

FORGE A COMMITMENT TO AUTHENTIC PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

By Arne Duncan

All work to improve the quality of professional development must begin with one simple assumption: Teaching is an incredibly complex profession that draws on a wide set of intellectual and emotional skills. Even the best teachers need to continue to learn and improve their practice, and many are willing to do so. The bottom line is that all teachers — all educators — grow from professional learning experiences that sharpen their practice.

However, the teaching profession in America is at a crossroads. Designed more than a century ago, in many ways teaching remains stuck in an outmoded and inadequate system of preparation and improvement. States, districts, and the federal government spend \$25 billion annually on support services to develop teachers and leaders (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). But most of what is spent has neither improved teaching nor benefitted teachers or students. Instead, teachers tell me about hours wasted in staff development seminars that do not meet their needs and do little to impact their teaching.

Leaders in education talk a lot these days about the need to improve the educational achievement of our students, describing how we can't afford to lose the one-quarter who drop out and why we need to close achievement gaps. But for a real transformation to take place in our schools and classrooms, we must radically rethink how we support teachers to offer the world-class education our children deserve.

Learning Forward has just published the updated Standards for Professional Learning, and I applaud the organization's efforts to help states and districts build the capacity of their teachers and educators. These standards are an important statement



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of principle, but by themselves they aren't a panacea for the problems facing professional learning in American education. We can't continue to tinker with half measures while avoiding the challenges we face transforming our schools. The new standards remind us that we need to reform our current ineffective systems of professional development and build new ones focused on the two essential goals of the standards: *strengthening educator effectiveness* and *improving results for all students*. Since these goals are not a radical departure from those created in 2001, they beg the question, *Will we let another 10 years pass while we stay trapped in the status quo without making real reform, or will we work now to take these standards seriously?* Put another way, will we continue to give lip service to the standards, or will we walk our talk?

LOUSY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, BUT PLENTY OF IT

Our nation's schools spend a lot of money on professional

development but receive little in return. The federal government alone allocates \$2.5 billion a year on Title II funds to improve teaching and teacher leadership. However, often these funds have been used to decrease class size or purchase equipment. States and school districts also allocate funds to professional development, but there's no indication that this is spent on evidence-based practices that improve teachers' skills and abilities in the classroom or that improve student learning. We need to ensure that those funds are used to help teachers and students and that they are tied to the Standards for Professional Learning.

Right now, that is not happening enough. I continue to hear from frustrated teachers all over the country who tell me that they are required to attend outdated and unhelpful workshops that they do not need. Principals report that their professional development efforts have been largely unfruitful, resulting in little if any change in student outcomes. Given the poor track record of some professional development programs, it is not surprising that curriculum directors, superintendents, and principals may lack confidence in the value of professional development.

In these tough economic times, the discussion can't be about pouring more money into a broken system. We must focus much more intentionally on using existing professional development dollars wisely. The Standards for Professional Learning present an opportunity to guide educators in designing professional development experiences that are worthy of our investments if we focus all of our energy around the two professional learning objectives, strengthening educator effectiveness and improving results for students. Getting there will require a substantial shift in thinking. We need to acknowledge teachers as learners, use student and teacher needs to direct professional learning, invest in whole-community growth, and make professional development a leadership priority.

TEACHERS AS LEARNERS

I've stressed the importance of continual learning for teachers so they can reach all students. Even the best teachers can benefit from professional learning that keeps them abreast of advances in the art and science of teaching and learning. Some will collaborate with teachers in other grades to vertically align their curriculum with their state's newly adopted college- and career-ready standards. Others will benefit by developing skills using emerging technology to foster student growth. Some desire useful strategies to engage parents and families in their children's education. Many tell me that they need help analyzing student data and refining lesson plans to accelerate growth. The list could go on forever because the potential for learning is unbounded.

Sometimes, the research offers teachers new information to update their methods. For example, recent studies in mathematics instruction have found that students learn to solve algebraic

equations better when teachers assign mixed types of problems for independent practice, as opposed to blocked problems that are all alike. Research supported by the Institute of Education Sciences indicates that often teachers aren't aware that although their students often do better on homework with similar sets of math problems, when they practice with mixed kinds of equations, students actually process the material more deeply and retain their knowledge (Taylor & Rohrer, 2010). Research findings such as these — that arm teachers with innovative strategies to maximize independent practice — continually emerge in the educational field. Most teachers would welcome professional learning opportunities that help them stay current.

USE EVALUATIONS TO DIRECT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Given the vast array of knowledge and skills that may be developed in teachers, how could anyone — teachers, teacher leaders, instructional coaches, principals, superintendents — make wise decisions about professional learning without first determining where a given teacher is strong and where he or she would benefit from further work?

The need to strategically align professional learning is precisely why it is critical that schools get teacher evaluation right. It is why the Department of Education is supporting states and districts as they build systems to measure the strength of a teacher's instructional practice and identify areas for professional growth through teacher evaluations that encompass multiple measures, including student growth. These measures could also include observations, student portfolios, and surveys of students, parents, and peers. Nearly everyone I talk to acknowledges that systems that rate 99% of the teachers as satisfactory have little value. Without a rigorous, meaningful evaluation system that values teachers as professionals with unique skills, strengths, and shortcomings, we diminish their value, treating them like interchangeable parts of a large and impersonal educational machine in which one size fits all.

INVEST IN WHOLE-COMMUNITY GROWTH

Professional development tied to evaluation systems is not enough. To create professional development worthy of world-class schools, we have to break ourselves free from the inertia of the status quo. We should fully embrace Learning Forward's call for professional learning as a catalyst for whole-system reform. We need to set high standards and immerse teachers in learning communities that build everyone's capacity and involve teachers in leading their schools. We need to abandon the crusty mindset that sees professional development as something that can be imposed on teachers from the top down.

In the past, professional development programs have taken individual teachers away from their workplace to receive training elsewhere, developing, at best, solo fliers. This has proven to be an inefficient way to change schools. Bringing a skilled and invigorated teacher into a bad system does not usually improve

the school, but it might bring down the newly inspired teacher. On the other hand, professional learning that relies on learning communities driven by teams of teachers can have an enormous impact on entire school systems, with everyone growing in the same direction or getting out of the way.

This is one reason I like the Take One! option offered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which sets a high bar for professional standards. Its Take One! program allows teachers in a school to work together to complete a large portion of national certification and bank their scores. It's also why I am a fan of the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement. TAP works to build teams of teachers who interact with one another to build their collective ability to focus on evaluation, professional development, and career advancement. Programs like TAP and Take One! are important because the challenges we face in education today will not be solved by individual teachers or leaders, but from teams of teachers, schools, students, families, and communities who are all invested in common goals and who develop a common attitude, intention, and energy in their schools. There are countless examples of schools that have adopted teamwide or schoolwide learning communities as a means for building educator capacity and improving student achievement — always, collaboration among a group of committed educators is the key.

This kind of whole-community learning done right has the benefit of leading to greater transparency. If I am a science teacher, I regularly visit another teacher's classroom to observe how she teaches, and she comes into mine. We grow by assessing what works and what doesn't and through processing the differences together. We meet regularly with our larger community of science teachers to share our scores on assessments, evaluate our students' mastery, determine how our practices need to change, and hone our craft. Over time, this process becomes less intimidating because we are part of a community that is vested in the whole group's growth and success.

The beauty of this transparency is that it has the effect of building shared accountability and internal motivation. When faced with powerful information about their students' learning, teachers, as learners themselves, are compelled to do something with what they've learned. They take the data they have from student performance and look for ways to improve. They insist on knowing which strategies work and which ones don't. They are not afraid of expanding their knowledge and skills by sharing their experiences or considering alternatives that have the potential to improve their practice, such as reading a book or an article, discussing a problem online with a connected community, taking a class, and so forth.

MAKE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING A LEADERSHIP PRIORITY

For systems of continual assessment and improvement to function and sharpen the skills of all teachers, leaders in schools and school districts have to be willing to seriously consider the

proposals in the Standards for Professional Learning. Professional learning cannot be the afterthought that it has been for so long. Those who seek to improve student learning must make professional development for teachers and teacher leaders their most important priority, in both word and in deed. Teachers need instructional leaders who set high goals and then offer a rich array of professional learning opportunities and supports that help them to address the issues most in need. Teachers rely on principals who direct professional learning dollars to channels that develop them professionally, leaders who will resist temptations to use staff development funds to purchase equipment or pay for incidental expenses unrelated to their growth. They ought to have leaders who protect Title II funds and use them to strengthen the profession, not to reduce classes sizes. And they should have principals and superintendents who are equally learners engaged in their own learning communities to strengthen their skills and practice.

As we expect continuous improvement on the part of teachers and school and system leaders, we must hold professional learning to that very same expectation. These new standards rightly call for all professional learning to be evaluated on an ongoing basis for its effectiveness and results. Teachers, principals, and district leaders deserve to know which programs lead to better results for students, and the programs themselves deserve useful feedback about how they can improve. Especially in tight budget times, we cannot afford to be blind to the effectiveness of the professional learning programs in which we invest.

Finally, teachers need principals and leaders who understand that they are unlikely to be motivated to improve by prescriptive, top-down mandates or by superficial extrinsic rewards. The effort to transform professional learning for teachers will not be led by federal or state policymakers. It will reside within the hearts and minds of teachers and school leaders across America.

The best instructional leaders recognize and nurture teachers' innate desires to help students excel and improve their lives. They harness these motivations and offer to teachers professional learning that is personally meaningful and helps students propel themselves beyond their current circumstances. When this happens, when teachers' desires matches their ability, leaders will have created a sustainable energy that keeps reform moving forward — a culture of continual renewal that touches everything and everyone, especially our students.

REFERENCES

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