

By Hayes Mizell, Shirley Hord, Joellen Killion, and Stephanie Hirsh

NEW STANDARDS PUT THE SPOTLIGHT ON PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Today's educators work under tremendous pressure. They are held accountable for preparing all students to meet increasingly rigorous academic standards. They must enable all students to perform at levels of proficiency, even those students without the preparation, attitudes, and behaviors necessary for optimal learning. In spite of profound demographic, economic, cultural, and technological changes that negatively impact student learning, the public expects educators to successfully reach all students. At the same time, the contexts in which educators work are often not conducive to effective practice. There are more requirements, fewer resources, less stability, and diminishing support. No one who is not accountable for ensuring student learning can fully appreciate the extent to which these conditions make it difficult for educators to succeed.

To support nations, provinces, states, systems, and schools in building educator capacity, Learning Forward has developed the Standards for Professional Learning. This is the third iteration of standards outlining the characteristics of professional learning that lead to effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student results. The standards are not a prescription for how education leaders and public officials should address all challenges related to improving the performance of educators and students. Instead, the standards focus on one critical issue: professional learning.

These standards call for a new form of educator learning. The decision to call these Standards for Professional Learning rather than Standards for Professional Development signals the importance of educators taking an active role in their continuous improvement and places emphasis on the learning. By making learning the focus, those who are responsible for professional learning will concentrate their efforts on assuring that learning for educators leads to learning for students. For too long, practices associated with

professional learning have treated educators as individual, passive recipients of information, and school systems have expected little or no change in practice.

Such learning opportunities have often been episodic and unconnected to a shared, systemwide purpose. This form of professional learning has consumed tremendous resources over the last decade and produced inadequate results for educators and students.

The quality of professional learning that occurs when these standards are fully implemented enrolls educators as active partners in determining the focus of their learning, how their learning occurs, and how they evaluate its effectiveness. These educators are part of a team, a school, and a school system that conceive, implement, and evaluate carefully aligned professional learning that responds to individual, team, schoolwide, and systemwide goals for student achievement. The standards give educators the information they need to take leadership roles as advocates for and facilitators of effective professional learning and the conditions required for its success.

Placing the emphasis on professional learning reminds public officials, community members, and educators that educators' continuous improvement affects student learning. Increasing the effectiveness of professional learning is the leverage point with the greatest potential for strengthening and refining the day-to-day performance of educators. For most educators working in schools, professional learning is the singular most accessible means they have to develop the new knowledge, skills, and practices necessary to better meet students' learning needs. If educators are not engaged throughout their careers in new learning experiences that enable them to better serve their students, both educators and students suffer. And if those educators are not learning collaboratively in the context of a sys-



Quick reference guide to Standards for Professional Learning, p. 41.

temwide plan for coherent learning tied to a set of goals aligned from classroom to school to school system, their professional learning is less likely to produce its intended results. Essential to improving professional learning's impact is recognizing and leveraging it systemwide, rather than using professional learning solely as a strategy for individual growth.

The standards make explicit that the purpose of professional learning is for educators to develop the knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions they need to help students perform at higher levels. This process of new learning for educators is more complex than most people realize. Indeed, researchers have found that it can take 50 or more hours of sustained professional learning to realize results for students. Students' learning results are paramount. Therefore, educators must make serious efforts to develop and implement practices that effectively produce those results. To support these efforts, professional learning must also be a much more serious enterprise than has sometimes been the case in order to demonstrably benefit educators and their students.

THE LINK TO STUDENT RESULTS

Learning Forward asserts that, when professional learning incorporates the indicators of effectiveness defined in its standards, educator effectiveness and student learning increase. Numerous research studies over the last 20 years confirm that

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there is a strong relationship between teacher practice and student learning. Studies, too, conclude that professional learning positively influences educator practice — specifically, teacher practice. Studies of school and district leadership conclude that there is a relationship between leadership practices, teaching effectiveness, and student learning. Some studies conclude that there is a relationship between professional learning and student achievement. Many studies of school improvement and education reform name professional learning as one of the top five components of reform efforts. The body of research about effective schools identifies collaboration among educators and professional learning as two characteristics that consistently appear in schools that substantially

increase student learning. Some studies of the effects of professional learning have also produced insignificant results on teacher practice or student achievement when measured over a brief period of time, most often at the end of one year of professional learning. Not all professional learning used as a treatment, intervention, or as part of a reform initiative, however, incorporates all the essential elements included in the Standards for Professional Learning. A few studies explore the relationship of policies at various levels of government or system level to the

effectiveness of professional learning and its effects.

The field of professional learning requires additional research and evaluation studies that examine the interaction between the effectiveness of the professional learning and its effects on educator practice and student learning. Research in professional learning today establishes that it is an important lever to improve schools, educator practice, and student learning. With additional research focused on the kind of professional learning that meets the standards specified in the 2011 version of Standards for Professional Learning, the research may lead more directly to the conclusion that effective professional learning that meets the essential elements described within these standards will produce greater effects for educators and students.

THE STATE OF THE FIELD TODAY

As more educators examined the effects of professional learning, the field gained clarity about what distinguishes effective from ineffective professional learning. In addition, an explosion of new technologies has emerged to support educator learning. With a grant from MetLife Foundation, Learning Forward facilitated a revision of the Standards for Professional Learning.

As the first step in developing new standards, Learning Forward undertook a comprehensive examination of the state of professional learning. A team of researchers from Stanford University's Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education led by Linda Darling-Hammond (www.learningforward.org/stateproflearning.cfm) conducted a three-part study that served as the foundation for the standards revision. The study included a review of the literature, a comparison of professional learning in the United States and in countries whose students outperform the U.S., an analysis of recent and past practice in professional learning in the U.S., and four case studies of state policy related to professional learning. This series of studies was made possible by generous grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, and MetLife Foundation.

The standards development process continued when Learning Forward again invited individuals representing leading education associations to review research and best practice literature to contribute to the standards revision with consideration of their own constituencies, including teachers, principals, superintendents, and local and state school board members. The associations agreed that a common set of standards to guide the field remained key. They viewed standards as essential for all aspects of professional learning, including planning, implementation, and evaluation at individual, school, and school system levels and as benchmarks for determining future directions for improvement. Rather than developing multiple sets of standards, nations, organizations, states, provinces, and school systems can use the Standards for Professional Learning as a foundation and devote their attention to implementing high-quality pro-

professional learning and thereby realize the results of their efforts more quickly.

Learning Forward integrated additional input and contributions into the standards revision process by convening focus groups of practitioners, noted authorities, and government officials and circulating the draft standards for public comment.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STANDARDS

The 2011 version of the Standards for Professional Learning includes several key changes from earlier versions.

Fewer standards: Seven standards emerged from the study of research literature about professional learning. While these seven were included in earlier versions of the standards, they are now more clearly defined, and some aspects are more prominent.

Holistic view: The standards work in partnership with one another. Focusing on some rather than all standards may contribute to the failure of professional learning to deliver on its promised results. These seven standards are not optional for professional learning that intends to increase educator effectiveness and results for all students. The context, process, content organizer is not as prominent in the new standards, yet remains a foundation for the seven standards. For it to be effective, professional learning occurs most often in learning communities; is supported with strong leadership and appropriate resources; is drawn from and measured by data on students, educators, and systems; applies appropriate designs for learning; has substantive implementation support; and focuses on student and educator standards.

Combined content standard: The three previously defined content standards — Equity, Quality Teaching, and Family Involvement — have been replaced with a single Outcomes standard that incorporates two

dimensions: student learning outcomes and educator performance expectations. There are essentially two reasons. First, the Standards for Professional Learning as a whole are focused on increasing results for all students and educators. All seven standards, rather than a single one, focus attention on equity and all drive toward that goal. Second, the educator performance expectations as defined by policymakers include substantially expanded expectations for equity, family and community engagement, and role-specific performance expectations. This combined standard strengthens alignment between educator professional learning and its role in student learning.

Revised stem: The standards begin with a common statement: “Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students” This statement confirms the link between educator practice and results for students. The link between educator learning and learning for every student is the

purpose of professional learning, and the stem makes that link evident. The statement also emphasizes equity of results. The use of “all” is intentional to elevate the significance of ensuring the success of every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, exceptionality, language, socioeconomic condition, culture, or sexual orientation.

Three areas of focus: The Standards for Professional Learning describe the context, processes, and content for effective professional learning. Learning Communities, Leadership, and Resources standards define the essential conditions for effective professional learning. Without these in place, even the most thoughtfully planned and implemented professional learning may fail. Data, Learning Designs, and Implementation standards describe the attributes of educator learning processes that define quality and effectiveness of professional learning. The single content standard, Outcomes, identifies the essential content of professional learning.

FULFILLING THE PROMISE

Continuous learning provides members of any profession with new understandings, insights, and ideas for how to develop essential skills and behaviors. In short, it enables the profession’s members to refine and extend their knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions related to their specific role and context. Individuals are unlikely to seek the services of an automobile mechanic, plumber, or surgeon who isn’t up-to-date on the latest field knowledge, studies, products, and procedures. Students deserve nothing less from the educators who serve them.

As educators invest in continuous improvement through professional learning, they demonstrate professionalism and commitment to students. School systems that invest in professional learning and build coherence throughout the system demonstrate commitment to human capital development and acknowledge that investment in educator learning is a significant lever in improving student achievement.

The use of Standards for Professional Learning by school systems and educators supports a high level of quality of the professional learning. Further, use of the standards to plan, facilitate, and evaluate professional learning promises to heighten the quality of educator learning, performance of all educators, and student learning. Increased educator effectiveness makes possible a shift from current reality to the preferred outcomes of enhanced student learning results — a goal to which all educators subscribe.

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Hayes Mizell (hmizell@gmail.com) is distinguished senior fellow, Shirley Hord (shirley.hord@learningforward.org) is scholar laureate, Joellen Killion (joellen.killion@learningforward.org) is deputy executive director, and Stephanie Hirsh (stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org) is executive director of Learning Forward. ■

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