



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Betty Wilson-McSwain

'WHEN WE LEARN BETTER, WE DO BETTER'

Betty Wilson-McSwain is assistant superintendent for federal programs and testing for McComb (Mississippi) School District and president of Learning Forward Mississippi.

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Why she is invested in professional learning: I became a Learning Forward member in 2006, but I can't remember a time when I didn't have professional learning. Professional learning can't be separated from anything I do. When I became a vocational director (what would now be called a career and technical education director), my staff and I started doing book studies together and then going to conferences together so that I would know how to support what they learned. I also lead our Early Learning Collaborative funded by the state legislature. The accompanying Collaborative Act of 2013 requires that we have professional learning communities that meet once a month. But in our district, we meet twice a month, and sometimes more, because we want continuous learning. When we learn better, we do better.

How professional learning is embedded in her current role: A big part of my job is managing federal programs, so part of what I do is look for available professional development dollars. That includes Title IIA, but Title I and Title V also have professional learning components. We use all of these resources to build the capacity of the people who are working with our scholars. We want to be sure that we use them in ways that make a difference. So, for example, when schools submit Title IIA proposals, we review them to make sure they follow Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning.

Why she relies on Standards for Professional Learning: The standards create a universal language for best practices and help us set criteria to ensure we are all learning in ways that really make a difference for students. Otherwise, we could say we were doing professional learning, but it might not be high-quality. That's why the Mississippi Public Schools Accountability Standards, which establish school accreditation policies and procedures, have Process Standard 15, which says that districts must base their professional learning efforts on Learning Forward's standards.

How Learning Forward Mississippi is building knowledge about the standards: Our affiliate just partnered with Learning Forward and the Mississippi Department of Education to do a deep dive into the standards because it's important for us to understand the standards to help others apply them. My favorite part was when the Learning Forward facilitators asked us to draw visual analogies of the standards. Each group went about it a different way, but everyone developed a deeper understanding (see p. 77). One thing we're learning is that we use a lot of practices that are consistent with the standards, but we weren't categorizing them this way or using the language of the standards. It's important to become more intentional about that.

Why Learning Forward Mississippi embodies the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard: Collaboration is essential for spreading best practices. We have a close relationship with the state department of education, including having board members who work in the department. That helped us get involved in writing the standards into the state accreditation standards and designing processes to monitor their implementation. We also have representatives on our board from higher education institutions. Collaboration helps us highlight best practices across the state. For example, in 2010, we decided to begin the Spotlight Schools award to highlight schools that are making growth and how professional learning is part of that. Another way we are building collaboration is through a preconference we organized at the largest state education conference last summer. We're trying to impact all entities to spread the importance of professional learning. ■