

At TAGOS Leadership Academy in Janesville, Wisconsin, for example, General Motors shut down a plant and many educated people are out of work without many job prospects. Woloshin at TAGOS Leadership Academy said, “They would just drop out if it wasn’t for how we are able show them opportunities here.”

Teen Parents

Most high schools visited had at least one teen parent, and EOC teachers said that a good percentage of their total population is made up of teen parents. Like all of the other atypical groups of students, they don’t want to “miss” and “make up” school. Teen parents seek an opportunity to make school work around maternity and child care needs.

Gigi Dobosenski at EOC wrote in the school’s 2009–2010 annual report, “It is . . . noteworthy that over half of the 5 seniors who graduated in 2009 were teen parents. . . . Although we do not [specifically seek to] cater to these students, this success can be attributed to the individualized academic plans we set forth for students.”

QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Teachers reported two questions and challenges associated with the changes they make to encourage students’ engagement and motivation.

1. Autonomous teachers who are affiliated with school districts are often required to participate in professional development that assumes teachers and students are in conventional roles. To spend time and money wisely, how can professional development adapt to accommodate different roles for teachers and students?

Autonomous teachers in most schools affiliated with school districts say they are often required to participate in professional development that assumes teachers and students are in conventional roles. This affects teachers, especially those who are serving as leaders, at ALBA, HSC, Independence, Phoenix, SFCS, and TAGOS Leadership Academy. Notably, Mission Hill’s pilot school agreement with Boston Public Schools allows for some flexibility in this area.

Teachers want to avoid giving states and school districts any reason to close their schools and limit their autonomy, so they attend. Yet they also convey that the trainings can be a waste of their time and their schools’ money because the tips and tools just don’t apply to their unconventional way of operating.

Autonomous teachers are open to developing or finding their own, more relevant, professional development, but doing that in addition to mandated training can be overwhelming. Teachers also said that their attendance at most mandated trainings is at the schools' expense, which limits their ability to spend professional development dollars on additional training.

For the time being, autonomous teachers who attend professional development trainings said that when necessary they adapt what they learn for how it is relevant at their schools. Adaptation can be especially important when the professional development explains state- or district-wide mandates, such as special education requirements (how to implement IEPs, for example).

Teachers said they understand that states and school districts need to do training to avoid liability. But often teachers must be creative to figure out how to apply mandates to their models, and the work can be time consuming. While most of these teachers have limited budget autonomy, some suggested that increased autonomy in the area of budget would allow them to hire consultants and attorneys to do the adaptation and customize the trainings.

Emerging questions include the following: Would increased budget autonomy as well as autonomy to decide on and arrange for their own professional development needs lead to teacher training that is more productive? And, what could be done to increase district officials' level of comfort to grant autonomy in these areas?

2. How does the requirement that teachers must be "highly qualified" to teach a specific subject, as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), affect teachers whose role it is to guide instead of instruct students?

Teachers can become "highly qualified" to teach a subject area in a variety of ways, including completing twenty-four semester hours of subject-specific undergraduate coursework or completing a graduate degree in the subject. But autonomous teachers who are acting more as "guides" than "instructors" don't necessarily teach students in a single subject. Instead they advise students on their learning choices in all subjects. These teachers are innovating with their roles to encourage student engagement and motivation, but in doing so are not compliant with NCLB.

In some states teachers can apply for waivers from the requirement, but this can be a time-consuming hoop. Thomas at MNCS explained that since she and her colleagues opt to be guides, the school has to send out formal letters to all families annually to notify them that MNCS teachers are not highly qualified according to the federal requirements.