



STEPS TO EQUITY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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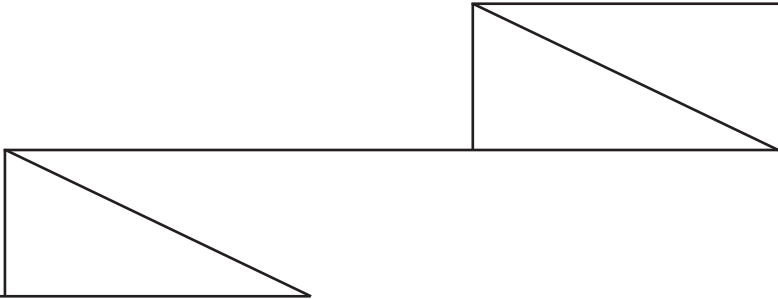
Designing professional learning that meets the diverse needs of special education professionals is exciting, challenging, and critically important. Special educators bring a wide range of job responsibilities and skills to the task of

addressing their students' needs.

At the Children's Center for Communication/Beverly School for the Deaf in Massachusetts, staff include teachers, teaching assistants, American Sign Language (ASL)/English interpreters, and related service providers such as speech-language,

occupational, and physical therapists.

Collectively, these professionals support deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing children from ages 3 to 22 with a range of communication and developmental challenges. We use the term "deaf" to include all deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals, while "Deaf" is



used in reference to those who identify with Deaf culture, participate in the Deaf community, and typically use sign language for communication.

Equity is key to meeting the needs of diverse special educators and their students. Indeed, equity is included in the definition of effective professional learning (Carter Andrews & Richmond, 2019), and this is reflected in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). But schools do not always connect these dots for special educators.

To ensure that equity is at the core of our work, we developed a framework to support the design and implementation of standards-based, equity-centered professional learning for special education professionals in our school and beyond. We aim to provide a road map for educators from all disciplines as well as cultural, linguistic, and professional backgrounds. This road map can be used to examine the professional learning they lead or engage in and identify opportunities to embed equity.

We know that high-quality professional learning improves teacher instruction, advances student achievement, and strengthens the teaching profession by supporting

educators' personal and professional growth (Garrett et al., 2021; King & Holland, 2022). Special education professionals need access to professional learning to foster their own practices and help their students thrive.

GROUNDED IN STANDARDS

We work at The Institute at the Children's Center for Communication/ Beverly School for the Deaf. The Institute was established in 2019 as a research-and-practice arm of the school, with a mission to generate and disseminate transformational ideas and practice. We engage in scholarly activities and partnerships to improve outcomes for children and youth who are deaf or deaf with disabilities and those with complex communication needs.

Among our responsibilities is the design and implementation of professional learning for the school's faculty. This provides an opportunity to ensure that our special education professionals – and their students – have access to evidence-informed practices (McLeskey et al., 2017). We also strive to capture and disseminate the outstanding teaching and service provision modeled by our school colleagues to ensure these

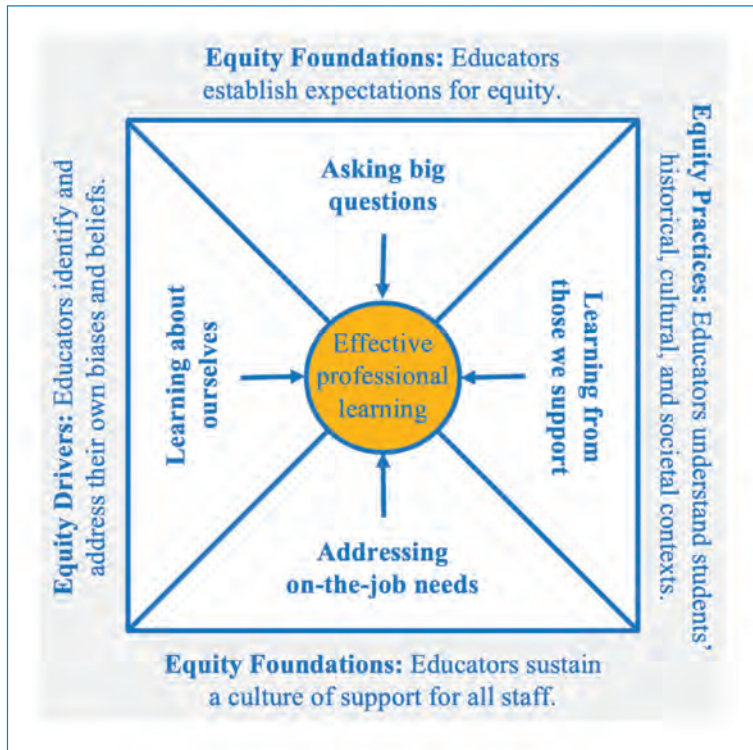
approaches are more widely available to professionals in the field.

Designing professional learning for the school requires that we consider diversity across both our faculty and student populations. Our faculty, some of whom are Deaf themselves, hail from many professional disciplines, and their students experience different levels of hearing loss and disability type. In addition, all individuals have unique familial, cultural, and linguistic experiences. This diversity, which we consider a benefit to our whole community, calls for multifaceted professional learning.

Until 2019, professional learning at the school was not the responsibility of a single team; rather, it was designed and implemented in piecemeal fashion. Faculty feedback indicated that the "one-and-done" approach was not working. We needed to centralize professional learning planning and implementation. At The Institute, we were eager to apply research-informed best practices to this process.

Early in our transformation of professional learning, we aligned our approach with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, focusing especially on how equity is embedded in the Leadership standard

FRAMEWORK FOR STANDARDS-BASED, EQUITY-CENTERED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS



Source: Sarah Brandt and Amy Szarkowski

(Learning Forward, 2022). We centered two constructs of that standard that we saw as essential for transforming our professional learning: Establish a compelling and inclusive vision for professional learning and advocate for professional learning with impact.

With these standards as a foundation, we began constructing a framework to guide our next steps. This was an iterative process, impacted by research-informed developments in best practices for professional learning along with feedback from our diverse school faculty.

For example, we asked questions about equity that are specific to Deaf individuals who communicate using ASL, such as: Is the content and delivery of professional learning Deaf-friendly and visually accessible? Are Deaf faculty afforded equitable opportunities for participation in

professional learning? How can we make the professional learning experience better for Deaf faculty?

While these considerations are specific to our school, professional learning designers in other educational settings should consider equity for all members of their particular communities.

ABOUT THE FRAMEWORK

As shown in the figure above, the resulting framework is composed of four quadrants, each of which represents important professional learning components and programming that we want to address: asking big questions, addressing on-the-job needs, learning about ourselves, and learning from those we support. Equity is central to all of them, so each quadrant is connected to one of the three equity standards in

Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022).

ASKING BIG QUESTIONS

The upper quadrant of the framework includes professional learning that facilitates asking big questions. This involves identifying a problem of practice, exploring relevant resources, and developing an action plan or solution. Professional learning of this nature requires significant time commitment, active engagement, and willingness to participate in co-creation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

At The Institute, we design professional learning for our school faculty that encourages asking big questions about equity at individual, school, system, and societal levels through a program called the Deep Dive. This approach aligns with the Equity Foundations standard by

HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FRAMEWORK	
Quadrant	Examples for implementation
Asking big questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional learning communities • Communities of inquiry • Action research
Addressing on-the-job needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational technology trainings • Instructional tool demonstrations • Problem-solving sessions
Learning about ourselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book/film club • Self-guided learning and reflection • Facilitated dialogue training
Learning from those we support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invited speakers • Panel presentations • Family-guided programming

establishing expectations for equity (Learning Forward, 2022).

A Deep Dive is a long-term opportunity to engage in structured learning, professional-guided examination of resources, and development of action steps. For example, the Diversity & Equity in Special Education Deep Dive involved broad discussion and exploration of equity at the school, while the Leadership Through the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Lens Deep Dive contextualized leadership skills within the diversity, equity, and inclusion framework.

An example of impact from asking big questions followed the equity-focused Deep Dives described above and resulted in tangible changes. For example, the Deep Dive process included discussion about the term inclusion, which has different connotations for the Deaf community and its allies than in many other contexts. For some, this term is associated with historical repression and the forcing of Deaf individuals out of

Deaf spaces and into those designed for hearing people (Kusters et al., 2015).

Our Deep Dives explored some big and important questions about terminology, and, as a result, The Institute has shifted from using diversity, equity, and inclusion to diversity, equity, and belonging. We recommend that other special educational professionals examine their language use to ensure they are promoting equity.

ADDRESSING ON-THE-JOB NEEDS

Another quadrant of the framework is addressing on-the-job needs. This involves learning and practicing skills necessary to support students' daily learning, such as the use of specific software, communication tools, or curricular resources. As an example, The Institute developed the Hands On Learning program to help faculty make moment-to-moment informed decisions and take actions that increase student accessibility to their learning and environment. This may involve adapting the background color and

font size in a digital book for a student with low vision or using a student's sensory regulation tool kit to support participation at a whole-school activity.

The Hands On Learning program embodies the Equity Foundations standard to sustain a culture of support for all staff (Learning Forward, 2022) because the on-the-job skills addressed promote accessibility, and thereby equity, for students with disabilities. We also facilitate this and other programs in an equitable way to provide accessibility to all faculty.

For example, topics are offered in both spoken English and ASL, ensuring that all faculty have access to training in their first language. Faculty have reflected on the benefit of the program, saying that it provides excellent instruction in a functional, practical format, and they appreciate that it has application to real life.

LEARNING ABOUT OURSELVES

Over time, we recognized that faculty also needed opportunities to look inward at their own practices,

beliefs, and biases. This led to the addition of the left quadrant of the framework: learning about ourselves. An important component of this is identifying and addressing biases and beliefs, which is part of the Equity Drivers standard (Learning Forward, 2022).

Professional learning relevant to this quadrant is organized by the school's Diversity Committee. Established by The Institute but facilitated by faculty members, this committee meets regularly on a voluntary basis to engage in diversity, equity, and belonging work. Members select content to spark conversations, such as a video on implicit bias or an article on the impact of ableism.

Through open discussion, members have the opportunity to identify their own biases and beliefs and examine the impact of those biases and beliefs on practice. For example, following a deep exploration of language related to neurodiversity and autism, Diversity Committee members created a bulletin board that displayed neurodiversity-affirming terminology and led small-group discussion with related service providers and teachers regarding neurodiversity-affirming practices.

Committee leaders, with support from The Institute, also plan programming such as a book club, film discussions, and topic-driven diversity discussions, such as allyship in the workplace. This type of learning provides opportunities for special education professionals to examine how their own perspectives impact their practice and how they engage in the workplace with their colleagues and students.

LEARNING FROM THOSE WE SUPPORT

In addition to looking inward, the framework also recommends looking outward. Special education professionals should learn from those representing the communities they serve. At our school, these include the Deaf and Disability communities.

On the right side of the framework is the quadrant learning from those we support, which helps to ensure that educators and professionals learn from others' lived experiences. This fosters Equity Practices, such as understanding of students' historical, cultural, and societal contexts, as described in Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022).

For example, The Institute created the Deafness, Disability, and Diversity Representation series. This program features individuals with valuable lived experience across Deaf and Disability communities sharing their stories with faculty. Presenters have included disability self-advocates, young adults with complex needs along with their families, as well as leaders from the Deaf and Disability communities from marginalized backgrounds.

Because the individuals invited to present in the Deafness, Disability, and Diversity Representation series are not typically directly affiliated with our school, there is an opportunity for open and honest dialogue.

This element of the framework has provided opportunities for authentic engagement with the individuals we support. Faculty have generally provided very positive feedback on this series. A teaching assistant noted, "For me, [Deafness, Disability, and Diversity Representation presenters] have impacted how I interacted with the students in such a positive way, but they also impacted my personal life, too. To have professional learning that can do both at the same time is very special and makes me a better person inside and outside of the classroom."

LOOKING AHEAD

The framework represents our progress toward the aim of standards-based, equity-centered professional learning for special education professionals. It will grow and change based on the needs of the professionals and students for whom it was developed. We encourage other educators and professional learning

designers to use and adapt it to their specific special education setting.

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