

COMMENTARY

Can Professional Environments in Schools Promote Teacher Development?

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Mounting evidence suggests that the school context in which teaching and learning occurs can have important consequences for teachers' career decisions, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement. In [this study](#), we build on this work by investigating how the school context influences the degree to which teachers become more effective over time. We find that teachers who work in more supportive environments improve at much greater rates than their peers in less supportive schools.

Using a rich panel dataset from [Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools](#), we track individual teachers for up to ten years. We examine how an individual teacher's effectiveness (as measured by contributions to student achievement) changes over time as they gain experience on the job, which we refer to as "returns to teaching experience."

Studies on the returns to teaching experience find that, on average, teachers make rapid gains in effectiveness early in their careers, but that additional experience is associated with more modest improvements. We document that average returns to teaching experience mask large variation across individual teachers—some teachers are improving two or three times faster than others and continue these rapid gains in effectiveness throughout their first five to ten years on the job. We also find that in some schools, on average, teachers are improving at much greater rates throughout the first 10 years of their careers than teachers at other schools.

We examine the role of the professional environment in explaining these differences in average returns to experience across schools. We construct our measure of the professional environment from teachers' responses to state-wide surveys. It captures teachers' perceptions on six dimensions of the organizational context: consistent order and discipline, opportunities for peer collaboration, supportive principal leadership, effective professional development, a school culture characterized by trust, and fair [teacher evaluation](#) processes that provides meaningful feedback. We find that, on average, teachers working in schools at the 75th percentile of professional environment ratings improved 38 percent more than teachers in schools at the 25th percentile after ten years. These differences are substantial, reflecting about 30 percent of the average total improvement teachers make in their first ten years on the job.

These findings challenge common assumptions made by education policymakers and highlight the role of the organizational context in promoting or constraining teacher development. Teachers are commonly characterized as having a fixed level of effectiveness in the popular press and in education policy reform initiatives. This characterization fails to consider the substantial degree to which individual teachers improve over their careers and how the school context can influence this improvement. Our findings also illustrate how policies aimed at improving teacher effectiveness that focus on the individual, ignoring the role of the organization, fail to recognize or leverage the potential importance of the school context in promoting teacher development. In

contrast to one-time workshops, teachers have the potential to benefit from the learning opportunities provided by a supportive professional environment every day. Furthermore, our narrow measure of effectiveness based on student achievement captures only one aspect of teaching, not the many other ways in which teachers contribute to children's development that also likely improve with experience.

Practice and research have started to highlight promising avenues for promoting improvement among teachers, such as providing teachers with actionable feedback about their instruction, creating opportunities for productive and sustained peer collaboration, supporting teachers' efforts to maintain an orderly and disciplined school environment, and investing in a school culture characterized by high expectations, trust and mutual respect. Transforming schools into organizations that support the learning of both students and teachers will be central to any successful effort to increase the human capital of the U.S. teaching force.

*The [full study](#) is in Kraft MA, Papay JP. "Can Professional Environments in Schools Promote Teacher Development? Explaining Heterogeneity in Returns to Teaching Experience," *Educational Effectiveness and Policy Analysis*. 2014;36(4):476-500. An ungated version is available [here](#).*

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