

Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

LEARNING FORWARD'S VISION: EXCELLENT TEACHING AND LEARNING EVERY DAY

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Best-practice takeaways

A new study shows how high-quality professional learning promotes effective teaching and leads to better student outcomes

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In a recent study, Learning First, an Australian-based social enterprise that promotes sustainable improvements in student learning through systemic change in schools, studied the professional learning practices of four high-performing school systems. Funded by the National Center on Education and the Economy's Center on International Education Benchmarking, *Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems* (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016) identifies a pattern of common practices that has emerged across all four systems. At the school level, the factors include:

- Organizing school improvement around professional learning;
- Establishing distinct roles to lead professional learning within schools and the systems;
- Recognizing and sharing teacher expertise developed through school-based research on improving student learning;
- Expanding teacher and school leader responsibility to include not only their own, but others' professional learning; and
- Building professional learning into the daily work of



teachers and school leaders.

The school systems all apply a strategic approach, based on an improvement cycle, that links professional learning with student learning. The cycle guides school improvement, teacher learning communities, beginning teacher support, and engagement of external experts. The high-performing systems provide a landscape rich with conditions, policies, and resources that contribute to effective professional learning.

LEADERSHIP IS KEY

Professional learning practices within these high-performing school systems depend on skillful professional learning leaders. Professional learning leaders who work closely with school principals to facilitate and support professional learning that deepens teacher content knowledge and practice. Professional learning leaders who are thoughtfully selected, prepared, and supported serve in a variety of roles to support professional learning.

Professional learning leaders are teachers who work at the school or system level with a focus on effective teaching. They foster a climate of continuous improvement through collaboration, and they facilitate the learning of others. They may have titles that reflect their unique roles as

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mentors, coaches, content experts, or pedagogy specialists — such as “school staff developers” in Singapore, “coordinators of inquiry” in British Columbia, and “principal master teacher in English language” in Singapore. The table below describes the various roles of professional learning leaders in the high-performing systems.

LEARNING TEAM FACILITATORS

Teachers within the high-performing school systems serve on school-based learning teams that employ a continuous cycle of improvement to engage in routine professional learning. Senior or lead teachers, heads of departments, or other professional learning leaders facilitate team meetings to ensure they are more than a friendly exchange of ideas and lesson plans among teachers. What distinguishes learning teams in the school systems studied is the purposeful use of learning processes and protocols focused on understanding student learning, developing instructional practices, and evaluating the effects of teaching.

SUBJECT-MATTER AND PEDAGOGY EXPERTS

Teachers advance through established career tracks to advanced roles as content and instructional specialists. These teachers work within schools and within school systems. As external experts, they provide direct services to teachers within schools. In Singapore, teachers might become principal master, master, lead, or senior teachers through advanced study and demonstrated performance. In these roles, they work to improve the instructional practice and to develop content and pedagogical expertise of teachers. Principal master teachers at the Academy of Singapore Teachers work directly with master and lead teachers to build their subject-

specific expertise so they can work more effectively with teachers within their schools.

External expertise is available to teachers through a variety of programs, including exchange programs, university-school partnerships, onsite services provided by subject and pedagogy experts, or grant-funded programs that support consultants. In Hong Kong, the Quality Education Fund funds schools to contract with external consultants to support professional learning. External experts align their services and support with a school’s improvement plan and with teacher needs and are held accountable for the quality and results of their professional learning.

MENTORS

Mentoring is another role for professional learning leaders. Although the focus of mentors is working with beginning teachers through their first three to five years, mentoring is not limited to beginning teachers. In Shanghai, every teacher has a mentor. Coaching and mentoring are routine components of an educator’s life. As teachers’ seniority and expertise grow, they become responsible for mentoring other teachers. Senior teachers mentor junior teachers. In their performance reviews, mentors’ work with their mentees and the performance of mentees and their students are considered. Beginning teachers access additional support for specific subject-matter and pedagogical expertise from external experts who work as lead teachers within school system or ministry offices.

COURSE DEVELOPERS AND FACILITATORS

Another role of professional learning leaders in the high-performing schools is supporting the design and im-

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING LEADERS IN SCHOOLS

BRITISH COLUMBIA Coordinators of inquiry	HONG KONG Curriculum leaders	SINGAPORE School staff developers
<i>Senior teachers</i>	<i>Deputy principal equivalent level</i>	<i>Senior/head of department</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help lead inquiry approach and collaborative working groups. • Support teachers in identifying student learning issues and setting inquiry research questions. • Coordinate and organize teacher development. • Demonstrate lessons. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduced as part of curriculum reforms. • Help lead school-based curriculum planning and implementation. • Support school head in assessment planning and coordination. • Promote professional development culture. • Lead in improving teaching and learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduced to help implement Growth Model 2006. • Help champion, plan, and facilitate professional learning. • Key role in strategic planning: leading learning needs analysis in school, balancing teacher needs and school priorities for teacher development. • Guide teachers on effective practices.

Source: Jensen, B., Sonnemann, J., Roberts-Hull, K., & Hunter, A., 2016, p. 13.

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plementation of courses and workshops to advance teacher knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices. These courses are most often provided through regional and ministry offices such as the Academy of Singapore Teachers and are taught by professional learning leaders. Courses emphasize new initiatives, content and pedagogy, and processes such as collaborative lesson planning, research, and the improvement cycle. The courses embed principles of effective learning, active learning, interaction among participants, and application to practice. In British Columbia, for example, teachers might participate in a locally provided master's degree program available for the district teachers and taught by a district principal or the yearlong Certificate of Innovative Educational Leadership.

CONDITIONS SUPPORTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING LEADERS

Tapping the expertise of professional learning leaders in the high-performing school systems requires conditions, policies, and resources to support its success. Chief among these are career tracks with explicit procedures for advancing as teacher leaders, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, designated time, ongoing professional learning, performance review with accountability for effective professional learning, and principal support.

Career tracks embedded within comprehensive performance-management systems enhance professional learning. In Singapore, teachers advance through three different career tracks: teaching, leadership, and senior specialist. Each defines distinct roles and responsibilities for those teachers as they move through stages of career development. Career tracks in other high-performing systems define in-school and out-of-school advancement paths that allow teachers to understand the specific options available to them for their career trajectory.

Each high-performing system establishes policies that provide resources for teacher collaboration and professional learning. The primary resource is time. In these systems, there are efforts to create time to engage in the continuous improvement within their daily work schedules. Teachers in high-performing systems studied have fewer hours of direct teaching than teachers in the United States and more time for engaging in collaborative professional learning. According to OECD, teachers in the U.S. teach an average of 27 hours per week in comparison to 22 to 23 hours in British Columbia, 17 in Hong Kong and Singapore, and 10 to 12 in Shanghai.

As the study notes, when professional learning is separated from teachers' routine work, it is less effective. Because professional learning is a normal part of the workdays in schools, it is more focused on the school's overall improve-

ment goals and teaching and learning. The study says that the time for professional learning should not be squeezed into existing time, but rather should be increased specifically for professional learning.

EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Evaluation and accountability systems in the high-performing systems study elevate the importance of professional learning and its role in school improvement. Professional learning leaders and principals collect and review data about the effectiveness of professional learning. In Hong Kong and Singapore, teachers participating in professional learning and their supervisors provide feedback on the effects of professional learning on their practice. Individual teacher, professional learning leader, principal, and school and school system performance review criteria include the quality of and the effects of professional learning. Ongoing peer-to-peer feedback that occurs in learning communities provides another form of initiative. The Shanghai Empowered Management Program is a school-to-school accountability in which a high-performing school is contracted to turn around a low-performing school. School principals, district leaders, and government officials are held to high expectations for the quality of professional learning and school improvement.

Professional learning leaders at schools and within district, regional, and ministry offices support ongoing professional learning practices that focus on improving teaching and student learning. *Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems* describes the roles and responsibilities of professional learning leaders who contribute to school improvement, effective teaching, and student learning. Most importantly, as the study notes, "Professional learning leaders help create the broader school climate for learning ... from within the teacher cohort. From helping to connect teacher needs to school strategic planning, to designing professional learning approaches, to sometimes just being the 'go-to' person on teacher development — these teachers are critical to embed the improvement cycle in schools" (p. 43).

REFERENCES

Jensen, B., Sonnemann, J., Roberts-Hull, K. & Hunter, A. (2016). *Beyond PD: Teacher professional learning in high-performing systems*. Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy. Available at www.ncee.org/beyondpd/.

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Learning Forward BELIEF

Effective school systems commit to continuous improvement for all adults and students.