

MAKE THE CONNECTION

Content is a key component of the Standards for Professional Learning

Sometimes Learning Forward's tight focus on the Standards for Professional Learning as the fundamental building blocks for meaningful educator learning can lead members to ask a logical question: What about content? Isn't content-specific professional learning essential if educators are increasing their effectiveness in helping all students learn and perform at high levels?

The answer to that question

is absolutely yes. Yes, content-specific professional learning is essential.

Content is embedded throughout the Standards for Professional Learning, both implicitly and explicitly. The introduction to the standards makes the first connection between what educators need to learn and what students need to learn: "The standards make explicit that the purpose of professional learning is for educators to develop the

knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions they need to help students perform at higher levels" (Learning Forward, p. 14). With that key purpose for professional learning, content-specific learning will always take center stage.

Let's explore how each standard has an indelible connection to content and consider how these connections are critical to planning, implementing, and evaluating professional learning.

OUTCOMES

The standard that most fully and explicitly describes the importance of content in effective professional learning is the Outcomes standard. It states: "Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards" (p. 48).

The rationale for the standard describes educator learning focused

on student learning outcomes, and "whether the learning outcomes are developed locally or nationally and are defined in content standards, courses of study, curriculum, or curricular programs, these learning outcomes serve as the core content for educator professional learning to support effective implementation and results" (p. 50).

Such professional learning, the rationale continues, engages educators in the kinds of learning experiences that

they are expected to offer students in their classrooms.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The Learning Communities standard puts content at the core of team learning through its vision of the cycle of continuous improvement, where teams engage in inquiry and research to solve specific classroom challenges. The adult and student learning needs that drive their collective work are content-based

and determined through an examination of data.

The work learning team members do together is driven by the content they teach, along with how they will teach it. The Learning Communities standard also describes the importance of goal alignment across school and system visions and goals, many of which encompass content-specific benchmarks and outcomes.

LEADERSHIP

Content-specific learning is one element of the learning that leaders do as they fulfill their role as models for, leaders of, and advocates for high-quality professional learning. As instructional leaders and learning facilitators, school and system leaders share responsibility for understanding and achieving content-based visions for students.

As advocates for professional learning, they see the connections between the demands that college- and career-ready standards place on students and those they place on teachers, and they help to create systems and structures that give educators opportunities to deepen content knowledge and content-specific pedagogical skills.

RESOURCES

The Resources standard explores the time, money, materials, and people essential to effective professional learning. Some of those resources will have an obvious content connection — for example, materials might include an online resource designed to deepen content knowledge within a discipline. Or an instructional coach might be content-oriented, providing support particularly in math or literacy. Other resources might not have such an obvious content connection, but without dedicated time, for example, there isn't a widely accessible means for job-

embedded teams to focus on specific content challenges in their learning.

DATA

Among the multiple sources of data that educators use in determining adult and student learning needs are student performance data from particular classes and subject areas along with content-specific data from high-stakes assessments. As they analyze data in sufficient depth to form learning goals for themselves and their students, they look at specific content areas to a level of precision that helps them set goals for the time period their learning will cover, whether it is a six-week grading period or over the course of a year.

LEARNING DESIGNS

In the Learning Designs standard, educators use their understanding of learning theory, learning strategies, and the desired outcomes of professional learning to determine the best approach to engaging educators in their learning experience. Specific content tied to student and adult learning outcomes is embedded throughout that equation and helps learning leaders make decisions about the approaches that will be most appropriate in any given situation.

IMPLEMENTATION

Without attention to the Implementation standard, educators aren't likely to get the sustained support that helps them apply what they are learning in their classrooms. None of the content that adults and students need to learn will stick if learners don't have frequent opportunities to practice, ask questions, get feedback, or apply content-specific strategies in context.

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

WHAT IS AN INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK?

The book *Becoming a Learning System* explores the importance of an instructional framework to create coherence in a school system, connecting student and adult learning goals and purposes. Consider how such a framework puts the content students learn within the larger learning system.

A FRAMEWORK OFFERS:

- A clear, research-based vision that includes high-quality professional learning standards and a set of student performance expectations, along with a description of the instructional strategies that will help ensure students meet them;
- The district's stated beliefs and assumptions about student learning expectations aligned with its strategic plan and goals, and a summary of the research that supports those beliefs and assumptions;
- Structures and supports to help school communities develop purposeful, thoughtful curriculum maps, assessments of and for learning, and inspiring and engaging instructional designs;
- A districtwide assessment plan;
- A collection of reference materials to help school-based teams understand the framework's concepts and assumptions;
- A description of effective instruction and assessment strategies with an analysis of how they address Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning;
- A guide for planning professional learning at the district and school levels; and
- A tool to communicate the goals of the standards to the community.

Adapted from **Hirsh, S., Psencik, K., & Brown, F. (2014).** *Becoming a learning system*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

