



**Research points to better ways of supporting students to do grade-level work even when they have knowledge gaps.**

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## CALL TO ACTION

Frederick Brown

# PROFESSIONAL LEARNING HELPS EDUCATORS ADDRESS STUDENT LEARNING GAPS

**M**ost of us accept that scientific knowledge evolves over time, so best practices in medicine and other science fields change. Knowledge about the learning sciences evolves, too, so we should constantly revisit and adjust education practices. To paraphrase the great Maya Angelou, when we know better, we should do better.

For example, as a new teacher, I was taught that differentiating based on student need meant that I should place students into reading and math ability groups. Since then, we've learned that this structure doesn't allow for students in lower-ability groups to catch up to those in higher-ability groups. I would approach this situation differently if I were in a classroom today because our field has learned so much about how to better support students' diverse learning needs.

A clear example of that evolution is the growing knowledge base on accelerated learning approaches, which are the focus of this issue of *The Learning Professional*.

Students' needs have changed and multiplied in recent years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice, and many other issues. This has created an urgent need for educators to understand how students learn best amid these challenges and implement instructional practices that ensure students with very different skills and needs can all engage in grade-level work.

Professional learning is the vehicle for making that happen. It has always been one of Learning Forward's core beliefs that all educators have an obligation to improve their practice, and in the most recent iteration of Standards for Professional Learning, we stated this unequivocally in the Professional Expertise standard. This standard reads: "Professional Learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators apply standards and research to their work, develop the expertise essential to their roles, and prioritize coherence and alignment in their learning" (Learning Forward, 2022). Like all of the standards, Professional Expertise has three key constructs, each of which is important to the discussion about accelerating learning.

First, educators are responsible for understanding and applying relevant standards, such as content-area standards and social and emotional standards, and research. As articles in this issue show, the research on remediation raises serious concerns that traditional methods actually cause struggling students to fall farther behind. Fortunately, research also points to better ways of supporting students to do grade-level work even when they have knowledge gaps. As educators, it's critical that we continue to stay abreast of this important research.

The second construct in the Professional Expertise standard reminds us how important it is that educators strengthen their discipline-specific expertise. Learning Forward defines discipline-specific as the knowledge, skills, and practices essential for professional educators to succeed in their roles. Within the context of accelerated learning, that discipline-specific expertise varies by role. For



teachers, it means understanding the key strategies needed for just-in-time learning support, including knowing the domain-specific skills students should know from previous grades and how to scaffold them when students haven't yet mastered them. For professional learning leaders, it means having the ability to apply relevant adult learning strategies and other key constructs found throughout Standards for Professional Learning to support teachers who are developing their own understanding of accelerated learning. For principals and district leaders, it means understanding how leaders create the conditions for teachers and others to engage in learning and strengthen their skills — for example, how to adjust the professional learning schedule so that educators' learning about accelerated learning and other important topics can happen as part of the school day.

The final construct in the Professional Expertise standard reminds us that educators who develop professional expertise attend to coherence and alignment in their learning over time. That includes aligning their practice to district goals and expectations and connecting with colleagues at the same grade level or subject area to use consistently evidence-based strategies for all students.

As you learn about acceleration, I encourage you to use Standards for Professional Learning to shape your and your colleagues' professional learning because the standards will help deepen your knowledge and understanding of teaching and leadership strategies and help you scale and sustain the kind of educator practices that make a difference for students. It's my hope that we can all evolve to meet the needs of this critical moment and that, when we look back on our early practices, we're proud to say that we know more and we're doing better.

## REFERENCE

**Learning Forward. (2022).**  
*Standards for Professional Learning.*  
Author. ■

# 7

## Ways to celebrate teacher growth

According to Kent Peterson, co-author of *Shaping School Culture* (2009), celebrations are an important component for high-quality learning communities. Here are simple ways for educators to celebrate the growth of their teammates, shared by Learning Forward's community of professional learning leaders.

**1 Acknowledge with an email.**

"When a teacher is name-dropped as doing something well, I will follow up with an email. I let them know that their hard work does not go unnoticed."



**2 Give away prizes.**

"For professional learning, we have contests where we give away prizes such as coffee, lunch, gift cards, or coverage."



**3** "To celebrate my own growth, I share new information learned with my colleagues."



**3 Post compliments on the bulletin board.**

"In our staff lounge sits prominently a large bulletin board, where teachers and staff post compliments about each other. The compliments are on things we see in improving instruction. They are not the usual 'I saw someone doing something nice' type of compliments. Instead, they have a more instructional focus."

**4 Share words of affirmation.**

"We celebrate academic growth with words of affirmation."



**5 Organize luncheons or breakfast gatherings.**

"For social/team building, we have lunches or breakfast each month to celebrate with and for each other."

**6 Give certificates.**

"We might observe a teacher using academic vocabulary and give him or her a certificate acknowledging that change in practice."



**7 Allocate time in team meetings for quick celebrations.**

"When planning our learning community work, we make sure to include time where they can share and see others' successes. Little things like snapping fingers or high-fives are quick and easy ways to celebrate the little steps we make forward."



Infographic by Ariel Durham