



We can only demand better professional learning when we know what it entails.

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CALL TO ACTION

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LET'S PUT AN END TO WASTED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING DAYS

I recently heard about a troubling professional learning experience from one of the teachers I spoke with at Learning Forward's Annual Conference in St. Louis last December. He had just spent a district professional development day learning to teach high schoolers how to make a tray of nachos. Yes, you read that correctly.

While his colleagues who teach core subjects like math and reading spent the day in content-oriented team learning, every "leftover" teacher from grades K-12 — music, physical education, health, business, and others — focused on nachos. The district staff leading the activity didn't connect the exercise to any stated outcomes, and this teacher knew his district had wasted a precious opportunity.

Why does this sort of thing happen? And more importantly, what can we do about it?

Such wasted learning days happen for a range of reasons. Two that we see most commonly may have been at play in this teacher's district: a lack of district vision and no meaningful educator input.

Lack of district vision for professional learning. When a professional learning system is aligned with a districtwide vision for teaching and learning, educators' learning is relevant to their classrooms. However, not all districts have a clear vision, or they write an impressive vision statement but fail to ensure that all educators know or understand it. Others fail to extend it to connect their vision to existing professional learning structures.

No meaningful educator input on their learning. Many districts have recognized the value of offering educators voice and choice in their learning, which can help ensure relevance, buy-in, and reciprocal learning. But when educators don't have input, they may believe there's no point in demanding better than nachos, especially when wasted learning days have been the norm and shaped educators' understanding of what professional development is.



What can we do to change these patterns? Leadership and vision are critical elements, starting with two things all leaders and advocates can do: increase awareness and elevate educator voice.

Increase awareness about how to best use professional learning time.

Because Learning Forward has been working on this challenge for decades,

we know that often a limited number of educators in a system have the authority or resources to drive the design of professional learning. But it is up to all of us, regardless of our role, to spread the word about what high-quality professional learning is to colleagues both within and outside our districts and organizations. We can only demand better professional learning when we know what it entails.

Elevate educator voice and student data. School and district leaders who prioritize adult learning create cultures where teachers and other educators are safe to speak up for their needs and where even students, as we discuss throughout this issue of *The Learning Professional*, have a say in the support their teachers need.

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Why and how she's learning to write curriculum: Plano ISD has a standard curriculum across the district that is written by teachers. The goal is to make sure that all students are learning the same content, although teachers may teach it in slightly different ways.

Any teacher can attend a curriculum design institute the district holds and then apply to be a curriculum writer. If you're selected, you receive training and support and you write the curriculum together over the summer. The district then provides professional learning to roll out the changes to teachers.

I decided to be part of the curriculum writing program because I have so many ideas I want to share. Working with a district team allows me and the other writers to reach as many students as possible, not just those in our own classrooms.

How she got involved with Learning Forward: Learning Forward participates in Plano ISD's externship program for teachers. The city has a very successful and competitive internship program for students, and they built on that to develop something similar for teachers so they could see what it's like to work in an environment other than school and

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see what they are preparing students for. Through that program, I found out about all the amazing resources Learning Forward offers and decided to apply for the externship. I ended up getting to help with the 2019 Summer Institute in Boston.

What she and her students learned from the externship: The students who were applying for internships had to do the same application process that I was doing for the externship, so I shared with them how I did my resume, helped them prepare for interviews, and used strategies like small-group discussions and presentations during class and explained why it's important to be able to do those things.

Since the externship, I have been sprinkling stories and examples during class. For example, I talk about how it's important to find a need and fill it. During the institute, one of my responsibilities was making sure presenters got where they needed to

go on time. Because of some severe weather, a lot of flights were delayed, and it caused a lot of stress.

I tell the students how I needed to be flexible, but also how I needed to figure out what was needed and fill that need without waiting to be asked. I also tell them about how important it is to communicate well and respectfully with people, even when people are complaining a lot or being difficult. I explained that you have to decide how you're going to react when people say all kinds of things to you.

Her best and worst professional learning experiences: The worst are workshops that tell and don't show and that focus exclusively on why to do something without explaining how. So much of the time, a presenter is reading from a PowerPoint slide with super small letters.

I want to be engaged in a conversation, or discuss a "what would you do?" scenario, so I can learn about the how. The Learning Forward Summer Institute was my favorite experience — honestly! — because I had so many deep, meaningful conversations with people I wouldn't have met otherwise. I got so many ideas of things I would like to try. ■

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But offering voice and choice is not enough. Educators need the knowledge, skills, and tools to understand and use data — student, educator, school, and district data — to plan their learning. Leaders must intentionally support educators to build those skills and resources.

Our responsibility as the membership association for professional learning means Learning Forward will continue to use *The Learning*

We will also continue our campaign to ensure every educator is an advocate for his or her learning and the learning of his or her peers.

Professional, our Annual Conference, and many other outlets to support leaders of learning to expand their expertise and influence. We will also continue our campaign to ensure every

educator is an advocate for his or her learning and the learning of his or her peers.

The teacher I spoke with at the conference clearly knew he deserved more and that his learning is a priority. We thank him and all of you for taking steps each day to abolish practices that waste time, money, and most importantly, educators' valuable energy. ■