

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

By Joellen Killion

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.

Professional learning leader role assessment



Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems

highlights the significant role of professional learning leaders within the high-performing school systems. These leaders are most often teachers who advance along a career track and assume responsibility for contributing to the professional learning of others.

The tool on pp. 5-7 helps teachers and teacher leaders in examining the roles of professional learning leaders within the high-performing systems, comparing them with current roles within their own systems, and identifying ways to focus the roles more specifically on professional learning leadership.

Source: Killion, J. (2016). *Facilitator guide for Beyond PD: Teacher professional learning in high-performing systems.* Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

Preparing for the assessment

Purpose: To facilitate conversation about the roles and responsibilities of professional learning leaders within high-performing school systems and within their own school or school system. To consider ways to strengthen and expand the role of teacher leaders so that they focus more specifically on professional learning.

Materials needed: “Best-practice takeaways” by Joellen Killion (pp. 1-3); Professional learning leader role assessment (pp. 6-7).

Best uses: Within teams of teacher leaders and within school and district leadership teams.

Time: 85 minutes. The task described may be divided into several meetings.

In preparation for the meeting: Invite participants to read the “Best-practice takeaways” by Joellen Killion (pp. 1-3) and review *Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems*.

At the meeting:

Steps	Time
1. Ask participants in table groups to identify which ways teachers serve as professional learning leaders in the high-performing schools and to note which ways currently exist within their schools or school systems. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a chart labeled with the title for each role that currently exists; list on each the major functions of each role and the primary audience for each role. Participants may want to add other information such as funding source, supervisor or persons responsible for the role, etc. to each chart if the information is available. • Invite participants to identify other roles not identified in the study that currently exist in their schools or school system that provide support for professional learning. Create charts for each of these additional roles. • To facilitate sharing, create electronic templates or wall charts of the criteria score sheet for small groups to use. 	15 minutes
2. Divide group members among the roles that exist within the school or school system.	3 minutes
3. Ask each small group to assess the viability and potential impact of each professional learning leader role for transforming teaching and student learning using the following criteria and assessment guide on pp. 6-7. Emphasize the importance of using evidence when possible to support their assessment. After the assessment is completed, ask each group to consider the questions for strengthening the role.	30 minutes
4. Reconvene in the large group to share the results of the small group work.	15 minutes
5. Determine next steps as a group to advance the recommendations.	20 minutes

Source: Killion, J. (2016). *Facilitator guide for Beyond PD: Teacher professional learning in high-performing systems*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

Professional learning leader role assessment

Assess the role based on the following criteria. Feel free to adapt the criteria if desired. While it is helpful to have data to support assessments, teams may find that they do not have specific evidence and must rely on professional judgment or experience rather than specific data to support their assessment.

Role: _____ Overall effectiveness score: _____

Criteria	Score range: 1-3	Score
1. Those in this role work directly with teachers within the school or school system.	1 (low, less than 5% of the teachers) to 3 (50% of the teachers or more)	
2. The majority of time of those in this role is focused on improving teaching and student learning.	1 (low, less than 20%) to 3 (80% or more)	
3. The school system has established sustained funding to support this role.	1 (low, funding tied to temporary income or external resources) to 3 (line item in the staffing budget)	
4. Those serving in this role have defined performance criteria for their evaluation.	1 (low, no criteria or currently using standards for another role) to 3 (defined performance standards and appraisal process specific to job responsibilities)	
5. Those serving in this role are thoughtfully selected based on criteria that include performance, experience, and readiness.	1 (low, no established selection or advancement process defined) to 3 (career track defined with ongoing opportunities to prepare for and advance into the role of professional learning leader)	
6. All teachers have access to professional learning that prepares them for this role.	1 (low, no preparation available) to 3 (ongoing preparation programs available to all teachers)	
7. Professional learning leaders have coaching, ongoing support, and supervision to increase the effectiveness of their work.	1 (low, no coaching available or only supervision) to 3 (regular coaching, ongoing professional learning, and support required for all serving in this role)	
8. Ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the role (not the person) in achieving school system, school, teacher, and student improvement goals.	1 (low, no evaluation of the role conducted) to 3 (scheduled evaluation of the role using multiple sources of evidence including feedback from teachers being served)	

Source: Killion, J. (2016). *Facilitator guide for Beyond PD: Teacher professional learning in high-performing systems.* Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

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Resources related to *Beyond PD*

Other resources related to the study *Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems*:

Facilitator guide: Joellen Killion offers ways to apply findings from the study to help education leaders, policymakers, and decision-makers improve the quality of professional learning. Contains more than 35 tools, giving stakeholders multiple entry points into the latest knowledge from the field, focusing on practical implications and next steps.

www.learningforward.org/docs/default-source/beyond-pd-resources/facguide_beyondpd.pdf

Webinar: Presented by study author Ben Jensen and facilitated by Joellen Killion, this hour-long on-demand webinar provides an overview of the study's findings and implications for professional learning.

www.learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/webinars/webinar-archive/beyond-pd-teacher-professional-learning-in-high-performing-systems

PD Watch blog post: This Education Week blog post by Joellen Killion, titled "Lessons From Abroad on Professional Learning," summarizes how the study "provides evidence that continuous professional learning deeply embedded into the framework of schools is fundamental to student success."

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning_forwards_pd_watch/2016/01/lessons_from_abroad_on_professional_learning.html

JSD feature article: In the February 2016 issue of *JSD*, Joellen Killion's article "How the World's Best Schools Stay on Top" provides a deep look at the study and its implications for improving professional learning programs and improving student outcomes in America.

www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd