



## Learning Forward's 'big bet' on policy reaps big wins in practice

Several years ago, I served on an advisory committee for Microsoft Partners in Learning, where I heard about the concept of the “big bet.” Microsoft placed big bets on investments promising the biggest returns.

In 2007, NSDC (now Learning Forward) launched a strategic plan. The big bet that emerged as one of our strategic priorities was “affecting the policy context.” The board and staff shared an assumption that policy affects practice and that good policy could promote better practice.

Impacting federal legislation is a huge undertaking. We began by clarifying what parts of the law we wanted to change. René Islas, our federal policy advisor, suggested we focus on promoting a new federal definition of professional development.

The term professional development appears almost 200 times in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Islas said that if we change the definition of the term, we change how it is interpreted throughout the law. So our first step was to write a definition in legislative language. Our

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goal was to translate NSDC's Standards for Staff Development into a single definition that offered a clear vision of effective professional learning in action.

Next, we set out to sell the definition. We worked with Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed, a longtime advocate of professional development. Spiros Protopsaltis, senior policy advisor in education for U.S. Rep. Jared Polis of Colorado, worked with us to



build a strong coalition of support. Building a constituency required meetings with associations in D.C. and a letter-writing campaign by our members. Ultimately, 14 organizations endorsed the Polis bill and nine representatives signed on to it. The bill was introduced in the 110th and 111th Congress. We will have to wait another year as Congress continues to negotiate ESEA.

As we approach the final year of Learning Forward's strategic plan, we see valuable outcomes from our federal policy efforts:

- Just as our standards continue to shape the field of professional development, our definition has contributed to efforts to improve practice by clarifying a compelling vision for professional learning.
- Powerful conversations with education leaders of national associations and organizations

contributed to a growing consensus about high expectations for professional learning in schools.

- Advocating for more emphasis on evaluating the impact of federally funded professional development contributed to a Department of Education initiative to develop more tools for local school systems to use in assessing professional development.
- A successful Race to the Top application that indicated professional development would be aligned to NSDC's Standards for Staff Development impacted the applications of new states in Round 2 and professional development providers seeking to do business with Race to the Top winners.
- Department of Education guidance documents that accompanied School Improvement Grant applications addressed the key components of the new definition.

Learning Forward's big bet is paying off. While the law hasn't changed yet, our efforts have influenced decision makers, thought leaders, and organization leaders. Our members tell us how they use the definition to guide their own improvement in districts and schools. The definition's introduction in Congress gives educators leverage in their advocacy efforts and strengthens their positions as thought leaders in their school systems. I would say we have had a big win. ■