



HERE WE GO Eric Celeste

The term ‘high-quality’ makes all the difference

When I first met Alan Cohen, he was trying to explain to me what he meant when he used the term “high-quality early education.” This was about four years ago, when Cohen was first put in charge of early education in Dallas ISD, a large urban district composed of 220-plus campuses and nearly 160,000 students. We were discussing how some researchers suggested praise for pre-K programs was overstated, that improvement in student outcomes didn’t always occur, or at least often faded.

“That’s true,” he said, “if the programs aren’t high-quality.” Cohen then opened a spreadsheet on which he’d scored every early education campus in the district on the 30 factors he said a classroom must meet to be considered “high-quality”: everything from more district support for out-of-class professional development for pre-K teachers to hiring pre-K coaching specialists to work in class with instructors. “High-quality early education, though, improves student outcomes,” he said. “I know it does.” The results he achieved in Dallas back up that assertion: From 2013-15, kindergarten readiness for Dallas’ disadvantaged pre-K population rose dramatically, from one in three kids being kindergarten-ready to one in two.

This was a seminal conversation for me. Once I realized the distinction, I viewed the research around that topic through the high-quality lens. It became clear to me that much of the research

suggests that *high-quality* pre-K programs make a real difference in educational outcomes.

A few years later, I came to Learning Forward, and I quickly began viewing the research around professional learning the same way. People often talk about inconclusive evidence of the positive effects of professional learning. But once they learn that there is a vast difference between many programs and high-quality professional learning, their faith in the effectiveness of professional learning is usually rewarded.

Drawing that link between the student outcome benefits of high-quality early education and high-quality professional learning helped me explain not only to myself but to others the importance of both educational approaches. It’s also a big reason I was excited to put together this issue focusing on professional education — marrying the two topics, if you will. (Or, at least, seeing at what points they intersect and support each other.)

That’s why I asked Cohen, now president and CEO of Thrive Washington, Washington state’s lead nonprofit partner in advancing high-quality early learning, to write a feature for this issue. His article (p. 42) explores one innovative program trying to better train high-quality instructors for early education — a specialty only now being given widespread consideration by



Alan Cohen

researchers.

It’s not all early ed in the following pages, of course. One of the signature changes to *The Learning Professional* since our February redesign has been to include a variety of other feature topics in our Ideas section, and this issue is no exception. We’re especially

pleased to bring you an article on the work Learning Forward is doing with eight Galveston County superintendents and their leadership teams to improve teaching and learning across the county. The article (p. 58) focuses on the principal learning community in one of those Texas districts: Clear Creek ISD.

Elsewhere in the issue, we’re excited to introduce you to Elizabeth Foster, Learning Forward’s associate director of standards, research, and strategy. She discusses an important new report, *Effective Teacher Professional Development* (p. 12) from the Learning Policy Institute, a paper that provides new evidence about the positive impact effective professional learning has on student outcomes. Again, a look at how high-quality professional learning is ultimately about improving student outcomes — a thread that runs through not only this issue, but all our work. Hope you enjoy.

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