



HIGH QUALITY DEFINED

Recognizing the need for high-quality professional learning for every educator, Learning Forward last year crafted a powerful definition of professional development. Based on a model of continuous improvement, the definition engages educators in a cycle of analyzing data, determining student and adult learning goals, designing joint lessons that employ evidence-based strategies, providing coaching to support improvement of classroom instruction, and assessing the effectiveness of educator learning and teamwork on student learning. The definition and explanation of its key points appears on pp. 16-17.

- **Stephanie Hirsh's perspective on the impact of Learning Forward in Washington, p. 76.**

THE FEDERAL POLICY LANDSCAPE

A look at how legislation affects professional development

By M. René Islas

Four years ago, Learning Forward established “affecting the policy context” as the first of five strategic priorities that would guide its efforts through 2011. Learning Forward believes that good policy promotes good practice and that we need laws and policies that promote and support effective professional development to achieve the organization’s purpose. Learning Forward set its sights on the nation’s most influential education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), currently authorized as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The law was set to expire and undergo improvement, or reauthorization, in 2007. We studied recent federal laws impacting professional development, developed a policy agenda with detailed recommendations for laws to guide the local practice of professional learning, and set out to advocate for the agenda and recommendations in Congress, the White House, U.S. Department of Education, and in the community of education organizations in Washington. While Congress has yet to reauthorize ESEA, Learning Forward has made a significant impact on the dialogue on professional development in our nation’s capital, and even more significantly on federal policy.

A centerpiece of Learning Forward’s work is establishing a new definition of professional development to be included in the reauthorized ESEA. If Learning Forward is able to achieve this goal, its criteria for high-quality professional development becomes part of federal statute, providing greater potential to shape local practices.

To understand the context in which Learning Forward

works to impact policy, here is a review of how current and recent education laws have addressed professional development, the Obama administration’s policies on educator effectiveness, and a look ahead to what the next reauthorization of ESEA will say about professional development.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN RECENT AUTHORIZATIONS OF ESEA

The two most recent authorizations of ESEA are the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 (IASA) and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Both iterations of ESEA focus significant attention on teacher quality and professional development. The laws provide guidance to state and local school systems on professional development and structure programs that include funding for professional development.

Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994

The IASA begins with a focus on professional development. Title I of the law reviews 12 findings based on what Congress learned during the previous authorization of ESEA. The fifth finding states, “Intensive and sustained professional development for teachers and other school staff, focused on teaching and learning and on helping children attain high standards, is too often not provided” (1994). A few lines later, the law highlights that one of Congress’ purposes for the law is “significantly upgrading the quality of instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development.” These two statements of congressional understanding and intent show how strongly Congress felt about professional development.

Congress also established programs dedicated to professional development within Title I and Title II of the IASA. Title II of IASA, named the Dwight D. Eisenhower Professional Development Program, removed requirements to focus on federally designated subjects, such as mathematics and science, required by the program's predecessor. Instead, Title II pushed states and local school districts to develop comprehensive and long-term professional development plans aligned to a serious assessment of system needs. Then-U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley wrote that, through the program, "the department is trying to encourage professional development that is sustained, intensive, and high-quality, and will lead to changes in classroom instruction and student learning" (Riley, 1993).

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

Only two days after President George W. Bush was sworn into office, he published his plan for education, which he named No Child Left Behind. The document was billed as the president's blueprint for education reform. The blueprint built on the reforms his father, President George H.W. Bush, and then-Gov. Bill Clinton introduced during the 1989 Charlottesville Education Summit. No Child Left Behind established four pillars of reform: accountability, a focus on what works, flexibility, and the empowerment of parents. Within the context of doing what works in education, Bush addressed professional development and teacher quality. Specifically, the president's outline noted that federal law should set high standards for professional development (Bush, 2000). This blueprint served as the organizing framework for updating ESEA.

Two years after Bush unveiled his blueprint, Congress passed

the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The law picked up on the president's call for high standards for professional development (2001). The law codifies a formal definition of professional development. It includes key elements such as linking professional development to schoolwide and districtwide improvement plans, requiring experiences that are sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused, and prohibiting one-day or short-term workshops or conferences. The definition of professional development is the longest definition included in the law. This demonstrates the seriousness with which the administration and Congress treated professional development.

While the new definition created a new standard in federal law and established an understanding in the field that professional development must be sustained in order to be effective, the sheer weight of the definition made it difficult for the U.S. Department of Education to monitor the fidelity of local implementation. Another factor diluting the impact of the new standard for professional development in NCLB was the fact that the leadership within the U.S. Department of Education emphasized accountability for student results over teacher quality initiatives.

President Obama's policy on educator effectiveness

President Barack Obama released *A Blueprint for Reform*, detailing his vision for a reauthorized ESEA (2010). The blueprint, like its predecessor, identifies general principles of reform. In this case, the president highlighted five pillars of reform:

1. College- and career-ready students;
2. Great teachers and leaders in every school;
3. Equity and opportunity for all students;

SPECIFIC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES

Here is the definition of professional development that appears in the School Improvement Fund program from the U.S. Department of Education.

B-6. What is job-embedded professional development?

Job-embedded professional development is professional learning that occurs at a school as educators engage in their daily work activities. It is closely connected to what teachers are asked to do in the classroom so that the skills and knowledge gained from such learning can be immediately transferred to classroom instructional practices. Job-embedded professional development is usually

characterized by the following:

- It occurs on a regular basis (e.g. daily or weekly);
- It is aligned with academic standards, school curricula, and school improvement goals;
- It involves educators working together collaboratively and is often facilitated by school instructional leaders or school-based professional development coaches or mentors;
- It requires active engagement rather than passive learning by participants; and
- It focuses on understanding what and how students are learning and on how to address students' learning needs, including reviewing student work and achievement data and collaboratively

planning, testing, and adjusting instructional strategies, formative assessments, and materials based on such data.

Job-embedded professional development can take many forms, including, but not limited to, classroom coaching, structured common planning time, meetings with mentors, consultation with outside experts, and observations of classroom practice.

When implemented as part of a turnaround model, job-embedded professional development must be designed with school staff.

Source: U.S. Department of Education. (2010, June 29). *Guidance on School Improvement Grants under section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*. Washington, DC: Author.

4. Raise the bar and reward excellence; and
5. Promote innovation and continuous improvement.

Obama's educator effectiveness proposals in the "Great Teachers and Great Leaders" theme of the blueprint includes collaborative professional development, the creation of teacher and principal evaluation systems, and the equitable distribution of effective educators. The professional development proposals include many points advocated by Learning Forward.

While Obama has not yet succeeded in securing the reauthorization of the ESEA, he has had an opportunity to shape education policy and practice. The global financial crisis prompted Congress to pass economic stimulus legislation, called the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), providing billions of dollars to states and localities. Much of the funding made available by ARRA was directed at education. One new program authorized under ARRA, Race to the Top, provides insight into the president's view of professional development.

In defining the new program's competition priorities, the administration emphasized creating educator evaluation systems paired with professional development, professional development as an instrument to improve practice in the nation's persistently lower-performing schools, creating data systems to support instructional improvement, and evaluating the impact of professional development on practice and student achievement. Obama also directed new funds to programs created under the Bush administration, such as the Teacher Incentive Fund and the School Improvement Fund, to create policy and shape practice. In the Teacher Incentive Fund, the Obama administration emphasizes that effective performance compensation systems would include professional development to support teachers in improving and acquiring merit pay. In the School Improvement Fund, targeted to the nation's worst schools, the U.S. Department of Education provides the most specific guidance on professional development. The very detailed definition of professional development (see sidebar on p. 12) emphasizes collaboration, alignment, and the need for teachers to be actively engaged in learning rather than passive recipients of information. The nonregulatory guidance provided by the school improvement grants is perhaps the best insight as to how the administration will treat professional development in the reauthorization of ESEA. This definition is very closely aligned with Learning Forward's vision for professional development.

FORECASTING FUTURE LAW AND POLICY ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The legislative outlook is dim for Congress to reauthorize ESEA before the session ends. As anticipated, this year's mid-term elections brought significant changes to both houses of Congress and their overall political makeup. This also means that Congressional committees face significant changes in composition, particularly with the leadership changing from Democratic to Republican in the U.S. House of Representatives.

With all of this change pending, it is difficult to make predictions about the reauthorization of ESEA. It is even more challenging to predict how specific policies, such as those shaping professional development, will resolve. What we can do at this stage is to study where there is consensus, leverage it, and re-educate members of Congress to ensure that they make the best policies when it is time to reauthorize the law.

Here is where we stand now:

1. Members of Congress and the administration understand that professional development is a critical lever influencing teacher effectiveness;
2. Members of Congress and the administration see the need to improve educator evaluation systems and link them to professional development;
3. There seems to be consensus among Democrats that professional development must occur among teams of educators as part of the regular school day; and
4. There seems to be consensus among Democrats and Republicans that investments in professional development ought to be evaluated for impact on teacher performance and student achievement.

Learning Forward remains committed to advocating for effective professional development. For the most part, our efforts seem to have resonated with policy makers, but we have several hurdles to clear. Most specifically, we must protect against the limited use of professional development to remediate individual teachers. We must continue to define the power of professional development to improve the overall teaching effectiveness across the school system. I am confident that if we as advocates practice persistence we will see long-lasting improvements in federal policy on professional development that supports great practice at the local level.

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- M. René Islas (M.Rene.Islas@bakerd.com) is the policy advisor for Learning Forward. ■**