



PIECES *of the* LEARNING PUZZLE

By Tracy Crow

Educators are demanding opportunities to access learning specific to their needs, and there are more options than ever for school systems to personalize learning. Sometimes these personalized learning options go hand-in-hand with teacher effectiveness systems that districts use to identify areas for educator growth.

At the same time, schools and teams set collective goals for improvement, and years of research tell us that collaborative learning has many benefits for educators, schools, and students. Learning Forward's definition of professional learning and Standards for Professional Learning prioritize collaborative learning and outline the need for time dedicated to team learning in the workweek.

So how can learning leaders balance what may at times seem to be competing needs and strategies for learning?

In schools and districts that don't have comprehensive professional learning systems established — or at the very least aligned — and cohesive learning outlined, these needs can indeed be competing. A teacher may be faced with addressing a relicensure regulation that requires one kind of learning, an evaluation from her supervisor that outlines

ALIGNED GOALS SHAPE LEARNING FOR ONE AND ALL

a different individual learning need, a weekly professional learning community tasked with an entirely unrelated goal, and a school improvement goal on another track. While the learning opportunities tied to each of these might have value, they may not add up to a whole that leads to optimal growth — and improved teaching for students — for the individual teacher or her team.

However, this combination of individual and collective learning can in many situations add up to a meaningful and logical learning plan. In fact, for most educators, both individual and collective learning will be ideal to meet their needs and improve their practice.

In schools and districts that have professional learning systems established, a vision and standards for learning guide everything associated with what and how educators grow. Educators will have resources and structures for setting learning goals — as individuals, on teams, and across schools. They will have multiple sources of student, educator, and system data to analyze as they set learning goals. They will have strategies for identifying the exper-

tise in their teams and buildings and for knowing when they need to tap external support. Their supervisory, peer, and coaching support will align to sustain and extend their individual and collaborative learning.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

In every learning context, learning leaders take into account several factors for skillfully balancing individual and collaborative learning needs and strategies. The Learning Designs standard is central to these considerations: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes (Learning Forward, 2011).

Purposes of the learning

Generally speaking, professional learning has three major purposes: to support individual educator growth, to achieve a team or school goal, and to support program implementation. At times, an educator's learning needs might align along more than one pur-

pose — perhaps she needs to strengthen her questioning strategies to help students in her classroom at the same time that a team has identified that same area of need for the whole 6th grade.

Learning goals and outcomes

Once the purpose of the learning is clear, leaders and learners can use student and educator data to identify learning goals and desired outcomes for individuals and teams. Desired outcomes are critical to determining optimal learning strategies and designs.

Learner preferences and engagement

Active engagement in learning — where learners interact meaningfully with the content and with other learners — leads to change in practice. Learners' preferences and identities as educators, their beliefs, backgrounds, experiences, and motivations, all play a role in understanding how they learn most effectively.

Resources available

Resources for learning — time, money, people, technology, and other materials — are largely determined at the system level. If a district has a learning management system in place, learners may be identifying and documenting much of their learning through that platform. If a district or school has established job-embedded time for collaborative learning, then learning in concert with other colleagues is more likely to be the norm.

While the reality in schools often dictates that learning options will be driven by the resources available, learning leaders will ultimately want to build systems where learning needs determine what resources the system provides.

NAVIGATING THE OPTIONS

Many educators, regardless of their context, already combine these types of learning and navigate their opportunities skillfully. For example, an advanced math teacher in a high school needs to

strengthen high-level content learning expertise and doesn't have colleagues in her building who have or need this sort of expertise.

She seeks for her professional learning network other advanced math teachers in other schools, districts, or regions, who together deepen their understanding of math content and pedagogy to support meaningful instruction. Perhaps she meets other teachers online or through a local university. Her individual needs are unique, and she is growing because of her collaborative learning.

In the same school, an English language arts teacher meets weekly with a subject-area team concerned with strengthening instruction for English language learners. They develop collective learning goals and use a range of strategies to deepen their knowledge. Because this teacher tends to learn best through reading, he brings academic research studies to the group and shares information that way, while other team members may seek information about teaching strategies in another way.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE

Individual learners, coaches, school leaders, and system leaders all have responsibilities for creating the optimal balance between individual and collective learning for every educator in the system.

The learner takes responsibility for her own growth by understanding her learning needs and preferences; seeking and reflecting upon feedback from peers, coaches, and supervisors; working with others to identify and create appropriate learning; engaging deeply as a learner; and evaluating the impact of learning on herself and students.

The coach assists the learner in setting learning goals and deciding which learning is most appropriate to achieve particular goals; offers feedback, support, and additional resources; facilitates or supports team and school learning; and helps to measure impact of learning and determine next steps.

The school leader offers feedback and support to the learner; advocates resources for both individual and collaborative learning; engages visibly as a learner individually and in collaborative settings; builds alignment between individual, team, school, and district goals; and helps to measure impact of learning and determine next steps.

The system leader offers feedback and support to the learner, particularly when the learners are school leaders; advocates and secures resources for both individual and collaborative learning; engages visibly as a learner individually and in collaborative settings; builds alignment between individual, team, school, and district goals; and helps to measure impact of learning and determine next steps.

Even in schools and districts that don't yet have a comprehensive system established, both leaders and learners find ways to align their learning meaningfully. Whether through a schoolwide focus on improving literacy that drives an entire faculty's learning, for example, or a science team's yearlong emphasis on student engagement, shared goals help individuals shape their specific learning so they can best meet the collective needs of the students they serve.

REFERENCE

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

•
Tracy Crow (tracy.crow@learningforward.org) is Learning Forward's director of communications. ■

