



Learning Forward offers a challenge to school systems

Learning Forward is the new name of the National Staff Development Council. But it is much more. It is a vision and a new way of thinking. For school systems serious about enhancing human resources to increase student achievement, Learning Forward is a great opportunity. The name provides a powerful watchword school systems can use to spark courageous conversations that transform ineffective professional development.

Ironically, the best way a school system can begin to move forward is to pause. When organizations are engaged in frenetic activity — as many school systems are — they may not make time to reflect on their assumptions and effectiveness.

So it is with professional development. Unless a school system pauses to soberly review its processes for professional learning and the corresponding results, the momentum of the past will define the future.

What is known, what is familiar, and what is comfortable, rather than what is effective, will continue to shape educators' learning.


A thoughtful review of a school system's professional development will not occur without the leadership of one or more central office administrators. Everyone in a school system defers to authority for cues about priorities and new directions.

Central office administrators have the responsibility to demonstrate that they are personally open to new learning, even if the experience challenges their assumptions or perspectives. They can do that by seeking and taking seriously practitioners' honest feedback about the relevance, quality, and utility of the school systems' extant professional development. If teachers experience these administrators as sincere learners, the teachers will become helpful partners in changing professional development to make it more engaging and productive.

Implicit in Learning Forward is the concept that learning is a continuous process that is integral to how school systems administer professional development. Many central office administrators refer to their school systems "providing" or "delivering" professional development, but do they learn from it? School systems devote enormous resources to learning about their students' education, and its results, but they fail to examine and learn from the professional development of adults responsible for the students' education. To do so, administrators will want to regularly monitor and assess whether and to what extent professional development is accomplishing its intended purpose—raising the performance levels of educators and their students. Only by systematically and consistently collecting such data can school systems obtain the information necessary to learn how well professional development is working and how to increase its impact.

However, Learning Forward will mean little if the practice of professional development does not change. Enlightened school system administrators are increasingly using the right words when they talk about professional development: job-embedded, school-based, sustained, and learning communities. This may not be the breakthrough it seems because sooner or later most savvy administrators weave into their rhetoric the language of cutting-edge education concepts. What really matters is whether the day-to-day performance of teachers and principals improves as a direct result of their professional learning experiences. That will not occur without changing the substance as well as the language of professional development.

Learning Forward calls for central office administrators to use their positions and authority to move professional development into a future that is more demonstrably beneficial for both individual educators and the school system as a whole. The first step is for the administrators themselves to risk new learning about current professional development and how best to transform it. The second step is for administrators to lead, support, monitor, and assess the implementation of new, more effective professional learning practice. Learning Forward offers the resources, community, and support to take these bold steps.

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School systems can use Learning Forward's name to spark courageous conversations.