



## How we can stop the cycle of ineffective professional learning

I'm proud to say how long I've been working hand in hand with so many other educators to improve professional learning. I've been with Learning Forward (formerly NSDC) for more than 25 years. I've contributed to three versions of standards describing professional learning that leads to changes in practice and student learning. And, at the same time, it's hard not to ponder this: Given what we know, why aren't more educators experiencing the great learning they need each day?

I have four possible reasons I'd like to share with you.

**Good professional learning is hard to do — and few people have the deep knowledge and expertise to plan and execute it.**

There is a science regarding how adults learn, and few people appreciate its complexity. Few people study the field deeply — both research and best practice — before assuming responsibility for it in their contexts. Therefore, often those who plan professional learning don't have the understanding necessary to ensure it is designed and executed so that it achieves its intended outcomes.

**Principals today are often the primary leaders of professional**

•  
**Stephanie Hirsh ([stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org](mailto:stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org)) is executive director of Learning Forward.**

**learning in schools, and very few of them have ever experienced effective professional learning themselves.**

As a result, principals frequently plan experiences that replicate ones in which they participated. Between their lack of experience with effective learning earlier in their careers and the fact that systems often neglect meaningful principal learning, it's not a surprise that principals often aren't prepared to lead learning.

**At the system level, the many people and programs that depend on professional learning for successful implementation compete, compromise, and economize on the elements essential to effective execution.**

In most school systems, professional learning is part of everyone's responsibility. Without a shared vision, plan, and expectations for its outcomes, professional learning often functions as a series of disconnected and competing activities. The people responsible for it can operate in silos, protective of their initiatives. As a result, the professional learning teachers experience is fragmented and incoherent — little of it sticks and nothing changes.

**Many people have lost confidence in the power of professional learning to improve practice and results for all students.**

Given what they've experienced and seen, those in charge devote little

effort to making professional learning meaningful, and the cycle of ineffective professional learning just repeats itself, contributing to the perception that further investment is not justified.

At Learning Forward, we continue to address these challenges. We are focused on helping people understand what is effective professional learning and to make it the norm through these strategies and others:

- **Support the adoption and implementation** of the Standards for Professional Learning, which define the elements essential to learning if it is to change adult behaviors and improve student learning.
- **Advocate for a change to the definition of professional learning** in federal policy. This will provide direction to states and districts on how to leverage federal funding for more effective professional learning.
- **Elevate and amplify the most successful stories** of effective professional learning in practice. We are committed to helping all stakeholders see what happens with professional learning done well.
- **Partner with school systems and organizations** active in redesigning their current practice so professional learning makes a substantive difference for educators and students.

Where else should we focus our energy to create and sustain change? ■