



BEING FORWARD

Linda Chen

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Linda Chen is a member of the Learning Forward board of trustees.

WE MUST DISRUPT THE STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO EQUITY

Linda Chen is the chief academic officer of the New York City Department of Education, the largest school system in the U.S., with over 1.1 million students in 1,800 schools. She joined the Learning Forward board of trustees in December 2019.

As chief academic officer of a large district, you oversee curriculum and instruction as well as other academic departments. How does professional learning contribute to the success of those departments and the district as a whole?

Professional learning is really the cornerstone of the work that we do in every one of the departments. The Chief Academic Office largely provides systems-level professional learning that is then shared with superintendents and instructional support staff in the districts and boroughs to support every school and the educators in them.

We are responsible for the content of academic policy and evaluation; curriculum, and instruction, including culturally responsive teaching, instruction for English language/multilingual learners and students with disabilities; assessment; teacher evaluation, development, and leadership. While we provide distinct content in each of those along with professional learning that meets the needs of different educators across experience levels, a common anchor is advancing equity.

A combination of expertise, knowing our audience, and a keen focus on student learning are key components to ensuring success in this work.



Equity is part of Learning Forward’s core mission. What is the role of professional learning in creating educational equity?

There is much work we need to do collectively to disrupt the structural barriers to achieving equity, and I think the only way we can do it is through professional learning. At the core of professional learning is development, both technical and adaptive development.

To best serve our students, we need to know who they are to meet them where they are with an asset-based approach. This requires a mindset of belonging, inclusion and pedagogical content expertise that tailors learning to the strengths, gifts, and needs of students in front of us. Mindset, behavior, and infrastructure change requires professional learning.

What are some of the positive trends you’ve seen in professional learning over the past decade?

It’s been good to see that professional learning communities are more of the norm than they used to be, and there is less of the sit-and-get kinds of things. There are also more resources that are readily available, through technology that provides the ability to connect people both synchronously and asynchronously.

Even before the pandemic, people were using Google Drive and documents to share information or other collaborative platforms, which has been very helpful for accessing information and connecting with learning communities.

There is also more attention to equity now. But it needs to go beyond talk to action and disruption that results in educational excellence, especially for our historically underserved and marginalized students.

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for combining the best of all learning platforms and virtual tools, without abandoning the importance of social interaction in schools.

KEY ACTIONS

FOR EDUCATION LEADERS:

- Explore teaching and learning tools systemically to identify options for innovation.

- Hold technology platforms and tools to high standards.
- Build educators' capacity in leveraging technology for student learning and professional learning alike.
- Advocate for technology systems and solutions that will advance district goals.

Clearly, this year's back to school isn't what we all grew up with or

anticipated. Yet, despite the many challenges educators face right now, we are hopeful that these challenges will reveal new avenues to excellence and equity in teaching and learning. Our greatest hopes are inspired by the educators we see leading the way every day. Learning Forward is here to support you at every step. ■

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What are some of the biggest needs that remain in professional learning, aside from the immediate needs caused by the pandemic?

The biggest needs are at the intersection of adult and student learning. Professional learning has to be about adults feeling they have agency and empowerment through knowledge and experience, but it must also be inextricably tied to impact on student learning. It is our responsibility to ensure that every student thrives through the experiences we provide, and are able to do grade-level work and beyond to prepare them for their future.

Even in the context of this pandemic, there is quite a bit of focus on technology skills. How do we engage in professional learning — largely in a new mode virtually — to ensure that, as a result of our connection as adults, we can fully leverage opportunities to greatly advance student learning within this environment?

We have the opportunity to connect with students in a different way, in a more personalized and inclusive way, because we are teaching them directly into their homes. We

have the ability to know them better and tailor work through the efficiencies technology can provide.

What readings or resources have had a large influence on your career?

There are so many, but I'll start with the earliest reading that influenced my thinking on racial equity. During an undergraduate sociology course at the University of Washington, I was assigned a short article called "White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh.

That piece impacted me and ignited the fire in my belly, if you will, around the importance of equity in education. It wasn't just the article itself; it was the rich discourse that my professor carefully designed and facilitated around it.

A few other more recent books include *Courageous Conversations About Race* by Glenn E. Singleton and *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond.

Another area that is important in my work is instructional leadership, and one reading I recommend is *Student-Centered Leadership* by Viviane Robinson. It centers on research showing that, of all the things principals

do, leading teacher learning and development has the biggest impact on student learning.

As a systems leader, I deeply believe that principals are the greatest lever to ensuring the success of every student at scale, particularly those students who have been historically underserved and marginalized.

What was one of your own most meaningful professional learning experiences?

By far, the best professional learning experience for me was when a staff developer came into my classroom and did demo lessons with my students. That showed me what was possible with my own students and showed me how to enact in my own classroom what I was reading and discussing in professional development.

That experience was powerful in the context of all the other professional learning pieces that allowed me to read, learn, discuss, reflect, teach, and ultimately have a positive impact on my students, which is what professional learning is all about. ■

COACHES NOTEBOOK / Joellen Killion

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They have the vital task of ensuring that the infrastructure of the coaching program is sound, coaches have the necessary preparation and ongoing professional learning they need to succeed, there are both formative

and summative measures in place to continuously assess and evaluate the coaching program, and coaches have coaching and other forms of support to succeed in their roles.

In most cases, the responsibilities of a coach champion — often a central

office staff member — are added to an already-long list of duties.

For coaching to have its desired effect, the overall program must be sound and fully functioning. Clear roles and responsibilities are the first step. ■