Taking the next step

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.

THE STANDARDS ASSESSMENT INVENTORY:

- Provides data on teachers' perceptions of the professional learning they experience in their schools.

- Reveals the degree of success or challenges systems face with professional learning practices and implementation in the system as a whole and in individual schools.

- 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.

SAI PRICING:

One school	$500
Systems with fewer than 15 participating schools	$750 plus $70 per school
Systems with more than 15 participating schools	$1,000 plus $70 per school
State/provinces with 30% of all schools participating	$60 per school
States/provinces with less than 30% of all schools participating	$1,000 plus $70 per school
Regional service centers	$1,000 plus $70 per school

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**.

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THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION
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Fenesha Hubbard

Professional learning leader, educator, and author

"When you look at reflection as a professional learning approach, it requires you to really be honest, it requires humility. It requires that you examine yourself and that you choose to grow. Because when you attend to the work of equity, what you're doing is really examining your actions. You're exploring your beliefs, and you're becoming more aware of what drives you in your instructional decision-making."

— Source: Hubbard, F., Hughes, A.R., & Gant, M.M. (2023, November 16). *Finding common ground to reach all students* [Webinar]. learningforward.org/webinar/finding-common-ground-to-reach-all-students/

Shifting culture requires learning together

Organizational culture shifts as a result of meaningful collaboration among educators, so where does that leave you when people feel their time is not valued and their needs are not being met? Professional learning that is relevant to the needs of educators and results in meaningful impact is the process through which a thriving culture of learning and shared responsibility is built.

But how do you bring educators back to the table ready to learn and engage?

Because professional learning is only effective when educators actually engage, learn, and implement new behaviors, Learning Forward partners with educational organizations at all levels to improve understanding of the professional learning needs of educators and to design and implement collaborative learning that

will bring them back to the table and foster the individual and collective efficacy that improves student learning.

To learn more about how Learning Forward can support your efforts to shift the culture of your school through improved professional learning, contact Sharron Helmke, senior vice president, professional services, sharron.helmke@learningforward.org.

NEW ROLES, NEW CHALLENGES: LEARNING HELPS US THRIVE

Encouraging all educators' career development can be an important part of keeping talented educators in the profession for the long term.

I always enjoy asking people about the paths that have led them to their current jobs. More often than not, those paths have included some unexpected twists and turns. (My own path is no exception.) Even people who are working in the professions they dreamed about as children describe surprises — about the kinds of projects they've taken on, the roles they've assumed, or how the nature of their work has changed over time. Those surprises are often the best parts of our stories because they keep us growing.

Learning is one of the main reasons so many of us have found ourselves in positions we didn't expect. We're always learning about our own interests and needs, how our skills fit into the world, and new opportunities and jobs that didn't exist when we started out.

Fortunately, learning doesn't just inspire us to take on new challenges, it helps us succeed in those challenges. No matter how much preparation and experience we have, we are all continually learning on the job. We learn from those around us, the expectations of the situation, and the evolving demands and opportunities of the work, often implicitly or even subconsciously.

High-quality professional learning provides the structure to make that learning intentional and even more useful. Professional learning gives us the time to reflect and practice, learn about and apply research, and ask questions of veteran colleagues with track records of success. It helps us grow not only in a professional capacity, but as professional people.

This issue of *The Learning Professional* shows how professional learning can lead us to new roles and challenges, help us thrive in those roles, and even open up new career paths supporting other educators' learning. The articles show diverse ways districts, schools, and organizations are supporting career growth in ways that benefit not just staff but, ultimately, students.

A district-university partnership in Chicago (p. 32) and a university graduate program (p. 28) are tapping into the power of teacher leadership, recognizing that some teachers want to grow and do more without leaving the classroom teaching they love. A district leader in Minnesota is taking inspiration from research on the unique needs of midcareer teachers to design tailored professional learning (p. 24).

A guidebook shows how to strengthen the pathway from assistant principal to principal, drawing on years of research funded by The Wallace Foundation (p. 46). And a Maryland district has committed to professional learning for all staff, including administrative, operational, and noninstructional staff (p. 41).

Helping each other continue growing as professionals isn't simply a nice staff perk. It matters for student success. Students benefit from consistent relationships with experienced educators (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). But educator attrition and burnout have been at concerning levels for years (Kurtz, 2022; NCES, 2022). Encouraging all educators' career development can be an important part of changing that trend and keeping talented educators in the profession for the long term. When educators keep learning, students keep learning.

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About our style and word usage

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VOICES

FIND YOUR FOOTING

"Professional learning can sustain us, even when the work feels uncertain, as it often does. It can also open new career pathways when we're ready for the next step."
— *A mantra for facilitators: 'Feedback is my friend,' p. 14*

ON-THE-JOB LEARNING SMOOTHS CHALLENGING CAREER TRANSITIONS

New roles are always challenging — often in ways that we don't expect or prepare for — and professional learning is the best way to navigate those challenges.

It's hard to believe that it's been 30 years since I first stepped into my assistant principalship in an urban middle school in Elyria, Ohio, a small district 30 miles west of Cleveland. I had been an elementary teacher in that district and was completing my coursework for an administrative certificate. The transition to administration came sooner than I expected: Four assistant principal positions opened in the district at the same time. So, with a clear need before me and the strong encouragement of my colleagues and supervisors, I applied for and accepted a position.

Transitioning into this role required a lot of on-the-job learning. Although my graduate program and coursework positioned me to take on my new role, the job-embedded professional learning was the most important factor that helped me succeed and positioned me to become a principal two years later.

I know I'm not alone in crediting my career growth and success to professional learning because other educators tell me similar stories of their own paths. New roles are always challenging — often in ways that we don't expect or prepare for — and professional learning is the best way to navigate those challenges so that our work can benefit students, regardless of which role we're in or how long we've been in it.

Based on my own experiences and those other educators have shared with me, here's my advice about harnessing the power of professional learning as you navigate new roles and career transitions.

RECOGNIZE THE POWER OF JOB-EMBEDDED FORMS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

When people think about professional learning, they tend to imagine conferences, workshops, and courses. But the most meaningful professional learning I experienced — and the learning that best prepared me for my next career steps — came from coaching, mentoring, and reflection with colleagues.

For example, one of my first challenges as an assistant principal was changing grade levels. Because all of my experiences up to that point had been in an elementary setting, I realized I didn't fully understand how best to support the middle grades child. As anyone who has worked with them or spent time with them knows, early adolescents have unique needs and strengths. During my time in the middle school, I came to appreciate these a great deal, but during my first days as an assistant principal and my earliest interactions with middle schoolers, I remember thinking about my choice to take the position, "What have I done?!"

Some of the best professional learning for closing my knowledge gap came in the form of coaching from my school's guidance counselor. I would often sit down with her to discuss situations I found particularly difficult. She helped me better understand the middle school

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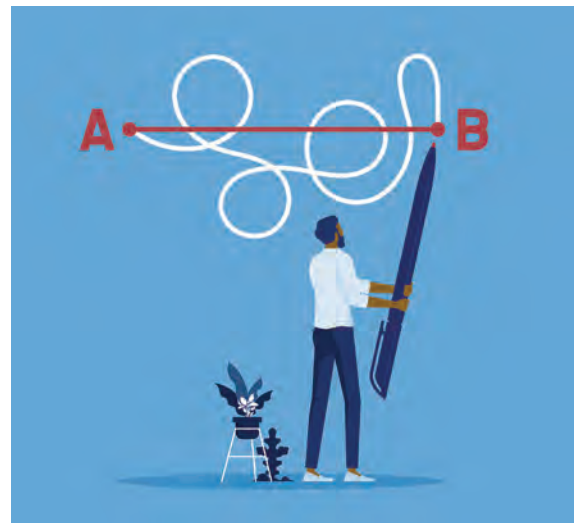
culture and the specific needs of its students. Those conversations also helped me better understand my own philosophies that would guide my work in this new environment.

As we discuss in the Implementation standard of the Standards for Professional Learning, it's critical that educators engage in meaningful and constructive feedback processes that deepen their understanding and improve their practice. That can be especially important in a new role or setting. But we often forget about the importance of cultivating the relationships with colleagues and mentors that help us engage in that kind of reflection, especially when we feel overwhelmed with new responsibilities. Taking the time and making the effort is essential, even when it feels difficult to carve out the space.

CHOOSE YOUR COACHES AND MENTORS WISELY

It's important to be purposeful in identifying your mentors and coaches. There's no one right person or position, but the key is cultivating the relationships that will benefit you — not leaving it to chance.

Different mentors can support different needs, and sometimes it makes sense to look for support from multiple people. For example, when I was an assistant principal, my school's principal helped me strengthen my instructional leadership, embodying the Professional Expertise standard. Our conversations were often about instructional philosophies, educator instructional practices, and school culture. As a result, as I entered my second year, I could feel myself getting much clearer on the kind of assistant principal — and, eventually, principal — I wanted to be.

My associate superintendent was another great support and model for me. He used a blended coaching strategy, moving from questioning strategies to a more direct approach, depending on the situation. His way

Only on-the-job learning would help me apply what I learned in graduate studies to my new job.

of engaging with me and the other assistant principals not only served me well in the moment, it also became the strategy I used as a principal when I was supporting teachers' growth and development.

I believe it's important that the individuals you choose as mentors know that you see them in that role and understand and agree to your expectations of them. For example, at times I needed my associate superintendent to be a coach and ask good questions versus tell me how he would solve a particular issue. Communicating those needs to him was beneficial for both of us.

CULTIVATE A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Colleagues in similar positions to your own have valuable perspectives to offer and can be a vital source of support. It's important not to feel alone, especially when you're the only one in your role in a building, and to lean on the support of peers.

When I was starting out my assistant principalship, I desperately needed professional learning on the procedural responsibilities of the role. In addition to my instructional leadership responsibilities, I supported our school's student discipline processes and worked with students when their behavior was off track. Although I had taken some wonderful graduate-level classes on discipline policies and processes, including due process procedures for students and guidelines for when and how to engage parents, it all became very real — and challenging — when I had that first student sitting in front of me, facing a suspension, and saying quite forcibly, "I didn't do anything wrong! My dad will be up here to talk to you!"

Only on-the-job learning would

help me apply what I learned in graduate studies to my new job. And I knew that on-the-job learning needed to include the support of colleagues in similar positions. Fortunately, the district's associate superintendent regularly brought together all four assistant principals into our own learning community. I could turn to this group of colleagues whenever I entered into an experience that was new to me. Together, we lived the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard as we each brought problems of practice — including handling discipline issues — to the team for discussion and reflection. I didn't have the words to describe it then, but we were engaged in rapid cycles of improvement.

PAY IT FORWARD

The key link among the powerful professional learning experiences I've described is that they were all job-embedded. I encourage all educators, regardless of your position, to recognize the importance of these types of professional learning and add them to your tool kit. Often, people look only to workshops and courses, but those are most effective when coupled with job-embedded support. That combination smoothed my path from assistant principal to principal so that I could be effective immediately for students, and it can smooth any professional path and increase student success.

As you are seeking out these kinds of learning opportunities, I also encourage you to recognize your role in supporting others and to pay it forward. Once I became a principal, coaching and mentoring other aspiring principals was not just a kind thing for me to do, it was actually my responsibility to our district. Whether or not it's an official part of your job, encouraging the growth of colleagues is important. It strengthens the field of education and the satisfaction it brings can help sustain you, too. ■

Alica Unruh, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, Alaska

District memberships give your whole team access to Learning Forward resources, tools, and more. For information, visit learningforward. org/membership or call 800-727-7288.

ALASKA SCHOOLS BENEFIT FROM DISTRICT MEMBERSHIP

Alica Unruh, professional learning coordinator for Alaska's Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, says her job is rewarding and exciting — never boring. Unruh joined us for a conversation about the evolution of the district's approaches to professional learning, making use of Learning Forward district membership benefits, and the benefits of in-person conference networking.

Unruh has held the position for 15 years at the state's third-largest school district, made up of about 12,500 students and 850 teachers. Although Unruh is her district's only professional learning coordinator, she works with a team of districtwide instructional coaches, technology coaches, and other staff that support all district teachers.

From left: Teachers Christina Carlson, Jessica Iglesias, and Shelby Hooper work together at a literacy professional learning session in May.

Unruh led a redesign of her district's teacher onboarding program and shared other professional learning impacts that have resulted in part from district membership benefits.

Why is Learning Forward membership a priority for your district?

When I started my job, [professional learning] was a few days of districtwide inservice and a few days of buildingwide inservice with a couple of classes in between, and not much more. Over several years, we have shifted to more focused, data-driven professional learning that is related to teachers' and students' needs. Learning Forward was a significant player in that.

In 2017, I attended my first Learning Forward Annual Conference as part of a district group. We were impressed with the focus of the conference, the organization, and the attention we got from Learning Forward staff. We learned that there was a magazine full of ideas, and we started looking at the articles and tools. These were really good professional learning resources for teachers and building leaders. So, in 2019, we became a district member.

I believe this (membership) is the most valuable resource out there for professional learning. We see the benefit of the conference and the membership, so each year we set aside money from our district's Title IIA budget to participate.

What membership benefits do you find helpful?

Every building leader (in our district) gets the magazine (*The Learning Professional*) and access to all Learning Forward online resources. I like the magazine because each issue has one specific focus. When it says coaching, it's all about coaching, starting with the research, the resources, individual articles, tools, and anything coaching.

We use the magazine a lot at the building level. I recently talked to a principal at a Title I school who was telling me how she uses the magazine articles or blog posts for faculty meetings. (For example), in the issue about student engagement, she found an article about how students

lead the class meetings. The whole class was engaged, and it mimicked real-life situations. So, she asked teachers in her school to create opportunities for their students to lead some classroom meetings. Students were in charge, and it made a huge difference for them. They felt that they had agency as opposed to just being told what to do.

We also use the magazine at the district level. About two weeks ago, we had a districtwide meeting of instructional coaches, and we picked two articles from the April 2022 issue, "Coaching for Change." Coaches shared their views and opinions about the articles, and we were able to come up with some interesting ideas about how we can make our coaching program better.

You also mentioned the Learning Forward Annual Conference. How is that valuable for your district?

The conference is a wonderful platform for meeting people, sharing ideas, and building new relationships. It's our favorite education conference. Every year, I set aside money so we can send our building and district leaders to attend. The (member) discount on the conference registration is helpful.

We try to send new principals who have not gone yet. The principals tell me they find lots of new ideas, new information, resources, and new connections with people in similar positions or with similar needs.

A few years ago, one of our middle school principals — who, at that time, was working with her team on improving math scores — happened to

sit in a conference session next to three middle school math teachers. She came back with a plan for the whole math program.

The conference also benefits the district leadership. When we send our assistant superintendents to attend, they have a unique perspective and are looking at the system issues. Each conference offers multiple sessions to address district systems. Participating leaders get information and tools that can help with implementation and improvement for the benefit of all students.

What other improvements has your district made because of your membership?

Several years ago, I was specifically focusing on new teachers. Our induction program was not effective — it was very short, and it did not give new teachers what they needed. I was looking for ideas how to make it work better. Ideas that I brought back from the conference helped us reimagine our new teacher induction program.

We have moved from a one-day sit-and-get type of new teacher orientation to a districtwide support system that helps teachers get through their first two years of teaching. It starts with three days of the new teacher academy, during which early career teachers as well as those new to the district get useful tools they need at the beginning of the year: classroom routines checklists, classroom management tools, technology that they need to use on the first day of school, and the instructional materials they need.

The academy includes working time that teachers use to work on their syllabi, philosophy of education statements, classroom routines, or anything they need to work on, and we provide support through coaches, curriculum coordinators, and mentors. At the end of the three days, they leave with a plan and with something they can use the first day of the school year.

(Throughout the year), we get them back a few times, depending on the need. We collect information about teachers' needs from coaches and mentors and based on the main issues they see in the classrooms. Then we create sessions around those topics and bring teachers for professional learning.

For the second year, some teachers still need a coach in the classroom. Most teachers request a coach to come to them, but we also push coaches to some classrooms. Some new teachers are on emergency certificates and don't have an educational background, so coaching is mandatory for them.

What are your hopes and goals for your district membership?

When we were reading the "Coaching for Change" issue of the magazine, one of the articles mentioned a school district in which coaches participated in a Learning Forward Coaching Academy. That is something I am hoping to bring to our district.

We will also keep coming to the conference and reading the magazine. Learning Forward resources are bountiful and available to everybody who is working on improving their professional learning. ■

NETWORKS AT WORK
Elizabeth Foster

EDUCATORS ENGAGE WITH CURRICULUM AS LEARNERS

Throughout October, three districts kicked off their participation in Learning Forward's Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network. Teams of math teachers, math instructional coaches, principals, and district leaders collaborated with Learning Forward to begin strengthening the implementation of the Illustrative Math curriculum for their districts' middle schools. Putting themselves in the roles of both students and teachers, they began to shift their practices and plan for a process of ongoing improvement.

As we described in the last issue of *The Learning Professional* (Bowman, 2023), network members — the School District of Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools, and Metro Nashville (Tennessee) Public Schools — are working to improve the way they support teachers to use their relatively new math curriculum. This means moving beyond typical silos that separate curriculum and professional learning departments and shifting from workshop sessions to job-embedded professional learning centered on high-quality instructional materials.
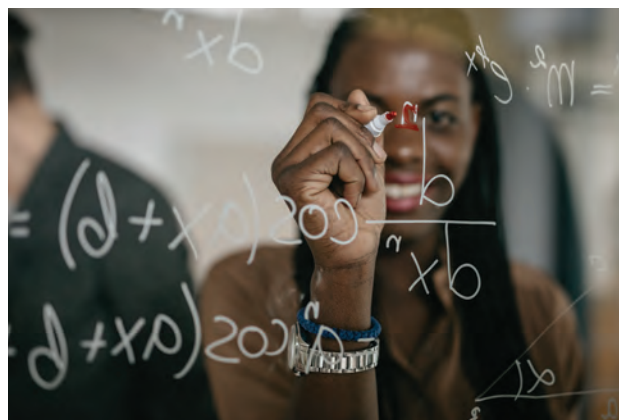
In the Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network, teachers experience the same kind of inquiry-based learning we expect them to provide for their students. Engaging with the curriculum as active learners supports teachers to change their instructional practices, test new ways of approaching content, and challenge their beliefs. Immersing teachers in the curriculum as students is a valuable learning model to transform practice, especially in the early phase of curriculum use (Klein & Riordan, 2011; Loucks-Horsley et al., 2003; Short & Hirsh, 2021).

During the kickoff meetings, district teams spent two full days with Learning Forward's networks team, learning about improvement methods and math instructional practices. Network participants became 7th-grade math students, exploring how to understand and develop scaled replicas of an American flag as they experienced an Illustrative Math unit on proportional relationships and percentages. They talked together about what "scaled versions" means, how and why to increase and decrease percentages, and how some of us may have forgotten how to multiply fractions. These "7th graders" then shared with the class how they took a standard-sized flag and created a scaled version for a stamp or a space shuttle. Participants then stepped out of the student role to make observations about the "teacher's" facilitation, including supporting questioning, productive struggles with the content, and collaborative meaning-making.

Grounded in classroom teachers' input about their day-to-day experiences with implementing the middle school Illustrative Math curriculum, teams also explored strategies and change ideas related to their own context — things like focusing student dialogue on mathematical language, engaging student learners with a range of prior experiences, and the challenge of maintaining the desired pace of instruction when faced with fire drills, assemblies, and other unexpected interruptions.

The Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network is supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Districts' work is grounded in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning and *The Elements: Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning* by James Short and Stephanie Hirsh.

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WHATEVER PATH YOU'RE ON, LEARNING IS VITAL

From local connections to global collaborations, the collective pursuit of knowledge propels us ahead.

Most professional paths, like personal ones, are winding. As educators, we go through unexpected moments — some good, some challenging — that shape who we are and how we work. Amid the ups and downs, the thing that keeps us moving ahead is learning. Learning helps us grow, keeps us on track or sets us on a new track, and helps us be our best for students.

As I reflect on my 40-plus years as an educator, three essential elements have significantly shaped my journey of continuous learning: working with a coach, expanding my perspective through multiple forms of professional learning, and embracing innovation.

FIND A COACH OF YOUR OWN

Finding a coach of my own was perhaps the most pivotal part of my learning journey and has continued to play a key role in shaping my career. My coaches' and mentors' questions, advice, and wisdom continue to be a source of guidance and inspiration throughout all my roles and experiences. In *Compassionate Coaching: Helping Teachers Navigate Barriers to Professional Growth*, Kenny McKee and I wrote about a 2017 TED Talk in which surgeon Atul Gawande (2017) points out that all athletes, even the top players, work with a coach.

McKee and I explained that coaches benefit from coaching, too: "Learning the importance of helping others reflect and grow is one thing, but experiencing the benefits firsthand is quite another. You deserve a confidant who will reflect with you just as you do with teachers" (Perret & McKee, 2021). My coaches and mentors have helped me by modeling the art of guiding others, whether students or adults.

As you seek out coaches and mentors, remember to let your journey extend beyond the physical boundaries of your school or district. For example, you can connect with individuals offering distance or virtual coaching. The location of your coach is less important than finding someone you can trust, someone who can provide valuable insights and partner with you to unlock your potential.

EXPAND PERSPECTIVES

Actively seeking out diverse viewpoints through professional learning opportunities, collaborations, or global experiences has broadened my understanding of education and enriched my approach to teaching and coaching.

When I'm coaching or facilitating professional learning, I emphasize that "the answer is always in the room" because colleagues are the best sources of insight and expertise. But today, "room" is a metaphor because we're no longer limited by physical space. The digital landscape has transformed how we expand our rooms, allowing us to bridge geographical gaps and create a virtual space where diverse perspectives converge for the collective learning of the education community. The larger our room, the more diverse perspectives we can learn from.

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EQUITY & IMPROVEMENT
Val Brown

A MANTRA FOR FACILITATORS: 'FEEDBACK IS MY FRIEND'

For professional learning to fulfill its promise, facilitators need to be well-prepared and steeped in best practices.

In 2024, I will celebrate my 20th year as an educator. I am grateful for my winding path, from alternatively certified teacher to professional learning facilitator to organizational leader. As my roles have changed and educational trends have come and gone, I have learned that professional learning can be a constant companion on the journey. Professional learning can sustain us, even when the work feels uncertain, as it often does. It can also open new career pathways when we're ready for the next step.

But for professional learning to fulfill those promises, facilitators need to be well-prepared and steeped in best practices. They need to be grounded in adult learning theory and Standards for Professional Learning, skilled at helping educators engage in reflective practice and implement change. When they do, all parties are able to thrive, and students benefit. When they don't, the effects are not only disappointing, they're lasting.

A few years ago, at a particularly active time for educator engagement on X (formerly known as Twitter), I found myself cringing at educators' accounts of low-quality professional learning experiences. In fact, educators seemed to report far more negative experiences than positive ones. As a practitioner-scholar of adult learning, I toyed with the idea of going on the defensive and starting the hashtag #NotAllProfessionalLearningFacilitators. But I did not want to dismiss anyone's experience, and truthfully, I knew many of the complaints were probably warranted. So I decided instead to do what a good facilitator does: I listened.

The constructive feedback these educators shared included lack of differentiation to teachers' experiences and skills, failure to provide ongoing implementation support, too much content to learn without enough time to process, high or prohibitive cost, and impatience with mandated workshops on noninstructional topics like bloodborne pathogens. Honestly, I could understand where their comments were coming from. What I read on social media about professional learning was not new to me.

More than a decade ago, during the summer I transitioned from classroom teacher to professional learning staff member, I shared my excitement about my new role with a veteran teacher from a different district. She looked me in the eye and said, on behalf of her teacher colleagues, "We hate you."

I was shaken, and I wondered if I had made a terrible mistake accepting the position. But what she said next made sense. She explained that, in her experience, smiling professional learning facilitators would attend a staff meeting at the end of the school day — when the teachers were tired and depleted — and tell teachers what to do, discounting their expertise.

I never saw that woman again, but she strongly influenced how I approach adult learning. She reminded me to be humble and listen to teachers' wisdom. She spurred me to treat adult learning as the specialized, research-based discipline it is to make sure that teachers' time is well-spent.

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Around the same time, one of my mentors shared a phase that I repeated to myself my entire first year: "Feedback is my friend." I did not have formal training in professional learning, and I knew that becoming a good facilitator would require study and intentionality. The feedback mantra became an affirmation that enabled me to seek all forms of feedback and use them to continue refining my practice. I have continued to take that mentor's advice to heart, and I encourage other professional learning facilitators to do the same.

In 2021, I conducted doctoral research on professional learning for educators working toward educational, racial, and social justice. I examined what educators want and need, and the findings are illuminating for facilitators:

- All educators, regardless of how long they have taught, arrive with expertise that should be honored.
- There is a desire for community in which educators can improve their practice and impact the outcomes of their students.
- Facilitators don't have to have all the answers. Educators value a collaborative facilitation style and authentic leadership.

It's especially important now for us to listen to these lessons and lead accordingly. With the introduction of artificial intelligence in education, the pace of change over the next five years is likely to move faster than ever. As expectations of educators and students change, it can feel daunting to keep up, especially if one chooses to go it alone. So I suggest we hang on to each other and listen to each other. As leaders of adult learning, we have a responsibility to support educators in all phases of their careers and in all the needs they bring. If we remain open and responsive, we can continue to work together for the advancement of the profession. ■

Continued from p. 12

During the kickoff meetings, participants also learned about continuous improvement strategies. They dug into plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle planning and engaged in structured conversations to narrow the focus of the problem they want to solve, generate change ideas, and begin planning for an inquiry cycle. They learned how their change cycles yield data that can help them decide whether to adopt the change going forward, adapt the idea or strategy and retest, or abandon an idea that seemed promising but did not yield any improvement. Over time, multiple PDSA cycles build a body of evidence about what works, especially when there are multiple teams in each district and multiple districts in a network, as there are in the network.

As with the math content, participants explored these continuous improvement strategies in interactive, experiential ways. For example, to practice PDSA cycles, teams worked together in an iterative process to assemble a toy. As they did so, they talked about how small-scale changes can impact the desired outcome and how important it is to articulate your prediction for how the change might improve the outcome and reflect on what actually happened so you can learn and adjust for future cycles. Calling on *Learning to Improve* (Bryk, 2015), the Learning Forward Networks team emphasized the value in learning from clearly identified change ideas, failing quickly if you are going to fail, and documenting what the team is learning along the way so that hindsight does not cloud anyone's perception of what happened.

Each team is now receiving frequent technical assistance and support from the Learning Forward Networks team, as well as virtual opportunities to discuss and learn from the other participating districts. All of the district teams came together at a full-day session at the Learning Forward Annual Conference to share data and reflections from their PDSA cycles, discuss what they are learning, and have role-alike conversations with educators from other districts in addition to collaborative work time with their own teams. The district teams are already poised to make important contributions to the emerging field of curriculum-based professional learning.

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I learned about the power of expanding virtual networks when I received my first laptop in the late 1990s. I was charged with learning how to use it and teaching at least 10 others. My quest for learning led me to discover online education communities predating the social media platforms we are familiar with today. Fast-forward to today, and X, formerly known as Twitter, has become my go-to source for connections.

Regardless of the platforms you use or the "rooms" you enter, I encourage you to take advantage of the global network of educators, foster collaboration, and exchange insights about teaching practices.

EMBRACE INNOVATION

Embracing innovation has been a cornerstone of my continuous learning. Staying open to new technologies, methodologies, and pedagogical approaches has allowed me to adapt to the ever-evolving landscape of education, ensuring that I remain relevant and effective in guiding teachers, coaches, and school leaders to prepare students for their futures.

Consider how the changes in education over the past five years have been marked by unforeseen innovations. For instance, in January 2020, educators couldn't have anticipated the swift transition to fully online teaching just two months later. Embracing the new landscape while building on existing technology integration was essential.

We now find ourselves in the artificial intelligence (AI) era. We have a choice: Ignore its growing presence or explore how it can enhance our personal and professional lives. I choose the latter. In my coaching sessions, we delve into AI from each educator's unique perspective and raise awareness of the possibilities because major challenges may arise if educators lack a solid understanding of these technologies when students regularly use them.

It is impossible to know what innovations will shape our schools and students in the coming years. That's why we need to commit to being aware, staying open, and continuing to learn.

LEARNING TOWARD THE FUTURE

My professional journey shows the importance of prioritizing continuous learning — and so does yours. Whatever path you are on, learning is a vital part of it, not just for you, but for students. The progress of education relies on our dedication to adaptability and openness to new possibilities. From local connections to global collaborations, the collective pursuit of knowledge propels us ahead, crafting a future where learning is an intrinsic aspect of our lives, consistently enhancing our educational and human experiences.

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Wellness is about tapping into who we are and who we can become as human beings.

GIVE THE GIFT OF WELLNESS TO OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER

This magazine's Focus on Wellness series has covered many important topics, including teacher burnout, healing-centered environments, resilient school communities, teacher wellness, and principals' well-being. As we wrap up the series, I want to focus on the connection among all of these topics, which is also the foundational connection among all of us: our shared humanity.

Wellness is about tapping into who we are and who we can become as human beings. It comes from within us and ripples out in all of our relationships. Developing wellness starts with three processes grounded in that humanity: knowing ourselves, listening to each other, and connecting. As the executive director of organizational development & leadership at Baltimore County Public Schools in Maryland, I am deeply invested in those processes, for myself and for the educators and leaders I work with, because I see firsthand how they make a difference for people and schools.

KNOWING OURSELVES

One of the most important relationships in your life is the relationship with yourself. To fully embrace our shared humanity, you first need to know who you are. My journey to knowing myself began as I was running a race, both literally and figuratively. I love to run and I like to use that time to reflect. But I had started to dread climbing out of bed in the morning for the early runs that I used to cherish. I was tired. I didn't like the "me" that was not filled with as much hope and energy and optimism as usual. But none of the things that I usually did, including running, helped.

I decided to try investing in myself by working with a coach. One of our first activities was to explore core values. Core values are like our North Star or our internal GPS — the things that are most important to us and keep us headed in the direction of our purpose in life. Discovering my core values — joy, kindness, courage, gratitude, vulnerability — had a profound centering impact on my life. Knowing them helped me focus on taking the time to feel my life and align my choices and actions to my core values.

Working with my coach enabled me to set goals and boundaries to honor my core values, thereby aligning the resources around me so that they empower me, increasing my sense of well-being and expanding my ability to be a fully present colleague and leader.

In addition, I discovered that part of wellness and happiness at work is reflecting on how closely the individual and the organization line up on values, vision, and relationships because without alignment, the employee will not be fulfilled and the organization will not be served.

Using a leaders' dashboard helped me examine the vision, mission, and culture of my organization and how it aligns with my core values and purpose, enabling me to connect, contribute and collaborate with intentionality. After doing this work to tap into my own humanity, I began to feel more energized, more hopeful, and more like myself again.

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LISTENING TO EACH OTHER

The most generous gift we can give is to listen because when we listen, we give our time and our whole being, physically and spiritually. Listening is the key to true connection. As I reflected on what makes me feel whole and well, I realized that I wasn't listening to my colleagues and friends as much as I intended to. To use the running metaphor, I had put myself on a treadmill of activities and commitments.

After attending a workshop on mindfulness and compassion based on Brach's (2019) book *Radical Compassion*, I came to see that, in trying to do so many things to support colleagues and loved ones, I was stretched too thin to listen and connect. Participating in this model with total strangers taught me that practicing mindfulness and compassion helps me be fully present to listen deeply. That kind of presence and engagement creates strong, trusting relationships, and those relationships are key to finding our shared humanity and wellness for everyone involved.

In addition, there are lots of tools to help all of us be deeper listeners and more compassionate, humane leaders. Some resources that I found helpful are Tandem Solutions' conversational framework, which is rooted in neuroscience and emphasizes listening techniques to build strong relationships (Tandem Solutions, n.d.), and empathy interviews (Nelsestuen & Smith, 2020).

CONNECTING

Connecting and building rich relationships that align with your core values is also key to establishing a form of wellness that is grounded in shared humanity. As many wise leaders have pointed out in recent years, our society needs a revival of relationships. In a time of disconnection, polarization, and isolation, we need to make an active decision to be in relationships with one another, unlike in previous eras when interdependent relationships were the norm in all parts of life.

Schools are inherently social places, but that doesn't mean we are intentionally developing relationships. Doing so is an important part of rebuilding and staying connected to our shared humanity.

There are many approaches to rebuilding those relationships in schools. One I recommend is asset mining. Taking the time to name who my people are and who I want to dream with and learn with provided me with a road map for intentional connection. It helped me identify to whom I can reach out to give and get support and inspiration.

I also recommend an activity sociologist and speaker Brené Brown developed called Square Squad (Brown, 2018). It helped me think about who matters in my life and if my relationships were serving me. I discovered much of my time was devoted to acquaintanceships rather than relationships, largely because many of the commitments filling up my calendar were out of a sense of obligation. Recognizing this allowed me to reprioritize my time and energy.

INVEST IN YOURSELF

For me, the journey of self-discovery is a journey of personal and professional wellness. It has helped me come into my own as a learner and a leader. I encourage all educators to make these investments in themselves and experience the benefits.

The benefits for me have included having more patience with myself and others, feeling more comfortable advocating for myself and others, setting clear boundaries, and apologizing less. My relationships are richer, and there is more peace and joy in my life.

It can feel daunting to embark on this kind of journey, so I recommend starting with some simple reflection questions:

- What brings you joy?
- What brings you peace?
- What makes you feel connected?
- What makes you feel whole?

During this time of year, when many people and cultures are celebrating holiday traditions, let's give the gift of wellness to ourselves and each other by standing up for our humanity and each other's humanity. Now and throughout the year, may we all have the space and grace to know ourselves, listen, and connect with others. We have the potential to change ourselves and everyone we encounter for the better.

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RESEARCH

TURN EVIDENCE INTO ACTION

"I challenge you to collect strategies that will help you transform your schools and systems and turn evidence into action because your students are counting on you. And I also urge you to share your stories with each other and with Learning Forward because all educators and communities need to learn from your success. Student impact is what we're all here for."

— *Learning Forward president and CEO Frederick Brown, speaking at the 2023 Learning Forward Annual Conference, Dec. 4, 2023*

RESEARCH REVIEW
Elizabeth Foster

A READING LIST FOR TURNING RESEARCH INTO ACTION

We believe it is important for all educators to ground learning designs and plans in research about what works, then consider how that research applies to their contexts.

Learning Forward's 2023 Annual Conference focused on the theme Evidence Into Action. This theme was in keeping with Learning Forward's commitment to building the evidence base on how professional learning leads to improved outcomes for students and schools.

We are invested in examining and applying research on high-quality, results-focused professional learning designs to our projects and services, and we seek to share what we and our partners are learning. We believe it is important for all educators to ground learning designs and plans in research about what works, then consider how that research applies to their contexts. To that end, I developed this list of must-read articles and reports cited or recommended by conference speakers.

▶ **Papay, J.P., Taylor, E.S., Tyler, J.H., & Laski, M.E. (2020). Learning job skills from colleagues at work: Evidence from a field experiment using teacher performance data.** *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy, 12*(1), 359-88.

A few conference concurrent sessions related to instructional improvement asserted that the strategies would be most effective if undertaken in a collaborative way, such as in a professional learning community or team meeting. Recognizing how precious collaborative time is for teachers, this means that it would benefit us to understand how to ensure that teacher collaboration is as effective as possible. The collaborative time in PLCs or team meetings is often also a way to support and induct new teachers and teachers with provisional certification, a pressing concern given the current teacher turnover and shortage realities.

This study is one of many cited in a recent report that summarizes emerging evidence on the promising features of professional learning that support ongoing teacher learning and development (Hill et al., 2022). The findings align with the Standards for Professional Learning, which note that research points to three professional learning formats for improving 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 (Learning Forward, 2022).

▶ **Chu, E., McCarty, G., Gurny, M., & Madhani, N. (2022).** *Curriculum-based professional learning: The state of the field.* **Center for Public Research and Policy.**

Curriculum-based professional learning was a theme throughout the conference. The term refers to professional learning anchored in high-quality instructional materials to increase student engagement and agency, expand access to grade-level content, and bridge home and school. According to research by the Center for Public Research and Policy, curriculum-based professional learning is poised to expand more consistently across the education landscape. The researchers call for diverse, interdisciplinary actors from across the education sector to work together to produce professional learning that strengthens educational experiences and outcomes for students. (See also Short & Hirsh, 2020.)

▶ **DiGirolamo, J.A. & Tkach, J.T. (2019). An exploration of managers and leaders using coaching skills.** *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 71*(3), 195-218.

One conference session featured a panel of experts focused on the importance and potential of coaching as a critical component of a comprehensive professional learning system. Panelists Jackie Owens Wilson, Jen Lara, and James Thurman explored when and how to choose coaching interactions over other modes of leadership, how to embed coaching into collegial and supervisory

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conversations, and how coaching can sustain learning, bolster collaboration and collaborative cultures, and engender equity among educators. This 2019 study, recommended by facilitator Sharron Helmke, Learning Forward senior vice president of professional services content, includes a literature review, interview and survey data on the elements of effective coaching, what skills are crucial for managers and leaders, and the benefits of coaching as a strategy. The study also includes a scale to measure the frequency of the use of coaching skills by managers and leaders.

▶ **Hinnant-Crawford, B., Bergeron, L., Virtue, E., Cromartie, S., & Harrington, S. (2023). Good teaching, warm and demanding classrooms, and critically conscious students: Measuring student perceptions of asset-based equity pedagogy in the classroom.** *Equity & Excellence in Education, 56*(3), 306-322.

Brandi Hinnant-Crawford challenged Learning Forward conference attendees to think about research, evidence, and data in an inclusive way, calling on improvement science to ensure they consider the perspectives of all educators and students, especially those who are traditionally marginalized or underrepresented in the research. Hinnant-Crawford's research focuses on improvement science and strategies to ensure equity and justice and asserts how student perceptions can inform research about professional learning. In a recent article, Hinnant-Crawford and her colleagues state that the Asset-Based Equity Pedagogy Scale can capture student perceptions in a new way to better understand approaches to instruction, teacher expectations, care, and whether educators are encouraging students to analyze and address real-world problems, especially those involving injustice.

▶ **Gardiner, W. (2018). Rehearsals in clinical placements: Scaffolding teacher candidates' literacy instruction.** *The Teacher Educator, 53*(4), 384-400.

▶ **Cai, J., Morris, A., Hohensee, C., Hwang, S., Robison, V., & Hiebert, J. (2017). Making classroom implementation an integral part of research.** *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education, 48*(4), 342-347.

Several concurrent sessions discussed the importance of providing time and structures for teachers to practice new instructional strategies, both individually and collectively, as well as the importance of learning new practices and thinking about their relevance and application. Numerous studies support the active practice of instructional skills during professional learning, such as through rehearsal or role-play of instructional routines, and identify this as particularly effective in improving instruction (see Garrett et al., 2019). While this isn't a new discussion, it is critical to get clear about how to embed and protect opportunities for teachers to try out new practices, reflect, test different improvement strategies, and practice further.

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

Throughout the conference, presenters made connections to the Standards for Professional Learning and its evidence base, noting how the research about coaching is evident in the Implementation standard or how studies about developing and practicing collaboration skills are called out in the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard. We know that the Standards for Professional Learning are a critical factor in informing and guiding professional learning systems (Darling-Hammond, 2017). In addition, sessions on the Standards for Professional Learning cited an empirical study that found consistent evidence that alignment with the standards is associated with improved teacher instruction and student achievement outcomes (Garett et al., 2021). These findings offer a strong rationale for examining programs using the standards as a framework and leaning

on them in decisions about priorities for professional learning designs and resources.

I will close with the request I made to conference attendees: Please share what you are reading and learning with us at Learning Forward. First, let me know if there is a research study about professional learning that you think would be important to highlight in this column. Second, we need your support in gathering evidence about the impact of the Standards for Professional Learning. If you have used the standards, either in an evaluation at your school or district or as a framework or rationale for a study or a dissertation, we would like to know about it. Email **elizabeth. foster@learningforward.org** and let me know about your contribution to our evidence-building efforts.

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DATA POINTS
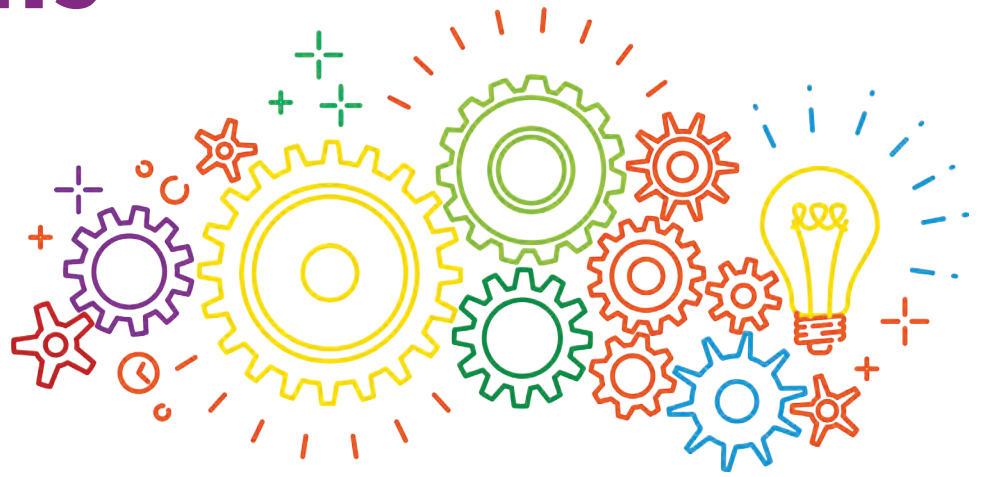
1 BLACK TEACHER CAN BENEFIT WHITE TEACHER PEERS

Studies have shown the positive effects that even just one Black teacher can have on Black student outcomes. But it's not just students who benefit — teachers do, too, revealed data from the IZA Institute of Labor Economics in June. A report from the institute cites a study from North Carolina showing that white teachers who have a same-grade Black colleague can significantly improve student achievement and reduce white teachers' suspension rates of Black students. What's more, knowledge spillover effects appear to change the way white teachers educate Black and Hispanic students. The effects of this peer learning were most notable for novice teachers. While the workforce continues to diversify, study authors suggest the thoughtful assignment of teachers of color and the creation of peer learning opportunities are strategies to positively impact how white teachers can better educate students of color.
bit.ly/3FPEOav

103 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WEIGH IN ON THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Since high school students will soon enter the workforce, their thoughts on the field of education and whether they see themselves in that future workforce are critical to identifying solutions for diversifying the teacher pipeline. A group of 103 high school students of color and Indigenous students from 18 states in the Educators Rising program participated in focus groups run by Teach Plus and the Center for Black Educator Development. A number of key findings emerged from the focus groups, published in *Seeing Myself: Students of Color on the Pros and Cons of Becoming Teachers*. Student participants said teachers of color are uniquely beneficial because they can relate to them through shared identity and experiences. They also reported representative curriculum matters as does observing teacher agency, which add to the profession's attractiveness. Students said low pay associated with teaching is a strong deterrent to choosing this career.
bit.ly/3u4sLmV

20% OF TEACHERS SATISFIED WITH THEIR JOBS

In 2022, 12% of teacher survey respondents said they were very satisfied with their jobs, but this number rose to 20% in 2023. A survey from the Winston School of Education and Social Policy at Merrimack College drew responses from 1,178 U.S.-based public school teachers. The research project, launched in 2022, fills the gap in data collection after the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher ended its long run of collecting U.S. educator views and experiences. The last MetLife survey was administered in 2012, at which point a much higher percentage of teachers (39%) reported they were very satisfied with their jobs.
bit.ly/469PxHc

7 HOURS MORE WORK FOR TEACHERS EACH WEEK

The improving-but-still-low levels of teacher satisfaction could be partly explained by the fact that teachers feel overworked and underpaid, reporting 53 hours per week for an average work week, compared to 46 average weekly hours by other working adults. Only one-quarter of teachers were satisfied with their total hours worked each week, compared to half of all working adults. Black teachers worked more hours per week and were less satisfied than their white counterparts with base salaries. As a result, Black teachers were more likely to consider leaving their jobs than white teachers. These findings came from the 2023 State of the American Teacher survey, detailed by the RAND Corp. in *All Work and No Pay — Teachers' Perceptions of Their Pay and Hours Worked*. Dissatisfaction with hours, salary, and working conditions all factor into poor well-being, leading teachers to consider finding other work.

Though the report authors list raising teacher pay as the first in a set of recommendations, pay increases alone are not enough to dissuade teachers from leaving. Improvements in hours and working conditions must also follow.
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FOCUS
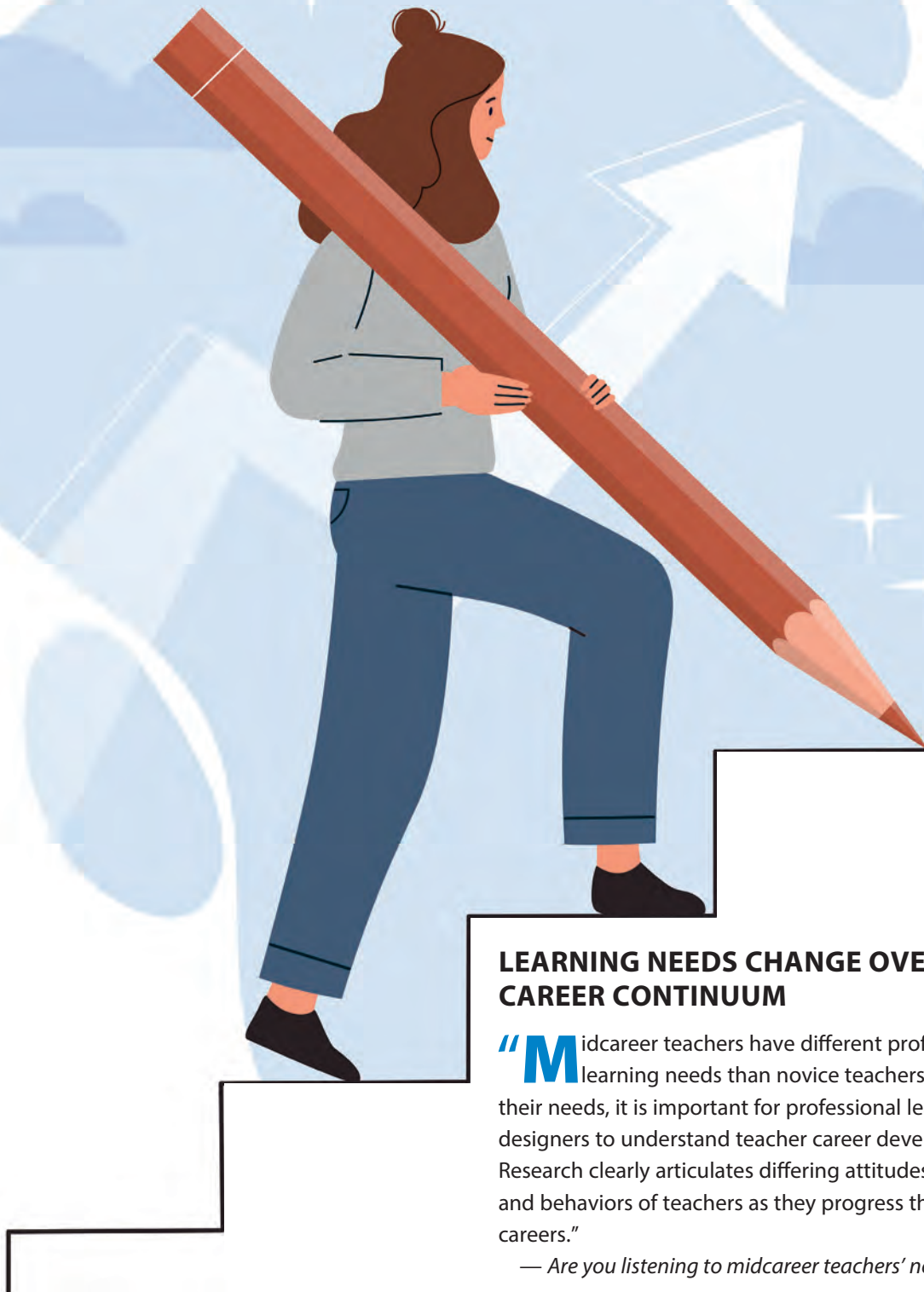
LEARNING NEEDS CHANGE OVER THE CAREER CONTINUUM

"**M**idcareer teachers have different professional learning needs than novice teachers. To serve their needs, it is important for professional learning designers to understand teacher career development. Research clearly articulates differing attitudes, needs, and behaviors of teachers as they progress through their careers."

— Are you listening to midcareer teachers' needs? p. 24

Are you listening to midcareer teachers' needs?

BY JENNIFER REICHEL

Midcareer teachers want something new from professional learning. That's one of the takeaways from dissertation research I conducted on the professional learning needs of experienced educators. Nearly all of the midcareer teachers I interviewed described a need for content that is fresh or invites a meaningful extension of their existing skills and understandings.

Take Jeanine, a second-career educator with 14 years of teaching experience who shared an example of how frustrating it can be when professional learning repeats the same information year after year. "As an English learner teacher, I have seen the cultural iceberg way too many times," she said, referring to a diagram noting visible and underlying beliefs, attitudes, and values of a culture that is commonly used in workshops. As a result, Jeanine said, if a session starts off with "a handout of the iceberg on my table, I immediately am discouraged."

Like many teachers, Jeanine appreciates professional learning, but

only when it meets her needs. She said she enjoys learning that is fresh and new and offers a different lens on concepts already in her repertoire of skills, like enhanced strategies or language to use with her students or even a question that invites her to sustain reflection long after the professional learning experience has ended.

Jeanine's request for learning that matches her experience and skill level is not only understandable, it reflects best practice. Midcareer teachers have different professional learning needs than novice teachers. To serve their needs, it is important for professional learning designers to understand teacher career development.

Research clearly articulates differing attitudes, needs, and behaviors of teachers as they progress through their careers (Burke et al., 1987; Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Huberman, 1989). It is important to understand that career development is not always a linear process. Lynn (2002) describes how teachers navigate "through stages, not in a lockstep, linear fashion, but in a dynamic manner reflecting responses to personal and organizational environmental factors."

Career development can look different for different teachers and can be conceptualized in multiple ways (Burke et al., 1987; Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Huberman, 1989). Yet some experiences and challenges are common among midcareer teachers.

For example, many teachers encounter career frustration or disillusionment with daily teaching experiences, or they reach a plateau where they feel adequate performance is acceptable (Fessler & Christensen, 1992).

Professional learning can be a solution to these common challenges, but qualitative evidence suggests that systems do not consistently provide the kind of meaningful learning for midcareer teachers to keep career disillusionment and complacency at bay. A deep desire to ensure that all teachers have professional learning experiences that inspire and engage them led to my dissertation research seeking to answer the question, "What characteristics of professional development do midcareer teachers say they need?" I grounded this investigation in research about adult learning theory, particularly the principles Knowles et al. (2020) described regarding the role of experience and readiness to learn.

WHAT DO MIDCAREER TEACHERS NEED?

Using a grounded-theory approach to research, I proposed, studied, and refined a theoretical framework and application-focused tool for leaders and facilitators to consult as they plan, support, and implement professional development for midcareer teachers (Reichel, 2023).

After reviewing existing research,

I interviewed midcareer teachers from across the U.S. from March 2022 to February 2023 via a convenience sample and additional participants recruited through social media professional groups. This article includes quotes from some of those teachers, using pseudonyms to comply with Institutional Review Board criteria for protecting research subjects' privacy.

The figure on p. 26 provides a visual of the framework, which represents four themes that emerged from the research that support the planning, preparation, and implementation of professional learning experiences that midcareer teachers need. The three components in the middle specify that professional learning should be contextualized, interactive, and led by expert facilitators.

The fourth component, time, surrounds the other components, and the figure is intentionally designed to be reminiscent of a clock to illustrate the influence of time on the whole process of professional learning. Professional learning for midcareer teachers should be cognizant of the demands on teachers' time, show respect for their time, and make good use of time.

Contextualized

Professional learning for midcareer teachers must be contextualized — considering not only the day-to-day context of the students they serve and the pedagogical underpinnings of

MIDCAREER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DESIGN FRAMEWORK

Contextualize

Time

Time

Time

Expertise   Interactive
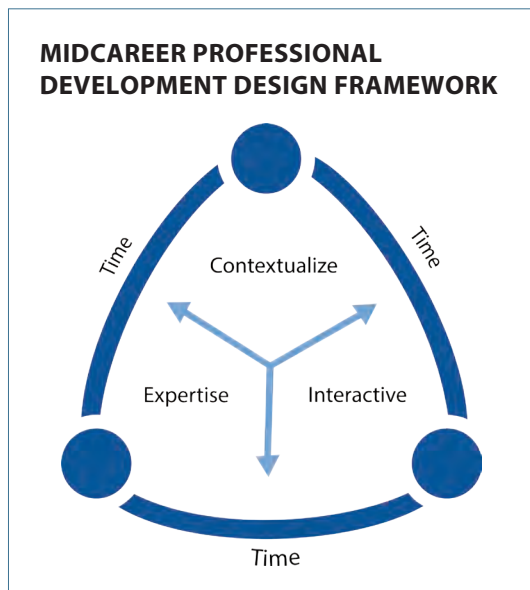
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their particular content or grade level but also how the learning experience aligns with current school and district initiatives and how it supports what's happening in the world.

Susan, a high school English teacher in an Eastern state, described a particularly impactful learning experience where she engaged in and learned to use a particular discussion protocol to facilitate student discussion that honored differing viewpoints. She began by sharing her context: She works and lives in a community like many around the country, with polarized wealth, political ideologies, and world experience. In addition, Susan noted that her high school students had not yet learned the skills to participate in meaningful discussions about rich literature because of the social impact of virtual learning during COVID-19.

The professional learning experience was meaningful to her because the learning kept in mind these two essential pieces of her context. After the learning session, she said she felt empowered to engage students in discussion without fear, explaining, "I felt that I that I had the tools now to

actually have those conversations, which I didn't have before."

Roxie, a middle school teacher in an affluent suburban charter school in the Midwest, also described how important it is to experience professional learning that is mindful of her context. She said that because of the social isolation of virtual learning due to COVID-19 and the high expectations students at her school perceive, she encounters more anxiety and mental health challenges than she did when she started her career. She appreciates professional learning that helps her be mindful of student mental health.

Knowing that she is not a therapist nor serves in the role of school counselor, her approach to student mental health needs to be grounded in her classroom environment, culture, and learning expectations. Roxie contrasted this experience with another professional learning experience that did not feel meaningful because it was led by new leaders at her school who seemed unaware of the school's context. She said it felt like the presenters didn't know the students, community, or the skills and strengths of the teachers and, as a result, felt frustrated by the learning experience.

Leaders planning context-informed professional learning should consider these questions:

- What is happening in current events locally or nationally that may have an impact on students or staff?
- What initiatives or strategic plan pillars are integral to the school or system that are necessary points of intentional integration?
- What is important to know and address about the school's student body?
- What classroom content, context, or expertise needs attention?

Interactive

Midcareer teachers value social experiences with colleagues with whom they have a sense of trust and mutual commitment (Shavit et al., 2022). To honor that, learning experiences should focus on creating deep, sustained interactions rather than surface and incidental engagement.

Bella, a literacy teacher from the Midwest, described an experience where the facilitators of professional learning created job-alike discussion

groups that they used throughout the two-day learning experience. Bella valued the opportunity to "go into breakout rooms with job-alike cohorts where we could synthesize information and share what it looks like in our current jobs." Because she was able to have ongoing conversations that were meaningful to her role and day-to-day context and learn with educators whose context was similar, the interaction proved meaningful to the ultimate application of the learning.

Midcareer educators benefit from experiences that invite meaningful discourse intended to enhance their craft and generate instructionally transforming ideas. Carrie, an elementary teacher in the Midwest, illustrated another value of interactive professional learning. She said that if professional learning invites "an innovative way of thinking about something, then it really, really helps. I love the (professional learning) that gives me language."

Teachers like Carrie also need to experience engagement strategies as a learner so that they can incorporate them into their practice. To that end, leaders of professional learning must complement new learning with opportunities for practice and must also make space for significant opportunities for midcareer teachers to discuss with like-minded peers the ways in which professional learning can be assimilated into their instructional practices.

As leaders prepare professional learning experiences, they might consider:

- In what ways will the learning experience invite meaningful opportunities to build community with colleagues?
- In what ways will this professional learning ensure that educators have opportunities to engage in craft-enhancing discourse?
- What strategy or concept must be modeled and debriefed during this learning experience?

Expertise

By the time teachers arrive at the midcareer stage of development, they have spent years cultivating a strong foundation of pedagogical expertise, so learning opportunities must be mindful of their skill set and build from there to help improve their craft.

Carrie, an elementary language immersion teacher in the Midwest, expressed frustration with facilitators she does not perceive to have authentic experience and expertise. She said that facilitators need to have knowledge that extends beyond the content they are sharing to be perceived as quality facilitators.

Elyse, a high school college and career readiness teacher at a school in the South, values learning from someone close to the source of the original information. When Elyse talked about a college readiness-focused learning experience, she noted her appreciation for the presenters. They were "people in school districts that had specific knowledge about this, and one presenter actually worked at the College Board and was in charge of this entire system that he was talking to us about."

Midcareer teachers have a readiness to learn at a deeper level and expect facilitators to be able to answer questions beyond the planned presentation and offer anecdotes to bring the content to life.

Leaders, facilitators, and consultants are encouraged to consider these questions as they plan professional learning for midcareer teachers:

- What preparation is necessary to ensure depth of knowledge?
- In what ways will the facilitator illustrate their authentic connection to the content?
- How will the facilitator ensure the content offers extensions to the expertise already internalized by those who attend the learning experience?

Time

Midcareer teachers, particularly those who perceive the duration of

their career as limited, place a particular value on how they spend their time. Carstensen's (2006) socioemotional selectivity theory uses time as a lens to understand how values change and shift. When applied to teacher career development, it sheds light on how teachers' values shift as they progress in their careers: They become more focused on whether their time is well-spent. Because of this, the other components of the framework described above become particularly salient.

In addition, midcareer teachers find value in sharing their expertise (Shavit et al., 2022). Midcareer teachers say their time is meaningfully spent when they are able to serve as mentors or guides to colleagues being inducted into the profession. Donna, a high school special educator in a Midwest charter school, echoed the research when she noted that it is "nice to tap into the talent and the information and the wisdom of some of the other teachers that you work with because we don't get a lot of time to talk to each other."

Like other midcareer teachers, Donna appreciates not only benefiting from the expertise of her colleagues, but also sharing her perspectives to benefit her school system.

Two questions that leaders or facilitators of professional learning need to consider as they are planning experiences for midcareer teachers are:

- In what ways will time be allocated to enhance relationships and cultivate expertise in areas of perceived strength?
- How will you intentionally offer time for practitioners to share their expertise?

CAPITALIZE ON LEARNING TIME

Time for professional learning is precious and often scarce. Capitalizing on the limited or infrequent opportunities to ensure that learning experiences are designed for the teachers in the space is essential. Too often, schools and districts focus their professional development resources in a

HOW TEACHERS CAN LEAD FROM THE CLASSROOM

BY RENEE GUGEL

As an administrator, I wanted to be — longed to be, even — an instructional superhero. Like all school leaders, I knew how important it is to help our teachers become the best they can be. But with responsibilities and to-do lists far longer than there are hours in a day, my best intentions often went unfulfilled. I found I was barely managing to get into classrooms to work with teachers, and even when I did, those meetings were rushed. It became clear to me that school leaders can't do instructional leadership alone.

I have since learned that the quality instructional leadership our school needed was right in front of me, but I failed to recognize it at the time. Empowering teacher leadership is a way to share responsibility for improving instruction and for teachers to pursue leadership opportunities without

TEACHER LEADERS' ROLES

Across the United States, teacher leadership takes on a variety of meanings. Some teacher leader roles include:

- Technology coach
- Instructional coach
- New teacher mentor
- Staff development/ professional development leader
- Curriculum developer/ specialist

- Peer evaluator (informal)
- Department chair
- Grade-level leader
- Lead teacher
- Data coach
- PLC leader
- Community partnership liaison

leaving their classrooms. Teachers are asking for opportunities to grow, make more contributions to their schools, and be recognized as experts, but not all of them want to be administrators. Teacher leadership is a win-win situation.

Now leading a teacher leadership program at the university level, I know both the benefits of teacher leadership and the challenges to making it more widespread. To grow our schools' cadre of teacher leaders, school administrators need to have a clear understanding of teacher leaders' roles and contributions, recognize and remove barriers, and listen to the voices of teachers.

GROWING TEACHER LEADERS

Just because teachers don't choose to get a degree in administration does not mean they are not interested in leadership opportunities. In many cases, the opposite is true. Teachers who crave more leadership responsibilities but don't want to leave the classroom are often left with few options. Even when teacher leadership positions are available, many teachers don't know about them or have chances to develop the skills to succeed in them.

Teacher leadership programs at higher education institutions fill this

gap. These programs have sprung up over the last 15 years at colleges and universities across the U.S. They help teachers learn how to become leaders in their schools and districts without formally becoming administrators or leaving their classrooms. A teacher does not need to enroll in a formalized program to become a teacher leader in their school, but they benefit enormously from opportunities to develop their leadership skills, and structured programs can provide that.

In these programs, teachers are able to network with like-minded peers, share ideas, and bring those outside ideas into their own schools. They take courses, including some that my program offers such as Guiding Data Teams in Schools, Teacher Outreach: Families and Communities, and Mentoring and Coaching Fellow Teachers. They also take on action research as they tackle problems of practice in their buildings. They learn and practice the skills they need to be successful leaders among their colleagues.

In 2008, a consortium of teachers, education leaders, and institutions came together to "think about the critical leadership roles that teachers play in contributing to student and school

success" and developed a set of Teacher Leader Model Standards (National Network of State Teachers of the Year, 2008).

The purpose of the standards was to elucidate the knowledge, skills, and competencies that teachers need to succeed in leadership roles. These are divided into seven domains that encompass a range of competencies from fostering a collaborative culture, to promoting professional learning, to community outreach, to advocating for the teaching profession.

Yet many administrators still didn't know what teacher leadership was, as I discovered when I began my role leading a teacher leadership program in Illinois. They could generalize the idea, of course, but did not understand the extent of the roles teacher leaders can take or the impact they can have on teaching and learning.

In 2018, when I began my teacher leadership advocacy work, about half of the administrators I spoke with didn't know that our state had adopted teacher leadership as a formalized endorsement a teacher may obtain along with their professional educator's license. Although recognition has grown since then, many administrators still do not know about the Illinois Teacher Leader

AN EXAMPLE OF BENEFITS OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

Dr. Washington, the district superintendent, has asked all the schools in the district to improve parental involvement. He is especially concerned about Birch Elementary, where there has been a decrease over the last few years.

Birch's principal, Ms. Sprague, knows how important this goal is, but feels overwhelmed with other responsibilities and wonders where to start. She realizes this is an excellent chance to promote teacher leadership. She turns to Mrs. Smith, a 3rd-grade teacher, who consistently has the strongest relationships with families. She is an expert at finding ways to make them feel welcome and solicit their input and feedback.

Ms. Sprague asks Mrs. Smith to help lead a committee on parental involvement and provide some tips for other teachers about how to welcome families. The situation is a win for everyone. Ms. Smith feels appreciated and recognized for her expertise, other teachers have new strategies for engaging families, and more parents are connecting with their children's teachers.

Working together, Ms. Sprague and Mrs. Smith are able to accomplish an important school and district goal while creating a culture of community and collaboration.

Endorsement. There is a need to better communicate the contributions of teacher leadership.

BARRIERS TO TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Unfortunately, lack of awareness is not the only barrier to growing the field of teacher leadership. Despite the benefits for teachers and schools, some states are discouraging formalized teacher leadership programs as principal shortages and concerns about the principal pipeline continue to grow.

In Illinois, the principal shortage is well-documented, along with contributing factors such as elaborate evaluation processes, new degree requirements, little state-to-state reciprocity, inadequate social and emotional support, and a lack of incentives (Rosborg, 2022). But discouraging teacher leadership can have unintended negative consequences.

Depriving principals of opportunities to distribute leadership could actually drive more administrators out of the profession. How can we retain principals who are trying to do everything alone because they don't have the support they need? Plus, some teachers ultimately

become interested in the principalship after dipping their toes in the waters of teacher leadership, so discouraging these programs can cut off the principal pipeline at an important point in the process. Furthermore, teachers who want to lead from their classrooms and are denied that chance may leave the profession, exacerbating teacher shortages.

Another barrier is a negative or misguided perception of teacher leadership. In Illinois, very few districts recognize the Teacher Leader Endorsement in hiring or salary structures (Teach Plus, 2021). This may be related to the fact that that at some institutions, the Teacher Leader Endorsement is "perceived as a lesser version of the administrative credential, rather than a unique program geared toward teacher leaders" (Teach Plus, 2021).

When teachers see that their desire to lead from a nonadministrative role is not as respected, they become frustrated and feel undervalued. Here again, by not recognizing the importance of teacher leader roles, we inadvertently create fewer leaders, exactly the opposite of the good intentions of policymakers.

In some cases, an additional

challenge is fulfilling the requirements of the Teacher Leader Endorsement because of a lack of support from districts. In Illinois, many candidates for the endorsement complete clinical hours in which they engage in hands-on leadership in their schools. This requires support from school leadership.

Although some candidates find their administrators are encouraging and enthusiastic, many others feel defeated and disheartened when they find their requests brushed aside. With these candidates, it is a struggle to find ways to fulfill the clinical hour requirement, and for some, it sparks a realization that it may be time to move on to a school that values teacher leadership.

LISTENING TO TEACHER VOICES

One of the best avenues to overcome these barriers and build more understanding is for school administrators to listen to teacher leaders and learn about the many ways they are impacting their schools.

In my current role, I conduct a workshop with administrators from all over Illinois where we discuss the value of implementing a quality teacher leadership culture in their buildings. Here are some things administrators

share after spending the day looking at resources and discussing teacher leadership with their colleagues.

- "I didn't realize how many options there are for teachers who want to lead but who do not want to be an administrator."
- "Having a common definition of teacher leadership is a good start to creating positions that will impact student outcomes."
- "Teacher leadership is an important pipeline for building future leaders."
- "I need to find a way to include teacher leaders in decision-making."
- "The power of teacher leadership is so impactful, and finding ways to increase those opportunities is critical for school improvement."

I also encourage leaders to talk directly with teacher leaders. These teachers' experiences and insights are powerful. That is obvious in these two responses to our teacher leadership program's exit survey:

- "This school year, I was asked by my administration to be a part of the teacher leadership team. … It has given me more of a leadership role in the school. I am helping to peer-observe and coach our new teachers, and I have gotten to help restructure our faculty meetings."
- "I don't know what I expected when I started this [teacher leadership] journey, but what I ended up with was confidence. Confidence not only in my teaching abilities, but also in my leadership abilities. I've also seen myself get involved in ways I never would have in the past. Because of this journey, my colleagues and administrators see me in a way they did not previously."

Most administrators I have met are not intentionally undervaluing teacher leadership. Sometimes they just need to be reminded that teacher leaders are change agents who can and will make a tremendous impact on teaching and learning in our schools if we create

an environment that allows them to do so. To those administrators, I say: You know your teachers' strengths. Capitalizing on those strengths will benefit you, the teachers, and most importantly, the students.

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Are you listening to midcareer teachers' needs?

one-size-fits-all format that might better support inducting new educators into the system.

This approach is detrimental to meaningfully engaging midcareer teachers in their own continuous improvement. The midcareer professional development design framework is intended to keep midcareer teachers engaged in their continuous improvement and ultimately to support the design of better learning experiences for their students.

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Science curriculum gets a boost from teacher leaders

BY SARAH E. STULTS, KAYLA CHERRY, JULIE A. JACOBI, AND RACHEL SHEFNER

A high-quality curriculum is vital for students to meet academic standards, and educators need professional learning to implement the materials effectively and align their instructional practices accordingly (Chu et al., 2022; Short & Hirsh, 2020). However, the growing movement for curriculum-based professional learning often overlooks an important resource for implementation: teacher leaders.

Unlike administrators, teacher leaders continue in the classroom while also demonstrating, facilitating, or building capacity among their peers. This positions them well to lead the implementation of new curricula. Unfortunately, many teachers do not see themselves as leaders, nor do

their supervisors or the general public (Bybee, 2023).

Recognizing that teacher leaders play an essential role in curriculum adoption and implementation, the Chicago Public Schools Department of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) partnered with Loyola University Chicago's Center for Science and Math Education to create a system of professional learning designed to advance teachers' practice while also explicitly enhancing their leadership capacity.

A cornerstone of this effort was the science master teacher leader cohort, a group of science teachers in the district who worked collaboratively with the Center for Science and Math Education and with each other. With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the group built a program that addressed common gaps in the field by defining teacher leadership, attending to issues of diversity and equity, and detailing leadership preparation components (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). That effort is paying off in improved instructional strategies and teachers' leadership development.

ESTABLISHING CRITERIA, NAVIGATING CONSTRAINTS

The district sought to recruit experienced science teachers to participate in 25 hours of professional learning yearly, with the plan that teachers would participate in the cohort for multiple years and new teachers could be recruited to account for attrition.

We invited teachers to apply to the master teacher leader cohort if they had demonstrated expertise in instruction aligned to the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), knowledge about Amplify Science (the K-8 science curriculum chosen by the district's science leaders and teachers), or leadership potential.

The targeted outcome goals for the cohort were:

1. Develop a community that shares and reflects on the key components of high-quality science instruction;
2. Engage in collaborative learning cycles of planning, implementing, and reflecting on instructional strategies; and
3. Reflect and share progress toward personal leadership learning goals.

In the years 2018-22, many factors put constraints on these goals, including COVID-19 school closures, hybrid learning, and systemic educational inequities. Set against these significant challenges, the project's ambitious scope required modification over time.

DEVELOPING A PROTOTYPE: 2019-20

In November 2019, 30 K-8 science teachers met to kick off the master teacher leader cohort and engage in collaborative professional learning. Amidst the adoption of Amplify Science, the teachers were excited to develop high-leverage instructional strategies for implementing the new curriculum.

To share and reflect on best practices, these teachers engaged in small-group collaborative plan-do-study-act (PDSA) learning cycles around a chosen focus area: student discourse, writing in science, or formative assessment. Giving teachers choice provided an individualized system of learning that was aligned with the Learning Designs standard of Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). The teachers also attended an additional 24 hours of Amplify-specific professional learning outside of the leadership cohort to ensure curriculum expertise and a shared understanding of the key components of an NGSS-aligned classroom.

Leadership development in the first year of implementation focused on preparing teachers to facilitate curriculum-specific professional learning. Teachers analyzed case studies from *Teacher Leadership in Mathematics and Science: Casebook and Facilitator's Guide* (Miller et. al., 2000) and developed leadership skills to prepare for these roles.

When the schools suddenly faced the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the cohort pivoted to learning cycles centered on the challenges of remote learning. This would come to define the next year of the program.

ADAPTING TO NEW CONSTRAINTS: 2020-21

The pandemic not only disrupted learning but unearthed barriers and disparities that minoritized communities have long faced in our education system. National discussions of educational reform for equity, the social and political climate of the nation, and hybrid learning all profoundly impacted students' and teachers' mental health.

In this context, the importance of being responsive to educators' immediate needs was apparent. Therefore, our goal was to sustain science teaching excellence focused on high-leverage instructional practices in a hybrid setting and, at the same time, attend to teacher and student social-emotional well-being.

All master teacher leader cohort participants collaborated virtually around instructional practices and formative assessment as well as one of three differentiated pathways for continuous learning. New members participated in Deepening NGSS Implementation. Returning members selected either Amplify Professional Learning Facilitation, which focused on building capacity to disseminate best practices districtwide by studying principles of adult learning and developing leadership skills, or School and District Leadership, which focused on building leadership skills.

The PDSA small-group work continued. Problems of practice included communicating scientific ideas, connecting content to the real world, developing student scientific identity, and evaluating student

discourse. Whole- and small-group work allowed for reflection on best practices for NGSS-aligned instruction.

Throughout, the cohort adapted to the constraints of virtual professional learning. Teachers shared celebrations and challenges of hybrid teaching, concentrating on meaningful ways to assess student progress.

REFINING THE DESIGN: 2021-22

As the project progressed, participant feedback revealed successes and opportunities to refine the professional learning design. Learning cycles aligned with Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) were a key component to building capacity for science teaching excellence. But while we had successfully developed a network of teachers implementing high-leverage instructional practices, we realized we needed to strengthen the leadership development portion of the program.

We restructured our support into inside the classroom and outside the classroom learning strands, each with its own unique set of goals. We introduced learning cycle action plans as an inside the classroom activity to lend structure to the PDSA process, outlined in the table on p. 35. As the name implies, this shared document gave groups the means to plan collaboratively for implementation throughout the learning cycle.

To support the learning cycle action plans, we introduced a pineapple chart protocol as a tool for making teachers' practice public (Barnes & Gonzales, 2015). The pineapple chart is a system that allows teachers to invite one another into their classrooms for informal observation.

In our iteration of this protocol, volunteers prepared a brief presentation of a specific strategy that increased student engagement in the science and engineering practices, such as facilitation moves to leverage student-to-student discussion. This addition developed teacher expertise as science educators while also allowing a safe

space for participants to practice leadership skills by sharing and receiving feedback from other adult learners.

Through differentiated activities outside the classroom, participants strengthened their leadership skills and developed personalized leadership goals. Goals included becoming professional learning facilitators, school leaders, Amplify Science curriculum experts, school or district advocates for science, and thought partners with colleagues at the Chicago Public Schools Department of STEM. Participants showcased their individualized goals, artifacts, and reflections from this learning strand in a leadership portfolio.

TESTING THE PROGRAM: 2022-23

Equitable science teaching became a priority in the most recent iteration of the master teacher leader cohort. Participants had established a foundation and were gaining traction with high-leverage instructional practices, and they were now positioned to tackle the equity issues that became obvious in 2020.

With support from new Chicago Public Schools instructional frameworks, we created opportunities for teachers to unpack their identities, examine biases and privilege, and reflect on how these factors impact interactions with students and peers (Brown, 2019). Activities included conversations about the wheel of power and privilege (adapted by Sylvia Duckworth, n.d.), equity within instructional practices, and how an individual's positionality intersects with social identity and impact (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019).

We continued with leadership development and pedagogical learning, refining and differentiating the learning activities to help educators navigate career development and strengthen their teaching practice. We also led immersive learning experiences, showcasing phenomenon-driven instruction, storyline sequencing, and strategies for equity and identity.

Andy DeVivo, 4th-grade science specialist, Chicago Public Schools.

A PARTICIPANT'S PERSPECTIVE

"Teaching can be an isolating experience with few moments of collaboration, but as a member of (the master teacher leader cohort), I was part of a community of like-minded individuals who inspired me to continue to improve my practice so that my students had a more rich and transformational learning experience in science."

— Andy DeVivo, a member of the first master teacher leader cohort in 2018. At that time, he was a 4th-grade math and science teacher. He continued to participate in the cohort until 2022, when he joined the Chicago Public Schools Department of STEM as the 4th-grade science specialist. He now serves as one of the facilitators of the master teacher leader cohort.

MASTER TEACHER LEADER COHORT LEARNING CYCLE ACTION PLANS		
November–January	**February–March**	**April–May**
Learn and plan	**Do**	**Act and share**
	Study	
• Build community. • Ensure shared understanding of our purpose. • Identify the question(s) we aim to answer. • Research and share best practices for effective instruction in the focus area.	• Begin integration of new practices into instruction. • Share and discuss data about what worked, what didn't, and how we know. • Discuss and identify trends, successes, needs, and priorities. • Refine our question(s) and plans.	• Reflect on practices and content implemented. • Create a plan of action to continue the work.

We included a video reflection component, in line with the Learning Designs standard of Standards for Professional Learning, to make learning "engaging, self-directed, and rewarding" and to help "build educators' feelings of self-efficacy" (Learning Forward, 2022). Teachers videoed instruction related to their goals, reflected on their footage, and used these reflections to guide group conversations.

IMPACT

About 70 teachers from 56 Chicago Public Schools have participated in the master teacher leader cohort program, and their participation is paying off in the following ways.

Cohort teachers are science instructional experts in the district.

We surveyed cohort participants at the start and end of each school year and compared findings with Chicago Public Schools science teachers participating in other professional learning from Loyola University Center for Science and Math Education. According to these survey results, cohort participants reported less instructional time engaging in direct instruction compared to other science

teachers, suggesting increased use of NGSS-aligned instructional strategies. They also reported greater confidence in their ability to implement NGSS-aligned instruction in the classroom than comparison teachers.

Artifacts created by participants support these findings. Cohort participants have developed formative assessment tools, scientific writing tasks and rubrics, resources for leveraging student-to-student discussion, and a number of equity and inclusion practices for the science classroom. The pineapple chart protocol initiated the development of a library of NGSS high-leverage strategies with the Amplify Science curriculum that can be used for future districtwide dissemination of best practices.

Cohort teachers have advanced their careers within the district.

Four former cohort members have been hired as science specialists in the Chicago Public Schools Department of STEM. At the school level, cohort members are serving on instructional leadership teams, leading science-focused grade-level meetings, hosting community science nights, forming science committees, and developing and

facilitating science professional learning. At the district level, there is a growing group of teacher leaders who develop and co-facilitate districtwide science professional learning and moderate an online community for district science teachers.

Cohort teachers set the example for equity within their classrooms and across the district.

Participating teachers are incorporating student identity into their delivery of the curriculum and their assessment practices. They facilitate conversations at the school and district levels to put equity practices at the forefront of science teaching.

IMPROVING THE DESIGN: 2023-24 AND BEYOND

The master teacher leader cohort's impact on science teaching in the district is just beginning. The next steps include a plan for sustainability and replicability. In 2023-24, the cohort is being redesigned as a two-year Master Teacher Leader Academy that continues and expands strategies for equitable, NGSS-aligned instruction and leadership capacity. Activities from the last four years that have proven to align

2023-25 GOALS AND ACTIVITIES		
Year	Program goal	Key activities
1	Collaborate around key components of a three-dimensional NGSS classroom.	• Small group collaboration around learning cycles and shared problems of practice. • Pineapple chart presentations. • Classroom video self-reflections. • Reflections on identity, power, privilege, and positionality. • Monthly individualized instructional coaching.
2	Make progress toward personal leadership learning goals.	• Leadership case study analyses. • Pineapple chart presentations. • Leadership self-assessment. • Individual leadership goal-setting. • Leadership stories and portfolios.

with Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) will shape the scope and sequence.

The 2023-25 goals and activities are outlined in the table above. Academy participants will facilitate districtwide professional learning, curate a video library of NGSS-aligned instructional strategies, and open their classrooms for peer observation. Impact measurements will expand to include interviews with cohort members, strategic analysis of participant feedback, and data from coaches' classroom visits.

The future looks bright for the master teacher leader cohort, and every year presents a new opportunity to further refine this model for science teacher leadership development. We are also confident that this model is replicable beyond the discipline of science and can be an exemplar for other districts looking to develop a teacher leadership program.

Research shows that leadership is second only to classroom instruction in school-based factors influencing student success (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004). Combining great teaching and great leadership can be key to improving outcomes across content areas.

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"The academy's strategies for planning and implementing effective professional learning changed the way we do things in our district and allowed us to think long term and realistically about goals and outcomes. It also allowed us to identify and address barriers in a way that we had not done before. My team and class members taught me so much! I learned to see things from many perspectives and to value and appreciate people so different from myself. I have grown as much as a person from this experience as I have as an educator."

~ Angela Walker

"The academy has given me tools to plan for change initiatives systematically, as well as developed my confidence in leading and carrying out this challenging work. Perhaps most importantly, it has expanded my network of peers, colleagues, and friends that I can without hesitation reach out to and collaborate with."

~ April Chauvette

Join the Learning Forward Academy!

Application deadline
March 15

"The academy experience has been such a growth opportunity. It has highlighted my skill set and allowed me to work on big projects and leadership development while still providing support around professional learning. I now am part of building our leadership pipeline and supporting aspiring principals and new principals. Even though I haven't changed positions, I believe I am seen more for my expertise now because of the opportunities the academy has afforded me."

~ Trisha Myers

THE ACADEMY GRADUATING CLASS OF 2022

A special thank you to our academy coaches, **Joe McFarland** and **Barbara Patterson Oden**.

orward Academy Graduates

Marquitis Adams
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Suwanee, GA

Lisa Bernstein
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LEARNING FOR ALL
IS MARYLAND DISTRICT'S PRIORITY

BY PETER CARPENTER

When we think of professional learning, we usually mean growing educators' knowledge base, abilities, and mindsets for the purpose of benefiting students. But Harford County Public Schools in Maryland has reframed it with a much broader scope. Professional learning is now called organizational development, reflecting the district's aim for everyone in all positions and levels to learn, grow, strive, and be the best that they can be.

To do this, we create learning opportunities for all staff. It's been a process to reach the point where we are now, and even though we've made many strides in creating educational spaces for everyone, our work is not done. We are still creating learning opportunities where few existed before. The growth and development of all staff is an ongoing priority.

Our district didn't always take this approach, however. In the past, if someone in a clerical role wanted to

improve their Excel skills, for instance, we might have suggested they learn from a colleague or expand their learning by finding resources on their own. While helpful, it didn't necessarily communicate a supportive system.

Similarly, when we held monthly meetings with system leaders on the instructional and the operations sides, most of that instructionally centered content excluded the needs and priorities of many noninstructional staff.

While our district applauded all professional growth and made efforts to help everyone see their place in supporting instruction, we did not formally support personalized growth for all employees. In 2019, that changed.

BECOMING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Harford County Public Schools is a midsized district, serving over 39,000 students and employing over 5,500 people. Like many school systems, our district's departments are divided into two main branches: the schools, which is further divided into elementary and secondary compartments, and the central office, which we call central services. Central services is subdivided into instructional leadership and enterprise leadership, otherwise known as operations or noninstructional work. All departments tend to be compartmentalized, each with its own leadership, goals, and purpose. Whether intentional or not, separating departments can denote and promote difference.

Previously, our district's professional learning primarily served educators and the instructional leaders of central services. Harford has had a long tenure of fostering strong learning through a variety of best practices linked to Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning. Some of these structures included:

- Instructional coaching models;
- Monthly personalized and

In Harford County Public Schools, professional learning is now called organizational development, reflecting the district's aim for everyone in all positions and levels to learn, grow, strive, and be the best that they can be.

differentiated instructional leadership meetings;
- Informal leadership onboarding processes; and
- Informal leadership overviews.

Our systems were effective, we felt, but as the baby boomer generation and Generation X employees began retiring, finding quality candidates to fill traditionally long-standing leadership roles throughout the organization has become more complex. The district needed to rethink how to attract, retain, and support the career growth of its staff and meet the changing needs of our workforce.

In 2019, while carrying several instructional roles in central services, I also became responsible for leadership development. I welcomed this shift both organizationally and professionally. My doctoral work had focused on leadership and innovation, so I was eager to shape that in my district.

This included creating a pipeline for prospective leaders as well as facilitating our monthly administrative and instructional leadership meetings. With my colleague Jackie Tarbert, the director of organizational development, I was eager to begin creating new structures and experiences for our leadership.

Since all my previous experiences were in the instructional realm, I naturally drew from great instructional leadership practices, but Tarbert challenged me to dig deeper and think bigger. What about *all* leadership?

What about *all* needs? What about ensuring that we not only support but collaborate with *everyone*? I dug into a variety of books on leadership to help spark ideas for our next steps.

Together with Tarbert and my team, we examined the existing organizational structure and realized we could do more to become what Peter Senge (2006) called a learning organization, wherein all departments of the organization should not only value learning but also make space for it. We wanted to develop a culture and means of learning for all.

EXAMINING OUR SYSTEM

When we set out to assess whether learning is a pervasive value in our organization, we asked these questions:
- Are the schools, and those leading and teaching in them, learning?
- Are the central services, and those leading within them, learning?

To begin this shift, we began by imagining what it could be. In their book, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*, Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey (2016) illustrate the purpose:

"Imagine so valuing the importance of developing people's capabilities that you design a culture that itself immersively sweeps every member of the organization into an ongoing developmental journey in the course of working every day. Imaging making the organization itself — and not separate, extra benefits — the incubator of capability" (p. 5).

What a challenge to think about creating space for every member of the organization to experience ongoing development. We decided to begin with developing language to articulate it. Guidara (2022) shares the purpose of language as a way to give intention to your institution, communicate your vision with others, and share your culture.

CORE LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

HCPS Leaders are...
HCPS leaders are...

- Instructionally savvy
- Enterprise experts
- Thoughtful builders
- Ethical stewards
- Upholders for equity
- Emotionally intelligent
- Mindful managers
- Lead learners
- Intentional collaborators
- Talent developers
- Systems influencers

HARFORD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Published by the HCPS Professional Development Advisory Council (PDAC)

We began with three tasks:
- Develop leadership competencies that grounded the organization with shared understandings;
- Construct a compelling yet simple vision, mission, and values to work toward; and
- Determine our needs as a total organization.

DEVELOP LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

Each aspect of our organization has universal competencies to guide us. Regardless of position, everyone strives to provide quality service through emotionally intelligent behaviors, such as empathetic listening and listening to hear.

In thinking beyond the instructional leadership lens, we realized it was possible to look at leadership competencies more globally. The competencies were drawn from Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, National Educational Leadership Preparation Program Recognition Standards, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, and Association of School Business Officials Professional Standards.

We investigated them from various organizational perspectives and conducted a crosswalk of patterns, which yielded patterns for leadership that were similar across frameworks. From them, we developed the HCPS Core Leadership Competencies (above).

A cross-functional team of senior-level leaders representing both the instructional and enterprise systems developed a framework that delineated standards for any system leader. The competencies help focus and align the work we do with current leaders and support aspiring leaders. Our goal is to expand the use of these competencies to our hiring practices. Additionally, by breaking down the competencies into smaller skills, we also hope to pave the way for microcredentialing, thus increasing leadership access to specific avenues for personal growth.

CONSTRUCT VISION, MISSION, AND VALUES

Building a core vision, mission, and values that encapsulate the purpose of organizational development for an entire system was somewhat of a challenge. Kouzes and Posner (2017) talk about vision as the "aspiration of what the organization wants to accomplish," and note that it "gives individuals a connected sense of purpose" (p. 98).

CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL TEAMS

Harford County Public Schools' cross-departmental teams work to determine and support professional learning and growth needs across the whole system.

Administrator professional development advisory team: This team includes members from schools, central services, and the enterprise side, facilitated by the supervisor of leadership development. The team's goals are to determine the needs for each level of leadership and project the proposed professional learning impact on each office. Designs for professional learning are brought to the team for feedback as are calendar items.

Teacher professional development advisory team: This group of instructional staff from across the system is facilitated by the supervisor of teacher induction and professional development. The team's goal is to determine the instructional needs for each school level and assess the impact of proposed professional learning for teachers. This team also reviews designs for professional learning.

Clerical professional development advisory team: Facilitated by the director of organizational development, this team's goal is to determine clerical professional learning needs and impact. New for our district, these offerings have been wildly popular. Typically, we provide virtual choice sessions twice a year.

Enterprise advisory team: The director of organizational development facilitates this team, which is a cross-section of enterprise staff. In its beginning stages, we are excited to see where our needs assessments will take this team. We are looking to equip our enterprise leadership with skills that will support succession planning and build leadership capabilities with our current staff.

For us, the vision of the office of organizational development and continuous learning is optimal learning for all. We aim to ensure everyone has access to high-quality professional learning.

Mission, as defined by Kouzes and Posner (2017), is a reason for an organization's existence. Our mission is to lead, live, and love learning. Our values are simple: educate, elevate, and evaluate. While these values are cyclical, they are also interchangeable blocks that can be stacked in any way we need.

In all things we touch, we strive to enter the process from one of these values. Sometimes our task is to take an existing structure in the organization, learn about it (educate), consider its effectiveness (evaluate), and then take it to the next level (elevate).

We did this with our monthly meetings for all frontline leaders, including principals, central services staff, and senior staff. We took stock of the past structures (evaluate), studied other effective structures (educate), and then nuanced our existing structure (elevate).

We established monthly meeting greeters to welcome people, but we put a twist on it by inviting greeters outside the office of organizational development. Each month, we recruit two greeters from school and central services leadership. Once these greeters have completed their role, they are asked to find next month's greeters.

These interactions between people from different departments help establish a culture of mutual trust.

This practice has taken on a life of its own, with greeters adding personalized touches to the assignment. One pair of principal greeters had kindergarten students write and illustrate positive thoughts on paper. At the meeting, they gave each arriving leader one of these handmade positive thoughts, which elevated the experience.

Now these sentiments can be found posted on walls all around our organization. What resulted, as we learned through our monthly evaluation surveys, was a more dynamic and engaging structure that administrators found satisfying and supportive.

In our office, we evaluate everything. To ensure that we regularly work toward optimal learning for all, we regularly ask our stakeholders how we are doing. Most of our surveys rate

overall session satisfaction. Over our two years of data collection, 97% of people in leadership surveyed were satisfied (24%) or highly satisfied (73%) with their experiences.

We ask participants to reflect and share what resonated (educate), the commitments they will make to their learning (elevate), as well as steps for continued growth on our part (evaluate). We always ask how they applied previous event learning to their contexts, which helps us assess whether the learning sticks (educate), while at the same time embedding soft accountability for that learning.

DETERMINE NEEDS

Determining the learning needs of an organization is complex, layered work. It takes many minds gathering around core initiatives. Part of the role of our office is to determine the felt needs in the system as well as those needs that arise, which may be mission critical.

For example, most of our school and central services clerical staff have to provide flyers or distributed content but may not come to the job with experience creating these. We brought in a resident expert in the design program Canva to provide two levels of professional learning: one basic and the other on the program's artificial intelligence capabilities and translation services for communicating with families. Our clerical staff raved about these sessions in their survey data and requested even more additional professional learning.

We live our core value of "evaluate" in many different spaces, supported by a variety of cross-department teams. Facilitated by members of the office of organizational development and teacher induction and professional development, these teams give guidance, support, and perspective to this systemwide work.

We list and understand our needs, and our core team facilitators meet biweekly to share what we've learned and build professional learning calendars and experiences for the system. We share these calendars and structures with senior staff and the superintendent, who provide insights into the structures moving forward.

THE FUTURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

While the district is proud of the growth that we've accomplished in just two years, we know that we have much more growth ahead of us. Some of our next goals include:

Leadership development: Future U is our program focusing on preparing aspiring principals and assistant principals. Future U aims to equip our leaders with skills embedded in the HCPS Leadership Competencies. We plan to launch a teacher leader version of Future U in spring 2024 to provide a similar format to build leadership skills such as group facilitation skills, structures for data dialogue, and more. Beyond that, we hope to expand the Future U structure to include any employee who wishes to build their leadership capacity.

Coaching cohorts: Over the past two years, the district has partnered with a local institute of higher education to train select administrators and teacher leaders to become certified as International Coaching Federation coaches. At present, over 70 staff members throughout the organization have taken the first three courses in the process. Next, we will formally recognize and identify those coaches as official support for others who may be new in their roles.

Executive leadership: As of yet, we do not formally prepare leaders for potential executive leadership but we have begun to have conversations on how to best prepare those interested in it.

We have made great strides in fulfilling our vision of "optimal learning for all" and agree with Kegan and Lahey, who say that "happiness is a process of human flourishing." Our goal is to ensure that optimal learning is the vehicle through which human flourishing occurs.

When we do so, we know that "a workplace built for flourishing stands shoulder-to-shoulder with a workplace built for well-being" (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). If our employees flourish in their roles, our students and stakeholders cannot help but flourish as well. And that is the goal of education.

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Which way to the principal's office?
Targeted support can guide assistant principals to leadership

BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD

Many professions have long runways to leadership, with mentorship and increasing levels of responsibility. Lead prosecutors start as assistant district attorneys, surgeons often complete a fellowship after residency, many business and nonprofit leaders move through the ranks of assistant director or vice president.

In contrast, the path to school leadership has historically not been well-defined. But that is changing.

The role of assistant principals has become a major stepping stone to the principalship. Among today's head principals, three-quarters have previously worked as assistant principals, and the ranks of assistant principals are increasing at a rate six

times that of principals (Goldring et al., 2021a).

Once thought of primarily as disciplinarians, assistant principals are now seen as key members of school leadership teams and an important part of building the principal pipeline. With responsibilities that include instructional leadership and professional learning, and with opportunities for close observation of and mentoring by principals, assistant principals are poised on a springboard to the next step.

But making sure the dive off that board results in successful leadership and great student outcomes takes intentionality and support, at the individual level and a systemic one. That is one of the conclusions of The Wallace Foundation's multiyear initiative to support the development of principal pipelines, from teacher leadership to the assistant principalship, all the way through principal supervision.

The initiative has found that when systems create comprehensive and aligned pipelines to identify, prepare, and support principals, student achievement increases more than 6 percentile points in reading and almost 3 percentile points in math (Gates et al., 2019). Comprehensive and aligned means that they include multiple entities, including higher education institutions, districts, and schools,

and that they support all phases of the development process. Some of those phases have been underused, or even untapped, and research suggests that the assistant principalship is one of them (Goldring et al., 2021a).

When districts recognize the potential of assistant principals and are intentional about supporting them to become successful principals, they can achieve three goals, according to research commissioned by Wallace: diversify the principalship, prepare effective principals, and achieve equitable outcomes for students (Goldring et al., 2021a). Those are big payoffs, especially at a time when principal attrition is growing (Levin et al., 2019) and student achievement is flagging (The Nation's Report Card, 2023).

NEED FOR SUPPORT

Historically, role-specific support for assistant principals has been lacking. According to a synthesis of 79 empirical research studies on assistant principals published since 2000 (Goldring et al., 2021a), gaps include evaluation processes and rubrics, sequential leadership development opportunities, mentorship and opportunity for people of color, and role-specific professional learning, despite the fact that learning that is relevant to one's position and set of responsibilities is a key

component of high-quality, standards-based professional learning (Learning Forward, 2022).

Unlike principals, who can look to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (NPBEA, 2015), assistant principals do not have the benefit of standards that can be used to drive evaluation, professional learning, and identification and preparation for the next step in the leadership pipeline.

Researcher Ellen Goldring, who co-authored the research synthesis, pointed out in an interview with The Wallace Foundation (Gill, 2021) that, "In most cases, principals and assistant principals are evaluated on the same rubric … In one study, the assistant principals did not even know if they were formally evaluated or how. Another study mentioned the complexity of using the same rubric: If I'm an assistant principal and evaluated on the same rubric as the principal, does that mean I can never be exemplary because that's only for principals?" She noted that this creates confusion about the types of tasks and leadership opportunities that assistant principals should have.

The gaps in support for assistant principals are magnified in rural areas and small districts and for educators of color (Goldring et al., 2021a). Educators of color are more likely than white educators to become assistant principals, yet they are less likely to

Establishing and Implementing a Professional Learning Pathway to Prepare Assistant Principals for the Principalship		
Area of Practice	**Practice** *District leadership has:*	**Reflection Notes**
Structured job shadowing experiences	☐ Established and implemented protocols for job shadowing experiences for assistant principals. ☐ Provided opportunities for assistant principals to shadow principals who demonstrate proficiency in a variety of leadership areas (fiscal management, culture and climate, instructional leadership, etc.).	
Organized collegial learning networks	☐ Provided opportunities for assistant principals to regularly meet as a cohort to learn from each other, engage in reflection, and enhance their leadership practice in preparation for the principalship.	
Job-embedded applied learning experiences	☐ Implemented professional learning content that addresses critical skills that have posed challenges to novice principals, as informed by data and input of principals, principal supervisors, teachers, and other stakeholders. ☐ Engaged assistant principals in learning experiences that allow them to actively apply research-based practices to support the professional growth of staff, analyze and apply data to inform decisions, enhance school culture and climate, and complete tasks in alignment with the day-to-day duties performed by principals.	

This excerpt from a guide produced by Policy Studies Associates includes a checklist and note-taking tool for the assistant principal advancement team to gather and review evidence of whether the district is taking key steps to support the professional learning of future principals.

become principals than their white colleagues. Research suggests several possible reasons for this, including discrimination in hiring and less access to mentoring, especially for females of color.

OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

The Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative shined light on these needs and provided an opportunity for district partners to be more strategic about helping assistant principals develop into principals. The initiative included six urban school districts working to identify, recruit, and support high-quality school leaders. The foundation also invested in understanding and supporting the roles of principal supervisors and university preparation programs for school leaders.

As part of this work, Policy Studies Associates recently produced *Assistant Principal Advancement to the Principalship: A Guide for School Districts* (Booker-Dwyer et al., 2023). The guide is designed to be used by a team dedicated to advancing assistant principals to foster commitment, consistency, and follow-through. The guide's authors recommend that the team be led by a district-level champion who has the support of senior leaders and include members such as the superintendent, chief of human resources, principal supervisors, principals, assistant principals, principal coaches, and equity officers.

Drawing on research, an evaluation of the Principal Pipeline Initiative districts, and input from diverse district leaders, the guide provides steps

districts can take to support assistant principals, along with reflection questions to consider how well those steps are progressing and where to place more effort. It is a valuable tool for professional learning leaders because it can help sharpen the focus on supporting assistant principals not just for their current jobs but for their own and their district's long-term goals.

These steps are organized into three interconnected components, all of which are consistent with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning: forecasting principal vacancies (Evidence standard), identifying assistant principals who have the potential to succeed as principals (Equity Foundations and Resources standards), and implementing professional learning pathways to prepare them for the principalship (Professional Expertise and Leadership standards). All are driven by an equity lens, with an emphasis on identifying and supporting leaders and potential leaders from diverse backgrounds (Equity Drivers standard) (Learning Forward, 2022).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING'S ROLE

Like all educators, assistant principals benefit from ongoing professional learning on many aspects of their jobs. But professional learning to prepare them for the next step is a specific niche that is often overlooked. The Policy Studies Associates guide's authors point out, "Professional learning experiences provided by school districts to prepare assistant principals for the principalship serve to bridge a gap between core content assistant principals learned through university preparation programs and the actual roles and responsibilities of principals" (Booker-Dwyer et al., 2023).

Recommended professional learning approaches to serve this function include:

- High-quality mentoring and coaching;
- Structured job shadow experiences with a variety of principals;
- Organized collegial learning networks;
- Applied learning; and
- Targeted training on addressing the needs of diverse learners.

All of these forms of learning are sustained, job-embedded, and consistent with the Learning Designs standard of the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). They are about facilitating a process of development

and growth over time, a process that should start as early as possible.

The topics covered in these learning experiences should be driven by the skill sets principals need and the areas the district has identified as lacking. The guide recommends using surveys, interviews, and focus groups with novice principals and their supervisors to help determine what those needs and missing links are: "For example, if your district finds that novice principals face challenges with fiscal management, then the district can add targeted learning that focuses on budgeting and sound fiscal practices to the professional learning pathway" (Booker-Dwyer et al., 2023).

The guide includes a checklist and note-taking tool for the assistant principal advancement team to gather and review evidence of whether the district is taking key steps to support the professional learning of future principals. (See p. 48.) Practices that have not yet been implemented can serve as a starting point for developing an actionable work plan.

That work plan should be based on a holistic review of all the practices and on district priorities and capacity and be informed by the Standards for Professional Learning to ensure that the professional learning is high quality.

The work plan is most likely to be beneficial if it is connected to the other parts of the principal pipeline process. Learning to be an excellent principal is an ongoing process that does not stop when assistant principals take on new roles as principals. New and experienced principals' needs have typically evolved beyond those of new assistant principals, but they build on existing skills and experiences and therefore should be considered holistically.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Creating professional learning systems for assistant principals to become successful principals takes many entities and roles working together. Key players include district-level leaders who set policies and allocate funding as well as principal supervisors who work at and across schools.

In several districts that participated in the Principal Pipeline Initiative, principal supervisors facilitated professional learning for assistant principals or connected one-on-one in ways that helped identify promising assistant principals and also facilitated continuity across the support continuum (Goldring et al., 2021a).

Current principals also play a role in supporting and mentoring assistant principals to take the next step. As Beverly Hutton of the National Association of Elementary School Principals pointed out in a webinar hosted by The Wallace Foundation (Goldring et al., 2021b), the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders explicitly include the responsibility of mentorship of assistant principals.

Universities are important players, too. They can be part of planning the continuum of preparation and support for assistant principals and principals. Some universities partner with local districts to organize ongoing professional learning. Even those that don't have the capacity to do so can partner with districts to understand their principal candidates' needs and how their leadership preparation programs can provide the most solid foundation of support (Goldring et al., 2021b).

MAXIMIZE POTENTIAL

Professional learning for assistant principals is a key part of the leadership pipeline, but it is not the only one. The lessons of the Principal Pipeline Initiative show that maximizing the potential of assistant principals should also include efforts to clarify the role of the assistant principalship as a stepping stone to the principalship; develop standards, leadership tasks, and evaluation processes consistent with that role; ensure principals have the skills to mentor assistant principals; and develop principals' awareness of and practices for advancing equity in the leadership pipeline.

When all the pieces are in place,

assistant principals' vital contributions to their schools and the field become more visible and continue to grow.

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IDEAS

THE REAL MECHANISMS OF SYSTEMS ARE PEOPLE

"The challenges that we have within our school systems will not be solved by one person or in one school year. Rather, it will take a group of people working together to create and maintain the systems our young people need. To create systems change, leaders need to build on connected autonomy, which suggests that each system is simultaneously connected and autonomous."

— Systems change is hard. 3 elements can help, p. 62

Learning Forward Academy:

30 YEARS!

of educator learning and growth

BY JEFNA M. COHEN

For three decades, the Learning Forward Academy has supported education leaders working to improve their schools and systems through a multiyear deep dive into professional learning. Since its inception, the academy has inspired and enhanced the professional learning work of more than 1,600 educators, and they serve as a testament to the power of standards-based, aligned educator learning.

The academy is a unique learning experience because of its intensive, cohort-based model and its focus on transforming organizations to improve results for all students. Graduates credit the academy with expanding their thinking about what effective professional learning looks like, giving them practical tools to make changes, and facilitating lifelong collaboration with other learning professionals.

As the academy celebrates its 30th anniversary, Shannon Bogle, Learning Forward's director of networks and academy and a graduate of the class of 2019, reflected on what the academy has meant for educators and students. "After COVID, it became even more clear how important this work is. It's exciting to see these leaders take their tools to improve school systems so they work the best they can for kids. I have witnessed the concrete results in the data — they are already making a substantial impact."

THE PROGRAM

Participating in the 2½-year academy is a commitment to growing one's professional learning practice. Members use and fine-tune the skills, tools, and methods needed to initiate changes that benefit students. The in-depth learning experience includes five live convenings totaling 10 in-person days, along with four virtual events and ongoing video and phone meetings that link together ongoing program work.

Every July, new cohort members join educators from around the world to immerse themselves in evidence-based professional learning designed to examine their systems and uncover the roots of the challenges that exist within them. They are led and supported by two experienced coaches — previous academy graduates who have

successfully led system change.

These experts in professional learning and facilitation challenge cohort members to stretch their thinking and improve their practice. Participants study researched-based strategies that lead them to solutions to their problems of practice. Equity-centered professional learning threads throughout the work.

Academy participation also includes Learning Forward membership for the program duration and registration for three of Learning Forward's Annual Conferences, which take place in early December. In addition, participants have access to Learning Forward's Standards Assessment Inventory, a web-based data collection tool for analyzing professional learning in schools and systems.

As is the case with all of Learning Forward's endeavors, the academy work is anchored in the Standards for Professional Learning and incorporates evidence from the latest relevant educational research and practice. "The academy helped me ground my work in the standards, making sure we were using them in the development of our [district professional learning] sessions and coursework for people," said Nikki Mouton, deputy superintendent of academic services for Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia. Mouton is an academy graduate who has also served as a coach.

The connection to the standards

also stands out to Dawn Wilson, a 2010 graduate and academy coach and mentor. "The most significant learning was about how the Standards for Professional Learning are foundational to best professional learning practices. The standards provide the lens through which to view all professional learning and serve as a framework to inform areas of strength as well as improvement."

INDIVIDUALIZED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The centerpiece of the academy is the problem of practice. Each member identifies and defines a problem of practice specific to their educational system. Schools' challenges and solutions are rarely one-size-fits-all and require ongoing reflection and refinement based on real-world outcomes and feedback.

By acknowledging this, the academy creates an opportunity for personalized, contextual learning while teaching members about methods and processes for facilitating change management that can be used in many settings and situations.

In small teams, academy members work on their problems of practice in ways that are both collaborative and individualized. They benefit from each other's insights and experiences as they shape and assess their own strategies.

Looking back on these experiences, Mouton said she appreciated the opportunity "to connect with other people in similar roles and similar problems of practice." She said it was helpful to grapple with the work among different small groups to get a variety of perspectives. Connecting on similar problems of practice is beneficial for comparing similar themes and leveraging discoveries that others may find useful, she said.

Ayesha Farag, superintendent for elementary education in Newton Public Schools in Massachusetts and a 2021 academy graduate, is working on a problem of practice around coherence between district departments. "There were siloed activities between the elementary school principals, the office of teaching and learning with the curriculum coordinators, and the office of student services with the special education administrators," she said.

Farag's academy work inspired her to find solutions for district alignment. "If these three departments were to work together and strengthen the relationships and calibrate around instructional expectations, we would be able to better align our efforts," she said. The result would be more cohesive professional learning and greater support for teachers as well as improved outcomes for students, she said.

Miladys Cepero-Perez said she also appreciated that personalized approach. Cepero-Perez, an instructional supervisor for Miami-Dade County Public Schools, is a member of the class of 2024 and a recipient of the Stephanie Hirsh Scholarship, one of the awards funded by the Learning Forward Foundation that make the academy financially accessible to participants. Cepero-Perez said that the Learning Forward Academy "has instilled in me the practice of conducting needs assessments. This aligns with the personalized learning approach, ensuring that professional learning is tailored to the specific needs and challenges within my district."

IMPACTING SYSTEMS

Joe McFarland, who has served as a coach for two academy cohorts, believes wholeheartedly in the academy's in-depth approach. He experienced the many ways it benefited his Pennsylvania district when he was a member of the class of 2015, and he continues to see benefits for the educators he has coached. "In my entire 33 years [in education], I have not had any kind of learning that was as impactful to my practice and to system change as academy work," McFarland said.

When he enrolled in the academy, McFarland was working at the district level as the assistant to the superintendent for curriculum and instruction. He was part of a district team that enrolled in the academy together, including a principal at each school level, as well as a district director.

While each staff member had a different problem of practice, they all connected to a common area of focus for the goal of enacting systemic change. What was once disjointed professional learning that went along with "whatever was coming down the pike," McFarland said, became coherent and aligned as a result of the team's academy work.

McFarland became superintendent after his first year in the academy and refocused his problem of practice to center on the school board, with whom he worked closely. "My goal was to help the board understand the importance of investing in sustainable, ongoing professional learning through the role of instructional coaches and the impact that they make on the instruction that happens in the classroom."

As a result, his district added coaches to every school level. Although McFarland has since left the district, the coaching program continues under the current superintendent, who was also a member of the academy.

Mouton continues to see the impact of the methods and resources she acquired and used in her academy work, both as a participant and as a coach. She relies on those tools today as she supports her district's implementation of a new reading program in a move from balanced literacy to structured literacy. For the largest district in Georgia, "the change management for that is huge," she said, and she is grateful for tools like the Concerns-Based Adoption Model, a framework of techniques to assess and facilitate the steps of reform.

Farag, the elementary superintendent from Massachusetts, says the academy has helped her think critically and intentionally about how she supports the 15 principals she supervises. "It has to be me looking at my own practices and how I provide

LEARNING FORWARD ACADEMY PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Understand the system, plan, and prioritize action.
Each academy member identifies a specific challenge within their school or district that focuses on the instructional core, is observable, connects to a broader improvement strategy, and directly impacts student outcomes. Educators analyze data from their system, including results of the Standards Assessment Inventory.
Then participants learn about root cause analysis, the process of looking deeply at the factors causing educational challenges, as well as the tools and processes for developing effective, sustainable solutions. Members hone their focus on a problem of practice that must center and benefit students. Examples include implementing specific teaching methods, increasing student performance, and improving school culture.

Measure changes and use evaluation frameworks.
Members learn to use an evaluation framework to measure progress toward their goals and problem of practice in a way that is aligned with the overall vision for their district's improvement plan. They learn about measuring changes in multiple areas that contribute to increasing student achievement. One of the models used to define outcomes examines educators' knowledge, attitude, skills, aspirations, and behavior, also known as KASAB.

Execute and support the plan.
Academy members refine their evaluation framework and explore potential solutions and strategies centered in professional learning to address the identified problem. This step may involve researching best practices, learning from other districts, and considering innovative approaches. Then they develop a theory of change, which is a structure for the strategies, actions, conditions, and resources needed to facilitate the desired improvements.

Analyze data and share findings.
Participants craft evaluation plans aimed at gauging the effectiveness of their initiatives. Following the implementation phase and data collection, an intricate data analysis guides them in discerning opportunities to broaden the reach of their efforts. The academy places great importance on empowering educators to champion their work. Gathering data, disseminating their findings, and showcasing the positive impact on educators and students all play pivotal roles in advocating for continued funding and support for professional learning.

Celebrate graduation and plan next steps.
At participants' third Learning Forward Annual Conference, they celebrate and acknowledge their hard work at a graduation ceremony. Educators reflect on their learning experiences and change management processes and share what they've learned with the wider Learning Forward community.

ACADEMY APPLICATIONS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

Visit **learningforward.org/academy** to learn more about the Learning Forward Academy and scholarships available. Applications for the 2026 cohort are due March 15.

the structure, support, and guidance to produce [more than] just a pleasant learning experience," she said.

Farag says she has also become much more focused on how the professional learning is leading to meaningful changes, and she acknowledges that work is more complex than measuring participants' satisfaction. "That's the piece that I feel like I've really become much more focused on through work in the academy."

PROFESSIONAL NETWORK AND COMMUNITY

For many academy members, the impacts of the academy continue to be felt in the long term because of the network and community they develop, which can last for years. Their cohorts become trusted colleagues, a support system, and a sounding board. Coach Dawn Wilson says, "Professional learning is a big door … and it swings on the hinges of relationships and engagement." Throughout Wilson's long academy history, she has seen the academy grease those hinges often.

Some members from the earliest academy cohorts still meet on their own, says Joellen Killion, a Learning Forward senior consultant. Killion has participated in or led in every academy except one. Killion's leadership has been an essential element in the evolution of

30 SECONDS of video reinforces teachers' strengths

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Thirty seconds. That's often enough video of their own instruction for teachers to learn about something they are doing right — and, importantly, to identify an effective practice that they could repeat more often.

The power of using a brief video clip during one-on-one coaching conversations is that teachers experience intense personal attention about the work that matters to them the most. That emerged as the most influential component of the MyTeachingPartner-Secondary (MTP-S) program, a model built on decades of research about effective coaching, according to recent interviews and focus groups.

Learning Forward conducted those interviews and focus groups as part of a project to extend the MyTeachingPartner model, which has been successfully used in elementary

and preschool settings (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Allen et al., 2011) to secondary schools across a range of states and school types.

"It was my clip. It was my time. I felt like I was the only one that (the coach) was talking to," said one Michigan teacher. A Texas coach observed that "what we plan to do and what we actually do is very different, and exposure to that reality is very eye-opening. (Teachers) watching themselves teach was more eye-opening than anything I would say."

Other elements of MTP-S resonated with participants as well. Teachers valued the model's emphasis on seeking their strengths rather than focusing on their deficits. They also applauded the model for how its predictable structure defined expectations for the process.

For five years, Learning Forward engaged in a partnership with the American Institutes for Research and Teachstone to learn more about how the MTP coaching model could be scaled, especially in secondary schools. The project was funded by a 2017 grant from the U.S. Department of Education through its Education Innovation and Research Program.

Learning Forward's interest in MTP comes from its longstanding belief in the value of coaching as an integral part of a comprehensive professional learning program because of coaches' ability to provide day-to-day support for educator growth and learning. The MTP-S model aligns in many ways with the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022), which provide guidance to educators on acquiring new knowledge and applying new learning to improve practice and sustain changes that lead to student learning.

Two recent randomized control trials studies found that MTP-S has positive impacts on student achievement: One found positive impacts on middle and high school student achievement and engagement in small and rural districts (Allen et al., 2011; Gregory et al., 2014), and another in urban middle and high schools found not only improvement in student achievement, but also a reduction in racial discrepancies in exclusionary disciplinary practices (Allen et al., 2015; Gregory et al., 2016).

Follow-up revealed that, even after the project ended, teachers who had participated in the coaching intervention maintained lower disciplinary referral rates and consistency of referrals by race (Gregory et al., 2016).

HOW MTP-S WORKS

Several components of the MTP-S model set it apart from other coaching approaches. Using video as the centerpiece of the coaching experience is the first component. The second is MTP-S's focus on teacher strengths, which means that coaches search for what teachers are already doing well in their interactions with students to replicate and build on those existing assets. The third component is the set of structured steps that MTP-S follows for each coaching cycle.

MTP-S coaches must be certified by Teachstone, the company that supports and disseminates the model to schools. Coaches learn how to use the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a research-based rubric that has been rigorously tested and validated, which focuses on interactions between teachers and students and peer interactions in three domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support.

Research has shown that teachers' ratings on these dimensions are strong predictors of students' academic and social success (Hamre et al., 2013). A focus on student engagement provides a through line among all the domains.

Once paired, coaches introduce the teachers to the CLASS domains, dimensions within those domains (such

as teacher sensitivity and quality of feedback), and observational indicators and behavioral markers within each of those dimensions (such as teacher questioning or noticing and the use of real-world examples). Before each coaching cycle, the coach and teacher agree on which aspect of classroom interaction will be the focus of the upcoming cycle.

After that, coaching follows a predictable pattern of five steps. In most cases, a cycle takes two weeks to complete. The steps of the cycle are:

1. To begin the coaching cycle, teachers **digitally record** 30 minutes of their own instruction and upload this footage to a secure platform accessible to their coach. Teachers select the lesson to record and when to do the recording. (Before they sign on with an MTP-S coach, teachers know that recording their instruction is required.)

2. The coach watches the entire video and selects **three short clips** — 30 seconds to two minutes long — that show a specific strategy or move by the teacher that created an effective interaction that encouraged student engagement.

3. The coach **writes a reflection** email guided by prompts (developed by Teachstone) for the teachers to consider before their next coaching session.

4. The coach and teacher **conference** together for about 30 minutes to review the clips and the teacher's reflection on the clips and discuss how to strengthen or expand on that effective practice in the next cycle. Coaching can be provided virtually or face to face, depending on the district's plan.

5. The coach **writes a summary, including an action plan for what CLASS dimension and indicators will be addressed next**.

The cycle then repeats, so that teachers can see their actions and their students' reactions in an analytical way and have an opportunity to pause and reflect on practices that work. This makes it more likely that the teacher will repeat the effective practice — an explicit purpose of the cycles and the coaching.

THE VALUE OF VIDEO

The video clips gave teachers a rare opportunity to step back and see themselves in action, something that few of the participants in the MTP-S project had experienced. The videos allowed teachers to home in on moments and interactions that may have seemed small but were actually significant. Some of those moments revealed practices teachers wanted to do more of, and some less.

Several teachers, for example, reflected on the CLASS indicators related to positive climate and teacher sensitivity and recognized that they were often pointing at students rather than calling on them by name to respond to a question. "I was surprised to learn that I wasn't already doing that," one Wyoming teacher said of using students' names. "When I changed and started doing that and when I encouraged students to use each other's names, that brought even more respect into the classroom," she said.

Other teachers became more sensitive to how they were facilitating the CLASS dimension of instructional dialogue, recognizing how often their voices dominated the classrooms and how often their perspectives took precedence. One social studies teacher observed this during a video clip: "I make connections to the real world all the time, but are they my connections or are they adolescent connections? I started allowing kids to share their examples before I share mine. An adolescent perspective is different. Real world can mean so many different things to different people," she said.

Video is a powerful component and

can also be used outside of the MTP-S program. Sharron Helmke, Learning Forward's senior vice president for professional services content, said, "Most experts on coaching believe that the fastest way to get teachers to change is through video. Teachers can't argue with what they see on video."

LOOKING FOR THE GOOD

Although teachers sometimes identified practices they wanted to change, many also recognized what they are already doing well and reflected on how to build on that. MTP-S uses the video clips to intentionally focus on identifying a teacher's strengths. As one coach noted, "Everybody does something right." This expectation to look for the strengths builds a teacher's sense of efficacy and offers each teacher a path for taking the next step in improvement.

One teacher expressed frustration that she often had to repeat a direction for her students. What the coach saw, however, was a teacher being very firm and very calm, going over something as long as necessary until it sank in with students. "You're not questioning your decision, and that's a positive," said the coach.

Another teacher had a well-developed routine that opened her class every day. The coach was able to point out this strength to her and encourage her to build on it in other aspects of her instruction. "It was so well done that students were doing it without being prompted. That did not just happen overnight. At some point, she had to teach them that routine," said the coach. The coach encouraged her to recognize this as a strength and pushed her to identify where she could introduce a similar routine in another part of her instruction. "That was a very powerful moment of learning for her," said the coach.

The asset focus has other benefits, too. It helps encourage teacher participation and buy-in to the program by overcoming the oft-held belief that

coaching is only about fixing a teacher's problems. And the connection between coach-teacher conversations and teacher-student conversations is clear. As one principal said, "If we (focus on strengths) with teachers, then they will do that with the kids."

Several experienced coaches who participated in the project noted that explicitly focusing on strengths was a change in focus for them and something that could work with any coaching model. "It was a mindset shift for us," said one experienced coach in Michigan. "We weren't there to fix something."

Another experienced Michigan coach said of her and her colleague's prior coaching practices, "Neither of us ever went in and just ripped someone apart, but I don't think we ever deliberately focused on the strengths, just totally building on all of the assets to get all the way stronger."

This emphasis on teachers' strengths within teacher-student interactions is not intended to be the sole solution for improving instruction. But a focus on improving the teacher-student relationship is one approach to building teachers' supports for all students. As Learning Forward's CEO Frederick Brown pointed out, "The teacher video is capturing a slice of what's going on in the room." That slice doesn't give the coach the full view of what's happening in the classroom, but it does give them a place to start building up the dimensions of teacher-student interactions that research shows are important.

STRUCTURE MATTERS

The consistency of MTP-S's prescribed coaching cycle benefits schools and districts that operate on strict schedules and must meet competing demands from many sources. The structure also helps everyone be accountable. Teachers know when they have to record the lesson. Coaches know how many days they have to provide feedback.

The teacher and the coach both know when they will be sitting down for the coaching conversation and how long it will last.

Specifying that teacher and coach will meet for only 30 minutes, for example, makes the meeting more palatable to teachers because they know they will not lose an entire planning period. That structure also helps establish coaching in a teacher's routine.

Participants found the transparency and structure of the coaching cycle to be liberating. Teachers and coaches knew what would happen during each segment, which helped them relax about what was coming next and helped develop trust between teacher and coach.

The brevity of the video clip ensured that teachers and coaches zeroed in on just one interaction or strategy, which kept the conversation focused and prevented it from rambling into too many directions to be effective. A coach in Wyoming said that previous coaching experiences had felt like "drive-by coaching," compared with the more structured MTP-S coaching model. "Somebody would stop by, do a little observation, give you a little sticky note feedback on whatever was happening in the classroom when they came by. The very structured (MTP-S) cycles takes a lot of guesswork out of deciding where to go next, but there's still a lot of flexibility. The structure freed up teachers to focus on just what was happening."

The MTP-S coaching is also job-embedded and timely. A Virginia coach noted, "I love the framework of the cycles. Because it was so focused on them (the teachers) and what they needed in those two weeks, it was pretty perfect professional development. It's so structured. It's not free-flowing. Teachers were steering the ship. They were talking about where they wanted to go next."

MAKING COACHING ACCESSIBLE

Coaching is a powerful model for professional learning that Learning

MTP-S MODEL SUPPORTS STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The MTP-S model supports the Standards for Professional Learning by focusing on improving student learning through improving teacher practice in a comprehensive way. It recognizes the power of job-embedded and sustained professional learning. Of note are three of the 11 standards:

- **Culture of Collaborative Inquiry**, which expects that educators in every role, grade level, and content area will collaborate for continuous improvement and support their colleagues' ongoing learning and development;
- **Equity Foundations**, which makes explicit that ensuring equity and improving student learning requires a culture of support for all staff. Promoting the growth of all educators lays a foundation for promoting the growth of all students; and
- **Implementation**, which values a culture that regularly engages in meaningful, constructive feedback and aids educators to apply new learning to improve their practice and sustain those changes over time.

Forward has advocated and supported for decades. And the MTP-S model could make coaching more accessible. For example, the option to employ virtual coaches could enable more districts, especially poorly resourced rural districts, to add coaching to their portfolio.

Experts say it is important to remember, though, that coaching is not a magic solution to all of a school's challenges. Learning Forward's chief learning officer Paul Fleming, who has been a high school principal,

IDEAS

says, "Coaching works best in places where they've done a lot of work. It thrives in a school culture where there already is collaboration and respect for collaboration."

Fleming said principals could learn a great deal from MTP-S's focus on teachers' assets. "Principals often look at teachers through an evaluation lens and not through a continuing growth approach. One of the powers of this model is recognizing teachers' assets and holding up a mirror to enable teachers to see them."

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Learning Forward Academy: 30 years of educator learning and growth

the academy's curriculum.

She spends a half-day with each cohort, focusing primarily on elements of her text, *Assessing Impact* (Corwin, 2017), which equips participants with the essential tools to construct comprehensive evaluation plans and assess the impact on educators and students. Killion supports and offers continuous coaching to academy staff, demonstrating her unwavering commitment and dedication to the academy's success.

The importance of these relationships is a common refrain among those who have been part of the academy over the past 30 years. "There's something about collaborating with people from around the country, speaking with professionals in similar roles to compare work and problems and having the freedom to share about tough stuff. You can have those conversations in a safe space," said Kristin Buehrig, Learning Forward vice president of conference programs and a former Learning Forward Academy director. She said she continues to use her experience and learning from the academy in her current role.

INVESTING IN PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Farag, who is a recipient of the Stephanie Hirsh Scholarship, credits the academy with stretching her thinking and energizing her with an infusion of new ideas and resources. She said that she "cannot underestimate the importance of dedicated time and support to break from the demands of the day-to-day to provide deliberate attention to my own learning, growth, analysis, and reflection."

For academy member Cepero-Perez, the experience has been deeply satisfying on a personal level and is helping her pay forward the contributions other educators have made to her path. "I want to contribute to the profession and leave a legacy," she says, through designing professional learning that is high-quality, embedded in teacher work, and actionable in school.

"I have been able to achieve that through the Learning Forward Academy," Cepero-Perez says. "When people talk about the programs that I lead with my team, they smile. They really want to participate because they see meaning in the work that we're doing."

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SYSTEMS CHANGE IS HARD WORK.

3 ELEMENTS CAN HELP

BY JAMES HILTON HARRELL

The first three years in my California district were marked with transition. Three different superintendents came and went, tipping off corresponding waves of senior leadership departures.

By fall 2016, things finally felt stable. I accepted the role of chief of staff for a network superintendent and deputy superintendent. My plan was to grow my leadership capabilities over the coming years. But by that winter, the district was facing a $30 million deficit and another superintendent resigned.

I was abruptly moved into a much more senior role as a principal supervisor — a move that came without the level of support I needed. I went from *learning* systems to *leading* systems within the span of a one-hour conversation.

My first role as a systems leader was trial by fire. I was often overwhelmed by the magnitude of challenges that come with running a cohort of 15 elementary schools. Despite the odds, our underresourced team got great results for students and showed me that real change can happen quickly.

There was a kind of alchemy in this position that I hoped to replicate going forward. Yet, in succeeding

roles, I couldn't always duplicate the magic. I fumbled by mandating the same techniques in new places or not spending enough time to see the challenges.

These successes and failures led me to evolve my thinking over time and embrace a systems-thinking perspective that also recognizes context. Now a senior leader, I am committed to developing systems thinking within my team.

Systems thinking is a global approach to understanding problems by noticing patterns, dynamics, and relationships while simultaneously looking at individual people and parts (Sweeney, 2001). It takes practice and time to learn, and it must be adapted because every setting is unique.

This article focuses on how to build leadership capacity for developing systems leaders in all contexts. By concentrating on three key elements — competence, care, and coherence — emerging systems leaders can better lead toward equity.

COMPETENCE

There is no "right way" in work, but people often have very strongly held beliefs about what constitutes right.

New systems leaders' mental models may default into one of two camps: the know-it-all who is unwilling to ask for help or the self-proclaimed imposter who doesn't know how they got the job.

Both camps represent deeply held assumptions on what it means to lead and how an individual can influence change. As a systems leader, there is a delicate balance between knowing that no one has all the answers while also drawing from one's own expertise.

When I transitioned from the role of chief of staff to principal supervisor, I had never been a principal. I suddenly had formal authority over a group that I had only previously influenced and coached. At the time, I had deep knowledge about the district's collective bargaining agreements and content standards from previous roles, but I didn't know much about budgets, risk management, or how to get a broken toilet fixed.

To avoid falling into one of the aforementioned camps, I gave myself an honest self-assessment. I tapped into my own strengths and previous experiences while I also sought resources to help me identify what I didn't know and fill in my new learning.

Context is a key player alongside competence. When entering a new organization, an employee sometimes brings norms from their past work to the new organization. If a principal moves from a large urban district to a rural one, a hiring committee might worry that they won't be able to adjust to the new environment.

But people can be effective in many different contexts if they know who they are, what matters to them, and how their thinking has evolved throughout their career path. New systems leaders each have different personal and professional experiences to draw from. For example, how I lead in Texas is different than how I led in California. However, my core values remain constant, my quirks remain, but the organization and team inform how I lead and manage day to day.

Leaning into lessons learned, while realizing that every experience represents a moment in time and particular context, is crucial. Leaders need to determine the best way to leverage their strengths within their specific settings to drive meaningful change.

To be successful, a systems leader must build empathy for the people served. Instead of framing the fact of never serving as a principal as a deficit, I saw it as the unique advantage of not thinking that I knew the "right" way to do the job. To fill in my knowledge gaps, I conducted formal empathy interviews as well as job shadowing. This allowed me to understand the unique aspects and pressures of the role.

And, while I was gaining an understanding of my position, I also listened closely to what principals needed and worked to get them results. I designed professional learning that focused on the instructional core and content standards, helped review and

think through progressive discipline, and asked many questions about how to get work done.

I helped design systems to meet principals' actual needs, not the needs that I thought they should have. Rather than assume that one understands the challenges of all employees, it is crucial to listen deeply to understand how the system presents challenges.

CARE

Systems leadership requires care because systems rely on people. Change requires vulnerability and courage, as it often requires the abandoning of previously held beliefs or workstreams. During times of organizational strife or crisis, leaders not only have to process, regulate, and express their own emotions but also help teams understand their individual and collective emotions.

This adds another layer to already challenging work and therefore might be avoided by leaders, especially if they don't feel adept with those kinds of tasks. Yet, as adrienne maree brown reminds us, "What we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system" (2017, p. 53). Care work is core work; care routines support the people in a system and have spillover effects for the bottom line.

In shifting my leadership role from California to Texas, community care looked very different across these geographies. In California, it was common practice to have relationship-building times to start and end each meeting. In Texas, holiday celebrations and community gatherings were more common ways to build teams, occurring separately from "the work." As a leader, I had to pay attention to the characteristics of the settings and then identify the types of care work that

resonated with me in each context.

Care work doesn't rely on one person — even if that person has the role with the most formal authority. A systems leader can routinize care and flag it as an important priority for the team. In fact, adding small routines of care into daily ways of work pays dividends across the organizational culture.

One practice I use today is starting meetings with relationship check-in questions connected to the meeting topic. For example, when launching cross-departmental working teams, I like to ask everyone to tell the team about a time when collaboration was successful.

As they talk, I listen for trends and then reference these throughout the meeting. This helps reinforce the lessons learned and identify red flags that might exist in our work together. These quick check-ins can build relationships and help document relevant learnings to drive improvement.

A primary charge of a systems leader is to develop their team to enact their vision. One technique that I have developed over time is to think of my feedback in terms of a process I designed called the CAVE method. This method has four elements: coaching, appreciation, validation, and evaluation. It is based on the ACE framework that includes appreciation, coaching, and evaluation (Stone & Heen, 2014).

Coaching is feedback designed to help you grow in your effectiveness and cohesiveness to the vision. **Appreciation** is feedback that says, "I see you and your efforts." **Validations** are observations around the external conditions in which individual employees find themselves. **Evaluations** rank employees against expectations and deadlines.

I used the CAVE method when building my department in Texas, beginning with coaching to help ensure vision alignment and organizational coherence. As this vision became reality, I offered appreciation for staff members' efforts.

My new department had four subdepartments that had never been

housed together before. Each faced a unique challenge and had different resources and attention from the board. One was a start-up that provided surge capacity with one-time federal funds, two were experiencing rapid growth because of newly named district priorities, and the fourth was a legacy program. Validating that each leadership context was different allowed members to focus on their challenges and not worry about having to compete with peers.

Finally, to round out the CAVE framework, my team and I held quarterly evaluations of the effectiveness of each program, team, and personal leadership. These quarterly evaluations allowed my team to reinforce expectations and determine the best strategy to move the system forward.

Though the example provided describes a linear process following the CAVE method, it's important to remember that a systems leader must deploy different techniques for growth and development. An effective coach or manager also recognizes what an employee needs at any given moment and differentiates support for them. For example, the same words as feedback, such as, "Prioritize scheduling this meeting," can be received as evaluation or as coaching. The primary interpretation by the individual receiving the feedback depends on the relationship between the two individuals. Building systems to honor the people helps prime conditions for growth.

COHERENCE

Education is made up of nested systems that extend from the federal government to the classroom and operate interdependently. Practically, this means that a new law, board

directive, or superintendent mandate can dramatically shift day-to-day work. Because of this, it is important to identify two important skills: knowing your locus of control and focusing on what Fullan (2021) calls connected autonomy to collaborate together.

The challenges that we have within our school systems will not be solved by one person or in one school year (Gutierrez, 2021). Rather, it will take a group of people working together to create and maintain the systems our young people need. To create systems change, leaders need to build on connected autonomy, which suggests that each system is simultaneously connected and autonomous (Fullan, 2021).

Think of a school operating in a district. The school relies on and is connected to the central office for services like curriculum or facilities. Simultaneously, it also has autonomy, especially over day-to-day operations. The principal must balance these elements of connection and autonomy to be effective.

In Texas, I launched a cross-functional working group between the offices of schools, academics, and talent. Our goal was to establish a teacher performance pay system, which would reward our highly effective teachers in an attempt to strengthen retention and build their capacity.

Each of our departments had crucial roles to play in teacher development, but, like many districts, we operated in silos. By intentionally building a shared vision together, defining our interdependencies, and committing to dialogue for improvement, separate departments were able to learn the

ways in which we were connected and separate.

In practice, systems leaders need to understand what they can and cannot control. I entered my role as a principal supervisor during a $30 million structural deficit. The district made rapid budget decisions, such as a hiring and spending freeze, which significantly impacted the schools I served. I couldn't control that these choices were made, but I could help my principals process their emotions, collect the impact of these choices for the budget office, and help pool resources across our cohort of schools.

Despite being a principal supervisor, I was ultimately a midlevel manager who faced unprecedented challenges without complete information. I didn't know everything that went into the call for the budget freeze and was not held accountable by the superintendent or board for these decisions.

At the time, many of my principals and I felt frustrated. Staying in a space of frustration would prohibit our overall effectiveness. To move into a more productive emotional space, one practice that I used to help identify my and my leaders' scope of control was to name the decision, identify and label the emotions that the decision caused, and then help leaders plan what decisions they needed to make for their work. The interdependent work of systems leadership ensures that we have choices to make, even if they are facilitating how staff can express and communicate their feelings and ideas.

Systems change is hard work and requires intentional learning to be effective. In coaching new systems leaders, there should be a focus on

building solutions that are fully within one's locus of control and connected to those who are impacted by them.

New systems leaders enter their roles with a wealth of knowledge, practices, and experience to draw from. Yet most will need to build new knowledge and skills to transform systems. Transformation occurs through people — ensuring that mental models are aligned to meet the demands of the situation at hand and not pre-existing ideas.

To help new systems leaders develop, managers and coaches should focus on deepening the new systems leaders' competence, care, and coherence.

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Teacher teams that lead to student learning

BY DIANE P. ZIMMERMAN AND JAMES L. ROUSSIN

I n many schools, teams come together primarily to plan events, build common assessments, or determine curriculum or grade-level planning. But teams often struggle to make teamwork an inquiry-driven process that focuses on problems of practice and student learning.

The essential focus of teams should be on building collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017). Research shows that teacher teams that make links to teaching practices are more effective when compared to teams with less intense forms of collaboration (Meirink et al., 2010).

In 2019, we collaborated with our colleague Robert Garmston on a book,

Transforming Teamwork: Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, which focused on this question: What essential conditions have the most leverage for transforming collaborative groups? We drew on seminal work about professional learning communities and team learning (e.g., Hord, 2008).

Over and over, we cycled back to three distinct but interrelated high-leverage processes: psychological safety, constructive conflict, and actionable learning. To stress the simultaneity of these processes, we wove them into a twisted spiral — a triple helix. This image makes explicit the synchronic interrelationship of three distinct drivers essential for high-performing, inquiry-driven teams.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Teams must create conditions for their members to feel safe so that they can ask for help and take risks. Psychological safety has four domains:

- **Trust in self:** Do I feel safe speaking my personal truths?
- **Trust in relationships:** Do I feel listened to and respected by my teammates?

- **Trust in process:** Does the team have processes (norms) for collaboration such as turn taking or seeking all voices?
- **Trust in collective learning:** Does our team activate cycles of inquiry exploring problems of practice that lead to increased student learning?

When any of these dimensions breaks down, teams tend to bog down.

Psychological safety is dependent on the degree of trust within a team. When teams regularly monitor the four dimensions of trust, they increase their psychological safety, capacity to self-monitor, and self-regulate (and co-regulate) to maintain and repair trust.

To foster psychological safety, teams must build in processes for self-reflection. While there are various survey tools on the internet or lists of norms for teams to adopt, we prefer a simple group process to facilitate the development of norms tailored for the group.

We start by asking participants to share what they *don't* like about meetings, and then we ask three to four participants to turn the "don't likes" into a group process agreement that captures a positive intention, such as, "Strive to have a balance of voices in the room" or "Check for understanding with summary statements."

This language of positive intentions offers solutions instead of criticisms and sustains psychological safety. For example, a single person can change the conversation by stating the intention with a request such as, "Time out. We need to balance voices in the room" or

"We seem bogged down. Can someone give a summary of the key points on the floor?"

For this exercise to work, the norms must be treated as a living history and group reflections must be embedded into the agenda. It's important to remember that psychological safety is not something that can be fixed and then forgotten. It is a *forever* commitment for transforming teamwork (Garmston & Zimmerman, 2013).

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

Conflict is an inevitable part of teamwork. The dilemma we all face when differences are expressed is staying open, neutral, curious, and interested. The ideal is to make our thoughts more available to diverse perspectives to better understand self and others. Margaret Wheatley, a thought leader and author, says, "Nothing living changes until it interprets things differently. Change occurs when we let go of our certainty — our beliefs and assumptions — and willingly create a new understanding of what's going on" (Wheatley, 1999).

When team members embrace conflict constructively, they work to be transparent, vulnerable, and receptive to differing views and perspectives. This allows them to challenge each other's thinking and initiate conversations about difficult-to-discuss topics, seeing disagreements as opportunities to learn.

Constructive conflict is dependent on a culture that embraces conflict expression — the way in which group members communicate and express

differences. Diversity of thought is an opportunity to learn, not a threat. If groups lack the ability to exercise conflict expression, their interactions can either break down or devolve into "groupthink" (Janis, 1982). This is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when the desire to maintain harmony becomes the dominant motivation in conversations or when information contrary to a majority of opinions is silenced.

Becoming more competent in dealing with conflict is first and foremost a personal practice of observing and managing internal reactions. Strong reactions trigger emotional responses that override thinking. Our challenge is to reframe these experiences of negative and counterproductive reactions into neutral or positive states.

Marcia Reynolds, author of *The Discomfort Zone* (2014), offers a few suggestions to try when you are triggered. First, take responsibility for your own reactions. Instead of blaming others, own your reaction and, without beating yourself up, acknowledge it. Pull back respectfully from the interaction and go deeper into yourself. Give attention to your physiological responses — body sensations, muscle tension, and breathing. Just this act of noticing creates a calming effect.

Then ask yourself: What feelings are being stirred by this situation or difference? Is it fear, anger, surprise, or disappointment? When feelings can be named, there is more potential for control and understanding. Labeling enables us to give honest feedback to our teammates. "I am feeling anxious, or angry, or sad about …" Then listen to what others have to say. Often others see the issue from entirely different viewpoints.

The final step is to find a word to capture a positive feeling from this reflection. Perhaps it is the feeling of calmness, composure, or equanimity. Each of us has the power to shift our own emotional state when triggered.

ACTIONABLE LEARNING

For team learning to be transformative, the learners must focus on deep inquiry into problems of practice to identify not only gaps in knowledge, but also discover new theories of action. When this happens, the learning curve shifts and participants are motivated to collectively identify what new actions lead to greater success for learning. We refer to this as actionable learning.

In the business world, collaborative teams that engage in this kind of learning are often called communities of practice, a term coined by Etienne Wenger (1998), whose research found that peer-to-peer interactions co-evolve into collective meaning making to find the best course for action.

When groups commit to building an integral community, they experience a high degree of satisfaction, collective efficacy, and an appetite to keep learning and improving. Actionable learning communities constantly assess: What do we know and what don't we know? Why is this important? How can we apply what we are coming to understand?

But the ability to ask probing questions is not automatic. The more top-down an organization is, the less likely the team members are primed to ask probing questions. This means that teams often need practice posing questions and probing for depth of understanding. A productive starting place is to bring the team together to ask questions about a program or curriculum that has been in place for some time and has a fair degree of fidelity in the implementation.

Initially, the questions start with general summaries that focus on teaching and learning, such as: What part of this program best supports your teaching? What part of the program best serves your students? Even in this early stage in the conversation, different responses will become evident and raise questions of the status quo. Professionals often take common knowledge for granted and are astonished to learn that colleagues have entirely different understandings.

One trap that can bog down teams is when one or two members appear to be expert and dominate the conversation. This causes others to stop conversing. When expertise becomes evident, it is important for the leader to ask how this expertise was gained. Teaching is an applied practice, and those who are experts have usually worked diligently to perfect these skills. This places the emphasis on effort, not on talent, and helps rebalance the conversation.

For example, in a writing inquiry, it became evident that a few of the teachers had taken extra workshops and read books to become self-taught writing experts, while the other teachers were dependent on simple writing exercises provided by outside sources. In another case, the teachers found that some of their colleagues were daunted by the new technology additions and that their fear kept them from even trying the software.

On its face, this seems simple, but the real work comes as groups begin to ask: What are we learning here? What might we do next? At this point, the leader needs to step back and encourage the team to self-organize by watching for evidence of conversations focused on proactive action steps. In one case, the teachers invited an expert peer to conduct a series of workshops on specific areas of writing. In another, they asked for professional learning and release time to visit and observe the new technology in action.

EXAMPLE: TEAM LEARNING IN ACTION

At an elementary school in California, teachers conducted mini action research projects as part of an assessment of their programs. For the spring term, teachers formed teams focused on questions of practice proposed by their peers. Each team created a plan for an ongoing

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS FOR TEAMS

The questions here can support teams in discovering where they stand on the essential conditions for transforming teamwork. Ask all team members to respond to the questions and reflect, individually or together, on their answers. Consider readministering these questions in the future to allow teams to measure growth over time.

Psychological safety	Constructive conflict	Actionable learning
Teams that feel safe are more likely to take risks, admit mistakes, and express diverse perspectives. Working in a positive, judgment-free space empowers teams to activate deep inquiry around problems of practice, leading to greater innovative thinking.	Engaging in constructive conflict requires new competencies. Smart teams monitor healthy and unhealthy conflict and intervene as needed. Collaboration is transformed when team members share their differences around perceptions, knowledge, and assumptions.	Teams engaged in actionable learning constantly assess: What do we know, and what don't we know? Why is this important? How can we apply what we are coming to understand?
To what degree do I trust members of my team with my concerns, ideas, and uncertainties? Low 1 2 3 4 High	How skillful am I at summarizing conflicts and using them productively? Low 1 2 3 4 High	How regularly does our team asks deep questions of practice? Low 1 2 3 4 High
To what degree do other members seem to have concern for my well-being? Low 1 2 3 4 High	When collaborating, what is my comfort level when others share different perspectives or points of view? Low 1 2 3 4 High	How much does our team challenge the status quo and examine assumptions around current theories of action? Low 1 2 3 4 High
What is the frequency, if any, with which I withhold information or perspectives from the group? Low 1 2 3 4 High	What ability do I have to intentionally draw out differences in the way others think and perceive? Low 1 2 3 4 High	How well can our team self-organize for collective learning that leads toward results? Low 1 2 3 4 High

investigation around the question. The teams worked with their own students and then met at intervals to compare notes on findings.

At the end of the term, the school held a symposium in which each team presented a poster session describing the research and reporting on the changes in practice (**actionable learning**) resulting from the investigation. All went well until the last presentation. Suddenly, one teacher and the librarian challenged each other. As their voices got louder, the conflict escalated, and onlooking teachers began to shift uncomfortably (**psychological safety** threatened).

The conflict centered around a project in which the 5th- and 6th-grade teachers had encouraged student groups to select books to read and then participate in self-guided discussions. The teachers were perfecting a protocol for student-run discussions and

wanted to test one teacher's assertion that students were more engaged when they chose the books.

Because the teachers did not have time to read all the books ahead of time, some read the stories along with the students. The teachers had not encountered any problems with the student selections. The librarian, on the other hand, felt that every book the students read needed to be vetted by the educator in charge and that the teachers had been irresponsible to run discussions without having previously read the book.

The principal of the school, skilled in **constructive conflict**, stepped in between the loud voices and asked the teachers to pause. Addressing the teachers in conflict, she acknowledged their strong feelings and then turned to the other teachers and asked them to help her summarize the key issues, which she listed on two charts.

As their peers described the two viewpoints, the principal asked the librarian and the 6th-grade teacher to add to and clarify their points of view. As they felt listened to, they calmed down and engaged in meaningful dialogue about the issues.

Soon, the conversation shifted to issues of student agency and censorship. Several teachers pointed out that it was not just books, but the students' life experiences that most often brought up uncensored and often uncomfortable topics into the classroom. All agreed that while teachers must be constantly vigilant, they can't control all the variables, which meant they needed skills for responding in the moment.

The librarian realized that choosing books for a library was different than for a classroom discussion.

The principal wrapped up the discussion by pointing out the value of constructive conflict. The librarian and the teacher agreed to follow up with the principal the next day to address any unresolved issues or discomfort. Before leaving, the teachers reflected on the power of a day devoted to their own learning and the opportunity to have meaningful conversations with their colleagues (re-establish **psychological safety**).

This example illustrates why teams must pay attention and respond to psychological safety, build protocols for constructive conflict, and focus on learning that is actionable. When teams learn how to learn together, they don't complain about time being wasted and indeed will often call a team meeting whenever they feel that a better solution might need to be considered.

In *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge reminds us that learning is where "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together" (Senge, 1991).

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TOOLS

Love this. So easy to share my takeaways from each session.

This is great, and I think adds to the excitement of attending a conference, as it creates intentionality pre- and post-conference, too!

How much more productive would meetings be if we planned them expecting staff to be able to fill this out?

Definitely going to use this in the future as a conference attendee and to pass out as a presenter!

I needed this for tomorrow's PLC for my teachers.

What an awesome post-conference/session reflection tool.

Great resource to help prioritize and focus your learning.

Thank you for sharing this resource. I used it today!

I love these professional learning tools from @LearningForward! I definitely plan to integrate this into workshops.

CONFERENCE TOOL KIT IS A HIT WITH READERS

In the October 2023 issue, we shared sections of Learning Forward's Taking Action Toolkit, designed to help educators plan and reflect before and during a conference. Here are some of the many comments readers shared on social media.

In the following pages, we share the next section of the tool kit for post-conference planning and action.

Action plan puts conference learning into practice

BY LEARNING FORWARD

Conferences are great opportunities to learn new information and strategies to improve leading, teaching, and learning, but they can be overwhelming. Conference attendees need a plan for applying their learning to practice.

Learning Forward developed a collection of tools to help educators turn an immersive learning experience, such as the Learning Forward Annual Conference, into an actionable plan. In the October issue of *The Learning Professional*, we shared tools that can help you make the most from your learning before and during a conference. In this issue, we highlight the components of our tool kit that support post-conference goals, actions, and plans.

The complete collection of tools can be found at **conference.learningforward.org/conference-action-toolkit/**

AFTER CONFERENCE ACTION PLAN TEMPLATE			
Action steps What will be done?	**Responsibilities** Who will do it?	**Timeline** By when?	**Potential barriers** What individuals or structures might present roadblocks? How will you address them?
Step 1			
Step 2			
Step 3			
Step 4			
Step 5			
Evidence of success: How will you know you are making progress? What are your benchmarks?			
Evaluation process: How will you determine that your goal has been reached? What are your measures?			

TOOLS

30-60-90-DAY PROGRESS CHECKS		
• What progress have you made toward your conference learning goals? How are you celebrating? • With whom did you connect? • What barriers did you encounter? How did you overcome them? • What's next?		
First 30 days	**First 60 days**	**First 90 days**

The last tool in the conference action plan tool kit is a detailed spreadsheet that is best used in its digital version. Here is a preview of the first part. Define your goal in the first column, and state your desired outcomes in the second column. Then select what tool or tools you will use to measure progress and success, either quantitative or qualitative. Determine who will be responsible for accessing the tools and pertinent information. List your lessons learned, reflecting on strategies that worked — or didn't — in pursuit of the goal. The last column is for determining how you are tracking toward the goal: on track, slightly off track, or not on track. (The digital version of the tool has drop-down choices to select.)

To make your own copy of this tool and view a video of how to use it, visit the conference tool kit web page at **conference. learningforward.org/conference-action-toolkit/**

COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC GOALS INTO ACTIONABLE INITIATIVES					
Goal	**Measurable objective**	**As measured by**	**Led by**	**Lessons learned**	**Outcome progress**
Name major topic: Vision	What is our desired outcome/result?	Tools used to measure success	Person responsible for this work	What worked? What did not work?	Tracking toward the goal: yes, somewhat, or no?
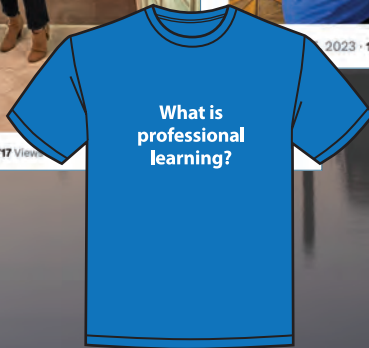
T-SHIRT TUESDAY TELLS THE STORY

Thousands of educators demonstrated their support for professional learning on T-shirt Tuesday at the 2023 Learning Forward Annual Conference. The front of the shirt asks, "What is professional learning?" On the back, the answer is: "Professional learning is success for all students, teacher retention, stronger schools."

UPDATES

Carmen Concepción

Concepción elected to Learning Forward Board of Trustees

Carmen Concepción has been elected the newest member of the Learning Forward board of trustees. Concepción is dean of the School of Education at the Padrón Campus of Miami Dade College in Miami, Florida.

A passionate advocate for literacy and educational excellence, she has served as a National Board-certified classroom teacher, literacy coach, curriculum support specialist, and district administrator in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Her leadership and expertise have been instrumental in the development and implementation of a range of literacy initiatives and programs.

She served as coordinator of Florida Reading Enhancement and Achievement at the University of Central Florida, where she provided professional learning and support to K-12 teachers across Florida, and as director of professional learning at Florida Virtual School. She has been active in Learning Forward since 2006.

She is a graduate of the Learning Forward Academy, former director of the Learning Forward Florida affiliate, selected reviewer of the most recent revision of the Standards for Professional Learning, presenter at conferences, and member of affiliate committees. Concepción has a doctorate in K-12 administration from the College of William and Mary. She looks forward to continuing to advocate for equity and excellence in teaching and learning by promoting high-quality, equitable professional learning for all educators.

Sue Sarber now serves as board president and Linda Chen as president-elect. Ash Vasudeva transitions to board past president.

Learn how to use Title IIA funds

Join us for a two-day learning event designed to help districts strategically plan their use of Title IIA funding to support comprehensive professional learning in their systems. The event will take place Feb. 29-March 1, 2024, at Lubber Run Community Center in Alexandria, Virginia. Federal grant programs managers or directors at the district level and their team members, as well as directors of professional learning and their teams, are encouraged to attend.

Participants will understand how to advocate for the strategic use of Title IIA funds to support district goals and best practices, develop a grant implementation plan that is compliant with statutory requirements and aligned to the Standards for Professional Learning, and learn how to evaluate the impact of professional learning programs and how to leverage evaluation data to advance strategy. For more information, visit **learningforward.org/TitleIIEvent**.

U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro

DeLauro receives Learning Forward's policymaker award

Learning Forward honored U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut with a federal policymaker award for her outstanding contributions to educator professional learning and education policies that improve student success. In particular, she was noted for her staunch advocacy for the expansion of high-quality professional learning opportunities through the federal Title IIA program.

Melinda George, Learning Forward's chief policy officer, noted DeLauro's advocacy for educators has contributed to districts' and schools' ability to create environments that foster continuous improvement in teaching practices, ultimately benefitting students. "Congresswoman DeLauro's advocacy for increased funding for professional learning, equitable access to resources, and support for teachers in underresourced communities is an enduring legacy and will continue to transform the education landscape and improve student success for decades to come. Federal funding is essential for this to be realized."

In a video statement accepting the award, DeLauro said, "Making investments to educate America's children and making sure that every child has the opportunity for a bright future is one of the most important things Congress can do." She commended Learning Forward for its leadership in elevating standards-based professional learning as a national education priority.

SELF-PACED COURSE: EXPLORE THE STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AT YOUR OWN SPEED

Learning Forward has launched its first self-paced online course. Introduction to Standards for Professional Learning is a four-hour, self-paced course that acquaints educators with the standards, explains the fundamental components of a comprehensive system of professional learning through the lens of the standards, and helps learners reflect on the implications of the standards for their systems, schools, and their individual roles.

Featuring videos, readings, and reflection activities, this course guides you to a deeper understanding of the standards. Learners who complete the course will receive a certificate for four hours of professional learning. Learn more about the course at **learningforward.org/online-courses-2/**.

Courses focus on coaching and learning designs

Learning Forward is offering these online courses for coaches, professional learning facilitators, and learning teams.

Powerful Practice for Professional Learning: This 12-hour, four-week course will help you implement a professional learning framework that promotes high levels of learning and retention and increases capacity to implement new learning. *Begins Feb. 13*.

Implementing a Coaching Cycle: This 15-hour, three-week blended course helps coaches plan, support, gather data, and reflect on lessons with the teachers they support. *Begins Feb. 19*.

Learn more at **learningforward.org/online-courses-for-educators**.

Anita Brown shares her story at the 2023 Annual Conference.

Share your story of professional learning impact

Sharing stories about the impact of professional learning convinces policymakers, inspires colleagues, and connects us to one another. Learning Forward is collecting stories from schools, districts, and provinces that show how professional learning is making a difference.

We would love to record your story — for example, about how your use of Title IIA funding is improving student outcomes or about how something you learned through coaching is making a difference for students you previously struggled to reach. We can help you craft your impact story so that you can use it in your local advocacy as well.

We collected many inspiring stories during the 2023 Learning Forward Annual Conference, and we want to add your story to the mix so we can keep building the evidence base for professional learning. If you're interested in telling your story, email **suzanne.bouffard@learningforward.org**.

PANEL FOCUSES ON SUPPORT FOR PRINCIPALS

Effective principals have a sizable impact on student achievement through instructional leadership, school climate, staff support, family engagement, and other pathways, according to research. Learning Forward chief policy officer Melinda George moderated a panel discussion as part of a 2023 National Principals Month policy briefing in October in Washington, D.C.

School leaders and policymakers discussed the state of K-12 education and the importance of supporting critical federal programs that help schools. After opening remarks, George facilitated a discussion with association leaders, who are also current and former principals, about what is needed now to support schools and leaders with the essential tools and resources required to effectively meet the diverse needs of their students.

The American Federation of School Administrators, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals hosted the briefing.

WE'RE HIRING!

Learning Forward is looking for a full-time conference associate based out of our Richardson, Texas, office. We're seeking someone with strong organizational skills, excellent written and verbal communication, and the ability to travel 12-15 days annually. For more information, visit **bit.ly/49wdUSB**.
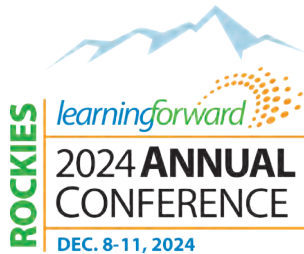
Apply to present at the 2024 Annual Conference

ROCKIES
learningforward
2024 ANNUAL CONFERENCE
DEC. 8-11, 2024

Share your professional learning and school improvement expertise with educators from around the world. Submit a proposal to present at the Learning Forward's 2024 Annual Conference in Denver, Colorado, Dec. 8-11, 2024. **The proposal deadline is 11:59 p.m. ET Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2024**.

The 2024 Annual Conference theme is Reach New Heights for Students, which continues along a path Learning Forward began two years ago. Our 2022 conference theme, Reimagine, was an invitation to educators around the world to take pandemic learnings and reimagine how we might change and improve possibilities for educators and students alike. We followed in 2023 with Evidence Into Action, speaking to the power of evidence-based practices and how Learning Forward bridges research and implementation to improve results for all students.

In 2024, Reaching New Heights for Students is a continuation of reimagining possibilities and leveraging them with evidence-based practices. Our conference proposal system has helpful resources for submitting a winning proposal. Visit **lfp.learningforward.org** to learn more.

EXPAND YOUR LEARNING WITH WEBINAR ARCHIVES

Learning Forward members have exclusive access to recent and archived webinars. Recent webinars include "The Power of Coaching" and "Finding Time for Professional Learning." Find recordings and related resources at **learningforward.org/webinars**.

To be notified about upcoming webinars, sign up for our emails by logging in to the Learning Forward website, clicking on My Profile, and scrolling down to Communication Preferences.

X #TheLearningPro
FEATURED SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Dr. Robert Thornell
@thornell5

Great article! Teachers must be involved in the work of continuous improvement. Closest to students, teachers are perfectly positioned to test and refine change ideas. @zjaffe_teacher #TheLearningPro learningforward.org/?p=85782 #bebold @LearnTexas @SarahThornellTX @kennidwyer

Follow us on social media. Share your insights and feedback about *The Learning Professional* by using **#TheLearningPro**.

Learning Forward Academy applications are open

Applications for the 2026 cohort of the Learning Forward Academy are now open.

The Learning Forward Academy is Learning Forward's flagship deep learning experience, committed to increasing educator and leader capacity and improving results for students in the ever-changing landscape of education. The 2½-year experience includes five in-person learning sessions totaling 10 days and continues with four virtual learning events, as well as registration for three of Learning Forward's Annual Conferences.

The academy is an excellent way to increase your capacity as an educator and leader. With colleagues from around the world, you will align your problem of practice to cutting-edge, equity-centered professional learning standards that incorporate evidence from research and practice about critical topics for educators.

Applications are due March 15, 2024. For information and the application, visit **learningforward.org/academy**.

Scholarships are available through the Learning Forward Foundation: **foundation.learningforward.org**.

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Write for us! 2024 *The Learning Professional* themes:

- Global perspectives on professional learning – *June*
- Learning to pivot – *August*
- Curriculum-based professional learning – *October*
- Building bridges – *December*

Visit **learningforward.org/the-learning-professional/write-for-us** for more information and submission deadlines.
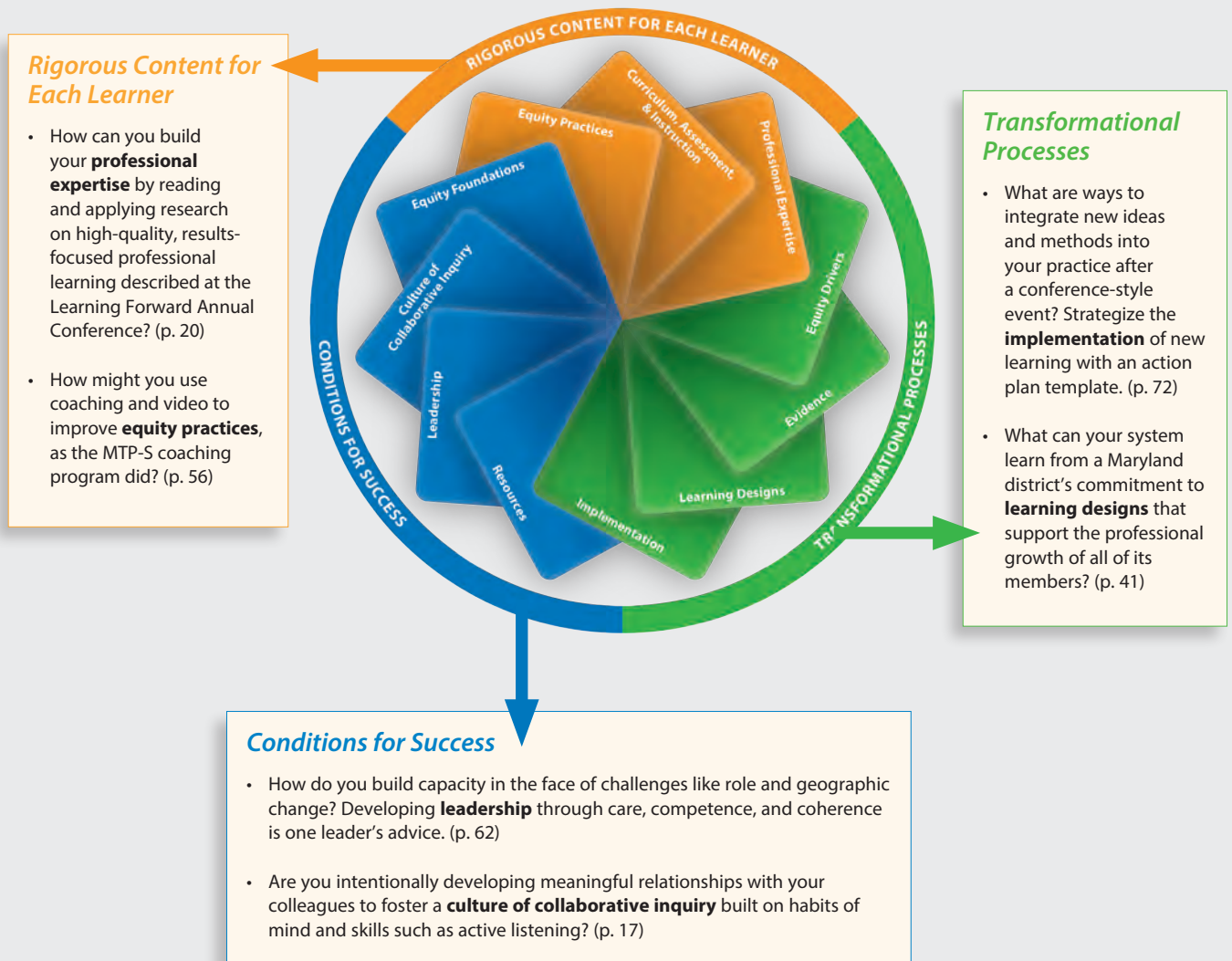
THROUGH THE LENS

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 EDUCATORS GROW

Rigorous Content for Each Learner

- How can you build your **professional expertise** by reading and applying research on high-quality, results-focused professional learning described at the Learning Forward Annual Conference? (p. 20)

- How might you use coaching and video to improve **equity practices**, as the MTP-S coaching program did? (p. 56)

Transformational Processes

- What are ways to integrate new ideas and methods into your practice after a conference-style event? Strategize the **implementation** of new learning with an action plan template. (p. 72)

- What can your system learn from a Maryland district's commitment to **learning designs** that support the professional growth of all of its members? (p. 41)

Conditions for Success

- How do you build capacity in the face of challenges like role and geographic change? Developing **leadership** through care, competence, and coherence is one leader's advice. (p. 62)

- Are you intentionally developing meaningful relationships with your colleagues to foster a **culture of collaborative inquiry** built on habits of mind and skills such as active listening? (p. 17)

Learn more about Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning at
standards.learningforward.org

AT A GLANCE

Workshops CAN be high-quality professional learning. Here's how.

High-quality professional learning is sustained, intensive, and job-embedded. But workshops, released days, and other short-term learning activities have a valuable role to play as long as they don't stand alone. When they are part of a comprehensive plan, they can be meaningful, efficient, engaging, and — most important — impactful for students.

Workshops are useful to:

- Introduce new strategies and provide just-in-time learning.

- Advance teachers to a new phase of learning or practice.

- Help teachers learn from each other and build on each other's successes.

- Build collaboration among teachers from different grades or buildings to make systemwide improvements.

How to integrate workshops into a larger learning strategy:

- Ground the workshop in the school improvement or professional learning plan.

- Develop a learning trajectory for the desired skills and show where the workshop fits in.

- Align workshop design and content with Standards for Professional Learning.

- After the workshop, follow up with coaching, professional learning communities, and other long-term supports.

How to make the most of workshop time:

- Start with goals and student needs and explain what you want teachers to know and be able to do.

- Focus on the big takeaways and reinforce them throughout the workshop.

- Design the learning to build over time, starting with participants' existing knowledge, and include practice opportunities.

- Plan follow-up, including the commitments you expect participants to make and the ongoing support you will provide.

Scan for more information on how to use workshop time effectively.

To learn more about our consultants or consulting services, visit **services.learningforward.org** or contact Sharron Helmke, senior vice president, professional services, at **sharron.helmke@learningforward.org**.

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