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## FROM WHERE WE SIT

Denise Glyn Borders and Wendy Robinson

## SIGNS OF HOPE, ACTIONS FOR CHANGE

**W**e see signs of spring all around us and, along with the change in season, several reasons for hope for educators and students. After weathering a punishing 2020, we are cautiously optimistic for better conditions for our students, educators, and communities.

More citizens are receiving COVID-19 vaccines by the day in the U.S., with an encouraging trajectory for the rest of the year. Many states — although sadly not all — have prioritized vaccinations for educators, hand in hand with more schools resuming in-person instruction and other essential services.

The Biden administration signed into law the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which includes funding for schools through the almost \$123 billion Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund. Money will be allocated to provide services to enable homeless children to attend school, address learning loss, ensure students have access to high-speed Internet access and devices, and so much more.

Many of the funds allocated to districts through states can be used to cover the professional learning needs and services that are so essential in ensuring educators have the capacity to strengthen teaching and learning in our current context. This funding will help educators address both short- and long-term needs and is a positive move toward sustaining significant support for professional learning, at least at the U.S. federal level. Beyond funds allocated for education, the aspects of the law that will reduce child poverty will have an enormous impact on students' readiness for education in the coming years.

And with that good news, our biggest reason for optimism remains the expertise, passion, and perseverance of educators around the world. We've heard inspiring examples of educators addressing challenges they've never encountered before and working tirelessly to create solutions so their students have continued to learn and thrive.

What we've experienced and recognized over the past 12 months, however, amplifies the following significant challenges that educators and communities face, and we at Learning Forward are committed to directing our energy to ensure professional learning can address them.

**Pandemic preparedness.** The COVID-19 pandemic isn't over by any means, and we recognize this may not be the last global health crisis that will impact schools. The need is as great as ever for systems that continually strengthen educator knowledge and skills so each student has access to high-quality teaching and learning and each educator has support and the opportunity



to collaborate and learn with colleagues, both virtually and in person.

**Equity in education.** The longstanding inequities that were made more obvious by the pandemic remain. Professional learning can address lack of access to effective teaching and learning for students of color, students living in poverty, students living in rural areas and other hard-to-reach circumstances and contexts, but only when nations, provinces, states, and systems prioritize meaningful learning for each and every student, no matter their context, background, or ability.

**Civic education.** The fundamental disagreements about the nature of truth and civic unrest that follows underscore the need to prepare educators to support students and communities to understand current events in real time and respond critically. Civic education, deep learning, and critical thinking must remain among our priorities for student and educator learning.

**Technology skills.** Educators' needs to leverage technology to ensure student access and engagement will grow, as will their need for professional learning to continuously upgrade digital and e-learning skills and practices.

**Assessment.** In the coming months and years, educators will need evolving strategies to assess what students know and are able to do and to plan ambitious teaching to accelerate grade-level learning.

These issues are complex and multifaceted. As we shape educator support to address them, the principles of high-quality professional learning are more important than ever. First, one-shot workshops won't help educators transform their knowledge, practices, and beliefs in ways that serve their students. Educators need long-term, sustained learning in collaboration with peers, facilitated by coaches and

informed by reflection and feedback from others.

During the pandemic, many educators experienced workshop learning to address immediate needs related to using unfamiliar tools and connecting with students remotely. This just-in-time emergency skill development is necessary, particularly in times of rapid change. And, it isn't the same as — or a substitute for — research-based professional learning where educators engage, for example, in ongoing teamwork and coaching to build their capacity to implement high-quality curriculum with a diverse mix of students.

The learning educators experience to continually improve over the long haul happens in systems that prioritize learning for each educator and each student, with informed attention to the conditions that surround learning, the leadership and resources that set a vision and create structures, and the commitment to equity that drives evidence-based practices.

Recognizing what educators require and deserve, we're proud that Learning Forward is prioritizing the following, among so many other important initiatives this year.

**Standards revision.** The revision of the Standards for Professional Learning has been underway since a year ago, with a plan to update both standards and implementation tools to meet educators' evolving needs.

**Virtual services.** Learning Forward has shifted our learning and professional services to online contexts, from the Annual Conference to our new coaching course to a wide range of services. (Learn more about our online coaching course on p. 68).

**Advocacy.** In concert with our members and affiliate leaders, Learning Forward continues to advocate for

increased and sustained U.S. federal funding for professional learning and funding to address emergency needs.

**Equity work.** Learning Forward is working with a growing number of districts and states to develop equity-oriented professional services that strengthen educators' capacity to foreground equitable access to teaching, leading, and learning, meet the needs of students who have historically been underserved, and support teachers and leaders of color.

Our work is informed by your needs. This magazine is just one way we share information with members. As members taking charge of your own continual growth, we encourage you to explore our many avenues for knowledge building and connection:

- Our webinars over the past year have grown as a lively platform for learning and community.
- *Professional Learning News*, our weekly e-newsletter, brings you the latest news and research.
- Our learning networks convene district teams to dig deep into their local problems of practice.
- At our virtual Annual Conference later this year, we'll learn by your side from colleagues sharing their lessons and insights and leading voices offering inspiration and findings from research. We'd love to see every one of you there.

We appreciate your dedication and expertise in leading schools and systems through and beyond a very challenging time. Please get in touch with us to help Learning Forward understand your challenges, successes, and highest priorities. ■