



The world is changing, our families, our culture is changing, and the way we teach and lead is changing. Professional learning can support all of these changes.

DISTRICT MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Melvina Crawl, Alexandria City Public Schools, Virginia

VIRGINIA DISTRICT BUILDS A PATH TO STANDARDS-ALIGNED LEARNING

Melvina Crawl knows the importance of making a districtwide commitment to educator learning that aligns to the Standards for Professional Learning. As executive director of professional learning and federal programs for Alexandria City Public Schools in Virginia, Crawl is nurturing a systemic approach to build all educators' capacity in the service of student learning. A Learning Forward district membership is a central part of that approach.

Crawl began in her current role in September 2023. She saw the benefits of district membership when she was director of professional learning in Griffin-Spalding County Schools, Georgia. That district became proficient in the Standards for Professional Learning, used the Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) to evaluate and improve professional learning, and leveraged publications, webinars, and other resources to build a common understanding of high-quality professional learning across the district. (Learn more about the SAI on p. 38 of this issue.) Crawl also advocated for the standards to become part of the local school division policy, and now they are — a milestone that makes her proud. Griffin-Spalding, a 21-school district serving 9,400 students, continues its Learning Forward district membership.

Shortly after joining Alexandria City Public Schools, a district of over 16,000 students and 18 schools, Crawl pursued a Learning Forward district membership. The district has used Learning Forward resources in the past, but this is the first year with a district membership. As the district becomes familiar with its membership resources, Crawl's goals are to align the district's professional learning plan and priorities with the Standards for Professional Learning and support her staff in implementing the standards throughout their work so that all students benefit from instructional excellence. Crawl talked about standards-based professional learning with Associate Editor Jefna Cohen.

Why does professional learning matter, and why do you do this work?

After 25 years of working in public education, I truly believe that professional learning is key to making a difference in the quality of teaching and leading in schools across the nation. Our children come to us each day and we are impacting their lives, possibly for the rest of our lives. Professional learning is how we as professionals grow and improve our practices so we can better equip our students and families to achieve their goals, leading to greater achievements in student outcomes. [It] is a powerful tool because it allows us to grow individually and collectively through collaboration with our peers within our existing divisions and beyond. Professional learning has helped me refine my practice. It should never be the first item on the chopping block when considering funding cuts. If anything, we should be pouring more money into professional learning to support the attraction, recruitment, and retention of employees. The world is changing, our families, our culture is changing, and the way we teach and lead is changing. Professional learning can support all of these changes.



How are you building systemwide use of the Standards for Professional Learning?

One of the areas I will focus on in the upcoming year is bringing awareness to the Standards for Professional Learning. This includes ensuring the central office, school building leadership, and the instructional leadership team are all trained on the standards so we can align them to our work.

To help us meet this goal, I will be inviting staff to take advantage of the online Standards for Professional Learning course that is part of our district membership. For the people who take the online course, I invite them to join me in small sessions that make sure everybody is aware and understands how we will use the standards in aligning our professional learning. The standards are key in aligning professional learning work. In the previous district where I served, we included the standards in training for new teacher orientation, new instructional coaches, and new administrators. We provided a (standards) class, and I would make sure that they had copies of the standards books. By offering the training each year, it helps to build sustainability of implementation and alignment.

To further support use of the standards, they are built into the professional learning management system. As courses are entered into that system, course builders can select the standard that is used to design the professional learning experience, whether it is a course or series. That is one way I can check that we are actually using them and aligning correctly.

How does this work connect to your district's strategic goals?

Our division has a five-year strategic plan with five goal areas and division priorities. As schools and division staff design their professional learning, they also identify the strategic goal area that aligns to the professional

learning. We are currently engaged in a division professional learning needs assessment as we prepare to plan for the upcoming year. I look forward to analyzing the data with our division team and planning how we can strengthen our professional learning practices.

The Standards Assessment Inventory is part of the district membership. What role has that played in your work to build high-quality professional learning?

In my previous district, staff took the SAI every year because the data was used to support our federal grants. In Alexandria City Public Schools, we are going to administer the SAI in March, and we will use the results as a source of data for our division improvement plan and school improvement plans, as well as for our Title I grant and Title II grant, which primarily funds professional learning. I am excited about seeing the results for this year to identify the areas that we can strengthen in the upcoming year.

What role does the district membership play in your teacher recruitment strategy?

New teachers coming into the profession often do not have money to invest in professional membership and organizations because they are just getting started. This year, I will be sharing our district membership at our in-person recruitment event in February because our district membership is a valuable asset. I love the resources and tools that they have (access to) as part of their beginning year. I will also share this information at our upcoming new teacher orientation this summer.

With district membership, you also get one job announcement in the Learning Forward Career Center. I like that feature because you have nationwide coverage. You can expand your reach to other areas nationwide and even internationally. This job

announcement is being used to support hard-to-fill positions.

What are your goals for the district membership over the next year?

Since the district membership is new here, I am launching a campaign to make sure everybody knows all of the features that are available, and I run that in our district newsletter. My goal is to continue to spread the word in our principal meetings and senior leadership team meetings so that more and more staff are aware of this resource and how it can benefit their teams.

We had one staff member complete the Learning Forward Academy, and I would like to have more staff participate in the upcoming year. In addition, we took a team of 13 staff to the Learning Forward Annual Conference this past December, and we look forward to attending the conference in Denver in December 2024.

As I reflect upon the upcoming year, I see a more robust system of professional learning with incorporation of the Standards for Professional Learning. Our division is doing amazing things with a focus on positive culture and increased student achievement. I consider it an honor and privilege to serve with wonderful, high-caliber leaders focused on creating positive experiences for our students, our families, and our staff.

What is the district membership's superpower?

Learning Forward's district membership is such a great resource with lots of tools on so many different topics. It is great to have resources available to our instructional coaches, our assistant principals, and principals. Teams can use the resources to support learning communities or individuals can support their own professional growth goals. The Learning Forward district membership is like a toolbox that you have available to help you in your journey as an educational professional. ■