

THE LEARNING System

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

High-performing districts provide clear and specific support to principals

By Valerie von Frank

For some school principals, traditional administrative training consisted of courses in law, budgeting, curriculum development, evaluation, research design, community relations, and politics.

But increased pressure on principals to be instructional leaders who can shape a school's culture and create an environment of continuous improvement in teaching and learning requires a set of skills not often learned in the classroom.

According to research, after the classroom teacher, principals have the most direct effect on student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Marzano and colleagues conclude from a meta-analysis of research on school leadership



that “a highly effective school leader can have a dramatic influence on the overall academic achievement of students” (2005).

That means that for districts to have the greatest effect on student learning, central office should focus some effort on supporting frontline administrators.

“It often comes down to superintendent leadership and defining a theory of action,” according to Bradley S. Portin, a former principal and now

professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Washington. Portin has been a lead researcher and writer on numerous leadership studies, including *Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools* (2009). The study was conducted as part of a Wallace Foundation-funded series on creating and supporting effective leaders.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Read more about supporting principals, p. 5.



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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.

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Transition to building-level learning takes conversation and focus

As told to Anthony Armstrong

Four years ago, the district realized that many of our adult learning activities were not focused on improving classroom instruction, so we started addressing this issue through conversations and learning. We talked with leaders in our district, administrators, and teacher leaders about Learning Forward's standards and what we would like to measure and evaluate. This helped focus our conversations around what we needed to learn and do. One thing we realized we were not doing well as a district was implementing research-based instructional strategies.

We originally had a district model of professional development, where we determined the focus but gave the buildings options for how they could implement it, such as learning sessions, professional development days, book studies, etc. Our district-level professional development committee identified areas of growth for student achievement, and we worked with people across the district in professional learning and instructional strategies to make sure everyone was on the same page. The professional development committee talked about a couple of standards each month, and we followed up with principals in newsletters.

We did this for two years and measured along the way. Measuring professional learning's effect on teacher practice was new for us. To measure

results, we looked at student achievement, behavior, building climate, increases in all the state and local assessments, and teacher practice. When we started our focus on instructional strategies, we observed 25% of the teachers using the strategies. Now, based on our walk-throughs, 84% are using the strategies.

As we supported building leaders in their learning, we slowly gave the buildings more flexibility. Our model went from district-led professional development to one where buildings could choose their topics, as long as it was focused and measurable. Over the years and especially in my experience in Learning Forward's Academy, I have learned much about effective professional learning. Building and teacher leaders also need that strong knowledge of effective practice and professional learning to be comfortable with that level of autonomy. For example, many people didn't know it takes around 30 hours to change teacher practice. We had a lot of conversations over the course of several years about how to find 30 hours to get the most leverage from the professional learning time.

To help keep the professional learning focused, we meet twice per year with school leaders to talk about the building's plan and have conversations about who needs what type of support. This helped us understand common needs across the district.

The principals liked our original model when it had a district focus because it was almost a turnkey service and was much easier for them to



implement. With our new building focus, they are not as comfortable and are realizing there are things they need to learn in order to provide effective professional learning. We are having a lot of conversations around this. It is like a lot of adult learning — they have the knowledge, but need to implement to fully understand. Leaders need to know the information they are to deliver, but they should also realize that they do not have to be an expert — they can learn alongside everyone else. Helping leaders transition to this deep learning is important. They do not have to always be the sage on the stage.

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“The districts in the study all had a clear improvement agenda,” Portin said, “including aspects that support principal leadership.”

According to Portin, a reform message — explaining and describing what the district is doing — is a crucial element of the work. Central office needs to connect the dots for principals, he said, articulating how parts of the system come together on the path toward the district’s mission and goals. Clarity and focus from the top are the beginning, he said.

The next step is specific support for building leaders, he said.

In successful districts, Portin noted, “There is a (more meaningful) relationship between principals and those who supervise them. It’s not just supervision and evaluation, but help and support for principals in their learning.”

One example he cited is New York City’s Leadership Academy, an organization that develops and supports school leaders who are preparing for jobs in the city’s high-needs schools. The academy uses teamwork, simulations, and job-embedded learning to build individuals’ practice.

In Atlanta, Ga., another district included in the study, the district’s 100 schools were divided into geographical areas, each of which had resources specifically directed to schools within it, including professional development for principals.

“The principalship in many districts is quite isolating and lonely,” Portin said. Portin and his colleagues’ research (2009) found four specific ways that principals’ work differed in districts where they received support, enhancing principals’ learning and leadership ability:

- A cultural emphasis on keeping conversation and attention focused on learning;
- A connection between work in schools and district and state policy;
- An emphasis on effective use of data; and
- A difference in how principals distribute leadership.

FOCUS ON LEARNING

Portin said the conversation in many districts among administrators focuses on operations and management, but in districts making advances in student achievement, interactions between people tend to focus more on instruction and student learning.

“It is tough for principals to reallocate time from crisis management and operations to a learning-focused agenda,” Portin said. “In these districts, there was a purposefulness in shifting that conversation.”

CONNECTION TO POLICY

A second aspect was a clear mission.

“The central office was more than a transmitter of policy,” Portin said. “They didn’t just say, ‘Here’s the policy directive, now implement it.’ There was a planned approach for what was expected and asked for from teachers. Teachers’ needs were assessed to provide better learning opportunities for kids.”

Portin said a consistent message across the district was an integral strategy in enacting this expectation. He said effective districts brought principals and teacher leaders together to jointly plan school improvement and professional learning around their individual needs.

“There was a richer connection between parts of the system than in a traditional, hierarchical system,” he said, “mediated through activities and people. Principals and assistant principals were able to talk about direction and policy shifts around teaching and learning — not in a compliance sense, but in how to connect policy to strategic planning to help teachers be more successful working with students.”

EMPHASIS ON DATA

Rather than simply collecting data as evidence or providing reports, central office staff actively worked with principals around the data, Portin said.

“They helped schools query the data so that they could do substantive planning,” he said.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Portin said districts that support principals often have their own leadership development programs that include preparation in using data, job-embedded learning for teachers, and mentoring for new leaders.

And, he said, “a big part of the story” is helping principals learn about the role of instructional coaches and how to distribute leadership.

“It’s a big change from principals being the sole instructional leader to principals being leaders of instructional teams,” he noted. “They need a lot of professional learning around how to work with and support teams.”

While district leaders may know and understand that principals need support, thoughtful action sometimes lags behind.

LEADERSHIP DRIVES REFORM

Although many educators believe Fullan, Cuttress, and Kilcher, who stated (2005), “There is no other driver as essential as leadership for sustainable reform,” the knowing-doing gap often remains. Districts advancing professional learning for teachers may overlook similar investment in

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Learning Forward BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skilled leadership.

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school leaders. Why?

“One reason is the sheer volume and turbulence of the work,” Portin said. “Leadership turnover is another reason. Some may lack resources. Others may be overwhelmed by what they need to do to get through the day and week, which can limit the ability to be strategic. And, people may not always know how to do it.”

Portin said data suggest central office can take specific actions to help principals:

- Provide flexibility and opportunities for principals to be creative, such as allowing the principal to budget staff in an alternative way. One example would be redistributing the school’s resources to create an instructional coaching position.
- Facilitate collaboration and partnerships among schools, bringing together cadres of principals, teacher leaders, and coaches. “Giving principals the opportunity to learn from colleagues is something every district can do to help principals manage a highly stressful job,” Portin said. “More than just administrative meetings, effective districts convene meetings that help principals share.”
- Provide district-level support for professional learning. “If nobody is paying attention to professional development, it’s not likely to be effective or to happen as often as you’d want,” Portin noted. “More than traditional staff development, learning needs to be driven by people with a keen interest and focus on both student learning and professional learning.” He said a districtwide perspective is useful, such as from an executive director or zone director whose primary role is to focus in this area.

Large districts may consider zoned support in key areas, such as special education or curriculum, to provide service. “Then critical resource people are able to develop a relationship with 20 schools instead of 100,” Portin said.

Overall, the researchers agreed, high-performing principals are not born leaders. They are created, through targeted support from the districts they serve in.

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4 elements of central office support of learning and leadership

Central office support for principals is a distinguishing characteristic of successful schools and districts. Research points to four factors that make up support. Reflect on how your district contributes to each of these factors. Use specific examples to explain the presence or lack of support. Use the questions on the next page to guide discussion with colleagues.

Factors	Degree of support in each area <i>(1 = low; 5 = high)</i>					Specific examples in practice
A cultural emphasis on keeping conversation and attention focused on learning.	1	2	3	4	5	
A connection between work in schools and district and state policy.	1	2	3	4	5	
An emphasis on effective use of data.	1	2	3	4	5	
A difference in how principals distribute leadership.	1	2	3	4	5	

Discussion points for central office support of learning and leadership

Review the indicators of support from the previous page with your colleagues, and use the questions below to guide discussion.

In which area(s) is the support the strongest?

What are visible examples of how that support is manifested in day-to-day operations?

Who provides most of the support available to principals?

How does the structure of the district enhance or impede the availability of support?

In what areas are improvements needed?

What are some recommendations for making those improvements?

Of the recommendations suggested, which are the high-priority ones?

What actions are needed to enact the high-priority recommendations?

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