



MOVING FROM  
**'STUDENTS  
CAN'T'**

TO  
**'HOW  
STUDENTS  
CAN'**

A LEARNING DESIGN  
ANCHORED IN THE STANDARDS  
FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING  
PUTS THE FOCUS ON EQUITY



BY JANICE BRADLEY, ANDREA RORRER, ASHLEY MCKINNEY, AND CORI GROTH

**W**hat happens when a university-based education policy center uses the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) to design purposeful professional learning experiences for teachers, community members, principals, central office administrators, superintendents, and university faculty to re-engage in the meaning and creation of equitable and excellent educational opportunities throughout the system?

Practitioners and decision makers unite in thoughtful learning conversations that include multiple perspectives about how pursuing excellence requires deliberate attention to equitable practices. School staffs see a viable path toward change in how they think about and advance equity and excellence through shared language, dispositions, and mindsets about instructional practices that open pathways to learning for all students.

These pathways are enhanced through the use of a professional learning system that embodies a continuous

improvement cycle at both the individual and organizational level. Conversations occur before, during, and after the learning experience, followed by actions taking place at school sites and central offices that support educators' changing practices for increasing equity and access for all students.

This deliberate, powerful, professional learning happens when:

1. The designers of professional learning shift their own thinking from professional development that offers content and activities for a workshop to focusing on what knowledge, skills, and dispositions educators can learn to transform their thinking and practices over time (Killion, 2013).
2. The Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) serve as part of the planning and learning scaffolding backbone.
3. Designers plan with the desired individual and systemic results in mind, including learning expectations and outcomes, outcomes to be observed, and the types of learning experiences needed for adults to change their dispositions about and practices for

- equity and excellence (Johnson, Perez, & Uline, 2013).
- The design team considers a research-based and organizationally systemic approach that fosters scalability and sustainability (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008).

## THE CONTEXT AND THE NEED

The Utah Education Policy Center’s mission is to bridge research, policy, and practice in Utah public schools and higher education. The center seeks to inform and influence educational policy to increase equity, excellence, access, and opportunities for all educators and students across the state. The center’s school support team creates the bridge of implementation to serve predominantly low-performing schools. The school support team offers a local school improvement process and support system to ensure that change and improvement occur in leadership, teaching, and learning.

When working with local schools and districts within our improvement system, we conduct extensive appraisals at school sites. Then, in collaboration with local educators, leadership teams identify school improvement needs, and we co-create school improvement plans, design structures and systems for ongoing standards-based professional learning, create support systems for successful implementation, and monitor progress.

While we note that developing human resource capacity is imperative in schools and districts, we frequently find that there is another element that needs further advancement. Along with increased knowledge and application of excellent and relevant instructional practices that allow every student access to mastery of content and state standards, we need to pay greater attention to substantive expansion of dispositions and mindsets from “students

can’t” to “how students can,” including how to apply this different disposition in the day-to-day work of an educator.

Our team regards professional learning as a foundational element, or anchor, of our work, including our

## HOW THE THOUGHT LEADER EXPERIENCE ALIGNS WITH THE STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Like many, we are critical of the one-shot professional development workshops that seem to persist despite the preponderance of research evidence that points to the need for intensive, targeted, job-embedded professional learning opportunities.

Unlike the one-time event with little to no impact, the thought leader professional learning experience is designed using Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning and results in changing dispositions. Specifically, we have focused on educators thinking differently about equity and excellence practices.

In the table below, we outline how we considered the standards in designing the thought leader professional learning experiences to change educator dispositions, knowledge, and skills.

STANDARD	ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS
Learning Communities	How can we create a structure to develop collective responsibility for changing equity practices? How can educators continually improve their equity practices?
Leadership	How can leaders develop their knowledge, skills, and dispositions for leading changes in equity practices? What support structures and systems are needed at the central office and school levels?
Resources	How can we coordinate resources to ensure that educators have opportunities for ongoing professional learning about equity?
Data	What data inform the need for a thought leader learning design? What data do we gather to determine what educators learned and changed?
Learning Designs	What is the intended outcome? How can educators be involved in the learning design selection? Does a thought leader design allow for all phases of the learning process — acquisition of knowledge to application and reflection? How will the design promote active engagement?
Implementation	What commitments can educators make to take action in their context? What support will be provided to implement the action? What kind of feedback loop will occur?
Outcomes	What results and changes do we envision if equity practices are implemented? What changes and results occurred after the thought leader experience?

comprehensive school improvement learning system support. In our approach, we believe that a key to changing or enhancing dispositions about excellence and equity comes from purposefully addressing the necessary leadership, instruction, learning, types of support, and processes for improvement that must occur.

To do this, we recognize that relationships, readiness for growth, and rigorous and relevant learning are required. Thus, our multifaceted experiences with and support of practitioners reflect the need to meet people where they are in their dispositions, knowledge, and practice and provide professional learning that makes the journey toward excellence and equity seem not only reasonable but also necessary and doable.

Our professional learning includes creating a space and time for practitioners to engage with research, including such experiences as a distinguished thought leader's research and applications of that research, facilitated targeted, focused, and sometimes "messy" conversations with state, district, school leaders, and whole school staffs about existing and effective equity practices, and explicit plans to execute leadership and instructional changes.

To capitalize on individual improvement efforts that can occur within each school site, a sequence of collaboratively designed learning experiences provides opportunities for school and district leaders and other educators to work toward similar goals while learning and working together. Through facilitated learning experiences, which often include nationally recognized leaders and researchers, school and district practitioners take part in a broader community conversation that explores challenges and frustrations as well as successes and opportunities for growth.

## WHY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AS AN ANCHOR?

Our school and district improvement support uses a systematic and agile approach to bridge research, policy, and practice. We use professional learning as an anchor to ensure that our processes are attentive to critical reflection and reflexivity — that is, developing professional identity necessary to transform an experience into something that shapes how one acts in his or her daily practice. While we are eager to work with schools and districts, we are averse to the idea of professional development that could not contribute to scalable or sustainable practice.

Thus, we plan professional learning that will address the systemic and variable needs of the schools and districts we work with. In part, this professional learning includes planning for proactive redundancy to build understanding, dispositions, and applied skills in equity and excellence. For instance, our school improvement work on-site reflects the Standards for Professional Learning, and the focus is on equity and excellence. We recognize the value of networking and engaging with other practitioners and nationally recognized thought leaders.

For this professional learning experience, we engage a thought leader in visits to schools to gain further context about our educational environment and then have an organized day that is portioned for district leaders, school leaders, and teachers. Using a *professional development* lens, our planning would have focused on the experiences educators would have. However, because we used a *professional learning* lens along with the Standards for Professional Learning, our focus was on what educators learned during the experience to allow them to think and act differently with regard to equitable practices for every student (Killion, 2013).

Given our experiential format, we wondered if anything different would result. If educators heard the message of creating high expectations, using instructional practices, and providing more rigor to achieve equity in opportunities and outcomes, would they change their dispositions and actions? Moreover, how could we develop a collective commitment and, therefore, greater impact long-term, given the multitier focus from the classroom level to the superintendency?

## THOUGHT LEADER LEARNING DESIGN

The impetus for the thought leader learning design came from our collaboration with schools and districts to support their improvement process. As we worked with different schools and districts and across settings, we were struck with the need for, and importance of, generating a powerful and shared vision for student success that could replace the common excuses and explanations of why students couldn't succeed.

With the goal of educators changing their dispositions and practices about equity and excellence, we chose the thought leader learning design to bring people together across settings, levels, and from varied personal and professional backgrounds to create synergy, excitement, and collective commitment to making schools excellent and equitable for all students (Flower, Muoio, & Garris, 2013).

## UNFOLDING EQUITY CONVERSATIONS

The center's work is grounded in equity and excellence. By nature and design, our school improvement support reflects this foundation. However, similar to our own evolution, we value the journey that must occur for dispositions to develop. This is embedded into our thought leader series.

Our initial efforts began by supplementing our school improvement support work with individual schools with a three-part series that included thought leaders external to the state. We included these thought leaders specifically because of the alignment between their research area or expertise and the assessments, school leadership and teaching needs, and progress in the schools at this point regarding school improvement and equity. The three-part series consisted of:

- **Stage 1.** The first thought leader grounded all attendees in mindsets about equity in the classroom and the schoolhouse. This national leader focused on the differences between equity and equality and the importance of building relationships to support growth.
- **Stage 2.** The second thought leader facilitated a conversation on what equitable and powerful Tier 1 instruction looks like in high-performing urban schools.
- **Stage 3.** The third thought leader focused on creating responsive learning environments and acting in equitable ways when considering school and student disciplinary responses and practices.

## STRUCTURE

When designing the thought leader learning experience, we applied “learning theories, research, and models,” as suggested by the Learning Designs standard of the Standard for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). This required that we address:

- How can educators be actively engaged?
- How will the thought leader design provide modeling and strategies to apply in practice?
- What will be the ongoing support for changing

dispositions and educator practices?

These design questions resulted in a five-part plan for the professional learning experiences. These include preparing for the experience, leadership learning, generative conversations, reflections and implications for improvement, and facilitated responsiveness.

### 1. Preparing for the experience

We seek active participant participation to prepare for the thought leader experience. One week before, we send questions to school staff—including principals, coaches, and teachers—to think about and discuss in professional learning communities or staff meetings. Examples of questions include:

- What structures or systems in your building are working to provide access for all scholars to the learning? What structures or systems might not be working?
- What does an equitable learning environment look, sound, or feel like (in your classroom, in your school)?
- There is an opportunity to learn about instructional practices that are effective with all students. What are you curious to find out?

### 2. Leadership engagement

District-level leaders, administrative teams, and principals engage in a two-hour leadership session facilitated by the thought leader. During this session, the thought leader facilitates exercises to examine beliefs and practices, develop skills regarding individual and organizational expectations, and align strategic efforts on leadership practices, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and support systems.

We find that convening leaders from each level creates space for norms to develop that otherwise may not be

feasible. One participant’s reflection calls these sessions “engaging and purposeful. The session was important for us to know how to re-create the experience with district leaders and do a gap analysis with full district office.” Another participant added: “It’s time to take a hard look at the current systems we have in place that promote equitable instruction.” A third noted, “We’ve got to learn how to operationalize equity.”

### 3. Generative conversations

During the large-group session, the thought leader shares ideas from his or her research and experiences to generate ongoing conversations with participants. Each thought leader who shared is considered a national expert in the field—one whose research and experiences contributed to changing mindsets about equity and excellence and creating responsive learning environments for all students. The thought leaders addressed questions sent earlier to participants, and they used these questions to engage participants in interactive dialogue to deepen their learning through conversation.

### 4. Reflecting on learning and implications for improvement

After the 1½-hour large-group session with the thought leader, each school staff meets for one hour in a smaller room with a facilitator to reflect on staff members’ learning from the speaker and develops commitment to take one action leading to change. From this process, schools integrate new thinking into their action plans.

### 5. Facilitated responsiveness

The structure for support that links to the thought leaders’ messages includes purposeful facilitation of responsiveness during our team’s monthly technical assistance learning sessions, school support activities, and communications with administrators.

Moreover, school support team members integrate the messages from the thought leaders into conversations, planning, and reflection on committed actions from their team sessions. This way, the thought leaders' main messages remain explicit, visible, and connected to implementation.

Actions taken at the school site include:

- Creating new beliefs about students and their learning (e.g. all students are capable);
- Identifying both individual and school actions to take (mastery, not coverage; increase student discussion; increase consistency in collaborative planning and instruction; building stronger relationships with students; checking for student understanding);
- Aligning beliefs and next steps with their improvement action plans; and
- Engaging in lengthy conversations where existing beliefs were openly challenged from a thought leader with a national perspective who seemed to awaken them from deficit thinking.

How do we know that convening is a quality professional learning experience? Adhering to the Data standard of the Standards for Professional Learning, we gather feedback from participants regarding the quality of their experiences and the ways in which their participation leads to changes in school or district practices. In our second year of implementation of convening with thought leaders, we have gathered evidence from end-of-session feedback forms and on-site support, communications, and observations.

Evidence so far includes transformations in dispositions and actions, shifting language

## "It was a pleasure to hear and learn from great role models in educational practices."

— A 5th-grade teacher

(student mastery, rigor, equity versus equality), references to key ideas (equitable instruction, high and clear expectations, building relational capacity) with greater frequency, and willingness to act differently based on conversations during professional learning communities and leadership team and school improvement sessions. Comments include:

- **From a behavior coach:** "That was the most worthwhile and powerful professional learning experience that I've ever had. I've shared with teachers how we keep ourselves grounded in the explicit trauma behaviors."
- **From an elementary principal:** "It's been amazing to have national-level speakers to be accessible to our staff and teachers and have it be relevant. They are coming in and showing teachers the why and how. That's had a huge influence on our teachers. It's so powerful to sit down and process what we've heard and answer questions together. The professional learning experience is not designed as a sit-and-get."
- **From a 5th-grade teacher:** "It was a pleasure to hear and learn from great role models in educational practices. I left feeling inspired and motivated to tackle hard things knowing they have done it with similar circumstances. Their enthusiasm for teaching and working with kids was infectious, and I gained a lot of positive insight."

Changing dispositions about equity is necessary and challenging. Through

a strategically designed thought leader learning experience using a professional learning lens, aligned to Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, evidence indicates that participants are learning to think in a different way about equitable practices serving each and every student.

### REFERENCES

**Flower, N.R., Muoio, A., & Garris, R. (2013).** *Gather: The art and science of effective convening*. New York, NY: The Rockefeller Foundation.

**Johnson, J.F., Perez, L.F., & Uline, C.L. (2013).** *Teaching practices from America's best urban schools*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

**Killion, J. (2013, May 22).** *Professional development vs. professional learning* [Audio podcast]. Available at <http://mediaportal.education.ky.gov/educator-effectiveness/2013/05/professional-development-vs-professional-learning>.

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

**Rorrer, A.K., Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J. (2008).** Districts as institutional actors in educational reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(3), 307-357.

•  
**Janice Bradley (janice.bradley@utah.edu) is assistant director, Andrea Rorrer (andrea.rorrer@utah.edu) is director, Ashley McKinney (ashley.mckinney@utah.edu) is research associate, and Cori Groth (cori.groth@utah.edu) is associate director at the Utah Education Policy Center, University of Utah. ■**