



Turning to partners doesn't have to create a feeding frenzy

Educators guided by analysis of student data are in the best position to identify the help they need to address their most important challenges. While the first part of Learning Forward's definition of professional development promotes team-based professional learning at the school site, it does not indicate that the team is the only source of knowledge about how to improve teaching and learning. On occasion, answers to a team's challenges are not available inside the school, and therefore the definition recommends the team seek expertise beyond the school when they need support.

In the second part of the definition, Learning Forward calls for strengthening professional development through work with external assistance providers when schools or teams don't have the required expertise within the school or organization. King and Newmann (2000) found that continuous interaction of great ideas from inside and outside schools promoted improvement efforts.

The idea of working with external partners to address professional development needs can conjure two

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images. One is the vulture scenario, where educators view all providers as sitting on a perch waiting for the right opportunity to swoop down and get a piece of the funding pie. Educators view the vultures with skepticism and mistrust.

Fortunately, there is another image to consider. In this scenario, state, district, and school leaders hold genuine assumptions of positive intent on the part of partners. They see people who work in external assistance enterprises as individuals who share their commitment to public education. They recognize that external assistance providers have chosen to



work in an enterprise that allows them to make a living providing a valuable service or resource for educators. In building their company, they develop a level of expertise in a specific area, and that expertise is often grown working alongside educators in schools and systems. In this scenario, vendors become valued partners to state, district, and school leaders who lack the capacity or time to meet certain specialized needs. Such partners expand the capacity of the inviting organization without the long-term challenge of adding staff or expense.

Through this perspective, educators and partners work together to achieve the goals in our definition for

professional development. When the time comes that a school-based team recognizes the need for external help, they are typically glad to know there is knowledgeable help available.

However, choosing the right partner can be daunting. Asking the right questions and examining the answers are initial steps in the process. Examples of questions to ask partners include:

- What experience do you have in addressing the challenge we have outlined?
- What evidence do you have of results in previous partnerships?
- How were these other circumstances similar and different to the proposed situation?
- What were among the most important lessons you learned in a previous partnership?
- What will your references say to us when we check with them?

Carefully considering the answers to these questions will help guide school and district leaders to identify appropriate partners. When educators make good decisions, the internal staff working with external partners will move the organization to the next level of performance for educators and students.

REFERENCE

King, M.B. & Newmann, F.M. (2000, April). Will teacher learning advance school goals? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 81(8), 576-580. ■