

# THE LEARNING System

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

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## A NEW GAME PLAN

Professional learning redesign  
makes the case for teacher voices

By Anthony Armstrong

The professional learning team at Lyons Township High School District 204 in La Grange, Ill., and Katie Smith, coordinator of assessment and research for the district, believe in the power of teacher-led professional learning. “As

educators, we want to improve our craft,” said Smith. “We all want to help our students. The challenge lies in providing opportunity for learning how to improve.”

Creating those opportunities was the goal of the district’s professional learning team, a group of teachers and administrators that united to develop a cooperative professional learning system in support of the district’s established professional learning communities. This team evolved following the administration of a professional development survey that revealed the desire for high-quality professional learning to improve instruction and student achievement.

According to the survey, almost half of the teachers indicated there was not enough time for working with colleagues or for implementation. The professional learning team concluded that “there was a clear need to restructure the professional development so that it was teacher-driven,

collaborative, ongoing, meaningful, and aimed at improving student achievement,” said Smith.

The team knew that implementing a high-quality professional learning program would require them to advocate for the right conditions within the system to support high-

quality professional learning, empower teachers by building their voices and leadership into the system, and provide ongoing support.

### ADVOCATE FOR THE RIGHT CONDITIONS

In *A Playbook for Professional Learning: Putting the Standards into Action*, Stephanie Hirsh and Shirley Hord (2012) address the role of leaders as advocates for creating the right conditions for

high-quality professional learning: “Leaders are responsible for communicating the importance of professional learning and advocating for it for all educators. They engage with stakeholders at all levels within and outside the organization to discuss the importance of investing in professional learning and to describe the connection between professional learning and the system’s goals for staff and students” (Hirsh & Hord, 2012, pp. 47-48).

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Four teacher-led teams advocate for and contribute to a district's professional learning plan.



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To communicate the importance of revising their professional learning program to system leaders, a subcommittee of the district's staff development team engaged administrative leaders in an in-depth presentation about the definition and purpose of high-quality professional learning.

In the presentation, the subcommittee established the need for change in the professional development system by reviewing an analysis of the district's professional development program and its opportunities for improvement, including the results of the professional development survey.

The subcommittee then shared with administrative leaders Marcia Tate's (2004) six principles of adult learning, which underscored the importance of collegial, collaborative, ongoing, and well-supported learning opportunities. (*See box on p. 5.*) The subcommittee's plan then called for the creation of a professional learning team that would plan and coordinate district professional learning, while also researching best practices for effective adult learning.

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BELIEF**

Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress.

**LINK TO STUDENT LEARNING**

According to Hirsh and Hord, discussions regarding the importance of high-quality professional learning must include establishing a link between professional learning and student learning (2012, p. 47). The subcommittee established this link by presenting to the board Rick and Becky DuFour's four critical questions for student learning.

1. What do we want our students to learn?
2. How will we know they are learning?
3. How will we respond when they don't learn?
4. How will we respond when they do learn? (DuFour & DuFour, 2007)

In addition to linking teacher learning to student learning, the subcommittee also planned to use the DuFours' four questions as a guiding framework for professional learning for the district. The subcommittee explained how they planned to create four teacher-led teams that would correlate to each question. There would be a teacher team specializing in curriculum design; a teacher team committed to assessing student learning and analyzing student performance data; an interventions group for responding when students don't learn; and a differentiation group that articulates ways to intervene or enrich instruction according to student interest, learning style, or readiness.

Within these four teams, the subcommittee explained, teacher members would learn about and specialize in each area, then become advocates and contributors to the district's professional learning program, as well as experts who could

increase the program's rigor with easy-to-replicate, research-based practices. "We wanted to create learning strands that would guide the professional learning events," said Smith. "For each teacher-led team, we planned to identify and recruit faculty members who could become experts in these topics and train others in best practices for adult learning."

After learning about the importance of high-quality professional learning and teacher participation and leadership in that learning, staff development and administrative leaders gave final approval for the subcommittee to create the professional learning team and implement the plan.

**BRING TEACHER VOICE AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES INTO THE SYSTEM**

According to Hirsh and Hord, successful leaders are those who "establish regular colleague-based learning teams ... (and) ... advocate for the importance of teacher perspective and voice in the decision-making process" (Hirsh & Hord, 2012, pp. 47-48). The professional learning team understood the value of teacher voice and saw its subcommittees as a way to bring more teacher voices into the professional learning planning and implementation process.

The team reached out to the faculty and asked for volunteers to help guide the new learning system. "We rolled out the data and introduced our plan to have a team of 20 people, consisting of many more teachers than administrators, that represented all divisions," said Smith. "This professional learning team would come together to develop a new system of professional learning for the district."

The team was initially surprised at the positive response. "Once we opened the doors to staff and invited them to come to the meetings, many people were interested in what we were doing," said Smith. "From the initial group of 30 attendees, six administrators and 13 teachers committed to joining the professional learning team." According to Smith, the only incentives offered were credit hours from the state and the ability to include the team's activities in teachers' professional development plans for the district. She cites a shared goal of student achievement as the main motivator for teacher participation.

**PROVIDE ONGOING LEARNING AND SUPPORT**

Research demonstrates that affecting deep change in teacher practice requires multiple types of learning designs, "observation, practice, and feedback," and learning in social settings, according to Hirsh and Hord (2012, pp. 126-127). The professional learning team recognized that the district's previous professional development program needed a change, so they contacted Learning Forward for assistance in understanding the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) and how they can be implement-

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ed. They also studied Marcia Tate's book *'Sit and Get' Won't Grow Dendrites* (Tate, 2004) as a group to reach consensus and understanding about effective adult learning.

The four teacher-led subcommittees were tasked with learning about their specialty areas and becoming leaders in implementing best practices in those areas. Each teacher leader subcommittee attended workshops within its specialty on curriculum design, assessment training, classroom engagement and response to intervention training, and differentiated instruction. "These teachers share knowledge with other faculty members by leading workshops on our professional learning days and facilitating learning sessions during planning periods," explained Smith. "Their topics align to our school's professional learning cycle and learning communities model."

The professional learning team planned two learning days during the first year that focused on interventions and featured the work of the intervention subcommittee. "The professional learning team members acted as coaches to the teacher leaders," explained Smith, "assisting in developing workshops and sessions that were designed to meet the needs of adult learners. We made sure every presentation the teacher leaders gave had to go through a dress rehearsal first, so we could make changes to the presentations based on how adults learn best. I knew it was working when I saw laptops close and cell phones go off in the audiences."

## REVIEW AND REFLECT

At the end of their first school year, the professional learning team met to review and evaluate their progress towards the team's goals. The professional learning team had conducted another survey of the teachers and reviewed those results as well to help inform the development of their action plan for the following school year. Overall, the survey results were much more positive, including requests for increased learning time and frequency of learning sessions.

To supplement the all-day learning events, the subcommittees hosted optional planning workshops that each staff attended during their planning periods. "Last year, 33% of staff attended at first," said Smith. "That increased to 37% later in the year, and of those, 96% said they used what they learned in the classroom and would attend again. The nice part about these workshops is that since they are during planning periods, we are only paying for one substitute to cover for the teacher leader that is facilitating the workshop."

During the first year of implementation, 20% of the faculty volunteered to become teacher leaders and 33% have dedicated their planning periods to professional learning. According to Smith, 75% of the faculty has reported changing their instructional practices as a result of the new professional learning program. Overall, the committee responsible for planning teacher professional development grew from

## A SUMMARY OF MARCIA TATE'S 6 PRINCIPLES OF ADULT LEARNING

1. Adults should have input into what they will be learning about and how they will be learning it. The participants should be involved with choosing the content and developing the plan to reach desired outcomes.
2. Adult learners bring knowledge and experience to the new learning environment. It is important for adult learners to connect what they already know to the new learning experience.
3. Adults receive information and learn in many ways, just as children do. Adults also have preferred learning modalities — auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, and visual.
4. Adult learning is more effective when it "addresses the concerns and issues faced daily" by the learner. In addition, adults are more comfortable when learning takes place in a collaborative environment,
5. Adult learners need time to reflect on new knowledge and implementation of new skills.
6. Adult learners need ongoing support to apply and sustain what has been learned.

**Source: Corwin Press. (2005).** *Tips for facilitators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Author. Available at [www.corwin.com/repository/binaries/TipsforFacilitators.pdf](http://www.corwin.com/repository/binaries/TipsforFacilitators.pdf).

eight to 19 members, and more than 59 staff presented or served as presenters' partners during all-day learning events.

The professional learning team has plans for more opportunities in the upcoming year. "Research shows that teachers need 50 hours of focused professional development to change their practice in the classroom," said Smith. "Our teacher teams are coming close to receiving 50 hours of training on their specified learning topics. We believe we will be well on our way to achieving our vision."

## REFERENCES

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