



## Standards connect the dots between teaching and learning

**H**ave you ever wondered about the impetus for professional learning standards? Here is my view of how professional learning has come to be seen as one of the most powerful strategies for ensuring a great education for all students.

In the early 1990s, new accountability systems demonstrated the inequities of educational experiences within schools and across school systems. The initial response by many focused on better test preparation and any strategy that made schools score and look better. At the same time, numerous studies affirmed the belief that the most powerful indicator of a student's success is the quality of teaching. When scores again flatlined, system and school leaders were ready — and, in some cases, forced — to turn their attention to improving classroom instruction. And many recognized that quality professional learning had to be a big part of that.

In 1994, Hayes Mizell, a program officer for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, challenged the National Staff Development Council (NSDC, now Learning Forward) and other education associations to develop the first set of nationally accepted standards for staff development for middle grades. Later, NSDC worked with two

national principals organizations to develop a related set of standards for elementary and high school grades. By 2000, changes in the field demanded a revision of the standards. NSDC, again with support from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, collaborated with 15 national education organizations to publish the first inclusive K-12 Standards for Staff Development, a definitive, research-based framework of characteristics of high-quality staff development. The standards were grounded in evidence and research to support the relationship between the standards and changes in educator practice and student learning.

These standards guided planning, implementing, and evaluating professional development for more than a decade. Numerous states, organizations, and school systems adopted policies and guidance documents related to the standards. When consistently implemented and regularly monitored and evaluated, the standards delivered on their promise.

Between 2001 and 2011, considerable research emerged in the field of professional learning with mixed results. The characteristics of effective professional learning became clearer. New technologies to support educator learning emerged. A deeper research base, combined with new reforms, research, and increasing accountability for schools, focused the professional learning needed to ensure that all educators and students meet

new standards. In 2011, with support from the MetLife Foundation, Learning Forward released the Standards for Professional Learning.

Representatives from 40 leading education organizations participated in developing these standards. Together, these representatives reviewed research and literature to contribute on behalf of their constituencies, which include teachers, principals, superintendents, and local and state school board members.

Naming this version Standards for Professional Learning signaled the importance of educators taking an active role in their continuous improvement. By making learning the focus, those who are responsible for professional learning can concentrate their efforts on ensuring that learning for educators leads to learning for students.

Today, the standards continue to serve as the hallmark of effective professional learning. They define the support educators deserve if we expect high levels of performance by educators and students. More than 35 states have introduced the standards into their policy, guidance, or regulations, demonstrating their own understanding of and commitment to consistent, high-quality, and effective professional learning for all educators. Learning Forward's ultimate desire is that effective professional learning is so ubiquitous that we no longer need professional learning standards to define it. ■

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