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Dynamic Tensions: Early Reflections from MDRC's Evaluation of the Innovative Professional Development Challenge

In the Innovative Professional Development (iPD) Challenge, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has invested in helping school districts and networks redesign their instructional support systems to better support educators in increasing student success. This Issue Focus, the second in a series, presents early reflections from MDRC's evaluation of the iPD Challenge and is based on interviews with school and district staff and surveys of secondary school leaders conducted in four school districts during the 2013-2014 school year, the first year of iPD implementation.

The iPD Challenge and MDRC's Research

The iPD Challenge's Theory of Action posits that strong support systems can create empowered, effective teachers by establishing a cycle that: (1) identifies teachers' professional development (PD) needs; (2) creates PD plans matched to teacher needs; (3) delivers multi-modal PD opportunities (including both individual and collaborative activities); and (4) provides continuous feedback on teacher practice. Each school district participating in the initiative began by determining its goals and priorities regarding educator development, assessing its own strengths and weaknesses, and developing a district-specific iPD plan aimed at addressing its needs. Each district is taking a somewhat different approach to iPD. As the iPD Challenge research and evaluation partner, MDRC's charge is to examine the initiative's implementation in a subset of participating districts and the subsequent changes in teacher PD opportunities and experiences, with a view toward identifying themes across these districts as well as gauging each district's progress relative to its own starting point.

MDRC's first iPD Issue Focus presented a key finding gleaned from a survey of teachers in the school year before iPD was implemented: Secondary school teachers said that they valued collaboration with colleagues and wanted more time for professional development. This second Issue Focus discusses two dynamic tensions that have emerged in several districts during the first year of implementation.

Dynamic Tension #1: Meeting Individual Needs of Teachers *and* Creating Opportunities for Collaboration and Collective Development

Districts implementing iPD have faced a tension between addressing teachers' individual needs and responding to the needs of larger groups of teachers or of the district as a whole. Early work in many iPD districts has prioritized one or the other — *either* the individual *or* the collective. Each approach has potential advantages. An individualized focus may help to ensure that individual teachers will have available a wide variety of PD opportunities matched to their needs and will receive targeted personal feedback. On the other hand, a focus on collective development may engage a broad range of teachers in finding solutions to shared needs, attend to district-wide goals, and create time for teacher collaboration (a factor that research on PD has cited as important to school improvement). Each approach also has drawbacks, however. Attention to collective goals can make it challenging to ensure

that teachers' individualized learning needs are met. A focus on individuals may not take into account school or district instructional priorities and may largely leave the hard work of instructional improvement up to each teacher. Therefore, a critical question for districts to consider related to this dynamic tension is: *How can districts provide PD opportunities that address both teachers' individual needs* and *collective development?*

Dynamic Tension #2: Implementing a District-Level Systemic Initiative *and* Working Inside School-Level Teacher Support Systems

Like many systemic improvement initiatives, iPD has been largely designed and led at the district level, but teachers' daily work and their opportunities for receiving instructional support typically occur inside their schools, often from school leaders and other instructional leaders. Thus far, school leaders and other administrators in iPD schools have not regularly participated in iPD activities. Consequently, school leaders' efforts to support their teachers may not be well-aligned with the district's vision of iPD, and the feedback that leaders provide to teachers may not reflect iPD's improvement goals or share the language and focus of the initiative.

This disconnect is particularly noteworthy in light of findings from a 2014 survey of school leaders in iPD schools: more than half reported receiving little or no support from their districts for identifying teacher PD needs or for ensuring that teachers' PD opportunities match their needs. Further, less than a quarter reported being "very successful" at pressing teachers to implement what they learned in PD. A critical question for school districts implementing iPD and iPD-like initiatives is: *How can districts ensure that there is programmatic alignment across different levels (both district and schools) and that school leaders are well-positioned to support district-wide initiatives that redesign educator support?*

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Finding satisfactory solutions to these tensions likely depends on all parties having a shared understanding of what PD is supposed to accomplish. For collective professional development to succeed, participants must agree that they are all striving toward a common objective. For school leaders to support district goals with respect to PD, the district's goals must be clearly articulated. Our work to date suggests that efforts to develop a common vision and a common language about PD and its aims would help to move the iPD initiative forward.

To a certain extent, the tensions described here may be endemic to the ambitious work of changing school systems. Indeed, these dynamic tensions we've identified have resonated with new school districts and networks just joining the iPD initiative in 2014. Some existing districts in our study are already making efforts to manage these tensions: in their second year of implementation, for example, they have made plans to better engage and support school leaders to participate in and foster the success of the iPD initiative. Moving forward, the MDRC team will continue to document the experiences of district staff, school leaders, and teachers in iPD districts as they wrestle with these and other challenges — developing lessons for others undertaking similar work.

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