



New standards offer second chance for system leaders

Thank goodness for second chances. Many of us don't get it right the first time — riding a bicycle, cooking, romantic relationships, or careers. It often takes time to learn from our mistakes, and for our brains to develop new neural pathways. Without second chances, we become mired in failure,

unable to grow and fulfill our human potential.

For many school system leaders, the new Standards for Professional Learning provide a second chance. The intentions of these leaders may have been good, but they did not produce persuasive evidence that professional learning leads to more effective

teaching and better student outcomes. As a result, many non-educators responsible for authorizing and funding professional development question its value, and are now reducing or withdrawing their support.

This cycle must not continue. Because of experiences and research during the past decade, we now know what it takes to conceive, organize, and implement professional learning that causes educators to improve their practice. The standards are a roadmap

school system leaders should use as a second chance to get professional learning right.

The standards are not a set of vague, visionary principles unrelated to the day-to-day challenges of educators or the administration of professional learning. To the contrary, the standards describe explicit practices and behaviors that are essential for professional learning to lift the performance of educators and advance student learning.

One of the seven standards emphasizes the need for “skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.” This means leaders at all levels in a school system must take *responsibility* for professional learning, not merely *administer* it. Especially in hierarchical school systems, leaders will need to muster the courage to tell supervisors and colleagues what they might not want to hear. This may include making the case for abandoning ineffective professional development practices that may nevertheless have strong support because they are familiar or convenient.

An early test for school system leaders will be what they do with the standards. Will they devote the time to read, study, and *understand* them? Will they engage colleagues in ongoing deconstruction and discussion of the standards, and their broader implications for the school system? Will they use the standards as a plumb line for determining how close or how far their school systems' practices are from

Access the new Standards for Professional Learning at www.learningforward.org/standards.

those the standards describe? Will they then act to align school system practices with the standards and annually assess their effects? True leadership is bringing the standards into the lived realities of school systems' functions.

Some leaders may be tempted to translate the standards into a formulaic checklist in the mistaken belief that it will foster compliance. However, the fundamental challenge of the standards is not paper compliance but improved performance. Achieving that result begins with school system leaders taking the standards seriously and engaging others in doing so.

The new Standards for Professional Learning are provocative and potentially groundbreaking, but they are not self-actualizing. Making the most of second chances is not easy. It requires leaders' determination to improve, to soberly reflect on and learn from past mistakes, and to invest the effort necessary to develop more productive behaviors. All of that, and more, will be necessary to improve the substance, utility, and results of professional learning.

•
Hayes Mizell (hayes.mizell@learningforward.org) is distinguished senior fellow at Learning Forward. 

