

# WHY WE NEED A BETTER APPROACH TO PD

## The case for customized professional development.

Teachers often feel stranded on islands within their school buildings, left alone to reconcile the increasingly complex challenges of modern students and the rapidly changing ideas about best teaching practices. The sense of feeling isolated and without much support frequently leads to low morale and an epidemic of teachers leaving the profession.

In fact, data from the Economic Policy Institute shows that [more than 50% of teachers don't feel sufficiently supported](#), and nearly 25% of those teachers consider leaving teaching as a result.

According to a study by educational leaders Desiree Carver-Thomas and Linda Darling-Hammond, the resulting [teacher turnover has a ripple effect throughout districts](#), resulting in:

- A higher number of inexperienced teachers in the classroom
- Bigger class sizes
- Higher labor and related costs for local educational agencies
- Reduced educational achievement among students, especially in high-poverty schools

### CUSTOMIZED PD SUPPORTS TEACHERS

Luckily, a growing body of research and experience indicates that the morale crisis can be addressed by approaching the growth and development of educators the same way we approach students' instruction: through differentiation and individualization.

Effective customization of professional development begins with a deep understanding of student data and the broader goals of the school and district. Being able to not only access data to *understand* it and use it should be the goal.

"Personalized PD provides a learning experience that is relevant to the organization at that time," says Joshua Perdomo, director of English learner services and world languages at Community Unit School District 300 in Illinois. "It meets the individuals where they currently are. We always have something else we could be doing, so making our time worthwhile is essential. Ineffective PD makes individuals lose confidence in the person delivering it and the program as a whole."


## WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT CUSTOMIZED PD?

The typical environment for teacher training is a passive "sit and get" situation. The lack of engagement deflates morale and makes effective learning — and teaching — impossible.

According to the Economic Policy Institute report, "teachers are not by and large immersed in learning communities that nurture good outcomes for teachers," and only [11.1% of teachers report having much to say about the content of their PD programs](#).

By contrast, customization gives educators access to the right data and teaches them how to use it to drive their own PD experiences. Flexibility and rich, real-time data on student performance win teachers over to change and make customized PD a key way of transforming instruction school by school.

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# 5 FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING A CUSTOMIZED PD SOLUTION

Ready to offer more personalized learning to your teachers and instructional leaders? Here are 5 considerations for your evaluation rubric:

## 1 IDENTIFY LEARNING GOALS AND OUTCOMES.

What are the district and campus instructional goals? Know *why* you need PD. This is essential for creating a customized, engaging PD session that participants will enjoy. In Illinois' District 300, a large number of English-language learners meant that custom PD addressed techniques of differentiation and installed a Spanish assessment program.

## 2 ALIGN IT WITH INSTRUCTIONAL PRIORITIES.

What do you want educators to be able to do, and does the PD lead them to that? The PD should provide strategies and information that align with what teachers are doing in their daily classroom work, and it should be flexible enough that feedback *from* the classroom can be used to improve the PD and the program being implemented.

## 3 LOOK FOR A CURRENT BEST PRACTICE BASE.

Is the PD based on the latest research on learning? Be sure the PD can adapt to multiple learning styles.

## 4 MAKE SURE IT MEETS THE NEEDS OF TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS.

Can the PD be adapted for use throughout the system? It's a big mistake to invest in professional development for classroom teachers without doing the same for administrators.

**5 FIND A LONG-TERM PARTNER.** Does the PD include ongoing instruction and mentoring from the program developers? "One and done" PD will not evoke change, but working side-by-side with teachers and supporting them through frequent instructional sessions and one-on-one tutoring will change the classroom. "Customer service is the end all and be all when it comes to my relationships with companies," says Joshua Perdomo, who manages ELL and world languages PD in District 300. ■





# TAILORING PD TO IMPROVE ELL INSTRUCTION

Joshua Perdomo, director of English learner services and world languages at Community Unit School District 300 in Illinois adopted Istation Español. The PD was highly customized by the trainer, who worked closely with district leaders beforehand to build a program that met local needs. The resulting personalized PD included special sessions and ongoing differentiated support for new and returning teachers. Trainers also customized the PD for the district's ELL and dual-language instructors, providing training in forming small groups for targeted instruction, and in the cycle of instruction for differentiated learning.

The Istation trainers were former teachers, and Perdomo says that was critical to the curriculum's success. Training with peers who understood their challenges increased teachers' confidence in the program.

Most importantly, the PD offered solutions to a problem that had been affecting the morale of teachers: Assessments and data on students didn't adequately address Spanish-speaking students, for whom assessments in English might pose special problems.

"Teachers were frustrated," Perdomo says. "We didn't have any normed data on the success of dual-language instruction. We only had teacher observation and English data, which wasn't necessarily a full reflection

of the student." Teachers were overwhelmed trying to differentiate instruction without adequate data.

In response, trainers created a customized PD program that included valid, research-based and easy-to-use assessments of growth in Spanish literacy. Suddenly, teachers could see data on the whole child and measure literacy across both English and Spanish.


"Teachers have resources in the target language to support our struggling readers, but also support our students who are enriched," he notes. "We now are using the data as a district to analyze how our dual-language students are doing in comparison to the rest of our student population."


Initially, Perdomo hoped the district's classroom teachers would regularly test the success of their new methods — data-driven differentiation for Spanish speakers, greater use of the instructional cycle, lessons built around the use of small groups for more precise differentiation. He had hoped teachers would use the assessments at least three times a year, but he soon discovered that they were so eager to use the data to see the results that they were giving assessments monthly.

"We've built a culture within our buildings that had gone from 'This is just one more thing' to 'I want to see how much my students have grown in the next benchmark period.'" ■

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## PERSONALIZED PD WORKS BECAUSE IT:

 **INVOLVES KEY STAKEHOLDERS.** When Lee's Summit R-7 School District in Missouri adopted a new set of online assessment tools through the blended learning platform Istation, leaders were intentional about getting buy-in from teachers and other stakeholders. They formed a steering group, included teachers to make the decision-making process as transparent as possible and partnered with program developers to provide customized training and rapid troubleshooting. The targeted engagement and training paid off. The district saw the percentage of K-6 readers at grade level jump from 70% to 80% in just five months.

 **MAKES USE OF DATA.** "When used correctly, formative student data can lead to a deeper understanding of not only students' needs, but also the needs of the educator," says Sarah Cude, a regional PD lead with Istation. "Professional development can then be customized to provide educators with the tools and knowledge to effectively target those needs in the core and intervention classrooms." These data-informed blueprints and interactive workshops are tailored to specific student populations, and requirements for instruction ensure PD is truly useful and adopted by busy teachers.



### LEVERAGES ADULT-LEARNING THEORY.

Taking a consultative approach from the planning phase of professional development and incorporating hands-on activities that utilize the adult-learning theory help teachers figure out how to make the puzzle pieces of data and instruction fit together.



### ACKNOWLEDGES TEACHERS' NEEDS AND INPUT.

"When we value and empower educators, they go above and beyond what is expected, and we can improve on morale by providing engaging PD based on their input," Sabrina Jones, professional development manager for Istation, notes.

## CUSTOMIZED PD FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Teachers, just like their students, need differentiated instruction and a degree of choice to master new technologies and practices and to bring those into the classroom with confidence. Customizing PD helps teachers make it their own and promotes the idea that change is something *they* are doing and not something that is being added to their already heavy loads.

"Every day we are asking teachers to use student data to drive and inform instruction," Cude says. "If we do not equip them with the meaningful professional development needed to make sense of it, then we are asking them to drive without a map." ■

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## ABOUT ISTATION

Istation's computer-adaptive intervention and instruction for [reading](#), [math](#), and [Spanish literacy](#) helps thousands of schools predict student success and more. Research-based and aligned to [state standards](#), Istation's computer-based diagnostic and screening programs, progress monitoring, and interactive lessons provide formative data that give teachers the insight to prioritize interventions, differentiate instruction, and reveal student potential.

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