



## OUR TAKE

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# ARE PERSONALIZATION AND HIGH-QUALITY MATERIALS MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE?

**L**earning Forward believes districts that don't prioritize the use of high-quality instructional materials are neglecting a pivotal ingredient in establishing equitable learning conditions (Learning Forward, 2018). If offering every student the opportunity to experience rigorous teaching and learning is part of a district's mission — and there are very few systems where this is not true — then high-quality materials are essential.

We also acknowledge that ensuring each student's access to rigorous content is necessary but not sufficient. Intellectual engagement is a critical factor in instruction and learning. As authors throughout this issue of *The Learning Professional* demonstrate, personalization gives students multiple entry points to content and helps them develop agency in their learning. Addressing their interests, needs, and unique approaches to learning are factors in whether they succeed at high levels.

Are personalizing learning for students and implementing high-quality instructional materials mutually exclusive? Can we support teachers to implement high-quality materials and nurture their agency and autonomy in their classrooms at the same time?

Learning Forward's just-completed four-day Summer Institutes in Boston raised these questions for me. We facilitated the institutes in conjunction

with our content colleagues Student Achievement Partners and BSCS Science Learning. With educators from across the country in districts large and small, we explored the rationale for focusing team-based professional learning squarely on student standards and high-quality instructional materials.

Participants dove deeply into one of three content areas — mathematics, science, or language arts — to study student materials and how they represent the shifts in approach to teaching content as prescribed by college- and career-ready standards and the Next Generation Science Standards. We engaged them in the process of reviewing and selecting high-quality materials, and in the kind of content-focused, effective professional learning we believe should be the norm for them, their colleagues, and those they lead or support. Finally, teams examined the five-stage learning team model described in *Becoming a Learning Team* (Hirsh & Crow, 2018) to consider how to support teachers as they implement instructional materials with students.



## MATERIALS LAY THE GROUNDWORK

As we emphasized throughout the institutes, materials on their own aren't the whole story. They only lay the groundwork for high-quality teaching and learning when they are part of an instructional vision that starts with high standards for students and encompasses aligned materials, professional learning, and assessments.

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Still, making the case for adopting high-quality instructional materials is sometimes a hard sell for educators. Teachers value the opportunity that developing lessons gives them to tailor instruction for the students in the room and create engaging and unique learning experiences. Teachers also know better than anyone the specific needs and interests of the students in the classroom on any given day.

In an environment where student data drives professional learning, as outlined in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), personalization is not an add-on, but is integral to the work of ensuring equity. When teachers know where specific learning challenges lie, they establish the foundation for personalizing learning. They set learning goals for themselves and for students, and they create learning agendas to prepare themselves to meet student needs.

They continually monitor progress to know that any learning experience they create is on track to achieve its intended outcomes, and they make adjustments when necessary. They experience support for new tools specifically created to drive personalization, and the professional learning designs for that support mirror how students will use such tools.

The rich learning in which we engaged during the Summer Institutes made clear that, with materials in hand, teachers don't lose their autonomy; rather, they use their considerable expertise and creativity to ensure that each and every student has access to the content in the materials. For some students, attending to unique needs may require enrichment; for others, tiers of support or scaffolding.

### HELP EACH STUDENT THRIVE

The professional learning that teachers engage in, ideally in teams, prepares them to do this challenging but important work by offering time for intensive study of content, support from knowledgeable peers and coaches,

and discussions about which concepts may present challenges to a particular student and how to address them.

Ultimately, we believe that high-quality materials, personalization, and ongoing job-embedded professional learning must co-exist in the journey to help each student thrive. This is a complex balance, and we are still figuring out what it looks like. As always, we encourage you to share with us your approaches and what you are learning from them.

We know that achieving our equity goals of ensuring that each and every student has access to effective teaching

and learning requires defining and aligning these elements.

### REFERENCES

**Hirsh, S. & Crow, T. (2018).** *Becoming a learning team* (2nd ed.). Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

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

**Learning Forward. (2018).** *High-quality curricula and team-based professional learning: A perfect partnership for equity*. Oxford, OH: Author. ■

## NEW WHITE PAPER EXPLORES D.C.'S TEAM LEARNING MODEL

Learning Forward has just released *The Path to Instructional Excellence and Equitable Outcomes*, a white paper on the District of Columbia Public Schools' innovative approach to supporting teaching instruction, called Learning Together to Advance our Practice, or LEAP.

LEAP is based on research that has found the most effective professional learning is school-based and content-specific, grounded in the instructional materials and strategies that teachers will use with their students. At its core, LEAP is about helping teachers become expert at teaching high-quality, standards-aligned content so that every student experiences rich, engaging, and challenging instruction every day.

Here are key takeaways from the paper:

- Teacher effectiveness increases through professional learning cycles focused on student content and instructional materials.
- Implementing high-quality instructional materials is complex and requires intensive support for educators.
- Alignment of an instructional vision throughout a system is bolstered through collaboration with an external assistance provider.
- Elements for successful implementation include a plan for intentional scaling and intentional development of leaders throughout a system.
- Educators who implemented LEAP with high fidelity saw marked improvements in student results.

LEAP was created through a partnership with Leading Educators, a professional learning nonprofit technical assistance organization. After two years of district capacity building and gradual release of design and implementation, the district has expanded the LEAP program to include teachers in all 116 DCPS schools.

Download *The Path to Instructional Excellence and Equitable Outcomes* at [www.learningforward.org/LEAP](http://www.learningforward.org/LEAP)

