Administrators' and Teachers' Perspectives on Professional Development

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Abstract

Teacher professional development (PD) is a critical component of the education system, supporting educators as school districts introduce new goals, expectations, and technologies. Teachers and administrators have distinct roles and needs related to PD, making it essential to understand their perspectives on its effectiveness. This qualitative study explored teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of a school district's PD system and identified potential avenues for improvement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three teachers and four administrators, generating rich, contextualized data. Thematic analysis, incorporating a priori, in vivo, and values, attitudes, and beliefs coding, revealed key findings: alignment of PD with teacher goals enhances motivation, PD options are often limited for veteran teachers, time constraints hinder PD attendance and implementation, and a disconnect exists between campus- and district-level administrators. Implications for improving PD systems and recommendations for practice are discussed.

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Introduction

The field of education is constantly evolving in response to new research, emerging technologies, and shifting societal values (Butler et al., 2004; Hagedoorn et al., 2025). Teachers are continually expected to adapt their practices to align with these changes, and professional development (PD) plays a critical role in supporting this ongoing growth (Stein & Wang, 1988). When PD is at its best, teachers, campus administrators, and district administrators share responsibility for implementation, fostering coherence across contexts and supporting collective participation, both key features of effective PD (Garet et al., 2001; Ganser, 2000). Thoughtful planning and selection of PD opportunities can significantly enhance both teacher and school effectiveness (Anderson, 2003).

Despite these intentions, many teachers report low motivation toward PD and often struggle to transfer new knowledge into classroom practice (Richardson & Placier, 2001; Aguilar & Cohen, 2022; Beltman & Poulton, 2025). Much of the existing research on PD effectiveness relies on cross-sectional surveys that highlight the experiences of either administrators or teachers in isolation. To better understand how PD content translates into practice, it is essential to consider both perspectives and the motivational dynamics that shape engagement and implementation.

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) provides a valuable framework for examining motivation in PD contexts. It posits that human behavior and learning are sustained by the fulfillment of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teachers, as active learners in PD, are more likely to engage deeply and sustain change when these needs are supported. When these needs are met, individuals engage through autonomous (self-endorsed) rather than controlled (pressured) motivation (Power & Goodnough, 2018). Within this framework, goals serve as expressions of motivation, they reflect what teachers value and the degree to which their professional learning is self-endorsed. When PD allows teachers to set personal meaningful goals, they make choices aligned with their interests and develop confidence in new skills. The degree to which goals are valued and internalized dictates the quality of motivation. Similarly, when PD fosters a sense of relatedness through collaboration and shared purpose, teachers are more motivated to internalize and apply what they learn. The social and cultural environments across PD sessions, campuses, and districts play a pivotal role in determining

whether these needs are met. The interplay between administrators' and teachers' beliefs, values, and attitudes toward PD ultimately shapes how effectively professional learning translates into classroom practice.

The overarching goal of PD is to enhance teacher knowledge and practice to improve student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Sims et al., 2025). Achieving this requires PD that is responsive to teachers' needs and grounded in principles of adult learning. As adult learners, teachers bring prior experiences, established goals, and contextual knowledge to professional learning opportunities (Hunzicker, 2011). Effective PD is therefore focused, job-embedded, and collaborative. Research consistently identifies two essential elements that drive its success: teacher motivation and the structure and content of PD itself (Kennedy, 2019; Mavi et al., 2025).

Teacher Motivation Surrounding PD

Teacher motivation guides the implementation of PD content in the classroom. The goal of PD is to positively influence educators' instructional practices and, ultimately, student learning, yet this desired outcome does not always materialize in practice (Aguilar & Cohen, 2022). According to the National Institute for Science Education (NISE) analysis, the amount of time teachers spend in PD sessions is not necessarily related to improvements in student learning (Guskey, 2003; Sims et al., 2025). Richardson and Placier (2001) found that teachers often resist change imposed by others but are more likely to engage in change they initiate themselves. This highlights the importance of understanding teacher motivation and the role of goal setting in shaping PD implementation. To enhance understanding of why teachers choose to apply or disregard PD content, researchers increasingly examine teacher motivation through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT) alongside external factors that influence teacher learning.

Building on the self-determination theory framework (Ryan & Deci, 2000), PD can enhance teacher motivation when its structure and content support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy in PD provides opportunities for choice and self-direction, competence assists with developing confidence and mastery for teachers, and relatedness encourages collaboration and shared purpose (Power & Goodnough, 2018). Within PD contexts, these needs influence how teachers form, pursue, and internalize professional learning goals. When PD experiences nurture these needs, teachers are more likely

to align new learning with personally meaningful goals, sustain engagement, and translate learning into practice (Zhang et al., 2022). Research consistently shows that PD is most effective when it supports teachers' active involvement, coherence with their goals, and sustained engagement over time (Desimone, 2011; Garet et al., 2001).

Autonomy. Autonomy plays a central role in fostering intrinsic motivation and meaningful goal pursuit. Autonomy-supportive environments allow teachers to make choices about their learning, understand the purpose behind activities, and align PD goals with their own professional values (Chiu et al., 2021). Randi and Zeichner (2004) emphasize that PD enhances teachers' growth when it helps them establish goals, plan for those goals, reflect on their practice, internalize new learning, and develop a sense of autonomy. When PD facilitators and administrators provide options in content, structure, and application, teachers experience a sense of ownership that strengthens motivation and increases the likelihood of implementing new strategies in their classrooms (Cheon et al., 2018).

Relatedness. Relatedness enhances motivation by cultivating a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Teachers are more likely to internalize PD content when they feel connected to colleagues and administrators who share similar professional goals and challenges (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Collaborative structures—such as peer discussions, mentoring, and group reflections—create meaningful connections that support both professional growth and the practical transfer of learning (Loucks-Horsley et al., 2003; Chiu et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). This aligns with Garet et al. (2001), who identified collective participation as a key feature of high-quality PD that promotes shared understanding and coherence across contexts.

Competence. Competence strengthens motivation by promoting feelings of mastery and self-efficacy. Teachers need opportunities to develop and apply new skills with appropriate guidance, feedback, and time for reflection (Power & Goodnough, 2018). PD that emphasizes concrete strategies, collaborative lesson design, and immediate classroom application helps teachers build confidence and deepen their commitment to instructional improvement (Coenders & Verhoef, 2019). Desimone (2011) argues that when PD integrates opportunities for active learning and evaluation of results, it not only strengthens teachers' sense of competence but also contributes to measurable improvements in student learning.

However, motivation does not exist in isolation. External factors such as time constraints, pacing pressures, and resource limitations can hinder teachers' ability to apply what they learn (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010). Teachers bring diverse goals, motivations, and strengths to their practice; therefore, effective PD must be flexible and responsive to these individual needs. When autonomy, competence, and relatedness are actively supported, and when teachers' personal goals are integrated into PD design, teachers are more intrinsically motivated to engage in learning and more likely to sustain meaningful changes in classroom practice.

Structure and Content of PD

PD encompasses both the structure of learning experiences and the content delivered to teachers. Each influences the other to shape teacher learning in a PD session (Ganser, 2000; Kennedy, 2019). The structure of PD refers to the way learning opportunities are designed and delivered to the teachers, while content refers to what teachers are expected to learn (Ganser, 2000). These two elements interact within a PD session: the structure shapes how teachers engage with the content, and the content must be meaningful within the chosen structure to facilitate application in the classroom (Mavi et al., 2025; State et al., 2019; Wayne et al., 2008) The interplay of the structure and content underscores the complex decisions administrators face when designing effective PD experiences (Sims et al., 2025).

PD Structure. Research has increasingly explored the effectiveness of different PD structures, including in-service training, professional learning communities (PLCs), coaching, and online modules (Baporikar, 2015; State et al., 2019; Wayne et al., 2008). In-service training allows teachers on the same campus to work collaboratively, which can lead to the formation of informal PLCs and opportunities for ongoing support from their peers (Marquez et al., 2016; State et al., 2019). Such informal networks enable teachers to share strategies and troubleshoot challenges in implementing new practices (Hagedoorn et al., 2025; Papay et al., 2020). Formal PLCs extend this collaborative approach by bringing teachers together around a specific interest, project, or shared goal (Stoll et. al., 2006). These structures can influence teacher practices, deepen teacher content knowledge, and improve student achievement (Hagedoorn et al., 2025; State et. al., 2019). Similarly, instructional coaching provides individualized support through feedback, modeling, and data collection (Freeman et. al., 2017). Coaching is most effective when it is thorough, context-specific, and goal-oriented (Kraft et. al.,

2018). However, coaching and PLCs are time and resource intensive and often more feasible in large districts with dedicated staff than in smaller or rural districts (Knight, 2006). In response to such challenges, schools and teachers have increasingly adopted online PD (Morina et al., 2025). Systematic reviews suggest that online modules can promote teacher knowledge and satisfaction, particularly when they include opportunities for interaction, scaffolding, and access to resources (Bragg et. al., 2021; Jimenez et. al., 2016; Parsons, et al., 2019; Stavermann, 2025). Online delivery, however, raises questions about relational engagement within a PD session. While the structure of PD shapes how teachers experience learning opportunities, the effectiveness of these structures also depends on the content that is taught.

PD Content. Beyond structure, the content of PD has also evolved. Early research emphasized teaching procedures, such as classroom management or questioning strategies (Kennedy, 2019). More recent evidence suggests that PD focusing on teachers' subject knowledge and understanding how students learn yields stronger effects on student outcomes (Mundry, 2005; Wayne et al., 2008). By deepening their understanding of student learning, teachers can tailor instruction to diverse classroom needs, design effective lesson plans, and respond adaptively to student challenges (Kennedy, 2019; Wenglinsky, 2002). In many districts and schools, administrators determine the content and structure of PD. Gersten et al. (1997) suggest that teachers often fail to implement PD content in their classrooms because researchers and administrators primarily drive PD decisions, potentially prioritizing administrative needs over teachers' professional goals. This disconnect can result in PD content or structures that do not align with teachers' diverse goals and needs, reducing motivation and engagement. The range of possible PD content is broad, and administrators are tasked with designing learning experiences that address the varying needs of teachers across a campus or district (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). One strategy to enhance effectiveness is to align PD content with school and district priorities, providing coherence and focus that supports teachers' intrinsic motivation and encourages engagement with professional learning (Zhang et al., 2022).

Ultimately, effective PD occurs when carefully designed structures, whether in-person, collaborative, or online, deliver content that is both meaningful and relevant, enabling teachers to apply it in their classrooms (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Garet et al., 2001). The chosen structure shapes how teachers engage with the content,

collaborate with peers, reflect on their learning, and implement new strategies in practice (Kennedy, 2019; Kilag et al., 2023). Research highlights that high-quality PD integrates features such as sustained duration, collective participation, content focus, and coherence with teachers' goals and instructional context (Garet et al., 2001). When motivation is supported alongside high-quality structure and content, teachers are more likely to transfer new learning into their classrooms, sustaining meaningful changes in practice.

The Present Study

Most research on teacher motivation and PD effectiveness remains quantitative, often relying on surveys that capture experiences from a single learning session or PD system. Such designs have limitations, as survey responses may be exaggerated or influenced by social desirability (Fryer & Dinsmore, 2020). Qualitative research in this field often focuses on specific training sessions, structure of PD sessions, or teacher implementation and learning. This narrow focus overlooks the complex system of interactions among teachers and administrators, and the contextual factors that shape the implementation of a school's PD system. An in-depth qualitative approach addresses these limitations by providing rich, contextualized insights into teachers' and administrators' experiences, allowing researchers to explore the goals, motivations, and decision-making processes that influence engagement within a PD system. Qualitative methods about a whole PD system can reveal nuanced patterns, diverse perspectives, and the interplay of social and organizational factors that quantitative surveys may miss, offering a more holistic understanding.

To capture the complexity of effective PD and understand how to facilitate the transfer of content into practice, it is essential to consider the perspectives of both teachers and administrators. This study seeks to address this gap by collecting rich qualitative data on how administrators and teachers navigate their varying needs and experiences surrounding PD in a large school district (83,039 students and 5,924 teachers). By examining these perspectives, districts can identify ways to improve PD effectiveness and provide teachers with the support necessary to implement PD content meaningfully. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: How do teachers and administrators perceive and navigate a professional development system in ways that support teacher motivation, goal alignment, and effective implementation?

Methods

Positionality

The first author conducted all interviews with the support in design, analysis, and interpretation of findings embedded in the literature from the second author. The first author identifies as a Caucasian female. She is a licensed secondary science educator and holds a master's degree in educational psychology. As a science teacher, she has been participating in PD since 2014, in various school districts in Utah, Texas, and Virginia, where she has worked as a teacher. She has also been responsible for planning and delivering PD for her campus throughout her career. The first author has not worked in the school district we examined, affording her an outside perspective paired with insights into PD from a teacher perspective. She negotiated her positionality at the beginning of the interview where she learned about participants' backgrounds, roles, and experiences with PD.

As an active participant in both teaching and attending PD, the first author has partiality towards its structure and functionality. To her, effective PD is akin to good teaching in that there are clear avenues for success. She believes many factors contribute to the effectiveness of a PD. This bias brings a degree of awareness into the data analysis in that administrators and teachers share equal responsibility to make PD effective. This bias was managed through frequent discussion and analysis of codes/themes with the second author to ensure accurate representation of the administrators' and teachers' data.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study has received ethical approval from George Mason University as well as the school district's review board. The ethical issues apparent in this research project are informed consent and protecting participants anonymity and confidentiality. All volunteering participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study, signing a Confidentiality and Consent Form. The participant identification and school district and campus names/locations will remain anonymous.

Participants

To triangulate interview data, three teachers and four campus and district administrators with diverse experiences and perspectives were interviewed.

Teachers

Teachers were recruited from two long-term professional learning community (PLC) sessions that met multiple times throughout the school year. At the conclusion of each session, participants were invited to complete a six-item, self-developed survey assessing their views on professional development (PD). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item included: "This PD session aligns with goals I have for myself as a teacher." Based on survey responses and demographic information, three teachers were purposefully selected to represent diverse experiences and perspectives on PD: Natalie, Sophia, and Jackie. Each teacher works at a different school within the district. Natalie has taught high school science for 11 years. Sophia is a fifth-grade teacher with 16 years of experience in elementary education. Jackie has worked in education for over 25 years, serving as a teacher, principal, and district administrator. Two years ago, she returned to the classroom and currently teaches high school English.

Administrators

Administrative personnel were randomly selected from a district-wide list of principals, instructional coaches, and central office administrators. Four participants were interviewed: one principal (Ryan), two instructional coaches (Emily and Matt), and one district-level administrator (Allie). Ryan is an elementary school principal with 11 years of classroom teaching experience and 5 years as an instructional facilitator and coach. Emily has over 10 years of teaching experience and currently supports novice teachers and those at risk of receiving unsatisfactory evaluations. Matt has more than 10 years of middle and high school teaching experience and now coaches secondary-level novice teachers during their first three years. Allie has over 20 years of experience in education, including roles as a middle school English teacher, mentor, instructional coach, and assistant principal, before transitioning to her current district-level leadership role.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via zoom. The interviews were transcribed using otter.ai and thoroughly checked to preserve the integrity of the data. The interviews lasted 25-45 minutes and yielded rich data, spanning 20,000 and 38,000 words in teacher and administrator interviews respectively. Interview protocols included 16

main questions for teachers and 13 main questions for administrators (see appendix A). Teacher interviews explored the teacher's perspective on how the PD opportunities aligned with their goals and practice, the types of available PD sessions, recommendations for PD sessions that are not currently offered, and views about what makes a PD impactful. Administrative interviews explored how administration chooses PD sessions, how the sessions align with the goals of the district or campus, and how the current PD system supports teachers.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and typed verbatim into separate documents. Pseudonyms were used instead of participants' names. Transcripts were read multiple times to gain holistic and intuitive awareness about the content as data was analyzed to create interpretative summations across transcripts. Each interview was read individually, then as part of a group to develop a preliminary list of coding categories. Responses of each participant were coded individually. When all responses were tentatively categorized, those from each category were analyzed as a group. Upon coding of all the transcripts, each category was re-analyzed to identify relationships between the codes and themes. Themes were derived from initial analytic work with codes and categories but were also independently constructed from a holistic review of the data across transcripts to capture recurring ideas.

A combination of a priori and inductive coding was used to identify emerging categories and themes from the transcripts. Following a priori codes, sub-codes were generated from the research literature structure of pd (on-site, online, PLC, and coaching), content of pd (teacher procedures, learning strategies, subject knowledge), self-determination (autonomy, relatedness, competence) and autonomous regulation of learning (goal alignment and internalization, autonomous engagement, reflective integration). The most prominent codes were self-determination (17%), autonomous regulation of learning (14%), and structure (12%).

Inductive codes included in vivo and values, attitudes and beliefs (VAB) coding. The inductive codes allow for a deeper understanding about the data, guided by the research questions. The in vivo codes consisted of quotes from the interviews that represented main themes seen throughout. These codes were: 'the PD does not match the description', 'just another meeting', 'quick and easy for me to absorb', 'PD is not going to help me improve my kids learning, paying attention

to my kids is going to help me improve my kids learning,' and PD is 'more meaningful coming from people who have done it and been in the trenches for a long time.'

Braun and Clarke's (2012) process of thematic analysis was used to make meaning of teachers' and administrators' perspectives on PD. Familiarization of the data began in the transcription process. The a priori codes were used first to organize the data into larger groupings. As analysis on these codes continued, the views and perspectives that the participants shared within those categories led to VAB codes that assisted in identifying participants' reasoning for their viewpoints. As these viewpoints were investigated, in vivo codes were identified that summarize the experience of the participants. The identification of codes was used to group data into distinct categories. Examples of these categories included considerations of time, helpful PD structure, PD that is not effective, planning PD, motivation, and communication.

The summation of this data into the categories allowed a thorough examination of trends seen between participants. These categories were analyzed between administrators and teachers, outlining areas where the participants' views aligned or misaligned surrounding PD. The major differences and similarities were grouped into larger themes. These themes included motivation, teacher choice system, time and values, and campus-district alignment.

Results

Administrators' and teachers' perspectives on PD in a large school district reveal both alignment and tension. Effective PD is seen as immediately applicable, collaborative, autonomy supportive, and conducive to self-regulated learning. Differences emerge around the needs of veteran teachers, prioritization of PD content, and balancing district versus campus level goals. These findings are organized into four interrelated themes: motivation, teacher choice system, time and values, and campus-district alignment.

Motivation

Teachers emphasized that setting clear goals for PD is essential to fostering intrinsic motivation. Clearly defined goals guide engagement, enhance focus during learning, and encourage the practical application of PD content. A common goal among participants was developing new strategies to better understand and meet students' needs. Sophia illustrated this connection by describing how she applied active listening techniques learned through PD to adjust her instruction:

"some of these students are like, well, we did [timed tables] in second grade…and they're afraid to do it. And so you know, just listening to professionals talking, [I learned] how to get students' anxiety off of the time test…it was really meaningful for me." When PD content aligns with teachers' internalized goals, it nurtures intrinsic motivation and facilitates the meaningful transfer of professional learning into classroom practice.

Providing teachers with autonomy in PD selection enables them to align their personal goals with available offerings, enhancing motivation, a view shared by both teachers and administrators. Natalie described how she evaluates PD options: "How applicable it is to the development level of the students that I currently teach?… Will this help me build better relationships with students?" Autonomy-supportive environments, such as allowing teachers to select their own PD, promote meaningful goal pursuit and strengthen intrinsic motivation to both attend and implement learning. Administrators echoed this perspective, emphasizing the importance of honoring teacher choice. Ryan tries to utilize a teacher's intrinsic motivation when he can. He explains, "if [teachers] ask or request…my answer is always yes…If it's requested, I jump all over that." Such support for teacher-driven PD selection not only validates teachers' professional judgment but also fosters alignment between teacher goals and PD opportunities, a factor both teachers and administrators identify as essential for effective professional learning.

PD that fosters a sense of relatedness through shared purpose enhances intrinsic motivation; however, when teachers attend sessions without a shared sense of purpose, the effectiveness of the PD can diminish. Jackie reflected, "a lot of times when you show up for a PD and there's like five to ten people who are there because someone told them they had to be, or it was the only thing left…it just changes the whole tone." Administrators echoed this sentiment. Matt noted, "if a teacher is just taking it to check the box that they were doing PD…that's a wash." Recognizing this challenge, Allie described intentionally designing PD to reengage teachers' motivation by incorporating inspiring keynote speakers "to be motivational and uplifting…sometimes having a keynote…is really helpful." These examples illustrate how both teachers and administrators actively navigate the PD system—teachers by seeking authentic, shared learning experiences, and administrators by designing PD that reengages motivation and community. Both groups perceive shared professional goals and collegial connection as critical for fostering intrinsic motivation, aligning efforts toward more effective PD implementation.

Collaborative PD structures, such as PLCs, CLTs, and coaching, support motivation by integrating goal setting, collaboration, implementation, and reflection—key elements that enhance teachers' sense of relatedness and competence. Teachers view these spaces as opportunities to connect shared goals with classroom practice. Natalie highlighted the value of dialogue with peers, explaining that "seeing best practices, norms, common experiences, and tricks of the trade" enhances her learning. Similarly, Sophia appreciated that PLCs avoid "wasting time after school. Instead, we're meeting collectively as a group of teachers who want the same thing for all of our students." For teachers, PD that includes structured discussion and collaboration is motivational because it fosters relatedness and competence, providing a support system for pursuing individual and collective goals.

Administrators perceive these collaborative formats as valuable tools for tailoring PD to teachers' needs and monitoring implementation. Ryan explained that he uses observations to determine "what's being applied, what's not being applied, what are areas for growth…we talk about it in the CLTs." Likewise, Allie described how the multi-day format of PLCs allows her to adapt instruction, noting, "If I don't get to [content] one day, I know how to adjust and put it on another day." Through these practices, administrators navigate PD as an adaptive system, using extended and iterative formats to personalize support for teachers while maintaining accountability for application. Together, both teachers and administrators recognize that sustained, collaborative PD structures enhance motivation and effectiveness by aligning professional learning with teacher goals, strengthening both competence and relatedness within the PD system.

Teacher Choice System

Providing teachers with autonomy over PD selection enhances motivation and perceived relevance, as both teachers and administrators agree that autonomy supports engagement and goal alignment. In the researched district, teachers choose the content and structure of their training days, allowing them to select sessions that best align with personal and professional goals. Natalie described her approach: "to choose [PDs] that are geared towards how to make learning more student centered, less direct instruction, more group or student-led instruction." For teachers like Natalie, autonomy enables them to pursue learning that directly connects to their instructional goals, reinforcing intrinsic motivation and commitment to implementation.

However, both teachers and administrators identified tensions

in how this choice system operates. Administrators view their role as curating and marketing PD opportunities in ways that attract teachers. Matt explained that "the description and the title… It has to jump out at you." From their perspective, crafting engaging PD descriptions is a strategy to boost participation and signal relevance. Teachers, however, interpret these descriptions as the main source of information for determining whether a PD will meet their instructional needs. When descriptions are vague or misleading, teachers experience frustration and disengagement. Sophia noted that "the description, sometimes it's really vague," while Natalie reflected, "there's been several sessions where I've been really excited about the PD. And then I got there and everything that I read on the handout, or the pamphlet was all the information that I gleaned from it." Jackie echoed this sentiment, adding, "sometimes I think that a PD is going to really align with [my goals], and then I get there, and I'm like, man, this doesn't fit at all."

These mismatched perspectives illustrate how motivation can be constrained by structural and communicative gaps in the PD system. While teachers rely on accurate descriptions to make self-directed choices, administrators often have to focus on marketing sessions, which can result in unclear or misleading descriptions of PD content. As a result, autonomy becomes superficial when teachers' expectations and experiences do not align. The perceived disconnect between description and delivery diminishes motivation and undermines teachers' trust in the system, highlighting how the design and communication of PD opportunities directly influence whether autonomy leads to genuine engagement or disillusionment.

Another point of frustration within the teacher choice system is the limited availability of PD options for veteran teachers. Jackie, who has over 25 years of experience, expressed concern about the lack of advanced opportunities: "When you've been in education as long as I have, there's not too much [PD options]. It is all basic knowledge… it doesn't typically go to that higher level." Natalie echoed this sentiment, observing, "I feel like if you're a new teacher, you have all kinds of interesting PD that's awesome. But if you're a veteran teacher who has been doing it for over a decade, there's not really that many new offerings for you."

Administrators acknowledged this imbalance, noting that PD content is often designed with novice teachers in mind. Emily explained, "[instructional coaches] really do differentiate for the novice teachers." Matt elaborated on the rationale: "We will only offer that specific PD to new teachers… so we can answer their questions and collect data to see what they know and don't know. But if we have experienced teachers invited, then it kind of gets muddled." This approach

reflects administrators' intent to tailor PD for teachers who require foundational support, but it inadvertently excludes veteran teachers seeking deeper, more challenging professional learning experiences.

This imbalance highlights a systemic tension in PD planning, balancing differentiated support for novice teachers while maintaining meaningful engagement for experienced educators. While increased PD options for novice teachers enhance their autonomy, relatedness, and competence, the lack of advanced opportunities for veteran teachers undermines these same needs. As a result, autonomy is limited, competence feels undervalued, and relatedness within the professional community diminishes. Without differentiated pathways for experienced educators, the teacher choice model risks disengaging those most capable of modeling continuous professional growth.

Time and Values

An additional factor that complicates the school district's PD system is the constraint of time. Teachers and administrators navigate the PD system differently based on their values and priorities for time allocation. Administrators must balance the time spent planning and delivering PD with providing direct support to teachers, while also ensuring that recommended PD sessions are perceived as high-value. Teachers, in turn, weigh the time required to attend a PD session against its potential benefits, considering both the immediate applicability of the content and the time needed to implement new strategies in their classrooms. Both administrators and teachers recognize that the timing of PD can influence its perceived value. This interplay between time, priorities, and perceived value ultimately shapes teacher engagement, motivation, and the overall effectiveness of PD.

Administrators are responsible for planning PD sessions and supporting teachers. Their personal values strongly influence how they allocate time throughout the workday to design PD. Emily, who values her relationships with teachers, explains that it is difficult to find "time to plan [PD]. That's one of the biggest things because I have like 40 teachers on my caseload, and I'm on 10 different campuses. I want to spend my time with my teachers, but then I also have to spend that time planning the PD. Where am I going to spend my time juggling?" Similarly, Matt, who aims to provide meaningful PD, struggles with time constraints within sessions. He describes the tension: "trying to get the key points within the time frame allotted to you… [then] if you're going to do a PD, you're gonna spend all this time on it. You want to try to get 20 people, you know, so you can reach a larger

audience. But for me, it's a dilemma, because I'm like, wow, I could really be helping those five people and that's something that I've been struggling with." These time constraints force administrators to make judgment calls based on their values, prioritizing what they perceive as the most effective ways to support the teachers they serve.

Administrators also balance time constraints with personal values when recommending PD to teachers. For example, as an instructional coach, Emily prioritizes building trust and carefully selects PD to ensure it is meaningful. She explains, "I make it very clear at the beginning of the year that if I share a training with you, I really think you should sign up for it. And then I'm very careful of what I share so that I make sure they don't feel like they wasted their time." Matt similarly emphasized that PD should not be "just another meeting…it's just adding another thing onto the teachers' plates." Ryan echoes this perspective, carefully selecting PD options only when he "understands the why behind it…I don't want to do anything unless there's a real reason why… I find that if I can't articulate that, then we are not going to be doing it." These considerations demonstrate how administrators' values and time management decisions shape the perceived relevance and overall value of PD for teachers.

Teachers, in turn, weigh the time commitment of PD against the perceived benefits and immediate applicability to their classroom. PD that provides time to collaborate and plan implementation is perceived as the most valuable. Sophia explains that she wants "something I can do right now to...impact all of my students." Without time to apply learning, teachers felt overwhelmed by ideas they could not implement. As Jackie described, "I leave with 27 great ideas, but I don't have any time to change everything I do to incorporate them… if it didn't apply to my classroom right then… [what I implement] might be the thing that stuck with me the most, but most often, it's the last thing I went to." Similarly, she noted that limited time to collaborate reduced the utility of PD: "you're listening to the information. And then I think the expectation is that you'll find time to connect with people. But when do we have time for that?" For teachers, PD that provides time to apply, lesson plan, and collaborate in the session, supporting relatedness and competence, increases the perceived value of what was learned in the session, resulting in higher motivation to implement it.

The timing of PD can also strongly influence both teacher attendance and motivation. Within this district, PD opportunities are offered at various times including, during training days, contract hours, and after school. Teachers consistently weighed the costs of PD participation against the potential benefits. After-school sessions

were described as inequitable due to long commutes and family responsibilities. As Matt noted, they are "not very equitable, because some people have children, some people just can't make it because they live far away." Even PD scheduled during the workday required trade-offs, as Jackie reflected: "I was excited about [the PD], but I had to think long and hard about this one, because it's a lot of time out of the classroom. And that means every time I'm at [PD] my kids have a sub." Administrators must balance scheduling to support teacher equity, while teachers must evaluate the effectiveness of PD relative to other responsibilities.

To address these constraints, the district introduced asynchronous PD. Teachers valued the flexibility and autonomy it provides. Natalie appreciated being able to control her learning pace: "if I have a question about something…I really like that it's self-paced, I can pause it… restart the video…and I can figure it out… I can learn." Jackie shared that she often completed PD early in the morning, when her "brain is the most fresh." However, administrators worry that asynchronous PD reduces opportunities for collaboration and relationship-building, particularly for novice teachers. Matt explained, "sometimes the only interaction they get is these virtual 20, 30, 40, 50 people PDs, so that's hard to develop relationships with, those teachers." He emphasized that in-person PD allows teachers and administrators to "build that relationship, …it's a little bit more meaningful." Asynchronous delivery increases buy-in by respecting teachers' time and supporting autonomy, but administrators worry that it comes at the cost of fostering relatedness and collaborative support.

Together, these findings illustrate that both administrators' and teachers' management of time, combined with the mode of PD delivery, directly impacts teacher motivation, engagement, and the likelihood of implementing PD content in the classroom. Administrators' values and time decisions shape which PD sessions are offered and recommended, while teachers' evaluation of time costs and benefits shapes attendance, engagement, and perception of relevance. Providing flexible PD options, including asynchronous and in-person opportunities, helps balance these considerations while supporting autonomy, relatedness, and competence for teachers.

Campus-District Alignment

In large school districts, multiple levels of personnel contribute diverse, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives on PD. Understanding how teachers and administrators perceive and navigate these

differences is essential for promoting motivation, goal alignment, and effective implementation. These differences are evident not only between teachers and administrators, but also between campus- and district-level faculty. Campus personnel often reported that PD originating from the district did not always meet local needs. Emily, a campus administrator, explained that the district provides PD that sometimes, "we feel like, okay, yes, this [PD] is really grounded in what they need. But some of the stuff that comes from above we're like, you're so out of touch." Teachers echoed this concern, with Jackie noting that, "school-based PD in general is more relevant than the district PD… the demographic is so different, the culture is so different, that two schools need completely different PD." Matt added that, "it's almost counterproductive to have a division-wide goal because schools are so different, and their needs are so different." These perceptions reflect how campus-level stakeholders navigate PD systems by assessing alignment with local goals and needs.

District administrators acknowledged these tensions. Allie described her efforts to strengthen systemwide coherence: "I think there's some work to do as far as alignment across the division…My professional learning plan is how can we make sure that all professional learning across the entire division is high quality." Teachers recognized these efforts but remained uncertain about the results. As Natalie put it, "they're slowly, painstakingly trying to make meaningful PD to help teachers, I just don't think everyone knows what that looks like just yet." These contrasting perspectives underscore the challenges administrators face in planning PD across a large school system and reveal how differing perceptions and communication gaps around PD expectations and needs can affect teacher motivation, goal alignment, and the successful implementation of professional learning.

Balancing district mandates with campus priorities adds further complexity. District administrators believe that schools have substantial autonomy in deciding PD priorities. As Allie explained, "schools get a lot of autonomy about what they decide." Campus leaders, however, perceive this differently. Ryan, a principal, explained, "you can have very big goals of what you want to do with your staff…but then the [district] comes in and they have you doing all these other things… there's just too much, it's not possible, you're always trying to balance." Top-down mandates can constrain time for campus-specific PD that addresses the needs of teachers and students at the local level. This misalignment affects the ability of campus administrators to implement PD that supports both teacher goals and student needs.

To identify PD priorities, the district uses multiple sources—

stakeholder surveys, principal meetings, instructional coach reports, and teacher proposals. Allie explained, "we try to use a variety of different sources, both surveys and people, to determine what is needed…we get a lot of feedback from the beginning teachers…our instructional coaches are able to let us know what schools need." However, novice teachers' needs often dominate this feedback because they are more closely supported by coaches and mentors. Veteran teachers, by contrast, have fewer structured avenues to communicate their goals and request PD, which may lead to their needs being underrepresented. This dynamic affects motivation, as teachers are more engaged in PD that aligns with their personal goals and classroom needs. Streamlining how to request PD could facilitate transparency and a line of communication to make sure the needs of all teachers are heard.

Ultimately, reconciling differing perspectives between district and campus leaders, as well as between teachers and administrators, is critical for fostering a PD system that motivates teachers, aligns with their instructional goals, and facilitates implementation in the classroom. Potential strategies include reducing district-mandated PD in favor of collaborative design with campus leaders, creating transparent channels for teachers to request PD, and ensuring that both novice and veteran teachers have equitable access to relevant opportunities. By understanding and navigating these dynamics, administrators can better support teacher motivation, goal alignment, and the effective translation of PD into practice.

Discussion

PD serves as both a mechanism for teachers to stay informed and a lever for administrators to implement instructional and organizational change. The perspectives shared by administrators and teachers in this study largely align with prior research regarding the qualities of effective PD. Both groups emphasized that PD is most effective when it aligns with teachers' instructional goals (Chiu et al., 2021; Desimone, 2011; Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 2003; Power & Goodnough, 2018; Richardson & Placier, 2001), provides direct application to classroom practice (Cheon et al., 2018; Coenders & Verhoef, 2019; Hunzicker, 2011; Zhang et al., 2021), and centers on improving student learning outcomes (Kennedy, 2019; Mundry, 2005; Wayne et al., 2008). Participants described PD as more motivating when it supports teacher autonomy, fosters collaboration, and promotes a sense of competence with new strategies (Desimone, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Zhang et al., 2021).

Administrators and teachers identified several PD structures that

effectively promote these motivational factors, including campus-wide in-service training (Marquez et al., 2016; State et al., 2019), instructional coaching (Freeman et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2018), and professional learning communities (PLCs) or collaborative learning teams (CLTs) (Ganser, 2000; Hagedoorn et al., 2025; State et al., 2019). However, both groups also acknowledged the time-intensive nature of these approaches. Online PD opportunities emerged as a motivating option for teachers, providing autonomy through content choice and flexible access to materials (Morina et al., 2025; Parsons et al., 2019; Stavermann, 2025). While administrators expressed concern that online formats may reduce opportunities for collaboration and relatedness, teachers in this study did not share that concern, highlighting a subtle misalignment in perceived value.

Time consistently emerged as a central factor shaping motivation, participation, and planning for PD. Teachers and administrators both recognized that time spent in PD does not inherently translate to meaningful learning (Guskey, 2003). Teachers reported being protective of their time, often evaluating PD through the lens of classroom relevance and student impact. They preferred PD that could be implemented quickly and produce visible benefits for students (Fernandes et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). Administrators, in turn, described weighing teachers' time commitments when selecting and recommending PD sessions, emphasizing the importance of perceived value and efficiency (Sims et al., 2025).

Teacher autonomy in PD selection also played a significant role in motivation. Consistent with prior findings (Cheon et al., 2018; Chiu et al., 2021), participants in this study confirmed that choice enhances engagement and ownership over learning. However, this study revealed misalignments between teacher and administrator perspectives regarding how PD options are communicated. Teachers reported that brief and vague descriptions of PD sessions often led to unrealistic expectations and disappointment, while administrators described the challenge of balancing concise, engaging advertisements with the need for transparency. Another key point of divergence involved PD availability for veteran teachers, who expressed frustration over limited, redundant options, compared to the greater range of offerings for novices. These findings suggest that PD choice systems are motivating only when teachers perceive options as meaningful, accurately described, and applicable to the classroom.

This study makes a novel contribution by closely examining where administrators' and teachers' perspectives on PD align and diverge. Collaboration between teachers and administrators was found to

enhance motivation, foster teacher learning, and support the transfer of PD content into classroom practice (Zhang et al., 2022). Yet, tensions emerged between district- and campus-level priorities. Teachers and campus administrators reported that district-mandated PD often felt disconnected from local needs, echoing previous concerns about top-down implementation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Our findings highlight the need for PD systems that are responsive to campus-specific contexts while maintaining coherence across the district. Improved communication channels among teachers, campus leaders, and district administrators are essential for aligning goals, clarifying expectations, and designing PD that is both relevant and strategic.

While this study's small, qualitative sample limits generalizability, the insights can guide reflection and structural improvements in other districts. Effective PD aligns with teachers' goals, directly applies to classroom practice, focuses on student needs, and is supported by strong empirical and contextual evidence. Structurally, PD should provide time for collaboration, support teacher competence, and offer genuine autonomy. Moreover, equitable opportunities must exist for both novice and veteran teachers to request and access PD that meets their needs. Strengthening communication between district and campus leadership will help ensure PD planning is both coherent and contextually grounded.

Future research could extend this work by using quantitative or mixed-methods designs to explore the relationship between administrator–teacher collaboration and PD effectiveness across larger systems. Additionally, future studies might focus more narrowly on content-specific or subject-based PD to further understand how alignment between teacher goals and PD design influences both motivation and instructional change.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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