



Use standards to assess how a conference measures up

In Learning Forward's definition of professional learning, conferences such as the events we offer each December have a specific purpose and role. Admittedly, professional learning that isn't embedded in the day-to-day work of schools has certain limitations. However, Learning Forward does everything possible to make sure its conference aligns with and supports the Standards for Professional Learning. Assess how well the conferences and external learning events you attend and plan live up to these standards.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Conferences where learners spend time together learning collaboratively can build learning communities of a sort. To meet the spirit of the standards, participants in such communities commit to not only learning together but also to integrating the learning into an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement.

LEADERSHIP

Because Learning Forward believes leaders are essential for effective professional learning that impacts all teachers and students in systems and schools, standards-based learning must include opportunities for leaders to engage in deep learning. Leaders benefit

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Stephanie Hirsh (stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org) is executive director of Learning Forward.

from attending conferences with others in their system.

RESOURCES

Attendance at any off-site learning opportunity is typically a very visible use of professional learning funding and time. Education leaders have a responsibility to document the impact of that investment for those who support it. Do your learning events help you to think about how to accomplish this goal?

DATA

Any initiative at work in school systems today has a data aspect associated with it. Implementing student standards, for example, requires constant assessment of progress. Therefore, any effective learning experience encourages individuals to use data to guide decisions about learning and determine how new learning will be assessed.

LEARNING DESIGNS

Different designs are used to promote different outcomes. Gaining clarity about the outcomes an individual intends to achieve with a learning opportunity is key to success. Exceptional learning opportunities recognize that individuals arrive with different backgrounds, expectations, and goals. Therefore, such conferences offer a wide range of learning options that lead to different outcomes.

Alignment with the Learning Designs standards also means that

conferences make effective use of technology to enhance the learning experience, both on-site and before and after the face-to-face meeting.

IMPLEMENTATION

Achieving the Implementation standard requires a sustained approach to learning that is difficult to reach through a single conference experience, so it is critical to determine how to build on participants' learning from conference attendance.

Attending conferences with colleagues can lead to more sustained learning in teams or through school-based coaching. Others may find support in joining communities launched during the conference experience.

OUTCOMES

The first question to ask in weighing a potential conference is, "How will this learning experience help us better ensure improved system growth, educator practice, and student outcomes?" If the answer is, "It won't" or "I can't see the connection," look elsewhere. Any professional learning — conferences included — must help educators boost their knowledge and skills to better reach students.

I'm curious to hear if you think conferences can meet these standards. Have you seen it in your recent experiences? And, if you attend Learning Forward's Annual Conference in Nashville this December, let us know how it measures up as well. ■