



# THE LEARNING PROFESSIONAL

THE LEARNING FORWARD JOURNAL

## The time dilemma

A NEW LOOK AT AN AGE-OLD PROBLEM

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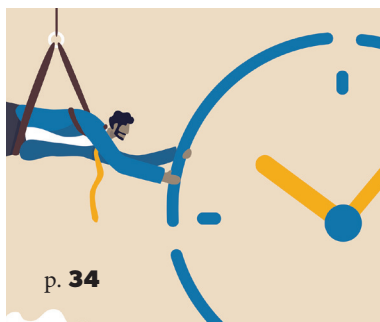
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## Kevin Armstrong

Principal of Dupont Hadley School in Old Hickory, Tennessee, and vice president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals



**"F**or us to have a solid grasp of curriculum, social-emotional learning, safety, and other needs, it is pivotal that we are at our best for our students, and for that to happen, we must have professional learning that is not only beginning in the summer but ongoing throughout the school year. ... (With) Title II funds, we have definitely seen an increase in our achievement since we have had the opportunity ... to have professional development throughout the school year."

— Source: [learningforward.org/webinar/professional-learning-is-stronger-schools-title-ii-a-funding-and-the-federal-education-budget/](https://learningforward.org/webinar/professional-learning-is-stronger-schools-title-ii-a-funding-and-the-federal-education-budget/)

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# [ NEW ] Standards Assessment Inventory

Learning Forward's Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) is a valid and reliable survey administered to school-based instructional staff that measures alignment of a school's professional learning to Standards for Professional Learning.

The SAI measures teachers' perceptions of the professional learning they experience in their schools and systems. The tool provides important data on the quality of professional learning at both the school and system levels.

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- Provides data on teachers' perceptions of the professional learning they experience in their schools.
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- Provides data on the quality of professional learning as defined by Standards for Professional Learning, a system's alignment of professional learning to the standards, and the relationship of the standards to improvements in educator effectiveness and student achievement.
- Elicits extensive collegial conversations among teachers and administrators about the qualities of professional learning that produce results for students.
- Connects Standards for Professional Learning (vision) with educator Action Guides, Innovation Configuration maps, and other planning and implementation tools.
- Helps schools focus on particular actions that contribute to higher-quality professional learning as guided by the questions on the inventory.

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Projects that do not fit into the categories above will be priced on an individual basis. Prices includes two administrations of the survey in one school year, detailed district and school reports available on the SAI website, additional resources and support materials, and a 45-minute data analysis consultation with Learning Forward.

For more information on the SAI, contact Tom Manning at [tom.manning@learningforward.org](mailto:tom.manning@learningforward.org).



## HERE WE GO

Suzanne Bouffard

# MAKE EVERY MINUTE COUNT, FOR EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

**Prioritizing professional learning time is a wise investment because it can help address schools' urgent goals and students' compounding needs.**

**T**ime is a perennial challenge for educators, one that is embedded in nearly all conversations about professional learning. The topic has been discussed in some form in nearly every issue of *The Learning Professional*, but it's so fundamental that we periodically shine a spotlight on it with time-themed issues.

While the challenges of prioritizing and structuring time for professional learning aren't new, the context in which we're navigating them has changed. As schools and the people in them aim to recover from the pandemic, it's safe to say we're in an educational crisis. Forty years after the landmark report *A Nation at Risk* lit a fire under American education, we're dealing with fires of a different nature and scale.

In this context, every minute counts. As Joellen Killion writes in this issue, we can't make more time; we can only make choices about what we prioritize and how to allocate the time we have. Prioritizing professional learning time is a wise investment because it can help address schools' urgent goals and students' compounding needs.

This issue is driven by vital questions about how to find and organize time. How do we shift existing structures and resources to make the time educators need for professional learning that will help them meet today's challenges? How do we spend the time we have to ensure meaningful learning that leads to changes in practice and student outcomes? How do we communicate the importance of professional learning time to stakeholders inside and outside of school buildings to promote and preserve that time?

This issue includes strategies for prioritizing time, like reflecting on assumptions about the nature and availability of time (p. 64), focusing on priorities (p. 12), and deciding what not to do (p. 34). It also shares insights that might be surprising to some readers, like how workshops can drive an ongoing learning agenda (p. 42), why credit hours may not be the best way to measure learning (p. 14), and how school boards play a role in supporting professional learning time (p. 38).

We believe educators are more than ready to tackle the challenge of finding time to learn. According to the Teaching and Learning International Survey, which included about 260,000 teachers in 48 countries, teachers across the world rated "offering high-quality professional development" in their top three spending priorities (Schleicher, 2019). In a study of time use in nearly 4,000 U.S. schools, teachers said the aspect of time they would most like to change is "staff professional time." Yet the same study found that a large percentage of teachers spend less than two hours per week collaborating with their colleagues (38% of elementary and 43% of secondary teachers), and only about half of middle and high school teachers have a common planning period with their colleagues (Silverman et al., 2020). There is clearly room for improvement and a desire for change.

In addition to the resources in this issue, I encourage you to use Learning Forward's workbook *Establishing Time for Professional Learning*, available on our website. An excerpt is included in this issue's Tools section. I also invite you to join our webinar on "Finding Time for Professional Learning" at 3 p.m. Eastern Time on Sept. 21. Bring your questions and ideas and learn from other educators to make the most of your time well beyond that hour.

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**HOW TO GET IN TOUCH**

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# VOICES

## OVERCOME TIME CHALLENGES

**M**aking time for professional learning is a constant challenge. This issue's columnists offer a range of advice on how to rethink time: Revisit priorities, focus your efforts, look beyond the clock, value your own learning, be creative. Above all, Learning Forward CEO Frederick Brown says, "I encourage you to focus on the possibilities of time and ground your work in the assumption that prioritizing professional learning time will enhance your efforts rather than constrain them."





**As you continue to look for and find time for collaborative, job-embedded professional learning, do not become discouraged or give up before meeting all of your goals.**

**Frederick Brown (frederick.brown@learningforward.org) is president and CEO of Learning Forward.**

## **CALL TO ACTION**

**Frederick Brown**

# **FINDING TIME TO LEARN IS A PUZZLE WE CAN SOLVE TOGETHER**

**L**ike many of you, my professional and personal schedules can get pretty hectic. There are some days when I literally don't know if I'm coming or going. Nonetheless, I always find time to check in with my family, get in a few relaxing or intense bicycle rides, and occasionally take time away from work for a bit of downtime and rejuvenation. I do these and other things because I value them. I recognize their importance, so I make the time to do them.

When I was an assistant principal and then a principal, I carried that mindset with me in the process of creating the schools' master schedules: I made sure to devote time to the things my teams and I recognized as important. It was a daunting task — especially because we didn't have the schedule-building software available today, so we wrestled with spreadsheets and blocked paper. This process was then, and remains today, like a Rubik's Cube. The second you think you've got it all figured out, someone reminds you that a major need was left unmet. Then once you make that adjustment, four additional needs move to the "unmet" category! All of which is to say that I understand why it can seem overwhelming for school and district leaders to create schedules that allow for the kind of job-embedded, collaborative professional learning we know makes a difference for teachers and their students.

Yet I frequently see schools and districts that are finding consistent time for subject-area or grade-level teams to meet and plan, engage in professional learning using the same instructional materials their students will use, and visit one another's classrooms. They do this because they know this kind of professional learning makes a difference, and they prioritize it. So do the authors throughout this issue of *The Learning Professional*.

Elsewhere in this issue, you'll read about a workbook Joellen Killion created, *Establishing Time for Professional Learning*, as part of a grant-funded professional learning initiative. We have excerpted a tool from that workbook called Examining Assumptions About Time, which asks users to consider various perspectives on time in general and professional learning time specifically. It helps educators understand how they think about time and how that impacts the way they structure their work (Killion, 2023).

I wish I had had this tool years ago when I was confronted by the naysayers who said it wasn't worth trying to build schedules that created time for all the things our teams valued. For example, I could have benefited from reflecting on one of the prompts that asks users if they believe time is a fixed commodity that cannot be adapted, a resource to adapt to one's needs, or somewhere in between. When first confronted with the task of building a schedule that met all our needs, I felt time was more of a fixed commodity. It took a real commitment and a lot of trial and error before that opinion began to change. Intentional reflection and thoughtful

*Continued on p. 10*





## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Peter Carpenter

# ENTHUSIASM FOR LEARNING FUELS HOST COMMITTEE CHAIR

**P**eter Carpenter is director of organizational development and continuous learning for Harford County Public Schools in Maryland. He is also the host committee chair for the 2023 Learning Forward Annual Conference Dec. 4-7 in Washington, D.C. His previous roles include teacher, elementary curriculum and instruction supervisor, and principal.

### What professional learning means to

**him:** The whole reason I love education is because, at its heart, it's about learning. I love learning. I see myself as a lead learner and developer. I once had a superintendent who said, "If learning's a wave, we always want to stay on the tip." For so many years, that's what I've aspired to do. But now the thing I'm thinking about is how to make the wave. Instead of having to ride someone else's ideas, what about being the organization that makes it happen? In my role, I oversee all the adult learning in the district for teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians, clerical workers, and leaders. That includes leadership development and school performance and achievement. Everyone in our district benefits from professional learning, not just educators. The learning we do as adults ultimately translates to learning for kids. That's the critical part.

**How he became a professional learning leader:** When I transitioned from the classroom to be an assistant principal, I was assigned to a Title I elementary school with a principal new to the school. In two years, we were able to turn the school around from the lowest-performing Title I school to a higher-performing one. That principal saw the strengths I brought to the role in terms of being able to plan, organize, orchestrate, and deliver high-quality professional learning.

**How he became involved with Learning Forward:** When I moved from school-based leadership into central services leadership, I really started to dive into Learning Forward. I joined the host committee for the 2015 conference and chaired the program team subcommittee. That spurred many partnerships. I got to know Learning Forward Virginia very well. We've been able to collaborate on some things, and, even through COVID-19, we were able to pick each other's brains and support one other. I became president-elect of the local Learning Forward Affiliate in Maryland for two years and was president for two years. Recently, I decided it was time to take advantage of Learning Forward offerings. I applied to the Learning Forward Academy, was accepted, and will partake in that after my role of host committee chair is completed.

**Why he encourages learning professionals to attend the Annual Conference:** I would say that time is made for what is valued. If you really value learning, not just the learning of students or the people you work with, but your own learning, make the time to come. I guarantee you're going to be different when you walk out — not just for what you've learned, but for the relationships you've gained. That's what is so unique about Learning Forward. The fact that we have meals together and that you can build your network. You can walk up

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If you really value learning, not just the learning of students or the people you work with, but your own learning, make the time to come. I guarantee you're going to be different when you walk out.



*Continued from p. 8*

conversation could have helped our team be even more strategic about time than we were.

Another prompt in the tool asks users whether they think time allocation is an individual decision or a collaborative one. This can help school teams recognize and reassess their beliefs about collaboration and lead to a systemic approach that promotes collaborative learning time. I know how important that vision and universal commitment is. If our individual teachers or even some of our teams had tried to find time in the school day to collaborate on their own, without the support of us building leaders or the support of the whole staff, it might have happened only occasionally — at best. It took all of us working together to create a building-wide schedule that allowed consistent collaboration among all of our grade-level and subject-area teams.

In addition to reflecting on these prompts in the tool, school and district leaders can learn from the way Standards for Professional Learning recognize the importance of dedicated time for professional learning. The rationale for the Resources standard specifically calls out time as an essential resource:

“Educators have a unique appreciation for time as a critical resource for professional learning.

Sustained, job-embedded learning requires time during the work day as well as on professional learning days during and beyond the school year. Collaborative, team-based professional learning happens ideally during the work week, with consistent, protected times for teams to meet.

“School and system leaders create time for professional learning when they establish master schedules with dedicated blocks of time for learning. They also examine other noninstructional uses of time in the schedule and maximize use of those hours to prioritize learning — for example, through the redesign of faculty and staff meetings” (Learning Forward, 2022, p. 68).

The role of dedicated, intentional allocation of time is also embedded in other standards. For example, the Learning Designs standard points out the importance of aligning professional learning to the cadence of the academic year and curricula, with ongoing and sustained support throughout the year. The Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard cannot be met without dedicated time, as it is grounded in the recognition that “achieving long-term goals takes time, persistence, and trusting relationships as well as regular cycles of planning, learning, testing, data collection, and analysis” (Learning Forward, 2022, p. 60). And

the Implementation standard notes that applying new learning is an “ongoing process [that] requires educators to adapt procedures, calendars, meeting agendas, staffing arrangements, substitute assignments and other structures” (Learning Forward, 2022, p. 52).

As you read through the rest of this issue, I encourage you to focus on the possibilities of time and ground your work in the assumption that prioritizing professional learning time will enhance your efforts rather than constrain them. Look for examples where school and district leaders stayed committed to their vision of ensuring that teams of teachers and leaders have the time to engage in the kind of professional learning that leads to the development and sustainability of new practices. As you continue to look for and find time for collaborative, job-embedded professional learning, do not become discouraged or give up before meeting all of your goals. Your teachers and your students will thank you for making the time.

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

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## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

 / Peter Carpenter

to someone like a Chris Emdin and introduce yourself. Really and truly, it is *the best* professional learning conference I've been to. I've been to all of them, and this is by far my favorite.

**Advice for first-time conference attendees:** It's a lot to take in. I would offer a few things. First, find the things that you're curious about. Make a list

of questions before you go. Search for sessions that look like they will answer those questions. If you have a goal to become a better coach, or become more equity-minded, or make connections with people who are in your same role, we can do that for you at this conference. Second, take full advantage of the location. There is so much history in the nation's capital. Go out

and enjoy the monuments or get out on the town. It will be the holidays, so it will be beautifully decorated. The last thing I'd say is to take full advantage of all that the conference has to offer. Go visit the vendors. Go to the meet-and-greets. Go to the bookstore. Don't just feel like you have to go from session to session. Those are still high-quality investments in yourself. ■

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## COACH'S NOTEBOOK

Kathy Perret

**While it's true that we all have the same 24 hours in a day, each of us has a unique story. It's essential to discover what works best for us individually.**

**Kathy Perret (kathyperretconsulting@gmail.com) is an independent educational consultant and virtual coach focused on instructional coaching.**

# TO AVOID OVERLOAD, ESTABLISH PRIORITIES AND FOCUS ON YOUR GOALS

If I asked a roomful of coaches, “Have you ever experienced needing more time to do your best work?,” I would expect to see every hand go up. The job of supporting teachers to educate every child with equity and excellence is huge and can easily lead to a sense of overload. On top of that, we often find ourselves burdened with new responsibilities or imposing unrealistic expectations on ourselves.

Because we can't create more time, prioritizing our responsibilities and goals is key. This is one of the essential elements of the Compassionate Coaching approach that Kenny McKee and I developed, and we recommend it as a strategy to mitigate feelings of overload (Perret & McKee, 2021).

Even when teams establish priorities together, it's important for individuals to go through their own prioritization process as well. While it's true that we all have the same 24 hours in a day, each of us has a unique story. Instead of comparing ourselves to others, it's essential to discover what works best for us individually.

When collaborating with instructional coaches, I like to take a look at how they have prioritized the following areas:

- Defining the role of the instructional coach;
- Ensuring the instructional coach has dedicated time to fulfill their coaching responsibilities; and
- Monitoring and reflecting on time use.

Keeping these areas in mind, coaches can address challenges and prioritize time to ensure the effectiveness of instructional coaching.

## A CLEARLY DEFINED ROLE

A well-defined role provides a clear sense of direction, purpose, and accountability. It enables coaches to effectively support teachers, promote reflection and collaboration, and align with the school's goals and priorities.

Adopting a systems thinking approach rather than an individualistic one is essential to establish a clearly defined role. Start by closely collaborating with school administrators to define your specific responsibilities as an instructional coach and explore how you can mutually support each other throughout the process. (See, for example, the principal-coach partnership agreement developed by Joellen Killion et al., 2020.) By working together, you can create a shared understanding of your role and maximize your impact on teacher development.

In addition to working closely with school administrators, it is crucial to include the voice of teachers in developing the instructional coach's role. We want to avoid the perception that coaching is simply an additional burden for teachers. By valuing and incorporating teachers' input, we can ensure that the coach's role is embraced and seen as a valuable asset rather than an extra demand on teachers' already full plates.



Remember that part of defining the role is defining what coaches should *not* do. When coaches are burdened with other excessive responsibilities, their ability to provide impactful coaching diminishes. Administrative duties, paperwork, and noncoaching tasks can consume their time, diverting their focus from the core purpose of supporting teachers' professional growth and improving instruction.

### PRIORITIZING COACHING CYCLES

Coaching cycles are at the heart of a coach's work with teachers, and it is essential to prioritize time for them (Johnson et al., 2017). Coaching cycles comprise a three-pronged itinerary of meaningful goal setting, core coaching actions (co-planning, co-teaching, modeling, observation), and reflection (Perret & McKee, 2021), although they will look different based on teachers' goals and the settings in which coaches work (e.g., the number of teachers they serve).

Coaches can be proactive in prioritizing coaching cycles and engage in strategic planning to balance and make time for all of their responsibilities and those of the teachers they support. To do so, coaches first need to determine how many teachers they can feasibly work with at a time. To address this challenge, Diane Sweeney and Leanna Harris published a three-part blog series titled "Coaching Cycles — Getting to 60%" (Sweeney & Harris, 2019) that offers valuable insights. The authors suggest breaking down the coaching work into six-week

rounds. Within each round, coaches can determine the number of coaching cycles they can handle effectively. Additionally, they offer a weekly sample schedule to help coaches structure cycles within the rounds.

After mapping out potential coaching cycle blocks, coaches need to find available time in the teachers' schedules and be mindful of teachers' preferences. This builds buy-in, trust, and collaboration. In one particular school, where I facilitated the process of setting the school's master schedule with the principal and teacher representatives, we began by identifying the essential elements to include in our schedule (such as common planning times) and those that would be nice to have. In this process, we recognized that coaching was just one of several priorities. Because teachers felt their time was valued and their priorities respected, they were open to coaching opportunities.

### MONITOR, REFLECT, AND ADJUST

Monitoring how you spend your time is essential to maximize coaching activities and minimize time spent on nonessential tasks. Regular monitoring and reflection allow you to make informed decisions about allocating your time and resources to support teachers effectively and demonstrate to supervisors how your responsibilities are — or are not — enabling you to help teachers improve instruction.

In *Compassionate Coaching*, Kenny McKee and I introduced readers to Michelle Te Grootenhuis, a former instructional coach who is now an

elementary principal in a rural Iowa community. She made a personal choice to set up a system to monitor her time. Each month, she logged her daily activities in an Excel spreadsheet and then graphed how she spent blocks of time. She also protected one hour a month to engage in her own personal coaching so she could reflect on her month, set a goal for the next month, and build in accountability to stay the course.

### STAY FOCUSED

Prioritizing time is critical for instructional coaches to thrive in their roles and have a positive impact on teachers' professional growth. It's easy to get overloaded and overwhelmed, but straightforward strategies and ongoing reflection can help coaches stay focused and maximize their effectiveness.

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**We need to rethink time to support curious and imaginative teachers to become even better versions of themselves and nurture even more curious and imaginative students.**

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## **EQUITY & IMPROVEMENT**

Val Brown

# **PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ISN'T ABOUT HOURS**

**A**s a professional learning scholar and practitioner, I long for the day when a teacher doesn't ask me, "How many credit hours do I get for attending this training?" Usually, the question comes from an educator who has not had the opportunity to consistently experience high-quality professional learning, which researchers have defined as a collaborative and active learning experience that is job-embedded, offers opportunities for feedback and reflection, and is sustained over time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2022).



Despite my frustration at the question, I have empathy for the educators who ask it. I know what it's like to feel perpetually short

on time, not only as a classroom teacher, but as a facilitator, as I have often been asked to lead transformative professional learning in a fraction of the time I thought was necessary.

The challenge of overcoming time limitations to ensure high-quality professional learning is significant for all of us, regardless of our roles. The hard truth is that, even though there is ample research that substantiates the need for ongoing time for professional learning, we are often asked to function within less-than-optimal conditions for our collective success. As a result, it's not surprising that when teachers walk in the door, they want to know how much credit they will earn for their time. If it's unclear whether they will be granted enough time to learn, they will understandably focus on checking off compliance requirements.

This is a cycle that's not easy to disrupt. To do so, leaders need to make sure we're focusing on the right goals and asking the right questions. Determining how much time to dedicate to professional learning isn't about finding the magical number of hours. It's about identifying our beliefs about professional learning and placing a high value on ongoing formal and informal learning opportunities for all educators.

The questions we should really be asking are these: Are we willing to invest in professional learning to make meaningful differences in our schools? Are we willing to invest time in building educators' capacity to serve all students equitably? Are we willing to invest energy in cultivating a learning culture? Are we willing to invest resources to retain educators by supporting their professional growth?

Our answers aren't just about professional learning. They are about how — and how effectively — we approach education's enduring problems. We can't solve the challenges facing our schools without addressing the initial preparation and ongoing development of the educator workforce. Brooks and Brooks (2021) remind us that, "Student learning in school happens with and through the daily work of teachers. There are no shortcuts; there is no teacher proofing of schools. Curious and imaginative teachers empowered to be master learners serve as powerful guides for curious, imaginative students" (p. 143). We need to rethink time to support curious and imaginative teachers to become even better versions of themselves and nurture even more

*Continued on p. 16*





## FOCUS ON WELLNESS

Allyson Apsey

# 3 WAYS TO APPROACH TEACHER WELLNESS DIFFERENTLY

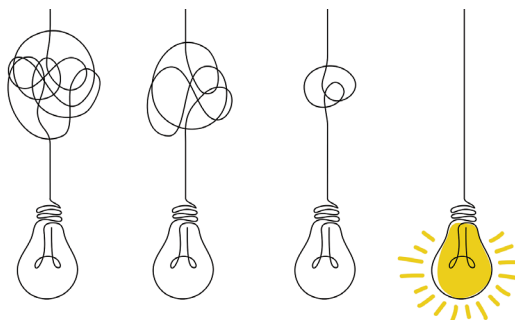
**When we let go of how we've done things in the past and set clear goals and action plans for the future, real change happens.**

**Y**ou know what they say about doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results? In the interest of not going insane, I like to think back to Bill Murray's character in the movie *Groundhog Day*, where he had to repeat the same miserable day over and over again until one thing changed — he did. This coming school year, we have to follow his lead and make changes if we want to combat stress and burnout many educators have been feeling.

The 2022 Global Emotions Report from Gallup found that stress, worry, and sadness are at all-time highs and that rest and joy are at all-time lows (Ray, 2022). Stress and burnout are particularly high among educators (Marken & Agrawal, 2022). For the past few years, wellness initiatives and self-care guidance have popped up in workplaces all over, and schools and districts are no exception. However, it feels like those efforts are never enough and are failing our staff.

Just because what we are doing is not working, that doesn't mean there is no hope. When we know better, we can do better. This is our moment to break out of the Groundhog Day cycle by making meaningful changes that make our school communities more whole and our jobs

more sustainable. Based on my experience as a school leader and consultant to other schools, here are three ways I recommend approaching teacher wellness differently.



**Ask teachers what they need.** Start by asking teachers what they need to do their best work at school. For example, one of the questions I often ask educators is, “What might make a teacher feel unsafe at school?” The responses that come up most often are gossip, judgment, and lack of support. School leaders can use that information to make needed changes to school culture, leadership style, professional support, and other areas. Note that how you follow up is as important as listening to the answers. Otherwise, teachers will lose trust in you and the school. I like to follow up by making a collaborative action plan alongside teachers that addresses any concerns that come up.

**Prioritize collaboration on instruction and learning.** Educators entered the profession to make a difference by working with students. Unfortunately, educator attention has been diverted in other directions because we have been living in crisis mode for the past several years. Teachers want to get back to collaborating about student learning, especially around instructional strategies that work for their students that they can implement immediately. Prioritizing time and support for educators to learn about, implement, and reflect on these practices (rather than getting bogged down in administrative tasks) can help restore teachers' purpose and morale. That sense of purpose and accomplishment can do more for educators' wellness than a string of one-off events and snacks.

**Choose just a few initiatives.** As people who care deeply about our work, we want to do everything right now. But that can lead to exhaustion, and the reality is that if we try to fix everything, we end up fixing nothing. Instead, I encourage educators to select a few areas of focus and go all-in with them. This isn't as simple as it may sound. It means that you will need to have transparent

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*Continued from p. 14*

curious and imaginative students.

Now is a great time to think differently about how we use time. My colleagues and I at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching are reimagining an educational landscape that is not bound by restrictions placed on educators and students because of the Carnegie Unit. The concept of the unit was developed in 1906 as a measure of the amount of time a student has studied a subject, and it has been used since then to determine how many credits students earn toward graduation. Much has changed since 1906, and in concert with others in the field, the Carnegie Foundation understands that learning in today’s world is not simply a function of students’ seat time in a classroom. As a corollary, teachers’ growth is not simply a function of the hours clocked in a professional learning session.

This is an important shift, and one that doesn’t necessarily happen quickly or easily. As a field, we haven’t made this shift in professional learning at scale yet. But we do have innovative models of professional learning not based on seat time, many of which

Learning Forward has espoused for decades, that we need to continue to practice and spread. They include instructional coaching, professional learning communities, and teacher action research, all of which center relationship building, collaboration, inquiry, and direct connections to the daily work of educators. Learning the methods of each model requires skill development, time, and flexible scheduling, but research continues to demonstrate the effectiveness of making those investments (Blazar, 2020; Nelson et al., 2008).

Here are questions every systems leader can ask to begin to separate professional learning from the traditional notions of time:

1. How is professional learning defined and measured in this system?
2. How is current professional learning rooted in relationships and inquiry?
3. What evidence is needed to demonstrate teacher learning?

Answering these questions and making changes doesn’t have to take generations. We collectively determine the pace of change, and we can start right now. The good news is that we

don’t have to finish the journey today. What is required of us today is to take one step away from the status quo and toward changes that rebuild the professional learning system to ensure our school communities become learning organizations for students and educators.

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conversations about what this will look like, what it will take, what the benefits will be, and how to move away from low-impact areas of focus. This strategy of focusing has many benefits for schools, students, and educators, including allowing teachers to have some space to take care of themselves and feel successful with the practices they are focusing on.

School leaders are essential to making these shifts. But principals are stretched thin and often feel like they are just keeping their heads above water. Leaders should reflect on what pulls them away from the things that

only a leader can do, like getting into classrooms regularly to provide feedback. Then make a proactive plan to reduce, eliminate, or delegate those things that are getting in the way. Even reducing those things by 10% will make a difference in your work and the day-to-day functions of the school.

It’s important to recognize that doing things differently does not happen overnight. Be patient with yourself and your colleagues, and take one step at a time. When we let go of how we’ve done things in the past and set clear goals and action plans for

the future, real change happens. And the absolute best way to help teachers feel well and whole at school is to help them be successful.

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EXAMINE. STUDY. UNDERSTAND.

# RESEARCH



## HOW DO TEACHERS SPEND THEIR LEARNING TIME?

**Q**uestions about how much time to spend in professional learning, and how to allocate that time, are notoriously difficult to answer. In this issue's Research Review, Elizabeth Foster examines a recent study that parses out one important component: how teachers tend to spend their professional learning time currently.





**Teachers took part in collaborative professional learning more frequently than any other format, including workshops or trainings.**

**Elizabeth Foster (elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org) is senior vice president, research & standards at Learning Forward. In each issue of *The Learning Professional*, Foster explores recent research to help practitioners understand the impact of particular professional learning practices on student outcomes.**

## RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

# STUDY EXPLORES HOW TEACHERS SPEND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TIME

**A**t Learning Forward, we are well aware that there is wide variation in how much time teachers have for professional learning. Research finds that only half (50.9%) of educators have any released time from teaching to participate in professional development (Garcia, 2019), and there is variation in how that time is spent. A recent RAND report provides a closer look at the time teachers spend in professional learning and its impact on their practice and classrooms. The findings offer some valuable insights for professional learning leaders at all levels and suggest avenues for further research.

### THE STUDY

**Zuo, G., Doan, S. & Kaufman, J.H. (2023).** *How do teachers spend professional learning time, and does it connect to classroom practice? Findings from the 2022 American Instructional Resources Survey.* RAND Corporation. [www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA134-18.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA134-18.html)



### METHODOLOGY

Authors of the study analyzed data from the 2022 American Instructional Resources Survey of 8,063 K-12 math, English language arts, and science teachers nationwide (Zuo et al., 2023). They examined teacher participation in professional learning and its link to classroom outcomes in the 2021-22 school year.

The survey asked about teachers' professional learning, with an emphasis on how much time teachers spent on professional learning activities and content. The focus of the survey is on professional learning related to the use of instructional materials, but it addresses other topics as well, which allowed the researchers to develop some general findings about professional learning and time. The research questions were:

- What types of professional learning do teachers engage in?
- How do teachers spend their time during their professional learning experiences?
- How do teachers benefit from their professional learning experiences?
- How does professional learning connect to instructional efficacy as measured by teacher-reported classroom practices and student achievement?

The survey defined professional learning as “the supports you receive, whether in-person or virtually, to improve your teaching practice and knowledge.” This includes professional development workshops or trainings, coaching, and collaborative learning with other teachers (e.g., professional learning communities), including instructional planning time. Participants' professional learning could be on any topic, such as the use of instructional materials, classroom management, or analysis of student assessments.

The researchers also examined the extent to which teacher participation in professional learning translates to instructional efficacy, as measured by teacher reports of classroom

practices and estimates of student achievement.

## FINDINGS AND CONNECTIONS WITH STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

► *Collaborative learning occurs most often.*

Teachers took part in collaborative professional learning more frequently than any other format. Nearly three-quarters of teachers indicated frequently working in collaborative learning, compared to reports of frequent participation in workshops or trainings (43% of teachers) or coaching (23%).

The finding about collaboration is encouraging. Standards for Professional Learning state that when educators develop a culture of collaborative inquiry, they “collaborate for continuous improvement and support their colleagues’ ongoing learning and development,” which in turn increases learning opportunities for every student. Developing collective knowledge and shared responsibility is essential for working toward the goal of improved learning for all students (Learning Forward, 2022).

However, more than half of teachers (52%) indicated they did not participate in any coaching during the 2021-22 school year, and a large percentage reported some but not frequent coaching. Coaching is one of the job-embedded forms of professional learning recommended in the standards because it allows for follow-up and sustained attention to the intended learning.

► *Student assessments and curriculum materials were the most common focus of professional learning time.*

Around 40% of teachers responded

that they spent at least one-quarter of their professional learning time analyzing and using student assessments and using or adapting curriculum materials. These activities were reported as the most common uses of collaborative learning time.

With the addition of the **Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction** standard to the 2022 version of the standards, Learning Forward emphasized the importance of grounding professional learning in curriculum and instructional materials, and the RAND study suggests there is progress in this area.

► *Teachers of historically marginalized students engaged in more professional learning.*

Educators with higher numbers of English learners, economically disadvantaged students, or Black or Latino students were more likely to participate in professional learning than educators who did not teach those populations. Specifically, 75% of teachers who served economically disadvantaged students reported frequently engaging in collaborative learning, compared to 52% of teachers who do not serve economically disadvantaged students. Similarly, teachers with no English learners or Black or Latino students in their classrooms had the lowest rates of frequent professional learning participation relative to teachers serving at least some students from these groups.

► *Teachers had limited access to expertise in subject matter and needs of specific student populations.*

More than half of teachers said that their professional learning opportunities provided only limited

access to expertise on subject matter knowledge, supporting English learners and students with individualized educational plans (IEPs) or 504 plans, and using required curriculum materials. However, the authors caution that some of this difference could be due to either the way estimates of percentages were calculated or teachers not knowing how to identify students. This is an area for further examination and potentially more contextualized research.

Of concern are the findings that less than half — 40% — of teachers reported that professional learning gave them substantial access to expertise on subject-area content and the use of their required materials. Many teachers reported not having any access to expertise on subject-matter content at all: 37% of science teachers, 19% of English language arts teachers, and 19% of math teachers.

Low percentages of teachers reported having substantial access to expertise on supporting students with specific learning needs: 26% for English learners and 35% for students with IEPs or 504 plans. More than one-third (38%) of teachers reported that they have no access whatsoever to expertise on supporting English learners.

The **Equity Drivers** and **Equity Practices** standards address the importance of professional learning content and practices that ensure all teachers are equipped and feel responsible for all students’ success (Learning Forward, 2022), and the **Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction** standard highlights the importance of subject-area expertise.

► *Teachers who engaged frequently in professional learning reported higher levels of standards-aligned classroom*

## RESEARCH REVIEW

*practices but not higher levels of student achievement.*

Teachers who reported frequent participation in professional learning generally reported higher scores on a self-report measure designed to capture how often they used a set of standards-aligned practices in their recent lessons. The difference was statistically significant for English language arts teachers in all forms of professional learning and for math teachers who engaged frequently in collaborative professional learning.

On the other hand, participation in professional learning was not significantly linked to higher student achievement, as measured by teachers' self-reported estimates of students' average achievement in English language arts and math on a scale from far below grade level to far above grade level. However, the authors note that there is room for bias in this measure and that the data were particularly "noisy," meaning there was a higher than expected amount of variation.

They also note that this finding is contrary to "a broad body of research, much of which is summarized in Garrett, Zhang, Citkowicz, and Burr (2021)" that indicates that teacher participation in professional learning "is linked to sizable improvements in both teacher practice and student achievement."

The study they refer to is a meta-analysis of professional learning studies conducted by American Institutes for Research that undergirds Standards for Professional Learning. As with all studies, this one should be interpreted in the context of the larger body of research on this topic, and meta-analyses are a helpful resource for doing so because they combine the results of multiple studies.

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study sheds light on how educators spend their time, but other important questions about time remain, especially how much time for professional learning is enough. That may not be a simple question to answer.

Although there is consensus among researchers about the *qualities* and *characteristics* of high-quality professional learning (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), the dimension of time is not understood well. It is usually defined vaguely as "adequate" or "sufficient." This is likely due to the fact that professional learning interventions that have been shown to lead to improved teacher and student outcomes have a wide range of duration and intensity.

Some studies have found positive impacts of short, focused professional learning, yet others show that sustained and cyclical time for professional learning is important for educators to process, reflect, and apply new learning in meaningful ways.

Prior research using data from the survey established the impact of professional learning frequency, finding that teachers who reported *frequent* (four or more times per year) participation in curriculum-aligned collaborative learning or coaching were significantly more likely than their peers to regularly use standards-aligned instructional materials.

The authors note that, although this research "does not causally link professional learning to instructional material use or other outcomes, it does present evidence suggesting that curriculum-aligned supports are intertwined with more frequent curriculum use" (Zuo et al., 2023).

There are multiple ways to measure and analyze time use, and the body of work exploring the connection between time and professional learning continues to grow. A recent study looked at the relationship between high-quality professional learning and teacher retention (Shuls & Flores, 2020).

The researchers set a threshold of 20 hours of professional learning and compared teachers who engaged at that threshold or above with those who engaged in none. They found that teachers with no professional learning in a school year showed only a 60% chance of retention, on average, while teachers

with more than 20 hours of such learning demonstrated an 85% chance of retention. This method doesn't tell us whether 15 hours is more effective than 10, but it does tell us that 20 hours or more appears to be more effective than none.

Standards for Professional Learning note, "Educators have a unique appreciation for time as a critical resource for professional learning" (Learning Forward, 2022). Given how precious time is, educators often seek an ideal — and sometimes a minimum — number of hours or days that are adequate for professional learning to improve classroom practice and student outcomes. Future research can help guide those decisions to make sure professional learning time is valuable for teachers and, most importantly, students.

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## RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT: RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

By Elizabeth Foster

Learning Forward recently became an affiliate of the Research Partnership for Professional Learning, which brings together professional learning organizations and researchers who are studying how features of professional learning address teacher learning and student experiences, well-being, and academic growth. As an affiliate, we will share with and learn from more than 60 organizations about professional learning research methods, tools, and findings.

Research Partnership for Professional Learning will convene its partners and affiliates in person for the first time at the Learning Forward Annual Conference in December 2023, where several ongoing research projects will be

highlighted in thought leader and concurrent sessions.

In addition, Learning Forward is exploring additional opportunities for collaboration, including ways in which Standards for Professional Learning can benefit Research Partnership for Professional Learning's work and projects and inform the research field at large.

Researchers from the partnership shared the following overview of their first research review on the effectiveness of professional learning.

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## WHAT LEARNING DESIGNS ARE MORE EFFECTIVE? RESEARCH OFFERS INSIGHTS

By John Papay and Heather C. Hill

The evidence base on teacher professional learning has advanced significantly over the past decade. Robust research efforts and recent literature reviews offer new insights into how — and how not — to design professional learning in ways that maximize its potential for improving teacher practice and student experiences. However, many professional learning design features are not yet standard across the field.

Our interpretation of the recent literature (Hill & Papay, 2022) suggests that several design features characterize professional learning that effectively improves instructional practice and student outcomes across classrooms and contexts. Some focus on how professional learning is implemented (formats) and others on what gets covered (foci).

While any given professional learning experience for teachers reflects a combination of these features, understanding the specific formats and foci that boost teacher and student outcomes across studies is instructive.

For the *how* of instructional

delivery, research suggests the following professional learning formats can be particularly effective at producing changes in instructional effectiveness:

- Built-in time for teacher-to-teacher collaboration on instructional improvement;
- One-to-one coaching, where coaches observe and offer feedback on teachers' practice; and
- Follow-up meetings to address teachers' questions and fine-tune implementation.

For the *what*, there is growing evidence that professional learning may be more productive when it focuses on:

- Building subject-specific instructional practices rather than building content knowledge alone;
- Supporting teachers' instruction with concrete instructional materials such as curricula or formative assessment items rather than focusing only on general principles; and
- Explicitly attending to teachers' relationships with students.

These six key design features from recent evidence suggest they are likely to improve teacher practice and student outcomes. A core theme connects these features: Professional learning appears more effective when it couples robust support for teachers' day-to-day practice with genuine teacher-level accountability for change and improvement.

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# DATA POINTS



## 40 YEARS AFTER A NATION AT RISK

The U.S. K-12 public education system continues to underserve students, particularly those historically marginalized, reports *Voices From the Classroom 2023*, a survey exploring teachers' perceptions of K-12 education's goals and measurement of success. The survey comes 40 years after the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*, which initiated the U.S. standards-based reform and accountability movement. According to the 2023 survey, teachers lack effective curricular materials and "need more support in effectively collaborating with other members of school staff in order to allow them to focus on their own core instructional work." School districts must "prioritize retaining high-quality, diverse teachers who are most deeply impacting students in moving toward the system's goals."

[bit.ly/3N7yaj5](https://bit.ly/3N7yaj5)

## 96% FAVOR RELEVANT MATH EDUCATION

96% of American survey respondents agreed that making math education more relevant would support students' engagement and lead to math success. Both math teachers and parents agree on this point in recent poll data released by Global Strategy Group. The poll revealed that math education is perceived as outdated and disconnected from the real world. In addition, 76% of teachers and 71% of adults believe that if students see themselves in the content, math will have more personal applications and create the likelihood for greater success. Nationwide, 805 parents and 732 teachers took the survey, which was commissioned by the Bill

& Melinda Gates Foundation.  
[gates.ly/3Jdi9qB](https://gates.ly/3Jdi9qB)  
[bit.ly/3JgQWDg](https://bit.ly/3JgQWDg)

## 20% STUDENT RECOVERY RATE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

20% of students' test score losses were recovered in English language arts by 2022, compared to 37% in math, according to a working paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research. "These recovery rates do not significantly vary across demographic characteristics, baseline achievement rates, in-person schooling rates in the pandemic school year, or category-based measures of recovery funding allocations," the authors write. However, there is wide-ranging state-level variation in English language arts recovery rates. Initial data indicates that reading legislation may be linked to English language arts outcomes, suggesting that there are better and worse policies for recovery.

[bit.ly/3pbDg5E](https://bit.ly/3pbDg5E)

## 40% OF U.S. SCHOOLS HAVE NO TEACHERS OF COLOR

As many as 40% of U.S. public schools do not staff any teachers of color, while more than half of all public school students identify as people of color, according to a report from So All Students Thrive, in collaboration with The New Teacher

Project and Educators for Excellence. In fact, only 20% of public school teachers identify as a person of color. "The research is clear — teachers of color benefit all students, in the form of greater classroom engagement, higher academic achievement, and increased cross-cultural interactions," the report states. Black students who have one Black teacher before 3rd grade are 13% more likely to graduate from high school and 19% more likely to enroll in college than same-race peers.

[bit.ly/42DtJf](https://bit.ly/42DtJf)

## 73% OF TEACHERS SAY PUBLIC PERCEPTION HAS WORSENERD

In an NPR and Ipsos poll of K-12 teachers and the general public, 73% of teachers believe the public's perceptions of them have worsened in the past decade. According to Ipsos, "About seven in 10 Americans (69%) and four in five K-12 teachers (79%) disagree that public school teachers are paid fairly. Further, three-quarters of Americans (75%) and nine-tenths of K-12 teachers (93%) say that teachers are asked to do too much work for the pay they receive." Add to that 86% of teachers reported purchasing school supplies with their own money, and 77% had assisted students on their own time. Even so, 80% of surveyed teachers reported they are happy they became teachers, despite pay and perception.


[bit.ly/3CM5nff](https://bit.ly/3CM5nff)



INFORM. ENGAGE. IMMERSE.

# FOCUS

THE TIME DILEMMA



WE ARE LEARNING TODAY  
SO ALL STUDENTS WILL  
LEARN MORE.

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TIME IS A VALUABLE RESOURCE

**P**rofessional learning time matters. But parents, policymakers, and even some teachers may not recognize the value of that time. Joellen Killion (p. 24) says all educators need to share responsibility for communicating the value. One powerful shift she recommends is changing the sign that says “No school – professional development day” in front of many schools on release days to a more meaningful message: “We are learning today so all students can learn more.”





# Time: A timeless topic

## WE CAN'T MAKE MORE OF IT, BUT WE CAN FIND BETTER WAYS TO USE IT

BY JOELLEN KILLION

**T**en years ago, as a part of Learning Forward's Transforming Professional Learning initiative, I wrote a workbook on finding time for professional learning. A decade later, the topic is still a frequent one among the professional learning leaders

I work with and a pressing challenge for schools everywhere.

If there were a simple solution to the troublesome topic of finding enough time, we would have already discovered it. But time cannot be approached as a technical challenge, one for which we already have the answer. Rather, time

is an adaptive challenge, one that we approach with continuous invention, creativity, and experimentation. Time is a nonrenewable resource. Like fossil fuels and earth minerals, it does not regenerate. We can't make more of it, but we can make wise decisions about its use.

Those decisions manifest our priorities. As financial planner Carl Richards once wrote in a New York Times blog, “I often refer to the old saying, ‘The checkbook and the calendar never lie.’ How we spend our lives, be it money or time, says something about us. It says something about our values” (Richards, 2015).

Time spent on professional learning demonstrates a true priority for teaching and learning because educators’ learning is linked to students’ learning. When educators learn, students not only achieve greater success, but they also have opportunities to witness adults modeling the value of continuous learning and striving to strengthen their professional practice.

At the heart of successful efforts to find time for professional learning are understanding how time is currently being used, examining policies and practices that are guiding its use, and reassessing whether current practices are meeting the learning needs of students and their educators.

Learning Forward created a workbook, *Establishing Time for Professional Learning* (Killion, 2023), that describes steps for forming a time study team and engaging in those processes, starting with conducting a time audit. The audit is an essential starting place because you can’t make informed decisions about your time use until you understand what your school, district, or system is doing now. You can learn more about the time audit and begin conducting one using this issue’s Tools section. The workbook is available at [learningforward.org/report/establishing-time-professional-learning/](https://learningforward.org/report/establishing-time-professional-learning/)

As you consider your time use and plan next steps, the following key points about time can help bring some clarity to this knotty issue.

**Decisions about time cannot be driven by zero-sum beliefs.** Too often, educators, policymakers, and the public view the time educators spend in professional learning as lost instructional time. They believe it’s a trade-off, with students on the losing end.

Of course, we know and research shows that the opposite is true — both students and educators gain when professional learning is continuous, accessible, differentiated, and equitably distributed within schools. But false and pernicious views put pressure on leaders to limit professional learning time. Helping all stakeholders view time for professional learning as a necessary condition for student success can open possibilities for increasing access to continuous professional learning.



*Action step: Assess beliefs about time among various school and school system stakeholders.*

Educators often have different assumptions and beliefs about the nature of time in schools and, in particular, time for collaborative professional learning. Understanding those differences is key for finding common ground. The tool Exploring Assumptions About Time, found in the workbook, presents opposing views about time to engage team members in reflecting on their personal views about time for collaboration and identifying differences among the team.

Educators may also have different

perceptions of how much time is currently being allocated; for example, leaders and teachers may have different opinions. The tool Staff Perceptions About Collaborative Time, also in the workbook, can be shared with all staff members to gather perceptions about how the school is currently allocating time for professional learning and provide a baseline from which to set goals and make changes.

### **Embedding professional learning into the workday expands educators’ access to it.**

Many educators perceive professional learning as time away from students, such as out-of-school training or conferences, workshops and meetings on nonstudent contact days, and summer course work. However, job-embedded professional learning inside the school day and even in the classroom can be one of the most effective and continuous methods (Killion et al., 2023). Such approaches take the form of coaching and mentoring, peer classroom visits, demonstration classrooms, lesson study, and action research, to mention a few.

When the work is recast as continuous learning within the context of the real work educators do each day, there are many more opportunities for finding professional learning time — and for making that time count. Every meeting, lesson, coaching interaction, performance evaluation, team conversation, and peer interaction can become a learning experience when framed as a collaborative opportunity to engage in inquiry, assess the effects of decisions, turn tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, and engage in hypothesis generation and testing.



*Action step: Examine the types of professional learning your staff are currently engaged in.*

As you are examining how you allocate professional learning time, look for both more traditional uses of time (e.g., at conferences, away from students) and time within the school day and year. Identify those that can be redesigned to include more collaborative learning.

As you design your ideal learning opportunities, study professional learning designs that can occur within the work of teaching and leading and that can be implemented while interacting with students. Look at school schedules from other districts and schools that have expanded professional learning time, including schools outside the U.S. education system (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), as well as Learning Forward's books, online resources, and standards.

**Outdated policies and routines interfere with redesigning the use of time.** Often, habits and routines coupled with outdated policies about time interfere with changing how time is allocated and used within schools. For example, one controversial issue is whether to dedicate time to individual planning versus collaborative planning. Because teachers have fought for years to have planning time recognized as crucial for their effectiveness, when they do get more time, the use of the newly found time is insufficiently clarified or guided. As a result, it is perceived as time for teachers to work independent of one another rather than as a team.

Yet when teachers work collaboratively, they are able to have a greater impact on student success, increase their job satisfaction, and share responsibilities, in part, because of a sense of collective efficacy or a group's confidence in its abilities to succeed (Bandura, 1993). Collective efficacy is strongly and positively

associated with student achievement, with an effect size nearly four times other factors that influence student academic success (Eels, 2011; Visible Learning, n.d.). It makes sense, then, for teams of educators to work together rather than independently to plan for instruction, assess student work, and use data for instructional decisions, and share confidence in each other's capacity to be effective.

Furthermore, educators may make assumptions that current habits are rooted in established policies when there is, in fact, flexibility to make changes. Understanding what is and isn't required can open windows of opportunity for change and even spur efforts to change policies that are not serving educators and students well.



*Action step: Examine existing policies and current practices to determine opportunities for change.*

Examine policies including contractual agreements, legislation, local school board policies, and other guidance documents to uncover the specific parameters regarding time. Look especially at guidance that determines or enables time for planning and other types of collaboration. Identify misconceptions that may exist or habitual practices that are perceived as policy. Reflect with your team on what is currently possible to change and what you might work toward changing down the road.

**Leveraging what we learned about virtual learning can broaden professional learning opportunities.**

The sudden shift from in-person to virtual education in spring 2020 is one example of how urgency becomes a critical motivator for professional learning. Educators were hungry for opportunities to learn how to be effective online teachers, team members, coaches, and administrators. They learned quickly, eagerly, and in new ways. (See examples in the 2020

issues of *The Learning Professional*, available at [learningforward.org/the-learning-professional/](https://learningforward.org/the-learning-professional/)) Imagine if educators perceived other changes, such as new curriculum and revised pedagogical practices, as equally urgent and significant. They might approach professional learning for those initiatives with the intensity of early pandemic efforts.

District and school administrators are responsible for engaging teachers in understanding why new curriculum and pedagogical practices are necessary and beneficial for student and educator success, and to do so in a way that conveys urgency without the fear that the pandemic brought. This is a necessary step in creating the drive for continuous professional learning, and with that drive and urgency comes a new willingness to find time for professional learning.



*Action step: Consider how technology and virtual learning can increase access to professional learning without increasing educators' hours and schedules.*

For inspiration on how to expand access to professional learning through technology, look to other districts and schools' efforts, including those featured in previous issues of *The Learning Professional* (e.g., DePiper et al., 2023; Foster et al., 2020; and Simons et al., 2022). As you consider these and other options, be sure to ground new efforts in alignment among the content of professional learning, content standards for student learning, and professional practice standards to ensure strong coherence.

**Advocacy for professional learning time is everyone's responsibility.**

All educators share responsibility for communicating to policymakers and community members about how professional learning contributes to students' success. Being an advocate means educators proactively sharing what they are learning, how they



are implementing it within their work, and the effects it is having in classrooms and on student learning. It means explaining that, just as other professionals are continuously updating their knowledge and practices, educators have a responsibility to stay current in their field.

Classroom and school newsletters, presentations at school board meetings, educator showcases, and other means of sharing learning increase both the public's and policymakers' understanding about why time for professional learning is essential for student success. Simple actions, like reframing the language we use about professional learning time, matter, too.

For example, as I was driving past a school's announcement board one day, I saw a message that said, "No school today — Professional development." I was struck by the main message those words conveyed: the challenging fact that families needed to find alternative child care for the day, rather than the importance of educators' learning. I called the principal (whom I know well) and recommended she revise the announcement to say: "We are learning today so all students will learn more." I hoped this message would enroll the community as supporters of professional learning because they recognized the benefit.

So often, the only message we send to parents and caregivers about professional learning is whether school is in session for students. This then creates repercussions for them and their children. It is no wonder they don't value professional learning time — or even actively complain about it. We can all help by taking the time to explain the reasons for and benefits of professional learning.



*Action step: Examine messaging about professional learning within and outside of schools and consider opportunities for reframing it.*

Educators at all levels can share

communications about professional learning, including an explanation of the link between professional learning and student success. For example, in parent-teacher conferences, a teacher might describe instructional strategies he has been learning to engage students in more classroom discussions to help them articulate their learning and use academic language. In a classroom newsletter or weekly email to parents, a teacher might include a short summary of a book her team is reading and how it is influencing her instructional planning. In a principal newsletter, the principal might summarize the goals of the schoolwide professional learning and how they relate to the school's overarching improvement goals.

In addition to these everyday ways of communicating about the value of professional learning, advocacy for state and federal investments in professional learning time is important. Learning Forward has a suite of tools and resources to help educators tell their stories of professional learning impact and to advocate, especially for Title IIA of the Every Student Succeeds Act, which is the main federal source of professional learning funding in the U.S. They are available at [poweredbytitleii.com/](http://poweredbytitleii.com/)

**Effective professional learning takes more than time.** An increasing number of schools and districts have rearranged school day schedules and school year calendars to provide more time for professional learning. However, the availability of time is not a guarantee that the time is being used effectively.

Professional learning should align with Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022), which delineate the research-based conditions, processes, and content for professional learning to contribute to student success. The standards also guide educators to align professional learning with district and school priorities and goals and build coherence within the education system so that

learning for educators leads to more learning for students.



*Action step: Assess all professional learning for its alignment with Standards for Professional Learning.*

The standards were designed to help educators across levels build the conditions for success, employ transformative processes, and make informed decisions about the content of professional learning. When you assess your own use of time in light of the standards, you can make necessary adjustments to increase alignment for student content and professional practice as well as school and school system priorities and goals.

One tool for doing this is a set of role-specific action guides with Innovation Configuration maps, which describe specific behaviors educators undertake in fulfilling their responsibilities related to standards, that can be found at [standards.learningforward.org/action-guides/superintendent/](http://standards.learningforward.org/action-guides/superintendent/)

Schools and districts can also use the Standards Assessment Inventory, which provides a way to assess all staff members' perceptions of how well current professional learning aligns with the standards. It can be found at [learningforward.org/sai](http://learningforward.org/sai).

## TIME FOR LEARNING BENEFITS STUDENTS

Time for collaborative professional learning is one of the most significant influences in student success. It is among the top priorities for school systems that want to strengthen student success. Finding time for professional learning within the school day and school year opens doors to educators to stretch and refine their professional practice.

When educators collaborate both in their work and their learning, they can exponentially increase the effects of their efforts. All educators

*Continued on p. 32*

# Yes, a conference can lead to sustained learning. Here's how



Learning Without Tears team members documented and shared their initial big takeaways from the 2022 Learning Forward Annual Conference after the closing session.

BY JULIET CORRELL

I knew that the Learning Forward Annual Conference could be the cornerstone of my team's yearlong professional learning strategy and could push us to improve the quality of learning we lead for our educators. I wasn't sure how 12 busy people who work across nine U.S. states would sustain and deepen

our learning over time, but I had some ideas, and the team was more than ready to dig in.

The professional learning team at Learning Without Tears leads the design, development, facilitation, impact assessment, and progressive improvement of professional learning for thousands of educators,

therapists, and other practitioners who use Learning Without Tears integrated solutions to build children's foundational early literacy skills.

We are working to transform the professional learning we facilitate from a long-standing (and highly rated), event-based workshop model to a sustained, just-in-time, learner-

## HOW TO MAKE CONFERENCE LEARNING LAST

Learning Without Tears team's steps for finding time and creating structure to apply and sustain learning from the Annual Conference:

1. Generate common understanding, desire, and shared goals.
2. Provide context and build background.
3. Plan and register for conference sessions with intention.
4. Personalize graphic organizers.
5. Implement initial in-person reflection.
6. Schedule blended follow-up to codify learnings and plan application.
7. Incorporate learning opportunities into regular routines.
8. Fold in external resources and support.
9. Reflect, assess, modify, and evolve, as needed.

centered, and reflective approach. Our team has committed to forming a plan for ongoing professional learning for ourselves as the first step, and the conference provided a perfect opportunity to deepen and shape that commitment, support it, and sustain it.

As the December 2022 conference wrapped up, the potential impact on our work was immediately clear. Yet, a touch of nervous anticipation fluttered across my mind. Would we really make the time to sustain the momentum, to use our learning to enhance our designs and strengthen the impact?

As the professional learning team, within a learning organization that loves collaborating with fellow educators, we were grappling with contrasting assumptions. We knew that we had participated in an unparalleled, yet still one-time event. We also knew the resounding evidence that job-embedded collaborative learning, led by agency and collective efficacy, has the greatest potential to positively affect all students.

When our team had made travel plans for the conference, I had asked everyone to commit to a final hour

together for reflections after the last session. During that time, we captured our initial reflections on sticky notes and affinity-mapped them, and we jotted down our collective learning on our organizers, journals, and devices. We put our hands in a circle with the sticky notes in the middle and took a photo so we could remind ourselves of our ongoing commitment to learning.

On the plane ride home, I thought about how we would enact our plan to leverage conference learning and see sustained results over time, using the steps we had established for before, during, and after the conference.

### **BEFORE THE CONFERENCE Prime the learning and plan for challenges.**

Before the conference, we began shifting our internal and external culture away from workshops to ongoing professional learning. I knew we needed external support, resources, and professional learning to help guide our way. We dove into this pursuit and devoured many forms of professional learning, including the Learning Forward coaching webinar

series, practice-focused articles, video exemplars of engaged learning designs, and Standards for Professional Learning, especially the Learning Designs and Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standards. We also integrated professional learning conversations into our regular meetings.

During this process, we started using mantras, like: "Remember to make time for learners to chew the apple" and "An event is not professional learning." We defined our theory of change for our improved approach to professional learning and articulated a Learning Without Tears professional learning methodology, which we would use as the basis for our evolution.

During the summer, I communicated with the team about the December conference and, especially, about the paradox of participating in a single event to drive sustained change. We talked about the difficulties we would likely encounter to carve out time after the conference and the importance of organizing ourselves beforehand to be ready to apply the learning later. By calling this out early



on, I hoped to generate common understanding and commitment to the problem so that we could be strategic about a schedule and structure for moving forward.

As a teacher, I knew that continuing to build background before the conference would provide deeper and broader context for new learning to attach and resonate. I shared content resources here and there, including purchasing a curated book for each team member based on their interests and roles, and we talked about starting book circles in the fall, coming out of our busy pre-back-to-school season.

In parallel, team members selected our concurrent conference sessions, mapping them on a spreadsheet to see who was planning to learn about what and when to ensure coverage across the key topics and themes that were most important to us. We considered where we would split up and determined when we would participate in pairs.

Next, we used the reflection and action planning graphic organizers Learning Forward provides to all conference participants and tailored those for each team member's conference schedule. Those pages filled the core of slim physical binders we created for each person. I had a moment of concern about the trees lost and the convenience of electronic note-taking, but I also recognized that the act of handwriting notes supports synthesis and fires up more synapses and brain connections than typing ever could.

## **DURING THE CONFERENCE**

### **Adapt on the fly and build time to reconnect.**

When we got to the conference, we were prepared and primed for learning, but we also brought an agile mindset and expected to adapt some of our learning strategies as needed.

As we started moving through our sessions, we quickly realized that we needed to customize the binders we had brought. While the templates were a useful starting place, our learning

needs overall and for each session were a little different.

For example, I wanted space before all of that processing to make notes, create simple visuals, draw arrows, and separate the content that I was learning from my process and facilitation notes. I needed this in the Design for Belonging session, in particular, where there were so many useful and engaging learning designs and tools modeled, while I was also trying to capture the gist of how to employ a liberatory mindset as another essential lens when we develop professional learning.

This wasn't a huge challenge as we easily crossed out, added on, and used our stickies with abandon. But next time, we'll review and modify the organizers in advance, based on our individual and team lenses and desired learning outcomes.

After every conference day, we reconnected informally as a group after rippling out to our concurrent sessions and joining in plenary sessions. We shared some high-level learning and noticed themes across sessions and team members, which cemented our understanding of the larger context and research basis for our work, and illuminated specific, practical examples for how to enact new ideas. The major focus areas for change that emerged were:

- Recognizing that real change happens from the inside out and empowering learner ownership and agency;
- Compiling strategies to support implementation coaching; and
- Designing professional learning with an equity mindset.

## **POST-CONFERENCE**

### **Identify key learning and integrate it into daily work.**

When we opened our laptops after the conference, we found it was tough for many of us to make time to refocus on what we learned. We were grateful to have done some work filtering through pages of notes, handouts, and online resources. And we gave ourselves

grace to modify our plans as needed.

We had designed a simple, blended, two-part post-conference follow-up plan. We scheduled a few live virtual touchpoints for January and February and created a shared digital space to asynchronously organize what we learned and upload supporting artifacts from conference sessions. We ended up shifting the live virtual meetings further out and broke them into smaller-sized ones to provide more flexibility for participation. We also gave ourselves nudges and reminders to populate the shared digital space.

During the live virtual meetings, we identified what we learned that had the greatest impact and related changes or upgrades to make to our work. We then began integrating those into our Learning Without Tears professional learning road map to prepare to implement the upgrades across all of the professional learning we facilitate. This is an ongoing process.

We also continue to embed 10-minute professional learning conversations on relevant topics at the start of every team meeting, with rotating facilitators and occasional outside guests leading the dialogue. Sometimes, these quick chats are centered on something a team member gleaned from an external source or from recent personal insight; others might focus on practical tips for facilitating virtual professional learning. We consider how to infuse new strategies or concepts into our thinking and practice in a frequent and feasible way.

The process of organizing our ideas and ourselves to apply what we learned took a few weeks longer than we'd hoped. We've now learned about setting more realistic expectations for our own follow-up.

## **IMPACT ON OUR WORK**

We ultimately documented much of what we learned. Specifically, we've synthesized many ideas gleaned about effective coaching to create a cohort implementation coaching model that

Yes, a conference can lead to sustained learning. Here's how

<span>Quick write</span> <span>Big picture of all learning</span> <span>Facilitation ideas</span> <span>JMS</span> <span>REB</span> <span>TLM</span> <span>FCN</span> <span>DTR</span>					
<b>Big Picture</b>					
Thursday, December 8, 2022 4:13 pm					
<b>Learning team members</b>	<b>Session title</b>	<b>Main theme</b>	<b>Main takeaways "The What"</b>	<b>Why is this important for Learning Without Tears? The "So What?"</b>	<b>Comments/ questions/notes</b>
JMS	In search of a meaningful meeting	Management			
REB	Inspiration to implementation	Data/coaching			
TLM	Growing your professional learning team facilitators	Facilitating a group of peers			

Excerpt of a spreadsheet to capture and summarize team members' conference learning and next steps.

we're piloting this fall. We will continue to facilitate initial live content sessions that help educators get started, followed by deeper dives into classroom use cases a few weeks later.

Beyond those highly engaging hands-on sessions, we'll reconnect with those same cohorts throughout the year during their professional learning communities or common planning time for short touchpoints to check in on how implementation is going.

Together, we will review data points, reflect on outcomes, identify what's working and not, and infuse a bit more pedagogical content knowledge when it's surfaced by the teachers as needed to guide toward student impact in a more job-embedded way.

We're also aligning the changes we've made to activate learners' existing knowledge base to foster focused engagement and ownership with the success indicators that are important to us, including learner engagement, knowledge and competency building, mindset shifts, degree of application, and student impact. We're honing our approach and dashboards to monitor

those measures to assess the effectiveness of what we've applied and continue learning.

We're noting promising initial impact from the changes we've made. Through a survey from a sample of 114 educators we work with, we've seen encouraging and valuable rates of change from professional learning participants who have indicated strong agreement or satisfaction across several indicators, including:

- 12% growth in meaningful opportunities to collaborate;
- 12% growth in the right amount of time to reflect; and
- 9% growth in developing content knowledge.

While we love seeing these numbers go up, our *raison d'être* is to enhance student learning. So we've also started to assess the degree to which these changes in professional learning experiences propel teachers to effectively advance teaching and learning. To move beyond knowledge-level impact, we designed and piloted an application survey to understand what's happening as teachers apply new learning in practice and

identify how we can support them along the way. We're refining that instrument for the fall, and we're also outlining an impact-level measure to be deployed later this school year, when we expect to see resultant changes in student outcomes.

Our professional learning facilitators have anecdotal feedback, too, noting comments from participants that their voices are being heard and they feel more confident about their readiness to implement and change their instruction. And our operations team is sharing the data with our customers to bolster feedback loops, including substantiating results and shaping additional learning needs — together. Internally, we're sharing with our product teams, too, so that student successes and challenges inform not only professional learning improvements, but also ongoing Learning Without Tears program enhancements.

## REFUELING AND REUPPING OUR COMMITMENT

To strengthen and sustain a learning culture, we're keeping our top

three focus areas from the conference front and center, while folding in additional content. We reviewed the range of 2023 learning opportunities offered by Learning Forward and other organizations, then correlated those topics with the real jobs to be done across the team and areas where we needed more support or deeper understanding. We've integrated several of those learning experiences into our schedules.

While we devote nearly all of our workdays to the pursuit of purposeful and impactful professional learning for others, making time for our own learning is not easy. And it's not only prioritizing time and budget for a conference. It's about prioritizing goals and needs and then revisiting them with an eye on changing context and equity. It's knowing what cups to fill, what to fill them with, when to add a little something sweet, and then

swirling in the right balance of creative tension to froth. It's about having regular, collegial conversations where the real learning happens.

We are doing this work imperfectly, but we are doing the work. We are learning what we can do better in the future, and we are reminded that great things don't happen quickly, even with foresight, shared aspirations, preparation, and loads of momentum.

For example, the book study that we had planned for preconference background building didn't happen. We had other pressing priorities, and the heft of a full book felt a little overwhelming to open. The purpose remains, but next time we might select a single book for all, instead of tailoring the books to individuals. Further, we might take a jigsaw approach to reading and presenting the chapters so that busy team members

aren't expected to read the whole book, or we might provide other bite-sized content that feels relevant and accessible.

We are learning and refining as we go, trying new things to sustain us on our own way. And we're preparing for the next Learning Forward Annual Conference in December 2023. We're ready to put what we've learned about conference application into practice and ready to continue the learning cycle to continuously move us forward.

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Time: A timeless topic

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and the education community share responsibility for continuously striving to expand their access to professional learning and for being accountable for its use and effects on professional practices and student success.

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# Florida district ensures professional learning time is well-spent

BY KATHRYN MURROW AND BETSY LEIS

“I don’t have enough time” is a common answer we hear when asking coaches and administrators about barriers to implementing professional learning. As district-level administrators, we can empathize with our colleagues’

feelings of never-ending to-do lists, the proverbial clock ticking away in the back of our minds. To be successful, we knew that we had to figure out how to address time and implementation challenges. In our case, part of the work turned out to be more about what not to do instead of adding on more.

We have noticed, especially over the last few years, a growing number of urgent tasks and issues straining already overburdened educators. Instead of easing workloads, professional learning seemed to pile on more, leading to its abandonment. It wasn’t by choice that teachers weren’t following through, but

a matter of priorities versus minutes in the day. We know that educator time is valuable and must be managed and allocated strategically. Even when that happens, we also know staff often work past contract hours, on weekends, and at home.

The trend in low implementation became clear as professional learning participants struggled to submit their implementation evidence. As a result, we examined our practices, had honest conversations about why some protocols were in place, and dug into whether they were helpful. By looking at the changing needs of instructors and being willing to rethink the existing system, we ultimately abandoned practices we could no longer justify using.

First, we discovered a need to replace the template for reporting professional learning feedback. Second, we changed the practice of mandatory prerequisite professional learning courses and allowed educators to take relevant classes when they needed them. Third, we increased the frequency of professional learning sessions while decreasing their duration.

Following are the steps we took to carry out these changes, which reduced the time it took for a participant to implement professional learning, eased the reporting process, and made job-enhancing, just-in-time learning accessible to educators.

### **Remove cumbersome formatting requirements for implementation evidence.**

We used to require participants to submit evidence of implementation of practices or takeaways from professional learning in a standardized format. For example, after instructional coaching, participants had to record their reflections, coach feedback, and data in a specific template that was useful to us as district administrators but, it turned out, not to coaches or teachers.

When reviewing our implementation submissions, we often had a less than 10% return rate from participants. When reaching out to them, however, they told us they were implementing the learning but didn't have time to transfer their evidence into our form.

As we visited schools, we observed where coaches were spending their time, often in "other duties as assigned," including supervision, lunch duty, and filling vacancies. These were additional responsibilities on top of supporting teachers, facilitating professional learning communities (PLCs), modeling lessons, and other duties. Through informal conversations we understood their daily multitasking left them feeling they were not making an impact the way they had envisioned. With that in mind, we studied our submission format and realized the following three things.

*1. The template reduced administrative time to review implementation evidence, but it created a burden for instructional coaches and teachers.*

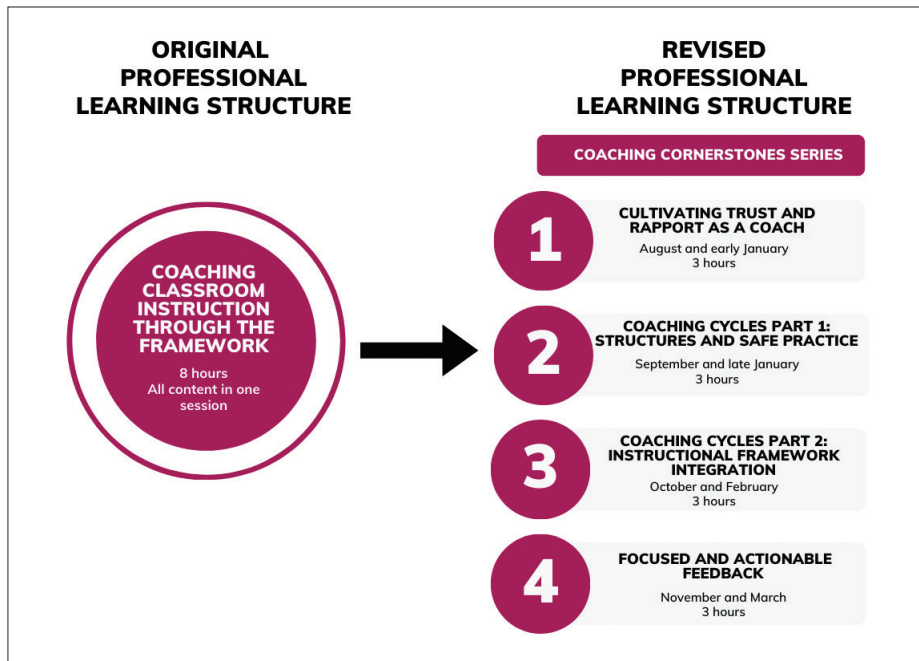
Instead, we wanted them to spend that time modeling or demonstrating instruction, ensuring common planning structures were effective, initiating coaching cycles, or aggregating and analyzing data to inform their work.

*2. By standardizing the feedback template, it also constrained the information that teachers shared.*

Our hope was to collect authentic data through honest feedback generation to better understand how schools and learning communities documented their coaching and instructional observations. We also wanted to see how coaches were naturally applying the learning from our sessions so we could then cater to their specific needs. But our form prevented this.

With over 200 schools in our district, we sought to streamline work by aligning our efforts, determining trends, and identifying exemplars. For example, we are always curious how data is collected by coaches — especially those new to the role — when they observe and support instruction. Ironically, we encouraged coaches to collect data in the unique ways that worked for them. When we mandated a specific format, we unintentionally





removed instructional leader autonomy and missed out on important details.

3. *This practice emphasized the disconnect between school and district personnel.*

It showed that we were unfamiliar with the time demands faced by instructional staff, especially during and post-pandemic, which likely reduced teachers' trust in us.

**Remove prerequisite course requirements.**

In the past, we had multiple prerequisites for the majority of our professional learning. We believed these building block courses ensured educators acquired foundational concepts before deepening their learning. However, we discovered we were denying some the opportunity to experience personalized, relevant professional learning that would benefit their work. This issue was exacerbated by teacher and administrator shortages.

We previously required a mandatory certification course before instructional staff could take a more in-depth coaching course. But across the district, coaches are being moved into

administrative positions and our teacher leaders, PLC leaders, and department leaders are being shifted into the instructional coach roles to support teachers' needs.

When new coaches had to take a certification course that wasn't available for months, they missed other coaching offerings that would allow them to better understand their new position, connect with coaches across the district, and have opportunities to safely practice coaching protocols. We were wasting staff time by making them engage in less relevant courses, slowing their professional growth.

An eye-opening conversation with a coach illustrates this point. She wanted to recommend a teacher leader for one of our professional learning offerings, but that person had not completed the required prerequisite. This person also did not have an official instructional coach job title. After consideration and talking with other school leaders, we realized how many coaching staff were not actually in coaching roles due to budgetary reasons.

Many of our coaches are titled resource teacher, testing coordinator,

or they may be coaching and teaching simultaneously. There was a wealth of potential and capacity in our district that we were not harnessing. With this new knowledge, it became clear that our prerequisites seemed rigid and we needed to rethink the path for aspiring coaches or those with multidimensional roles.

Additionally, by establishing more robust relationships with coaches and school leaders, we had a heightened awareness of turnover effects. Many coaches were being promoted to assistant principals. Due to the frequency, there were often cases where strong teachers, PLC leaders, department heads, or others were moved into a coaching role with little or no experience. They needed professional learning more than anyone, but we had restrictions that would prohibit them from engaging in exactly the type of practice opportunities, networking, and support structures that they needed as they moved into a new role, often midyear.

To address this, we eliminated all barriers and prerequisites. Did it cause more work for us? Of course! We had

to revise content, accelerate learning due to gaps in knowledge, and provide differentiated support that stretched our team. Was it worth it? Absolutely! Eliminating prerequisites increased our attendance in a coaching offering by over 60%.

Our new coach participants, who had little knowledge of the role, expressed their thanks because the professional learning resources and support were just what they needed. As a result, we have been able to make increased connections and support our coaches in their new career journeys, and we couldn't be happier with our decision. New coaches are now more effective because they have what they need, when they need it. This is a great improvement over participating in a mandatory, one-size-fits-all continuum of courses.

We realized we could and should do more. Our next step is to consider implementation quality and the time it takes participants to efficiently implement the new learning in relevant, job-embedded ways. We are also examining the amount of time required to understand, implement, reflect, and refine the skills we are teaching. One of the ways we are addressing this is with our third program adjustment.

### **Restructure our professional learning: increase in frequency, decrease in session length.**

When reviewing our professional learning offerings, we noticed that many of them were full-day courses. There are times a full day may be necessary to cover the content in the time allotted by the school calendar, but when we looked at the amount of learning taking place and the implementation outcomes, it was clear that some of the missing evidence for implementation was due to cognitive overload.

In an August session for new coaches, a participant emailed to apologize for having to step away. During the lunch break, we briefed

her on what she missed. She launched into an explanation of the discipline issue that needed attention and also asked a lot of questions about the coaching cycle. We learned she had just transitioned into the coaching from teaching geometry, had no formal coaching experience, and was still teaching some classes due to vacancies.

Further, she was trying to facilitate a math PLC but had no experience doing that. To top it off, her assistant principal was also new. The more she talked, the more we realized how overwhelmed she was. We ended up modifying some content for her, and set up some one-on-one time later to talk her through some of the things she seemed stressed about. Per her request, we later worked side-by-side as she coached so she could receive feedback.

She was so eager to learn, but had little time to devote to mastering the job due to so many other urgent duties. This is one of many examples we encountered in taking the time to have conversations, gauge educator needs, and address some of their concerns through professional learning.

Like the geometry teacher, many participants come to professional learning sessions late or have to leave early because being out of their building for a full day is a challenge for all educators. These educators miss learning time, which creates extra stress when trying to catch up and causes confusion when trying to implement new concepts and skills because they only have a partial grasp on them.

To address this, we restructured many of our full-day professional learning offerings into four shorter sessions. Participants now spend less time away from their day-to-day responsibilities and have more time to implement digestible chunks of learning and reflect on them with us at the next session.

The graphic on p. 36 shows how we transformed our instructional coaching professional learning. With the new structure, new coaches spend more time with us by about four hours

total, and we anticipate coaches will be able to more fully immerse themselves in and apply their learning by spreading it out. We will facilitate this series at the start of each semester so the content is relevant to the timing of the school year. This way coaches can progress successfully through the learning while adding tools, strategies, and techniques to their toolboxes, implementing as they go.

### **A CLEAR PATH FOR LEARNING**

Going forward, we hope the changes we made to our professional learning system will make a measurable difference. By removing unwieldy formatting requirements, we cleared a path for receiving feedback in ways that were not only authentic and meaningful to participants, but also less time-consuming. Additionally, we adjusted our professional learning requirements so that teacher leaders can take courses to enhance their work right when they need it, rather than having to wade through less relevant prerequisites. Finally, we restructured professional learning experiences into shorter sessions, which were easier for participants to synthesize and apply and required less time away from their daily duties, therefore easing the burden of finding coverage.

We anticipate measuring increased success through participants' feedback and their evidence of improved implementation quality. Our goal is that these three strategies — observing our system, listening to our educators, and taking stock of this particularly challenging moment in education — will decrease workload and increase educator fluency in leveraging evidence-based instructional strategies to improve student outcomes.

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# The school board's role in a professional learning system

## Q&A with Verjeana McCotter-Jacobs

BY JEFNA M. COHEN

**S**chool boards are an important but often unacknowledged part of professional learning systems, although they allocate two essential resources: funding

and time. To learn more about this role and how learning professionals can collaborate with school boards, we spoke with Verjeana McCotter-Jacobs, who was recently named the new executive director and CEO of the National

School Boards Association after having worked for the organization since 2017 and serving on the Prince George's County school board in Maryland for 10 years. This interview has been condensed for clarity and length.





Verjeana McCotter-Jacobs

**Q:**

**What roles do school board members play in enabling and supporting professional learning for teachers and leaders?**

**A:**

School boards play a critical role in budgeting and developing the school schedule. When we think about scheduling, there are two components. There's the bell schedule, in which they aren't as involved, and the school calendar, which they develop in collaboration with their superintendents. Of course, they set aside days for professional learning in yearly calendars. But boards handle professional learning in different ways. It's how many days in the calendar are allocated for professional learning without students in the building, but it's also about creating peer opportunities.

At the National School Boards Association, teacher retention is part of our advocacy agenda. We are pushing to have teachers get paid more and have more support to deal with our teacher shortage issue that everybody is experiencing.

**Q:**

**Why is it important for school board members to understand professional learning and its value?**

**A:**

When school board members are running for office, professional learning is probably not their top issue, but, after taking office, they very quickly learn its importance. Professional learning is about raising the bar for teachers to be better at their craft. I'm talking about aligning teacher professionalism and teachers' skill sets to what they're delivering to kids.

You have to answer the question: What will be the outcomes, ultimately, for students as a result of professional learning? People don't necessarily see that connection. As a parent, you may think it's another professional day or another day that the teachers have off. That's why it is important to help parents and others make the connection that professional learning is directly tied to student outcomes. That's a key message that sometimes gets lost, and I think that's really important. School boards can help the community understand that.

**Q:**

**How would you recommend that educators advocate for professional learning time and funding to their school boards?**

**A:**

This depends on the community because we (National School Boards Association) are all about what's best in local communities. One way to advocate is to come to school board meetings and testify. Provide what you know about the importance of professional learning, say, "These are the outcomes from our professional learning," and show how it's enhancing teachers' skill sets and leveling up professionalism in their craft. Definitely be engaged and involved and advocate for budget time and the scheduling process, but not just at those times. Use the parents to your advantage and have them be part of the conversation because they do influence, and highly influence, what happens at school board meetings.

**Q:**

**Can you give any examples where leaders worked with the school board to increase professional learning capacity?**

**A:**

In one example, the school board worked with the superintendent and the cabinet on the question of what professional development looks like for their district. This was so important because school boards have started to have conversations about how we require teachers to do professional development and don't do it themselves. Boards are realizing they need professional development, too, so they can be better at governance and board policy, etc.

In this case, the superintendent wanted the board to agree to a long-term (two-year) professional development process, and the board was already giving so much of its time. The discussion evolved to how we want our educators to be up-to-date and prepared and so the school board should, too, to ensure its members have the knowledge necessary to make the right policy decisions. The school board worked on developing policy, community relations, and a better understanding of what it means to allocate resources based on the needs of the local district.

I think if we look at communities and school boards that are working in tandem with the administration and community, there are opportunities to do things together.

**Q:**

**We know that professional learning is sometimes perceived as a burden. How can we share the message that it matters, that the end goal is to benefit students?**

**A:**

You have to say what you're going to do, do what you said you were going to do, and then tell people you did it. Use storytelling to get that message out. I think that's always important.

Build the relationship with parents because parents will just see it as a day off if there's no communication before or after that says, hey, this is what's happening. Get that parent or group of parents to help tell the story, come to the school board meeting, talk about it, and share with the community to the extent you can. Where there are teachers unions, they should be helping to communicate that, too.

Also, connect with businesses. Every community pretty much has a chamber of commerce, and they have a great interest in schools. Say to the businesses that we need support to help us advocate. Go to them to talk about the importance of teacher professional learning and the impact that it has in the community. In our community, we use the businesses to give teachers scholarships.

You can use every opportunity to push an agenda that's supportive of students. You've got to leverage those pieces you already have.

At National School Boards Association, we intentionally integrate students and student voice into several of our sessions at our various events. Those sessions always receive the highest attendee ratings. Student success is why our school board members do the hard work they do. And learning opportunities are critical to renewing energy, learning new strategies, and expanding one's professional network.

**Q:**

**What else would you like professional learning leaders to know about how school boards operate or how our community could help them?**

**A:**

School boards are groups of volunteers who have enormous responsibility, and they are either not paid or paid a small stipend. They are juggling the task of being a school board member and, at the same time, their day job, if they have one.

We are also community members. I often say our offices are in the grocery store, or Walmart, or wherever, because that's where parents see us and talk to us. Take advantage of those opportunities when you see them. Come to the meetings. I remember sitting in school board meetings and someone would come with a public comment, and it just raised so many questions for me. It led to me asking the superintendent for more information. Educate your school board. That's how it can start.

Also, understand that school board members have competing interests. That's why, when you're advocating for your interests, you've got to make that connection to outcomes for students and to the desired results from either the strategic plan or goals that the district has laid out.

Remember that school board members are coming into the role with different backgrounds and areas of knowledge. Some are prior educators and some are not. If you are willing to work with them, I've seen that they're committed to creating that opportunity to collaborate.

•  
**Jefna M. Cohen (jefna.cohen@learningforward.org) is associate editor at Learning Forward. ■**

# WHY SOME TEACHERS SKIP PROFESSIONAL LEARNING DAYS

BY LEARNING FORWARD

This might be a familiar scenario: You spend months planning a release day or afternoon for teachers and other staff to engage in professional learning, but when the day comes, you discover that many staff members have called in sick or taken a personal day. Learning Forward wanted to know what's behind this phenomenon and what to do about it.

We surveyed our social media followers, reached out to our partners at Teacher2Teacher and Principal Project, and talked with leaders of our Learning Forward Affiliates about reasons for the problem. Their insights point to strategies for ensuring all educators engage in high-quality professional learning.

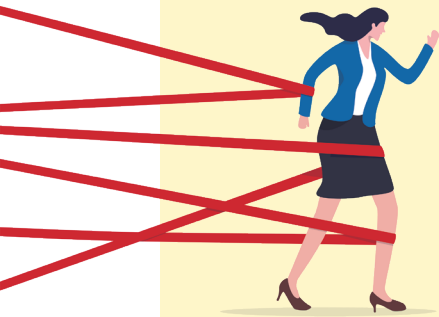


## RELEVANCE IS ESSENTIAL.

- **26%** of Twitter and LinkedIn respondents said that educators skip professional learning days when they don't see them as relevant.
- **51%** said educators skip when they perceive them as a waste of time.

## SOLUTIONS:

- Design professional learning that is relevant, applicable to participants' needs, and has clear follow-through steps.
- Engage teachers in sharing their needs and goals and co-design professional learning.
- Communicate about the value of professional learning for student success.



## SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS SEE DIFFERENT BARRIERS.

- **48%** of school leaders thought teachers skip because they feel overloaded, whereas only **29%** of teachers felt that way.
- **34%** of teachers said it was because they have a work conflict or no substitute coverage; only **14%** of school leaders thought this was the case.

## SOLUTIONS:

- Collaborate with teachers to identify work conflicts and structural barriers, including lack of available substitutes, and implement strategies to address them.
- Discuss reasons teachers are overloaded and recognize this affects their capacity to learn.



## A SMALL PERCENTAGE OF TEACHERS SKIP BECAUSE THEY NEED PERSONAL TIME OFF.

- Similar (and small) percentages of school leaders (**14%**), teachers (**17%**), and our social media followers (**17%**) believed teachers skip due to personal conflicts or to take personal time.
- Conversely, Learning Forward Affiliate leaders said some teachers take sick days to attend professional learning when not given released time by their schools.

## SOLUTIONS:

- Examine time-off policies and consider ways to create more breaks for teachers.
- Communicate with school and district leaders about why it's valuable to invest time and resources in both job-embedded professional learning and released time for learning.





# Can workshops be high-quality professional learning?

BY SHARRON HELMKE AND SUZANNE BOUFFARD

One of the defining features of high-quality professional learning is that it is ongoing, not a one-off event. Learning Forward’s definition of professional learning, which appears in U.S. education legislation,

specifies that meaningful professional learning activities “are sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused” (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). But that doesn’t mean that a workshop or a learning

session has no place in professional learning. Dedicated time away from the classroom for in-depth learning can be very valuable — if it’s done well.

To make a difference for educators and students, workshops must be an integrated part of a larger professional

learning strategy. They can be used to introduce new strategies or concepts, advance to a new phase, or provide an opportunity for educators to share successes and learn from one another. In all cases, they should be driven by and aligned with district and school goals and with other elements of the professional learning plan and to the elements of quality outlined in Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022).

When we plan lessons for students, we start with what we want students to know and be able to do and create an intentional learning trajectory that builds over time, not a series of lessons on disconnected topics that happen to sound interesting. So why would we approach professional learning for educators that way?

And just as we should do with students, we should be clear and transparent with teachers about the learning trajectory we're constructing and how individual workshops or sessions fit into it. Even more importantly, we, the professional learning designers and facilitators, must be clear about that ourselves.

In working with schools and districts, we have seen how workshops can go wrong — but also how they can go right, anchoring and forwarding a professional learning strategy that is grounded in Standards for Professional Learning. The following recommendations can help learning professionals in a variety of roles and levels make the most of workshop time to drive meaningful changes in instruction and student learning.

## **START WITH GOALS AND NEEDS**

Ensuring that workshop time is meaningful starts with intentional, goal-focused planning — not with figuring out how to fill up a release day. The planning process begins with asking: “How do we expect teachers to implement their day’s learning, and how will this benefit students?”

The answers to these questions should be connected to a larger strategic plan, such as a school improvement plan or district strategy. There are many things we’d like to help our colleagues do, but what are the current priorities we have established to lead to more student learning?

Additional questions that can be helpful in setting the vision for the workshop include:

- What is the challenge that this learning needs to address?
- What would a successful outcome be?
- What will successful implementation of new practices or mindsets look like?

Asking these questions leads to a fundamentally different approach than planning to introduce content and then tacking on a “how to apply this information” section at the end of the workshop. It allows learning designers to draft a desired outcome statement for the workshop, then begin to identify the important characteristics of the learning content, sequence, and workshop experiences that will lead to that outcome.

But before getting too far into the content, we need to understand

what teachers already know and do and what learning they have engaged in. This information-gathering stage is a kind of formative assessment. Just as lesson planning for classrooms should incorporate students’ current knowledge and skills, professional learning planning should begin by assessing where teachers are.

The following questions can help with that process:

- What have participants learned before this that you’ll be building on?
- What evidence of implementation of previous learning have you collected?
- What is the current range of implementation among the participants?
- What barriers have you observed or heard referenced regarding this initiative or learning so far?

## **FOCUS ON YOUR TAKEAWAYS**

One of the problems of workshops, especially long workshops, is that they can result in cognitive overload. If we introduce too much at once, people struggle to retain it all, and that issue is compounded when learning sessions happen after a half or full day of teaching, when participants are already mentally and physical tired. Although thoughtful scheduling can help with that challenge, we also need to be mindful of what we’re asking of participants in a limited amount of time.

It’s helpful for learning designers to ask themselves: “What is the most important thing I want people to



### HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF WORKSHOPS

- Start with goals and needs.
- Focus on your takeaways.
- Place the workshop in a larger context.
- Design the learning experience in accordance with best practice.
- Plan follow-up.

remember, if they're only going to remember one thing?" The design of the workshop should take this into account and ensure that the most important thing really stands out.

Participants need meaningful opportunities to think about it, process it, practice it in a supportive environment, and figure out when and how they're going to implement it. That requires threading and reinforcing the take-home message throughout the workshop, as well as planning for follow-up.

It's not always easy or straightforward to identify the "one big thing" we want people to remember. It can be helpful to start by using the KASAB framework (Killion, 2017) to figure out the domain we're most interested in at the current stage of learning. KASAB standards for:

- Knowledge: Conceptual understanding of information, theories, principles, and research;
- Attitudes: Beliefs about the value of particular information or strategies;
- Skills: Strategies and processes to apply knowledge;
- Aspirations: Desires, or internal

motivation, to engage in a particular practice; and

- Behaviors: Consistent application of knowledge and skills.

Often, educators only focus on knowledge and skills and fail to recognize the importance of the other elements that are essential for enacting change. Attitudes and aspirations affect whether people are receptive to new learning, how they make meaning of it, and whether they put in the effort to change practice. Behaviors are essential for learning to be translated into practice. It is the totality of these elements that leads to transformation.

### PLACE THE WORKSHOP IN A LARGER CONTEXT

It's not enough for the designers and facilitators to know why this workshop matters and how it is connected to a larger standards-based professional learning strategy. We also need to make that clear to the participants. Learners are the ones who make meaning of their experiences and connect them with other knowledge and skills, but facilitators can be valuable guides in that process, just as teachers are for students.

Planning should therefore consider

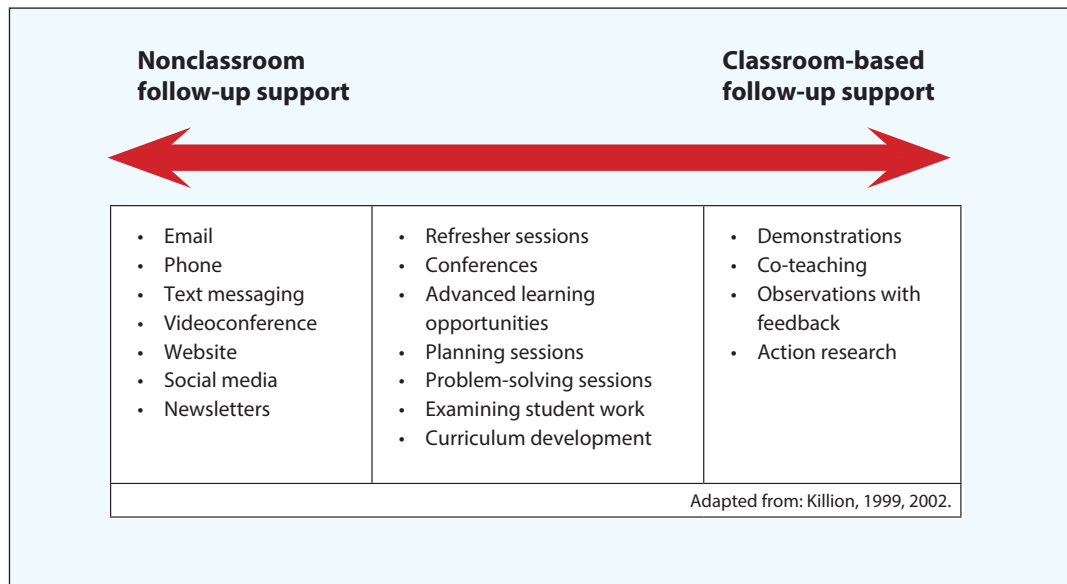
who will communicate to teachers what they are expected to learn and implement as well as when and how. This communication should also address the things teachers need to know about how they will be supported as they implement the new learning. Without this information, participants may be confused or frustrated. With it, they can feel prepared to learn and implement change.

For example, if the goal is to implement a new strategy for working with English learner students, professional learning leaders need to tell teachers why it's necessary to try the new approach and what it will look like; show models of the new skills to be developed; explain what resources and incentives will be available and when, such as curriculum materials and coaching support; and tie it together with an action plan that charts a path forward.

While all of these aspects must be introduced, it's important to plan how and when each aspect will be introduced to learners in a meaningful and timely manner. Respecting adult learners means that care is given to sequencing the release of information so that ample time is given for processing



## TYPES OF FOLLOW-UP SUPPORT



the new information, adapting to the changes required, and integrating the new learning. A key role of professional learning designers is to understand the holistic learning map and plan a trajectory that keeps adults challenged and energized but avoids making them feel overwhelmed.

Creating a meaningful, useful workshop agenda is an important part of this communication with participants. It should include a “why” for the new learning as a road map that establishes expectations for the time together and beyond. Knowing what they’ll be doing can reduce participants’ anxiety. For example, knowing that they will be up and moving and not sitting all day can help teachers feel relaxed and energized to learn.

### DESIGN THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

There are many considerations in designing a meaningful learning experience, and a full exploration of them is beyond the scope of this article. But here are a few components to keep in mind.

Community commitments, sometimes known as norms, are important for any group learning experience. Not only do they make the experience run more smoothly for everyone, but they can help build community and create an intentional learning space.

This is particularly important for workshops, when participants may not have a history or ongoing relationship with each other and may not have a lot of time to get to know one another. In fact, the shorter the workshop, the more important it is for the facilitator to take charge and create appropriate conditions for people to take in information, process what they’re going to share, and collaborate effectively.

Norms should be designed to create the community you need for this specific learning experience. It’s worth taking the time to develop a set of norms tailored to the group and the workshop rather than using a standard set. For example, if you plan to introduce a concept or initiative that’s a big departure from past practice or could make participants feel overwhelmed or vulnerable, you might

want to include a norm about keeping in mind that high-quality professional learning should challenge you to stretch your thinking and your actions or a norm about accepting the discomfort of uncertainty and lack of closure.

Many facilitators like to have the group develop its own norms, while some prefer to set the norms themselves to avoid the discussion being dominated by some perspectives more than others. In Learning Forward sessions, we recommend that groups that come together for a short period of time, such as in a workshop or ad hoc committee, use norms set by the facilitator.

This not only saves time but ensures that the facilitator will define the working conditions that are needed, whereas group members may not know what the work will look like. On the other hand, when groups are coming together repeatedly to engage in ongoing work or learning, as in professional learning communities (PLCs) or data teams, we recommend the facilitator lead the group in setting its own norms.

We also find that a hybrid approach can work well, in which:

- The learning facilitator sets expectations for learning behaviors;
- The learning facilitator identifies their needs for particular behaviors to enhance learner safety and the effectiveness of the learning;
- Participants suggest additions or revisions; and
- The learning facilitator seeks agreement and commitment.

Another important and often overlooked component of the learning design is activating background knowledge. This is an important part of setting the context. Adults, like students, learn better when they can see how new content connects to what they already know, and facilitators play a key role in this priming the new learning by revisiting past learning and existing knowledge. Here are some ways to do that:

- Situate the learning within the larger context of the subject, the curriculum, best practice strategies, etc.
- Share the challenge that is being addressed by this new learning (the “why”).
- Invite participants to reflect on and share relevant experiences or expertise.
- Facilitate independent and collaborative recall of past learning.

**PLAN FOLLOW-UP**

To ensure that workshops are not a one-and-done event, it is essential to plan for follow-up in advance. That means designers and facilitators have to plan how they will help participants integrate their new learning, practice new behaviors, and follow through to consistent implementation.

We recommend getting a specific, actionable commitment from participants before they leave the workshop. Overt, out-loud commitments are especially good for creating accountability. Participants can take time to reflect individually and

then do a turn-and-tell with a partner.

To increase the accountability, encourage participants to ask each other how the commitment is going the next time they see each other, whether in a formal meeting or an informal in-passing connection.

Another way to encourage commitment and accountability is to ask participants to complete a written exit ticket before packing up to leave. There are many formats for this, but it could be as simple as writing on a sticky note or a notecard: Three things I learned today; two things I’d like to know more about; and one question I still have, or using the classic sentence stem, “I used to think, but now I know ...”

Inviting participants to write down their key takeaway is not only a post-assessment for the facilitator to compare to their intended takeaways, but it also helps solidify learning for the participants.

Facilitators should also take an active role in follow-up and plan for that in advance. You might email participants to check in, set up partners or small groups to meet to discuss how they are putting the new learning into practice, or set up coaching support. Some facilitators engage in mini coaching cycles or just-in-time support to make the time commitment minimal and the coaching focused, relevant, and timely.

Before adjourning the workshop, remind participants how and when you’ll be following up. And if you’re tempted to omit this step or leave it for later, remember there is little point in devoting time to workshop learning if there isn’t a plan to help participants actually use that learning to improve outcomes for them and their students.

The table on p. 45 presents a range of strategies for follow-up support, adapted from Killion (1999, 2002).

**TAKE A SYSTEMIC APPROACH**

Over the last 50 years, professional learning workshops have been both celebrated and villainized. Often, they are seen as a waste of educators’ time —

a perspective supported by high teacher absenteeism on designated professional development days.

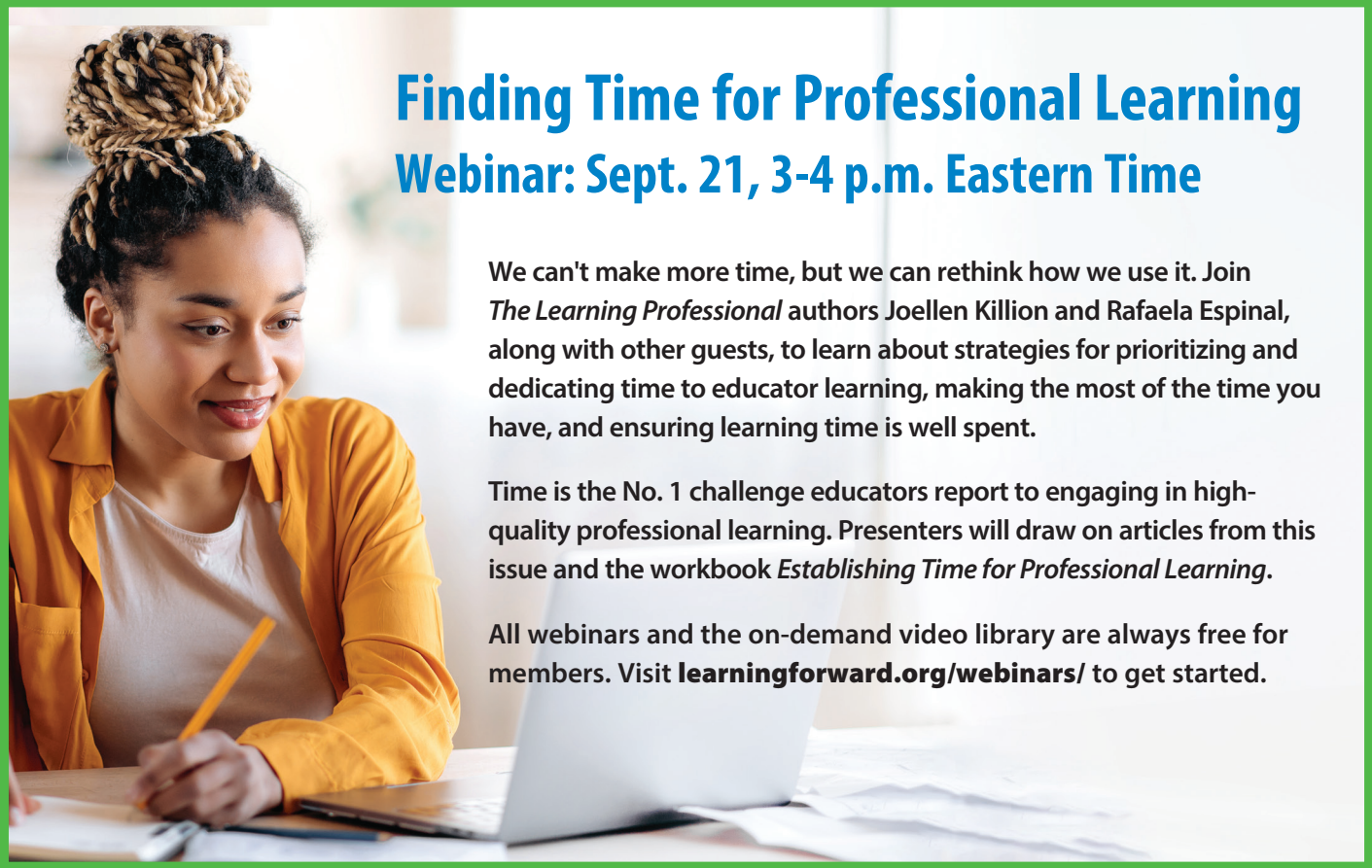
Rethinking how we, as professional learning leaders, structure and use workshop time and professional development days can shift not only how we plan, design, and facilitate learning, but how our participants think about and engage in those days.

The key is to start seeing workshop time as part of a larger, systemic, and holistic learning design that incorporates large-group learning (e.g., workshops), small-group learning (e.g., PLCs and grade-level teams), and individualized support (e.g., coaching or observational feedback).

We need to recognize that significant, lasting change takes more than a single great session. But a day’s learning can contribute meaningfully to a larger learning process. Bringing the pieces together in accordance with Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) takes strong instructional learnership and a clear vision of how ongoing adult learning leads to improved student outcomes.

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## Finding Time for Professional Learning Webinar: Sept. 21, 3-4 p.m. Eastern Time

We can't make more time, but we can rethink how we use it. Join *The Learning Professional* authors Joellen Killion and Rafaela Espinal, along with other guests, to learn about strategies for prioritizing and dedicating time to educator learning, making the most of the time you have, and ensuring learning time is well spent.

Time is the No. 1 challenge educators report to engaging in high-quality professional learning. Presenters will draw on articles from this issue and the workbook *Establishing Time for Professional Learning*.

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# Don't make time, *rethink time*

## Experts weigh in with practical advice for educators

BY JEFNA M. COHEN

**H**ow do you overcome the challenges to finding time for meaningful professional learning? We asked seven experts in the field, and these practitioners offer powerful strategies for making better use of educator time.

An example from Illinois centers student data in school systems as an essential component of a school's

overall commitment to learning. In-house teacher leaders in New York model effective teaching and learning for those newer to the profession through group shadowing experiences.

A Utah transformation of staff meetings into professional learning communities (PLCs) — also giving teachers more autonomy — is another compelling example. And two Florida authors detail ways video

gives educators flexibility with their professional learning, empowering them to personalize for areas of need and interest and leading to high rates of teacher retention.

Here is the practical advice they share.

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## Build professional learning around data

By Elizabeth Dampf



There is not automatically a direct relationship between the number of hours people spend in professional learning and instructional prowess. Teachers are active practitioners who are always learning on the job and, in fact, can only learn on the job because this is where application and adjustments happen.

We pine for more professional learning time when, realistically, we could have all the time in the world and still not get the results we want. As you contemplate how to drive innovation, think carefully about the systems you need to build, rather than the time you need to spend.

Professional learning is most valuable when it provides a space for collaborative reflection, planning, and analysis, with current student learning data at the center. Imagine a team meeting or convening that starts with a piece of recent student learning data, arranged by grade, school, or even teacher.

The facilitator asks, “What professional learning activities should we do during our time together to improve these student outcomes?” That makes the conversation feel immediately relevant, and even urgent, to everyone involved. The message is: We will improve student outcomes, and teachers feel, I have a say in this, as well as a responsibility to participate.

But data on their own don’t make change. You need to contextualize the student data as the direct responsibility of

all staff. Only a professional culture in which staff see the data as their direct responsibility, no matter what, will yield a focus on collective adult learning.

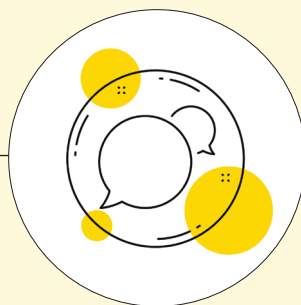
Systems are also a key piece. Systems — ongoing processes embedded into our daily practices — bind the elements of professional learning together and blend them into teaching and learning. They incorporate research, experimentation, analysis, reflection, coaching, data, and school improvement goals, making a continuous loop of the things teachers and leaders do every day and using this loop as the driver of professional growth.

Data and systems should then become part of your school’s overall commitment to learning and improvement, which may include walk-throughs, instructional coaching, and enacting improvement plans. The data and systems bring all those things together around the same goals and enable professional learning that is within teachers’ day-to-day tasks.

Not only does this mitigate the logistical challenges of finding time for professional learning, but it also reframes how teachers see professional learning as an ongoing process centered on students’ and teachers’ needs.

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## Encourage job shadowing

By Elizabeth Simons and Marguerite Dimgba

**J**ob-embedded shadowing experiences are positive ways for an organization to grow and nurture staff, and shadow days are always very popular with our new teachers, mentor teachers, and teacher leaders. The teacher being shadowed reports spending extra time and care in the lesson planning, and the observing teacher often reports the experience as being transformative.

Finding substitute coverage for shadow day opportunities was challenging until we shifted our thinking and switched to a group shadowing experience. Rather than one teacher observing a master teacher, a small group of new teachers and a mentor teacher joined to participate in the shadow experience.

Our shadow days begin with a planning and look-for time, when educators decide if they'll be paying attention to classroom design, standards or curriculum implementation, or instructional techniques. The bulk of the day involves classroom observations, and the end of the day concludes with time to reflect and set individual goals.

Shadow days are ongoing, job-embedded, and responsive to teacher needs. Because they are offered within the school day and as a part of a teacher's active practice, they can help build a strong system of professional learning. Before observing, the new teacher may review particular elements of their instruction with

a mentor, instructional coach, or administrator, and then self-select an area for focus.

We provide each participant with the description, steps, checklist, and reflection questions on how to effectively conduct a shadow day, from the book *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (Easton, 2015) and several note-catching tools. A new teacher may benefit from this practice once or even twice throughout the school year.

The teachers find shadow days valuable, and the students in the visited classes reported that the small group of teachers observing did not negatively disrupt instruction. We continue to grow this work, and, as we do, our professional learning staff is modeling lifelong learning.

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## Rethink staff meetings

By Nathan Justis and Laura Reina

**N**ear the end of the 2020-21 school year, the leadership team at the Edith Bowen Laboratory School recognized a need for teacher professional learning after analyzing student proficiencies. Understanding that each teacher's growth areas were different, we embarked on a great experiment to create separate learning teams for teachers of math, science, early literacy, and writing.

Originally, we planned to assign learning teams based on our perceptions of teachers' needs. But after reading about the importance of teacher autonomy (e.g., Patton et al., 2013), we let teachers choose their learning team, even making it optional to join one at all. An advantage to participating, however, was that it would meet a requirement within teachers' individual development plans. For administrators, it was a paradigm shift that required increased trust in teachers.

This decision also required a lot of logistical planning to reduce the number of whole-staff meetings to make space for learning teams. The school has early dismissal on Fridays that provides two to three hours for staff meetings and teacher preparation. Several years ago, we realized those afternoons were consumed by administrative tasks and school procedures, which caused disinterest and exhaustion among teachers before adult learning could begin.

The summer before our great experiment, administrators mapped out a schedule for the school year to share with teachers. We noted that it was a work in progress, subject to adjustments. Having a clear plan underscores the priority we place on learning teams, instills confidence in teachers, and shows respect for their time.

We then allocated two Fridays a month to learning teams with the hope that teachers would use the time to learn alongside their colleagues in meaningful ways. Weekly emails covered necessary business items, calendaring, and procedural matters, effectively freeing up Friday time slots for learning.

Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) capture what we aspire to achieve with our school's professional learning. Some specific points strongly resonate with our recent work, including creating a culture of collaborative inquiry through engaging in continuous improvement and leveraging professional expertise through

sustaining coherence and alignment. As our teachers have worked to align their practices, we have found that their professional expertise has grown.

At the end of the first year of this experiment, we asked teachers to reflect on this approach. In interviews, educators spoke about empowerment and ownership of their learning and the value of working toward meeting students' specific needs. One teacher compared this process to past professional learning, saying, "It builds investment because we choose whatever content we want to focus on. People are interested and engaged. It's different from top-down."

Not only has trust increased between teachers, but also mutually between administrators and teachers, too. One teacher said, "We are in control of our own learning as we collaborate and learn from each other. This is a powerful model to address challenges we face as educators. It's so different from traditional professional development — it's not one more thing we have to do."

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## Leverage video

By Carmen Marroquin and Casey Swift

**A**t Florida Virtual School, the retention rate among our teachers has stayed consistently above 88% over the past three years, even increasing to 93.2% for the 2022-23 school year. We believe this is because our teachers have the time, flexibility, and autonomy to choose their professional learning.

We know that time is a precious commodity, so we provide structures where teachers have the resources and the time to choose what they will learn and how they will monitor its impact on students. We offer different avenues for educator learning at a time that is convenient.

These include asynchronous video sessions, live synchronous learning during work hours, short videos about a topic like time management, and flipped lessons where our teachers spend time preparing before the professional learning session. The flipped model allows them to come to the session with integration ideas or questions they might need clarification on, giving them more time to collaborate with their peers or have in-depth conversations.

Since we are a virtual school, teachers can plan their days to attend sessions over videoconferencing or watch recorded video sessions on their own time. This flexibility in schedule creates an environment of engagement because teachers who join the sessions want to be there. They also receive credit toward certification.

Video learning has been successful in districts across the United States (Sablić et al., 2021). Professional learning facilitators can record their sessions and add the video to their self-paced library using professional learning software.

Teachers who excel at using the strategy or tool could prepare a recording to share with their colleagues. This would be a great way to highlight what teachers in the district are doing without having to schedule live visits and arrange substitute coverage. Educators can then watch on their own time, allowing teachers to asynchronously collaborate and learn from one another.

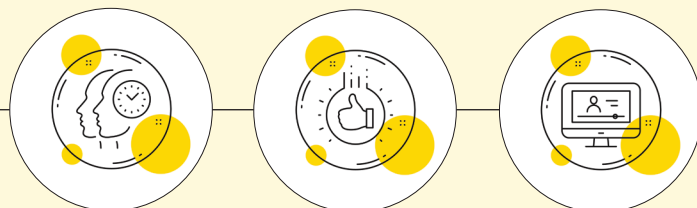
After every professional learning session, we ask teachers to fill out a survey about their experience and tell us what topics they are interested in. This feedback makes it easier for us to plan future learning around their needs and wants.

As a result of these efforts, teachers feel supported and respected. In 2021, 83% of our teachers reported that they had the resources to empower themselves to help their students. Choices in learning, flexibility of time, and adequate resources all contribute to a culture that shows respect for the work while also encouraging teacher agency.

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REACH. INVESTIGATE. DISCOVER.

# IDEAS

## LEADERS ARE LEARNERS, TOO

**S**chool leaders are learners at different levels in terms of pedagogy, leadership, and organization, so as we do with students, it's important to begin with the learner and identify individual strengths and areas of challenge."

— "Superintendents can boost principals' learning," p. 58





## To improve assessment, Georgia district turns to teachers

BY AMANDA D. LYNCH

**E**ducators everywhere are responding to the realities of student learning loss, unfinished learning, or disrupted learning as we continue to experience the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even two years later, studies are

documenting lasting drops in students' academic achievement in reading and math since the onset of the pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

Moreover, we know students of color and students attending high-poverty schools experienced the largest achievement declines, increasing pre-

existing gaps for already marginalized students (Lewis et al., 2021; Dorn et al., 2021). Teachers and leaders are working to maximize instructional time to ensure students are able to rebound academically, while grappling with staffing shortages, mental health concerns, increased disruptive

**Designing and using assessments requires a set of skills that educators can develop with intentional professional learning and support.**

behaviors, absenteeism, and other pandemic-influenced realities.

Large-scale assessments can do more than document the learning gaps resulting from the pandemic. They can also be a vital tool to help reduce these gaps. Assessment should inform educators about student needs, drive strategies to address them, and ground professional learning about using those strategies to advance student learning, as indicated in Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). When done well, assessment is well-aligned with curriculum and instruction and helps inform teaching and learning by pinpointing what standards students have or have not mastered.

Designing and using assessments requires a set of skills that educators can develop with intentional professional learning and support. In Fulton County Schools, Georgia, we recognize the need for this support as part of a districtwide effort to advance an assessment strategy that honors instructional time and is useful for teachers and beneficial for students. A core component of this effort is our assessment leaders cohort, a group of teacher leaders who are developing the assessments, supported by job-embedded professional learning on assessment development, unit planning, data analysis and action, and leadership skills.

While the assessment leaders cohort was in place before this initiative, we were able to reimagine its purpose and outcomes. Previously, principal-selected teachers would attend assessment-focused workshops four times throughout the year. Now, by aligning their professional learning to the larger district assessment strategy, we are able to restructure our professional learning to be relevant, ongoing, job-embedded, and linked to our larger district improvement goals around student achievement. This approach benefits participating teacher leaders and, ultimately, the district as a whole.

### **DISTRICT UNIT ASSESSMENTS**

Fulton County Schools is a large, diverse, urban district in Georgia that serves nearly 90,000 students in 106 schools. Enhanced assessment is one of our strategies for pandemic recovery. This initiative includes creating unit assessments in the areas of English language arts at grades 3-8 and 11 and mathematics at grades K-8 and Algebra 1.

Creating our own district assessments allows us to align their content to district curriculum maps and prioritized standards, assessing standards that are taught in each unit. Units vary in length by grade and content, but most courses have between five and eight assessments over an

academic year. These unit assessments, which are used in all schools throughout the district, are intended to:

- Provide a measure of how well students are progressing toward mastery of standards that have been taught;
- Inform teaching and learning efforts as teachers and professional learning communities (PLCs) use results, including item analysis, to plan reteaching or enrichment opportunities;
- Serve as a planning tool for teachers as they engage in initial unit planning in their PLCs by providing items that align to the content and rigor of the standards; and
- Encourage teachers to maintain appropriate pacing by assessing standards that are indicated on the district scope and sequence and curriculum maps.

For unit assessments to be successful teaching and learning tools, we needed to ensure their purpose was clear and that they were high quality. It was also vital that they would generate useful data. We had to make sure that resources and support were in place for both data analysis and instructional planning.

It was a large lift, and to fulfill it, we turned to teachers. Specifically, we

# IDEAS

realized our assessment leaders cohort could support assessment development and training around district unit assessments if we engaged them in effective professional learning focused on assessment and leadership skills. This required the change from less effective and more general professional learning on assessment to our more purpose-driven, job-embedded work.

## REIMAGINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Recognizing the importance of ensuring assessment leaders cohort members' knowledge of and alignment to the district goals and best practices in assessment, we took this opportunity to reimagine the structure, purpose, and content of the professional learning for this cohort.

The program is led by a team of district assessment program specialists, who support district and school-based staff in the implementation of effective assessment practices, similar to how a central office content specialist would provide support and direction to schools within a particular content area, such as English language arts or math.

First, we shifted how teachers became members of the assessment leaders cohort. We moved from a principal-identification process to an application process that also required a principal recommendation. This helped ensure we were engaging teacher leaders who were interested in assessment work and serving as PLC leads.

Our initial cohort with this new application process resulted in the acceptance of 76 teachers. They represented all levels — elementary, middle, and high — as well as each of the geographically diverse learning zones across our large, urban district.

Second, we more clearly defined the purpose for members of the assessment leaders cohort. Participants would gain knowledge and skills on both the assessment and leadership content we defined, but they would do so through supporting district unit assessment creation and implementation. This

## By investing in professional learning, we increased teacher capacity to develop, select, use, and learn from assessment, while generating context-specific assessments that are used districtwide.

provided relevant experience that could then be transferred to the work of their PLCs as they created other assessment opportunities, such as common formative assessments or daily exit tickets.

Finally, we restructured the professional learning content for this cohort. Previously, the learning focused on formative instructional practices. We revised the content to also include assessment development, unit planning, and data analysis and action. At the same time, we approached the content through more relevant, experiential learning than in the past.

We also included an intentional focus on developing cohort members' leadership skills so they might feel better prepared to lead assessment work in their PLCs at their school. Cohort members were expected to bring the assessment practices from their professional learning to their own PLCs and received coaching and feedback from the assessment program specialists.

Ultimately, the professional learning we designed for our newest assessment leaders took place over a year and a half. This began with four paid days in the summer focused on item alignment and assessment design. Assessment leaders cohort members practiced reviewing and evaluating test items for quality from existing items, item banks we owned, and state assessment guides.

Next, they learned about assessment design and then made decisions in their collaborative teams about the number and types of items to include for each standard.

Throughout the process, assessment program specialists supported teacher

leaders so they could receive ongoing feedback about their work.

The work of the assessment leaders cohort yielded the first round of our unit assessments. These were then reviewed by content directors. Success in the item alignment and review training qualified these teachers to be hired outside of school hours to support the development of additional unit assessments following the same process.

In addition, cohort members developed the skills to support the assessment work in their buildings. Throughout the school year, assessment program specialists offered professional learning on initial unit planning protocols using the unit assessment, as well as data analysis and action protocols on the data the assessment generated.

Assessment leaders cohort members were encouraged to facilitate this same learning in their PLCs. We further supported cohort members to effectively lead the assessment work in the PLC by identifying challenges to implementation and providing specific strategies to overcome these challenges.

Importantly, our assessment program specialists offered feedback and support throughout this process. For example, they would offer to help plan for or observe and provide feedback on PLC meetings that the assessment leadership cohort members led focused on assessment practices.

## EVERYONE BENEFITS

The success our district has had with implementing the new assessment strategy can largely be attributed, we believe, to the professional learning for teacher leaders. By investing in professional learning, we increased teacher capacity to develop, select, use, and learn from assessment, while generating context-specific assessments that are used districtwide.

This experience directly countered the message we often hear in schools that there is not time for professional learning. As instructional time becomes even more sacred post-



pandemic, we believe we don't have time not to build teachers' capacity.

For the district, the professional learning made the unit assessment development possible and the use of the assessments effective. The scope of the project was not possible without the support of teachers, and the support of the teachers would not have been possible without the learning.

Furthermore, the involvement and engagement of the teachers increased ownership and buy-in among educators at all levels. Having teachers promoting the quality and benefit of unit assessments helped create buy-in at the teacher and school level throughout our large district in a way that would not have been possible without them.

As a result, district unit assessment participation rates exceeded 80% at most schools. The teacher leaders' knowledge and capacity also helped make sure the PLCs applied the assessments effectively. PLCs used the assessments to help plan effective instruction at the rigor of the standard, and, after administering them to students, they analyzed data, identified student misconceptions, and planned for reteaching.

For teacher leaders in the assessment leadership cohort, there were multiple benefits.

Contributing to the creation of assessments that would be used districtwide provided cohort members an important sense of purpose. Not only would the assessments be highly visible, the cohort members themselves would be among the teachers administering the assessments, so they

**The scope of the project was not possible without the support of teachers, and the support of the teachers would not have been possible without the learning.**

were driven to create a high-quality product that would positively impact teaching and learning.

Engaging in professional learning also provided cohort members with practical skills that were relevant to their regular work. Because effective assessment involves more than unit assessments, our teachers were able to apply their knowledge and skills to other assessment types, such as common formative assessments, exit tickets, quick checks, etc. These skills were practical for their regular instruction.

Assessment leaders also benefited from their involvement and advocacy for the unit assessments. As part of their professional learning, we intentionally practiced leadership skills with them. We identified challenges they might face when leading colleagues in their building and strategized ways to overcome them. By contributing to their leadership development, assessment leadership cohort members are also gaining experience that can help them in future roles or leadership opportunities.

Our experience shows how an intentional effort to align professional learning with districtwide goals and initiatives is a win-win situation for

everyone involved. We believe the lessons we learned can be applied to many other initiatives, in our district and beyond, and we're convinced the investment is worthwhile.

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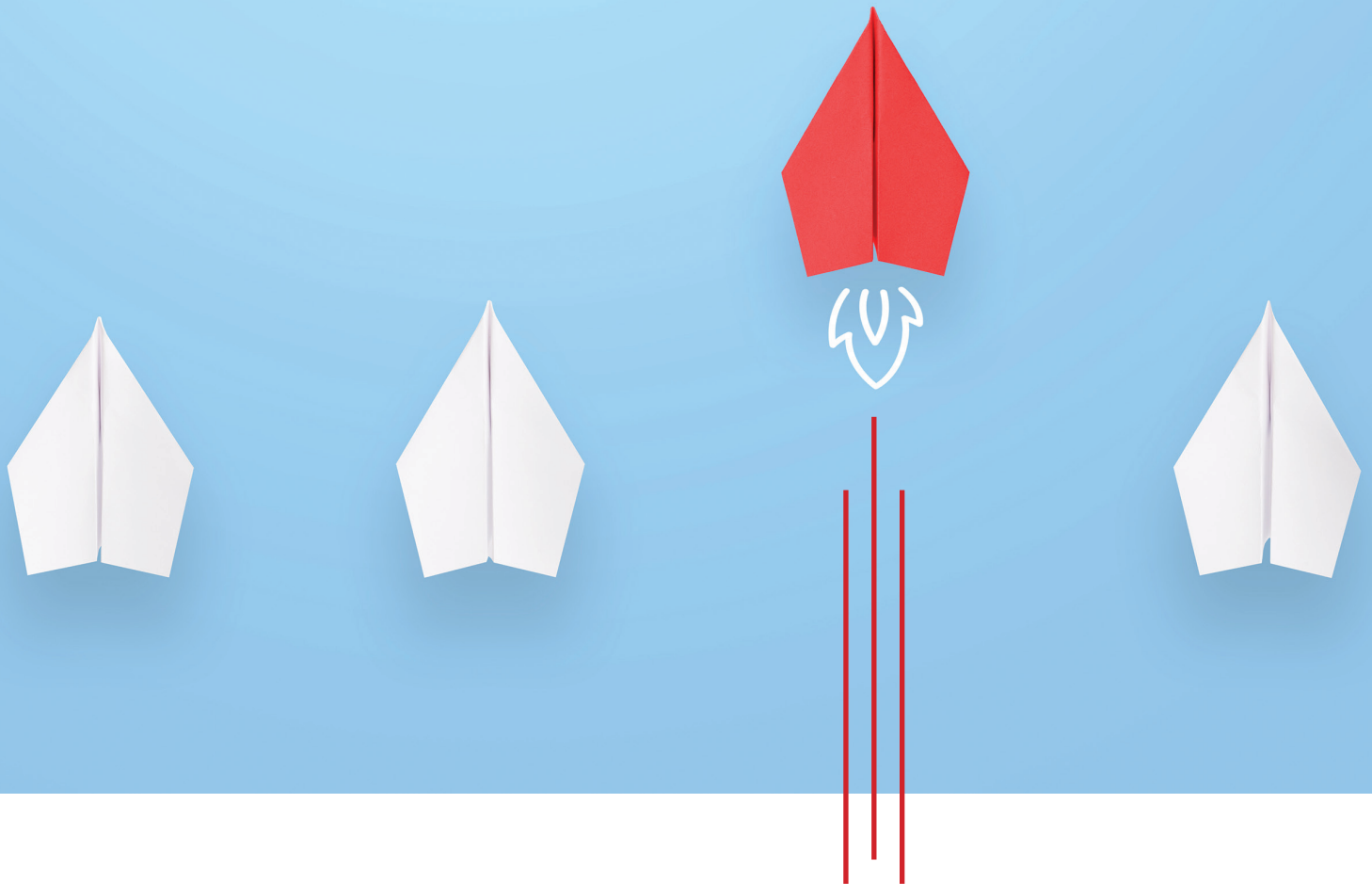
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## Superintendents can boost principals' learning

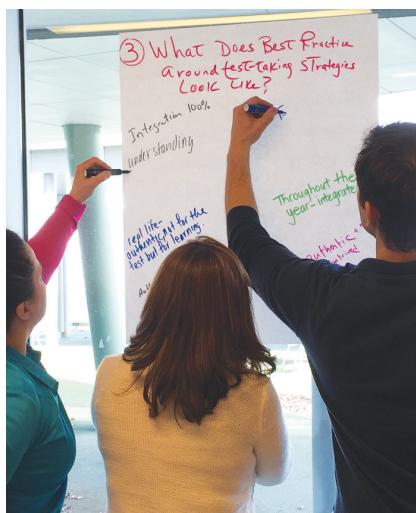
BY RAFAELA ESPINAL

**W**e know the importance of dedicating time for teachers' professional learning, but we often neglect to dedicate adequate time for principals' learning and development. As a district administrator in New York

City, I have learned the value of superintendents modeling direct and deliberative learning practices and processes so that principals can do the same for teachers and teachers, in turn, can do the same for students.

I recommend that superintendents take the following steps to guide their efforts to support principals' learning:

- Get to know principals as individual learners.
  - Ground the work in adult developmental theory.
  - Be intentional and strategic about allocating time and resources to principals' professional learning.
- These strategies are based on



Principals from Community School District 12 in New York City, including Danielle Derrig (far left), engage in self-reflection, differentiated group work, anchor text, and district-created tools as a way to develop engagement and connection. Rafaela Espinal, who was district superintendent from 2014 to 2018, led the principal professional learning. Photos by Rafaela Espinal.

research and on my experience as superintendent of Community School District 12 in the Bronx, New York City. In that district — the poorest Congressional district in the U.S. (Caliendo, 2017; Daniels et al., 2021; Johnson, 2022) — a commitment to these principles in the service of instructional leadership has helped schools achieve significant academic progress.

### GET TO KNOW PRINCIPALS AS INDIVIDUAL LEARNERS

School leaders are learners at different levels in terms of pedagogy, leadership, and organization, so as we do with students, it's important to begin with the learner and identify individual strengths and areas of challenge.

Superintendents and their teams need to identify specific gaps in knowledge, skills, or mindsets to anchor our goals to plan, teach, and increase the principal's capacity. This

also allows us to set measurable targets when making decisions, establishing partnerships, and allocating resources. Establishing the edge — where each challenge and strength meet — affords us the opportunity to reflect and plan the most accessible teaching or coaching strategy to reach the principal as a learner based on their level of competency.

We can use our understanding of current strengths and needs to solidify a principal's strengths through feedback, then connect what they already know and do well to something new. When I use this strategy, the principal and I work together to continue to make connections until principals have a self-extending system of strategic decision-making, a concept that comes from developmental reading behavior, in which the learner can build on what they know to identify and organize the right resources for filling in the things they don't know (Clay, 1991).

As one example, principals I worked with reviewed their personal performance data during a planned day of rigorous learning on curricular expectations and equity-driven teaching. We grouped the adults strategically to provide them with differentiated, tiered models of support.

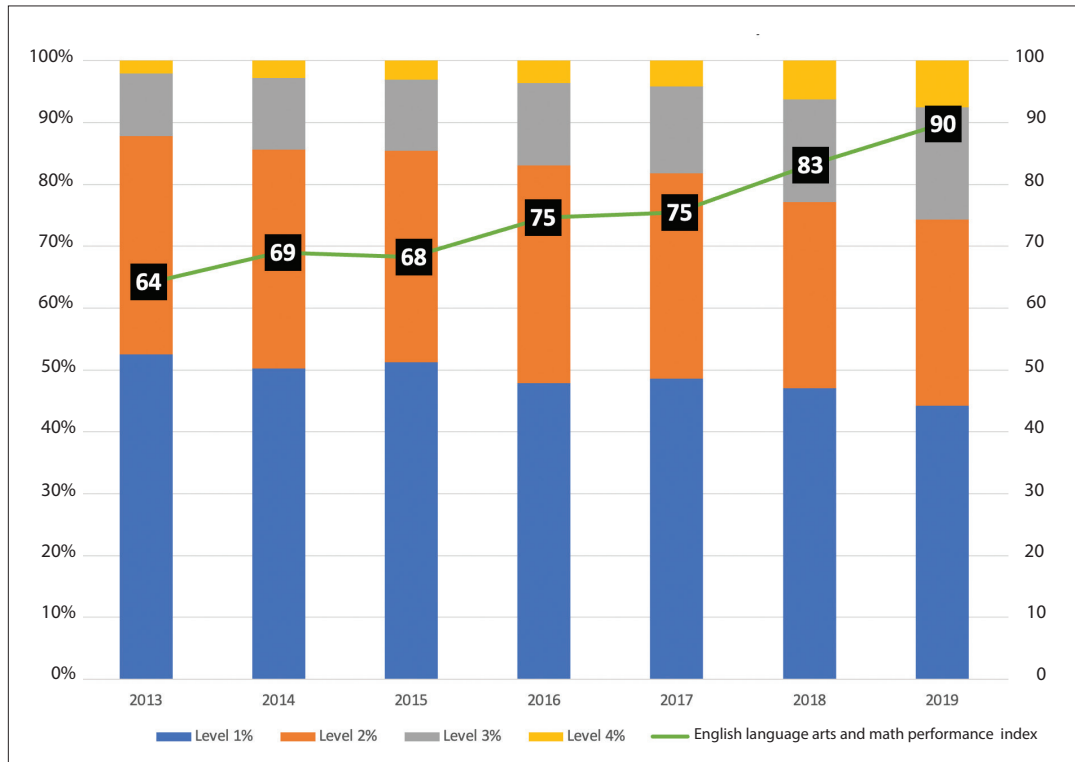
These particular middle school principals, who were grouped based on their common language and set of challenges with the students they served, were positioned to have discussions that were meaningful to them as adult learners and leaders. Together, they designed action plans that they could implement for their individual school communities.

### GROUND THE WORK IN ADULT DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

Although some of the principles of teaching and learning apply to both students and adults, others do not. It is therefore critical to ground



**COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT 12:  
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professional learning for principals in adult developmental theory and ensure that time cultivating adult learning connects theory to practice with actionable strategies and protocols for collaboration, communication, and feedback (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018; Drago-Severson, 2014).

In my own learning and growth, I have internalized adult learning theories, most recently Drago-Severson’s (2012) ways of knowing based on constructive developmental theory, a framework for understanding how adults make sense and meaning from their experiences, the roles in which they serve, and themselves (Drago-Severson, 2009).

Drago-Severson’s theory holds that different people orient to the world in different ways — for example,

through concrete processes and rules or through relationships and social approval. I find this approach helpful when supporting principals and other adult learners because it allows us to explore how these learners relate to themselves and each other and identify what they need and what is likely to resonate.

**CREATE SPACE AND TIME FOR INTENTIONAL LEARNING**

The best intentions and theories don’t lead to progress unless we create time and structure to put them into action. Superintendents play a key role in allocating that structure and making time for purposeful planning.

Beside my office in the district office of Community School District 12, I had a room dedicated to teaching and learning formally and informally.

I named it “Rafaela’s Classroom.” It allowed me to anchor professional learning in the district office and model its importance.

As a superintendent, making time to lead professional learning for school leaders and modeling practice for principals set the direction of learning in the school and provided an opportunity for principals and teachers to replicate the learner-centered approach across all school levels.

When we structure professional learning, we need to allocate the time to build understanding over time in a series of learning cycles so that learning opportunities are not seen as one-shot deals, but as connected learning opportunities. This has scheduling implications that we need to make clear to principals and others in the district.

### Tips for superintendents to support schoolwide professional learning

- Prioritize time to strategically plan.
- Allocate time in principals' schedules for professional learning, including coaching and other forms of job-embedded learning such as instructional rounds.
- Acknowledge and address the guilt school leaders often feel when taking time away from school buildings or administrative duties.
- Provide tools that will help principals make connections between professional learning and the district's overarching mission and goals.
- Connect all levels of professional learning so the time principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and teachers spend coheres across all levels.
- Invite principals, teachers, and educators at all levels to lead professional learning to build ownership and empowerment.
- Shift hearts and minds to understand that continuous learning matters for leaders as well as teachers and students.

We should also remember that planning time is essential and must be created intentionally, including making time to find resources, articles, and books so we can anchor learning in shared texts and align language so that, as a district community, we can understand ourselves and others.

We also need to establish and articulate the purpose and goals of the professional learning. This starts with creating clear outcomes for learning sessions and developing a common language over time by sharing those intended outcomes and pointing out how they align to the district's strategic plans and district and school goals aimed at improving teacher practice and student learning. We should communicate and reiterate these connections in agendas, facilitator guides, and other communications before and after learning sessions.

Time and communication are particularly important when we

introduce principals to new curricular content or district expectations. We can support coherence by leveraging the expertise of the district staff and school leaders' strengths to give whole-group and individual support.

And we shouldn't lose sight of the importance of including other leaders in our efforts to introduce new initiatives and increase coherence with overarching goals and plans. For example, we can lead assistant principal study groups that align with principal development goals.

### IMPACT OF TIME DEVOTED TO ADULT LEARNING

Measuring the degree to which professional learning for school leaders accomplishes its objectives is essential. In my experience, impact is best reflected in qualitative data. In my work in the Bronx, and now as a director working with 11 superintendents in Manhattan, I seek to gather reflections after every

professional learning opportunity.

For example, in Community School District 12, after principal conferences and school support visits, we surveyed principals to evaluate the visits and conferences. I used the results to engage my cabinet and guide future opportunities and decisions. Using those results, we identified and documented best practices (e.g., videos, case studies).

We also gathered quantitative survey results after job-embedded coaching and targeted support visits (which were differentiated specifically based on the needs my team and I identified during previous visits). We found that school leaders' confidence in facilitating professional learning to support teacher practice that improves student learning increased, and principals reported a high level of preparedness to implement all aspects of different initiatives.

We also examined data on student learning before and after we

began implementing an approach to instruction and leadership that is deeply grounded in professional learning and capacity building for leaders and teachers.

When I went to the district in 2014, I found that some school leaders had forgotten what it was like to be a learner and even a struggling learner with varying challenges, so we created consistent and coherent learning opportunities that placed the leaders in the learner's seat and promoted active engagement in deliberate practices.

We began modeling instructional leadership and best practices in adult and student learning in all our meetings and professional learning, grounding our work in research and best practices, and making time for processing and reflecting on what we were learning. As a result, we shifted the culture of adult learning and shortly began to see differences in student learning.

The graph on p. 60 shows students' growth in math and English language arts from 2013, the year before our team took this approach, through 2019, the year after I left the district. It includes all students, including English learners and students with disabilities. The graph shows the district's trajectory on a measure of academic progress based on the ESSA Achievement Index.

Levels 3 and 4, represented in gray and yellow, are the levels that indicate the percentage of students making progress. The graph shows that, over time, the percentage of students falling into those progress categories increased significantly, with level 4 increasing proportionally higher than level 3, while the percentage of students falling into levels 1 and 2 decreased significantly.

The black line is a weighted average of proficiency. If the number in the black box is going up, it means any combination of moving more students from level 1 or 2 to level 3 and level 3 to level 4.

While we still need to make

more progress so that all students are achieving at the highest levels, the progress made in the last few years is significant. Our students face a number of challenges, especially those related to poverty, that students in wealthier districts do not, yet they have made real strides and will continue to do so if the district stays committed to strong instructional leadership and practice.

We cannot directly attribute the progress to professional learning because the professional learning and capacity building for principals and teachers are deeply embedded in the larger instructional approach, which follows best practices for professional learning. But my research and practical experiences show that prioritizing professional learning time for teachers and principals is essential to shifting culture and instruction and therefore improving student learning.

By implementing a robust instructional plan focused on developing principal instructional leadership capacity, we began to see growth.

## MEETING PRINCIPALS' NEEDS

As a superintendent, devoting intentional time to professional learning helped me meet the principals' needs. By applying adult developmental theory and a developmental model for professional learning design, educators were able to build capacity at the individual, school, and system levels that positively influenced student achievement.

By focusing on school leaders as learners, we continue to create a community of practice that reinforces coherence across schools and provides a common language within the district. Modeling the value of professional learning time through job-embedded and collaborative practices may be a missing link for superintendents in which they can invest and prioritize time. Professional learning is a resource to inspire and

support all learners at all levels of a school organization.

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- 
- Rafaela Espinal (rye2101@tc.edu) is assistant superintendent and director of multilingual/English learners for Manhattan (Districts 1-6 and high schools) at the New York City Department of Education, an adjunct professor at City College, CUNY, and a coach for Summer Principals Academy at Teachers College, Columbia University.** ■



DISCUSS. COLLABORATE. FACILITATE.

# TOOLS



## ESTABLISHING TIME FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

SECOND

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ESTABLISHING TIME FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

**TOOL 3**  
Examining Existing Time

**TOOL 3.2, cont.**  
**Time use log**

Use the log to identify how non-instructional time is spent on various tasks and indicate if that time is spent alone or in collaboration with one or more colleagues.  
A = alone / C = collaboration with one or more colleagues

Areas	Monday		Tuesday		Wednesday		Thursday		Friday		Total min.
	A	C	A	C	A	C	A	C	A	C	
Instructional planning (lesson design, curriculum development, materials and resource development, etc.)											
Assessment (analyzing student work, grading student work, designing assessments, data analysis, etc.)											
Professional learning (formal or informal learning that occurs during the workday)											
Management/Clerical (reporting, etc.)											
calls:											

Professional learning in school and beyond: A tool kit for New Jersey educators, by Joellen Kilian, Department of Education and National Staff Development Council, 2006. Page 117.

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ESTABLISHING TIME FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

**STEP 1**

### Forming a Time Study Team

Initiating the study of time for professional learning begins with defining the purpose and goal for the work. Most districts engage in time studies to create options that provide additional time for the collaborative professional learning needed to increase educator effectiveness and student achievement. Typical goals for this work include forming recommendations to present to a decision-making body for consideration.

To officially launch the work, senior district or school leaders develop a charge statement that describes the work to be accomplished, parameters for the work, the team responsible for the work, and other expectations for the process and outcomes of the work. **Tool 1.1: Time Study team charge statement** outlines the expectations for the Time Study team including required membership, the line of authority, timeline for the team's work, and parameters for the recommendations the team offers. Finding time for professional learning will require agreement among stakeholders with differing perspectives; therefore, membership of the Time Study team is an important consideration. **Tool 1.2: Recommendations for membership of the Time Study team** provides a list of potential representatives who would bring a wide range of perspectives to a Time Study team. The context, climate, and culture within of a school or district influences membership for work groups such as the Time Study team. When perspectives are more diverse, membership should include a broader membership. In some cases, district or school leaders might decide to have a small work group conduct the research and analysis and form recommendations, and then share the recommendations with a broad group of representatives for feedback. If a smaller team is formed to conduct the research and analysis and provide recommendations, gathering feedback from a broad range of stakeholders is advised.

Tool	Tool Title	Description
1.1	<b>Time Study team charge statement</b>	A sample charge statement outlines the responsibilities, membership, level of authority, and parameters of Time Study work.
1.2	<b>Recommended membership of Time Study team</b>	This list includes recommendations for membership of the Time Study team.

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## A PRACTICAL GUIDE ABOUT TIME

Learning Forward's workbook, *Establishing Time for Professional Learning*, guides districts and schools to increase collaborative learning time for educators. It includes steps for forming a time study team, assessing challenges and opportunities, developing and vetting recommended changes, and assessing the impact of those changes. This issue's tool comes from the workbook and helps educators reflect on their understanding of and assumptions about time use.

Find the workbook at [learningforward.org/report/establishing-time-professional-learning](https://learningforward.org/report/establishing-time-professional-learning)



# TOOLS

## Explore how you use time — and find ways to improve it

BY JOELLEN KILLION

Ask any educator what the major challenge is in providing effective professional learning and the answer is probably the same: time. Many schools and districts, nevertheless, find ways to create schedules that provide regular, frequent opportunities for teacher collaboration and collaborative professional learning.

Learning Forward's workbook, *Establishing Time for Professional Learning*, which can be found on the Learning Forward website, is a tried-and-true resource that guides districts and schools to develop, vet, and implement recommendations for increasing collaborative learning time for educators, and then evaluate the effectiveness of the change. The workbook is grounded in a rich set of tools.

Here we share two of those tools to kick-start your efforts to study how you use learning time and make needed changes. They are designed to surface beliefs about time because understanding personal assumptions provides fundamental information for teams as they discover how they are currently using time, make meaning of those findings, and make and implement new plans. These two tools can be used alone or in combination with the rest of the workbook.

•  
*Joellen Killion (joellen.killion@learningforward.org) is a senior advisor to Learning Forward.*

### Suggestions for use

1. Ask team members to independently complete the first tool, Exploring Assumptions About Time. It presents some contradictory positions about time and asks each person to identify where their beliefs fall along a spectrum. Provide time for individual reflection and possibly a pair-share discussion.
2. Use the second tool, Staff Perceptions About Collaborative Time, to conduct a quick check on staff perceptions about collaborative professional learning. Gather responses from as many staff members as possible. Compile the results and share mean scores with staff.
3. Facilitate a team discussion about individuals' and the team's beliefs about collaborative professional learning time, using the six questions at the end of the second tool as a guide or inspiration. Consider how the group's beliefs align with the current approach to collaborative learning time and whether any changes might be needed.
4. For further exploration, use the full workbook, *Establishing Time for Professional Learning*, to create a time study team and engage in a deeper dive into time use in your system.

## Exploring assumptions about time

Use the statements below to explore your personal assumptions about time and time for collaboration among educators in schools.

Each row contains two statements that represent different perspectives on one aspect of time. Indicate which perspective more closely aligns with your personal view by placing an X in one of the five boxes.

For example, in row 1, if you agree more with the statement on the left, yet not fully with it, you might place an X in box b. If you do not have an opinion related to the statements in row 1, you might place your X in box c.

One perspective about time	Range of agreement					Another perspective about time
<b>1</b> Time is a fixed commodity that cannot be adapted.						Time is a resource to adapt to our needs.
<b>2</b> Time constrains our efforts.						Time enhances our efforts.
<b>3</b> Determining how time is allocated and used during the workday is an individual decision.						Determining how time is allocated and used within a school day is a collaborative decision.
<b>4</b> Decision-makers or policymakers outside the school determine the amount of time available for collaborative professional learning and work.						The amount of time available for professional learning is determined inside the school through a collaborative process that engages all stakeholders.

To download the workbook:  
[learningforward.org/report/establishing-time-professional-learning/](https://learningforward.org/report/establishing-time-professional-learning/)



# TOOLS

		a	b	c	d	e	
5	Time controls us.						We control time.
6	Leaders in our school and district do not support teacher collaboration as a means of increasing teaching effectiveness and student achievement.						Leaders in our school and district support teacher collaboration as a means of increasing teaching effectiveness and student achievement.
7	Parents and community members believe that factors other than collaboration among teachers and ongoing professional learning lead to increased student achievement.						Parents and community members believe that collaboration among teachers and ongoing professional learning lead to increased student achievement.
8	The district expects educator professional learning to occur outside educators' workdays.						The district expects educator professional learning to occur routinely as a part of educators' workdays.
9	The more time allocated to student learning, the more they learn.						It is not the amount of time allocated that affects student learning, but rather how time is used.
10	Increasing time for collaborative professional learning among educators decreases the amount of time for student learning.						Increasing time for collaborative professional learning among educators can be accomplished without decreasing significantly the amount of time for student learning.

## Staff perceptions about collaborative time

Use this tool to conduct a quick check on staff perceptions about collaborative professional learning and work. The survey might be added to an online survey tool to make it easier to use and compile results. Gather responses from as many staff members as possible, compile the results, and share mean scores with staff.

### Where are we now?

1. Our school includes time during the contract day for teachers to learn and work together in teams whose members share common goals (school, grade level, department, etc.) for student learning.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
-----------------------	-------	---------	----------	--------------------------

2. In our school, professional learning occurs primarily during the school day.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
-----------------------	-------	---------	----------	--------------------------

3. In our school, teams of teachers have scheduled time several times per week for professional learning.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
-----------------------	-------	---------	----------	--------------------------

4. Our principal uses staff meetings for professional learning.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
-----------------------	-------	---------	----------	--------------------------

5. Teachers in our school are hesitant about asking for help from their peers.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
-----------------------	-------	---------	----------	--------------------------

6. Teachers in our school use all available time for collaborative professional learning and work.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
-----------------------	-------	---------	----------	--------------------------

7. In our school, teachers value individual planning time.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
-----------------------	-------	---------	----------	--------------------------

# TOOLS

8. Teachers in our school believe that collaborative professional learning and work improves their individual effectiveness.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
-----------------------	-------	---------	----------	--------------------------

9. Teachers in our school prefer to plan individually rather than collaboratively.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
-----------------------	-------	---------	----------	--------------------------

10. Teachers in our school use collaborative time to identify and solve issues related to student learning.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
-----------------------	-------	---------	----------	--------------------------

11. The benefits I receive from having time for collaborative professional learning with my peers are:

12. The challenges I have with having time for collaborative professional learning and work with my peers are:

Use the questions below with the staff to analyze the results.

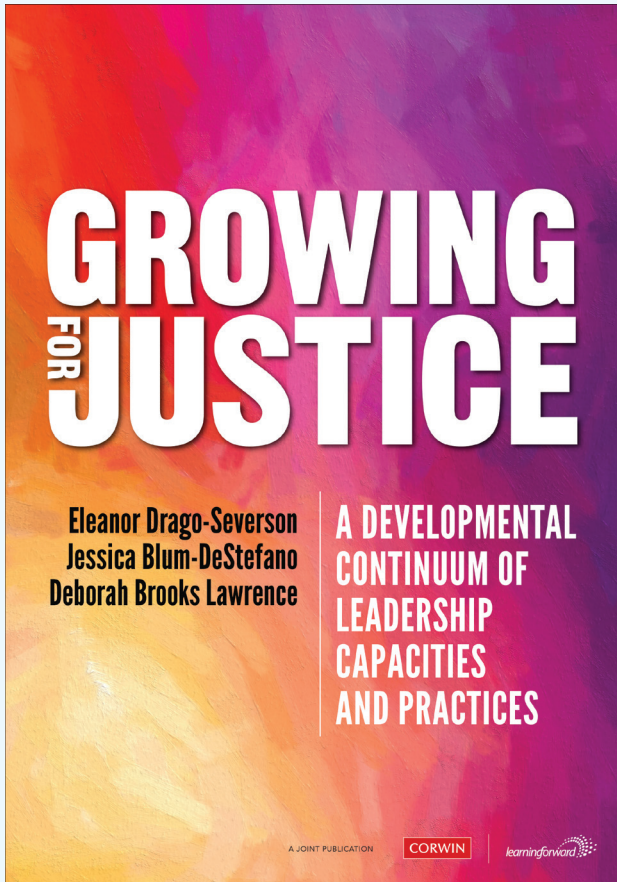
1. What trends or patterns exist in the responses?
2. What surprises us?
3. Which will support our efforts to create additional time for collaborative professional learning?
4. Which are potential barriers to creating additional time for collaborative professional learning?
5. What do these results suggest we need to pay attention to as a school as we study time for professional learning?
6. If we were able to create more time for collaborative professional learning and work, how would we expect these results to change in a year or two?

**Source: Killion, J. (2023).** *Establishing time for professional learning.* Learning Forward.



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# UPDATES



## LEARNING FORWARD BOOK CLUB FALL EVENT

Learning Forward's Book Club will feature a members-only discussion with authors Eleanor Drago-Severson, Jessica Blum-DeStefano, and Deborah Brooks Lawrence on their book, *Growing for Justice: A Developmental Continuum of Leadership Capacities and Practices* at 3 p.m. Eastern Time on Wednesday, Oct. 4. The book explores how leaders committed to social justice support the growth of others while also developing their own capacities to engage, connect, and lead for change.

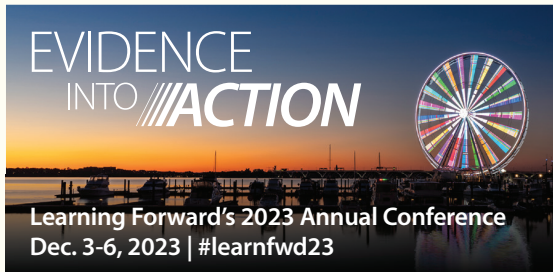
Participants in this live-only virtual event will have opportunities to engage with the authors and their peers. To ensure an open and trusting space for learning, this conversation will not be recorded.

The Book Club is a benefit of membership for Learning Forward comprehensive members. Comprehensive members can register here: [learningforward.org/webinars](https://learningforward.org/webinars).

To learn more about becoming a comprehensive member, visit [learningforward.org/membership](https://learningforward.org/membership).



## ANNUAL CONFERENCE WILL EXPLORE ‘EVIDENCE INTO ACTION’



Join us Dec. 3-6 in Washington, D.C., for Learning Forward's Annual Conference, where we will explore the theme "Evidence Into Action." Learn from expert education leaders at all levels how best practices from research can be implemented in classrooms and schools.

Learning Forward only accepts evidence-based sessions with clear learning designs. The conference provides a variety of learning opportunities in different formats:

- All-day **preconference sessions** provide deep learning experiences;

- **Concurrent sessions** give learners access to new knowledge and deepen their understanding via discussion with colleagues and content experts;
- **Keynotes** offer insightful perspectives, research, and strategies;
- **Thought leaders**, education researchers, and educational leaders present on the latest in the field of professional learning;
- Informal discussions through **roundtables and table talks** are excellent venues for giving and receiving feedback, engaging in discussion, and meeting colleagues with similar interests;
- **Sponsor sessions** feature publishers, advocacy organizations, and technology partners with cutting-edge ideas, innovative solutions, and successful examples from schools and systems.

Registrations for the conference are outpacing last year's sold-out event. For more information or to register, visit [conference.learningforward.org](https://conference.learningforward.org).

## U.S. professional learning funding update

July was an eventful policy month as Congress worked to move fiscal year 2024 spending legislation through appropriations committees. The House Appropriations Subcommittee's majority members approved elimination of the Title IIA program from fiscal year 2024 onward and approved drastic cuts to other education programs, including a \$14.7 billion reduction to Title I below the fiscal year 2023 enacted level. Fortunately, the Senate Appropriations Committee's bill preserved Title IIA at the same funding level as last year.

While the House and Senate continue the appropriations process, Learning Forward is encouraging members and allies to reach out to Congress to express their support for a fully funded Title IIA, which is the backbone program for improving student achievement and educator retention through professional learning.

Learning Forward's advocacy site at [learningforward.org/advocacy/](https://learningforward.org/advocacy/) includes a template letter to Congress that supporters can personalize and send. In the campaign's first week, more than 1,000 pro-Title IIA messages reached the inboxes of members of Congress from Learning Forward's advocacy hub. We encourage supporters to attend town halls and request meetings with their representatives while lawmakers are in their home districts in August.

For more information on how to support Title IIA, watch this recording of a special policy briefing Learning Forward hosted that represented the voices of superintendents, principals, teachers, and the U.S. Department of Education on the value of professional learning: [learningforward.org/webinar/professional-learning-is-stronger-schools-title-ii-a-funding-and-the-federal-education-budget/](https://learningforward.org/webinar/professional-learning-is-stronger-schools-title-ii-a-funding-and-the-federal-education-budget/)

## Learning Forward CEO elected to Learning First Alliance board

Frederick Brown, president and CEO of Learning Forward, was elected secretary/treasurer of the Learning First Alliance for 2023-24. Learning First Alliance is a partnership of leading education organizations, including Learning Forward, working to improve student learning in America's public schools. The coalition represents more than 10 million parents, educators, and policymakers. Jill Cook, executive director of the American School Counselor Association, was elected chair of the board of directors. L. Earl Franks, executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, is immediate past chair.

## Fall webinars highlight equity, coaching, time use strategies

Learning Forward webinars return this fall with innovative professional learning leaders sharing how to help you plan, implement, and advocate for professional learning that gets results for educators and students.

**Sept. 21:** We explore **time as an essential resource**, and share policies, mindsets, and strategies that help you maximize time for job-embedded, collaborative learning.

**Oct. 19: Instructional coaches** will share lessons learned from the transition from hybrid and virtual coaching back to in-person support for teachers.

**Nov. 16: “Reframing the Equity Conversation”** will feature leaders who are using new language and strategies to navigate the nuances of equity and success for all students in today’s polarized environment.

Learn more about these and other webinars at [learningforward.org/webinars/](https://learningforward.org/webinars/)



## SEPTEMBER ONLINE COURSE: IMPLEMENTING A COACHING CYCLE

Expert coaches Heather Clifton and Andy Mendelsberg will unpack the critical coaching cycle of planning, support, and reflection that guides instructional coaches’ work with teachers during the online course *Implementing a Coaching Cycle*, which begins Sept. 25.

Learners will identify types of coaching cycles appropriate for their work with teachers, develop and implement strategies for strengthening their own application of each key component of the cycle, and engage in a coaching cycle with a teacher they support.

Participants who complete this three-week, hybrid course will receive a certificate for 15 hours of professional learning. Learn more at [learningforward.org/online-courses-2/](https://learningforward.org/online-courses-2/)

## School leaders explore effective professional learning

Learning Forward staff spent three days in June with participants in the University of Maryland College Park School Improvement Leadership Academy, facilitating interactive sessions about effective professional learning, Standards for Professional Learning, and instructional leadership with school leaders from Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey.

School Improvement Leadership Academy is funded through a federal SEED grant and provides principals and assistant principals with a two-year comprehensive, evidence-based professional learning experience focused on school improvement, equity, and instruction.

Participating principals and assistant principals receive a stipend and doctorate credit at University of Maryland. Recruitment is under way for the second cohort, which starts in November. If you are interested, contact Cherise Hunter at [cjhunter@umd.edu](mailto:cjhunter@umd.edu).

## AFFILIATE NEWS

Learning Forward Affiliate leaders met in Louisville, Kentucky, to engage in professional learning and strategize for the 2023-24 school year.

The group examined standards implementation tools, including *Advancing Outcomes for All Learners*, which connects challenges to student outcomes with the Standards for Professional Learning most central to overcoming the challenges, and *Vignettes*, which provide true-to-life depictions of multiple standards being implemented in a variety of contexts.

Affiliate leaders learned from each other through networking conversations and a presentation from members of Learning Forward Texas, who shared insight about providing learning opportunities to educators across the country through Learning Forward’s online courses. They also explored the power of storytelling as a way to communicate the impact professional learning has on educators and students.

Many Learning Forward Affiliates offer educators the chance to extend learning from Learning Forward’s Annual Conference by hosting conferences in their state, region, or province throughout the year. In September, Learning Forward Florida’s Fall Conference will feature Learning Forward’s CEO Frederick Brown and senior advisor Joellen Killion. Learn more at [www.fasdonline.org](https://www.fasdonline.org).

For more information or to find an Affiliate near you, visit [learningforward.org/affiliate-chapters/](https://learningforward.org/affiliate-chapters/)



# THROUGH THE LENS

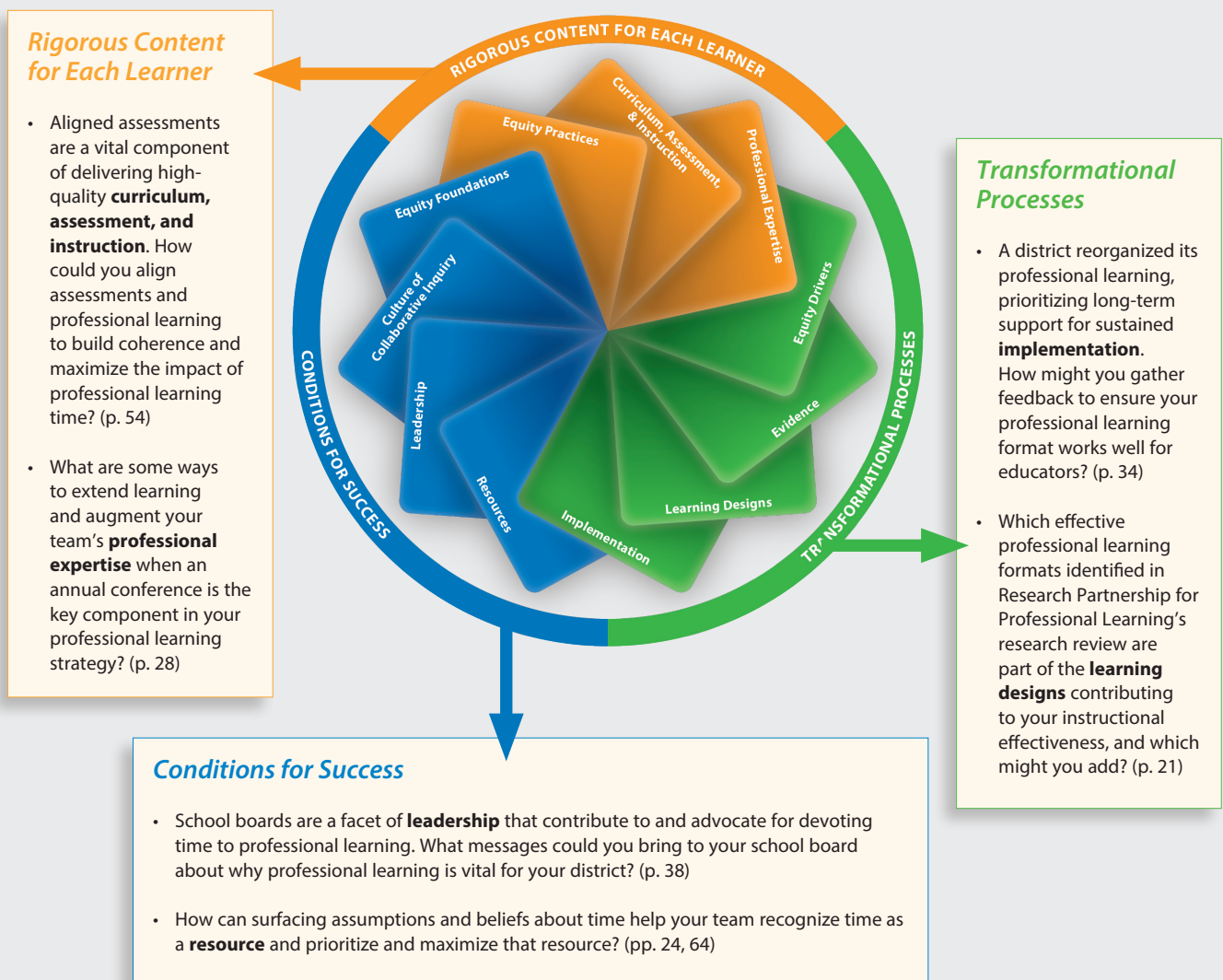
OF LEARNING FORWARD'S STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Standards for Professional Learning describe the content, processes, and conditions of high-quality learning that makes a difference for students and educators. They are organized in a framework of three interconnected categories. Understanding each category and each standard can help learning leaders build systemic professional learning.

To help you deepen your understanding, this tool provides reflection questions that draw on articles from this issue of *The Learning Professional* and connect to standards from each category. You can use these questions to guide your reading of the articles or you can use them in conversations with colleagues — for example, during professional learning communities, observations, or planning discussions.

The page numbers after each question will take you to the article that corresponds to the question.

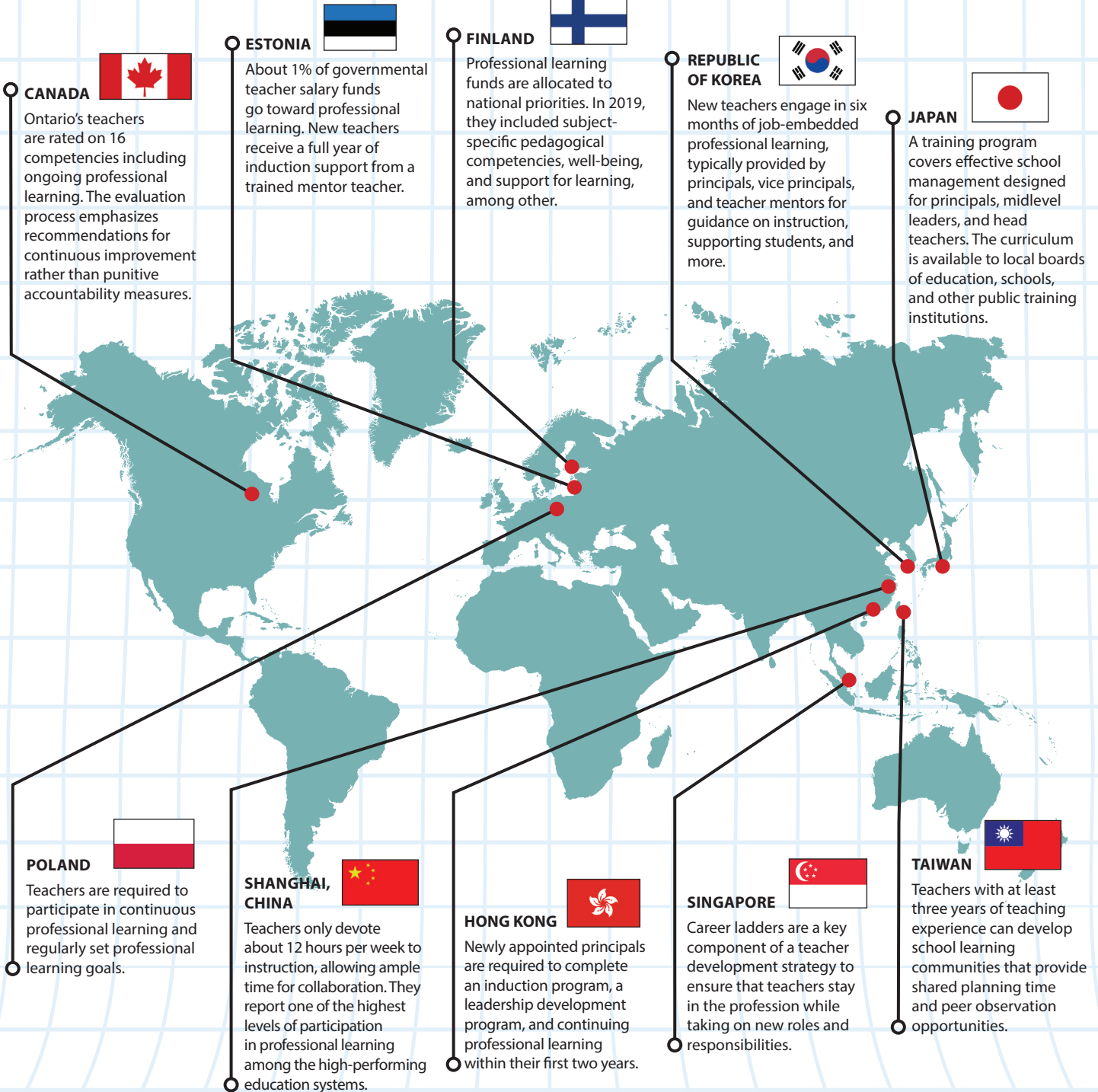
## HOW STANDARDS CAN HELP STRUCTURE LEARNING TIME



Learn more about Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning at [standards.learningforward.org](https://standards.learningforward.org)

# AT A GLANCE

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN THE WORLD'S TOP EDUCATION SYSTEMS



The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) identified the world's most successful educational systems using the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). High-performing education systems place a high value on the teaching profession and educator learning.

Source: [ncee.org/top-performing-countries/](https://ncee.org/top-performing-countries/)



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## Learning Forward's **2023 Annual Conference**

Washington, DC

Dec. 3-6, 2023

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