

Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

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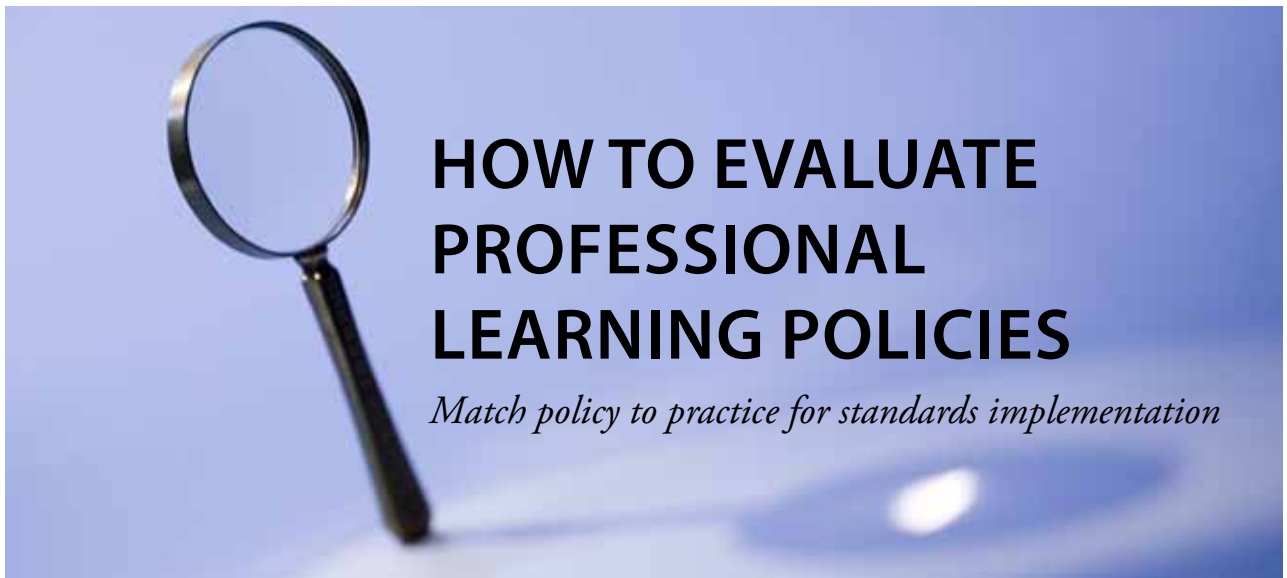
Current practices in professional learning, pp. 4-7:

Use the open-ended questions in this tool to gather information on stakeholders' perspectives on current professional learning practice.

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



By Anthony Armstrong

"Policies create a vision of what professional learning is, what standards guide quality, how educators know what quality practice is, and how to integrate ongoing assessment and evaluation for improvement," said Joellen Killion, senior advisor for Learning Forward. She understands that policy drives practice and learning.

Yet for many, while the link between effective professional learning and changes in educator practice and student outcomes may be clear, the importance of strong policy

to support professional learning may not be as clear. And, for educators in a range of positions, knowing how to even examine policies is still muddier.

Knowing about and advocating for effective professional learning is one challenge; working to create system-level policies is another step entirely. To help systems determine if their policies are aligned to the professional learning

required for today's school and school system challenges, Learning Forward created *Professional Learning Policy Review: A Workbook for States and Districts*. "The workbook allows people to move through a series of stages," said Killion, "providing a set of tools to evaluate what they have in place, assess it against a set of criteria, and then use that assessment to shape recommendations for changing policies."

High on the list of challenges in schools is the implementation of Common Core State Standards. According to the recent *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership*, a majority of principals (67%) and teachers (59%) rate implementing Common Core standards as challenging or very challenging for school leaders (p. 6).

Karen Kidwell is a member of a task force in Kentucky charged with developing a statewide, comprehensive professional learning system to support educators as the

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state implements the standards. The task force, part of the Transforming Professional Learning initiative (see box on p. 7), realized early in their development process the need to review state and local policies and assess how they supported teacher professional learning. And that's how the policy review workbook came about.

"As we looked at implementing Common Core standards, including English language arts, math standards, and other legislation, we knew we would be implementing standards in content areas over the next few years," said Kidwell, director of the Division of Program Standards for the Kentucky Department of Education. "We were looking to create a strong and systemic foundation for professional learning. We needed something that would help us implement and scale work across the state at the present and in the future as we implemented a new educator effectiveness system and the new Common Core standards."

The state of Kentucky is not alone in seeing the urgency of professional learning as the linchpin to achieving the standards. From *Meet the Promise of Content Standards: Professional Learning Required* (Learning Forward, 2012),

"It is clear that these changes (full implementation of the college- and career-ready standards) cannot wait for a new generation of teachers and school administrators to emerge from teacher and principal preparation programs. Teachers and principals who are employed in schools need intensive and ongoing professional learning to develop and refine their existing practices to meet their new responsibilities related to educator evaluation; Common Core State Standards or college- and career-ready standards; rigorous, more personalized education for every student; and new assessments."

Killion, one of two lead facilitators of the Kentucky task force, says that traditional forms of staff development are less likely to move teaching practices or student learning forward, so educators need to implement richer and deeper professional learning designs. "We have to move beyond surface knowledge and awareness to focus on deep understanding, where we change assumptions and beliefs, and modeling and coaching practices that are aligned with Common Core themselves," she said. "If we aren't willing to do that, then we are not going to be able to meet our results or goals. Change equals learning, and learning equals change, so we have to learn how to support and coach changing mindsets to align with a new way of acting," said Killion.

From the MetLife survey, 93% of teachers say that "strategies and coaching to teach content more deeply"

Learning Forward BELIEF

Improving student learning and professional practice requires ongoing systemic and organizational change.

BUDGET DECREASES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH DECLINES IN A SCHOOL'S PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT.

- Teachers who report that their school's budget has decreased in the past 12 months are three times as likely as others to report that there have been decreases in time to collaborate with other teachers (35% vs. 11%) and in professional development opportunities (27% vs. 8%).
- Principals at schools with decreased budgets are also more likely than principals at schools with increased or steady budgets to say that professional development opportunities (21% vs. 5%) and time for teachers to collaborate with each other have decreased (18% vs. 3%) (MetLife, 2012).



would be helpful or very helpful in implementing Common Core standards, but half of teachers (49%) and principals (50%) agree that providing "guidance and opportunities for teachers to build their competence and skills" is challenging for school leaders to do (MetLife, 2012).

GETTING STARTED

The workbook engages and guides stakeholders through six stages of reviewing policies and making recommendations, using research-based elements of effective professional learning. *See p. 7 for six phases of a policy review.*

Tina Tipton, chief academic officer and deputy CEO for the Ohio Valley Educational Cooperative (OVEC), a consortium of 13 school districts serving more than 50,000 students in north central Kentucky, sees the primary value of the policy workbook as a comprehensive guide for a complicated process. "Without the policy review tools, it would be overwhelming to go through the process. Additionally, you have the work of having to explain the 'why' of reforming policies to folks who have been doing policy for a long time, and having to look at how the policies affect practice and kids. The tools and agendas in the workbook take you through this process step-by-step. It has it all laid out and user-friendly. I've done a lot of revision work before, but I never thought through the steps of the change process."

Tipton has used the workbook to help align the districts OVEC serves so they are moving in the same direction

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with their professional learning policies. “In my position, I support leaders at various levels, such as superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders. Their teams have monthly meetings with time on the agenda for me to share district support services. I usually share two resources from Learning Forward so we’re not sharing everything all at one time. We spread them out over the year in bits in pieces. They see their agenda as their time, so I left it that way because they spend a lot of time sharing and supporting each other.”

KNOWING WHERE POLICIES STAND

The audit of Kentucky’s professional learning policies revealed several areas that needed strengthening. “A lot of the results we saw were not surprises,” said Kidwell, “but they did confirm and validate that we needed to make some improvements.” While Kentucky had a set of standards written into their policies, she said, they were unknown to many people and did not offer guidance as to what practices were acceptable for professional development providers.

“We had no real monitoring or guidance or quality control around what people would offer and claims they would make for their professional learning, how it should be conducted, or how they would follow up,” said Kidwell. Through its work, the task force was able to identify several inconsistencies.

“Our final recommendations don’t call for eliminating policies or practices wholesale,” said Kidwell. “We just

needed a way to tighten up the pieces we have and leverage other opportunities for teachers to learn.”

“For example,” explained Kidwell, “we had a requirement of 24 hours of professional development per year. According to the old policy, teachers couldn’t count anything that occurred during the workday as professional learning, so even when teachers engaged in lesson study or team planning or data analysis, they could not count that if it happened during the school day. So we revised those kinds of policies because we knew that was the type of work that moved schools forward. We kept the 24-hour requirement but ensured that teachers could work during the day in collaboration or teams. We have also recommended adding 50 hours, not so they are tracking hours, but to drive the policy in how master schedules are created — to guarantee those hours are available during the school days.”

ACKNOWLEDGING CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge Tipton sees in implementing the policy review process is the time commitment. “It is up to the district to find the time, so it might help to see if it can be coupled with another activity. For example, an accreditation audit or strategic planning process might have room for policy review.”

For Kidwell, the notion of initiative fatigue was the biggest obstacle to overcome. “We had to position the work we were doing as a piece of larger, systemic work in our state. We had to make sure they knew that our focus was to ensure that more students were taught by effective teachers. When we linked everything — Common Core readiness, excellent courses and learning, what teachers need to know, how to do it, etc. — it helped everyone make those connections. They saw that it was not just a layering of initiatives but a truly comprehensive and systemic approach to professional learning.”

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MAKING TIME FOR LEARNING

- More than six in 10 teachers say that time to collaborate with other teachers (65%) and professional development opportunities (63%) have either decreased or stayed the same during the past 12 months.



However, more teachers now than a year ago are reporting increases in time for collaboration with other teachers (33% vs. 24%) and in professional development opportunities (35% vs. 26%).

- Seventy-nine percent of principals and 60% of teachers say principals have a great deal of control over teachers’ schedules; far fewer say they have a great deal of control over finances (22% of principals, 25% of teachers) (MetLife, 2012).