



This moment of understanding, embracing, and learning about each other's experiences is an opportunity for professional learning around the conditions that shape the lives of our students.

Ash Vasudeva is a member of the Learning Forward board of trustees.

BEING FORWARD

Ash Vasudeva

'THERE'S AN OPENNESS TO LEARNING AND CHANGING RIGHT NOW'

Ash Vasudeva is vice president of strategic initiatives at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He joined the Learning Forward board of trustees in December 2019.

Why has professional learning been important in your work?

Ultimately, everything we do in education comes down to high-quality teaching. When I was at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, we called it effective teaching. No matter what you call it, it's at the core. Even though political and social forces may shift the focus sometimes, the pendulum will always swing back to high-quality teaching.

For example, when I was [co-executive director] at the School Redesign Network at Stanford University, it was around the time that the No Child Left Behind Act heightened the importance of test-based accountability measures in literacy and mathematics. But the critique of that approach was also emerging.

The work of our team was to figure out how to align and support systems, including central office, to take a systemic view of excellence in the classroom so they would be ready to support high-quality teaching when the pendulum did swing back.

To get to excellent teaching, you have to have a mindset about how to create richer, stronger professional learning environments for teachers. When I was at the School Redesign Network, NSDC [which later became Learning Forward] commissioned my colleague Linda Darling-Hammond to review effective teaching supports from an international perspective. One of the big takeaways was the importance of professional learning in developing high-quality systems.

In that review, we saw how well many other nations in the world were doing versus the U.S. I saw a major mismatch in our aspirations and our conditions for teachers. What was so compelling from that review of other countries' systems was the role of *ongoing* support and collaborative environments in getting to excellent teaching.

What are some of the readings that have influenced your thinking?

Early in my career, I was heavily influenced by *Horace's Compromise*, by Ted Sizer of the Coalition of Essential Schools. It guided my thinking about what schools could be, and I continue to think about that.

I also appreciate books that characterize teachers and teaching in high-quality systems. For example, [Amanda Ripley's] *The Smartest Kids in the World* drew a comparison among different countries' ways of getting to outcomes. You can drill students and test prep them and they get a good score, but they lose a richness of understanding and critical thinking and engaging with one another.

Or you can have rich classrooms led by highly skilled teachers where students gain expertise through peer collaboration, and you can get to the same place on a test score but with so much more.

In [U.S.] education, we're always bouncing between "show me the test score" and "show me the educated child." We have to always push for "show me the educated child" — and for supporting the qualified professional who got him or her there. Teachers have so much more to offer [than test prep] and we need to do more to support what they have to offer.

What is your assessment of the state of research on professional learning?

In education research, it has been challenging to sort out effects, that is, to figure out what factors contribute to what outcomes. In traditional research, when you study an individual



intervention, you are looking at how one factor affects another factor, generally in highly controlled settings. But educational settings are often more complicated than that.

I'm heartened by work that recognizes that improving teaching is multifaceted steps and systemic. However, those complex approaches are more difficult to study. Even if you can isolate the factors in a controlled intervention, when you take any intervention designed to support teachers out into schools, all the conditions and factors that went into the positive effect may not be present.

The work I'm doing now at the Carnegie Foundation is about how to create systems that allow for evidence-based changes to be taken up in new settings. We call that adaptive integration. No two systems are exactly

alike, so how do we build a set of processes that are checking to see if you're making progress along the way, if you're making early gains that are predictive of future results?

You're making an educated guess that something will work, but then you're building in a set of processes to test that hypothesis and refine its use in a specific place. We believe this kind of continuous improvement research is what's been missing in education.

In this kind of approach, which we call improvement science, feedback and guidance from teachers and students is essential to refine and improve the science. The people doing the work of teaching have to be empowered and encouraged to improve the work of teaching. And without teachers playing an active, front-and-center role in shaping professional learning and

improvement efforts, we'll be far less effective than we could be.

Improvement science tries to bring in multiple types of expertise. There is some knowledge base that resides largely in the education research literature that says, basically, "here's what we think we know."

But then you need the knowledge of the local context and conditions: "What do the challenges and problems look like here?" Nobody knows the local context and conditions like teachers. In improvement science, there's a merging and an interaction of those two types of expertise.

Traditionally, in our field, we haven't valued the process of understanding the problem from the perspective of the users — teachers and students. Improvement science is trying to change that.

With so much going on in the world, what are the implications for professional learning?

We're in a unique cultural moment. There is a pandemic going on, but there is also a social and cultural crisis about race in America. I think there's an openness to learning and changing right now. This moment of understanding, embracing, and learning about each other's experiences is an opportunity for professional learning around the conditions that shape the lives of our students.

Our professional learning agenda will be richer for these conversations that are happening now. It should challenge all of us to ask ourselves what the world looks like from the perspective of our students and families and how we can better support them. ■