around the principle of being “a school district, not a district of schools.” The diagnosis was frank: the prior culture of school-level autonomy, while well-intentioned, had been “furthering inequities in our system because every student wasn’t getting access to what they deserved. Every educator wasn’t getting access to what they deserved.” That recognition became the foundation for a district-wide push toward alignment—in curriculum, in professional learning, and in expectations for how adults support student growth.

Across the district, professional learning is now anchored in high-quality curricula and connected to student data.

A central pillar of this unifying effort has been the rapid adoption of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) across schools over the past three years. The district introduced a “flexibility cycle” requiring schools to either use the district’s core curriculum or submit a formal proposal to use an alternative vetted material. The result has been striking: Denver now reports a 92% opt-in rate for district core curriculum. With that foundation largely in place, the district’s PL strategy has shifted accordingly. As Carmen Stagg, Manager of Professional Learning, describes it, the focus is now on “building coherence across all of our learning structures,” **ensuring that PL for every role is grounded in the HQIM**. This includes a new framework focused on using curriculum with fidelity, as well as shared quarterly learning objectives that drive each of the district’s three central PL days. Importantly, the district has also created a new requirement that **all PL sessions be tied to student data**, so that educators understand the “why” behind both the learning itself and the instructional materials being used. When student data is brought to bear in these sessions, the PL then helps to equip teachers to make “those in-the-moment strategic interventions for specific students,” according to Houston.



Denver is building accountability by giving school leaders clear visibility into the central learning sequence.

Building coherence across such a decentralized system has required sustained effort to create shared structures and lines of sight for school leaders. The district has developed PL scope and sequence documents to be shared with schools' instructional leadership teams—which typically include senior team leads (STLs), content leads, and building administrators—so that principals can plan their school-based PL in alignment with what is being delivered centrally. Houston describes the practical vision: a principal should be able to see that "on August 18th, my teachers are getting this" and "August 25th, my math content lead is getting this," and then build their coaching cycles and school-based PL around that sequence. This matters especially in Denver because, unlike many districts, the teacher contract does not require attendance at PL—it only allocates the days on which it can be provided.

Accountability for participation and follow-through therefore depends heavily on principals' having the information and tools to create that expectation at the school level. Monthly content lead sessions, principal quarterly gatherings, and curriculum-aligned walkthrough tools are among the mechanisms the district uses to reinforce the connection between central learning and school-level implementation.

To sustain coherence, the district is working to deepen partnerships with principals and content leads.

Amidst this unification, the district remains clear that it is principals and content leads—not central office specialists—who are with teachers every day. Thus, they aim to continue to work towards building deeper partnership with network directors to strengthen accountability at the school level, which requires the trust, tools, and shared language needed to make coherence real in every building.



"The School is the Unit Of Change"

How Chicago Is Empowering And Equipping School Leaders To Meet The Unique Needs Of Their Students

Challenges

- Inconsistent PL attendance across the district, paired with stagnant progress for the most marginalized students
- Six years into district-wide HQIM adoption, desire to meaningfully differentiate PL based on school's time since adoption

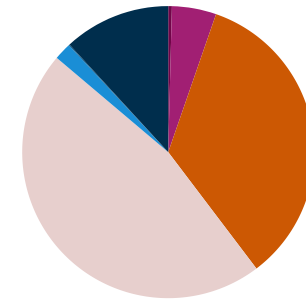
Strategies

- Develop a suite of multi-touch PL experiences that are sustained over time, connected to in-classroom supports, and maintain a clear through-line between instructional practice and district-wide objectives
- Target recruitment to these experiences for schools serving students with the greatest needs
- Require school leaders to enroll teams in these PL offerings

Chicago Public Schools

630	Schools
24,832	Teachers
316,224	Students
\$8.66B	SY26 Budget

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



- American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.4%
- Asian: 4.9%
- Black/African American: 34.3%
- Hispanic/Latine: 46.4%
- Multiethnic/Multiracial: 1.9%
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.1%
- White: 11.8%

27%	Multilingual Learners
72%	Economically Disadvantaged
17%	Students With Disabilities



Building on the belief that lasting change happens at the school level, Chicago Public Schools has moved toward a more intentional, school-centered professional learning model.

Chicago Public Schools has made a deliberate and strategic shift in how it organizes professional learning, moving away from a broad, open-enrollment model toward a targeted, school-centered approach grounded in the belief that "the school is the unit of change." Jacob Stefan, who leads the district's PL teams for curriculum-based support, describes the evolution: the district transitioned from "publishing an à la carte set of offerings" where teachers could register for individual sessions at will, to a much more intentional model focused on depth over breadth. This shift was informed by the district's six years of experience implementing Skyline, its district-created HQIM, and by research on how to differentiate supports based on where educators are in their implementation journey. The result is a cohort model that serves fewer teachers than before, but with significantly more contact hours and **a much stronger connection to in-classroom practice.**

The district transitioned from 'publishing an à la carte set of offerings' where teachers could register for individual sessions at will, to a much more intentional model focused on depth over breadth.

Jacob Stefan
Director of Teacher Development
Chicago Public Schools

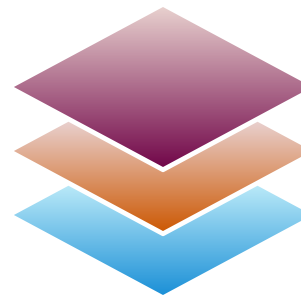


A cohort model builds school-level capacity by pairing teacher learning with training for instructional leads to sustain the work internally.

Chicago's PL is organized into three layers that move from shared foundation to targeted support. Universal learning establishes a common instructional focus across the district, ensuring all schools engage in the same core content and language around effective instruction. Network-level learning then builds the leadership conditions needed to sustain that work school-wide, and optional school-level learning allows individual schools to deepen or customize their focus based on their own improvement priorities.

School-level learning is primarily delivered through a cohort model, which is explicitly designed to build school-level capacity, not just individual teacher skill. Participation is structured accordingly: **a school leader opts in and commits to enrolling a minimum of three teachers**, along with a designated instructional lead who receives both the cohort learning experience shared by all teachers and additional training on how to facilitate collaborative planning practices back at their school building. Stefan explains the vision this way: **"We're building more capacity for schools to support this work internally and be able to build a PL plan that uses the curriculum to advance their goals for student learning."**

Three layers of Chicago's PL



Optional school-level learning allows individual schools to deepen or customize their focus based on their own improvement priorities

Network-level learning builds the leadership conditions needed to sustain that work school-wide

Universal learning establishes a common instructional focus across the district

While cohorts are organized by content area and grade band (e.g., high school science, K-5 ELA), all cohorts share a common instructional core: protocols and language for unit internalization, lesson preparation, and student work analysis, along with guidance on how to lead these practices collaboratively. These protocols are adapted to fit each cohort's specific context and goals, but the underlying structure is consistent across the district. Cohorts are deliberately kept small and organized geographically, so that teachers from the same part of the city can build relationships with one another—a relational quality that Stefan identified as one of the model's most valued features among participants.



Equity commitments drive decisions about which schools receive the district's deepest professional learning investments.

The district's equity commitments are a driving force behind decisions about which schools receive its deepest investment. For Stefan, preserving resources for schools serving "the highest proportion of students furthest from opportunity," including those with growing numbers of multilingual learners (MLLs) and students with disabilities, is a non-negotiable. This principle holds across both the cohort-based PL programs and coaching supports.

This commitment reflects a broader "targeted universalist" approach to equity: while all students deserve access to effective instruction, the district recognizes that students furthest from opportunity—including Black students, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, early learners, and students navigating postsecondary transitions—have historically been least likely to receive it. **Rather than treating equity as a separate initiative, the district embeds this focus directly into how PL is designed and delivered**, pairing universal access to core learning with deliberate, targeted support for the schools and student groups most in need.

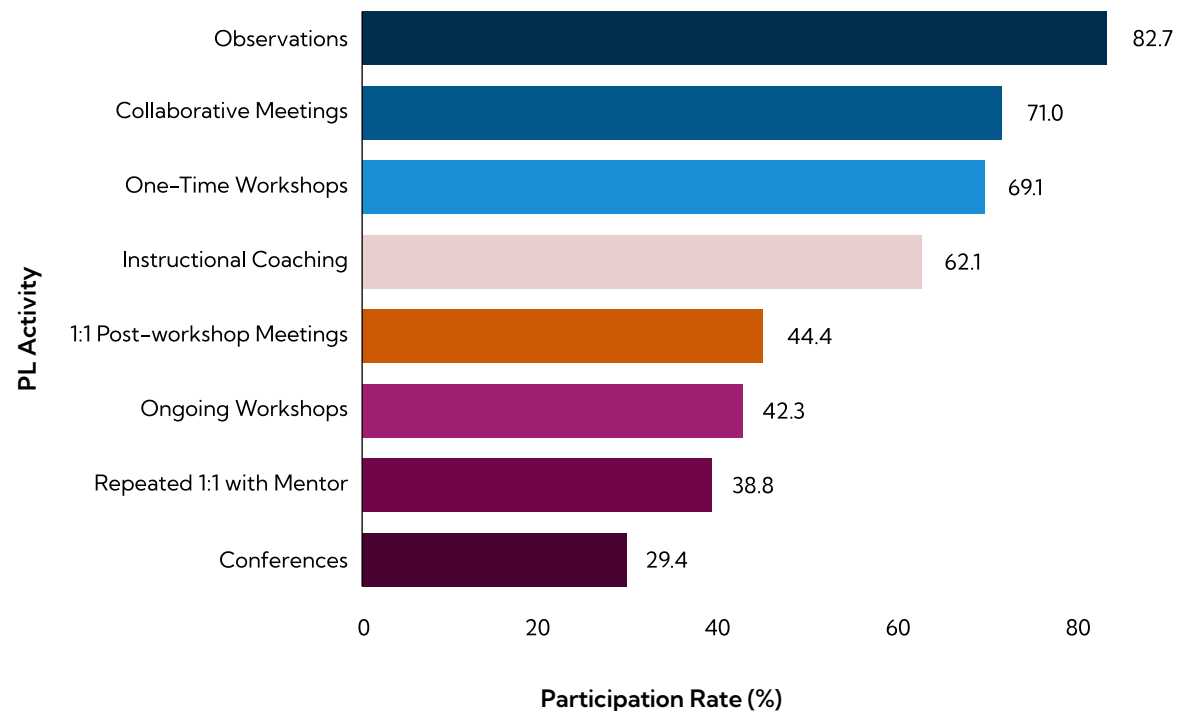
This commitment is enacted through how the district identifies which schools to engage in PL. Rather than waiting for schools to self-select into available offerings, the district conducts proactive outreach to schools most in need of support. Stefan describes how the process unfolded during this past school year: the team identified schools that had been Skyline users for multiple years, where engagement in PL had been low in recent years and improvements in student achievement had not materialized. From that analysis, a short list of roughly 20 to 30 schools was assembled for direct, targeted outreach. "We saw really good participation from those schools as a result of being more targeted in our approach of who we're trying to engage," Stefan notes. Beyond these priority schools, participation in the cohort model is open to any school in the district that opts in, subject to the same enrollment requirements described above. This opt-in structure with enrollment requirements ensures that school leaders are invested partners rather than passive recipients of district-mandated PL.

Together, these structures reflect a district betting on depth, coherence, and equity over breadth: rather than dispersing PL widely and thinly, Chicago concentrates its investment in the schools and educators where the need—and the potential impact—is greatest.

While PL participation is dominated by classroom observations, high proportions of early career teachers are also participating in instructional coaching, workshops, and collaborative meetings.

- Observations serve as the primary driver of PL participation, with 80.5% of CMs reporting participation.
- Instructional coaching is also highly prevalent; 60.4% of early teachers participate in instructional coaching, surpassing the 48% participation rate found in a recent report among teachers overall (Zuo & Kaufman, 2023).
- Collaborative meetings and one-time workshops/trainings follow as the next most prevalent activities, at 69.1% and 67.3% respectively.

Figure 2. Overall PL Participation





Developing Teachers 'Worthy of Our Kids'

How Philadelphia Pairs Accountability With Trust in Instructional Coaching

Challenges

- Instructional coaching requires teacher buy-in, built from a combination of coach objectivity and the cultivation of trust
- As the set of instructional coaches across the district rapidly increases, the district is eager to maintain their quality and protect their funding

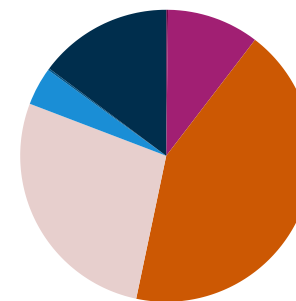
Strategies

- Draw coaches from the same peer group as the teachers they coach—ideally with formal union involvement where possible—so coaching feels collaborative rather than adversarial
- Collaborate with schools to protect need-based funding through creative mechanisms, including district-level reallocation of funds

The School District of Philadelphia

220	Schools
8,000	Teachers
120,057	Students
\$4.63B	SY26 Budget

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



- American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.2%
- Asian: 10.2%
- Black/African American: 42.9%
- Hispanic/Latine: 27.5%
- Multiethnic/Multiracial: 4.2%
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.2%
- White: 14.8%

21%	Multilingual Learners
75%	Economically Disadvantaged
20%	Students With Disabilities



Philadelphia's coaching program is grounded in a peer coaching philosophy that balances collaboration with accountability.

As instructional coaching has become one of Philadelphia's most effective levers for improving teaching practice, their Office of Professional Learning has built a program defined by differentiated roles, scaling with quality, and funding with equity. Philadelphia has three main coaching roles, each tied to a distinct point in a teacher's career. Altogether, the office manages over 100 coaches—a number that has grown dramatically in recent years. A defining feature across all roles is the **peer coaching philosophy: coaches are drawn from the same collective bargaining unit as the teachers they serve**, which Deputy Chief of Teaching and Learning Dr. Meredith Mehra describes as "incredibly important to help it feel very collaborative while also being able to hold someone accountable."

Consulting Teachers provide job-embedded coaching to non-tenured first-year teachers—including experienced teachers new to Pennsylvania—and to teachers rated unsatisfactory. They're embedded within the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program, co-managed by the district and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT). Executive Director of Teacher Development Daria Silvestro asserts that the strength of this collaboration between the district and the union is that it allows them to "[agree] that these teachers are worthy of being in front of our kids." As the district's only term-limited coaching role, Consulting Teachers serve six-year terms to stay close to recent classroom experience.

K-12 Academic Coaches provide the district's "Tier 2" support: when a new or non-tenured teacher exits PAR, those deemed in need of extra support are assigned additional coaching for roughly a half year. K-12 Academic Coaches also work with teachers rated "needs improvement" and can accommodate volunteers. Because they operate outside PAR, the district has more autonomy to staff and deploy this role than it does Consulting Teachers.

School-Based Academic Coaches (SBAC) are the district's only school-based, content-specific role, covering high school math, high school ELA, K-8 math, and K-8 ELA. They support all teachers in their content area within a building, leading coaching cycles, PLCs, and other school-level PL. Governance is split: the central office controls assignment, evaluation, and time off, while the coach is also informally embedded in and accountable to their school's instructional leadership team.

Philadelphia's coaching structure reflects a deliberate split between district-level and school-embedded roles. Consulting Teachers and K-12 Academic Coaches are peer coaches who work across many schools rather than being embedded in any single building—a structure designed to preserve their independence and ensure they're seen as neutral third parties, not extensions of a principal's authority. School-Based Academic Coaches take the opposite approach: embedded in just one or two schools, they sit on the instructional leadership team and build the kind of trust and context that effective content coaching requires. The tradeoff is real—objectivity on one end, deep integration on the other—and the district has structured each role's placement around which one matters more for its purpose.



Philadelphia's instructional coaching program has proven successful—now, its capacity to scale and fund it must keep pace with growing demand.

Instructional coaching is becoming one of Philadelphia's most effective levers for improving teaching practice. Demand reflects this: more schools are requesting coaches, and district data shows results, with schools that had coaches outpacing similar schools that didn't. But that success brings two challenges. First, growth: the program has expanded rapidly, straining the systems in place to train and oversee an increasingly large and inexperienced coaching staff. Second, funding: because coaching has depended on a patchwork of grants, school budgets, and relief dollars, keeping coaches in the highest-need schools depends on protecting that funding whenever any one source dries up—a task made harder without geographic zones, since the Office of Professional Learning must manage it citywide with a staff that can't be everywhere at once. It's this tension—rising demand for a program that works, against the limits of scaling and funding it—that has shaped Philadelphia's coaching approach.

Philadelphia has built a layered training system that blends shared, cross-role learning with role-specific development.

All coaches attend the district's curriculum-based PL alongside the teachers they support. The coaching team also has monthly PL days built around two areas: curriculum implementation (rotating across subject areas) and content-agnostic, focused on the craft of coaching itself. Consulting Teachers and K-12 Academic Coaches share additional targeted development. Since both write and manage teachers' improvement plans, this year they received ad hoc sessions on writing curriculum-aligned goals and tracking data—sessions successful enough that the district plans to build them into the regular calendar next year.

In addition, coach oversight is anchored by job-embedded support from Directors of Teacher Coaches, who serve as day-to-day managers and conduct rotating field visits—observing a SBAC lead a PLC or debrief, or a Consulting Teacher or K-12 Academic Coach's classroom visit and subsequent debrief. With roughly 1,500 coaching relationships districtwide, in-person observation can't reach everyone, so directors increasingly ask coaches to record their debriefs (typically over Zoom) as an additional feedback touchpoint.



Coaches are funded to support schools with the highest needs.

Philadelphia's approach to funding coaches echoes Chicago's need-driven, targeted model, reflecting a partnership between district and schools to prioritize the buildings that need coaches most. SBACs began in 2019 funded entirely by federal and state grants, tied to high-need schools. As the program proved effective, funding diversified. Schools began paying through their own operating budgets, Systems of Great Schools funding, and COVID relief dollars. Today, funding is typically layered: **school discretionary dollars are sometimes supplemented by centrally allocated funds for schools with particular needs**; for example, a former charter school returning to district control. The district's commitment to supporting coaching was tested this past year when COVID funding ended and a district deficit threatened some positions; rather than cut coaches at schools making real progress, the office found funding elsewhere in its budget to protect them.

Philadelphia is reflecting on what is working and committing to solidify foundational practices.

Despite scaling pressures, the coaching system has produced meaningful results—and the district is learning from both its successes and its strains. Over half of the current coaching team was hired within the last two years, a rapid influx that has left the office with a much less veteran-heavy team than it had a few years ago. In response, the office is treating the coming year as a deliberate reset: reinforcing core coaching responsibilities and goal-writing consistency before continuing to scale. Of course, to retain teachers and improve student achievement, coaching must be effective, especially for emergency-permitted teachers. The challenge of managing a rapidly scaling coaching program is immense, but the district's response—differentiated roles, close union partnership, layered training, and a candid focus on foundational quality—reflects a serious and sustained effort to meet it.



"Collaboration As Transformative, Not Transactional"

How Metro-Nashville Cultivates Consistently Meaningful Teacher Collaboration To Promote Student Gains

Challenges

- Need to standardize across a district where school leaders have a lot of autonomy, and have historically been more operational than instructional
- Need to sustain the quality of HQIM implementation and continue supporting teacher learning and improvement

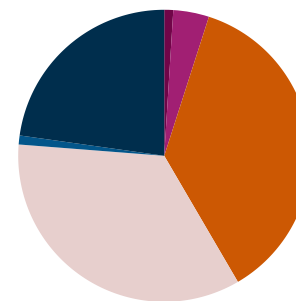
Strategies

- Codify and embed instructional collaboration routines into leadership responsibilities
- Pair accountability with support from district office to school leaders

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

160	Schools
4,912	Teachers
78,040	Students
\$1.38B	SY26 Budget

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



●	American Indian/Alaska Native: <1%
●	Asian: 4%
●	Black/African American: 37%
●	Hispanic/Latine: 35%
●	Multiethnic/Multiracial: 0%
●	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: <1%
●	White: 23%

32%	Multilingual Learners
33%	Economically Disadvantaged
14%	Students With Disabilities



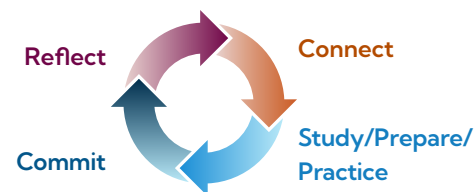
Nashville has worked deliberately to make instructional collaboration a genuine engine of professional growth in every school.

For Nashville Public Schools, instructional collaboration isn't an add-on to PL—it's a cornerstone. David Williams, Deputy Chief of Academics, describes **weekly teacher collaboration as so embedded in school culture that it has become as routine as showing up to work**. Rather than treating collaborative planning time as a logistical necessity, Nashville has worked deliberately to recast it as a genuine engine of professional growth—what Williams describes as "transformational, not transactional." The goal is not simply for teachers to prepare for the next week's lessons, but to use that time to deepen their understanding of content, pedagogy, and the curricular materials they are implementing. This vision is anchored in one of the district's five principal "Leadership Plays," which explicitly names instructional collaboration as a non-negotiable expectation in every school. Weekly collaborative planning is built into master schedules across the district's more than 130 schools, and Williams expresses confidence "that it has been instantiated in our culture."

The district formalized collaboration in a four-phase cycle grounded in teachers' curricular materials.

To give that weekly collaboration time a consistent and meaningful structure, Nashville developed and formally introduced an instructional collaboration cycle in the 2025–26 school year. The cycle unfolds in four phases: reflect, connect, study/prepare/practice, and commit. Rather than a one-time sequence, these phases operate as a continuous cycle, with each round of commitment feeding back into reflection, launching the next cycle of learning. Its rollout at the district's summer Principal Launch event was well received, with **principals appreciating the clarity of having a repeatable structure**. Some schools even adapted the structure to allow for deeper work—evidence, Williams noted, of the model generating its own momentum at the school level. The instructional collaboration cycle is grounded in and reinforced by Nashville's curriculum-based approach to PL. Rather than offering abstract instructional strategies, the district has deliberately situated all PL—including the content of collaborative planning sessions—in the specific materials teachers are using every day, whether in ELA, math, or science.

Nashville's Instructional Collaboration Cycle





A layered system of coaches, principals, and district leaders ensures that every level of the organization is working toward the same instructional vision.

A layered system of coaching and leadership support surrounds and reinforces the collaboration structures at the school level. School-based instructional coaches—most commonly literacy coaches at the elementary level, with math coaches and generalist coaches in some schools—attend collaborative planning sessions alongside teachers. In recent years, though, the district has made a deliberate shift to build the capacity of teacher PLC leads to run those sessions themselves, freeing coaches to focus on individual coaching cycles. District-level lead coaches, meanwhile, spend the majority of their weeks in schools—typically visiting two schools per day—supporting school-based coaches, stepping in to facilitate instructional collaboration where no coach exists, and calibrating with principals on what strong implementation looks like. Principal supervisors follow the same rhythm, visiting schools Monday through Thursday and using those visits to observe the five leadership plays in action and provide direct feedback.

The district has also constructed a deliberate learning sequence across its principal development structures, consisting of the monthly Principal Leadership Network, content and coaching days, and quarterly instructional leadership team meetings, so that principals

The aspiration is a system in which every layer—from teacher collaboration to coaching to principal development—is working toward the same instructional vision, with collaborative planning serving as the closest and most recurring point of contact between PL and the daily work of teaching.

David Williams,
Deputy Chief of Academics
Nashville Public Schools

and coaches are receiving connected learning before coming together to apply it. As Williams summarized it, the aspiration is **a system in which every layer—from teacher collaboration to coaching to principal development—is working toward the same instructional vision**, with collaborative planning serving as the closest and most recurring point of contact between PL and the daily work of teaching.

Out of all PL activities reported, collaborative meetings are where teachers spend the most time and attend most frequently.

- Collaborative teacher meetings are attended with the highest relative frequency, followed by instructional coaching and then meetings with mentors.
- Most early-career teachers are observed, but many with much lower frequency and time spent than collaboration.

Figure 3. Time Spent by PL Types

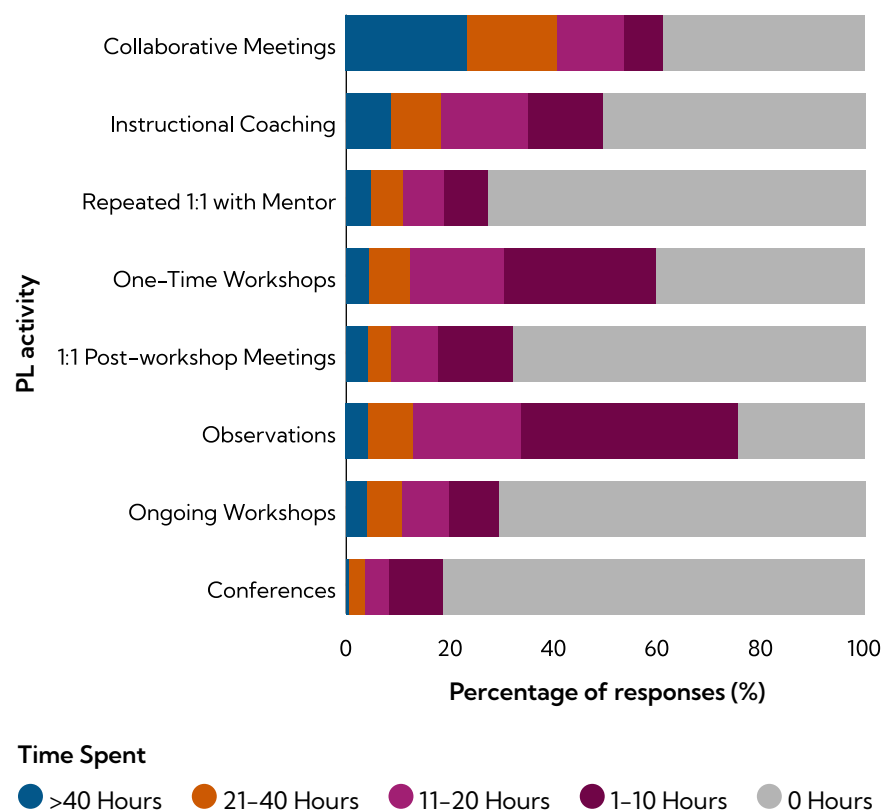
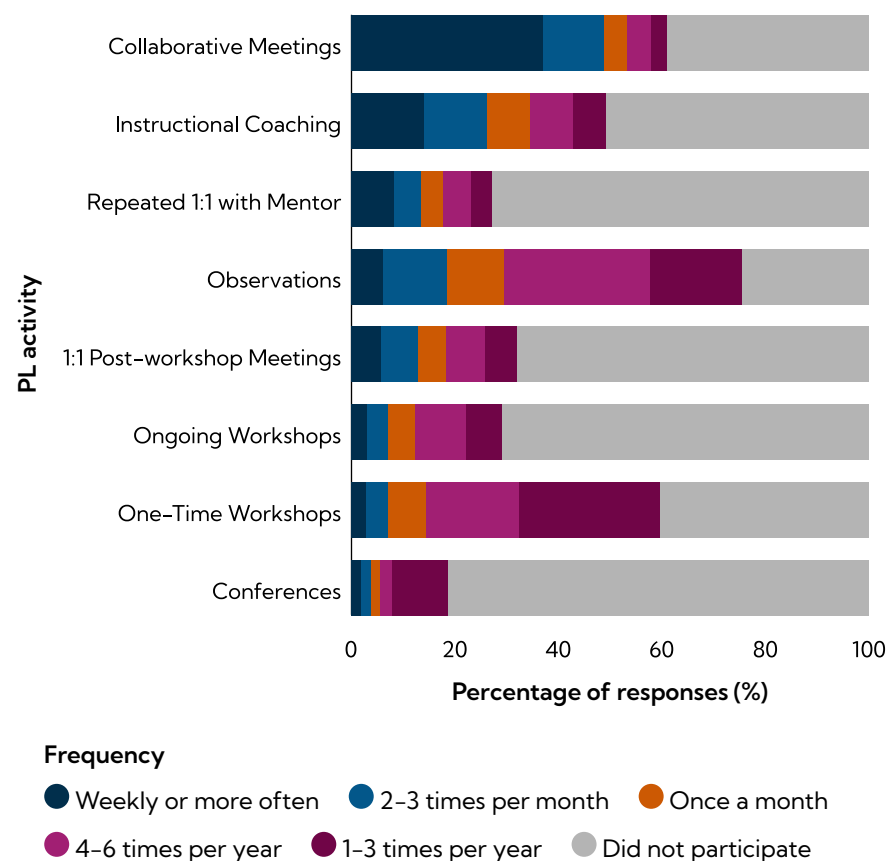


Figure 4. Frequency by PL Types





"This Session Needs To Be DFAL'd"

How Baltimore Ensures High-Quality Professional Learning Through The Design And Facilitation Of Adult Learning

Challenges

- Fragmented PL across the system, lacking the elements necessary for adult learning

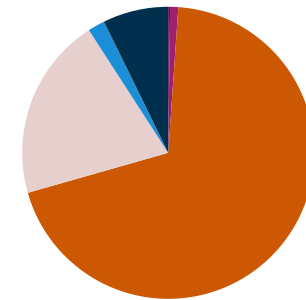
Strategies

- Create a district-wide PL workshop grounded in [Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning](#), required for any facilitator of PL workshops
- Develop a second version of the workshop focused on the facilitation of PLCs

Baltimore City Public Schools

159	Schools
5,298	Teachers
76,362	Students
\$1.9B	SY26 Budget

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



●	American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.2%
●	Asian: 0.9%
●	Black/African American: 69.2%
●	Hispanic/Latine: 20.2%
●	Multiethnic/Multiracial: 1.8%
●	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.1%
●	White: 7.2%

14.4%	Multilingual Learners
71.6%	Economically Disadvantaged
15.1%	Students With Disabilities



Baltimore City Public Schools overhauled a fragmented PL system by building an approach grounded in how adults actually learn.

Baltimore City Public Schools has undergone a significant transformation in how it conceives and delivers PL for educators. When Dr. Katya Denisova, Director of Professional Learning, assumed her role, she found a fragmented landscape: PL sessions were uncoordinated, there was no shared understanding of what distinguished training from genuine professional learning, and adults were being treated as passive recipients rather than active learners. An early analysis of more than 10,000 teacher feedback responses confirmed these patterns, revealing the gap between how PL was being delivered and what the principles of adult learning actually require. As Dr. Denisova described it, the district needed to move away from a situation where sessions were largely “training” and offered in a disjointed, uncoordinated way, toward **a system built around a shared understanding of how adults learn, when to bring people together, and how to facilitate PL so that adults are not treated like children.** This diagnosis laid the groundwork for a deliberate, multi-year reform effort grounded in [Learning Forward Standards](#), the science of learning, and continuous improvement cycles.

The Design and Facilitation for Adult Learning (DFAL) course transformed facilitator quality and became the gateway to school-level autonomy.

The centerpiece of Baltimore's approach to building facilitator quality is the Design and Facilitation for Adult Learning course, known district-wide as DFAL. Developed by Dr. Denisova first piloted in May 2023 with 22 participants, the course has since reached over 1,000 educators, including roughly 350 school administrators. DFAL has become so embedded in the district's professional culture that it has evolved into a verb: saying a session needs to be “DFAL'd” means it requires redesign to prioritize active engagement over passive delivery. **The course operationalizes a clear instructional philosophy:** the recommended ratio for any PL session is 20% direct delivery to 80% application, processing, and planning. As Dr. Denisova explained, to DFAL a session means getting rid of too much content, making meaningful pauses, allowing opportunities for meaningful collaboration and application, and using experiences from people in the room to drive the flow. **The course is required for anyone seeking to design or facilitate PL, and it has served as a direct lever for expanding school autonomy:** the district's Chief Executive Officer stipulated that schools would only be granted permission to run their own PL if at least one administrator had completed DFAL. This policy alone triggered an influx of approximately 250 administrators enrolling in a single summer.



Facilitator quality is complemented by multi-session learning arcs and a shift toward measuring real classroom transfer and impact.

Beyond the initial DFAL course, the district has built a layered system to sustain and deepen PL quality over time. Learning arcs, which are multi-session series tied to quarterly cycles of professional learning, replaced one-off workshops, ensuring that educators engage with content across the school year rather than in isolated events. These cycles are organized around district-wide literacy priorities, with each quarter deepening a specific instructional focus such as discourse and questioning, or writing. Critically, the district has moved its evaluation framework away from basic satisfaction surveys toward measures of transfer and impact: **educators are now asked, through their new learning management system, to what degree they are applying what they have learned in their classrooms and whether they are observing changes in student performance.** Dr. Denisova acknowledged that reaching the gold standard of measuring impact on student outcomes remains an ongoing challenge at scale, but noted the progress that has been made. This shift in how learning is measured reflects the same rigor the district brings to the design of PL itself.

The district is now investing in a second course to build school-level capacity for sustainable Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

Looking ahead, Baltimore is investing in a second-generation DFAL course, known as DFAL2, focused specifically on building the capacity of coaches and school leaders to establish and sustain PLCs at the school level. The pilot enrolls 50 participants in teams of coaches and administrators and reflects Dr. Denisova's conviction that the highest-quality PL must ultimately be embedded as close to students as possible. As the people who go through these courses come out as different leaders, the district is improving one school at a time.

PL facilitation lives largely at the school level.

- The majority of facilitation (59%) occurs inside the school building: across all combined PL activities, 40% of facilitation is executed by school-based coaches, teacher leaders, or department chairs, while an additional 19% is delivered by school principals or assistant principals.
- Distinct from the other PL activities, ongoing courses / workshops stand out as being disproportionately facilitated by district staff (42%).

Table 1. PL Facilitators by Activity

PL Activity	School coach, teacher leader, or dept chair	School principal or assistant principal	A coach or other facilitator from district	A coach or other facilitator not from district	Other
One-time Workshops or Trainings	24%	18%	34%	19%	6%
Ongoing Courses or Workshops	25%	11%	42%	16%	5%
Conferences	29%	19%	24%	19%	9%
Instructional Coaching	48%	20%	21%	9%	2%
Observations	38%	30%	19%	10%	2%
Repeated 1on1 w. Mentor	55%	15%	19%	8%	4%
Occasional 1on1 Post-workshops	46%	22%	22%	8%	2%
Collaborative Mtngs w. Teachers	53%	19%	17%	5%	6%
% Across all PL activities	40%	19%	25%	12%	5%



"Level Up Fulton"

How Fulton County Is Leveraging Professional Learning To Excel At Teacher Retention

Challenges

- Desire to promote a desirable workplace where teachers can grow and remain long-term in service of supporting students, amidst nationwide teacher shortages

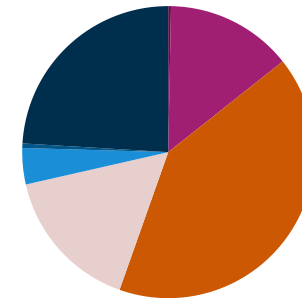
Strategies

- Develop a central PL program that (1) meets district standards for quality, (2) incentivizes teacher growth and retention, and (3) builds the internal capacity of all employees

Fulton County Schools

102	Schools
6,234	Teachers
86,031	Students
\$1.47B	SY26 Budget

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



- American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.3%
- Asian: 14%
- Black/African American: 41%
- Hispanic/Latine: 16%
- Multiethnic/Multiracial: 4%
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.5%
- White: 24%

11%	Multilingual Learners
56%	Economically Disadvantaged
12%	Students With Disabilities



Fulton County Schools built Level Up Fulton, a three-tiered professional learning program designed with broad employee input to develop capacity across every role in the district.

Fulton County Schools has developed a distinctive and ambitious approach to PL that is as much a retention and recruitment strategy as it is a capacity-building one. At the center of this effort is Level Up Fulton, a multi-tiered PL program conceived at the direction of Superintendent Dr. Mike Looney and designed with input from a cross-district committee of approximately 65 employees spanning every division and school level. The program is structured around three tiers: Level 1 grounds employees in the district's core values and competencies; Level 2 develops job-specific skills and abilities; and Level 3—launching in fall 2026—offers three distinct pathways for those seeking to advance as school leaders, professional coaches, or facilitators of professional learning.

Level Up Fulton Tiered Professional Learning



The program functions as a retention strategy, offering tangible career benefits including stipends that signal a long-term district investment in its educators.

The program has been explicitly **designed to compete with the private sector for talent and to stem teacher attrition at a time when the educator workforce is increasingly transient**. When Dr. Brian Keefer, the Executive Director of Professional Learning and Leadership Development, joined the district four years ago, teacher retention stood at approximately 75%. It has since risen to 89%, with preliminary indications pointing toward 91–92% for the upcoming school year. Principal retention is similarly strong, at 94% compared to an urban district average of around 85%. District leaders are careful not to attribute these gains to Level Up Fulton alone, but the connection is clear in how they talk about the program's purpose. Lisa Steele, Director of Professional Learning, describes the thinking behind its design: "It's not just other K-12 organizations who are our competitors and our competition that they're leaving us for. They're leaving for other industries as well. And so it would be foolish not to look at those other industries to say, why are they able to retain employees there?" The result is **a program that treats professional growth as a genuine career benefit**—one reinforced by a \$1,000 stipend upon completion of each level, a tangible signal to early-career teachers in particular that the district is investing in them. The district has budgeted one million dollars to fund these stipends, and even as Fulton faces roughly \$95 million in cuts over the next five years, the school board has committed to holding that line. As Keefer puts it, "we've told the story well enough and our participants have told the story that shows that what we've created is so valued that this is a long-term investment, not a short-term investment."



Level Up Fulton reduces reliance on external vendors by growing facilitators, coaches, and school leaders from within the district.

Beyond retention, Level Up Fulton is designed to reduce the district's reliance on external vendors and consultants by growing capacity from within. The program's Level 3 facilitator-of-professional-learning pathway is particularly strategic in this regard: it trains experienced employees to become designers and facilitators of PL who can then be called upon by any department across the district. Similarly, the aspiring instructional coaches program—a year-long experience including a practicum and feedback on coaching practice—produces a bench of district-vetted candidates ready to fill instructional coaching positions as they open. The district has also committed to funding an elementary literacy coach in every school through district funds, getting ahead of a state mandate that has since passed but not yet come with guaranteed state funding. Looking ahead, Keefer describes plans to extend this logic to principal development: rather than paying for external executive coaches to support new principals, the goal is to eventually use Level 3 graduates—themselves exemplary principals—to coach their incoming peers. "Instead of spending X amount of money" on external contractors, Keefer explains, **"now we can stipend our own people to show them how much more we value them."** And you get our local district flair in that executive coaching, which is way more bang for your buck than you get from an external partner."

National recognition and improving student outcomes affirm Fulton's core belief that investing in educators and investing in students are inseparable.

The coherence and ambition of Fulton's approach to PL have not gone unnoticed. The district's Human Resources Division was recently named the winner of the Georgia Oglethorpe Award by The Sterling Council, the state's highest recognition for organizational performance excellence, becoming the only educational organization in the state's history to receive the honor. Reviewers specifically cited Level Up Fulton as a distinguishing factor, noting that the program's combination of measured teacher growth and evaluation outcomes was unlike anything they had seen in a K–12 setting. For district leaders, the recognition affirms a philosophy that has guided their work from the start: that **investing in the people who work in schools is not separable from investing in students.** As Keefer summarizes it, "if teachers are thriving, we all know that kids are going to thrive. That's simple math." The student outcomes data is beginning to bear this out: with the district on track to post its third consecutive year of significant academic gains, what began as a retention strategy is becoming a model for what it looks like to treat educators, at every level, as the professionals they are.

What District Leaders Can Learn From These Experiences

While the large districts included in our sample tend to offer a similar set of PL activities to their teachers, individual participation rates don't reveal district-level patterns—suggesting that teacher-level data alone doesn't uncover the strategic choices driving those experiences.

When we turned to district leaders, several patterns emerged. Spotlight districts are grappling with:

- How to anchor PL in HQIM
- How to measure PL impact beyond satisfaction
- How to embed equity as an organizing principle for design
- Whether, when, and how to build internal capacity for PL facilitation
- How to balance district-level control and school-level ownership

Questions for District Leaders to Consider

The questions below are designed to help district leaders locate where their own system sits on the tensions surfaced by our spotlight districts, illustrated by concrete strategies from the districts we profiled. Rather than a checklist, these are diagnostic questions—a way for leaders to identify where their own strategic choices are (or aren't) intentional yet. Some speak to how PL is structured system-wide, while others point to narrower design choices district teams can act on directly. Instead of prescribing a single model for districts to replicate, these examples are meant to illustrate what deliberate design can look like in practice.

Is there a gap between what is offered and what teachers experience?

Many districts design PL portfolios without a clear picture of what teachers actually receive. Surveying teachers on their participation, not just cataloging offerings, is a first step toward aligning investment with experience.

Are the deepest investments targeted toward highest-need schools and teachers?

Chicago's proactive outreach to underperforming schools—rather than waiting for self-selection—is a practical equity lever. Identify which schools are falling through the cracks of voluntary PL models.

Continued on next page

Do teachers experience PL as a set of disconnected events, or as sustained learning that is embedded into their everyday routines?

Spotlight districts have moved away from stand-alone workshops toward multi-session arcs tied to regular learning cycles. Rather than adding new initiatives on top of existing routines, these districts have re-envisioned structures teachers already encounter— collaborative planning time, coaching cycles, team meetings—as the learning opportunities themselves. The structural insight is the same across contexts: when learning is cumulative, role-connected, and embedded into a teacher's common experience, it becomes part of how the system operates.

How can facilitators of PL be equipped to deliver high-quality experiences for teachers?

To empower school-based educators to provide the best PL offerings to their teachers, Baltimore and Fulton have invested in training those very educators. Consider whether your facilitators (coaches, teacher leaders, principals) share a common framework for adult learning.

How can PL structure support investments in coaching?

Philadelphia's three-role coaching infrastructure and Nashville's deliberate shift to build teacher PLC leads (freeing coaches for 1:1 work) both illustrate that coaching is most powerful when it's differentiated, layered, and structurally supported.

How can the district's PL serve as a retention tool?

Fulton's experience shows that structured career pathways and visible investment in teacher growth (including financial stipends) can meaningfully improve retention—which itself drives student outcomes.

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Methods Appendix

Quantitative Survey Data on PL Participation

Data

We analyzed a survey of TFA Corps Members (CMs) conducted at the end of the 2024-2025 school year. CMs were asked to report on their participation in a variety of PL activities, and told, “Do not include activities provided through TFA.” Thus, these activities represent participation in PL above and beyond what is offered by TFA (i.e., provided by their school or district). For activities on which respondents marked “yes” to participating, they were asked a series of follow-up questions including time spent, frequency of participation, and facilitator of the activity. It is worth noting that, while this varies widely by district, many districts have PL requirements that are specific to early-career teachers or those new to the district.

Sample

We analyzed a subsample of TFA’s survey participants that included only districts that are members of the 100 largest districts in the United States. Within those districts, we removed CMs who teach in charter schools,

as charter schools vary widely in the extent to which they participate in or add onto the PL activities provided by their district. We excluded districts who had fewer than 10 CMs participating in the survey. Our analytic sample was composed of 1,137 CMs in 24 districts, spread geographically across the entire continental US and Hawaii. See Table 2 for additional information.

Qualitative Spotlight Districts

Sample, Data Collection, and Analyses

Among districts that were included in the TFA survey subsample, we selected six to participate in a series of semi-structured interviews. We spoke to district leaders who design and execute on PL strategy to understand their decision-making processes, implementation, and trade-offs. We conducted a total of 10.5 hours of interviews and collected a combination of publicly available and internally shared documents related to PL design and delivery, including PL plans, PL offering catalogs, strategic plans, and instructional frameworks. All transcripts and documents were analyzed using a hybrid approach to thematic coding that integrated inductive and deductive methods.

Table 2. TFA Corps Member Survey Descriptives

	N	%
Total Respondents	1137	
Overall Response Rate		100%
Follow-Up Questions Response Rates		
Conferences		56%
One-time Workshops		67%
Ongoing Courses		57%
Occasional 1 on 1		59%
Post-workshops		
Observations		65%
Repeated 1 on 1 with Mentor		60%
Instructional Coaching		60%
Collaborative Meetings		64%
Year in TFA		
First-year CMs	581	51%
Second-year CMs	556	49%
Urbanicity		
City	841	74%
Suburb	251	22%
Town	31	3%
Rural	14	1%



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 team@rpplpartnership.org