THE
IMPACT
FACTOR

WHY WE CAN'T NEGLECT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVALUATION

By Stephanie Hirsh

Demonstrating the impact of professional learning has never been more important. Educators are implementing rigorous content standards and assessments and experiencing new evaluation systems, even as they navigate a sea of other challenges and resources for professional learning are on the chopping block.

For educators to be successful in ensuring that students are college- and career-ready, the support school systems provide must include high-quality professional learning. But without indications that professional learning has an impact, why would school systems continue to invest in it? And how can educators stay committed to lifelong learning that requires their own investment of time and energy if they don't see an impact on what they do each day?

Agreement among decision makers and advocates about professional learning's purpose and role is essential to determining its impact and ensuring continued investment in it. The most effective strategy for improving the performance of educators and students is professional learning, and professional learning's primary purpose is to do just that.

Professional learning is most effective when it is part of a comprehensive system focused on improving team, school, and system performance as well as the performance of individuals. In such a system, all educators take responsibility for all students. Educators are building better learning institutions for all of the learners within, be they adults or students.

STANDARDS EMPHASIZE IMPACT

The foundation and guidance for evaluating the impact of professional learning can be found in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). Connecting professional learning to changing the knowledge and skills of educators and improving student outcomes is at the heart of the standards.

The Standards for Professional Learning guide the planning and implementation of educator learning that makes a significant difference for institutions, educators (teachers and administrators at all levels), and students. The diagram on p. 12 shows the relationship between adult learning and student learning when professional learning is standards-based.

Note that the arrows in that diagram move both ways. If changes in student results are not as expected, then professional learning has to change. This process requires constant monitoring to assess impact and change practices to improve results.

Tying professional learning to outcomes is explicit throughout the standards, but especially in the Data, Implementation, and Outcomes standards.

In the Data standard, educators determine what student, educator, and system performance data are available to guide the planning and evaluation of professional learning. They consider the implications and value of both quantitative and qualitative data. They use the data to

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND STUDENT RESULTS

1. When professional learning is standards-based, it has greater potential to change what educators know, are able to do, and believe.
2. When educators' knowledge, skills, and dispositions change, they have a broader repertoire of effective strategies to use to adapt their practices to meet performance expectations and student learning needs.
3. When educator practice improves, students have a greater likelihood of achieving results.
4. When student results improve, the cycle repeats for continuous improvement.

This cycle works two ways: If educators are not achieving the results they want, they determine what changes in practice are needed and then what knowledge, skills, and dispositions are needed to make the desired changes. They then consider how to apply the standards so that they can engage in the learning needed to strengthen their practice.

Source: Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning.* Oxford, OH: Author.
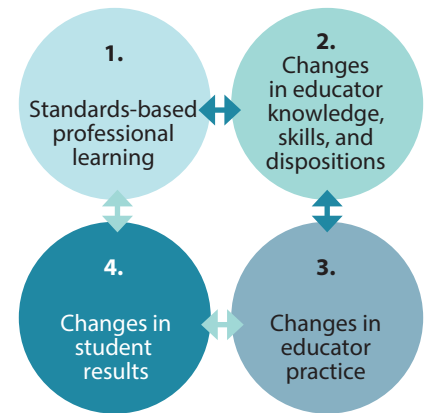
guide planning, improvement, and assessment.

Two critical components of the Data standard are to assess progress and to evaluate professional learning. When educators assess progress, they monitor implementation of their learning on an ongoing basis. They look, for example, at student work (qualitative data) to understand how their modified lessons influenced student understanding. Based on what they find in those student examples, they adjust their instruction and consider what else they need to learn to strengthen their teaching.

This monitoring is frequent, intentional, and based on short- and long-term goals (quantitative) for student learning. In high-performing systems, the process is part of a collaborative continuous improvement cycle, where teams with shared concerns set goals together, learn together, and periodically review progress together.

Within the Implementation standard, systems and educators emphasize the support required to sustain learning over the long term to achieve results. Part of that process requires the deliberate use of feedback. In effective learning systems, school and district leaders build in structures to clearly define expectations for educators and systematically give feedback and guidance to improve progress.

Working alongside educators, they determine the benchmarks and evidence that will demonstrate growth. Such systems also provide continued support to those leaders to ensure they have the skills to offer feedback that sustains learning over time.

While each standard begins with the words "Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students" to emphasize the connection between adult and student growth, it is the Outcomes standard that defines this concept in detail.

Equity is achieved when educators focus on similar outcomes and hold all students accountable to high standards. Effective professional learning addresses both educator performance standards, often set by states as prerequisites for initial and advanced licensure as well as evaluation, and student outcomes standards, such as the Common Core State Standards

or Principles and Standards for School Mathematics from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Outlined within educator performance standards is what effective educators need to know and be able to do to promote student growth and support other educators. Student outcomes standards describe the specific knowledge and skills students must master in order to progress in their education. These expectations provide guidance to what educators must understand deeply to ensure all students are successful.

The Standards for Professional Learning and the guidance they provide lay the foundation for an effective professional learning system that demonstrates improvement and results. Aligning professional learning to the standards will help educators document impact by:

- Keeping them focused on what is most important.
- Telling them whether they are on the right track to achieve their goals.
- Giving evidence to reassure those responsible for investments in professional learning.

BUILDING AN EVALUATION PLAN

Isolating the effectiveness of professional learning from other factors that promote school and individual improvement is challenging. Most school systems and schools lack the research capacity and time necessary to determine that a particular professional development activity produced a specific performance outcome. Documenting whether professional learning is achieving its intended outcomes is not a simple matter, but that's no excuse for neglecting its evaluation.

Decision makers need useful data to make informed judgments about the results of professional learning. In most cases, sophisticated research methodologies are impractical and not the answer. Instead, school system and school leaders need resources and tools that fit with the realities of their work environments and enable them to gain greater understanding about whether professional learning is solving their problems, improving their school, team, and individual performance, and helping

DATA COLLECTION   Use this table to gather evidence to support a professional learning plan.

SCHOOL GOAL					
	What knowledge and skills do we need?	What practices and behaviors will we see?	What evidence (including student performance data) will demonstrate growth?	Where are we starting (baseline)?	What is our end-of-year achievement according to student performance data and other evidence?
Teacher goals					
Student goals					
TEAM GOAL					
	What knowledge and skills do we need?	What practices and behaviors will we see?	What evidence (including student performance data) will demonstrate growth?	Where are we starting (baseline)?	What is our end-of-year achievement according to student performance data and other evidence?
Teacher goals					
Student goals					
INDIVIDUAL GOAL					
	What knowledge and skills do we need?	What practices and behaviors will we see?	What evidence (including student performance data) will demonstrate growth?	Where are we starting (baseline)?	What is our end-of-year achievement according to student performance data and other evidence?
Teacher goals					
Student goals					

more students to achieve standards.

Most educators responsible for professional learning focus their attention on the organization and content of a learning experience and don't make an effort to understand either what educators learned from their experience or how they will apply their learning to change practice or improve student outcomes. However, as the Standards for Professional Learning outline, these questions — what do educators need to learn, and what will they do with their learning — are the cornerstone of a professional learning evaluation plan.

Here is a framework for developing and implementing an evaluation plan meant for practitioners to be adopted or adapted for assessing the impact of professional learning. Educators may choose to collect different data or ask different questions depending on their role in planning, implementing, engaging in, or assessing the learning.

DEFINE AND COLLECT EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Determine a goal for student growth. Examine the quantitative and qualitative data available about student achievement. It is preferable to have peers who share responsibility for the same or similar group of students conduct the data examination and goal setting together. Then consider the times where progress toward the goals may be naturally assessed. These may include daily, weekly, six-week periods, or other assessment opportunities.

Set educator performance goals. Study and determine the

precise behaviors the educators will learn and apply to promote accomplishment of student goals. Be able to articulate them for supervisors and coaches so that when they observe in classrooms they will be able to document the use of the new behaviors as well as give feedback on application.

Establish educator learning plans. Refer to the Learning Designs standard. Determine how educators will gain knowledge and skills to achieve the new performance goals. At the same time, develop joint agreements on what the new skills look like in practice in the classroom. Determine a process for providing educators with feedback on implementation and guidance for improvement.

Conduct classroom observations to provide feedback on classroom implementation. Educators can turn to instructional coaches, supervisors, and colleagues to provide the information they need to determine if they are using the practices deemed necessary to improve student performance. They can videotape their classroom and use the video to promote their own self-assessment. Those providing feedback need training and support to ensure the feedback is presented in a manner that will have the intended impact. They need to know what they are observing and how to look for fidelity of implementation. Ultimately, this information contributes powerful data to inform educators and other decision makers regarding the value of professional learning.

Assess impact and determine next steps. Examine the data from student performance to determine if educators' actions have resulted in the desired student outcomes. If students have made the intended progress, then it will be time for educators to re-examine the data to determine the next set of goals as well as answer the next questions regarding their own goals and learning plans. If student success has not reached desired levels, educators will need to conduct additional assessment of their own practices and determine additional learning and support they may need to achieve their goals.

This framework is clearly aligned with Learning Forward's definition and Standards for Professional Learning. The differ-

ence is the emphasis in each step. Begin with the end in mind and draw attention to the impact data collected in each step. This information gives educators the information they need to assess the impact of their own investment in professional learning. When asked what difference it is making, educators will have the data and experience to make their own case.

The data collection table on p. 14 can become a part of the professional learning evaluation plan that educators may refer to when asked: What impact is professional learning having in our school or system?

SCHOOL AND SYSTEM SUPPORT

Assuming school systems and schools are definitive about how an educator's participation in professional learning should increase student performance — and if they aren't, why are they allocating significant resources to professional learning? — they need to determine whether and to what extent it does so.

Student performance data are among the evidence critical to planning and assessing professional learning progress. In making the link between student and educator learning, educators will need to collect or have access to data, whether that comes from results of teacher-made or standardized tests, observation of student performance, observation of students' classroom interactions, or samples of student work. School systems have a responsibility to improve educator access and understanding of this data.

Overall, the process in not simple. Many educators collaborate with multiple teams working simultaneously on multiple goals. Systems may have to invest in new technologies that allow educators to manage their various learning plans and hold the data that documents the impact of their efforts. Systems responsible for ensuring that educators have the support necessary to document their various learning journeys will have the evidence they need the next time they meet to discuss the impact of their professional learning investments.

Such a process has its own challenges: the time it takes, the knowledge and skills to plan carefully and analyze data, and the need for ongoing refinement of the process. However, this approach can inform and engage educators and help them better align their learning with that of their students.

While this approach is feasible and will provide a wealth of information most schools and school systems don't yet have, educators haven't leveraged tools and structures that might help to begin this work. Learning Forward is ready to collaborate with one school or school system to co-develop and refine such approaches. Who stands with us?

REFERENCE

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning.* Oxford, OH: Author.

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