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Research & Learning Institute™

Bridging the
Gap

PART 2
Sustained & Intensive

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About the Authors

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About the Institute

The Frontline Research & Learning Institute generates data-driven research, resources and observations to support and advance the education community. The Institute's research is powered by Frontline Education's data and analytic capabilities in partnership with over 9,500 K-12 organizations and several million users nationwide. The Institute's research reports and analysis are designed to provide practical insights for teachers and leaders as well as benchmarks to inform strategic decision-making within their organizations.

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With Gratitude

The authors wish to thank members of the Frontline Research & Learning Institute Advisory Council, the review team at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Research and Reform in Education and our respective teams at Frontline Education and Whiteboard Advisors for their expertise, insight and review of *Bridging the Gap*.

Introduction

This report is the second in a four-part series exploring the new federal definition of professional development and its role in setting the standard for quality in professional learning for teachers and leaders. The first report, *Bridging the Gap: Paving the Pathway from Current Practice to Exemplary Professional Learning*, established specific definitions of each of six criteria for quality set forth in the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, including sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven and classroom-focused.

Using an anonymized data set from 203 school districts that included over three million professional development enrollments, researchers at the Frontline Research & Learning Institute identified key metrics associated with each of the criteria and then examined the extent to which activities and enrollments over the last five years met the metrics and aligned with the criteria in the federal definition. The findings, while perhaps not surprising, were startling: for four out of the six criteria, over 80% of enrollments failed to meet the metric. In other words: most professional development offered and enrolled in today does not meet the federal definition of quality.

The findings, while perhaps not surprising, were startling: **for four out of the six criteria, over 80% of enrollments failed to meet the metric.** In other words: most professional development offered and enrolled in today does not meet the federal definition of quality.

The first report in the *Bridging the Gap* series stopped short of diving into the ways that each of the criteria play out in classroom, school, and district settings. And while the definitions promulgated by the report

Each of the deep dives into a criterion are meant to be used together by school and district leaders as well as teachers to evaluate or design professional learning opportunities. **Taken together, these strategies can transform both the experience and the effects of professional learning.**

reflect several years of research, they are merely a starting point for school and district leaders interested in setting a target for high quality and then working to meet it. This report and the two that follow will dive more deeply into each of the criterion definitions and metrics, establish a framework for employing them meaningfully in schools and districts and discuss strategies for improvement of professional development that's falling short. This report concludes with seven key steps any school or district can follow to set priorities for improving professional learning, engaging in the challenging work of making and measuring improvements, and reflecting on progress to make strategic improvements over time. These steps are designed to be applied to each of the six individual criteria, but also to the six criteria together.

Because each metric must be considered independently to best understand what it means and how it might look in practice, the reports separate and examine each criterion independently. However, each of the criteria work in concert to produce high quality — that is, effective in supporting educators to grow and improve — professional learning, and merely meeting one or two does not translate to effectiveness. Each of the deep dives into a criterion are meant to be used together by school and district leaders as well as teachers to evaluate or design professional learning opportunities. Taken together, these strategies can transform both the experience and the effects of professional learning.

Definitions of Key Professional Learning Terms

Sustained \sə-ˈstānd\ adjective;

taking place over an extended period; longer than one day or a one-time workshop.

KEY METRIC: Activity enrollments consisting of more than three meetings

finding: 13%

Intensive \in-ˈten(t)-siv\ adjective;

focused on a discreet concept, practice or program.
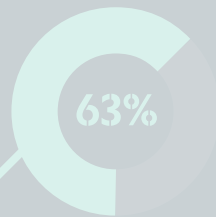
KEY METRIC: Average length of PD activities (in hours)

finding: 4.5 hours

Job-embedded
\ˈjäb, im-ˈbe-dəd\ adjective;

a part of the on-going, regular work of instruction and related to teaching and learning taking place in real time in the teaching and learning environment.

KEY METRIC: Activities offered within the school system

finding: 63%

Collaborative \kə-ˈla-bə-ˌrātiv\ adjective;

involving multiple educators, educators and coaches, or set of participants grappling with the same concept or practice and in which participants work together to achieve shared understanding.

KEY METRIC: Enrollment in an activity with a collaborative format

finding: 9%

Data-driven
\ˈdeɪ.tə̩ˌdrɪv.ᵊn\ adjective;

based upon and responsive to real time information about the needs of participants and their students.

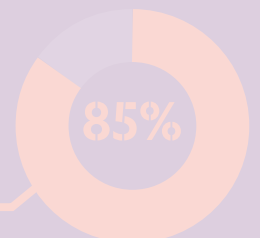**KEY METRIC:** Activities offered aligned to a data-driven format

finding: 8%

Classroom-focused:
\ˈklasˌroom, ˈfoʊkəst\ adjective;

related to the practices taking place during the teaching process and relevant to instructional process.

KEY METRIC: Activities aligned with classroom-focused InTASC standards.

finding: 85%

Pitt County Schools:
An Exemplar

23,500

STUDENTS SERVED BY

1,600

FACULTY ACROSS

37

SCHOOLS

Pitt County Schools in Greenville, North Carolina is a school district with about 23,500 students — about half of whom are African or African American. In 2014, district leaders set out to improve professional learning for approximately 1,600 faculty working across 37 schools. Leaders first focused on the extent to which educators had adequate time to develop key competencies that could improve their instruction. Their efforts have paid off. Over the last three years, the district has seen improvements in the length of average time teachers actually spend on individual professional learning enrollments. *What's more: teachers and principals report thinking differently about the design and utility of their professional learning activities, which has led to improvements in satisfaction with learning experiences.* Pitt County Schools' efforts are highlighted throughout this report as concrete examples of improved practice.
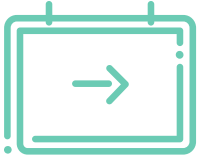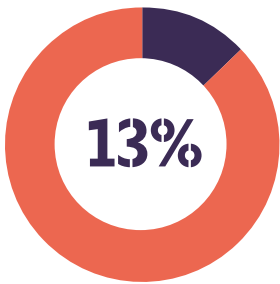
Sustained

Establishing Metrics

Sustained professional development takes place over an extended period and is longer than a one-day or one-time workshop. Teacher "in-service" days are often employed as a primary means of professional learning, and most school districts are constrained by pre-set schedules to offer in-service days that are few and far between. Perhaps that is why, when the research team at Frontline Research & Learning Institute reviewed data on professional learning offered as a one-time or one-day event, they discovered that 80% of activities fell into that category. Only 13% of activities lasted more than three meetings.

13% Only 13% of activities lasted more than three meetings.

Scheduling can pose a significant challenge to implementing sustained professional learning, but it is possible to overcome the tyranny of the calendar by thinking more broadly about what constitutes professional learning, how it is provided to teachers and leaders, and how it becomes most practical to those who must employ it in their classrooms. By first considering the mode of professional learning, leaders can establish key metrics or indicators that help track whether educators are have

access to enough quality learning time to improve practice. Modes of professional learning include expert to group design, expert to individual design and peer to peer design. Figure 2 below summarizes examples of each design.

Figure 2:
Modes of professional learning design and example activities.

Mode	Expert to Group	Expert to Individual	Peer to Peer
Definition	Content is designed to be delivered to educators together based upon core concepts or shared needs	Content is designed to be delivered to individual educators based upon demonstrated need	Content is based upon observation of or engagement in dialogue with others in similar positions
Examples	• Workshops • Classes (on-line or in person) • Lectures	• Coaching • Mentoring • Demonstration	• Professional learning communities • Co-observation

There is nothing inherently good or bad about any of these designs. It is up to those selecting or designing professional learning to evaluate quality using an agreed upon definition and metrics like the ones this report series employs. Professional development planners can select among these designs to identify the best match with demonstrated educator needs.

Pitt County Schools:
Staying Narrow and Going Deep

Pitt County Schools leaders focused on professional learning in support of lesson plan design and instructional strategies. They elected to award credit only for enrollments that met a minimum 10-hour threshold. Specifically, professional learning leaders moved toward:

- *Offering a variety of learning designs such as a mix of expert presentation to group, expert to individual and peer to peer.*

- *Extending individual learning opportunities beyond the initial learning so they include follow-up with an instructional coach or principal.*

- *Providing initial induction training for new teachers and adding an on-going, weekly reflection to identify lessons learned, application and impact of professional learning.*

- *Conducting more observational walkthroughs by experienced leaders to provide feedback and coaching on instruction.*

- *Implementing professional learning communities — which require all participant teachers to bring data and reflection to on-going meetings — aligned to district initiatives to foster teacher collaboration and data exploration.*

- *Organizing professional development through the lens of district initiatives, adult learning principles and reflection.*

Although it is treated independently in this discussion, sustained development that fails to meet the other criteria is failed professional development.

Whether professional learning is sustained can be measured in different ways depending upon the design — and some metrics might be appropriate for multiple modes. The key quality indicator of sustained professional development is whether it happens regularly over time. In an expert to group design, this might mean a class meets several times over a semester or year. In an expert to individual mode, it might mean that a principal observes and provides feedback to a teacher several times over a semester or year. Similarly, in a peer to peer mode, it might mean that a professional learning community (PLC) meets weekly to discuss and resolve teaching challenges. Note that sustained is one criterion in a larger definition that also includes intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused. Although it is treated independently in this discussion, sustained development that fails to meet the other criteria is failed professional development.

Metrics reflecting sustained professional development focus on count statistics. For example, counts of meetings or activities and number of activities offered during a meaningful period of time. Figure 3 below summarizes potential metrics aligned with each professional learning design.

Figure 3:
Examples of "sustained" metrics by professional development design.

Mode	Expert to Group	Expert to Individual	Peer to Peer
Definition	• Number of meetings for a course • Count of times an individual educator participates during a school year	• Number of times principal or other instructional leader meets with teacher • Duration of meeting period	• Periodicity of PLC meetings • Number of peer observations • Number of content-driven meetings between teachers

These examples are not exhaustive. Most include a count statistic easily captured by examining a data field that includes the number of meetings or the duration (over time, rather than individual meetings) required for an activity. The first step in selecting metrics is to establish a shared understanding of what the metrics should demonstrate and whether the information they provide is actionable. While count data can be extraordinarily valuable, it is important to collect the data most relevant to effectiveness rather than the data that are most readily available.

The next step is to review available data fields to discover which metrics might be easily captured and which might require a change to the way that professional learning activities are entered into a professional development management system. Starting with available indicators helps to ensure that progress toward improvement isn't thwarted by missing data. Set the goal of capturing more valuable data over time.

Establishing Benchmarks and Setting Goals

Once metrics are selected, they should be measured using available data on professional development offerings and enrollments across a school or district. With clarity about the selected metrics and the data fields that may be used to measure them, leaders can examine where a school or district stands against the metrics. Just as data should be entered into the professional development management system with consistency, results should be reported based upon data from the professional development management system with consistency as well. Leaders are well served to develop documentation of the metrics selected and how they're measured. For measurements of sustained activities, descriptive statistics such as counts over time are practical measurement tools.

When it comes to evaluating whether professional development is sustained, the core question to grapple with is, "How many times is enough?". The answer will vary depending upon the school or district context, the skills and content knowledge being developed, as well as the needs of teachers and students. The definition provided here, taking place over an extended period and longer than one day, is distilled to the most essential components of what it means to be sustained. Leaders

When it comes to evaluating whether professional development is sustained, the core question to grapple with is, "How many times is enough?".

are encouraged to build upon that definition, and to set a quality goal that is meaningful. Development activities that meet three or fewer times are not sustained. But whether they should last four, five, or a dozen times to be meaningful is up to leaders — with input from educators — to determine.

Data from the Frontline Research & Learning Institute point to a dearth of activities and enrollments of greater than three meetings. Figure 4 below shows a five-year trend of activities and corresponding enrollments. Activities and enrollments plummet between one and three meetings, which means there is both enormous need for and the opportunities for improvement. These data also suggest that raising meetings beyond three commensurate with the time required to achieve intended learning outcomes may be an appropriate first step toward improvement, and extending to five or seven meetings may be a longer-term target.

Figure 4:
Average number of professional development meeting dates by activity count and enrollment over five years between 2011-12 and 2015-16.[1]
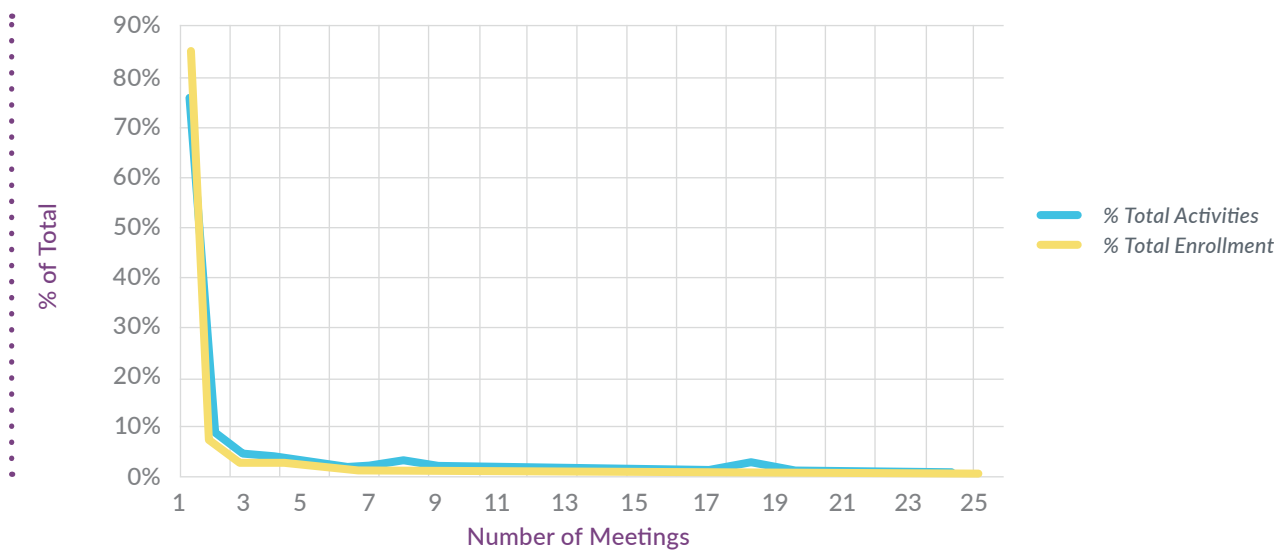
1   Data used in this study were gathered from activities offered and enrolled in between July 1st, 2011 and June 30th, 2016 in 203 school systems across 27 states. The study examined 376,908 activities completed by 107,870 teaching professionals. The total number of enrollments across activities was 3,227,306. For the purposes of this study, data were limited to activities offered to instructional staff. From that group, data were further refined to include individuals defined by their districts as having instructional classification with no administrative access. The resulting pool of analyzed activities applied only to individuals with instructional responsibilities such as teachers and school librarians (referred to as teaching professionals throughout this report), and excluded those with limited or no instructional responsibilities, such as paraprofessionals and school principals.

With clarity about the benchmark, or starting place, as well as the target for sustained professional learning in hand, leaders can set goals for improvement. There is likely to be considerable inertia around professional learning because it has been offered in a similar way for dozens of years. Data from the first report also reveal that educators are increasingly likely to select professional development activities that are not sustained, which means there may be other barriers to change such as teacher preference or overall availability of quality "sustained" options. For these reasons, setting incremental goals to reach the target may make the most sense. If a school district finds it is presently providing professional development that does not meet with the definition of sustained about 80% of the time, for example, leaders may be wise to set a goal to reduce that number by 20% each year over four years rather than immediately slashing all development that meets three or fewer times.

Pitt County Schools:
Measuring Success

Pitt County Schools leaders decided to align their metrics according to whether professional learning activities included substantial time and approaches for teachers to adequately master the knowledge and application of specific content. As a starting point, they sought to recognize only enrollments of greater than ten hours in their continuing education credits. The chart below demonstrates their progress toward driving up the length of learning engagements over the last few years.

Figure 5:
Average Number of Hours per Enrolled Activities by Year

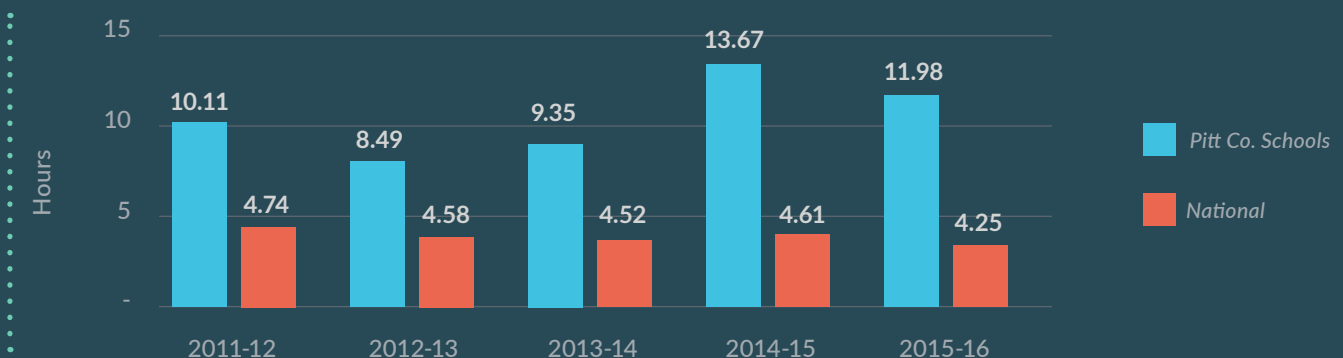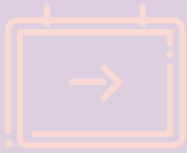
Legend: Pitt Co. Schools, National

Year	Pitt Co. Schools	National
2011-12	10.11	4.74
2012-13	8.49	4.58
2013-14	9.35	4.52
2014-15	13.67	4.61
2015-16	11.98	4.25

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a part of the on-going, regular work of instruction and related to teaching and learning taking place in real time in the teaching and learning environment.

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involving multiple educators, educators and coaches, or set of participants grappling with the same concept or practice and in which participants work together to achieve shared understanding.

KEY METRIC: Enrollment in an activity with a collaborative format

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Data-driven \ˈdeɪ.tə ˌdrɪv.ᵊn\ adjective;

based upon and responsive to real time information about the needs of participants and their students.

KEY METRIC: Activities offered aligned to a data-driven format

finding:

8%

Classroom-focused: \ˈklasˌroom, ˈfoʊkəst\ adjective;

related to the practices taking place during the teaching process and relevant to instructional process.

KEY METRIC: Activities aligned with classroom-focused InTASC standards.

finding: **85%**

Intensive

Establishing Metrics

Intensive professional learning is focused on a discreet concept, practice or program. Teachers and leaders alike often attest to "going a mile wide and an inch deep" when it comes to professional learning — a result of good intentions interfering with prioritization and difficult decision making. Leaders and coaches must constantly grapple with questions about whether it is more essential for an educator to strengthen content knowledge or pedagogical skills, classroom management or assessment design. These questions are especially challenging to answer with little direction from research about which skills are foundational and which can be addressed in succession. For this reason, establishing school- or district-wide goals is an essential precursor to achieving truly intensive professional development; it is only feasible to be intensive in a few key areas. In addition to clarity about school-level goals, leaders must also be clear with the educators in their buildings about their individual skills targets and set goals for each individual's improvement.

When it comes to measuring intensity, the most readily available metrics center on duration. Unlike duration over time, which is related to measurements of sustained professional learning, duration in this case is the amount of time spent focused on developing a competency.[2] Research on how much time is necessary to improve practice is limited,

2   Yoon, K. S., Duncan, T., Lee, S. W.-Y., Scarloss, B., & Shapley, K. (2007). Reviewing the evidence on how teacher professional development affects student achievement (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2007–No. 033). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs

but one source identified 49 hours devoted exclusively to a topic as the minimum requirement for developing competency.   While this time commitment is not conclusive, it establishes a target range. Findings from the first report in this series show that teachers are not only spending far less than 49 hours on a topic — average time on topic has been on a slight decline over the last four years and is now about 4.25 hours — but they're also spending fewer than 49 hours (the average was 38.46 hours in SY15-16) on total professional learning each school year. The same review concluded that spending fewer than 14 hours on any given topic does not result in better outcomes for students. In other words, average professional learning today isn't even a full mile wide or a full inch deep.

The summary of designs presented in Figure 2 on page 10 provides a framework for potential metrics applicable to each of the six criteria. In the case of intensive professional learning, associated metrics can be switched out for those that focus on duration. Figure 5 below provides an unexhaustive list of example duration metrics for each design.

Figure 6:
Examples of "sustained" metrics by professional development design.

Mode	Expert to Group	Expert to Individual	Peer to Peer
Definition	• Length in hours of course meetings • Total amount of time in hours spent on one topic or standard	• Length of observations of teaching focused on one competency • Total amount of coaching time focused on one competency	• Total amount of time spent on one area • Length of peer coaching sessions focused on one topic or standard in hours • Length in hours of observations and associated debriefings

These examples include a duration metric that, like the sample sustained metrics above, employ a count statistic that is easily captured by examining a data field that includes the amount of time required for a professional learning activity. The key is that activities are focused on developing a single competency (or set of related competencies), which may mean that it's necessary to cross-reference "topic" fields to discover how much time is devoted to the competency in question. Professional development management systems can simplify this process by automatically aligning educator professional learning activities with school and district standards and goals. As with the strategies presented in the discussion of intensive professional learning, the first step in selecting metrics for intensity is to establish a shared understanding of what the metrics should demonstrate and whether the information they provide is actionable. Metrics in this category should help understand whether professional learning opportunities provide adequate time to dive deeply into content and to engage in the practice and feedback required to develop competency.

The key is that activities are focused on **developing a single competency** (or set of related competencies)

Next, review available data fields to understand which metrics might be easily captured and which might require a change to the way that professional learning activities are entered into a professional development management system. Once prospective metrics have been identified, narrow the list by considering which one (or combination) provide the most useful information.

Establishing Metrics and Setting Goals

After selecting key metrics, examine where the school or district currently stands by selecting the relevant fields and pulling data. Be sure to consider whether special constraints should be placed on the data that are pulled to ensure the information used for analysis is clean and relevant. All constraints should be well documented to best track progress over time. Leaders may also wish to pull data related to all metrics at approximately the same time to provide the most robust possible picture of progress during each period of analysis.
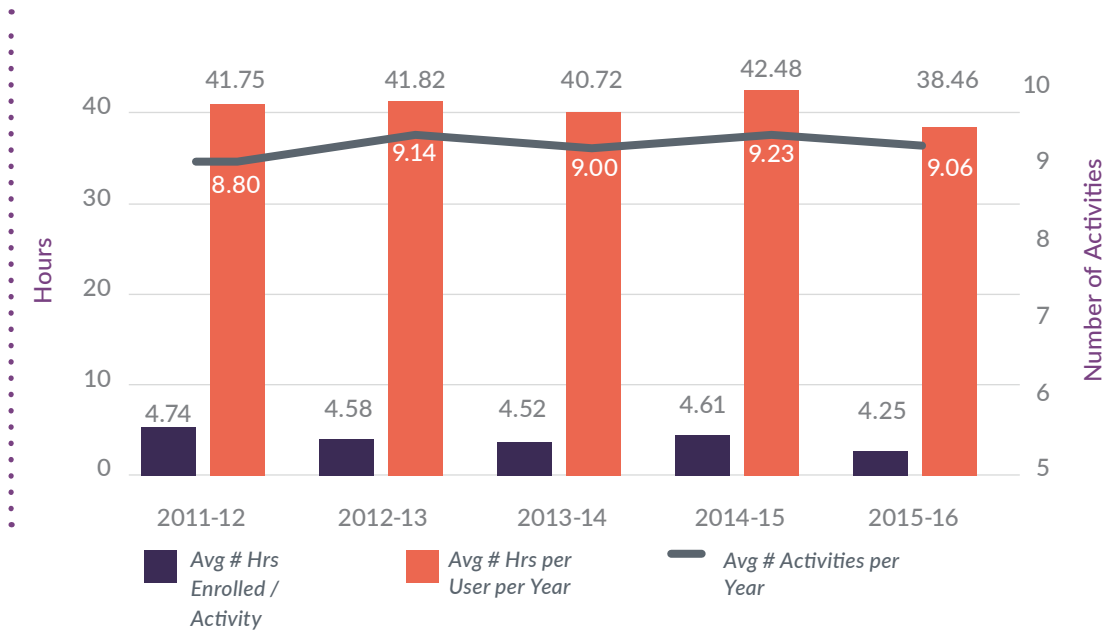
To evaluate whether professional development is intensive, the core question is, "How much time is enough?". School or district context as well as the needs of teachers and students should dictate the answer. Focusing on a discrete concept, practice, or program is a broad definition that could be expanded to include a specific amount of time, for example. Leaders should consider convening peers as well as teachers or other faculty in a conversation about what meaningful intensity looks like in their schools and districts, then consider a definition that matches the shared understanding. Development activities that attend to one concept for fewer than five hours are probably not intensive, but it may be difficult to get 49 hours of learning time during the whole school year.

Develop a target definition that is informed by experience and by feasibility, but don't compromise on the big picture: intensive professional development that succeeds in developing educator competencies. Even if reaching the target does not seem immediately attainable, the objective of measuring benchmarks is to gain a clear understanding of current practice, set goals for improvement, and track progress toward meeting those goals. Whereas researchers have gained more clarity on the minimum amount of time in professional

development required to achieve improvement, data suggest educators are spending less and less time in discrete learning activities. Figure 7 below demonstrates a downward trend in the average amount of time spent in an activity over the past five years — even while the total number of activities (around nine) has remained nearly stable. Moving toward a more focused program of professional develop might include reducing the number of enrollments by two or three each year and trading the resulting time freed up for deeper engagement in fewer activities.

Figure 7:
Comparison of average total professional development activities offered and enrolled with average total activities completed between 2011-12 and 2015-16.

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Avg # Hrs per User per Year	41.75	41.82	40.72	42.48	38.46
Avg # Activities per Year	8.80	9.14	9.00	9.23	9.06
Avg # Hrs Enrolled / Activity	4.74	4.58	4.52	4.61	4.25

- ■ Avg # Hrs Enrolled / Activity
- ■ Avg # Hrs per User per Year
- — Avg # Activities per Year

CHALLENGES:

1 *There may not be adequate time to go deeply on anything*

2 *There is an enormous gap between how much time is needed and how much time is presently spent on professional learning*

The agreed upon target definition, along with supporting metrics, should pave the way for establishing a benchmark and then setting a goal for improvement. Data from the representative sample in this study suggests two big challenges to achieving intensive professional learning: first, there may not be adequate time to go deeply on anything; and, second, there is an enormous gap between how much time is needed and how much time is presently spent on professional learning. Considering the feasibility principle, it may not be reasonable to focus all professional development on a single topic for an entire school year. It may, however, be reasonable to identify only three areas (including school-wide, PLC-wide, and individualized by educator) and split the pie relatively evenly. An initial target, then, may be to consider the total number of available hours and divide by three (e.g. if there are 41 available hours, a teacher might spend 13-14 hours per competency). Even though 13-14 hours falls far short of the ideal, it at least meets the minimum threshold. Over time, total time in professional development could be increased, or total professional development activities could be reduced to one or two. Compare it against the common vision for competency development set above and consider whether doubling or tripling the amount of time spent on one competency could make a difference. It likely would.

Pitt County Schools:
Continuous Improvement

Leaders at Pitt County Schools have made tremendous progress over the last three years, but they are not content to stop here. Going forward, says Professional Development Coordinator, **Thomas Feller:**

"We want to continue to make sure everything is aligned to our narrow focus, be more responsive to teacher needs and place an additional focus on performance-based evidence. We also want to define what high quality PD looks like outside of the District so we can provide more online learning and external opportunities and identify how those opportunities are aligned to school and district goals."

Building the Bridge

Data from *Bridging the Gap* reveal that there are wide gaps in the average U.S. school between professional development that is sustained and intensive and professional development that is currently being offered. These gaps are likely long-standing and will require time and persistence to close. They'll also require a collaborative effort among key stakeholders in an education ecosystem to prioritize improvements and make progress toward a level of quality that teachers and students deserve. However, in order to make this progress, educators need to be able to take an honest assessment of where they are now, and set goals to identify their desired practice. This installment in the four-part series begins with a framework for organizing modes of professional learning and aligning metrics with those modes. It is not, however, intended to be the only pathway or to provide an exhaustive list of potential metrics. The possibilities are probably endless. This effort is designed to provide a starting place, establish actionable metrics, and propose a framework that can be modified to meet individual school and district contexts. Below are the seven steps that can serve as a practical pathway from the status quo to high impact, transformative professional learning.

KEY PLANKS IN THE BRIDGE

1	Establish a shared understanding of what the metrics should demonstrate and whether the information they provide is actionable
2	Review available data from professional development management systems to understand which metrics might be easily captured and which might require a change to the way that professional learning activities are entered into the system
3	Examine where the school or district currently stands by selecting the relevant fields and pulling data
4	Consider the core question posed by each criterion and gather input from key stakeholders on a target definition of what good looks like
5	Evaluate the gap between where quality stands and the target definition
6	Set proximate goals to make progress toward the target definition
7	Evaluate progress and make course corrections as needed; track improvements in educator performance and student outcomes as key metrics of success

This pathway toward improvement is designed to jumpstart change in a professional learning environment with a lackluster track record nationally. For too long, it has been easy to lament poor quality while also deprioritizing improvement because the effort required to do so is gargantuan. As the case study in this report demonstrates, however, it is possible to create the right condition for effective professional learning — and to achieve a learning framework that results in more practical learning for teachers and better outcomes for students. The time has come to make a change and this report, along with the next two in the series, provide strategies that are concrete and actionable — but also feasible — to take on along with the multitude of other priorities that so many school and district leaders face. To make the work especially accessible, this report series is available free at www.FrontlineInstitute.com. We hope these resources will sow the seeds of positive change for your teachers and students.

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Learn More

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FrontlineInstitute.com

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