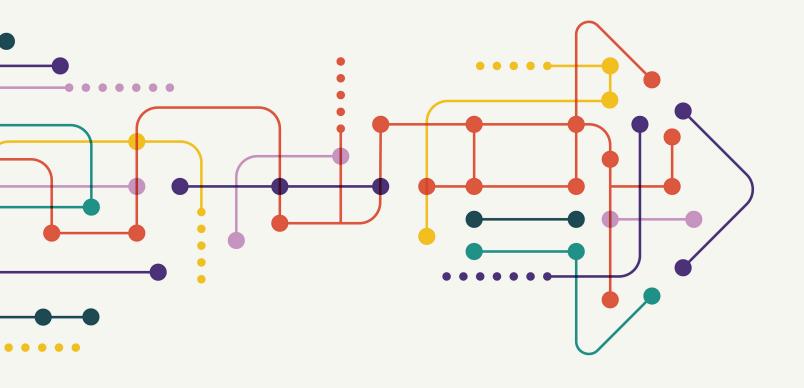# What do Standards for Professional Learning look like in practice?

BY LEARNING FORWARD

In our ongoing efforts to illustrate how Standards for Professional Learning can be implemented in diverse settings, Learning Forward created the following case vignette of a fictional district. This district, like most, faces many challenges, including the theme of this issue of *The Learning Professional* — supporting educators' professional paths over time so that they and their students are successful in both the short and long term.

The purposes of this vignette are:
- To envision what professional learning informed by Standards for Professional Learning looks like in a real-world setting; and
- To consider how standards-based professional learning can address essential school and district challenges.

The vignette shows how Standards for Professional Learning can support schools, districts, and provinces in addressing their student and adult learning priorities through the story of a teacher who grows into the principalship and helps his district cultivate an equity lens. The narrative depicts how implementing the standards is a journey, rather than an overnight transformation or a checklist to be completed.

THE STANDARDS AT WORK: ON THE PATH TO EQUITY-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

Terrell Baxter loved being a middle school language arts teacher at Burbank Middle School. The school was in a large urban district that included a roughly equal split between Black and white students, and Burbank had a higher Black student population than other middle schools in the district. Even in the tough days of his first couple of years, Baxter enjoyed working with students. He excelled at relationship building and engaging students who sometimes struggled in other classes.

Baxter benefited from a circle of supportive colleagues, meeting with them frequently in the middle school English language arts professional learning community. He appreciated the support of one informal mentor in particular — Katrina Wyler, the only other Black educator in the building. Wyler split her time between teaching and serving as a literacy coach. She had been instrumental in pushing for Baxter to be hired full time after his stint as a student teacher and continued to support him as he grew into his position and became a valued member of the teaching staff.

Baxter and Wyler shared the goal of increasing the staff's racial diversity — a goal that Wyler also discussed frequently with assistant principal Scott Diamond, with whom she served on the school leadership team. Their leadership work had a heavy emphasis on the district's strategic goal to ensure every student had access to high-quality teaching. Through frequent conversations, Wyler helped Diamond, who was white, understand how important it is for Black students to have Black educators, as well as the benefits to white students and the school as a whole.

Diamond became a strong advocate to further diversify the school's staff and asked Wyler to join him in conversations with central office staff for support in this effort. Their collaboration struck a chord with a district assistant superintendent for talent development who had concerns about the district's recruitment practices and retention rate for Black educators.

GROWING INTO LEADERSHIP

As Baxter became more experienced, he gained leadership responsibilities at the school, including professional learning. He began serving formally as a mentor and took newer Black teachers under his wing as the building continued to recruit and hire Black educators.

Baxter learned about Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, which the district had adopted a couple of years before. He learned that the standards had prompted Burbank Middle School to shift its professional learning approaches to embed learning and growth opportunities during the school day instead of the old model of Saturday workshops.

Baxter had noticed that opportunities to learn in collaboration with colleagues around specific learning needs and engage with coaches in ongoing dialogue about students' toughest challenges were critical to his own growth. He also heard district leaders explain how the standards were essential to the district's strategic goal to ensure access to high-quality teaching for each student.

In one of their frequent morning chats in Baxter's sixth year, Wyler asked Baxter when he was going to take the next logical step and become a principal. Baxter wasn't surprised — they had spoken about this before. But he wondered if he would be supported and satisfied in a new role. He had noticed that almost every school in their district had a white principal, and retention rates among Black leaders in their system were not encouraging.

Wyler explained to Baxter that the system was overhauling leader development and support. Guided by Standards for Professional Learning and the latest leadership research, the assistant superintendent for talent development was leading a new initiative to formalize the diversification of the leader pipeline with an emphasis on educators of color.

District leaders couldn't ignore the gains among Black students where more Black teachers and leaders had been hired. The district superintendent, who participated in a learning network with leaders from other districts, was modeling the pipeline effort after an initiative at another urban district her network had studied the previous year.

Ultimately, a principal development academy, which the district had developed in partnership with a local university, led Baxter to the principalship. He was in the first cohort — a small class that worked collaboratively over a two-year period to earn the initial leadership endorsement for his educator license.

The program combined elements of the university's existing education leadership program with customized

support for the district's cohort, including a mentor from the district and a residency in his school that provided opportunities to acquire and implement leadership skills and practices. The district also supported each cohort to remain connected as a learning network in the years following the academy to sustain the valuable relationships emerging leaders forged during their learning.

TAKING ACTION FOR EQUITY

During Baxter's time in the program, the district worked to infuse equity throughout professional learning. Baxter took every opportunity to encourage district leaders to move from vision to action. He frequently partnered with his colleagues to help the district look at multiple levels of the challenge of equity of access to learning for students and educators alike, from transforming system structures, including resources and data use, all the way to supporting school-level teams to examine and adopt culturally responsive practices.

As he assumed the role of principal at another middle school in the district, Baxter took seriously his responsibility to model ongoing learning and participate frequently in grade-level teams, monitoring how teachers used the district's data platform to pinpoint which students needed academic help and access to social services.

Remembering his own experience and drawing on lessons from his leadership academy, Baxter also ensured that recruiting, hiring, and supporting educators of color was an essential pillar of his school's improvement trajectory.

By the end of his second year as principal, he was pleased that, in his school, the data indicated that students had increased access and opportunity to excel and that the educators had those same opportunities and access. Looking ahead to his own future, he was determined that the district sustain its commitment to supporting him and his principal colleagues on their growth journey. ◼

NOTE-TAKING PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- What critical school and district challenges are present?

- What strengths and improvement-oriented actions do you see in the vignette? Where do you see room for growth?

- Which Standards for Professional Learning do you see reflected? Note key phrases that represent the standards at work.

- What ideas, questions, or concerns does the vignette spark for your work in your context?

Standards for Professional Learning

Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators ...

EQUITY PRACTICES
... understand their students' historical, cultural, and societal contexts, embrace student assets through instruction, and foster relationships with students, families, and communities.

CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT, AND INSTRUCTION
... prioritize high-quality curriculum and instructional materials for students, assess student learning, and understand curriculum and implement through instruction.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE
... apply standards and research to their work, develop the expertise essential to their roles, and prioritize coherence and alignment in their learning.

RIGOROUS CONTENT FOR EACH LEARNER

Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators ...

EQUITY DRIVERS
... prioritize equity in professional learning practices, identify and address their own biases and beliefs, and collaborate with diverse colleagues.

EVIDENCE
... create expectations and build capacity for use of evidence, leverage evidence, data, and research from multiple sources to plan educator learning, and measure and report the impact of professional learning.

LEARNING DESIGNS
... set relevant and contextualized learning goals, ground their work in research and theories about learning, and implement evidence-based learning designs.

IMPLEMENTATION
... understand and apply research on change management, engage in feedback processes, and implement and sustain professional learning.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES

Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators ...

EQUITY FOUNDATIONS
... establish expectations for equity, create structures to ensure equitable access to learning, and sustain a culture of support for all staff.

CULTURE OF COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY
... engage in continuous improvement, build collaboration skills and capacity, and share responsibility for improving learning for all students.

LEADERSHIP
... establish a compelling and inclusive vision for professional learning, sustain coherent support to build educator capacity, and advocate for professional learning by sharing the importance and evidence of impact of professional learning.

RESOURCES
... allocate resources for professional learning, prioritize equity in their resource decisions, and monitor the use and impact of resource investments.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS