



Develop a community constituency for professional learning

Professional learning is essential, but vulnerable. Not enough educators and members of the public understand and value it. Many school boards and the people who elect them have only a tenuous commitment, if that, to professional learning. Even educators have conflicting attitudes about professional learning, depending on how they have experienced it during their careers.

We are unlikely ever to see educators carrying protest signs that read, “I demand new learning!” or “My students depend on my professional learning.”



Understanding the value of professional learning will not change until school system leaders take intentional, thoughtful actions to build constituencies for increasing the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices of all stakeholders, including educators,

administrators, school board members, etc. That process has to occur within both school systems and their communities. In school systems, it begins with leaders significantly improving professional learning and its effects. If education leaders don't value professional learning enough to make it a transformative process resulting in more effective practice, why should front-line educators support it? They won't do so unless school system and school leaders ensure that educators experience professional learning as responsive and beneficial.

Developing a communitywide constituency is more difficult. If citizens think of professional learning at all, they regard it as an inside game, just one more arcane feature of public education. They believe the only time it affects their lives is when professional learning schedules cause students to be out of school while their parents are working. Most families aren't aware of the direct relationship between the quality and amount of professional learning for teachers and the quality of educational experiences for students. Communities can't support what they don't understand.

It is, therefore, the responsibility of school system leaders to engage their communities in understanding and supporting professional learning. Here are examples of steps they can take:

Use focus groups to understand citizens' perceptions of professional learning. Most school systems don't try to learn what citizens know and don't know about increasing the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices of current educators. By conducting focus groups composed of representatives of diverse communities, school systems can gain insights into factors that impede community support for professional learning. What a school system learns should prompt sober reflection and result in improvements that respond to community concerns.

Personalize the impact of effective professional learning. In most school systems, there are teachers, principals, or school counselors who

can enthusiastically describe how they have improved their instruction, leadership, or family engagement because of professional learning. A school system can arrange for them to make presentations to civic clubs and parent-teacher organizations, and encourage local news media to report on their learning experiences. In all such cases, the emphasis should be on how the new learning has benefited students.

Invite community leaders to observe professional learning in action. The old adage that “seeing is believing” may be trite, but it is still true. Most citizens have never seen effective professional learning. School systems can remedy this by periodically providing opportunities for selected community leaders to observe venues where educators are actively engaged in authentic new learning. But not just any professional learning will suffice. Community observers will quickly discern if teachers are just going through the motions or are experiencing the professional learning as poorly organized and irrelevant to their needs.

Whatever approaches school systems take, the goal should be to cultivate communities as allies for professional learning. Without such affirmative efforts, communities will be fertile ground for those who want to oppose the policies and resources and practices effective professional learning requires.

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