

THE LEARNING System

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Fall 2012

Vol. 8, No. 1

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

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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Explicating data's multiple links to professional learning

A decade ago, most educators gave little thought to the links between professional learning and data. Now, data is one of the seven Standards for Professional Learning.

What happened? The shift in data awareness began with the No Child Left Behind legislation. The law did not specifically link data to professional learning, but it did cause school systems to disaggregate student achievement scores by demographic subgroups. That, in turn, led educators to examine why some students were not making adequate yearly progress towards meeting academic standards.

One factor in student achievement, and an important one, is the performance of teachers. When teachers improve their instruction and classroom management, it increases opportunities for struggling students to achieve. For most teachers, improving their performance requires a combination of resolute will, hard work, and effective professional learning.

The bedrock of professional learning is data, but the mere existence of data makes no difference. To truly increase student achievement, other factors must be in place to make data widely available, used in the planning and evaluation processes, and supported by leadership and resources.

Data must be widely available in formats that encourage and facilitate its use. This enables educators to disaggregate and analyze student performance data to develop a deeper

understanding of students' specific learning gaps. It is only through such a deliberative process that educators can gain insights into the knowledge and skills they must develop to become more effective in helping students learn.

Many educators do not appreciate why or how student performance data should shape educators' professional learning. Therefore, system leaders should insist that preliminary to developing any professional learning experience, educators must analyze relevant student performance data and understand its implications for educators' learning needs.

Educators must root the design of professional learning in their new understanding of what they need to learn and do differently to more positively impact student learning. This applies to all educators—central office administrators, principals, teacher leaders, and all others who engage, individually or collectively, in learning experiences that a school system financially supports.

However, the value of linking data analysis to professional learning extends beyond its design. When school system leaders succeed in developing a culture of data use and analysis to improve professional learning, educators use data to monitor and evaluate the short-term, intermediate, and long-term effects of professional learning. This requires intentional and

thoughtful efforts by school system leaders to determine what professional learning data are most important to collect, and how to do so in ways that don't burden front-line educators. Perhaps no other area of professional learning is so neglected as the collection, analysis, and use of data.

Achieving this new approach to professional learning will require more than central office mandates. Many educators will need time, expertise, and facilitation to become comfortable with student performance data and its meaning for their practice.

This is why two other standards for professional learning address the need for leadership and resources. The seven Standards for Professional Learning are not a menu from which school system leaders can choose one standard to emphasize. Rather, the standards are interdependent components that must work in tandem for professional learning to achieve its potential benefits for educators and their students.

School system leaders have a responsibility to not only make data use and analysis a priority, but to deploy it in the context of a comprehensive, standards-based restructuring of current professional learning practice.

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Data must be widely available in formats that encourage and facilitate its use.



Charlotte meets the challenge of Common Core by building capacity

As told to Valerie von Frank

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District started professional development around the Common Core last school year. We chose to take a capacity-building approach, providing training at all levels of the organization — executive staff, school board, principals, assistant principals, literacy facilitators, coaches, and teachers — so that we built a common understanding across all leadership levels.

We chose to focus specifically on Writing Standard 1, argumentation, realizing that argumentation cut across all grade levels and content areas, all disciplines. Everyone read the same texts and used those as foundational pieces as we talked about argumentation.

A cross-functional steering committee of zone superintendents, the deputy superintendent, curriculum specialists, a teacher in residence, principals from all levels and types of schools, and a staff member from the accountability division planned the district professional development. That was a key piece of our success in implementation. We came back together after each segment to ask, “What worked well? What didn’t?”

The state provided every district with five dedicated days to facilitate training on the Common Core. That gave us the gift of time, which is often the enemy in a districtwide implementation of this scope and scale. We taught unpacking one standard so that process could be replicated by teacher

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and school teams.

We positioned our principals to lead teacher professional development and surrounded them with a support team at their school that had had the same training and could do side-by-side teaching with them. Our biggest challenge was getting our principals to a level of comfort to lead the professional development and be the instructional leaders. We did not want a program where we pulled out teachers. With 9,000 teachers, it’s impractical to take that approach.

We were fortunate to have in place professional learning communities for principals, assistant principals, facilitators, coaches, and teachers for four years. We used that infrastructure and comfort level to organize our professional development and have everyone work in learning communities.

Every teacher in the district had to implement a writing standard performance task and submit a student sample that was below the standard on the rubric, at the standard, and above. We created an internal shared website where teachers can upload their teacher tasks, so we now have an amazing bank of 5,000 student performance tasks that have been developed by teachers from kindergarten through 12th grades in a variety of subjects and

elective areas which we can build on in this school year. If a kindergarten teacher submitted a writing task, every kindergarten teacher in the district can see that task.

We spent all summer in every discipline and content area working on the Common Core, unpacking the standards, designing curriculum guides to go with each grade level and subject area. We started the summer with a teacher conference with more than 2,000 teachers.

We had two STEM institutes for K-12 math, science, technology, and engineering teachers. We had a weeklong summer leadership conference for all principals and assistant principals, and we had groups of teachers in all content areas write curriculum guides under the guidance of a curriculum specialist.

Now we are focusing on another writing standard and reading standards. We will provide ongoing professional development throughout the year through job-like meetings, all day or a half-day, once a month so that we continue to build the capacity of lead teachers and coaches to deliver the professional development as we go deeper into the standards.

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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.

Learning Forward 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.

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."

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Leadership roles and responsibilities

Use this activity and tool to identify opportunities for exercising leadership regarding professional development, including identifying different groups responsible for making decisions and generating ideas about the kinds of decisions they make related to professional learning.

Optional supporting materials include:

- Video vignette, available at www.learningforward.org/standards/leadership/index.cfm#Video.
- “Support and structures make the difference for educators and students,” by Kyla L. Wahlstrom and Jennifer York-Barr. *JSD*, August 2011, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 22-25, 32.

DIRECTIONS		TIME
1.	Read the Leadership standard to the group or post it where all can see: <i>Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.</i>	1 minute
2.	Have groups discuss the degree to which the standard reflects members’ views of the relationship between leadership and professional learning.	5 minutes
3.	Ask participants to think about why the standard was named “Leadership” rather than “Leaders.” Invite them to share their thoughts.	5 minutes
4.	Leadership occurs at the individual and collective levels. Brainstorm different levels at which decisions are made (teacher, teacher leader, principal, and so on) that advance or inhibit effective professional learning. Give examples of the levels and the decisions that can be made at each level.	5 minutes
5.	Consider the responsibilities of different leadership role groups for professional learning. Use the Leadership Roles chart on the next page to organize the conversation, noting responsibilities for each role, opportunities that responsibility offers, and how your thinking for this role affects professional learning. As a group, complete as much of the chart as time allows.	10 minutes
6.	If multiple groups are participating, invite each to share at least one highlight from each section of the chart.	10 minutes
7.	Discuss the most significant implications and potential next actions for strengthening professional learning in your setting.	5 minutes
8.	Record these statements and share with others as appropriate.	4 minutes

LEADERSHIP ROLES	RESPONSIBILITIES RELATED TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING	DECISIONS RELATED TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING	IMPACT ON PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
Department Grade-level Team chair			
Teacher leader			
Instructional coach Facilitator			
School-based staff developer			
School improvement team leader			
Professional learning committee member			
School administrator			
District administrator			
Policymaker			

Source: Hirsh, S. & Hord, S. (2012). *A playbook for professional learning: Putting the standards into action.* Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

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