



Effective professional learning requires leadership at all levels

Oh, that effective professional learning did not require leadership. It would be so convenient. No one would have to take initiative or responsibility. No one would have to be accountable. Professional learning would just “happen,” like spontaneous combustion.

It’s a nice fantasy, but in the real world of public education, nothing — positive or negative — happens without leadership. That’s why Leadership is one of the seven Standards for Professional Learning.



It’s important to understand all the Leadership standard encompasses. Otherwise, one might assume that it refers only to educators in positions of authority, such as superintendents and school administrators. Their roles are important, but the standard makes the point that effective professional learning requires leadership at all levels of K-12 education.

Because school boards are charged by state laws to be responsible for local school systems, their leadership for

professional learning is essential. Their first responsibility is to understand that increasing student performance depends on educators engaging in rigorous, sustained learning experiences. When school boards commit to that proposition, they assert their leadership by providing the vision, funding, oversight, and accountability to ensure that professional learning is effective.

Of course, most school boards are composed of citizens who serve part-time. It is up to a school system’s professional staff to provide the day-to-day leadership that professional learning requires. That begins with the superintendent and appropriate central office staff understanding the Standards for Professional Learning and using them as a guide. Their leadership manifests when they set high expectations for professional learning and organize it to increase the capacities of educators who interact with students each day. That requires clear and frequent communications, strong management, and monitoring of professional learning as it occurs.

In past years, many principals have been passive about professional learning. They have left it to the central office or the initiative of individual teachers. This is rapidly changing as learning communities become ubiquitous and principals’ roles in teacher evaluation come under greater scrutiny. Principals who are effective leaders know that professional learning is the most important tool at their disposal to improve the effectiveness of their teachers. They advocate

for teacher learning experiences that are responsive to students’ learning needs, and they are vigilant that such experiences make effective use of teachers’ experience, talents, and time. More importantly, principal leaders support teachers’ classroom use of new learning, and they partner with teachers to seek evidence that the teachers’ application of that learning improves student performance.

Many teachers complain that too often they have only been passive recipients of professional learning. That will not change without more assertive teacher leadership, with teachers advocating on their own behalf, forcefully describing and demanding the professional learning they need to successfully overcome students’ learning challenges. Teachers can take the lead in making sure that learning communities function effectively, focus relentlessly on improving instruction, and document results. Even the most timid of teachers can lead by demonstrating that collaboration with a coach can lead to more productive practice.

The potential for effective professional learning to become the reality in every school, every school system, and every state is palpable with strong, skillful leadership. For that to occur, educators at all levels will have to exert leadership, not expect that it will just “happen” or that “someone else will do it.”

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