



lastinger  listeningtour

Balancing District Priorities and Teacher Needs in Mathematics Professional Learning

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In the Spring of 2026 we conducted a follow-up to our 2023 listening tour (UF LC, 2025) to more deeply understand the current state of mathematics-specific professional learning (PL) across Florida. This brief reports on what we learned from teachers, school and district coaches and administrators, and external PL providers from survey responses and focus groups about the opportunities and constraints for high-quality PL. For a comprehensive report of our methodology, visit lastinger.ufl.edu.

The Current Responsibility of Professional Learning Largely Rests with Districts

Across the focus groups, PL opportunities were described as shaped largely through district priorities and administrative decision-making, although teachers, coaches, and external providers also influence the process. This aligns with survey responses from 328 teachers, among whom only 6% reported finding PL on their own when they were already receiving PL that was required or suggested by their district. In other words, when teachers receive guidance from their district about PL to engage in, they rarely look beyond it, underscoring districts' influence over the PL that teachers experience.

Among teacher focus groups, only 38% reported having sufficient PL options to choose from, while 34% indicated that PL topics are primarily determined by the district. Survey results show that around 62% of teachers participate only in PL their district requires or suggests to them, with 19% only participating in district-required PL. Further, in only 13% of focus groups did teachers state that they are able to bring their own PL ideas directly to their school administration. Although research emphasizes that high-quality PL should be responsive to teachers' instructional needs and grounded in their daily work with curriculum (Alicea et al., 2025), these findings suggest that opportunities are most often driven by district priorities rather than by teacher-identified needs.

Math PL decision-making power rests strongly with school and district administrators. Among 33 school and district level administrators who responded to the survey, they reported making decisions about the content to be included (91%), the PL provider (82%), and who should participate in it (76%). Similarly, administrators in focus groups consistently described themselves as key decision-makers in determining PL, with all administrator focus groups reporting a substantial role in the planning process. Although administrators emphasized collaborating with coaches, they noted that PL must ultimately align with district goals and priorities.

Selected PL Provider	Admin	Coaches
Curriculum Provider	74%	64%
Ed Tech Provider	52%	25%
Publicly-Funded Provider	42%	18%
My School/District	36%	77%
FLDOE	36%	35%
Consortium	23%	7%
Private PL Provider	23%	9%
Math Program (e.g. College Board)	10%	7%
Professional Organization	10%	9%
Non-Profit/Foundation	7%	4%
University Faculty	3%	7%

Coaches described having less autonomy, with fewer than half of the focus groups reporting significant influence over PL decisions. Indeed, among the coaches who responded to the survey saying that they only implemented PL (N = 45) and were not key decision-makers, only 31% reported making decisions themselves even about the content and focus of the PL—that was reported to be made by a variety of school and district administrators or other coaches. Coaches with decision-making power who responded to the survey (N = 106) reported having considerable control over the content (95%) and who participated in it (86%), with less power over the provider (66%) and little to no control over cost (28%). Coaches, in the focus groups, described that they were more likely to gather and incorporate teacher feedback when identifying PL needs, but typically required administrative approval before implementing new PL opportunities. This collaborative structure aligns with the Research Partnership for Professional Learning’s (RPPL) framework’s emphasis on coherence across district and school systems (Alicea et al., 2025), yet the limited decision-making authority reported by coaches may reduce opportunities to design PL that is responsive to teachers’ evolving instructional needs.

Funding structures appear to reinforce these decision-making dynamics. Administrators reported having greater authority over funding allocations, whereas coaches often described being able to recommend expenditures but needing approval to access PL resources, in alignment with survey results. Across districts, participants frequently identified Title I and Title II funding as common sources of financial support for PL initiatives. Although these funding streams provide important resources for PL, participants suggested that how funds are allocated ultimately influences the type, duration, and accessibility of PL offered. This could be a reason why administrators reported on the survey that the majority of the PL they made decisions about was provided by textbook companies

(74%), educational technology companies (52%) and publicly-funded PL providers (42%), with only 36% reporting that it was provided by someone in their own school or district. A recent national study of PL spending similarly concluded that relative spending has not increased over the last 20 years, spending variation across districts is substantial, and more funding is necessary to align PL infrastructure with research-based recommendations (Boguslav et al., 2025). As such, the RPPL framework notes that district systems and resource allocation play a critical role in ensuring that PL is sustained, job-embedded, and supported over time rather than delivered as isolated events (Alicea et al., 2025). See our brief report on teacher needs for high-quality PL for a thorough discussion of these topics (UF LC, 2026).

External PL providers, including Florida Department of Education staff and other regional and national organizations, similarly emphasized the importance of tailoring PL to local contexts. All of these focus groups reported adapting their content to the needs of districts, schools, and teachers, with these adaptations most often informed by district priorities and school performance data. Similarly, survey results from administrators and coaches with decision-making power showed that the majority of the evidence they use to determine whether the PL they make decisions about is effective or not comes from teacher feedback (74% vs 78%, respectively), classroom observations (74% vs 71%), feedback from math coaches (68% vs 57%), feedback from school administrators (65% vs 61%), and student math achievement data (61% for both). These findings closely align with the RPPL framework’s principles that PL should be grounded in local instructional contexts while supporting implementation of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), and supported by measurement for improvement and impact (Alicea et al., 2025).

Stakeholder	PL Aligned to School Goals	PL Aligned to District Goals
Teachers	36%	28%
Coaches Implementing PL	33%	49%
Coaches Making Decisions about PL	61%	60%
Administrators Making Decisions about PL	52%	49%

These findings suggest that although PL is often designed to address local needs, its content and implementation are largely constrained by district priorities, administrative oversight, funding mechanisms, and approval processes. Survey results also suggest that perceptions of alignment with district and school goals differ across stakeholder groups, with teachers reporting substantially lower alignment than coaches involved in PL implementation, and lower than coaches and administrators involved in PL decision-making. This discrepancy suggests that organizational priorities may not always be clearly communicated or experienced consistently across roles. As districts make decisions about PL, the RPPL framework suggests establishing a strong, shared instructional vision while balancing organizational priorities with teacher-identified needs to ensure that PL remains responsive, curriculum-aligned, and capable of improving classroom practice (Alicea et al., 2025).

“I think that vision’s really important...having a clear vision of where you’re trying to go. And having people who are making the decisions at all levels, different impact levels, teachers, coaches, those sorts of positions involved.”

- University Faculty Member

Structural Constraints Limit Access to High-Quality Professional Learning

Across stakeholder groups, focus group participants described structural constraints that make it difficult to provide the type of PL that research identifies as most effective. Teachers most frequently reported that math-specific PL is limited, with available opportunities often centered on student data, new initiatives or curriculum, or standards implementation rather than instructional strategies—something that many teachers desired. As a result, many teachers described seeking math-specific PL on their own, much of it online. Indeed, 23% of the 328 teachers responding to the survey reported only engaging in math-specific PL that they found on their own—that is, they did not participate in any math-specific PL that was required or suggested by their district. Moreover, only about 6% of teachers who reported participating in PL required or suggested by their district also reported participating in PL they found on their own. This provides evidence that when teachers are provided opportunities from their district, they rarely participate in opportunities outside of that, even if they desire to or actively seek those opportunities.

We previously reported that the majority of teachers across the state claim they have less than 3 hours per month they could dedicate to PL (UF LC, 2024). Together these findings suggest that while districts provide PL, it is not always grounded in teachers’ day-to-day instructional practice or responsive to the content-specific support they need. Research emphasizes that PL should be grounded in practice, providing teachers with opportunities to directly apply learning to their curriculum and instructional materials rather than focusing primarily on compliance or broad initiatives (Alicea et al., 2025).

Stakeholder	Coach Support	Expert Feedback
Teachers	26%	21%
Coaches Implementing PL	31%	36%
Coaches Making Decisions about PL	69%	22%
Administrators Making Decisions about PL	58%	30%



“We hardly have any math trainings. Most of our focus is reading, behavior, [and] testing. When we adopt a new math series, we get trainings; other than that, it’s not on the forefront.”

- Elementary School Teacher



Coaches and administrators identified a different set of challenges, emphasizing limited time, competing district priorities, insufficient teacher participation, and inadequate coaching capacity. Survey results show that support from coaches or feedback from other experts is rarely reported by teachers and coaches whose main responsibility is to implement PL. However, coaches and administrators making decisions about PL frequently reported that support from a math coach was a feature of PL. Combined with focus group results, this contrast could be a difference of interpretation of what it means to have math coach support, or it could imply that the kinds of PL that most teachers receive is not the same as the kinds of PL that decision makers intend. Furthermore, many noted in focus groups that English Language Arts receives greater instructional and professional learning emphasis than mathematics—a finding in line with our prior listening tour (UF LC, 2024)—reducing opportunities for sustained math-specific PL.

These constraints directly affect districts’ ability to provide the ongoing support that research identifies as essential (Alicea et al, 2025). Rather than relying on isolated workshops, research recommends that PL be intensive and sustained, supported by recurring opportunities for implementation, reflection, and feedback (Alicea et al, 2025). Likewise, instructional coaching is considered a core feature of high-quality PL because it provides personalized, job-embedded support that helps teachers translate learning into classroom practice (Alicea et al., 2025).

University faculty and external providers described broader systemic barriers that extend beyond individual schools. Faculty highlighted the influence of high-stakes testing and accountability systems, which often narrow districts’ capacity to prioritize sustained PL. External providers similarly pointed to limited organizational and district coaching capacity as a barrier to scaling PL across schools. This is especially important given that 71% of the 24 employees of external providers who responded to the survey indicated that someone at the school or district is implementing their PL, while 50% of them reported that it was someone at the external provider’s organization.

Overall, these findings suggest that improving math-specific PL requires more than increasing the number of offerings. Consistent with the RPPL framework, districts should consider investing in sustained coaching infrastructure, protecting time for ongoing collaborative learning, and designing PL that is responsive to teachers’ instructional contexts and curriculum implementation rather than competing organizational priorities (Alicea et al., 2025).



Recommendation: Invest in High-Quality Professional Learning Opportunities that Meet Teacher Needs

In addition to expanding districts' internal capacity to expand and deepen their internal capacity to align with high-quality PL that is aligned to standards and HQIM (Alicea et al., 2025), teachers need access to no-cost opportunities to pursue high-quality PL that meets their instructional needs. State-supported opportunities can reduce financial burdens while expanding access to evidence-based PL beyond what individual districts are able to provide. Such opportunities should complement district priorities by allowing teachers to pursue targeted learning aligned with their grade level, content area, and instructional needs while remaining grounded in state standards and HQIM. One current model in Florida is the UF Lastinger Center's Math Matrix Micro-Credential that incentivizes teachers, with a stipend provided by state legislative funding, to engage in 60 hours of high-quality PL aligned with the Florida B.E.S.T. standards (FLDOE, 2020).



Recommendation: Re-Envision Existing District Structures for Sustained Professional Learning

Rather than creating new, ambitious PL systems, districts should consider redesigning existing PL structures to provide more focused learning experiences that are staged over time to take into account teachers' evolving needs as they use and deepen their familiarity with new HQIM (Alicea et al., 2025). Districts can leverage existing structures (e.g., professional learning communities, collaborative planning time, early release days, district PL days) to create staged learning cycles that build knowledge and practice over time in small chunks, rather than relying on isolated workshops. Additionally, participants highlighted the value of learning from colleagues, suggesting that teacher leaders can play an important role by facilitating discussions, modeling effective instruction, and sharing classroom examples. For instance rather than offering a single districtwide session on mathematical discourse, districts could organize a series of short grade-level learning sessions throughout a semester in which teachers learn one strategy, implement it with their students, analyze student work with peers, observe a demonstration lesson from a coach or teacher leaders, and refine their practice before progressing to the next topic. Re-envisioning existing PL structures in this way supports the features of high-quality PL in a way that is feasible for teachers, coaches, and administrators.

"I really think [PL] consistency is the most important...every month and in little snippets, rather than beginning of the year, middle of the year, done."

- Elementary School Teacher

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