



Let's use the lessons learned though this crisis to build for an effective and equitable future.

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POLICY POINTS

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AIM HIGHER AS WE MOVE TOWARD A NEW NORMAL

Over the past few months, Learning Forward has convened educators to share support in navigating the COVID-19 crisis. Through webinars, our online community, and individual conversations, we have heard educators' needs evolve week by week. Many education systems focused initially on food and safety and then on internet connectivity and devices.

Throughout these stages, systems have been reducing bureaucratic requirements in favor of meeting the basic needs of students and educators in real time. In early April, Learning Forward — which helped write the definition of professional learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) — supported the U.S. Department of Education's decision to waive some funding requirements so districts would have more flexibility in how to use professional learning dollars.

The waivers included a provision that states could offer emergency stopgap training for educators who had not had access to ongoing, job-embedded, sustained professional learning related to distance learning before the pandemic. Along with added education stabilization dollars, this flexibility for how funds could be used was critical.

But this was a short-term measure that helped to address immediate and extraordinary needs. As we move into the next phase of COVID-impacted teaching and learning, Learning Forward will continue to advocate for adherence to the ESSA definition's vision of ongoing, job-embedded, sustained professional learning. The next phase of support must be a long-term investment in the capacity of educators.

As a start, this should include reinforcement of training days or workshops with follow-up learning and support with coaches or among learning communities. This will help educators who participated in the stopgap training be more likely to retain new knowledge and build new skills. This combination of strategies brings us closer to what we know makes a difference in professional learning.

A second step will include the incorporation of virtual supports for ongoing professional learning — virtual coaching, virtual peer observations, virtual collaboration, and facilitated online communities. Educators need to learn by using the same technology they are using with students. This will increase not only comfort levels with the technology but further discovery of the opportunities and benefits the technology offers.

Learning Forward looks forward to the day when we can take the elements of effective professional learning and the lessons we have learned from the pandemic and combine them for a new long-term strategy. Something that has stuck with me throughout this pandemic is this idea that we don't want to return to the imperfect education reality that we had. Let's use the lessons learned through this crisis to build for an effective and equitable future.

Professional learning is a great place to start as we envision an innovative, more responsive new normal. If we can reach all educators with the just-in-time professional learning that they need and provide it in an environment, in person or virtually, that is collaborative and sustained, we will succeed in not just surviving the pandemic but moving forward as a result of it. ■

