



## Develop a clear and unified vision of professional learning's purpose

A fundamental challenge confronting school system leaders is developing an operational understanding of professional development's purpose. Professional learning is such an accepted, if underresourced, part of school systems' operations that it is rarely the subject of consideration and dialog about its purpose.

Of course, many school board members and administrators now agree that professional learning should enhance the knowledge and skills of teachers and administrators. But this view is not universal. Some leaders cite "professional growth" as the reason for engaging educators in learning. Because this term is imprecise, it is also convenient; it can justify many different types of activities, not all of them worthwhile. Still other administrators

consider professional development to be an employee benefit, a non-wage compensation educators can use to build their resumes, or satisfy educational requirements for certification renewal

or higher salaries. Leaders of some school systems are even redefining the purpose of professional development to be a remedial component of teacher evaluation.

These divergent concepts of professional development's purpose are seriously compromising school systems' and states' efforts to increase student achievement. There is broad consensus among voters, government

and business leaders, and researchers that the economic security of current and future generations depends on what they know and can do in a global context. Therefore, significantly raising levels of student performance must be *the* priority for every school system. For that to occur, current educators must also dramatically raise their performance levels.


Professional development is the only practical tool school systems have to engage educators in the learning necessary for them to increase the effectiveness of their instruction and classroom management. There are no shortcuts—not nifty curricula, not gee-whiz technology, not human resource logic models, not elegant compensation plans. The deliberate, grinding work of improving educators' performance requires their sustained learning. The ultimate test of that learning is whether it enables teachers to more effectively address gaps in what their students know and can do. But teachers' professional development, responsive to their students' learning challenges, is only the first step. It will make no difference if educators do not incorporate what they learn into their daily practice. And even that is not sufficient. Teachers must then practice and hone the application of their new learning, and continuously engage in and master additional learning to improve their performance week-by-week, month-by-month, and year-by-year.

The purpose of professional development should be clear. It is to raise

the performance levels of both educators *and* their students. To achieve these results, school systems must: (1) clearly and consistently articulate to educators and the community at large the purpose of professional learning; (2) hold educators accountable for organizing and engaging in professional development that causes teachers to become more effective; (3) support educators' application and refinement of their new learning; and (4) collect and report data that document the extent to which professional development is raising the performance levels of teachers and their students.

School systems that use professional development for other purposes shortchange their educators and their students. Without effective professional learning, new teachers cannot compensate for the inadequacies of their preservice education. Veteran educators need to constantly build their knowledge and skills. Without high-quality support, teachers are unable to adapt to new research findings, demographic and cultural changes, or higher standards of performance.

There should be no misunderstanding or confusion about the purpose of professional learning. School systems should critically review their conception and use of professional development, and ensure that in operation its purpose is to increase the achievement of educators and their students.

•  
**Hayes Mizell ([hayes.mizell@learningforward.org](mailto:hayes.mizell@learningforward.org)) is distinguished senior fellow at Learning Forward.** 



**The purpose should be clear: To raise the performance of educators and students.**