Schools and districts buy millions of dollars’ worth of professional development (PD) and training for their teachers. Collectively, Education spends about $8 Billion on total PD for teachers. In K-12, it ranges between $500 and $18,000 per teacher every year. In most schools, teachers are expected to attend the Fall intensive trainings, plus regular “in-line training” with online courses and workshops during the year. The 2017 Digital Curriculum Strategy Survey of 477 schools and districts shows schools offering a wide variety of training.¹

So, what’s the problem? First, existing PD does not work — even under the best of intentions, at least half the money invested into PD for teachers is wasteful. “An extraordinary and generally unrecognized commitment to supporting teachers’ professional growth is the primary strategy schools are trying to apply for accelerating student learning.” — this according to the 2015 study by TNTP.² The study continues that “Despite these efforts, most teachers do not appear to improve substantially from year to year. School systems are not helping teachers understand how to improve—or even that they have room to improve at all.”

Second, teachers and administrators highlight bad professional development. “Treats them like children” is the most common complaint about training.³ & ⁴

These “system” issues get further exacerbated with how technology impacts almost every part of teaching. Unfortunately, teachers are too often frustrated with how technology changes their classroom and feel they are left by the system to just ‘wing’ it.

This problem of ineffective PD is a big deal because every teacher is a gatekeeper between millions spent on technology and students. Quality of teaching is by far the most important measured aspect of student achievement. According to a long-term study, an average teacher (compared to a mediocre teacher) can improve quality of life and lifetime earnings by $250,000 for each of their students.¹⁰

We expect teachers to personalize learning for every student in the classroom, yet we cannot provide the same when it comes to their professional learning needs. The Learning Counsel further explored the top 6 threats and consequences of bad PD for teachers below, and features a possible approach.
1. Competition from Consumers

The Education industry feels increasingly like the waning years of Blockbuster before Netflix. Compared to other industries, Education is five or more years behind in digital delivery, and consumers are adding fuel to that fire. Consider that when it comes to learning apps and digital content, parents and students are already outspending all schools put together by nearly $6 billion.¹

Parents and students have real alternatives for education, including access to remote teachers and expert curriculum planners, highly actualized digital courseware and more. To be relevant, district leadership must re-think every part of institutional quality, most particularly the quality of teaching. Administrators can learn from business CEOs to look for skills that cannot be replicated by machines, such as creativity, innovation, leadership and emotional intelligence.

2. High Cost of Inefficiency

Inefficiency is usually a threat when other, increasingly critical areas go without. Anyone who runs a school is aware of the many ways to use a restructured budget. With reduced federal spending by billions towards PD on the horizon, citing a national malaise of ineffectiveness, it’s time to see inefficiency as a threat. The “do it yourself” mode of internal workshops has contributed to ineffectiveness and associated high costs in paid staff time.

By looking deeply at how to re-imagine teacher learning and modularize journeys on-demand, much of the inefficiency can be reduced. Live practice sessions and coaching are also needed to the degree that training can be personalized and real efficiency from teacher learning to student outcomes can be gained. The real impact is in student’s life-long gains.

3. New Demands, Old Methods

According to the 2017 Learning Counsel survey, 50% of teachers are using digital more than 25% of the day. This is a major shift in the essential nature of the classroom. 46% of teachers spend between 4 and 10 or more hours per week building digital learning content. This is significantly more than bygone days of textbooks.

In most cases, teachers are not ready for the challenges of digital transition. Teachers are “overwhelmed in lesson planning using technology” – it is one of the top five most significant issues. Training on devices and software is not preparing teachers for the shifts in how to teach around the technology.

Today, the PD being delivered to teachers may be missing this essential shift. The NCES survey of 42,000 teachers showed 82% of teachers had some PD related to the content they teach. Curiously, there is no mention of professional learning in pedagogy, the teaching skills to learn and work in the digital age.

4. Disassociation from Professional Learning

According to the 2017 study of 6,300 teachers by Learning Forward and the National Education Association (NEA), teachers feel “disassociated”
from the process of professional development. “Teachers tend to think their school leaders prioritize professional learning, but say they are rarely involved in the decision-making process.”

When little is personalized, there tends to be over-generalization of what is being taught. Also, lack of involvement results in a gap between the professional learning teachers want and what they receive.

The elements of a successful learning program for adults are well known and include commonsense things like choice, internal leadership, experiential learning and ongoing support. What is lacking is the operational know-how that addresses and scales these models for teachers.

5. Data Poor

Schools are starting to use student achievement data to help inform some PD, but not necessarily using this data to customize around the teacher’s pre-learning needs and post-learning outcomes.

PD is data poor when it is one-sided – data about students, but not about the teacher. Diagnostics that establish a teacher’s baseline of skills can help make smarter decisions about the convergence of students’ goals with the teacher’s learning needs.

6. Employment vs. Development

Improved PD helps ameliorate another real threat – teacher shortage. Any school employer needs to promise meaningful professional learning opportunities to win recruits and deliver on this promise to retain their best teachers. Continuing with disparate types of training for teachers that does not reflect existing competency and learning preferences is training that adds time and contributes to a sense of being overwhelmed. Winning PD initiatives show teachers how to utilize and benefit from personalized professional development, based on commonly accepted standards (e.g., ISTE Standards for Educators).

The New Starting Point is the Teacher

All six of these threats have teachers posed as critical warriors in the learning delivery battle. Consumerized learning as competition, high cost of inefficiency, the overwhelming digital transition and student personalization, a sense of disassociation, teacher shortage and data that focuses solely on students – all indicate a flip is needed for the way we help teachers advance on the job. The teacher should be the starting point.

To remain relevant, schools everywhere are leveling up their technology game, honing in on student personalization, and working hard to develop the best teachers they can.

The Learning Counsel has looked at numerous efforts to address parts of the overall threats. One company, 2gno.me, has developed a way to automate teacher pre-learning diagnostics to personalize learning for every teacher, at scale, and help schools determine effectiveness of their PD investment and impact. Their unique approach relies on self-knowledge and feedback from peers.
The Learning Counsel helps our subscribing 215,000+ education professionals in the K12 and Higher Ed sector gain research and context on the digital education experience. Our mission is to help districts and schools reach real transformation through strategies for digital content & curriculum. Through consulting services and research, to events, custom publishing and online editorial, the Learning Counsel provides dynamic and diverse opportunities for private and public-sector leaders to collaborate for positive change.

**LeiLani Cauthen**  
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Well versed in digital content and curriculum change, the adoption process, successful strategies, and helping schools understand what’s available and what will work, LeiLani often writes on the changes and future of the education space. She is a media, research, marketing and sales professional with 26 years of experience in the high tech, government and education sectors.

**Dr. David Kafitz**  
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Expert and charismatic change-agent, David helps schools move forward with a well-reasoned strategy for digital content and curriculum, professional development and IT strategy. He is a former Superintendent, Director of Technology Services, Principal, and Teacher in North Carolina Public Schools.

The award-winning platform clarifies who needs what kind of learning when it comes to skills and competencies in education technology. This approach means that PD would implement a new foundation for all efforts, and that foundation would be a system focusing on the individual teacher. All other efforts would tether around that, going off in directions like those of internal workshops and online PD. To answer these six threats requires teacher centricity.³

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**Sources**


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**Underwriter for this Brief**

**2gno.me**  
**To Know Me**

“Our 2gno.me partnership is the missing piece to our professional development.”  
– Evelynn Bragg  
Director of Learning Technology,  
Jacksonville State University

Teachers are asked to personalize learning for students in the classroom, but what about their learning needs? 2gno.me (To know me) is a secure skills platform that personalizes learning for every teacher through diagnostics and improved alignment of professional learning. Schools and districts use our award-winning approach and data to better allocate professional learning and determine its usefulness — from teacher development all the way to student outcomes. To learn more, please visit [https://2gno.me](https://2gno.me).