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# Teacher-Directed Professional Learning: Opportunities, Challenges, and Solutions

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# Teacher-Directed Professional Learning: Opportunities, Challenges, and Solutions. Cross-Project Summary.

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## Introduction

Teachers are professionals, whose job relies on continued professional growth and learning. Teachers want their professional learning experiences to treat them like professionals, and be relevant, interactive, delivered by subject matter experts, sustained over time, and empowering ([Gates Foundation, 2014](#)). Professional learning is any instructionally-relevant activity designed to improve and increase classroom teachers' (1) content knowledge; (2) understanding of instructional strategies and intervention techniques, including how best to analyze and use data to inform such strategies and techniques; and (3) classroom management skills ([Education, Innovation, and Research \(EIR\) program](#)). In many other fields, managers empower professionals to seek out training and professional development they feel most aligns with their professional goals, needs, and interests ([Lemmetty, & Collin, 2020](#)). In other words, employees are treated as professionals. Yet, our approach to the education of teachers is different. The common approach to teacher professional development is oftentimes not personalized or self-directed, rather masses of teachers attend prescribed, district-lead professional development throughout the year. This approach is designed to standardize teacher skills and knowledge that are critical for the district. Sometimes this is necessary, but when it is the only professional development option, teachers may experience the lack of choice or agency in their own professional learning in a way that decreases their sense of professionalism. Lack of professionalism is a key contributor to teachers' dissatisfaction, "the data consistently show us that a big issue is how much voice, how much say, do teachers have collectively in the school-wide decisions that affect their jobs? Are teachers treated as professionals? That's a huge issue" (Walker, 2015).

An alternative approach to teacher learning is to empower teachers to direct their own professional learning experiences, given their skillsets and educational context. Teacher-directed professional learning (TDPL) is an approach that provides teachers choice, voice, discretion, and autonomy over how they develop and grow their own pedagogical knowledge and skills. This model is seen as a method of improving teaching practices, high-quality instruction, teacher morale, and student outcomes. Recognizing the need and promise of such an approach to professional learning, the [Office of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) in the U.S. Department of Education has made significant investments in TDPL through the [Education Innovation and Research \(EIR\) program](#)<sup>1</sup>; among other content areas, the program currently includes seven TDPL projects awarded to school districts and non-profits (including universities) in 2020<sup>2</sup>. The EIR program is funding Local Education Agencies (LEAs), non-profits, and research institutions to develop and implement TDPL programs and evaluate their impact on student and teacher outcomes.

While the potential promise of TDPL is clear, organizations face a range of challenges when developing and implementing TDPL programs. As EIR grantees and others engaged in similar work adopt these system-wide changes to supporting teachers' continuous professional growth, various considerations are essential to program success.

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<sup>1</sup> The EIR program was established under section 4611 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Through a competitive grant process, the EIR program is designed to generate and validate solutions to persistent education challenges and to support the expansion of those solutions to serve substantially larger numbers of students. <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/innovation-early-learning/education-innovation-and-research-eir/>

<sup>2</sup> Applicants responded to specific requirements about teacher-directed professional learning as specified in the Notice Inviting Application (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-07-29/pdf/2020-15994.pdf>)

### **Early lessons from EIR grants illuminate the following key initial actions**

- Set up systems and develop resources to support program implementation.
- Think critically about specialized skills needed for TDPL staff.
- Recruit champions at the school- and district-level.
- Integrate state and local priorities.

In this cross-project summary, early implementation lessons from four TDPL EIR grantees will offer perspective on each of these four areas to serve as a resource for others to consider such innovation. Although this content is specific to teachers, readers are encouraged to consider applying these ideas to programs for school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, and other educators.

## **What is Teacher-Directed Professional Learning (TDPL)?**

Teacher-directed professional learning (TDPL) is defined as any teacher-determined and initiated growth or development activity that is held outside of conventional professional learning opportunities initiated at the school- or district level ([Artman, Danner, and Crow, 2020](#); [Mushayikwa and Lubben, 2009](#)). It is rooted in the andragogical theory that states adult learners who identify knowledge gaps and interests, and plan how those needs and interests will be met, ultimately engage more deeply with learning opportunities ([Blaschke, 2012](#); [Trotter, 2006](#)).

### **How are TDPL programs structured?**

TDPL programs are tailored to meet the needs of local education contexts and individual teachers, and thus, there are many different approaches and types including mentor talks, teacher support groups, Twitter chats, professional learning communities, and Massive Open Online Course participation. Despite the variation, all TDPL programs are centered around the ideas of learner freedom, autonomy, and independence (Artman et al, 2020; Brookfield, 1985). Most TDPL programs take place outside of conventional school offerings and target specific teacher wants and needs.

**While there is variation in structure, TDPL programs generally take a 5-step approach to support teachers' path toward self-directed professional learning experiences:**

1. The program establishes a stipend system to offload the financial burden of participating in professional learning experiences. Teachers either receive a stipend upon completion of a professional learning opportunity or have access to a "stipend bank" which can be used to pay for professional learning opportunities in advance. In this case, programs allow a certain maximum amount (e.g., \$1,500) that teachers can spend per year.
2. Teachers complete a self-assessment to identify knowledge and skill gaps in a particular topic area or pedagogy
3. The assessment is used to develop a professional learning plan and goals
4. Teachers engage with a facilitator or coach to review their assessment data, professional learning plan, and select relevant and useful professional learning opportunities to achieve goals
5. Teachers reflect on the impact of the professional learning opportunities attended.

## **What are the potential benefits of TDPL?**

Teachers, students, and educational systems at large can benefit from TDPL which results in "learning that is more relevant, situated, and empowering," ([Carpenter and Green, 2018, n.p.](#)).

### **Potential Benefits of TDPL for Teachers**

TDPL is a highly personalized and differentiated approach to learning ([Trotter, 2006](#)) that provides teachers greater autonomy than conventional professional learning to pursue activities that align with their interests and needs, as well as their schedules and preferred learning formats ([Artman, Danner, and Crow, 2020](#)). Thus, simply put, the primary benefit of TDPL is that it provides teachers "a voice and a choice" in their professional growth and learning. TDPL programs provide teachers agency over their own learning. Providing this autonomy engenders a sense of respect and dignity that has the potential to improve morale and professional enthusiasm, which is more important than ever as educators continue to cope with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to elevate the profession by treating teachers as the dedicated, reflective, passionate professionals they are is one important step among many.

TDPL also builds teachers' sense of community, confidence, and motivation, which can, in turn, combat feelings of isolation. This is particularly true for teachers in geographically dispersed locations (i.e., rural settings), those in isolated subject areas without role-alike counterparts, teachers serving special populations or students with intensive learning needs, or those in high-stress environments ([Mushayikwa and Lubben, 2009](#); [Artman, Danner, and Crow, 2020, p.7](#)). Furthermore, TDPL encourages leadership development amongst experienced teachers, who "have the opportunity in professional

learning networks, Twitter chats, teacher groups, etc. to take on mentor roles and share their experiences in personalized ways that conventional professional learning does not generally offer,” ([Artman, Danner, and Crow, 2020, p.5](#)).

### **Potential Benefits of TDPL for Students**

Empowering teachers can lead to direct benefits for students. TDPL programs allow teachers to fill gaps in skills or knowledge, thereby improving their quality of instructional practices and having a positive impact on student achievement and attainment outcomes ([Artman, Danner, and Crow, 2020](#); [Lopes and Cunha, 2017](#); [Rabbitt, Finegan, and Kellogg, 2015](#)) as well as students’ socioemotional development (A. Woods, personal communication, March 15, 2022). For example, in their experimental study, [Balta and Eryilmaz \(2017\)](#) found that tenth-grade high-school students’ who were taught by teachers engaged in a TDPL program had higher achievement scores on an end-of-course physics assessment compared to students who were taught by teachers not engaged in TDPL.

### **Potential Benefits of TDPL for Educational Systems at Large**

The benefits of TDPL extend far beyond the teacher and student; when teachers engage in TDPL and “make intentional efforts to improve upon their practice, colleagues often follow suit” ([Shurr et al., 2014, p.5](#)),” thereby fostering a collaborative learning environment that can combat turnover and improve school climate. Also, research shows that while teachers engaged in TDPL pursue professional learning opportunities in areas of interest or need, learning goals are often influenced by and aligned to school contexts (Louws, 2017). Furthermore, TDPL programs can be designed in ways that are cost-effective as professional learning is not predicated on high-cost trainers or programs ([Brennan, 2021](#)). Finally, schools and districts can identify new professional development offerings and opportunities that might be worth investing in at scale.

## **Cross–Project Summary Methodology**

To understand the unique opportunities and challenges EIR grantees faced in the early implementation of TDPL programs, AnLar conducted targeted interviews with four Project Directors of TDPL EIR grants awarded in 2020. As illustrated in Table 1 below, interviewees represented an array of EIR grants.

Interview questions focused on three key themes. First, we sought to understand each program’s unique approach to TDPL, including adult learning frameworks the program developers utilized to structure their approach and resources created to support program implementation. Second, we explored the successes of each TDPL program and identified the benefits teachers and educational systems have observed because of the TDPL. Finally, we asked these grantees to discuss challenges they have experienced implementing TDPL programs and solutions to these challenges. Participants were encouraged to provide both a general view of challenges and successes they faced, as well as those specifically faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. AnLar coded interview conversations and notes to identify common themes and prominent trends amongst interviewees’ responses. These themes were combined with literature on TDPL to contextualize and expand TDPL EIR grantee experiences.

**Table 1. Interview participants**

Grantee Interviewee(s)	Project	Geo-location Type	Program Focus
<i>Appalachian State University</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dr. James Beeler</li> <li>• Katherine Chesnutt</li> </ul>	Empowering Teacher Learning in Western NC	Boone, NC Rural	Micro-credential
<i>Charleston County School District</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dr. Abigail Woods</li> </ul>	C3: Choice in Cultural Competency	Charleston, SC Non-rural	Cultural awareness and competencies
<i>Region 18 Education Service Center</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jessica Navarro</li> </ul>	Self-Directed Professional Learning Project (SDPLP)	Austin, TX Non-rural	Math instruction in Grades 3 - 8
<i>Virginia Advanced Study Strategies</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jennifer Stevens</li> </ul>	Professional Learning by Choice Community	South Boston, VA Rural	STEM in rural settings

## Challenges & Solutions to Implementing TDPL Programs

TDPL EIR- grantees were asked to reflect on specific barriers or challenges they experienced implementing TDPL programs and what solutions they developed to overcome said challenge. Challenges included staffing skill sets, logistical infrastructure, buy-in, and supports. The challenges described below were underlying prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to be challenges faced when developing and implementing TDPL programs<sup>3</sup>. In response to these challenges, TDPL EIR grantees articulated four useful solutions. Below we describe the challenge and potential solution and provide illustrative examples of how the solution was implemented within their EIR-funded project.

### **Challenge 1. A sophisticated logistical infrastructure is needed to curate learning opportunities, track attendance, and reduce the burden on teachers.**

TDPL are complex programs that often have multiple, concurrent workstreams that necessitate sophisticated data systems that can (1) curate high-quality professional learning opportunities, (2) track teacher attendance and payment for individually selected training, and (3) help alleviate any burden (financial or logistical) on teachers for engaging in professional learning. TDPL EIR grantees noted that, in most cases, these systems were not in place prior to receiving an EIR grant for their TDPL program, and thus, needed to be created.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> During interviews, EIR grantees often interwove challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic with those faced developing and implementing TDPL programs. This is not unique to these EIR grantees. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing academic, socio-emotional and physical challenges in education ([Goldberg, 2021](#); [Gagnier, Okawa, and Jones-Manson, 2022](#)), which has disrupted the daily operations of educational systems as well as EIR grant implementation and lifecycles.

<sup>4</sup> The EIR program recognized significant infrastructure required to develop and implement high-quality TDPL programs and thus to help grantees carefully think through this process and all components, the Notice Inviting Applicants required EIR TDPL applicants to outline a process to determine that each learning activity is job-embedded or classroom-focused, collaborative, data-driven, part of a sustained and intensive program, and related to the achievement and attainment of high-need students.



## Curating and accessing a list of professional learning opportunities

Due to the broader definition of what is considered a professional learning activity in TDPL, the universe of options is extensive. Several TDPL EIR grantees noted that significant staff time is needed to curate a list of all professional learning opportunities. This entails several detailed steps including (1) identifying all opportunities for specific teachers (e.g., elementary vs. high school) and in particular content areas (e.g., math, literacy); (2) identifying and describing the learning goals of each experience (i.e., what a teacher will take away from this experience); and (3) listing key details important for teachers such as the format (virtual or in-person), the cost, and the time commitment. In addition to listing the universe of possibilities for professional learning, some TDPL programs have sought to help teachers select high-quality experiences beyond the curated list of offerings; this requires program staff to develop a rubric and rating system for scoring potential learning opportunities based on the qualities of effective professional learning established in the literature ([Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardener, 2017](#); [Hunzicker, 2011](#)) and established practices and recommendations from professional organizations, such as the [National Council of Teachers of Mathematics](#) and the [Center for Disease Control](#). The review of individually-requested opportunities can be labor intensive and varies based on the structure and size of the TDPL program. To rate the quality of an opportunity based on an evidence-informed rubric, the TDPL project team had to develop the rubric and then gather information from the professional learning opportunity provider to be able to rate the content and resources for quality. One TDPL EIR grantee commented that an unexpected barrier faced when collecting and determining quality professional learning opportunities was that providers were hesitant to disclose information or resources, they considered to be proprietary (J. Navarro, personal communication, March 9, 2022).

## Tracking professional learning opportunities

Program developers need a process to track which professional learning opportunities teachers attend as this data can increase both the high-quality implementation of such programs and the evaluation of their impacts on student and teacher outcomes.

Tracking to guide program refinement: In the interest of continuous quality improvements to the program, it is critical to track indicators such as the number of professional learning opportunities different teachers attend and whether this varies by demographic characteristics such as teacher location and years of experience, whether teachers select learning opportunities that are aligned with their goals, and how teachers' ratings of the quality of a learning experience relate to the intended goals of the professional development opportunity. Understanding these types of data can lead to programmatic refinements and improvements.

As many programs offer stipends, tracking expenditures is important to determine the financial logistics of self-directed professional learning. Tracking this type of data allows for questions such as how much do individual teachers spend on professional learning throughout the year? Is the financial reality closely aligned with the allotted amount (e.g., \$1,500) or should this amount be changed? It also allows for an understanding of questions such as what the average cost of professional learning in different topical areas, or specialties. Finally, tracking the financials of professional learning will ultimately facilitate the design of an efficient professional learning system, whereby teachers can use their time and money to wisely select highly effective and useful professional development.

Tracking to evaluate the program's impact. Additionally, details about each teachers' selected learning opportunities also provides data that sheds light on the effectiveness of such programs on teacher, student, and district outcomes. For example, we can evaluate whether there are greater increases in student outcomes when teachers attend more professional learning opportunities, or when they attend certain types of professional learning opportunities (e.g., opportunities rated as higher quality based on a quality-rubric).

### **Reducing the burden on teachers to participate**

There are two key burdens that professional learning imposes on teachers, which TDPL programs are attempting to address. First, the cost to attend a professional learning opportunity can range based on activity type, duration, and location. As one TDPL EIR grantee reflected, "Many teachers will not go to training because of the upfront cost. Even though money may be available to them via reimbursement, there's a barrier to teachers being able to cover the upfront cost and be reimbursed later. If they're going to a national conference, which can be upwards of \$2,000 when you factor in lodging, airfare, and incidentals," (J. Stevens, personal communication, March 22, 2022). Second, the logistics of seeking out and registering for a professional learning opportunity can be significant. Curated lists of opportunities help alleviate this burden. However, program developers navigate a complex balance between easing the burden of teachers having to search for opportunities with the true spirit of teacher-driven learning opportunities – which at their core entrust complete ownership to the teacher to identify opportunities. Additionally, some TDPL programs reduce the burden even more by registering the teacher on their behalf using previously obtained information from onboarding processes (J. Stevens, personal communication, March 22, 2022).

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### **Solution 1. Set up systems and develop resources to support program implementation.**

TDPL programs are complex professional learning systems that have multiple, concurrent workstreams. Therefore, data systems, resources, and supports are crucial to ensuring programs are implemented intuitively, efficiently, and effectively. To support the implementation of the programs, TDPL EIR grantees described developing two unique types of supports and resources. Teacher-level resources were specifically developed to support the teacher as they completed the self-assessments and used the data to establish learning goals and select learning opportunities. Program-level resources were needed to support the establishment of the program team, internal protocols, and processes, and manage relationships with key partners to ensure buy-in and support recruitment.

**Teacher-Level** resources were developed to help teachers gather data and make choices regarding their professional learning and growth. These resources scaffold teachers through the process of identifying growth opportunities and blind spots as well as lead them through important reflection questions to allow them to identify the utility of each learning experience. To support teachers' experiences in the programs, TDPL EIR grantees developed:

- *Self-reflection assessment.* Multiple TDPL EIR grantees emphasized the importance of a self-reflection assessment that allows teachers to identify gaps quickly and easily in their skills and knowledge. TDPL EIR grantees leveraged existing assessments (e.g., Charleston County School District's use of the [Intercultural Development Inventory](#)) or created their own assessments that aligned to state or district standards (e.g., Appalachian State University's [North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System](#) rubric survey). The goal of the self-assessment is to provide a structured, data-driven approach to helping teachers identify areas of opportunity, set professional learning goals, and seek out professional learning opportunities to meet goals and areas of opportunity.
- *Professional learning plan template.* To support teachers' use of the self-assessment to develop a plan for the upcoming year, many TDPL EIR grantees created a professional learning plan and goals template. This template facilitates teachers' review of their self-assessment and use of the self-assessment data to support the development of a professional learning plan. For example, Virginia Ed Strategies scaffolds teachers' goal development through a series of prompting questions designed to help teachers develop a "SMARTER" goal, that is specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-sensitive, and equitable (J. Stevens, personal communication, March 22, 2022).
- *Coaching protocols, tools, manuals.* Many TDPL programs utilize coaches to help bridge the self-assessment with the selection of professional learning experiences. The coaches facilitate the teachers' discovery of their own growth opportunities through the self-assessment data, develop a professional learning plan, select experiences that align with that plan, and reflect upon the learning experience and how it can impact their classroom practice. To facilitate this process, grantees have created coaching resources such as protocols, tools, and manuals help professional learning specialists/coaches provide replicable and equitable experiences across all teachers engaged in a TDPL program. For example, Charleston County School District also created an app that tracked the coaching conversations the Professional Learning Specialists are having with teachers. This allowed the program to determine where the teacher is in terms of learning and how they are engaging with the program and professional learning opportunities (A. Woods, personal communication, March 15, 2022).
- *Post-professional learning experience reflection.* For a professional learning experience to be effective, it must relate to classroom practices; connections to state and local initiatives can help sustain such changes in practice. To support the explicit connection and reflection following a professional learning experience, TDPL EIR grantees developed post-professional learning experience reflection surveys that teachers complete after engaging in professional learning. One TDPL EIR grantee recounted that teachers complete "essentially a 'Yelp' review where we ask questions like, 'How would you rate this?' 'Would you recommend this to others?' 'Did this meet your anticipated needs?'" (J. Navarro, personal communication, March 9, 2022).

**Program-Level** resources support the overall quality and functioning of the program. These include documents to guide the establishment of partnerships critical to the success of the program, protocols to support recruitment of schools, and metrics of quality of professional learning. For example, TDPL EIR grantees developed:

- *MOUs and partnership agreements.* Setting clear expectations for engagement, articulating role responsibilities, and executing MOUs and partnership agreements fosters successful partnerships. For example, Virginia Ed Strategies reflected on the data-sharing agreement and MOU they have with the Virginia Department of Education that will allow them to understand the impact of their TDPL program.
- *FAQ documents to support buy-in and support teacher recruitment.* Multiple TDPL EIR grantees encouraged transparent communication with districts and partners who wish to engage in TDPL programs. Some TDPL EIR grantees created clearly-worded [FAQ documents and newsletters](#) (see Figure 1) that provide a high-level overview of the program and expectations regarding role responsibilities and time commitments for recruitment purposes (J. Navarro, personal communication, March 9, 2022).
- *Quality rubrics.* The universe of professional learning opportunities and continuum of quality is expanded under TDPL programs. To ensure that the experiences teachers are engaging in are high-quality and relevant to their interests and needs, one TDPL EIR-grantee developed a quality rubric to assess professional learning opportunities. This [rubric](#) is rooted in research-based criteria for high-quality professional learning (content-relevancy, timely, job-embedded, utilizes adult learning theory, supports collaboration, encourages sustained implementation and reflection) ([ESC 18-TxCEE, grant application](#)). Such a tool is useful as it can be used by program staff to approve professional learning requests and/or by teachers when selecting opportunities.
- *Data system to track professional learning opportunities, teacher attendance, and stipend data.* As described in further detail in the illustrative example below, a data system that tracks opportunities, attendance, and stipend has been incredibly valuable to TDPL EIR grantees. Having access to information about professional learning opportunities in one platform drives teacher autonomy by allowing them to select opportunities that best fit their needs and interests. Such data systems also minimize the burden on the administrators and leaders who may need to approve opportunities.



Figure 1

## **Illustrative Example: Professional Learning by Choice Community (PLCC)**

*Virginia Advanced Study Strategies, Virginia*

**What is the project?** Virginia Advanced Study Strategies, Inc. (Virginia Ed Strategies) partnered with the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and the Coalition of Small and Rural Schools of Virginia (including its 88 eligible rural LEAs) developed a TDPL program for rural STEM teachers. The program replaces 100 percent of required professional development hours and teachers participate in the program for two years. Teachers in the program complete a self-assessment of their professional knowledge, planning, instruction, assessment, learning environment, and overall professionalism. Teachers will then work with an instructional coach/mentor to select professional learning option in the PLCC data dashboard and register to attend, which “triggers the PD vendor to bill the PLCC finance department to make direct payment for the training,” ([Virginia Ed Strategies, grant application, 2020, p.4](#)). Teachers reflect with their instructional coach/mentor following the professional learning activity, as well as their peers through online professional learning communities (PLCs).

### **How did they set up systems and develop resources to support program**

**implementation?** A critical component of Virginia Ed Strategies’ TDPL program, was the development of the PLCC dashboard, which combines Canvas and Airtable. The PLCC dashboard, “Allows the teachers to go in and see a variety of professional learning opportunities from providers in and outside of Virginia. We have those opportunities in a catalog where they can see every detail about the opportunity,” (J. Stevens, personal communication, March 22, 2022). Virginia Ed Strategies works closely with PD providers in the Commonwealth to ensure the catalog of options is up to date, and therefore the list is constantly evolving.

The dashboard also houses the program’s stipend system. Teachers are given a “bank” upfront to alleviate the burden of upfront costs and reimbursement. Once a teacher selects an opportunity in the PLCC dashboard, Virginia Ed Strategies gets an alert that a teacher wanted to attend that opportunity. Virginia Ed Strategies then registers and pays for the teacher on their behalf using the information the teacher provided during their program onboarding process; the money then comes out of the teacher’s “bank.” The prepayment extends to airfare, lodging, or other upfront costs that the teachers may incur attending the professional learning opportunity. To promote teacher autonomy and ownership over their professional learning and growth, teachers are provided an accounting of their “bank” balance.

## **Challenge 2. Specialized skill sets are needed to implement TDPL programs.**

Successfully designing, managing, and implementing a high-quality TDPL program at scale requires a variety of specialized knowledge and skills sets that span classroom practice and high-quality instruction, district leadership, data systems, instructional coaching, and high-quality, effective adult learning experiences. First, these programs rely on a knowledgeable program director who has vision and also project management skills to execute all the components of the program (both conceptual and logistical) while understanding the unique needs of teachers, principals, and district leaders. Second, curating high-quality learning opportunities for specific teachers (e.g. elementary) in particular content areas (e.g. mathematics) requires knowledge of the existing literature on effective professional development ([Darling-Hammond, Hylar, and Gardener, 2017](#); [Desimone and Pak, 2017](#); [Desimone, 2009](#); [Garet et al., 2001](#)) as well as deep knowledge of the local educational context and particular requirements for teachers in partner districts or states. Third, “even the most self-aware educators may not perceive gaps in their understanding or see areas where they need to improve,” ([Carpenter and Green, 2018, n.p.](#)) and thus these programs rely upon skilled and effective coaches or facilitators to support the teachers as they reflect upon their professional learning experiences and identify how to use them to make changes to their classroom practice. Finally, as detailed above, these programs rely on a sophisticated data system that can list and organize learning opportunities for teachers and track their attendance and expenditures. Thus, teams will need to hire or externally contract with data systems experts to develop a database that meets all their unique needs.

## **Solution 2. Think critically about specialized skills needed for TDPL staff.**

One action in developing a TDPL program and establishing key programmatic features is to think critically about staffing skill sets that are needed. Developing and implementing TDPL programs at scale draws upon specialized knowledge from many different fields (e.g., professional development and adult learning literatures, data systems, coaching) and thus requires a variety of specialized skill sets. Programs should identify skill sets that are currently in-house, as well as gaps that can be filled through hiring, contractors, or external partners.

TDPL EIR grantees identified common roles that have facilitated the successful implementation of their TDPL program, including:

- *Project Director.* This person usually has knowledge and skills in teaching, teacher training, adult learning, instructional coaching, educational leadership, and data systems, which allows them to provide high-level oversight and vision for the project. The project director oversees the entire program and thus projects benefit from a director with a unique background and set of experiences that allow them to understand the needs of the classroom teacher, the school principal, and the district-level administrators.
- *Project Manager.* As TDPL programs require so many conceptual and logistical components, someone with expertise in project management is critical for the implementation of the program. This person is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the program including compiling lists of professional learning opportunities, working with the data systems specialists to build the data system to support all program tracking, interfacing with the coach to ensure they can be maximally effective in helping the teacher understand their self-assessment and use this to structure their learning goals and learning opportunities throughout the year.

- *Professional Learning Specialist or Coach.* This person is the bridge between the professional learning experiences and the classroom teacher. Ideally, this person has experience teaching and coaching either as a former teacher or instructional coach, as well as subject matter expertise in the program's focus topic area. These individuals work with teachers to select professional opportunities that align with the interests and needs teachers identified through self-assessment, as well as reflect with the teacher to allow them to consider the impact of the professional learning on their practice, either one-on-one or in small PLCs. The coach is responsible for shepherding teachers through this process including helping the teacher understand their self-assessment, using that data to guide potential professional learning goals and opportunities, and then helping the teacher reflect upon their experiences to identify how the professional learning experience may be implemented in their classroom. An individual in this role may also cull together professional learning opportunities based on their subject matter expertise.
- *Technology or Data Systems Specialist.* The backbone of many EIR TDPL programs is a data system that supports the logistics of these programs. This system houses all potential professional learning opportunities, tracks teachers' attendance in and reflections on these experiences, and tracks the financial aspects of the program including the amount remaining for individual teachers. In some cases, these systems also handle teachers' registration for individual professional learning opportunities.

Like teachers, program staff should also freely engage in professional learning opportunities to strengthen and hone their skill sets. Furthermore, if a particular skill does not exist in-house, the program may consider providing opportunities to program staff to build them. As further described in the Illustrative Example below, one grantee required the program's two professional learning specialists to attend coaching and equity training to hone their coaching expertise. Moreover, the Project Director has enrolled in project management training to deepen her knowledge of best practices so that she may provide guidance to others.

Sometimes the needed skill sets are not present in-house and thus these programs require the addition of other team members with specific skills. To support this process, TDPL EIR-grantees have developed job descriptions for critical project staff. Developing a set of job descriptions is useful because it allows an individual to think critically about the skills needed to achieve organizational or programmatic goals and objectives. While there are tools and resources available (e.g., Microsoft competencies) that can help identify skill sets for roles, one TDPL EIR grantee commented that she prefers to take a reflective approach to writing job descriptions; she looks to other organizational systems to identify what has been successful and could be applied to her own educational system (A. Woods, personal communication, March 15, 2022).

TDPL programs are a tremendous undertaking, therefore, it is critical at the beginning that programs identify new hires, contractors, or external partners, as well as tools and resources to fill gaps. For example, one TDPL EIR grantee reflected, "You learn to work smarter not harder. We constantly look for tools [to support us] ...and fill in gaps with contractors or with our partners. . . . We have a multitude of partners working with us and it's not just in name or 'let's get their logo on our proposal.' We have the leaders of these organizations interacting with us at least monthly and in smaller workgroups to help implement and continuously improve what we're doing. They're helping us plan, think through challenges, and recruit school divisions through their contacts and their networks," (J. Stevens, personal communication, March 22, 2022).

## Illustrative Example: C3: Choice in Cultural Competency

*Charleston County School District, South Carolina*

**What is the project?** Charleston County School District (CCSD) is implementing a teacher-directed professional learning program focused on building teachers' cultural competency in ten K-12 Sea Island schools. Teachers complete the [Intercultural Development Inventory](#) (a brief assessment that measures one's ability to shift cultural perspective and respond with the appropriate behavior), the results of which are then used to develop a Personal Learning Plan. Teachers work with two Professional Learning Specialists to select professional learning activities that best suit their needs; teachers receive a stipend to attend activities.

**How did they think critically about staffing needs?** CCSD's approach to hiring staff with the requisite skill sets was twofold. First, during the planning phase of the program, the interview team discussed key roles and brainstormed candidates who would be able to provide project management expertise to efficiently run a TDPL program at scale. Ultimately, the team selected a candidate who did not have a background in K-12, but rather one with a strong project management experience. As Project Director Dr. Abigail Woods reflected, "I was a principal for fifteen years. There are certain skill sets that I am drawn to because that's the right skill set to be a teacher. What I have learned is that it's not the same skill set to execute a project like this... sometimes in education, as educators you only get educators' perspective. There's something to be had about opening our minds to knowing how other systems operate and work..." (A. Woods, personal communication, March 15, 2022). Second, it is important for program staff to do their own self-reflection, identify gaps in their skill sets, and attend training to fill those gaps. For example, the two Professional Learning Specialists attended two training sessions focused on how to be effective coaches before interacting with teachers ([Cognitive Coaching](#) and [Equity Coaching Framework](#)). Similarly, Dr. Woods herself attended project management classes with an external organization to deepen her expertise in this area.

### Challenge 3. Buy-in at the teacher, principal, and district level.

TDPL is a cultural and systematic shift from how professional learning "has always been done." The typical approach to teacher professional learning is a top-down one, in which districts or principals select professional learning opportunities for their teachers. TDPL requires a mindset shift, away from prescribed, general professional learning for ALL teachers, to personalized, tailored, and selected opportunities driven by teachers. TDPL is a bottom-up approach where teachers are given professional autonomy to know what they and their students need and select opportunities they deem most appropriate for achieving their goals. This freedom and flexibility can be unsettling for some district leaders or principals. In addition to the general challenges with systems-level changes in large public institutions, education leaders also are charged with upholding state and local priorities, including their employees' training needs to support those goals. For example, one TDPL EIR grantee reflected, "Principals have a lot of leverage... It's very evident that [in the schools where] the principals who are poised and competent in leading professional learning work and supporting their teachers, the teachers are much more open to the data, coaching, and choice," (A. Woods, personal communication, March 15, 2022).



### **Solution 3. Recruit champions at the school- and district-level.**

As noted previously, TDPL programs are a change both in mindset and organizational structure from the typical approach to professional learning. Mindset and organizational shifts are often best supported by champions, or individuals who advocate for and support the implementation of a program. In this case, champions can advocate for a shift from an approach to professional learning that tells teachers what they need, to one that trusts teachers to identify what is needed for themselves and their students. TDPL EIR-grantees noted the importance of having champions amongst teachers, principals, and district leaders to help drive buy-in during recruitment and sustained engagement throughout a program lifecycle. As one TDPL EIR grantee commented, “finding two or three people in the school who are leaders [has a ripple effect] to get the rest of the teachers on board.” (A. Woods, personal communication, March 15, 2022).

TDPL EIR-grantees have thoughtfully crafted messaging to teachers, and school and district leaders that highlights the benefits of TDPL and how TDPL can be used to further school goals. One TDPL EIR grantee commented that a particularly strong “selling point” for garnering buy-in is that TDPL is particularly impactful for teachers who are isolated and do not have peers in their schools: “we tell the principals, once your teacher enrolls in the program they’re getting the money, the funds, and choice. But they’re also getting the support that helps them all along and ideally helps them implement in their classroom which then improves student outcomes,” (J. Stevens, personal communication, March 22, 2022).

Similarly, another TDPL EIR grantee shared that the program emphasizes that TDPL drives collaboration, autonomy, and may boost teacher morale: “We ask principals... ‘how often do these teachers get this opportunity?’ When we think about the challenges that districts are facing from a recruitment and retention perspective [it’s important] to have teachers feeling more motivated about learning needs and growth...and be able to choose their own learning and address their needs, they can become more effective educators, and more effective educators are better for kids in the long run,” (J. Navarro, personal communication, March 9, 2022).

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## **Illustrative Example: Self-Directed Professional Learning Project (SDPLP)**

*Region 18 Education Service Center, Texas*

**What is the project?** Recognizing a need for self-directed professional learning amongst Grade 3 - 8 math teachers across the state, the Texas Center for Educator Excellence housed at Region 18 Education Service Center (ESC 18-TxCEE) developed a TDPL program where teachers (1) attend an orientation session where they complete a self-assessment of their needs, review student data, and their existing professional learning plan; and (2) complete two professional learning cycles where teachers select, participate, and reflect on the professional learning opportunity. Teachers receive a stipend for participation in professional learning opportunities; the program leverages an existing data system, Texas Educator Excellence Management System (TEEMS), to manage the stipend process and track teachers' attendance and reflection on professional learning opportunities ([ESC-18 TxCEE, grant application, 2020](#)).

**How did they identify and recruit champions?** ESC 18-TxCEE redesigned the project scope and timeline to better align with district timelines. As Project Director Jessica Navarro reflected, "We've found our sweet spot in recruiting during February. We realized this is the time of the year when we need to get districts on board because they're making all the decisions around budgeting and who will be here next year. Teachers are making those decisions, too. [Districts] also will know how many days are set aside for PL and what the focus will be for the next school year," (J. Navarro, personal communication, March 9, 2022).

### **Challenge 4. Lack of a formalized process for identifying how individual professional learning needs relate to broader local and state priorities.**

One rationale for the one-size-fits all approach in which all teachers in a district attend the same prescribed professional development, is that these learning opportunities align with local and state priorities. A challenge for TDPL programs is how to meet individual teacher needs and the needs of the local and state-level educational context. Programs leaders negotiate a need for balance between being teacher-directed and also providing some guidance to ensure that teachers select opportunities that reflect both their interests and needs and also those that are aligned with their district or state. This can be a challenge and different TDPL programs take different approaches. Some add additional self-driven professional development above and beyond district-provided trainings. Other TDPL EIR grantees are replacing either all or most district-led professional learning requirements. The type of approach taken is developed through conversations with district and state partners.

In most contexts, there is a need for a formalized process for mapping these needs and growth opportunities onto the larger local context. Without such, TDPL programs must develop their own structures, protocols, and approaches to help teachers identify their own growth opportunities and blind spots and how these needs are centered within the broader local and state context. This process involves identifying local or state professional development certifications or standards, identifying professional learning opportunities that align with those, and scaffolding teachers to select and attend opportunities that both meet their individual needs and that of the district or state.

#### **Solution 4. Integrate state and local priorities.**

To address this challenge, TDPL EIR grantees have explicitly mapped professional learning opportunities onto local and state priorities. “We are doing our best to garner information from each school district regarding their school improvement goals - what they’re doing across the division to improve student outcomes. We try to put that information front and center in the dashboard for the teachers. As they’re making their decision, they’re not only thinking about how I personally want to improve my practices, but also keeping in mind, that I work for this school district that has these goals. How can what I do impact these goals? The principals then feel more secure that the teachers are choosing professional learning opportunities that are impactful and necessary for their school divisions,” (J. Stevens, personal communication, March 22, 2022).

“As they’re making their decision, they’re not only thinking about how I personally want to improve my practices, but also keeping in mind, that I work for this school district that has these goals. How can what I do impact these goals?”

Similarly, TDPL EIR grantees are encouraging teachers to pursue professional learning opportunities that align with school and district policies and goals. For example, one TDPL EIR grantee commented that “We vet the professional learning experiences to some degree. [Charleston County School District] has a policy around cultural awareness, called the ACE policy that the [Cultural Competency Task Force](#) wrote, and it was passed in December 2019. There are three strands, in one of the strands there is some language around cultural competency and so we try to align the professional learning experience with that policy and those three strands.” (A. Woods, personal communication, March 15, 2022).

## **Illustrative Example: Empowering Teacher Learning (ETL) in Western NC**

*Appalachian State University, North Carolina*

**What is the project?** Appalachian State University partnered with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to develop a TDPL program that replaces 100 percent of the mandatory district and state recertification professional learning requirements. In the program, teachers (1) attend a summer training program in which they complete a self-assessment survey and develop a learning plan; and (2) earn micro-credentials through the Digital Promise platform. Teachers will earn stipends for completing the learning contract and earning three micro-credentials ([Appalachian State University, grant application, 2020](#)). Teachers also have access to a professional learning coach who will guide them in selecting micro-credential courses that best align with their personal learning plans.

**How did they tie professional learning opportunities to district or state initiatives and standards?** The Appalachian State University has thoughtfully aligned program initiatives to existing state standards and requirements to minimize the burden on teachers. As Project Director Dr. Katherine Chesnutt described, “What we’ve done is align that whole process with what the state already requires teachers to do. In NC, teachers need to take the North Carolina Educator Excellence Survey rubric and [we] turned it into a survey that teachers can take. It takes them about fifteen minutes, and it’s administered through Google. When they finish it, it automatically takes them to a Google Data Studio dashboard where they immediately get data upon completing the survey...they use this information to generate goals and a professional learning plan,” (K. Chesnutt, personal communication, March 21, 2022).

In addition, Appalachian State University worked closely with LEAs during the planning phase of the program to identify district professional learning themes and goals for student outcomes to ensure the micro-credentials offered to teachers aligned with and furthered these goals. “We created a website that mapped the NCEES standards to the Digital Promise micro-credentials... teachers can search by NCEES standards...that takes them to a curated list that the [Appalachian State University] team brought together,” (K. Chesnutt, personal communication, March 21, 2022).

## Looking Forward

Teacher-directed professional learning programs empower teachers to know what is best for their practice and context and to select learning opportunities that are best suited to develop their individual skills. This is one of many steps that education leaders and educators can engage in to elevate the teaching profession, stem teachers' dissatisfaction with the profession, and increase teacher motivation and morale. Incremental and sweeping changes to professional learning at local, district, and state levels to increase teacher autonomy in their own learning has powerful potential. As with all EIR projects, investment in efforts to innovate, iterate, and replicate provide a promising pathway for continuing to explore the variety of ways to embark on this journey of continuous learning that empowers. TDPL programs can be intensive investments upfront, but have the potential to truly advance the quality of education. Our goal here is to offer promising solutions from TDPL EIR grantees who are currently implementing these programs to support more schools and districts to develop and implement their own versions, in part or in whole, of programs to support autonomy in teacher learning.

## Resources

[MiPLAN FAQ Newsletter](#)

Region 18 Education Service Center

[Professional Learning Quality Rubric](#)

Region 18 Education Service Center

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