



Align your district's professional learning under ESSA

The single most important way to achieve equity and excellence is by ensuring a knowledgeable and skillful educator workforce. Ensuring the availability of excellent educators for all students requires a culture of learning and a system of support for every school and school district. This means that our goal isn't just to improve professional development experiences, but to endeavor to make each school a learning system for students and teachers.

At the center of these types of learning and improvement systems are teams of teachers who assume collective responsibility for their students' and their colleagues' success. Although these learning communities are the most important part of a learning system, it takes a shared vision at the state and district levels to establish, build, and sustain a learning and improvement system that ensures success for all

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The text and tools are taken from *A New Vision for Professional Learning: A Toolkit to Help States Use ESSA to Advance Learning and Improvement Systems* (Learning Forward & Education Counsel, 2017). Find the full toolkit at www.learningforward.org/docs/default-source/getinvolved/essa/essanewvisiontoolkit.

students and their teachers. States and districts have a responsibility to establish the conditions that foster these types of learning systems, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides an unprecedented window of opportunity to advance these conditions.

Within ESSA, the federal definition of professional learning has been revised to ensure that professional development activities are “sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused.” All federal funds used for professional

development must align with this definition. (For the full definition of professional learning under ESSA, see www.learningforward.org/who-we-are/professional-learning-definition.)

This updated definition provides states and districts with an opportunity to articulate or re-envision their own definition of professional learning — in alignment with the new federal definition — and use it to review their current professional learning investments and ask: Do all professional learning programs meet these evidence-based characteristics?

VISION-SETTING PROTOCOLS

This tool is designed to support a group in establishing a draft vision for systems of professional learning and identifying state and district roles for supporting these systems. You can find the handouts in *A New Vision for Professional Learning: A Toolkit to Help States Use ESSA to Advance Learning and Improvement Systems* (Learning Forward & Education Counsel, 2017), available at www.learningforward.org/docs/default-source/getinvolved/essa/essanewvisiontoolkit.

DEFINE HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Time: 45 - 90 minutes

Materials: Handouts: State definitions of professional learning (pp. 44-46), federal definition of professional learning (pp. 14-15), chart paper, markers, tape, sticky notes

1. Ask individual members of the group to write attributes of their definition of professional learning on self-adhesive sticky notes, one attribute or idea per note.
2. In groups of four or five, share the attributes on sticky notes, clustering similar ideas together.
3. Report similarities and record them on chart paper.
4. Use the federal definition of professional learning on pp.14-15 to compare your own characteristics.
5. Alternatively (or, in addition, if time allows), review the Kentucky, Michigan, and Connecticut definitions of professional learning and note the similarities and differences.
6. Come to consensus on the key points to include in a definition of professional learning.
7. Invite a small group to craft the definition using the key points generated and bring it back to the next meeting for review and revision. The group can move on to the next vision-setting exercise in the same day if needed. During the discussion, be sure to consider what words may be confusing to others who don't fully understand what you're aiming to do around professional learning.
8. Encourage members to share the definition with stakeholders to seek feedback. It is important to acknowledge that stakeholders will not have the same depth of background knowledge and the opportunity to cultivate an understanding about the different terms that team members have experienced, so the task is not to seek their agreement, but rather to assess if the definition makes sense and to collect the questions it generates.

TOOLS

CREATE A CLEAR PICTURE OF WHAT THE DEFINITION LOOKS LIKE IN ACTION

Time: 1 - 2 hours of prep and 1 hour of facilitation

1. Based on the definition the group has developed, the group (or a subset) may develop a document, such as a chart, narrative, or anecdote, that shows what the definition looks like in a school. Try to describe the experience of educators in a school with a high-quality learning system aligned to the definition. If the group decides to create a chart, one column might list what the vision for professional learning looks like, while a second column explains what it is not. Regardless of the format, the document might address:
 - How frequently educators meet to discuss and improve their practice;
 - How educators decide what to focus on;
 - The qualifications of those who are leading professional learning, and how they were trained and supported;
 - How educators give and receive feedback;
 - How educators know whether their efforts are resulting in improvements in practice and student learning;
 - What a professional learning conversation might sound like;
 - How leadership has created a culture that supports learning and improvement.
2. Share the document draft with the planning team and additional key stakeholders, either through written feedback or in person.
3. Revise based on feedback. If needed, facilitate a call or in-person meeting to reconcile feedback.
4. If time allows, engage additional stakeholders in discussing the second iteration of the document.
5. Prepare to publish the document more widely so that it serves as a concrete picture of what the vision would look like in practice. In preparation, consider:
 - How can we ensure that all staff share a common vision and understanding of quality professional learning?
 - Who are our best champions and messengers?

CLARIFY HOW EACH LEVEL OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM — SCHOOL, LOCAL, AND STATE — CAN UNIQUELY CONTRIBUTE TO HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING SYSTEMS

Time: 90 - 120 minutes

Materials: Handout: Essential Roles in our Professional Learning Ecosystem graphic organizer (p. 47), chart paper, markers, tape, sticky notes

1. Facilitate a group discussion, capturing roles within a pyramidal graphic organizer (with schools at the base as the most important level in the ecosystem):
 - Based on our vision for professional learning at the school level, what must be in place — in terms of culture, leadership, expertise, systems for measurement, time structures, and resources — to effectively implement our definition/vision of professional learning in every school?
 - How can districts establish the necessary conditions to support schools in this work? How can they support increased personalization of professional learning that may be unfeasible in an individual school (e.g. providing content-focused professional learning for subjects with only one teacher in the building)?
 - What is the state's role in contributing to this system? What is the state uniquely suited to do?
2. Consult the handout if helpful to get discussion started. Be sure to cite specific examples that are unique to your context.