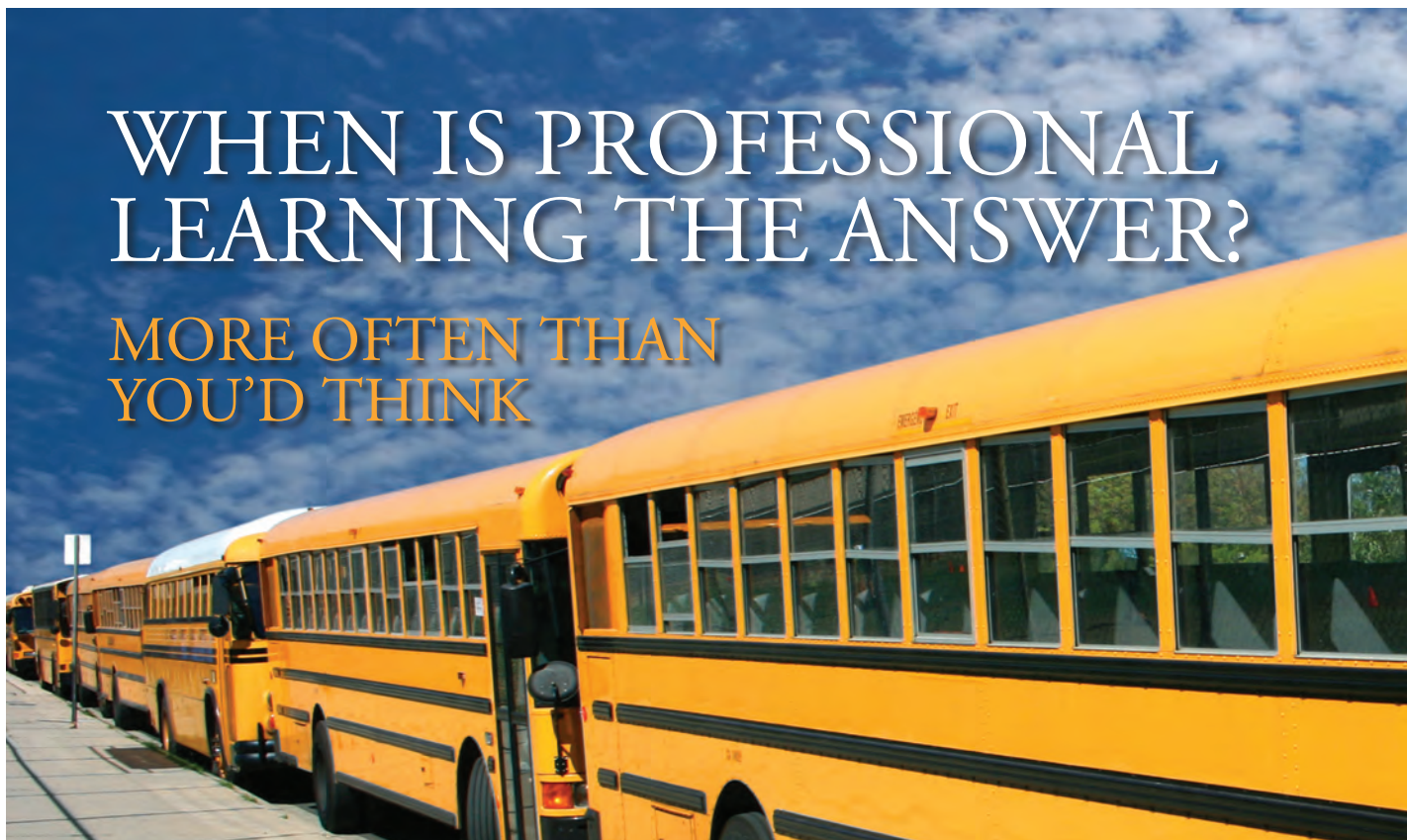


WHEN IS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THE ANSWER?

MORE OFTEN THAN YOU'D THINK



By Frederick Brown

Here's a dilemma many of us in professional learning face. Our colleagues in schools and districts often frame their challenges in the following ways:

- Our students' literacy scores are below district and state averages.
- We need to implement Common Core or our state's new student standards.
- Our student discipline is out of control.
- My principal is about to be removed because the district feels she is ineffective.

As educators grapple with these issues, often they don't see them as professional learning challenges. Instead, they are categorized in other ways that lead schools and districts down paths that can be costly as well as ineffective.

For example, consider low student test scores in a particular content area. The curriculum and instruction department is asked to find new instructional materials that offer more promise in helping students achieve at

higher levels. This solution is based on the assumption that the test score problem comes from ineffective materials.

Negotiations begin with various providers that may lead to the large-scale adoption of new instructional materials or textbooks. Once the new materials are purchased, attention eventually shifts back to professional learning for teachers.

Districts may take similar approaches to student discipline, Common Core implementation, and other issues they feel may require an off-the-shelf solution.



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Meanwhile, in those same districts, those responsible for professional learning see these same problems differently. These professional learning experts recognize their systems aren't structured for adult learning.

Literacy scores may be low because teachers haven't yet internalized the practices associated with the current set of instructional materials. Student discipline may be perceived as out of control because teachers may not have engaged in collective learning with their colleagues, practiced



behavior management strategies, or received feedback from peers. Principals may be seen as ineffective because they haven't yet engaged in their own learning community with their peers.

Taken together, schools and districts that don't have structures and processes for adult learning will always have students who experience varying levels of educator effectiveness, regardless of the issue.

This leads me to our professional learners' dilemma:

- How can we, as professional learning experts, help our colleagues, schools, and districts see their challenges as professional learning issues?
- How can we encourage districts to collect data on the implementation of current practices before they rush to adopt new ones?
- How can we strengthen systems that assess the impact of current professional learning approaches so districts know whether teachers and leaders are implementing the new skills and strategies they experienced as part of a learning program?
- In districts, how can we better connect those responsible for professional learning to those focused on talent management and leadership effectiveness?

We discuss these kinds of questions a great deal at Learning Forward, and often we turn to the Standards for Professional Learning for guidance. I see this particular dilemma as one we need school and system leaders to help us resolve.

In the Leadership standard, Learning Forward posits that leaders must advocate for effective professional learning and the essential role it plays in improving educator practices and student results. We also see that leaders establish structures and resources for learning. Most importantly, they model the importance of continuous learning, and they do this by engaging actively in building their own knowledge and skills around the issues that they face as educators each day.

Perhaps, then, the first step in addressing our dilemma is to ask leaders to publicly state their intention to put learning first, starting — but not ending — with themselves. I wonder what solutions will follow from such actions?

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