



## CALL TO ACTION

Denise Glyn Borders

# STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT IS ONGOING, CHALLENGING — AND NECESSARY

### LET ME HEAR FROM YOU

In my first several columns for *The Learning Professional*, I'll highlight specific issues that are core to my concerns as Learning Forward's president/CEO. I look forward to hearing your input and questions anytime.

**Denise Glyn Borders is president/CEO of Learning Forward.**

One of the most important roles leaders play in professional learning is strategy. Making meaningful improvements in teaching requires everyone to work toward common goals. When a district aims to improve literacy, for example, leaders should ensure that all teachers have the tools and knowledge to teach grade-appropriate skills that build on one another. Random acts of professional learning don't get schools or students to accelerated learning.

Much of our work at Learning Forward is helping states, districts, schools, and organizations approach professional learning strategically. Lately I've been focusing on a key component of strategy at the system level: how and where leaders position professional learning in the districts and schools they lead. Is it the highest priority for impacting teacher practice and student learning? What funding sources support it? How is impact measured? Where does professional learning live in the organizational chart? The variety is striking.

There is no single right answer to these questions. Professional learning can thrive under many different umbrellas. But the one place it can't thrive is in a silo. Through conversations with superintendents, chief academic officers, principals, and other leaders, I have become convinced that strategic alignment and collaboration are core to achieving the vision of excellence for education organizations.

Alignment means that everyone is looking toward the same horizon and pulling in the same direction. Everyone knows not only where they are headed as a team, but what they are accountable for and why it is essential to the goal. Actualizing this kind of alignment in the day-to-day work takes communication, collaboration, and structures to enable that collaboration.

That means that superintendents must have opportunities to communicate goals to professional development directors and listen to what they and their staff members need to achieve those goals. Instructional coaches need to hear from the directors how to focus their work in support of the districtwide goal and share how the teachers they work with are progressing. Curriculum and instruction offices need to be in this loop, too — for example, to ensure that high-quality professional learning for teachers accompanies newly selected instructional materials. Most importantly, these educators work together to design professional learning. Through such aligned, collaborative structures, the vision from leadership becomes happily married to the daily work of teaching and learning, and leaders amplify professional learning's impact when they create systems to assess changes in teacher practice and resulting improvements in student achievement.

Strategic plans should provide an articulated, and ideally visual, representation of how professional learning is integral to the district. They help everyone involved see the role of high-quality instructional materials and other essential resources. And they can inform conversations and plans for funding professional learning, a commitment we outline as important in the Standards for Professional Learning, which are scheduled for a revision beginning in 2020.

The work of strategic alignment is ongoing and challenging. I am inspired by the many superintendents, principals, and other leaders in the Learning Forward community engaged in this work. I am eager to learn from all of you about your successes, challenges, and ideas. I hope you will include Learning Forward in your collaborative process. ■

