

# Professional learning research insight: Motivations for schools participating in external professional learning

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Professional learning is a common strategy for influencing and supporting the use of evidence-based practices in schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and enhancing learning outcomes for children and young people. The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is exploring how best to deliver professional learning in the Australian education context. This research summary outlines early evidence from one of our research projects on coaching.

AERO has partnered with the [Science of Language and Reading \(SOLAR\) Lab](#) in the School of Education at La Trobe University to examine the mechanisms of sustained, in-school coaching (alongside online training and targeted resource provision) that are most effective for supporting changes in teacher practice and student outcomes. Teachers, support staff and leaders from 22 schools are participating in this randomised controlled trial throughout 2024 and 2025. The professional learning provided through this study consists of either an online training program over a 12-week period or the same online training plus coaching throughout the duration of the study. The professional learning is delivered by SOLAR Lab staff, who are not employed at participating schools and are, therefore, delivering professional learning as external providers. Early in the study, we asked 24 leaders what motivated them to engage their school in the external professional learning provided through this research project. The results are presented in this research summary.

## Early findings

### External professional learning is a way to access expertise and knowledge that can be shared within the school

One of the main motivators for engaging in professional learning from an external provider was to access expertise and knowledge that weren't already available in the school. School leaders explained that they wanted to make changes and that bringing the new expertise and knowledge into their school would help achieve this:

It came from a combination of both our school data and our teachers ... We were looking for a different way to meet those children's needs. We felt that our teaching practices needed to change to make sure we continued to get good results.

Many leaders also viewed the professional learning as a stepping stone to building in-house expertise for supporting ongoing improvement:

[A reason for choosing external professional learning was] to access the expertise and build our capacity, and then we can do some internal training with our own staff.

### Professional learning delivered by an external provider offers consistency and structured guidance within schools

Leaders talked about the need for consistent messaging and structured guidance to ensure all staff were on the same page and to promote the use of evidence-based practice across the school:

[We were looking at] finding a way to develop teacher content knowledge in a way that they [are] all getting the same message.

[W]e were finding that some teachers were doing things one way, other teachers were doing things another way; whereas this [external PL] enabled us to all follow a systematic approach that was very structured, and everyone was on board.

Leaders explained that the structured and ongoing, accessible nature of the training ensured that schools could continue to provide the same message to all teachers and maintain consistent teaching practices, even amid staff turnover:

When you have a lot of part-timers, [it's] very hard to get the consistent message ... Because they're never here on the same day. So, when I run a meeting, if I'm running it for one group of teachers, the other part-timers are missing out on the information ... So, doing it this way, where everyone's doing the professional learning and then I'm implementing things here at school, it's working better. I think it's helping me and supporting me to implement things.

We also have had quite a lot of new staff in the last two years, almost 50% of our staff [...] are new. Even though we were heading in this direction, of course, every time you get a new staff member, you have to sort of start from scratch with them. So, it was making sure that we've got some good professional learning to support those staff as well.

## The external professional learning provider is a source of reliable support and clarity

Given that the professional learning was delivered over a period of time (in this case, 12 weeks, with each short course running for a minimum of 4 weeks), the external professional learning provider was seen as a source of support and clarification. Leaders found this especially important during a period when they were delivering change within their schools:

We're very committed to being able to make changes in our literacy program and align it with science of reading evidence.

We're really grateful to be involved. Being a small school – we're only 200 students – for us to be able to afford the level of professional learning that our staff are getting would be near impossible. So, to have that through the support of La Trobe, I think's been really good.

## External professional learning can support the goals, direction and objectives of the school

The professional learning was valued for its close alignment with the school's goals, direction and objectives, and for the support it provided to enhance the school's current efforts:

It suited our school direction, and we were very interested in the professional learning component ... it was a way of validating what we were doing.

[I]t just fitted everywhere we wanted to go in the next couple of years.

[W]e were already looking in that direction, and it just seemed too good to be true, and we're very grateful for being involved.

In some cases, it helped schools to start adopting anticipated system-wide changes:

[T]his is the direction that [our school system is] heading ... we were just trying to get ahead of the game ... because we knew the change was coming.

Overall, leaders recognised the opportunity to leverage the expertise, consistency and structured support available through the professional learning to build capacity and use evidence-based practices more effectively within their school. The research project will explore if and how this professional learning enables practice change and improved student outcomes.

## About AERO's professional learning research

AERO is conducting a range of studies in Australian schools and ECEC services to gather evidence about:

- the mechanisms that make professional learning effective – for example, managing staff cognitive load, setting and agreeing on goals, action planning, modelling and arranging practical social support (see Sims et al., 2021, for further information on professional learning mechanisms)
- ways that professional learning can be delivered at scale so that a greater number of teachers and educators can have opportunities to enhance their practice.

## Our research project focused on coaching

This research project, conducted in partnership with the SOLAR Lab, is a randomised controlled trial involving 22 schools in Victoria, working with over 200 Foundation to Year 2 teachers, support staff and school leaders. All participants receive online professional learning as well as targeted resources. Of these 22 schools, 10 also participate in bespoke coaching. See [AERO's Professional Learning Research](#) project page for a description of the project and Serry et al. (2025) for the study methodology.

## Next steps

Early findings from our research suggest that external professional learning is valued by school leaders as a strategy to support practice change. Our study will continue throughout 2025. We will analyse data and views from all participants, including leaders, teachers, education support staff and coaches. Findings from this study will be published as they become available between late 2026 through to 2027.

## References

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Sims, S., Fletcher-Wood, H., O'Mara, A., Cottingham, S., Stansfield, C., Herwegen, J. V., & Anders, J. (2021). *What are the characteristics of effective teacher professional development? A systematic review and meta-analysis*. Education Endowment Foundation. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/teacher-professional-development-characteristics>

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