



4 questions focus learning on expectations and accountability

Most educators struggle with how to focus their attention and effort. They are subject to so many demands that they frequently lose focus. When they attempt to respond to each expectation with equal time and effort, they dissipate their potential impact. Student achievement is usually the victim of this syndrome; it is so much easier to attend to the assigned tasks that are less difficult.

Doing everything correctly but nothing effectively can also compromise the results of professional learning. Organizing professional development that increases the learning of educators and their students is also difficult. At a minimum, it requires thoughtful data gathering and analysis, realistic planning, rigorous implementation, conscientious follow-up and serious evaluation. It is no wonder that expedient, event-centered professional development is such a temptation. Scheduling a session and securing a speaker, consultant, or video becomes the task, rather than organizing deep learning experiences that are appropriate and useful.

School system leaders should keep professional development focused on what matters most—authentic learning. They can do that if they create a climate of expectations and accountability by posing four basic questions to guide the organization of all professional learning:

What do the performance data of our students reveal about the learning needs of our teachers and principals? While professional development can serve many purposes in a school system, the most important is to increase the knowledge and skills educators need to help students learn what is necessary to meet academic standards. Understanding the gaps in students' learning should inform the content of educators' professional development. This works best, however, when educators use data from the students they teach rather than the school system prescribing one-size-fits-all professional development based on a study of systemwide data.


How are we organizing professional development so it causes our educators to take greater responsibility for their students' learning? When school system leaders identify a problem, and use professional development to address it, teachers and principals are usually passive participants. They don't own the problem and may not commit to solving it. It is important, therefore, to organize professional development in ways that engage educators in understanding more about their students' learning needs and how the educators' practices relate to those needs. If educators take responsibility for student performance and hold themselves accountable for it, they will more likely engage in and use professional development to increase student learning.

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educators to learn from each other's successes, and collaborate to learn from experts elsewhere? In all school systems, some teachers are much more effective than others. For their subject or grade, the achievement gap among their students may even be much less than in other classes. Professional development that draws on the expertise and experiences of these educators will in most cases be more relevant, credible, and cost-effective than contracting with an external consultant.

What is the evidence that our professional development is increasing educators' effectiveness in ways that also raise levels of student performance? Professional learning has limited value if educators don't develop new learning relevant to their students' needs, and if they don't apply that learning to benefit their students. Yet, few school systems systematically document whether and how professional development increases what both educators and students "know and can do." Collecting and publicizing evidence about the results of professional development is essential to improve and sustain it.

These four questions should not replace the use of Learning Forward's standards, but school system leaders can help focus professional development by asking the questions again and again—and demanding solid answers.

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