



Transformational professional learning needs to be more than a cosmetic change

It has been my experience that when respected voices in the educational community start talking about professional development being transformational or revolutionary, I had better hold onto my seat. My experience tells me I need to be prepared to be fixed, for my programs or staff to be operated on, and for new external providers to quickly come up with “new and improved” products or workshops to transform strategies and guarantee student success. All too often, what was promised to be transformational is cosmetic, simply a reworking of old ideas — much like a new haircut.

We do have a lot to change regarding professional learning — we truly need transformation. Too often, we see a scenario like this: At the beginning of the year, everyone gathers in a hall to hear a motivational speaker followed by a word-by-word review of the handbook. This all kicks off a day of professional development on a topic that educators are mandated to focus on for the year. Well-intentioned districts will focus on a new transformation that will be better than the old transformation. Later in the year, there will be one to three days of “follow-up.” In such scenarios, there is

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no ongoing, job-embedded professional learning that includes data analysis, team-based discussion of student needs, sharing and refinement of research-based strategies, or reflection. Rather, professional development is treated as an isolated event that must be entertaining enough to engage participants for a full day.

As president of Learning Forward, I'm a proponent of real transformation of professional learning, and I'm also alert to unreasonable claims that such change is on the way. Here's another example. I heard about a new possible transformation recently at a gathering of more than 4,000 administrators. Our state education entity is espousing the financial benefits of online professional development. One of our state leaders is also proposing granting furlough days to teachers to curtail educational costs — fewer days worked means less pay — as long as the days furloughed are not instructional days. The clear implication is that we'll use professional development days for the furlough days.

I am concerned about the idea that we can replace professional development days with online learning. The argument goes like this: Teachers can learn online at home on their own unpaid time, we all save money,

and teachers learn as much as they would in other ways. Depending on implementation, this could be as effective as much of the professional learning educators experience in the scenario I described here.

Interestingly, I didn't hear other administrators expressing concern about the idea. If districts' typical professional development had the characteristics of Learning

Forward's definition, there would have been a howl of criticism at the idea that learning online at home, alone, is the best way to improve teacher effectiveness. I believe online professional learning can be extremely effective. I know it can connect isolated teachers and create authentic communities. However, in this example, I am afraid that our knowledge about what constitutes high-quality professional learning will be set aside in a rush to save money.

When it comes to transformation, I want us to be intentional. What are our purposes? How will we know we are successful? And most importantly, who benefits? Otherwise, we'll find we're just getting another haircut. ■

