



From input to influence: Building teacher expertise into decision-making

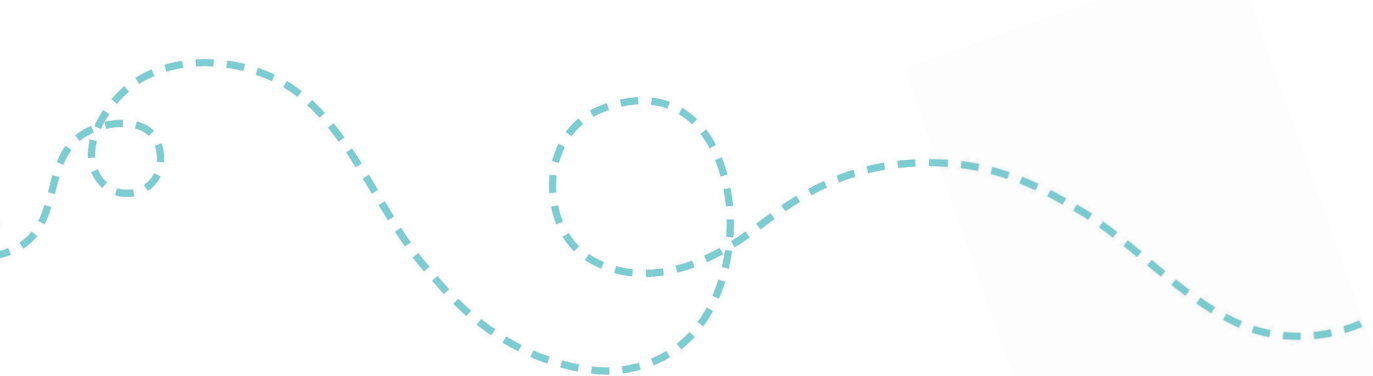
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In schools and districts, we often say teacher voice matters. It appears in strategic plans, learning frameworks, and conference agendas, and it is frequently positioned as essential to both improvement and sustainability. Yet despite how often we name its importance, in many systems teacher voice remains largely peripheral to how decisions are actually made.

This pattern is not new, but it is becoming more visible as systems take on increasingly complex initiatives such as artificial intelligence, where implementation decisions made without teacher input can quickly become disconnected from classroom realities. Often, leaders will attribute implementation challenges to a lack of teacher buy-in or know-how when the challenges are actually more reflective of

a failure to learn from and incorporate teachers' expertise.

In my research and work in schools, I have found authentic engagement depends not just on opportunities to contribute, but on whether systems, especially professional learning systems, are structured to incorporate teacher expertise into decision-making (Thomas-Reynolds, 2005). In many cases, teachers are invited to share



perspectives through surveys, focus groups, and advisory structures, yet those mechanisms are not always connected to clear decision-making pathways. Over time, this creates a gap between participation and influence that is subtle but has significant consequences.

WHEN VOICE BECOMES SILENCE

Research finds that teachers who perceive their input as influential report stronger job satisfaction and a deeper commitment to their work (Doan et al., 2023) and that leadership and meaningful involvement in decision-making are closely tied to teacher retention and school improvement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In contrast, when educators are asked for input but cannot trace how their perspectives influence decisions, their engagement shifts and wanes. Teachers begin to calibrate how and when they speak based on what they have observed in prior experiences. Over time, this pattern produces a response that is easy to overlook but essential to understand: silence.

In professional learning spaces, facilitators and leaders often misinterpret silence as either agreement or disengagement, when in reality

it often occurs because teachers' prior experiences have demonstrated that participation does not lead to visible change. Silence may also reflect a perception of professional risk when teachers in systems shaped by evaluation, hierarchy, and accountability feel speaking candidly could lead to repercussions. The concept of psychological safety helps explain why this occurs. Individuals are far more likely to contribute openly when they believe their perspectives will be respected and will not lead to negative consequences (Edmondson, 2018).

Even though asking for teachers' input while failing to incorporate it may not be malicious — many leaders genuinely care about teachers' perspectives — it can lead to a cyclical pattern in which initiatives lose momentum not through visible resistance but through gradual disengagement. As a result, implementation becomes inconsistent and the work quietly stalls.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AS THE LEVER

Professional learning is one of the most visible ways systems communicate whose expertise matters and how

decisions are made. When it is designed as something delivered *to* teachers, it reinforces a limited role for teachers in which they are expected to absorb and implement ideas developed by others. When it is designed *with* teachers, however, it expands their authority and positions them as active contributors to both learning and system improvement. The latter type of professional learning is the result of true collaboration, which is an essential component of the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2025), as opposed to cooperation, which is more passive and involves less agency. The difference between these two approaches is not simply instructional; it is structural, because it determines how teachers experience their roles within the system.

My perspective on professional learning as a lever for teacher voice is informed by six years serving as the project director for two multiyear Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program grant awards funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The grants were designed to improve teacher effectiveness, develop teachers as leaders, and strengthen the recruitment and retention of effective teachers. Each grant consisted of a consortium of five school districts that functioned as

networked improvement communities where teachers, instructional coaches, principals, and district superintendents worked together to strengthen instructional practice, develop teacher leadership, improve district systems, and share best practices across districts. Across these initiatives, teacher voice was an explicit design principle because meaningful improvement depended on creating structures through which teachers could influence decisions rather than simply implement them.

In the Teacher and School Leader grants, teachers participated as partners in district improvement efforts alongside principals, instructional coaches, and district leaders. Teacher voice was intentionally embedded within professional learning and continuous improvement through collaborative planning structures, teacher design teams, and expanded teacher roles. These positioned teachers to help shape instructional priorities, inform human capital systems, and co-design professional learning experiences. Leading these initiatives demonstrated that teacher voice becomes influential when systems intentionally create structures that recognize teachers as co-designers rather than implementers. This reinforces that teacher voice is not simply a product of teachers' willingness to participate but of organizational structures that allow teachers to influence instructional improvement and system-level decision-making. Teachers were engaged as co-designers of district human capital systems alongside administrators and helped shape instructional priorities, leadership pathways, and professional learning experiences.

Through expanding teacher leadership roles, including lead teacher and master teacher roles, teachers actively facilitated professional learning, led peer collaboration, and brought forward collective insights from classrooms to inform district-level decisions. What proved most significant was not a single decision, but a shift in how teachers were consistently

positioned to bring forward collective insights grounded in classroom experience, creating a more consistent feedback loop between practice and policy.

These principles became operationalized across the participating school districts through two complementary improvement structures developed by Insight Education Group (now K12 Coalition). First, the 5 Star Meeting Protocol provided a disciplined routine for collaborative inquiry and evidenced-based dialogue (Stricker, 2019). And second, Traction for School Improvement served as the overarching continuous improvement framework, organizing collaborative problem-solving, implementation cycles, and organizational learning (Moody et. al., 2019).

The 5 Star Meeting Protocol ensured teacher voices were not only heard, but organized around clear outcomes, shared accountability, and actionable next steps. Teachers were expected to bring evidence from their classrooms to grade-level professional learning communities, contribute to collective problem-solving, and leave with defined actions that directly informed instructional practice.

Similarly, Traction for School Improvement provided a disciplined structure during professional learning community meetings for identifying priorities, monitoring progress, and adjusting strategies based on real-time input from educators. Together, these approaches created consistency in how teacher perspectives were surfaced, discussed, and translated into decisions, moving voice from contribution to influence.

Through these protocols, teachers played an active role in defining challenges, analyzing evidence, and shaping next steps. As a result, professional learning conversations became more grounded in real instructional challenges rather than abstract concepts. Leaders consistently reported noticeable increases in teacher participation, more consistent

use of agreed-upon instructional strategies, and stronger alignment across classrooms over the course of implementation. While variation still existed, the overall coherence of practice improved because teachers were helping define and adapt them in context. Professional learning became both responsive to teacher needs and influential in shaping how systems evolved, and teacher expertise became embedded within the instructional and organizational direction of the system.

DESIGNING FOR AUTHENTIC TEACHER VOICE

If we take seriously what both research and experience suggest, the path forward is less about creating additional opportunities for teachers to speak and more about strengthening the connection between voice and decision-making. This work is most visible in how leaders and facilitators design professional learning experiences that invite meaningful engagement from the outset. In the table on p. 13, key system conditions and expected outcomes in systems where teacher voice is integrated are summarized and contrasted with those in systems where teacher voice is not fully realized.

One of the most important shifts involves engaging teachers earlier in the process. When teachers help define problems rather than simply reacting to solutions, their expertise is more fully leveraged and resulting decisions are more grounded in classroom realities. This approach aligns with principles of continuous improvement, which emphasize the importance of practitioner knowledge in designing effective and sustainable systems (Bryk et al., 2015). It also changes how teachers experience professional learning, shifting it from something they attend to something they help shape. These conditions strengthen teachers' sense of professional efficacy, reinforcing their confidence in shaping both instruction and system-level decisions.

Clarity about purpose is equally important. Each engagement

SYSTEM CONDITIONS AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES WHEN TEACHER VOICE IS AND IS NOT MEANINGFULLY INTEGRATED

	Teacher voice is meaningfully integrated	Teacher voice is not realized
System conditions	Leaders show how input is clearly connected to decision-making and next steps.	Teachers provide input but do not see how it influences decisions.
	Feedback loops are visible, consistent, and transparent.	Feedback cycles are unclear or inconsistently communicated.
	Teachers help define problems before solutions are developed.	Administrators diagnose problems and determine solutions.
System outcomes	Professional learning is designed collaboratively with teachers and includes teacher-led facilitation.	Professional learning feels delivered with teachers as passive participants.
	Teachers demonstrate ownership in how initiatives are applied.	Silence increases in spaces where teacher engagement was previously strong.
	Implementation is aligned across classrooms.	Implementation varies widely across classrooms.

opportunity should make explicit what decision is being informed, what level of participation is expected, and how input will be used. Without this clarity, participation becomes ambiguous, and ambiguity erodes trust. Over time, this uncertainty influences how teachers choose to engage, often leading to more cautious and limited contributions.

Closing the loop is just as critical. When teachers contribute their perspectives, systems must communicate what was heard, what themes emerged, and how decisions were made. Even when input does not lead to a desired outcome, transparency reinforces respect and communicates the integrity of the process.

Ultimately, incorporating teacher voice meaningfully requires shifting the framing of the concept from something systems invite or allow to a core component of system capacity. When teachers' expertise is intentionally integrated into professional learning and decision-making structures, systems become more responsive,

more adaptive, and better positioned to sustain meaningful change. District and school leaders play a central role in making this shift, especially as they navigate emerging complex priorities, including the integration of artificial intelligence and other innovations. The effectiveness of these efforts will depend not only on the quality of the tools or strategies, but on whether teachers are meaningfully engaged in shaping how they are implemented in practice.

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