



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Drawing on survey and interview data, this policy brief examines perceptions of professional development among public school teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It explores what types of professional development teachers have access to, the barriers to professional development they face, and teachers' stated needs for additional professional development. We find that teachers in the UAE have high rates of participation in professional development. They benefit from both week-long professional development workshops and in-school teacher networks that cover subject matter material and pedagogical skills. However, concerns about existing professional development offerings include that they can be repetitive or irrelevant and that there are few incentives associated with attending training courses. Key areas for future support include offering training on 1) students with special needs; 2) information and communications technology; and 3) community engagement.

Teacher Professional Development in the UAE: What Do Teachers Actually Want?

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Introduction

Countries around the world are facing the question of how to ensure that their children receive high-quality education, and the UAE is no exception. Studies consistently point to teacher quality as one of the most important predictors of student learning (Barber and Mourshed, 2007), and, in line with this research, scholars have increasingly advocated reform approaches focused on improving teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Recognizing the importance of teacher quality to student success, education leadership in the UAE has stated that its priority for the 2015–2016 school year was “to improve teaching methods,” and the country's five-year strategic plan, Education 2020, highlights the importance of teacher quality (Salem, 2014).

Unfortunately, teacher quality remains a vague concept, with vigorous debates over whether great teachers are “born” or “made,” which reflects a larger policy debate over whether recruitment or professional development and retention should be the policy priority (OECD, 2005). An emphasis on recruitment recommends raising the educational requirements for entry into the profession or simply increasing the status and pay of teaching to attract high-caliber applicants. Alternatively, those who support the perspective that teaching is a skill that must be continually honed advocate for better support for teachers' continued professional development once they are working in schools (known as in-service professional development). In-service teacher training is recognized as a central component of teachers' overall professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2006), as research indicates that in-service professional development is linked to both improved knowledge and improved pedagogy (Desimone et al., 2002).

In-service professional development is critically important for retaining high-quality teachers in the field (see Lynch et al., 2013). It not only contributes to continued learning on the part of teachers, which helps keep their knowledge and skills up-to-date, but it also addresses the social and relational aspects of teaching. Teacher professional development, which often takes place through mentoring, workshops, or teacher networks, connects teachers to other educators inside and outside their schools. By linking teachers across

classrooms and schools, relational networks help teachers share knowledge; find social, emotional, and motivational support in an often-challenging career; and reduce the sense of isolation that is often associated with teaching.

In-service professional development can take many forms, including content courses, teacher professional networks that share information and strategies, and mentoring programs that pair more experienced teachers with novice teachers. At the school and district levels, policies can support teachers' professional development in various ways, such as providing designated times during which teachers can collaborate; creating school- or district-wide learning communities; providing accessible workshops; or offering incentives (financial or otherwise) for participation in professional development activities.

However, even when support for professional development exists, there are countless barriers to participation. Teachers may be too busy to participate, they may have conflicts due to family responsibilities, or they may feel that, despite official policies, their administrators are not actually supportive of professional development. Perhaps more concerning, teachers sometimes view professional development as a waste of time or as failing to meet their actual needs. In light of this, it is important to develop an understanding of what types of professional development teachers actually want and need.

Teacher quality is an important policy issue right now. Similar to most nations, the United Arab Emirates faces many challenges in terms of ensuring teacher quality and supporting teachers' professional development. Currently, teachers in the UAE come from various national backgrounds—and, as a result, their training varies widely (Ridge, 2014). Officially, teachers are required to participate in 30 hours of professional development each year, and Abu Dhabi Education Council and the Ministry of Education run a number of programs offering teacher training throughout the year. Despite the importance of professional development as a policy priority, in the 2015 federal budget, only AED 15,000 was devoted to teacher professional development (Salem, 2014).

In addition, the UAE's three educational regulatory bodies (Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC), which governs public and private schools in Abu Dhabi; Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority

(KHDA), which governs private schools in Dubai; and the Ministry of Education (MOE), which governs public and private schools in the northern emirates as well as public schools in Dubai) all set their own standards for teacher recruitment. This means that teacher standards differ across the country. In the 2016–2017 academic year, the three bodies are piloting new regulations governing teacher licensing, which create a set of uniform standards applicable nationwide. These new regulations will require teachers to pass an exam and show a portfolio of evidence to teach in the UAE (Pennington, 2016). Such a reform has been an ongoing discussion for many years. The program will be piloted next year and rolled out nationwide by 2021.

While focused on ensuring that there is a nationwide set of minimum entry requirements for teachers, these changes also aim to raise the quality and qualifications of existing teachers. Many teachers will need to upgrade their qualifications in order to comply with new standards. It is unclear, however, what the role of in-service professional development will play in the new licensing requirements. That said, there is reason to believe that in-service professional development could be a component of the license-renewal process. As such, the introduction of new licensing requirements provides an excellent opportunity to think about how to better support teachers' continued learning.

This policy paper addresses teachers' participation in, barriers to, and needs for in-service professional development in the UAE. It is organized around four questions:

- What types of professional development have teachers participated in?
- What are major barriers to participation in professional development?
- Did participation in professional development have an impact on teachers?
- What types of professional development do teachers say they need?

Data Sources

To examine participation in professional development, this policy brief draws on data from the OECD's 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). OECD's TALIS is a cross-nationally comparable survey of teachers' backgrounds and in-school experiences

that surveyed more than 116,000 teachers and principals around the world. Of 38 total countries and sub-national regions that participated in TALIS 2013, Abu Dhabi (UAE) was the only Arab representative. The survey included more than 2,000 teachers in public and private secondary schools (middle and high schools or cycle two and cycle three schools). Questions covered teacher backgrounds, school environments, opportunities for professional development, and pedagogical practices. This paper focuses on teachers in public lower secondary schools. In total, TALIS included roughly 1,000 teachers in public lower secondary schools in Abu Dhabi.

To complement the quantitative data, this policy brief also draws on 20 interviews with teachers in public schools in the UAE in January 2016. The interviews were conducted in two girls' schools and two boys' schools, in English and Arabic. Questions centered on teachers' major challenges, their experiences participating in existing professional development programs, and their needs for additional professional development or support. An important caveat to the findings reported below is that these data reflect teachers' opinions and perceptions of professional development, rather than objective assessments of professional development offerings in the UAE or the demonstrable impact that such professional development has had.

High Rates of Participation in Teacher Professional Development

What types of professional development have teachers participated in?

The rates of participation in various forms of professional development are higher in the UAE than in most nations surveyed by TALIS (OECD, 2015).

Of the 987 teachers surveyed in lower secondary public schools in Abu Dhabi, 873 (88%) of them had participated in a course or workshop in the past 12 months, and 458 (46%) stated that they had participated in a network of teachers formed specifically for professional development. Such high rates of teacher professional development are likely due to the fact that participation in professional development workshops is mandatory for teachers, who are expected to attend a week of training prior to each term.

The content of teachers' professional development covered a broad range of topics, including subject matter, evaluation practices, and information and communications technology (ICT) training. Table 1 shows the percent of teachers participating in professional development on a range of topics.

Table 1: Professional Development Activities Offered to Public School Teachers in UAE (n=902)

Type of Professional Development Offered	Average Participation (%)
Student evaluation and assessment practices	90%
Pedagogical competencies in subject field	87%
Classroom management	87%
Information and communication technologies	86%
Knowledge and understanding of subject field	79%
Teaching problem solving, learning to learn	78%
New technologies in the workplace	77%
Knowledge of the curriculum	72%
Approaches to individualized learning	72%
Student career guidance or counseling	59%
Teaching students with special needs	54%
School management and administration	47%
Teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting	40%

Source: TALIS 2013

As the table shows, in the UAE, teachers were most likely to participate in professional development on student evaluation practices (90%), pedagogical competencies (87%), and classroom management (87%). They were least likely to have participated in professional development on teaching in multicultural settings (40%), school administration (47%), or teaching students with special needs (54%).

In interviews in the country, teachers frequently mentioned that they participated in mandatory teacher training that was provided by the Ministry of Education in the week before classes began each term, covering subject matter knowledge, curricular content, and methods for student evaluation and feedback. Many teachers reported that they found these skills useful. As one female Emirati teacher explained, "There were some new techniques that were useful. For example, we learned new criteria

on how to provide feedback and different types of feedback, and how to manage time in the classroom."

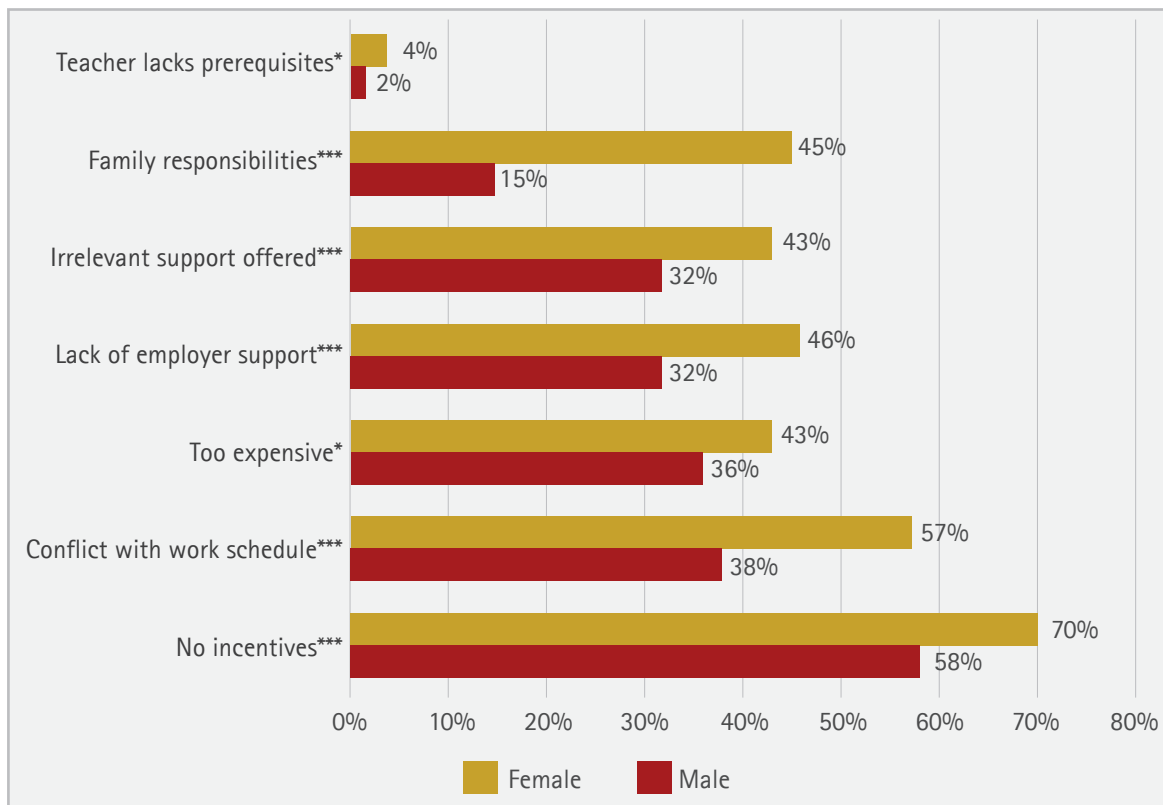
What are major barriers to participation in professional development?

Nonetheless, teachers face a number of barriers to pursuing professional development. Figure 1 shows the major barriers to participating in professional development, by gender.

Very few teachers reported that they lack the prerequisites to participate in professional development (4% of female and 2% of male teachers). Rather, teachers point to situational factors as major barriers to participation.

88% of public school teachers participated in a professional development course or workshop last year.

Figure 1: Barriers to Professional Development¹



Source: TALIS 2013

¹ Researchers conducted a series of t-tests to see if mean responses differed between male and female teachers. Stars represent statistically significant differences in mean between male and female teachers. p value: * 0.05 ** 0.01 *** 0.001

For both male and female teachers, the most common barrier is a lack of incentives, with 70% of females and 58% of males saying there are no incentives for them to participate in professional development opportunities. The second largest barrier is that professional development conflicts with teachers' work schedules, according to 57% of female teachers and 38% of male teachers.

Overall, it also appears that male teachers face fewer barriers to accessing professional development than female teachers do—the starkest contrast concerns family responsibilities. Roughly 45% of female teachers see family responsibilities as a hindrance to professional development, representing the fourth largest barrier for females overall. Meanwhile, the percentage of male teachers who feel that their family responsibilities preclude professional development work is a much lower 15%.

While there are important gender differences regarding access to professional development opportunities, the largest and most important barrier to participation in professional development for both genders is incentives. Making professional development mandatory for teachers to attend has the unintended consequence of turning professional development into a chore, which may undermine its usefulness in the

minds of some teachers.

Did participation in professional development have an impact on teachers?

Simply asking about participation does not gauge the impact of these professional development workshops or indicate whether teachers find their professional development experiences useful. Table 2, below, shows the impact that teachers feel professional development has had on their teaching. The table reports the percent of respondents that stated workshops on the following topics had "little or no impact," a "moderate impact," or a "large impact" on their teaching.

It is clear from Table 2 that the majority of teachers surveyed stated that the workshops and professional development options in which they participated have had a large impact on their teaching. More than half of all teachers reported that professional development related to subject knowledge, curriculum, student evaluation, and classroom management greatly impacted their teaching.

The most effective types of professional development were related to curriculum knowledge (66%) and subject field knowledge (60%). In addition, professional

Table 2: Impact of Professional Development on Public School Teachers in UAE (%)

Type of Professional Development	Little or No Impact	Moderate Impact	Large Impact
Subject field knowledge	7%	33%	60%
Pedagogical competency	9%	39%	53%
Curriculum knowledge	6%	28%	66%
Student evaluation practices	7%	37%	56%
ICT skills	10%	38%	52%
Classroom management	10%	36%	54%
School administration	13%	45%	42%
Approach to individualized learning	11%	49%	40%
Teaching students with special needs	21%	43%	36%
Teaching in a multicultural setting	16%	44%	40%
Teaching cross-curricular skills	11%	44%	44%
New technologies in workplace	9%	40%	51%
Student guidance and counseling	10%	38%	52%

Source: TALIS 2013

development on student evaluation practices, classroom management, and pedagogical competency are all found to have a large impact on teachers' classroom instruction. The high number of teachers stating that these forms of professional development have had an impact on their teaching is in line with other research; for example, in a review of research on effective professional development, Guskey (2003), finds that "helping teachers to understand more deeply the content they teach and the ways students learn that content appears to be a vital dimension of effective professional development" (Guskey, 2003).

However, only a third (36%) of those participating in training on teaching students with special needs said the instruction had a large impact on them. Only 40% of those participating in professional development focusing on individualized learning and on teaching in a multicultural setting said the activity had a large impact on their teaching. It is possible that workshops or other classroom-based courses are less likely to help teachers in these domains and that other modalities of training are necessary. In the next section, we draw on interviews to think about how to make professional development more effective for teachers.

Learning From Other Teachers

In interviews, teachers frequently stated that one of the most effective types of professional development was school-based professional development, organized by teachers or a school committee. One female teacher explained that, at her school, there is a professional development committee that plans programming for the school. According to her, "At the beginning of each semester, they ask what types of professional development they want so that they can provide workshops on those topics." Teachers perceived these school-based workshops as beneficial, as one teacher stated, "Every month, we have professional development that gather[s] teachers of the same grade. This is excellent and useful, and I [have] gained a lot from it."

In addition, teachers mentioned observing other teachers' classes, and, in many cases, they explained that these visits are a formalized part of professional development, arranged by administrators. However, feedback concerning peer observations was more mixed. While some teachers liked observations, stating that they offered ideas for new techniques, other teachers were more skeptical, stating that observations

took up time and were stressful for the teachers being observed. Teachers' ambivalence concerning peer observations and feedback is not surprising; research suggests that teacher coaches must establish a high level of trust to be effective (Finkelstein, 2016).

On another note, teachers viewed access to teacher networks positively. A male teacher commented, "One good thing is that I learned about a new phone app that promotes dialogue between teachers of the same subject—for example, an online network for English teachers of sixth grade in the UAE." The interest in this type of professional development suggests that, in addition to in-person and school-based training, teachers can benefit from online networks that allow them to share information and pedagogical tips.

Making Professional Development More Effective

Despite success in some areas, teachers did not consider all forms of professional development useful. Teachers' most negative feedback centered on workshops and training mandated by education authorities. Teachers complained that many workshops were repetitive, contained irrelevant training materials, or were conducted by unqualified instructors. In addition, many training sessions were too generalized. In response, teachers expressed a desire for more targeted training, namely related to classroom management skills, incorporating information and communications technology into their classrooms, and parental and community involvement.

Levels of Engagement

Many teachers interviewed stated that the training opportunities mandated by the government were not particularly useful. At least five teachers mentioned that the training events are "very repetitive," and others complained that the workshops are "really long and boring" or that there is no "new material." One teacher commented that he was being taught "things that I don't really need—things I learned 20 years ago." Another explained that the workshops, geared to all teachers "treat those with 15 or 20 years of experience the same as they do people with little experience." One male teacher stated, "We have to sit and listen to things that are repeated over and over." Repetitiveness detracted from the benefits of professional development. As one female Emirati

teacher explained, "Concrete training is good, but if you have to go and sit for four hours and hear the same things over and over, it's not good."

Nonetheless, teachers also recognized that the quality of the training varies significantly. One teacher explained, "This year, our professional development was much better than last semester, but it really depends on the facilitator. I was happy with my facilitator, but it really depends on who is delivering it."

Relevance of Material

A second area of concern among teachers was that the content of professional development training events was not useful or did not target their needs. One female teacher explained, "Yes, we have professional development training, but it's not what we want." Similarly, a male teacher said, "We want training that has a direct relationship to our teaching. We need something directly related to the curriculum; a lot of the training has little relevance." Another teacher commented that "the trainings offered by the [education authorities] are far-removed from the curriculum." As teachers are evaluated based on their students' mastery of the curriculum, it makes sense that many want professional development related to

the curriculum they teach.

Academic support staff mentioned that their training needs to be much more specialized. For example, one librarian told interviewers:

We need more specialized training—take me, I'm a librarian, and I had to sit in on a training in health. I just had to go, even though it wasn't related to my specialization. I need training that's related to library stuff, like academic resources and electronic research, et cetera.

Perceptions of Trainer Qualifications

Complicating the issue that professional development training options are sometimes seen as repetitive and not engaging is that teachers also believe that those delivering the instruction are sometimes unqualified to do so. One teacher asked, "Who are the people presenting? Before it was normal teachers we nominated, but last time we had foreigners, but they were really bad." Teachers were not implying that they could not benefit from learning about other countries or from foreign experts; in fact, a male teacher mentioned he would like to see "case studies from other countries" that could help teachers be

Table 3: Areas in Which Professional Development is Required (n=930)

Professional Development Required	Agree (%)
Teaching students with special needs	54%
New technology in workplace	43%
Teaching in a multicultural setting	41%
School management and administration	38%
Student career guidance and counseling	36%
Teaching cross-curricular skills (e.g., problem solving, critical thinking)	33%
ICT skills	32%
Approach to individualized learning	28%
Student assessment and evaluation practices	22%
Classroom management	21%
Pedagogical competency	15%
Subject knowledge	10%
Curriculum knowledge	9%

p value: **p* < .05

Source: TALIS 2013

more effective. However, they stressed how important it is for material to be contextualized in terms of the UAE. One male teacher commented: "These trainings done by the [government] were copied and pasted from international sources, from Britain. They have to be implemented here. There's no consideration for adaptation to the context."

A related issue is that some training sessions are poorly run. Many teachers complained that the nature of the training events themselves was not conducive to learning, stating, "Professional development should include more discussion and exchange." Otherwise, teachers are not likely to participate actively in the training. Therefore, they are not likely to benefit fully from it.

What types of professional development do teachers say they need?

Recognizing the limitations of current professional development practices, we explore what types of training would be most useful to U.A.E. teachers. Table 3, drawn from TALIS data, asked teachers in Abu Dhabi what types of professional development they would like to have.

Though most teachers reported that the professional development they were offered had a positive impact, there are certain areas in which teachers welcome additional professional development options. The majority of teachers surveyed (54%) stated they need training in teaching students with special needs. Other areas of instruction that are in high demand include training for new technology in the workplace (43%); strategies for teaching in multicultural settings (41%); and training in school administration (38%). Interestingly, these are among the types of professional development that teachers are least likely to have attended.

Teachers Need Specialized Professional Development

In interviews with teachers in the UAE, we asked teachers for more detailed descriptions of their professional development needs. Teachers' needs echoed the findings from TALIS in that teachers expressed a desire for specialized training related to teaching students with special needs. Other needs, including classroom management, were expressed

more strongly in interviews than in the survey data. For example, although classroom management is one of the less-emphasized needs according to TALIS data (21%), teachers who were interviewed linked classroom management to teaching children with special needs. This suggests that challenges discussed in TALIS surveys are, for some educators, closely linked to one another in practice.

Class Management Activities

One of the main needs noted by teachers was training on how to manage classroom issues, including how to motivate students, to address behavioral issues and hyperactive students, to integrate activities into lessons, and to work with slow learners or those with special needs.

As one male teacher stated, "What we need [are] methods for solving the problem of demotivated students." Another male teacher made a similar comment, saying, "We have a lot of behavioral challenges and social challenges. The students fight. They don't stay in their seats. We want to know how to deal with slow learners and talented students." This feedback reflects the need for teachers to have more strategies for instructing students with special needs and approaching classes through differentiated instruction. Many teachers grouped these issues together, stating that they needed strategies for "classroom management." As behavioral issues are worse in boys' schools and compounded by the fact that most male teachers are expatriate Arabs (see Ridge, 2014), male teachers expressed the need for classroom management training more often than female teachers did.

Teachers stated that they needed what they called "practical" and "applied" strategies, which they contrasted with theoretical workshop instruction. In addition, one teacher suggested having a professional development professional "in the school to help the teachers, to give feedback on teaching directly," while another pointed to the need for additional "research on classroom management" to understand what types of techniques are effective in these classroom contexts.

Specific Training in Technology and Other Topics

Others teachers stated they wanted more specialized training opportunities in technology, including

smartboards. Many teachers explained that they had access to smartboards, but needed help knowing how to use them. One male teacher stated, "We're supposed to be doing smart learning, but we don't know how to use the smartboards, and we don't have a system for cooperation between teachers for sharing worksheets and other resources." Similarly, another teacher stated, "We also need training on ICT and how to integrate ICT into teaching."

Community and Parental Engagement

Finally, teachers mentioned wanting to learn about how to get parents more involved with the school—to improve parental engagement in education. A male expatriate teacher explained that teachers need professional development in "how to communicate with students and parents, and how to get them to understand the importance of education." A female Emirati teacher mentioned that, at her school, they want advice and techniques for improving "the participation of parents, such as how to get parents more involved and interested in their kids' work." To help achieve this, one male teacher added that, with respect to parental and community engagement, it was not only the teachers but also parents who could benefit from training opportunities. In his words, "We need seminars for parents as well, in order to make parents aware of their children's needs and the school's activities and role." Other teachers made similar comments.

Policy Recommendations

In the UAE, there appears to be a need for professional development to be better incentivized and targeted to teachers' needs. We recommend the following:

For Education Policymakers

1. Many teachers stated that they benefited from the week-long teacher professional development training events held before each school term. Holding week-long teacher development courses that do not conflict with teachers' professional and personal responsibilities seems to permit widespread attendance. However, workshop design and content must be more responsive to teachers' needs. In a meta-analysis of what makes professional development effective,

researchers found that, although short-term workshops are often criticized as ineffective, in fact, "all of the studies that showed a positive relationship between professional development and improvements in student learning involved workshops or summer institutes" (Guskey and Yoon, 2009, p.496). Importantly, these workshops focused on implementing research-based instructional practices; incorporated active learning into workshop design and delivery; and provided teachers opportunities to practice their newly learned skills in real-life classroom scenarios. This policy brief recommends quality control of all mandated teacher professional development workshops, ensuring that they are designed to align with good practices.

2. Teachers stated that they need and would benefit from more specialized training options. In the future, education leaders should consider a "menu of options" of more specialized and targeted training opportunities that teachers could choose from, allowing them to find professional development that meets their needs. The menu of options for these specialized training sessions should include trainers' professional biographies and experience so that teachers can make informed choices and feel confident about the quality of these professional development options. Such a model of training options was pioneered in 2015 by ADEC, through the program Tanmia, which offered 11,000 teachers week-long training events that gave them the choice of training in high achievement for all pupils, planning for high-quality instruction and literacy strategies, and developing strategies for English language learners (Pennington, 2015).
3. The menu of options offered to teachers must include training related to smartboards, ICTs for teaching, teaching students with special needs, and engaging parents.
4. Prior to the beginning of each school year, administrators should consult teachers about the types of training they want. This practice is already implemented in some school-based teacher training, and teacher surveys were also used to select the offerings of the Tanmia program.
5. Technological tools, including ICTs and the

internet, should be leveraged to provide a platform for teachers to discuss issues, problem-solve, and share information and resources.

6. It is clear that teachers must perceive greater incentives for participating in professional development. Therefore, professional development pathways and rewards should be revised to incentivize teachers. We recommend a scaffolded reward system; rather than making all workshops mandatory, the education authorities should consider rewarding participation in high-impact professional development (including long-term programs or specialized content) by subsidizing the costs or offering bonuses or pay increases for teachers who accrue a certain number of professional development points. Opportunities to incorporate in-service professional development into the UAE's future licensure program should also be explored.

For School Leaders

7. School leaders should support teacher leaders in developing local, school-based training

opportunities for educators. It is important to offer these training sessions so that they do not conflict with teachers' other personal and professional commitments. Excellent teachers in each school can be nominated to teach these, and school-based committees should survey all teachers to weigh in on what types of training are needed.

8. Teachers must feel incentivized to participate in professional development. It is up to school leaders to create a school environment in which there is a shared commitment to high-quality instruction that involves encouraging all teachers to pursue professional development. This can also be done by having school principals set annual goals with teachers and by creating personalized professional goals and professional development plans each year.
9. Finally, school leaders should also be charged with promoting parental engagement through parent-school associations and committees that work to engage and educate parents about their children's school experiences.

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