

THE LEADING Teacher

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

Advocacy can be the avenue for change

KANSAS EDUCATOR DESCRIBES THE STEPS
IN MAKING THE CASE
FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING



By **Anthony Armstrong**

When Learning Forward revealed the newly revised Standards for Professional Learning in July, 2011, 4th-grade teacher Sheri Thomas was in the audience, representing the Kansas Learning Forward affiliate as president-elect. “Learning Forward challenged us to make the commitment to take the standards back to our district,” Thomas said. “So I did. As the chair of my school’s professional development council, I felt that the standards would help focus the district’s professional learning.”

GAINING LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

Thomas knew that in order to get support for standards-based professional learning, district leadership needed to understand the link between student learning and professional learning. A new superintendent had just started at

McLouth Unified School District, a small, rural school district in north-east Kansas, so that’s where Thomas started. “I wanted to make the introduction of the new standards a collaborative process from the beginning,” said Thomas. “I gave the new superintendent a copy of the standards booklet and we talked about the seven standards and how they could help lead to effective professional learning. He already understood the importance of a commitment to quality professional development, so he was supportive of bringing in the new standards. He even made a commitment to collecting data and having conversations with the board about needed resources.”

Thomas then put herself on the schedule to talk with

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Sheri Thomas advocates on several fronts for Learning Forward’s standards.



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the district's school board in October, 2011. She prepared a simple sheet with bullet points that referenced why the standards were needed and how they help teachers. She also took a blog entry by Stephanie Hirsh (July, 2011) that introduced the standards and some supporting materials from the Standards section of the Learning Forward website.

"I gave them each a printed version of *Standards for Professional Learning: Quick Reference Guide* (Learning

Forward, 2011), and reviewed the stem statement for each standard individually," said Thomas. "I then took them through the core elements of one standard in detail."

Thomas went back to the board a month later in November and shared Stephanie Hirsh's video (n.d.) that provides an overview of the standards. Thomas followed the video screening with questions and answers about the standards that included making the link from the standards to student results. "One board member wanted to know how the standards would help our special education population," said Thomas. "My presentation had a slide showing the benefits of the standards for all students, so we discussed that and the board ended up officially making a commitment to effective professional learning and adopting the standards."

McLouth's school board did more than just place supportive language into the bylaws. It also became an active supporter of high-quality professional learning. "The board has been very supportive," said Thomas. "For example, the board provides the resources to hire substitutes so teachers can spend half days engaging in observation walk-throughs. They also recently approved the purchase of a book for the entire staff on total participation techniques that we wanted teachers to use. Before, those kinds of purchases weren't happening for the entire staff. The board has also been supportive of our adjusting the calendar to provide full or half days of professional learning per month for whole staff to help us introduce our new initiative on 21st century skills."

Advocating for district- and school-based conditions that support effective professional learning can be intimidating for many teacher leaders. Thomas was nervous about presenting to the new superintendent because she felt she

needed the superintendent's support before she could move on to give information to the district's board of education. Once she had that support, she felt confident in talking with school board members because her role as advocate gave Thomas several opportunities throughout the years to interact with her district's school board members. "This was a great experience," said Thomas. "I had a first-hand chance to talk to board members about their role in moving the standards into practice. I discovered that board members will listen to teacher requests."

BUILDING COLLEAGUE SUPPORT

Thomas knew she also needed to promote high-quality professional learning with her colleagues, so she introduced the newly revised standards to staff when they returned in the fall. She gave them introductory materials and talked about how the standards would ultimately benefit students. "It is important to get staff to buy into changes," said Thomas. "For example, teachers in non-core subjects may not immediately buy into collective responsibility or may not be immediately ready to take part in using professional learning communities, so you have to build a sense of collective responsibility."

To help build that collective responsibility in the teachers, the district steering committee gave all teachers in the district the opportunity to participate in walk-through observations. "When teachers are put in charge of walk-throughs and collecting data, everyone starts to see the results in the classrooms and the gaps in the data," said Thomas. "They start to feel ownership over the professional learning."

According to Thomas, almost 90% of the teachers in McLouth have conducted walk-throughs in the district, where they collect data from five-minute teacher observations. Halfway through the year, the teachers started to see where gaps and overlaps were occurring. "We realized that we need to do more similarities and differences with students, so we did some Marzano work and brought in a resource person to help," said Thomas. "We started talking about the data collections and how we were responding with our professional learning to make changes and what it would look like. The teachers are using the learning communities to have these conversations, and we weren't having those kinds of data-based conversations about professional learning three years ago."

Thomas describes a ripple effect, where the increased focus and conversations around the standards have led to changes to professional learning in high-needs areas. For example, this year, the district steering committee has aligned the school's observation form with the school improvement plan. Thomas also reports seeing more teacher commitment to high-quality, effective professional learning and more

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Tools to help you make the case for using the Standards for Professional Learning

The resources and tools below help you support the argument for using standards in your professional learning. Available at www.learningforward.org/standards

- *The Standards for Professional Learning* book
- *Standards for Professional Learning: Quick Reference Guide*
- Stephanie Hirsh's overview video
- Stephanie Hirsh's blogs
- The August 2011 issue of *JSD*
- *Facilitator Guide: Standards for Professional Learning* (includes detailed tools and slides)
- Crosswalk with previous standards

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teacher conversations that are changing the professional learning within the schools. “We have set up teacher collaboration within grade levels and departments, by building, and across the districts,” said Thomas. “I see teachers sharing more ideas and activities and having discussions about how to teach. This started to happen in the spring.”

Thomas also engages in discussions of the standards as a member of McLouth’s steering committee, a small group composed of three administrators, two counselors, and a balance of teachers from elementary and secondary levels that help provide guidance on curriculum, assessment and professional development. It meets monthly, for a full day at the end of the school year, and just before the start of each school year. “Right now we are working on our school improvement plan, which we revise every year,” said Thomas. “The new plan targets higher-order thinking skills such as viable arguments, persevering, problem solving, etc. These are points of emphasis that all of the staff can address in their lesson plans, so it promotes collective responsibility. The steering committee looks at what professional learning is needed, what resources we’ll need, how we will monitor it, what it will look like, what we need to change, etc.

Learning Forward BELIEF

Every student learns when every educator engages in effective professional learning.

“The standards have helped us focus on what we are doing as a whole so that we are not looking at anything in isolation. The committee will be talking with the board about the impact of high-quality professional learning and the school improvement plan, and has been working in collaboration themselves and reviewing best practices

literature. We’ll be meeting with the board in October, talking about our progress in the school improvement plan, what has happened in the past, where we are going in the future and the role that professional learning has played in our progress.”

ADVOCATING BEYOND THE DISTRICT

As president of the Kansas affiliate for Learning Forward, Thomas was involved in the affiliate’s introduction of the standards to Kansas’s state board of education. “The state board of education wanted to know what the standards were, what the definition of professional learning is, and what research was behind the new standards,” said Thomas. “So we attended a meeting in March and provided a presentation explaining each of these.”

In April, 2012, the Kansas State Board of Education officially adopted guidelines for professional learning that were based on the newly revised Standards for Profes-

From the Leadership standard:

ADVOCATE FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

“Leaders clearly articulate the critical link between increased student learning and educator professional learning. As supporters of professional learning, they apply understanding of organizational and human changes to design needed conditions, resources, and other supports for learning and change.

“As advocates for professional learning, leaders make their own career-long learning visible to others. They participate in professional learning within and beyond their own work environment. Leaders consume information in multiple fields to enhance their leadership practice. Through learning, they clarify their values and beliefs and their influence on others and on the achievement of organizational goals. Their actions model attitudes and behavior they expect of all educators.”

— *(Learning Forward, 2011, p.p. 29-30)*

sional Learning. Thomas and Sandee Crowther, Learning Forward Kansas executive director, plan to continue the current momentum in the state by spending a full day at the state education board’s annual conference, where they will go deeper into the standards and show how they are being applied in the district. Thomas and three members of Learning Forward Kansas who have adopted the standards plan to share their experiences using the resources available on the Learning Forward website, such as the videos of the standards and the Shirley Hord Learning Team Award winner video.

“It has been a lot of work, but Learning Forward makes a good case for being an advocate for standards-based professional learning, and we have certainly seen the benefits.”

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