WHO ARE THE ADVOCATES IN YOUR SCHOOL?

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CRIES OUT FOR LEADERS TO SHAPE IT AS A RELEVANT AND ENERGIZING FORCE

By Hayes Mizell

Here is a simple test: Identify leaders in your school system or school who are advocates for professional learning. The people you identify can be from any role group: school board member, central office administrator, principal, teacher leader, or classroom teacher. There is only one restriction: The primary focus of the person's job cannot be professional learning. That eliminates directors or coordinators of professional learning and instructional coaches at the central office or school levels.

As you reflect on this test and its implications, several questions should come to mind. For example, what does it mean to be an advocate for professional learning? To effectively advocate anything, a person has to believe in it. Advo-

cacy that is not rooted in belief is hollow; it lacks credibility.

However, as current political discourse demonstrates, advocacy grounded only in a strongly held belief is not sufficient. Knowledge and understanding of an issue are also necessary. Therefore, an advocate for professional learning believes deeply that it is essential for educators to not only learn throughout their careers but to use their learning to become increasingly proficient over time.

The advocate buttresses this belief with knowledge of specific processes and practices that constitute effective professional learning. Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning are the seminal source of this knowledge base.

"The advocacy vacuum provides an opportunity. It means the time is ripe to take initiative, provide leadership, and become an advocate for standards-based professional learning," says Hayes Mizell, Learning Forward's distinguished senior fellow.

TAKE INITIATIVE

Some educators, particularly those employed to conceive, plan, organize, manage, implement, or facilitate professional learning, meet the belief-knowledge criteria for advocacy. But this does not make them advocates. Effective advocacy requires taking initiative to bring an issue to the attention of people in positions of influence and authority. In professional learning, these are leaders responsible for making or shaping decisions about allocations of human and fiscal resources, including time.

It is not easy for educators responsible for professional learning to be advocates. The word "advocate" doesn't appear in their job descriptions. Most often, school systems employ these leaders to execute specific administrative or operational tasks, not to advocate for more intensive, sustained, and effective professional learning.

Advocacy for professional learning requires persistent and vocal efforts to advance standards-based practices, but school system or school leaders may not be receptive to

HOW LEADERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Whatever the issue, it is what leaders do, as much as what they say, that makes them advocates for professional leaning. When leaders at all levels seek and engage in professional learning, and when they use their learning to improve their performance, they also advocate the purpose and value of professional learning. But their professional learning will only have that effect if they pursue it with integrity:

- Just reading and talking about a book or a professional article is not enough. Does the leader use the reading or discussion to improve his or her performance?
- Just taking a college course or seeking an advanced degree to qualify for a promotion or salary increase is not enough. Does the leader use the additional education to improve his or her practice?
- It is also not enough when an administrator sits in on a learning experience that is primarily for teachers. Does the administrator use what he or she learned to more effectively monitor and support teachers' use of the learning experience?

In all these scenarios, what makes a difference is not the process of engaging in learning. Rather, what makes a difference is whether the leader draws on his or her learning to become a more effective educator, and students, as well as the leader's colleagues, see the difference.

proposals they perceive as challenging more familiar or convenient approaches to professional development. It is understandable that even educators responsible for professional learning fear the potential consequences, real or imagined, of questioning conventional practice.

On the other hand, if educators who are paid leaders of professional learning don't advocate for it, who will? There is no professional code that requires them to be advocates, but perhaps there should be. Because professional development may have no champion, in some school systems and schools it drifts along from year to year as a low-expectation, low-impact administrative function. Because there is no advocate constantly striving to improve professional development, its quality may never rise above the level of mediocre, and teachers regard it more as a draining obligation than a renewing opportunity.

Educators assume professional learning always has been and always will be a component of a school system, even though, in various incarnations, it is less than 40 years old and is frequently under attack. Professional learning cries out for advocacy, for leaders to proclaim and shape it as a relevant and energizing force for higher levels of performance. Educators who are primarily responsible for professional learning must provide that leadership every day.

THE VALUE OF PERSISTENCE

They should not be the only advocates. There are other people in school systems who hold positions of authority with potential to influence their colleagues' perceptions, understanding, and expectations of professional learning. When a school board member, superintendent, deputy superintendent, or a principal is a strong advocate for effective professional learning, their peers and the people they supervise take notice. An important dimension of advocacy is persistence, and when school system and school leaders consistently speak up on behalf of standards-based professional learning, other people in the school system take it more seriously.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about resources related to the Standards for Professional Learning, visit **www.learningforward.org/standards-for-professional-learning.**

Fortunately, there are more such leaders than in past years. They recognize that continuous learning is essential for educators to have any chance of surviving school and classroom challenges that increase each year. They understand that effective professional learning is central to successfully addressing such complex issues as teacher attrition, teacher evaluation, implementation of the Common Core Student Standards, and student achievement.

Given that agenda, one would expect that *all* school system leaders and school principals would be vocal advocates for professional learning, but that is not yet the case. Advocacy should not fall solely on the shoulders of educators who have day-to-day responsibility for leading professional learning. Their performance rises or falls depending on the expectations and advocacy of school system and school leaders. Like all educators in all school systems, educators responsible for professional learning hunger for effective leadership from those who employ and supervise them. When those leaders don't advocate for professional learning, performance and hope erode.

CONNECT WITH TEACHERS

Let's go back to the test posed at the beginning of this article. If you exclude people in positions that indicate they are or should be advocates, who is left? The answer is teachers, the primary consumers of professional learning. It seems obvious that teachers should be advocates for more and better learning experiences.

Teachers have suffered more than anyone from ineffective professional development. They have endured training unrelated to their needs. They have tolerated superficial inservice and boring consultants. They have had little or no support as they have sought to apply their learning to benefit their practice and their students. Because teachers have the most firsthand knowledge of ineffective learning experiences, they should be the most vocal leaders for professional learning that works. Yet, that is often not the case.

The reasons for teachers' lack of leadership are diverse and complex. Foremost among them is that many school systems do not permit, encourage, or facilitate teachers' critical participation in making professional learning as powerful as it can and should be.

To the contrary, many school systems regard professional development as a tool to force learning on teachers. A school system identifies gaps in teachers' knowledge, skills, or performance, and it decides what teachers need to learn, and when and how they should learn it. Teachers do not invest themselves in these learning experiences, and the results are often problematic. Ironically, in spite of school systems' major financial investment in professional development, most make little effort to understand what teachers learned, how well they learned it, and whether and how they use their learning to improve their instruction or classroom management.

There are other reasons teachers are reluctant advocates for more effective professional development. Some believe advocacy is the role of their unions or educators whose jobs focus on professional learning. Others believe there will be a price to pay for speaking up and questioning the decisions of administrators. And there are some teachers who are not concerned about professional development, even if it is ineffective, because they believe they know all they need to know and require no additional learning.

Whatever the reason, most teachers do not advocate for standards-based professional learning, if they know what it is. They complain about the status quo and wait for an enlightened

superintendent or principal who will spark the creation of authentic learning experiences that are truly relevant and helpful. Most of these teachers are still waiting because, even though they have the most to gain from effective professional learning, they don't advocate for it.

Professional development will not serve *all* educators well unless leaders at each level make professional learning *their* business, advocating for it individually and collectively. They will have to be aggressive in helping disengaged educators understand standards-based professional learning and how it can leverage much more effective learning experiences than many educators have known in the past.

It is also important for these advocates to be sensitive to the reasons some educators don't now believe that the quality and utility of professional learning relates to their self-interest (teacher evaluation, Common Core implementation, school improvement, etc.). Rather than dismissing or ignoring these reasons, advocates will make more progress with these educators by listening and understanding. A lot of patient conversation may be necessary.

THE ROLE OF THE STANDARDS

Becoming an effective advocate for professional learning is only the first step. What should be the substance of the advocacy? The Standards for Professional Learning should be the foundational guide, buttressed by Learning Forward's supplementary materials educators can use to translate the standards into practice.

Even the titles of the seven standards suggest substantive issues rich in potential for any school system's or school's inquiry, reflection, and action. For example, the Learning Communities standard states, *"Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment."* Throughout the United States, different forms of "learning communities" are ubiquitous, but to what extent does a learning community align, in practice, with the professional learning standard?

One element of advocacy is not only pressing for a certain action, but also asking pointed questions. Given the variations in practices that carry the title "learning community," it is certainly appropriate to raise questions about the relationship between learning communities and professional learning. At the most basic level, what is the evidence (also see the Data standard) that a learning community "increases educator effectiveness and results for all students"? What are the indicators that it is "committed to continuous improvement"? How does it practice "collective responsibility"? It will take time and effort to probe and answer these questions honestly, but both are necessary if learning communities are to advance professional learning.

The Outcomes standard is also an example of a touchy subject that demands leaders' advocacy because otherwise it receives too little attention. That standard states, *"Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards."* In other words, there should be a direct link between educators' learning experiences and their performance.

Some professional development is more about information dissemination, raising awareness, or cheerleading than about the performance of educators. In such cases, the limited resources for professional learning (see the Resources standard) are misused, if not wasted.

A major challenge for professional learning is to dedicate it to the most important tasks of school systems: providing highly effective teachers for all students and enabling those teachers to develop and apply the knowledge and skills necessary to help all students meet academic standards. Keeping professional learning focused on these outcomes can be difficult, especially in school system cultures where administrators regard professional development as an expedient tactic to respond to a wide variety of problems.

CARE ENOUGH TO ACT

As you try to identify leaders in your school system or school who are advocates for professional learning, you may be disappointed. Perhaps very few people have made professional learning their cause. Perhaps it is rare to hear anyone initiate thoughtful, deep conversations about professional learning and how to shape and use it to increase educator effectiveness. Aside from occasional references to professional development events, the people you identify as leaders may focus their attention on other issues.

Professional development will not serve all educators well unless leaders at each level make professional learning their business, advocating for it individually and collectively.

If this describes the context in which you work, don't despair. The advocacy vacuum provides an opportunity. It means the time is ripe to take initiative, provide leadership, and become an advocate for standards-based professional learning.

Regardless of your role, or because of your role, other people are waiting for your leadership. Even if they don't dare say it, they want professional learning that works for them. They want you to invite them into conversation and community focused not on quick-fix solutions, but on intentional, deliberate inquiry into how their learning can be more relevant and useful. Advocacy begins with caring enough to act, and that is the leadership standards-based professional learning requires.

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